

**Introduction to the exhibition called “Medium Religion”, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009, Sligo, Ireland  
By Tony Partridge**

When I first read of the exhibition called “Medium Religion,” I was immediately reminded of a comment made by the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky regarding Dostoyevsky. He said that, “Many things have been ascribed to Dostoyevsky which just aren=t true. For example, people everywhere - including Moscow - think of him as a religious writer. But it does not seem to have occurred to them that he was not so much religious as one of the first to express the drama of the man in whom the organ of belief has atrophied.” Tarkovsky quotes a conversation between Stavrogin and Shatov in Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*:

AI just wanted to know - do you yourself believe in God or don=t you?≡ Nikolai Vsevolodovich looked at him [i.e., Shatov] sternly.

AI believe in Russia and Russian Orthodoxy ... I believe in the body of Christ ... I believe that the Second Coming will be in Russia ... I believe ... A Shatov began to splutter in desperation.

AAAnd in God? In God?≡

AI ... I shall believe in God.≡

Tarkovsky argues that modern Western man suffers from a “chronic syndrome” whereby his “organ of belief” is atrophied. He says that Dostoyevsky was the first writer to describe this chronic syndrome. Now, whether one agrees or disagrees with Tarkovsky, it seems to me that he has created a space where dialogue can occur between religious belief and the exhibition called “Medium Religion.”

This exhibition speaks about religion in “the public sphere of visual communication.” It says that religion is bound to the visual media, for “Without writing there is no church; without scrolls, no belief.” The stated aim of this exhibition is to demonstrate this “aspect of religion using current examples of religious video propaganda and the work of contemporary artists.” It wants to enable “a critical analysis of the respective religious iconography as well as its transfer to a cultural modernity.” Those are the exhibition’s own statements of intent.

But what about that chronic syndrome where the organ of belief is atrophied. Where does that fit into all of this? In an article called “Immortal Bodies,” Boris Groys says that, “If one is merely mortal, to escape one’s position in the world is impossible.” Here, he is dealing with a key underlying aspect of, certainly Western, religion, the immortality of the soul. He states that in recent times a kind of atrophy has occurred where Western man is finding it more and more difficult to believe in the immortal soul. It seems that nowadays Western man finds it easier to believe in the immortal corpse than in the immortal soul. Thus: “[The] process of decay [of a corpse] is potentially infinite ... This unification with the cosmos, materially as well as spiritually, offers a perspective that makes possible ... [that] ... instead of the immortality of the soul we achieve a different kind of immortality: the immortality of the body’s material substances, the immortality of the body as a corpse.” We can see this on one level as being a kind of pantheist materialism of the body, where the body achieves its immortality through joining with the universe in a material sense. This, it seems, is an alternative to the way of believing in the immortal soul. It is the way of believing in immortality through materialism, one that Western man often finds more comfortable, and maybe more comforting, than the older beliefs he is now having difficulty with. It is a way that Western man can conveniently move around, and away from, the atrophy of his organ of belief. But where is the repository for these immortal bodies, as distinct from the immortal souls? According to Boris Groys, “... today’s mass cultural imagination ... is full of immortal bodies without souls.” It seems that, “in our culture the actual location of physical immortality are our various archives – and in particular the museums. Works of art are the corpses of objects. In art museums, objects are kept and put on display after their death: they have been defunctionalised, removed from the practice of life.”

In the exhibition called, “Medium Religion,” we find cultural artifacts as images that represent religion. Are these images defunctionalised? Are they removed from the practice of life? And remember, the Greek word *psyche*, that is usually translated as “soul”, can equally well be translated as “life”. Does the exhibition engage with the physical immortality of the religious iconography? Is today’s mass cultural imagination exhibited here as immortal bodies without souls? Have we, here, in this exhibition, a statement about Dostoyevsky’s insight into the confused state of Western man as he contemplates the atrophy of his organ of belief? Or is that being too judgmental? Can we create a space here for a dialogue between religious belief and the modern visual media used to communicate religion? Can we create the space for a dialogue, a space where Boris Groys can talk to us and others can come to discuss “Medium Religion”? With this in mind, I am now going to try to open up a

space. I am going to ask Boris Groys – the renowned philosopher of art - to move into that space and speak to us in that space. Then I am going to ask you, the audience, to engage in a discussion with us here about “Medium Religion.”