

MAŁGORZATA ABASSY

COMMUNICATING RELIGIOUS CONTENT  
AND THE RECEPTION OF MEANINGS IN SOCIAL SPACE:  
THE SERIES *SAVIOUR UNDER THE BIRCHES*

**Abstract.** The article contains an analysis of the content of the 12-part series entitled *Saviour under the Birches*. The main idea of the director, Leonid Eydlin, to show the audience the ordinary side of life, however related to faith and the search for the right decisions in difficult situations, was confronted with the comments of the viewers, posted under subsequent parts of the series on youtube.com, kinopoisk.ru, otzovik.com, and kino-teatr.ru. The source material is treated as a cultural text in the Lotman sense. Content analysis and the hermeneutic method, taking into account contexts, are the research methods. Analyses of the content of the series made it possible to show that Eydlin's intention to show Orthodoxy as a religion culture, based on the realities of everyday life of an ordinary man, preoccupied with material problems but also searching for the meaning of the problems affecting him in the non-material world. The analysis of Internet users' comments, in turn, showed that they identify their problems with those experienced by the characters in the series.

**Keywords:** Orthodox faith; cinema; Russian culture; society; post-Soviet trauma.

INTRODUCTION

THE SERIES UPON THE BACKGROUND OF THE 1990'S

The series *Savior under the Birches* (*Spas pod berezami*, 2003) is one of the latest films of the Russian director Leonid Davidovich Eydlin. It was created as a kind of answer to the atheistic post-soviet society and violent reality of the 1990s. That period in Russian history was marked not only with poverty, uncertainty and precarity in everyday life but also it was deprived of stable

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Dr hab. MAŁGORZATA ABASSY, prof. UJ – Jagiellonian University in Krakov, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Institute of Russia and Eastern Europe; correspondence address: ul. Władysława Reymonta 4, 30-059 Kraków; e-mail: [malgorzata.abassy@uj.edu.pl](mailto:malgorzata.abassy@uj.edu.pl); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9294-6156>.

ideological foundations. The Soviet Union had been dissolved and the idea of the state-superpower was buried, too. Spiritual emptiness combined with the lack of clear vision of the future made the whole society vulnerable to disintegration. The 1990's was also the time when a search for the "Russian idea", understood as a uniting values, started (Tsygankov). After almost seventy years of atheization of the society a turn towards the Orthodox religion was not an easy matter. The Orthodox Church had to be restored first. Nevertheless, religious ideas had become an inseparable part of Russian culture far earlier before the communist state was created. That was regarded as a source for the values that might fill the void. Russian filmmakers were also included into the process of revealing the values and supplying them to the Russian society. Eydlin, and his series *Saviour under the Birches*, was among them.

Although many Russian religious films were made in the 1990s and early 20th centuries (among others *The Miracle Maker* [Chudotvoretz, 2000], *The Island* [Ostrov, 2006], *The Priest* [Pop, 2009]), *The Saviour under the Birches* is unique in that it contains the most themes concerning everyday life. This fact made the audience identify with the characters and their problems. The religious theme was not presented as an element of spiritual life only but was strongly linked to the aspect of secular life, which is characteristic of culture-faith. That type of culture was described by Lotman as a "semantic type o culture" (Lotman, 2000, pp. 400-417). Romanowicz also pointed out this way of conceiving of Orthodoxy, or – more broadly – religion: "Religious culture is a derivative of the acceptance of religion, its values, patterns of behaviour and elements situated in the moral layer" (Romanowicz, 2015, p. 167). It is also a film that Russians eagerly reach for, despite the fact that it was made twenty years ago. The problems of contemporary Russians, arranged in twelve sections, allow us to analyze the social and political contexts that leave a mark on their everyday lives. In the case of the aspect of Orthodoxy highlighted in the analyses (which is also in line with the director's intention), we are dealing with culture-faith, and therefore it is everyday life that reflects faith and is its expression.

The general ideal of the series, as the one which was to attract the Russians to forgotten religious values, was expressed by Eydlin in an interview for *Rossiyskaya gazeta*. The director said: "Viewers, of course, get used to cruelty. [...] I wanted them to see the other side of our lives, quite ordinary, but connected with faith, with the search for the right decisions in difficult situations" (Treneva, 2004).<sup>1</sup> The series consists of twelve parts, each of them reflecting the idea that the Orthodox religion is the foundation of everyday life and manifests

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, translations of foreign language fragments are mine (M.A).

itself in many ways. Eydlin constructed a narrative aimed at introducing religion into everyday life as an inseparable element of human struggles. The editor tries to make the audience aware of the fact that Orthodoxy deeply permeates culture: “There are twelve separate novellas in the film. Heroes come to God in different ways, they contact the *batyushka*. I am deeply convinced that Orthodox culture is the foundation on which much in our lives rests. It’s time for the conversation about this to appear on television. [...] At the same time, I emphasize that our project is not ecclesiastical, but secular. It’s about the everyday lives of specific people” (Treneva, 2004). The *Saviour under the Birches* faith gains depth of interpretation only within the frames of Orthodox culture. The director, taking up the theme of the transcendence of everyday life, at the same time challenges the post-Soviet atheistic culture, prompting its participants either to feel the resonance that the religious themes of the series evoke in them, or to state the lack of an internal response to the film’s message. In the latter case the viewer faces their spiritual emptiness. That is how the quest for Transcendence and making one’s life meaningful starts.

#### SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the main source material consists of a corpus of two texts: dialogues and statements of the characters of the *Saviour under the Birches* series, as well as comments from Internet users under individual parts. The latter have been supplemented with a few comments posted on video commentary sites such as kinopoisk.com. Comments with the most “likes” and accompanying comments were selected as representative. The source material was treated as a cultural text, in accordance with Yuri Lotman’s definition that it is a collection of signs ordered and connected by relations (Rygielska, 2015, p. 31). It is worth noting that culture, as a dynamic and diverse system, consists of many texts, and therefore the research process requires the isolation of the text under study – like dialogue (existing within a broader text, such as an episode of a TV series, or a text superior to it: a series). In the same way, a set of commentaries for individual parts of the series was separated. The point of reference was the series itself. The adopted research method: content analysis falls within the area of methods used in cultural studies and is a qualitative method. In the case of the extracted texts, it consisted in searching for meaningful words and symbols indicating religious content in the series, and then checking whether and to what extent the statements of Internet users refer to the said content.

THE CONTENT OF THE SERIES:  
MAIN HEROES AND EXPOSED ISSUES

The scheme below presents titles of parts of the series, main hero, supporting characters, and the main issue discussed in each of them. The purpose of this part of the article is to make it possible for people who do not know Russian to gain some understanding of the series, as the footage does not have a voiceover or subtitles in English. An approximation of the content and main problems in the form of a table can be a starting point for comparative studies with similar series created in Western cultures.

Table 1. Content of the series: topic and heroes

	Part title	Principal character	Supporting character	Issue
1.	“Father Georgiy (Otec Georgiy)”	The Orthodox priest Father Georgiy	His family: daughters, Tatiana and Dasha, and the wife	Traditional male and female roles in a family. Lack of a candidate for Tatiana’s husband. The young women’s aspirations versus the parents’ concerns.
2.	“Golden domes (Zolotyje kupola)”	Teenage Valera	Two women who paint the flat (Lara and Gaya). The younger one, Lara, falls in love with a boy named Valera. The feeling is reciprocal.	Lara is pregnant. Valera’s mother does not accept her son’s choice. Valera leaves home and moves to the church.
3.	“Together with Yura (Vmestes Yuroy)”	Anna Timofeyeva – the mother of the young man (Yura) who got killed in Afghanistan.	Aleksej (Losha – afganec) and his wife, Mila.	The district inspector checks the tenants of Timofeyeva. Timofeyeva protects them, claiming that they are like family to her. Birthday of the deceased Yura. Losha confesses to his wife that he has been lying to Timofeyeva that he was Yura’s companion in order to have a free apartment. In the cemetery, he confesses the truth to Timofeyeva, and she forgives him: “You are all the same for me, because you were all there – together with Jura” (p. 3, 41:40) <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> References to the film are marked according to the scheme: p. (part), minutes: seconds of the beginning of the phrase.

4.	“Dima (Dima)”	Dima	Father Georgiy, Olga and her father.	The church is an old building. The controller comes and wants a bribe or he will close the building. Another man helps: he says he is a debtor to the church. Dima asks Father Georgij to find a wife for him. The priest does it and Dima marries Olga. Tanja killed a (drunk) woman in a car accident. Two children are left without mother.
5.	“Guest performance (Gastrol’)”	Grishka Timofeyev, a church beggar	Members of the performance teams (hired to lie), Grishka’s relatives	Grisha is a beggar who collects money on the church’s stairs. However, he visits his parents and let them think he is a prosperous high-ranking official in Moscow. He lies and that makes him unhappy.
6.	“Tram father (Tramvaynyy otec)”	Tram driver – Sergey.	The tram driver’s wife and daughter. An old silent man who, by name and surname may be Sergey’s father.	Sergey meets an old man. He brings him to his home, warms him with family love. Sergey’s wife objects, she suspects that it could be a total stranger and she wants to get rid of him. When Sergey is absent, the old man goes to a nursing home, leaving a penitential letter to his son. Sergey puts a note on the driver’s window: “Father, come back!”
7.	“Miracle worker (Chudotvornaya)”	Tolyan Zhmukhin – a locksmith.	Tolyan’s son – Valka, the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos	Tolyan drinks every day, robs his customers. And then the trouble is: his son Valka beat the neighbor’s guy for calling Tolyan a thief. Valka faces two years in prison. Drunk Tolyan talks to the icon he has stolen from the church. A miracle happens: Valka is released and Tolyan confesses his sins, asks people to forgive him and starts a new life.
8.	“Weather for tomorrow (Pogoda na zavtra)”	Mayka and Valera	Late Kramarenko’s family	During the renovation, a note is found in the walls of the church: Kramarenko Igor is a traitor. Fedorczuk and his friends were arrested. Mayka and Valera go to Kramarenko’s family to “look for justice”. Instead, they understand that a man cannot judge another man – it is God’s right.

9.	“Son for the Bald (Syn dla Lysogo)”	Alexander (Lysyy), a gangster	Father Georgiy, Alexander and his wife Natasha	Alexander wants to pay for prayer to help his wife to get pregnant. The miracle happens only when Lysyy experiences a deep inner transformation. He dies but his wife is expecting.
10.	“The Man in the T-Shirt (Chelovek v raspashonke)”	Fiodor Valuyev – the narrator who tells the story of the church and Galina, the painter		Struggle for love of mature people against envy and lies.
11.	“Choir (Khor)”	Aliona Borisovna – the choir conductor	The choir team	Quarrels among singers, tension. There is a dissonance in the choir: “Everyone sings for themselves and not a penny of consent,” says Father Georgiy. The solution is to repair the relationship.
12.	“Long bride (Davno nevesta)”	Tatiana	The children who were orphaned in the accident, their father	Tatiana becomes the guardian of the children and replaces their mother. In this way, she saves them from being given to an orphanage. The father can work when they are cared of.

In the series universal issues were expressed. They concern every human being, regardless of the place and time. Love for another human being, sacrifice, responsibility, honesty, starting a family, truth are the main themes. Many episodes of the series, however, touch on issues that are closely related to the post-Soviet reality. These include the problem of the so-called “Afgancy”, young people who did their military service in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan has not been thoroughly revised by the Russian authorities. One can even speak of falsehood: on February 15, 1989, in Russian news, the speaker congratulated on heroic attitude and spoke of the need to fight for the homeland to the end (*Efir programmy ‘Vremja’*, 7:30), although the Central Committee had already decided to withdraw the troops (Daudi, 2021, pp. 138-142; Marshall, 2006, pp. 2-3) and the Afgancy were given only lofty words. The trauma of the Afgancy was not mentioned as a national tragedy, even though it affected a large group of surviving soldiers and parents of the soldiers who died in the war (Alexievich, 2015, pp. 5-7). Official statements on this subject are laconic (Gareev, 2002, p. 131). The problem of cultural trauma, cumulated in the individual experience of a person was expressed by Timofeyeva

(*Vmeste s Yuroj*, p. 3, 41:40), who says that for her everyone is like her Yura. In the *Savior under the Birches*, the director proposes a solution in the light of Orthodoxy: the unity of all those who experienced that war should be recognized. The problem of the soldiers who served in Afghanistan is the only political issue in the entire series. At the same time, it is a personal matter for many Russians. The Soviet-Afghan war of 1979-1989 was an event that left an exceptionally strong mark on the psyche of Russians for several reasons: the war was undeclared, the names of the dead and their actual number were kept secret, and there was no discussion after the withdrawal of troops about the real causes of the war and the casualties suffered by ordinary Russians. The tragedy of the phenomenon of the Afgancy is augmented by the fact that many of the fallen were very young people, often recruits. How difficult it is for the regime to hold its crimes accountable was shown by Svetlana Alekseyeva in her documentary narration "Zinky boys".

The issue of settling accounts for the crimes of the past regime is one of the most important threads. It concerns not only the problem of the Afgancy but also such unsolved crimes of the totalitarian system as forcing people to report or arresting them for alleged crimes against the cult of personality symbolized by Stalin.

The times when denunciation was a double-edged weapon many people suffered innocently. How justice is sought remains a difficult matter in any society. In totalitarian systems, it is all the more complicated the more power lies, propaganda and manipulation have. Can faults be left without a judgment, and who has the right to seek justice? In the series, from the point of view of Orthodoxy, this issue is resolved unequivocally: those who are not direct witnesses of those times have no right to judge. Young Valera is confronted first with Mayka's grandfather, and then with the family of Kramarenko. In the first case, the old man says that the arrest was often the result of coincidence, the result of an unfortunate event: "I poured ink over the image of the Chief" ("Weather for tomorrow", p. 8, 6:55). In the latter, Valera confronts the image of Kramarenko as a miscreant with the image presented by the family of the "informer" – a warm, loving, kind man. Leaving judgment in the hands of God, who alone knows all the circumstances and what is happening in the heart of man, brings peace. This is the main message of this part of the series and a proposal to solve the problem of informers and victims of a bygone era. The message is expressed by Valuyev who is looking at the sleeping Valera and comments: "The avenger was coming out, the philosopher was back. And he is sleeping, smiling at the pillow. He has understood everything" ("Weather for tomorrow", p. 8, 41:15).

The series presents the most pressing problems of everyday life in Russia in the 90's of the twentieth century: migration to Moscow and other large cities, crime, poverty. According to the narrative of the film, each of these problems can be soothed, and even solved, thanks to entrustment in God. It is not without reason that Father Georgiy and the church called "Saviour under the Birches" are the uniting elements for the whole story.

#### CENTRAL SYMBOLS OF THE RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN THE SERIES

The director presented two religious symbols, binding together the narrative of the series. These are the temple "Saviour under the Birches" and the figure of Father Georgiy. Their unifying function is not just a technical procedure. It goes beyond the framework of the series, emphasizing the importance of religion in human life and for the permanence of culture over time. Orthodoxy is a set of truths that finds practical application in everyday life. The first part of the series begins with the words of the narrator, who in the series is the writer, Fyodor Valuyev. It tells the story of the temple.

Saviour under the birches was built in the 16th century. He fully experienced everything that Russian temples had to experience. He welcomed thousands of people into this world, sent thousands to the next world. Desecration with dignity endured and for decades – various stalls and shops. After the latter, not even a trace remained. And still other events wounded its walls with bullets, stained with blood. And the years passed and passed... (p. 1, 1:35–2:10).<sup>3</sup>

The building combines fleeting events concerning everyday life with historical changes. The former are baptisms, funerals. The second is the revolution, the desacralization of buildings during the Soviet rule. Regardless of the time and circumstances, the temple, the Savior under the Birches, has always been a refuge for the faithful.

The director's attempt to introduce the central symbols of Orthodoxy: the temple building and the figure of the priest helped to expose an important feature of this religion. According to Yuri Lotman, Orthodoxy expresses a semantic type of culture, consisting in the fact that the part fully reflects the whole (Lotman, 2000, pp. 400-417). In this view, the believer has all the qualities that the community represents. His task is to reveal them in himself and recognize

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<sup>3</sup> Film quotes are given according to the following format: series number, beginning of quoted text minute: second – end of quoted text minute: second.



that they are an immanent part of it. Otherwise, he is doomed to loneliness and failure of his life plans. Understanding that a believer belongs to the community not only leads to finding one's own place in the community, but also helps to understand the meaning of life. The latter flows from God's plan. The recognition of the upper force directing human fate ensures peace.

The walls of the temple tell stories of events and people. However, their interpretation is not always easy. Father Georgiy comes to help, supporting with good word, advice, or admonition. The priest is presented as an ordinary man who has experienced many difficulties in his life. This fact results in practical life wisdom and gives him the right to instruct others. Father Georgiy is no stranger to persecution. He lived in Soviet times, so he understands the complexity of the choices made between loyalty to friends and betrayal. He refrains from judging and tries to pass this attitude on to others. He has a family, which makes him face the husband – wife relationship, resolves the dilemmas of raising children in obedience on the one hand, but with respect for their right to self-determination on the other. Father Georgiy understands that there are things beyond the human will. One can pray for the realization of desires, but the final result lies in the hands of God. This ordinary human aspect of Father Georgiy's personality is combined with the qualities of a sage, a shepherd for the faithful. The position of a clergyman and guardian of the temple makes him enjoy authority. The characters of the series undergo a metamorphosis: their lives change when they themselves recognize universal values.

#### RECEPTION OF THE RELIGIOUS CONTENT IN SOCIAL SPACE

As it was mentioned in the introduction of the article, Eydlin's intention was to provide the viewer with a tool to understand reality and face everyday problems, which the director revealed in an interview with him, mentioned in the introductory part of this article. Was the director's intention reflected in the audience's reactions? I was looking for answers to these questions in the comments posted on the youtube.com, under each part of the series, and in discussions posted on Internet forums, such as kino-teatr.ru, kinopoisk.ru, otzovik.com.

Most comments can be found on youtube.com, underneath the individual parts of the series. On the one hand, this allows you to correlate the comments with the issues of a specific episode, and on the other hand, to verify their relevance to the series as a whole.

The table below presents the number of views for each episode, “likes” and comments (no “dislikes”; negative comments are sparse, which is why this category is not included here), as well as threads that are the most specific from the point of view of the research task of this article. The comments were displayed in two modes: from the newest and from the most popular. The purpose of the table below is to show how the different parts of the series are contextualized by the viewers; what experiences from their own lives, or what social and historical facts viewers reach to give the content of the series a personal meaning.

Table 2. Comments on YouTube.com

Part number	Displayed	Likes/ comments	Specific remarks
1.	400692	2900/122	<p>“I watched all 12 episodes, specifically returned to the first one to leave a comment. The film is wonderful! Recommended! Each series is a separate story of the life of ordinary people. And after all, not some fairy tales invented, but the real life. It’s a shame there’s no sequel” (Nadezhda 2).</p> <p>“The Lord lives and his name is sacred forever! And all the good that we encounter in this world is evidence of this. God bless all the creators, participants and viewers of this bright, kind and touching series that touches the thinnest strings of the soul. And please accept my human gratitude for your work” (Elena K).</p>
2.	144265	889/71	<p>“This film warms the soul, I turn it on many times, as a cure for poisoning and stress in this terrible 2020 for my native Belarus. And look at this grace and you can go further, with other emotions. Thanks to the director, the actors. For a certain category of people, the film is very precious” (Aleksandra Vishnyakova).</p> <p>“You watch, and the soul rests, thank you very much for the film, ‘Father Matthew’ is such a film” (Lyogkaya Lan’ 68).</p>
3.	117696	796/95	<p>“Gorgeous performance of the song. To the point of tears” (Natalya M).<sup>4</sup></p> <p>“What has been done to the country? How could this be done under the strongest army in the world and the KGB?” (Evgeniy V).</p>
4.	116469	804/54	<p>“Tanja, Tanja, you missed such a man, now you would be a mother, what were you missing!?” (Darya Belousova). Answer: No, it is just not her Destiny!” (Laura Zhakhina).</p> <p>“Lord, people, is there such a prayer to stop the war. People are dying... mothers cry... it is frightful. Pray for peace, who knows how” (Svetlana Nova).<sup>5</sup></p>
5.	101802	671/37	<p>“‘Father Matthew’ look, I, like this film, watched it in one breath, it rested my soul” (Larisa Soboleva).</p>

<sup>4</sup> We are talking about the song of Bulat Okudzhava entitled “Song about infantry”.

<sup>5</sup> The comment was added after 20 February 2022, so it probably concerns the war in Ukraine.

6.	86136	692/70	<p>“Thank you for a great, life story. I myself have been working for 15 years in a nursing home, I am their daughter and granddaughter, they become so close. A lot of people are very, very lonely... each with their own life story...” (Angela Becker).</p> <p>“I am crying, I was six years old when my dad died, I don’t remember him, only from the photo, a wonderful film” (Tatyana Konoplova).</p> <p>“This film exposed my emotional wounds. People, before it’s too late – listen to the voice of conscience!” (Theodore White).</p>
7.	90276	713/44	<p>“The movie is good, but the statistics are bad. Russia is on the first place in the number of male suicides. And in terms of the number of divorces. Demographic crisis” (Aleksandr Vesoly).</p>
8.	82912	616/42	<p>“It’s a wonderful series. I came on the recommendation in the topic ‘Father Matthew’, and I discovered such a miracle!” (mau44992).</p> <p>“Dad said the other day. Granny worked with him at the factory, remembered her golden childhood under Stalin. The child was still there, the parents sent for bread to the store. She took the newspaper from the table to wrap the bread in it and went. No sooner had she moved far from home – her father runs after her on all pairs. I caught up, took the newspaper and kicked the girl off. You know what? There was a portrait of Stalin in the newspaper, but the child did not attach importance to this. Maybe I didn’t notice, it was shallow. Such is ‘thanks to Comrade Stalin for our happy childhood!’” (Alla Shevchenko).</p>
9.	77016	615/59	<p>“I recommend watching the 20th serial film ‘Father Matthew’. This, as well as the film ‘Savior under the Birches’ must be watched repeatedly. When you watch these films, you involuntarily look into your soul and see how much dirt there is [...] Unfortunately, we see the sins of other people, and our own [...] as if the veil is hiding. It would be good to get rid of at least some for the rest of your life. But we must hurry, do not exchange your life for vanity, because no one knows when the last hour of earthly life will come. And the answer will have to be held before the Lord for everything: deeds, words and even thoughts. Thanks to all the creators and artists of this film!” (Svetlana Sdobnova).</p> <p>“If that were true... the mountains can be moved. I still watch this movie as a beautiful fairy tale. I watch and cry for the freedom that has been taken away” (Bezymiannaya Zvezda).</p>
10.	83219	654/59	<p>In my city I was in two temples: in one like dogs gawk, in the other a little more polite. We don’t have the kindness of kindness in any of these temples. This is in the city of Kurgan the temple of Alexander Nevsky and the church of the Holy Trinity. What to be surprised – in the cinema is always different as in life (Natalia Kononova). “Answer: I sympathize with you. I have been to many cities, and the temples were not rude anywhere. On the contrary, every time I left the temple, there was a huge gratitude for the help and attention of the people in the temple!” (Rodnoj dom).</p>

11.	79750	687/72	“About seven years ago I watched this film for the first time. I reviewed it three times. It would seem that there is nothing unusual in these little stories. Ordinary people are shown – not sinless, not perfect. But the soul and heart of which are alive, real. Every time after watching there was a feeling of some kind of warmth” (Olga Dombrovskaya).
12.	79704	1200/200	“I cried at the end! A film about a dream. We have to live like this. But something went wrong” (Larisa Fedorova).

The series appeared on television in 2003, but from the comments on youtube.com, it appears that it is still watched by a large audience. The positive responses can be divided into two kinds: one concerns general, universal and existential problems of a man in the contemporary world, and the other, directly or indirectly, refers to the cultural problem of the post-Soviet Russia. The latter comments are in minority and they were marked in the table above. The first part had the most views and comments. From the second, the number of views and comments began to decrease. Compared to parts 2-11, the last part of the series is characterized by a halving of the number of comments, although the number of views is similar to those of the preceding ten parts. This can be explained by the fact that it is a summary for the entire series, which is why the viewers felt the need to express their opinion. This is indicated by comments like “I love this series... know it almost by heart. Each episode teaches something... and every time I find something new in it for myself” (Comments. Davno nevesta: gesha129). The series also arouses emotions among people who declared themselves as non-believers: “More for god-lovers, but as an atheist, I liked it” (Comments. Davno nevesta: user-hv4ss6wd6j). The “Specific remarks” column shows that viewers drew on their own experiences to understand the message of the series. The comments are emotionally charged. There are repeated references to another religious series *Otec Matvey* (based on *Don Matteo*), in which the character of the priest acts as an authority and guide to everyday life. A huge number of comments refer to the actors’ play. The characters of Yuri Belayev, Georgi Taratorkin, Anatoly Bely and Irina Muravyova are known to viewers from Soviet times and associated with professional acting. Commenters refer both to their own memories and to stories heard – from the mouths of grandparents or parents. A lot of emotions were aroused by episode eight “Weather for tomorrow”. The assessment of the Stalinist era has divided society into those who demand an unequivocal condemnation of Stalinist crimes and the denial of the cult of Stalin and those who have a fondness for those times. In statements approving the Stalinist times, there is nostalgia for superpower. This thread also appears in the commentary on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan,

included in the question: how is it possible that such a powerful state could not cope. However, the comments on secular matters are isolated. The vast majority of statements concern spiritual matters and existential problems.

The chart below shows typical comments for each episode. They were divided into those with universal content and those related to the cultural and historical issues of each episode, that is, the main problem that the director presented as a problem of post-Soviet times.

Table 3. Comments on general and detailed issues of the parts of the series

Title of the part	Comments on general issue	Comments on detailed issue
1. "Otec Georgiy"	"Such films make people cleaner and brighter. Thanks to the creators of this wonderful television series" (Larisa Makarowa). "Thank you very much for the film! It feels like I went to confession! Lightness and peace on the soul... " (Valentina Belousova).	"What a good priest family. I know two priests, simple, rural, also families are good, kind, children are smart, calm. God saves!" (Aldar Kose). "Why so shame the girl she feels like a commodity. Especially she is not going to be a mother" (Oksana Pradivus).
2. "Zolotyje kupola"	"A very correct film, good dialogue, competently staged, simple heartfelt speech. The acting is great! And most importantly, the meaning of faith, the essence of religion, the image of the Lord and the existence of the temple are conveyed!" (Dariya Ullibka).	"Well said I do not trade in other people's sons and I advise you mine" (Ivan Fofonov). "And what kind of love is that? That you can sell it for 3 thousand dollars? The guy is great, but the maiden – God forbid you fall in love with such a woman... There aren't even decent words for those" (Valda Filipsona).
3. "Vmeste s Yuroy"	"Thank you for the film, I watch, and the tears roll by themselves! All life is in front of our eyes, after all, we have something human, since it takes so much for the soul. And judging by the comments, there are so many of us, that it is not unimportant!" (Svetlana Gusak).	"Gratitude from the Motherland for the years of military service: there is nowhere to live and nothing to live on. And how many of these mothers cry for their conjured sons" (Natalja Unru). "The more she worked, the poorer she became" (Pavel Goncharov).
4. "Dima"	"I would like to see the entire list of those rescued under the birches, with timecode indications" (Asaf).	"So who saved whom under the birch trees? (Aleksandr Pizaruk). Answer 1: Savior. And not just under the birch trees. (MrsDiagnoza). Answer 2: Watch it again and you will understand, and if you don't understand, then don't watch anymore, it's not given, so it's a pity. Help you, Lord! I counted a lot of saved people, and it is only the fourth series" (Nina Koshelenko).

5. "Gastrol"	"Where can I find such a Father. It is so light on the soul" (Ελενα Μπαρμπασινα).	"I didn't like this particular episode, I don't like lies" (Rosmary). "The main vodka in the cemetery flows like a river... so according to the Orthodox, and in general the end of this action is a feast! But about the ugly Russian laziness – just to the point!!! A lazy, unhealthy tribe!" (Privet Privet).
6. "Tramvaynyj otec"	"Slowly, the temple of the soul is being built... How good it is to be a Man: conscience is pure, great grace!" (Julya Aleks).	"If young people watched such movies, maybe there would be fewer single-parent families" (Tatyana Demina).
7. "Chudotvornaja"	"Our Lady ruled everything" (Mariya Sherbakova). "The image of the Mother of God saved and directed him to the true path. True" (Lyudmila Luchkina).	"One of the best series, and how played! Especially the scene when Zhmykhin asked Barashkin for forgiveness" (mau44992).
8. "Pogoda na zavtra"	"I think it's about something else. No one discounts the merits of Stalin, but the fact that it was he, by virtue of retaining power, who allowed the arbiters of fate – the "troikas" – to exist – is also a fact. And informers always spoil the lives of normal people and break destinies. And then there's personal responsibility. Just the topic touched upon is very topical and Christian: how to forgive scoundrels. About forgiveness series" (Mashkina Lyudmila Vasilievna).	"First I did not like the series... such a good series and must be ruined... probably the directive was brought and said: it is necessary to bypass Stalin's times... as everywhere and always, lately, because they pay for it... is it possible to praise a man-statist who won the war, who raised and rebuilt the country in a short time, under which life improved every day, the population grew [...] people were happy! [...] My stepfather was imprisoned for a shortage at the freight station, but never once did I hear from him a condemnation of Stalin [...]" (Julya Khmelkovskaya).
9. "Syn dla Lysogo"	"Yes, spiritually a very strong film. You won't see much of that. But in the Christian sense, this is the most important thing – self-knowledge and repentance. This is the meaning of a Christian's life. One of the saints said that the first sign of the beginning of the health of the soul is the vision of one's sins innumerable, like the sand of the sea" (Anna Kizim).	"Here it is, Alexander's repentance – on his knees before the 'Spas Nerukotvornyj, to tears..." (Nina Koshelenko). "And here you are, killed, no one from their filthy business is released by bandits" (Valentina Zloschastiaeva).
10. "Chelovek v raspashonke"	"I watched this wonderful film for a long time when I was young. But now I watched it as if from a different angle. That is not a series that parable" (Alina Gorbunova).	"Lord, how I experienced the whole series, how afraid that some... Larisa or Petyunya, or something else, and everything will fall apart and not happen! How well done, thank you. It's

		<p>an amazing series. Wonderful actors” (mau44992).</p> <p>“Yet envy is the most terrible of all sins, it gives rise to the rest of the sins, of which there are so many in this world” (Kenya. S).</p> <p>“This bleak reality in real life makes me sick. I do not like such people who are shown in the series, seemingly simple, but at the same time they are full of evil, meanness and vices. Nothing cute in one word” (fwys96).</p>
11. “Khor”	<p>“Pity is like medicine – two drops more and killed” (Vera Aloe).</p>	<p>“Oh how her jealousy was ‘one everything, the other nothing’. And the end of tranquility and peace. As there ‘at the door sin lies; he draws you to him, but you dominate him’, but sin itself became master...” (Pavel Goncharov).</p> <p>“And why is everyone dumped on the regent!?! Some are to blame, and others are to blame. It is time for the priest to think that it is not the regent’s fault, but the root of the evil that must be sought from the envious singer who inflated the censer with this machine. He also talks to the regent, inserts the rest of the singer of the mind, it is immediately clear how the evil one confuses” (Daria Belousova).</p>
12. “Davno nevesta”	<p>“It’s a great movie, the artists are great. It’s nice to look at good people!!! And especially to see the love of the priest for people for God and his beautiful family. If only the grace of God would reign in the temples” (Tatyana Epanchinova).</p>	<p>“I watched in the zero years and thought ‘well, a good believable series about ordinary people in life situations’, now I watch and think ‘yes, these are practically saints!’. What have they done to the people if decent, honest and kind people are now perceived as a miracle” (Pavel Goncharov).</p>

The comments indicate that the spiritual and secular orders intertwine. Viewers are looking for inspiration, motivation and solace. They mention catharsis, a sense of harmony and regaining faith in the fact that the good is present in everyday life and ultimately wins. The question of authority arises among the specific issues. The family of the priest with the values professed by them is perceived as a model of relationships. *Batyushka* himself awakens longing for the presence of a wise man to whom one can go for advice. In the comments there were questions about where such a person can be found in

real life. Emotions are also aroused by the position of women, especially Tatiana, for whom *batyushka* is looking for a candidate for a husband. The traditional image of the vocation and role of women (Evdokimov, 1991, pp. 171-173), primarily as mother and wife, clashes with the achievements of emancipation. One viewer expressed outrage over the matchmaking process as humiliating for a young woman.

The commentaries also show that viewers are aware of the problems that remained after the Soviet era: the Afgancy and the Stalinist era. Compassion for the situation of the common man who has fallen victim to the times is mixed with a longing for greatness. The latter is expressed in the falsification of memories of terror. The subject of the assessment is also poverty and the inability to accumulate wealth. Mention was also made of crime, which in the 1990's was a real scourge: against this background, the commenter assessed the death of Alexandr – Lysyy. The reality of the post-Soviet era as a collection of socio-political facts was intertwined with the assessment of human characters. In the comments there are sentences that contain an assessment of the behavior of the heroes of the series. Lying and envy were stigmatized.

Every part of the show provoked tears. Commenters often wrote that they were crying without knowing why. This fact proves that the content seen on the screen moved very personal strings. Mentions of the church, in turn, show that people are looking for a place where they can feel peace and harmony; the more turbulent the times are, the stronger the desire for asylum becomes.

Comments posted under individual episodes of the series on the youtube.com indicate a great interest in the religious content of the film. They also confirm that the series has not lost its popularity in the twenty years that have passed since its premiere. Many commenters emphasized that they watch the series many times and intend to return to it.

Comments posted on other opinion-forming channels confirm the above conclusions. There were 14 comments on the otzovik.com. The first one appeared only in 2013 with the following remarks: "By the way, I was very surprised that no one has yet written a review on this film. Although it was filmed in 2003." The last comment is from January 3, 2022.

On the channel there is an opportunity to add feedback from comment readers. Each of the opinions has an additional dozen or so – several dozen comments from other users of the site. This greatly increases the range. Otvovik.com gives the user the opportunity to post an extensive reflection on the content viewed, a short summary sentence, recommendations of the content viewed and sentence-slogan, viewing time. The series was positively evaluated by all 14 commentators.



The following strengths are highlighted: “Teaches about the basics of Orthodox culture”, “Soulful, truly spiritual, talented actors, easy to understand, awakens all the best in the soul”, “Interesting, with meaning. Good movie”, “In one of the 12 episodes you will find something about yourself”, “Close theme, interesting stories, cinema for the whole family”. The idea of the director was fully understood. *Levnadsbana* wrote: “This series is about the faith and life of a provincial temple and its inhabitants. I decided to watch it according to my husband’s reviews, and I was delighted, it you watch it in one breath. [...] I’ve watched the series several times and will review it again, so I recommend it to everyone.” The forum users highlighted educational power of the series. *Natasha Larina* wrote: “I would very much like this film to be watched carefully by the audience, especially the young. Here, each episode can be watched separately. And, in general, you will not be able to watch this series in a ‘volley’ – too much emotional impact.” Much attention was also devoted to the emotion triggered by every part of the series: *Samsval* wrote: “the spirit and religious mood of the film immediately became clear. The first reaction of consciousness was the rejection of open mental relationships, the idea that this is not the case anywhere else. But then, tuning in and trying to understand, the film captivated and interested.” As for the time of watching the series, it was different. Some, like the user with the pseudonym *Natasha Larina* returned to it several times: “The mini-series *Spas under the Birches* has long been dearly loved by me. I watched it many times and in its entirety when there was time, and in separate episodes when there was no time.” The others, like *Semasval* watched several series under the row, however – despite the delight – they did not watch all of them: “During a corporate trip [...] the bus turned on the movie *Savior under the Birches* [...] – I never watched the last 2 episodes.”

As it was mentioned in the introductory part of this article, following the words of the director himself, Ejdlin intended to show how the Orthodox faith informs all spheres of life and can serve as a tool to solve contemporary problems. He managed to achieve that. “The viewers, based on the concept sung by the correct religious postulates: love for one’s neighbor, kindness, loyalty, honesty, devotion, self-sacrifice, etc. And at the same time, the director managed to consider common episodes of our life. With many, each of us had to meet in person or on the example of close or familiar people. Thus, the series becomes very instructive, showing us a reflection of reality, with the right solutions to the problems that arise, so to speak” (otozvik.com: *Pochtalyon Pechkin*). Similarly, the series was received by users of the portal kinopoisk.ru. Here we find 4 extensive comments along with the opinions of other users.

There are many more opinions on kino-teatr.ru – here, we find 64 comments. They confirm the conclusions drawn from the analysis of statements posted by the users of otozvik.com.

### CONCLUSIONS

The series *Saviour under the Birches* fulfilled the task set by the director: to give people hope and remind them of values that can be signposts in the difficult post-Soviet reality. Together with the series *Otec Matvej* it fits into the genre of religious cinema. In contemporary Russian cinema, Orthodox values are realized as three main thematic themes: the image of the saint, the salvation of the common man, and Holy Rus (Garanov, 2014, p. 14). In post-Soviet Russia, many films and series were made, which brought an overview of religious, Orthodox values, and their functioning in the life of the state and society. Eydlin's series enriches them with content available to an ordinary person. In the public perception, it is perceived as a direct indication of how to live and act. Moreover, viewers find their own fate in the characters, recognize the people with whom they meet every day. The line between good and evil is not blurred but there is an agreement to leave judgment to God. Acceptance of human imperfections brings peace and catharsis. The desire to find asylum in the symbol of the church and the figure of *batyushka* also becomes clear. Questions about salvation are transformed into questions about the possibilities of solving existential problems and finding the meaning of past, difficult events.

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KOMUNIKOWANIE TREŚCI RELIGIJNYCH  
ORAZ ICH ODBIÓR W PRZESTRZENI SPOŁECZNEJ:  
SERIAL *ZBAWICIEL POD BRZOZAMI*

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera analizę treści 12-częściowego serialu pt. *Zbawiciel pod brzożami* (2003). Główny zamysł reżysera, Leonida Ejdlina, by pokazać widzom zwyczajną stronę życia, związaną z wiarą i z poszukiwaniem właściwych decyzji w trudnych sytuacjach, został skonfrontowany z komentarzami widzów, zamieszczanymi pod kolejnymi częściami serii na youtube.com, kinopoisk.ru, otzovik.com oraz kino-teatr.ru. Materiał źródłowy jest traktowany jako tekst kultury, w ujęciu Łotmanowskim. Przyjętą metodą badawczą jest analiza treści oraz metoda hermeneutyczna, uwzględniająca konteksty. Analizy treści serialu pozwoliły wykazać, że Ejdlin zrealizował swój zamysł pokazania prawosławia jako religii-kultury, opartej na realiach codzienności życia zwykłego człowieka, zaabsorbowanego problemami materialnymi, a jednocześnie poszukującego sensu dotyczących go problemów w świecie pozamaterialnym. Analiza komentarzy internautów, z kolei, uwiarydociła, że utożsamiają oni swoje problemy z tymi, których doświadczają bohaterowie serialu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** prawosławie; kino; rosyjska kultura; społeczeństwo; postradziecka trauma.