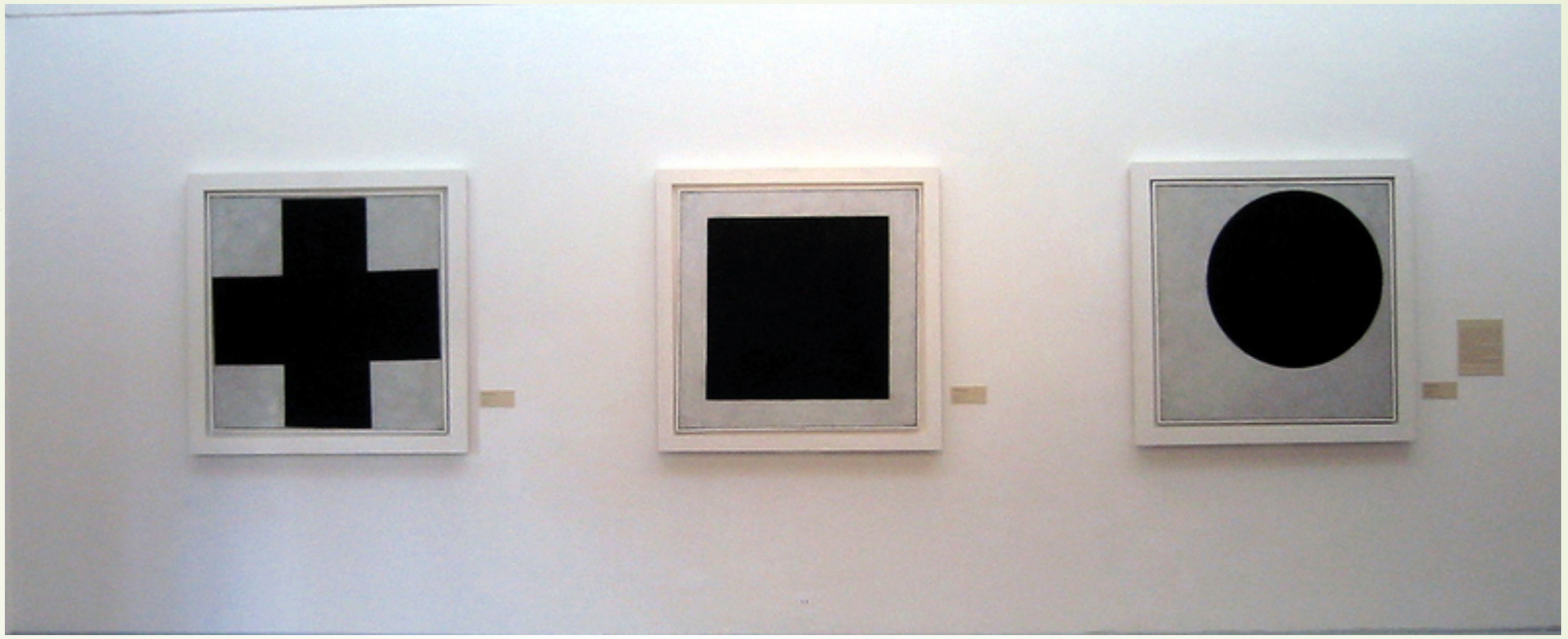


Religious Markets, Art Words, and New Religious Movements: The Mystery of Kazimir Malevich

Massimo Introvigne

ASREC 2015 Meeting - Boston

Niches in the Spiritual Market

- Religious economy focuses on supply. It postulates that demand remains comparatively stable, even in the long period. This happens, the theory as developed by Rodney Stark (left) and others argues, because consumers, including consumers of religion, tend to distribute themselves in market niches according to their demographics, financial capabilities, and preferences

Niches and Strictness

- Stark, Roger Finke and Lawrence Iannaccone (right) created several models of religious demand that distinguish between niches according to strictness and costs. Religion is more strict when its costs are higher, and when its members are expected to believe and behave in a more traditional and conservative way than society at large. Religious consumers distribute themselves in niches of different strictness

Niches Are Not Created Equal

- One of the conclusions of the religious economy theory most supported by empirical data is that niches are not equal in dimensions. There are, indeed, more consumers in the central moderate-conservative niche than in the others; and the strict niche is larger than its liberal counterpart

The Liberal Niche Dilemma

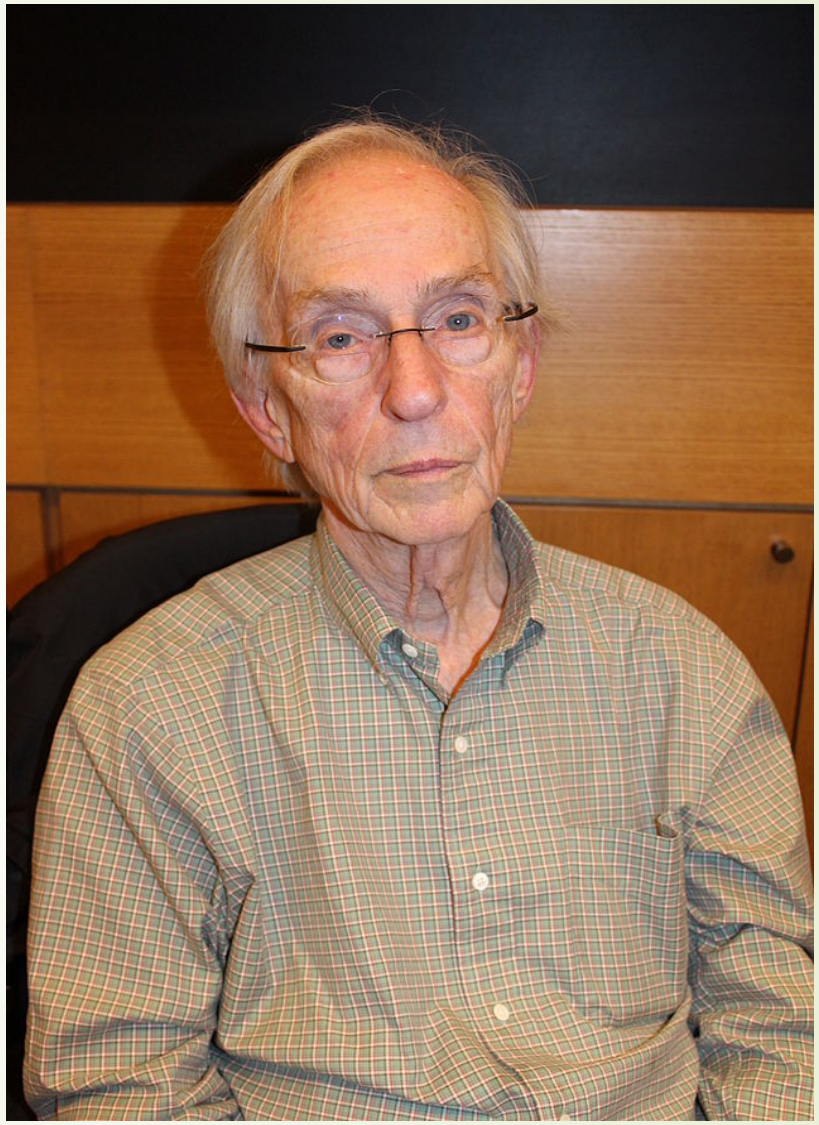
- Liberal ideas in general seem to prevail in most Western societies. Why they do not prevail when it comes to determining religious demand?
- One of the answers is that liberal ideas prevail mostly among *those who are not religious*, while the theory of religious demand does not deal with society in general but only with its segment including those interested in religion
- In most Western countries, however, atheists are but a limited percentage of population. In Europe, a solid majority does not join any form of organized religion but is not atheistic («believing without belonging»)

Competition in the Liberal Niche

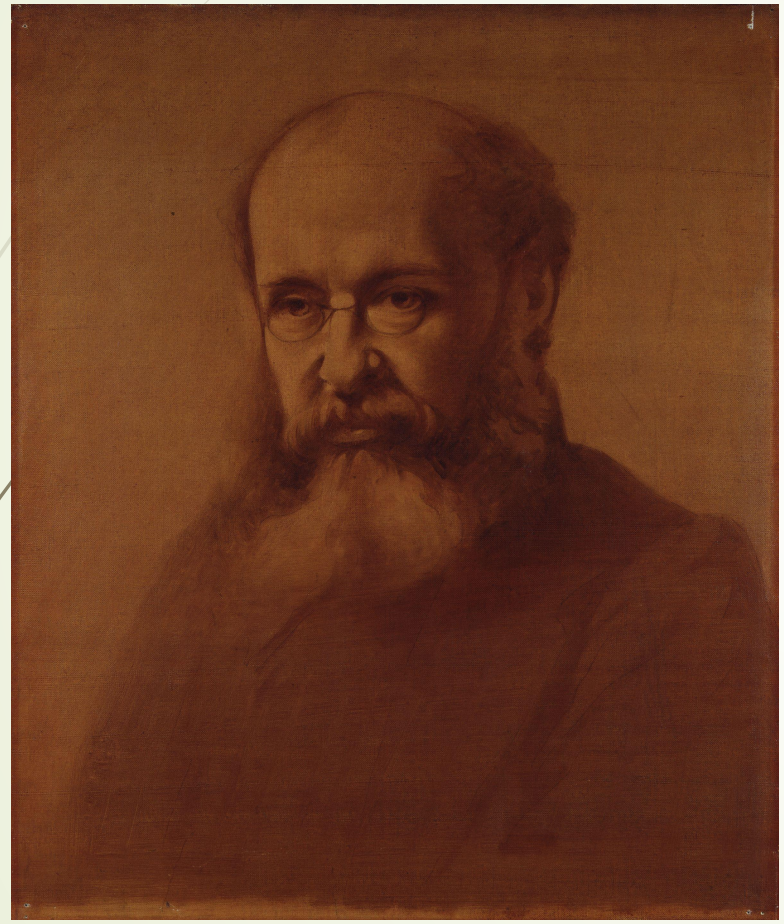
- Those in the liberal niche of the religious demand may join a low-intensity form of organized religion, or no institutional religion at all
- Low-intensity religion competes in this niche with other «spiritual but not religious» offers. They may include some forms of the New Age phenomenon, or low-demand esoteric organizations such as the Theosophical Society or certain versions of Freemasonry
- This paper examines the hypothesis that modern art may also offer to religious consumers in the liberal niche the spirituality they look for, in competition with other agencies. In order to test the hypothesis, a closer look at modern art is in order

Art Worlds

- An important textbook for the comparatively recent discipline of the Sociology of the arts is Howard S. Becker's *Art Worlds (*1984). Becker regards art as socially constructed by a plurality of actors, forming together an «art world». The art world, rather than the individual artist, is responsible for producing works of art



Trollope's Butler



- In Becker's famous, if controversial, example, the butler who used to wake up every day the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope (1815-1882, left), serving him tea and allowing him to start his writing, was a part of the art world that produced the novels. Less controversial is that critics, audiences, patrons have a crucial role in determining whether a certain work should be called art, and thus cooperate in its social production

Art Worlds and Religion

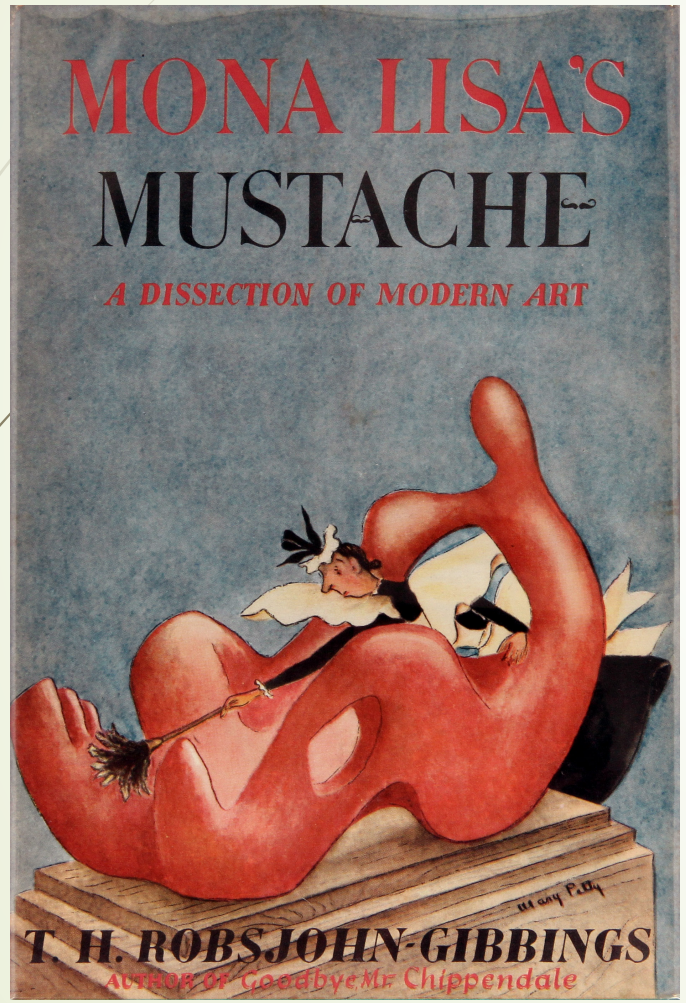
- Few of Becker's examples concern religion, but there is little doubt that religious bodies and agencies have been quite relevant in creating and sustaining art worlds throughout the centuries

Modern Art and Religion

- Modern art is a very complicated commodity. It is accepted and promoted (i) for its aesthetic features, (ii)for its potential as an economic investment, and (iii) because it is attuned to certain worldviews
- Although the three elements constantly interact within themselves, what kind of art is promoted by certain social groups is also determined by religion, as well as by non-religious ideologies

View of booths at Art Basel Miami Beach 2014

Mainline Religion vs Modern Art



- Mainline religion has noticed at least since the 1950s that, for certain categories of religious consumers, the aesthetics of modern art provide a spiritual experience that may be in competition with institutional religion
- One strategy has been to warn their members against modern art as evil and even demonic, occasionally using the argument – originally developed by secular art critics such as Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905-1976) in his *Mona Lisa's Mustache* (1947) – that modern art largely originated in an esoteric and occult milieu

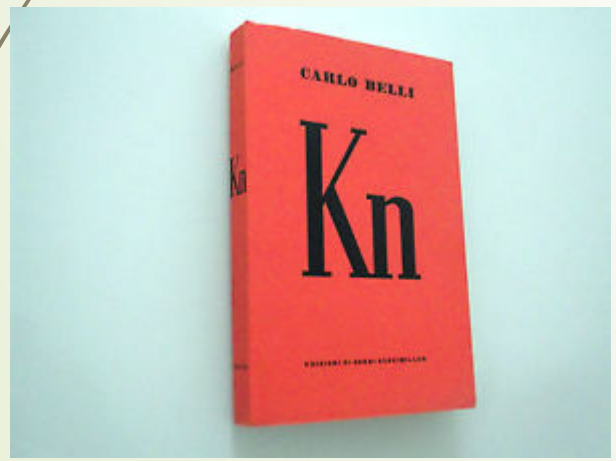
Mainline Religion *and* Modern Art

U.S. Air Force Academy Chapel, Colorado Springs (1962)

- A different strategy by mainline institutional religion has been to embrace modern art (at first, mostly architecture), arguing that it includes potentially religious values and may offer the starting point for a dialogue allowing churches to recapture a certain kind of religious demand

The Catholic Connection

- In the Roman Catholic Church the first confrontation happened during the Holy Year 1950. Groups respectively hostile and favorable to modern art organized competing exhibitions in Rome, with some controversies centering around Alfred Manessier (1911-1993; *Process and Flagellation of Christ*, right, 1949)



Carlo Belli and KN

- The debate focused mostly on abstract art. Is it inherently anti-religious or iconoclastic? The main manifesto of Italian abstract art, *KN*, hailed by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) as one of the must-read books on the subject, was written in 1935 by a conservative Catholic, Carlo Belli (1903-1991: *Rapporti*, 1929, above). Belli used the philosophy of the Catholic priest Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855, beatified in 2007) in order to claim that the abstract forms and colors correspond to the world in its deepest truth, as God sees it

«Christian» Abstract Art?

- While there are Christians who still oppose abstract art, some notable abstract artists are Christian believers and even priests, such as the Korean Dominican father Kim En Joong

Theosophy and Modern Art

- The Theosophical Society, a quasi-religious movement based on Western esotericism and Westernized Hinduism and Buddhism, was an important part of the process creating art worlds since its foundation in 1875
- Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (1935-1992) published in 1970 his seminal volume about Theosophical influences on Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944; *Sky Blue*, 1940,right)

A Booming Academic Field

- Although some of Ringbom's arguments were thoroughly criticized, he opened a door for subsequent scholarship. There is a long way from Ringbom's lonely volume of 1970 to the Amsterdam conference *Enchanted Modernities* of 2013, with more than 150 scholars discussing the relationship between Theosophy and the arts, and another 2,000 connected via streaming

The Role of the Theosophical Society

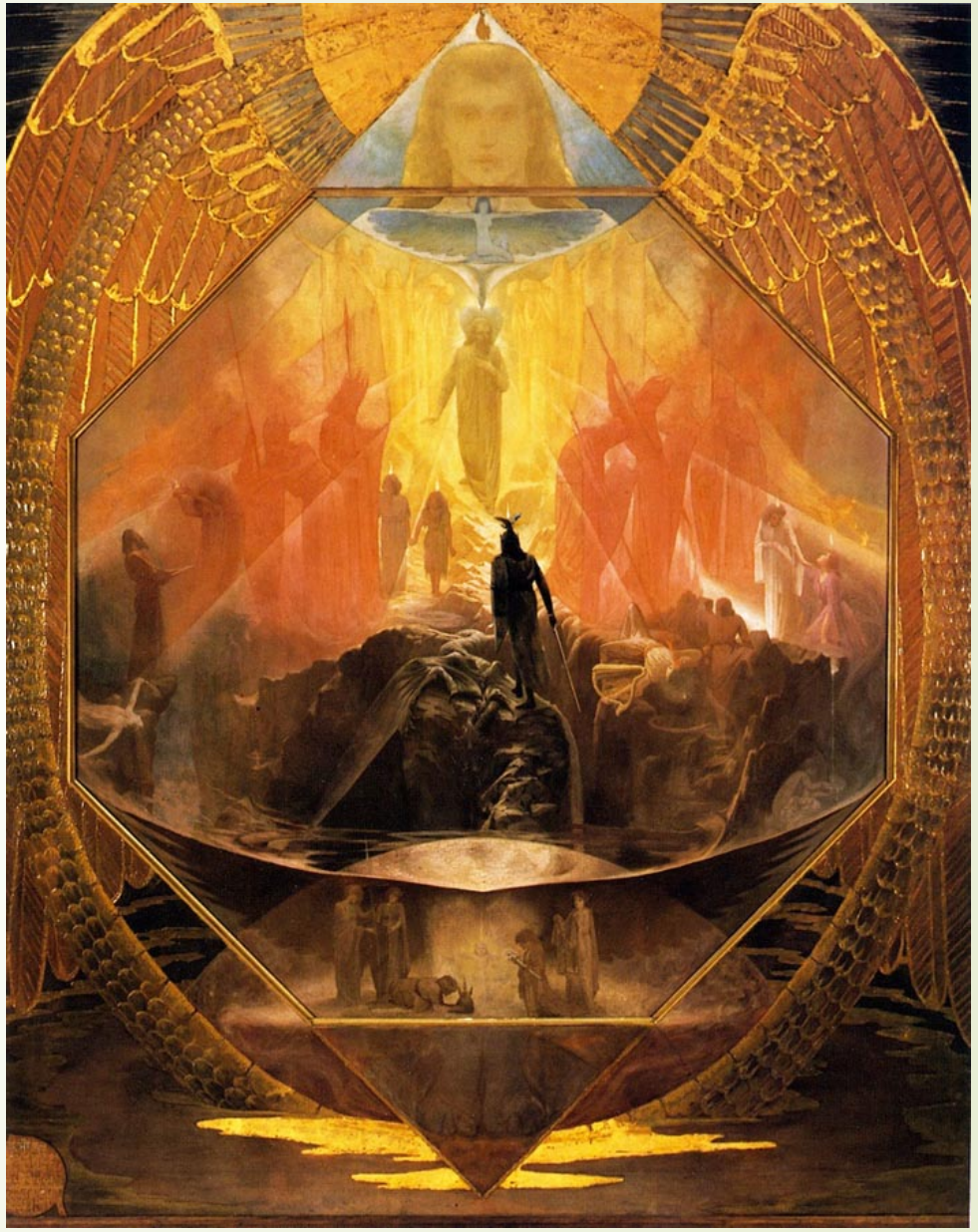
- The role of the Theosophical Society, founded by Russian traveler Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and American lawyer colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), was not typically that of a patron. Unlike the Catholic Church, the Society normally did not orient artists through its commissions
- If several actors politically negotiate the process where a work becomes art, however, the Theosophical Society was often part of this negotiation, before and after the works were created

Multiple Influences

- Such Theosophical art world was never uniform. Artists who were card-carrying members of the Theosophical Society went from Symbolist (Jean Delville, 1867-1953) to pioneers of abstract art (Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944). They operated in very different artistic milieu, from France (Paul Sérusier, 1864-1927) to Canada (Lawren Harris, 1885-1970). There were even itineraries of artist going from Theosophy to Catholicism, such as Jan Verkade (1868-1946, left), who became a Benedictine monk

«Theosophical» Artists?

- Theosophy influenced dozens of important artists, but that does not mean that the Theosophical Society developed a conscious strategy aimed at using modern art to strengthen its spiritual offer. In fact, the Society included artists since its foundation but its leaders realized how influential it had been on modern art only after World War II
- Only a handful of Theosophical artists wrote on the relationships between their art and Theosophy, including the early Symbolist Reginald Machell (1854-1927: *The Path*, right), Delville, Harris, and Mondrian

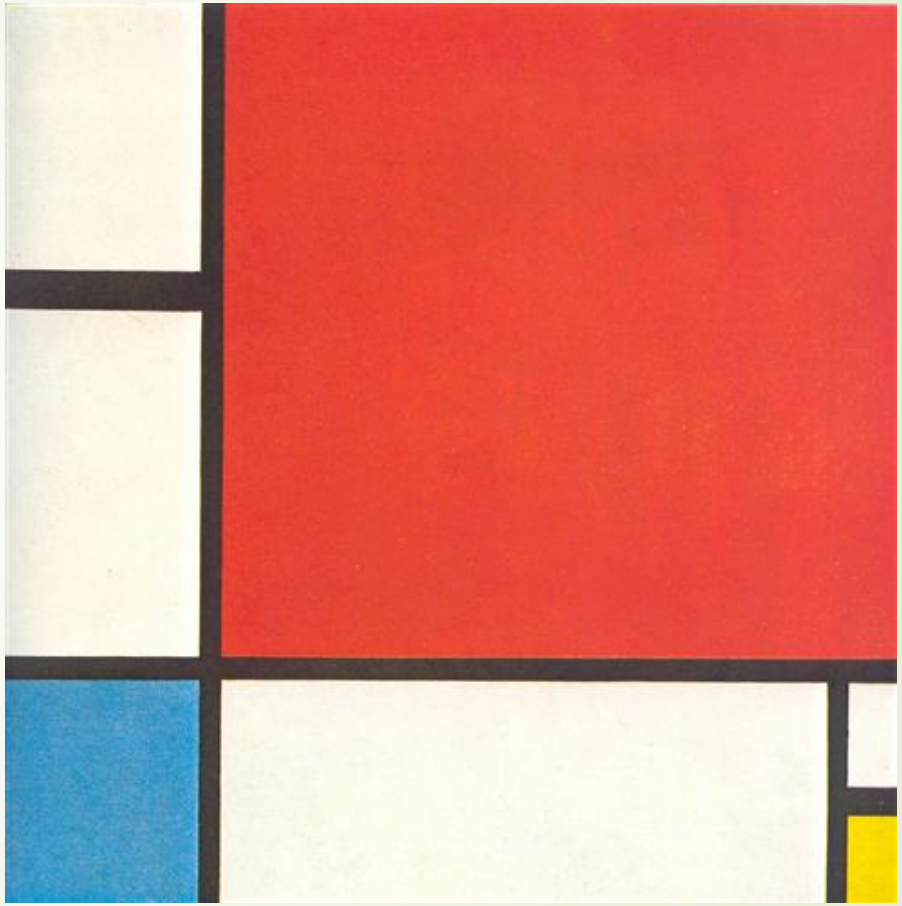


Mondrian and Theosophy

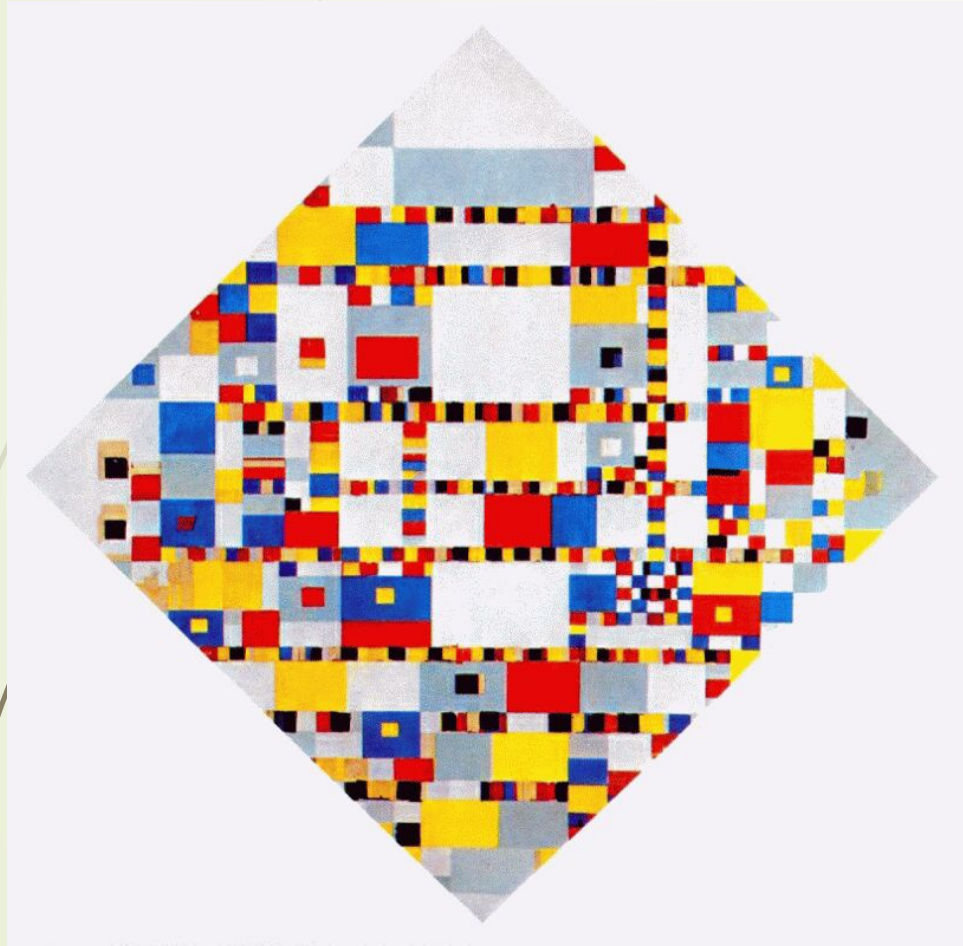
- An interesting case is Mondrian. Active membership in the Theosophical Society played an important role in his intellectual career (see his very Theosophical *Evolution*, 1910-1911, above), yet the Dutch Theosophical Society never fully understood nor promoted his art

Neo-Plasticism as Religion

- Ultimately, Mondrian *(Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow*, 1930, right) came to see his vision of art, Neo-Plasticism, as a millenarian project for transforming the whole of society. He believed that, just as the Neo-Plastic way of painting disposed of the old art and created an entirely new one, so Neo-Plasticism would end up destroying the old forms of religion and even of politics, and creating new, simpler and better ones



Spirituality, rather than Religion



- In the end, Mondrian (*Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1944, left) theorized precisely that art can serve, for an «enlightened» segment of modern society, as a spiritual alternative to institutional religion, and even to organizations such as the Theosophical Society or Freemasonry (the latter refused to accept the painter as a member)
- Of course, few if any joined Neo-Plasticism as a «new religion». But the deep spiritual experiences many felt before works by Mondrian and others did function as a self-sufficient form of spirituality – without leading them to any *movement*, Theosophy included

Pistoletto and Omnitheism

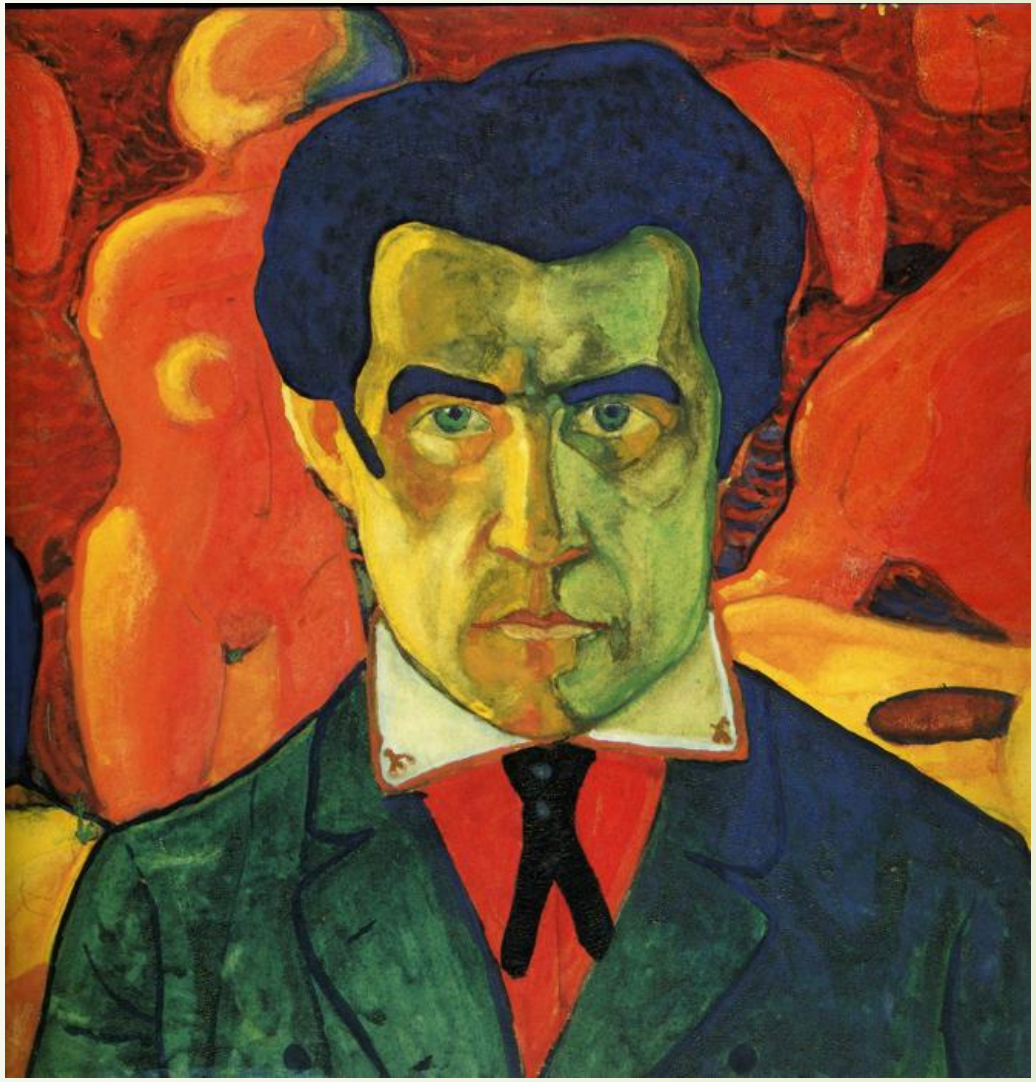
- One contemporary artist who consciously promoted the role of modern art as creating a «secular spirituality» for those who no longer regard as relevant traditional religions is Michelangelo Pistoletto. He is a leading figure in the Italian Arte Povera movement, with exhibitions held in leading international museums, including the Louvre and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Pistoletto (left, *Venus of the Rags*, 1967, and right, his apple, symbol of his "Third Paradise", 2007) called his proposal «Omnitheism» and actively promoted it through manifestos and interviews

Religions without Followers?

- Mondrian or (so far) Pistoletto (here smashing his well-known mirrors) did not recruit a significant number of followers for their ambitious new forms of spirituality. However, they contributed to spreading the general idea that modern art can offer to some all the spiritual experiences they look for

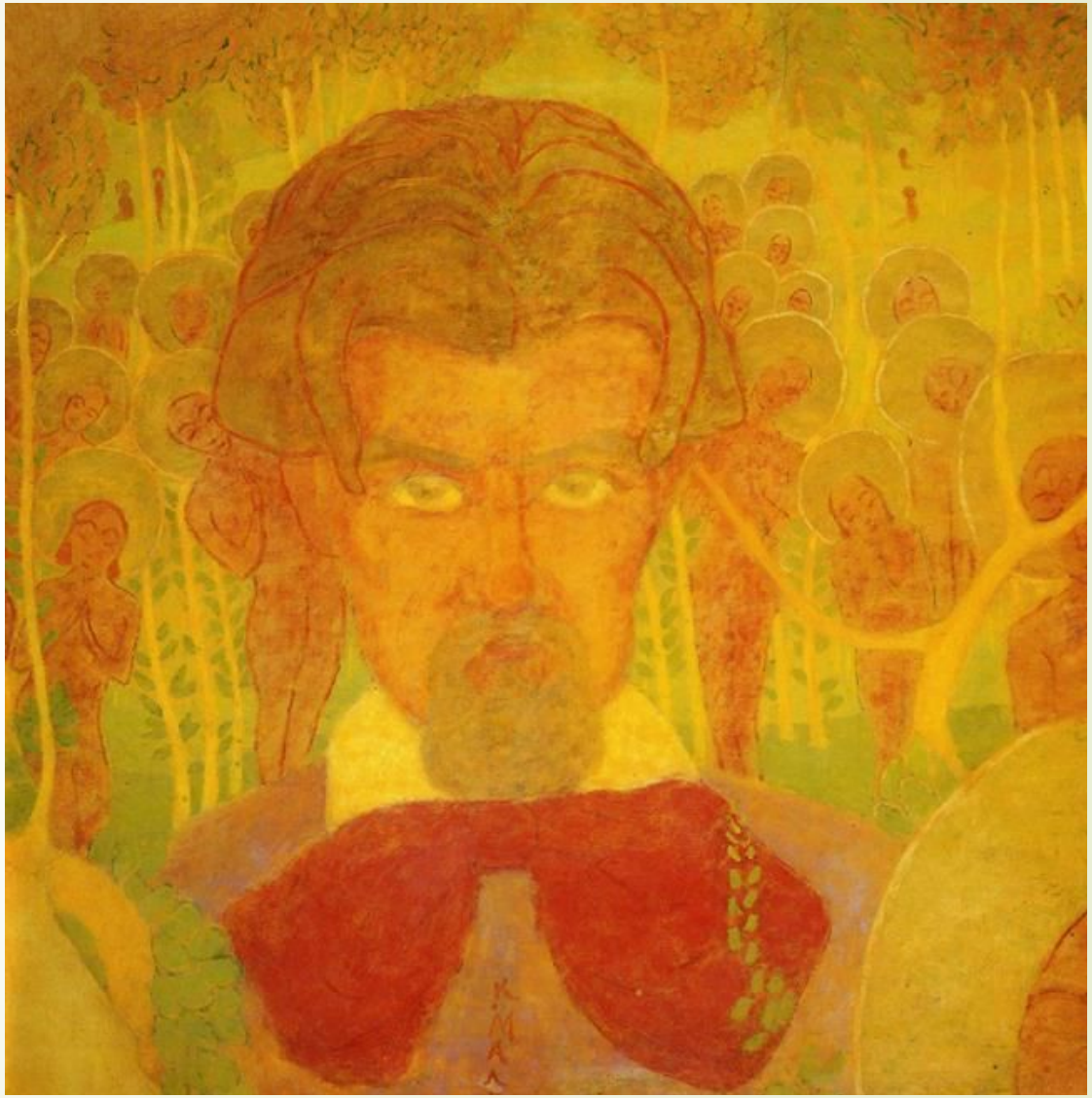
The Mystery of Malevich

- A different case was Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935: *Self Portrait*, 1912, right). He is crucial to our hypothesis because, at various stages, his artistic worldview, called Suprematism, did offer to a small but not insignificant niche what appeared as a viable alternative to other forms of religion and spirituality



Young Malevich

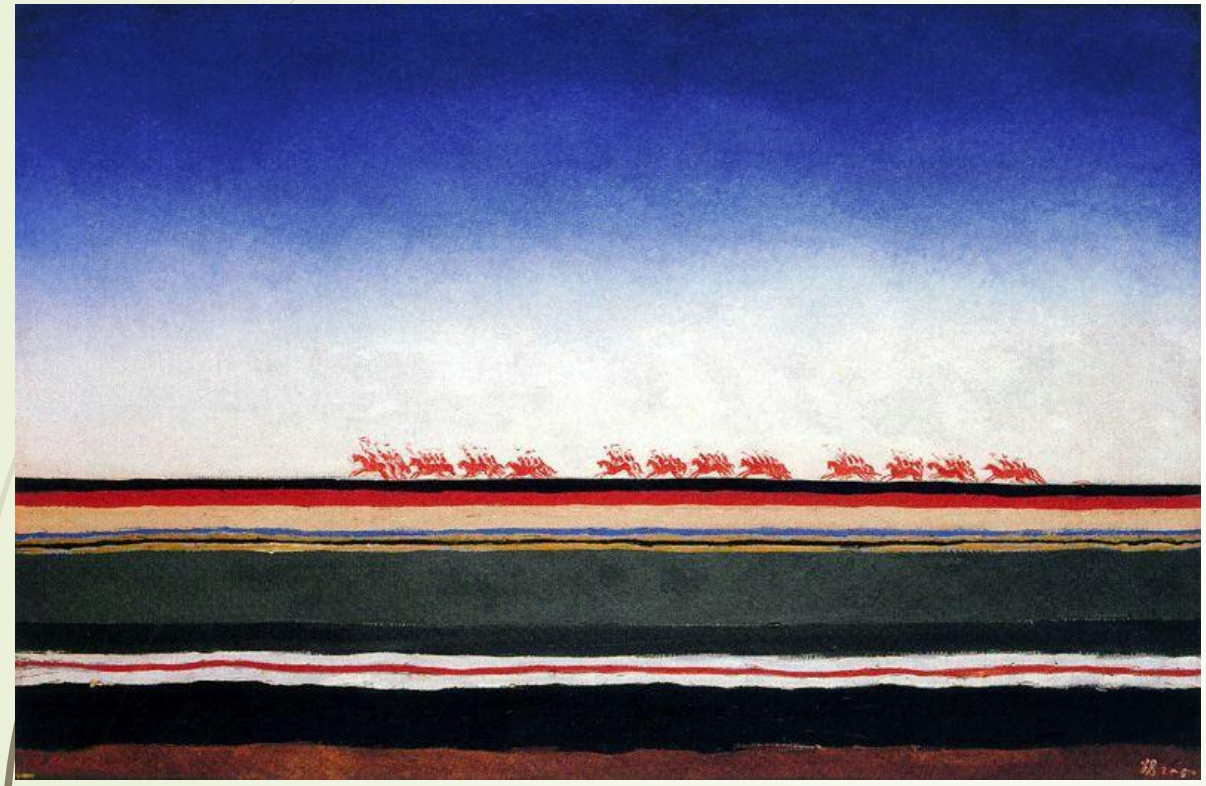
- Young Malevich tried his hand at religious painting. In his twenties he prepared studies for Christian fresco paintings, where however – as he later explained – he portrayed himself as God (right). Rather than evidencing early megalomaniac attitudes, this may be an early version of his later theory of art as religion, and the artist as God in the microcosm of the painting



Malevich before the Revolution

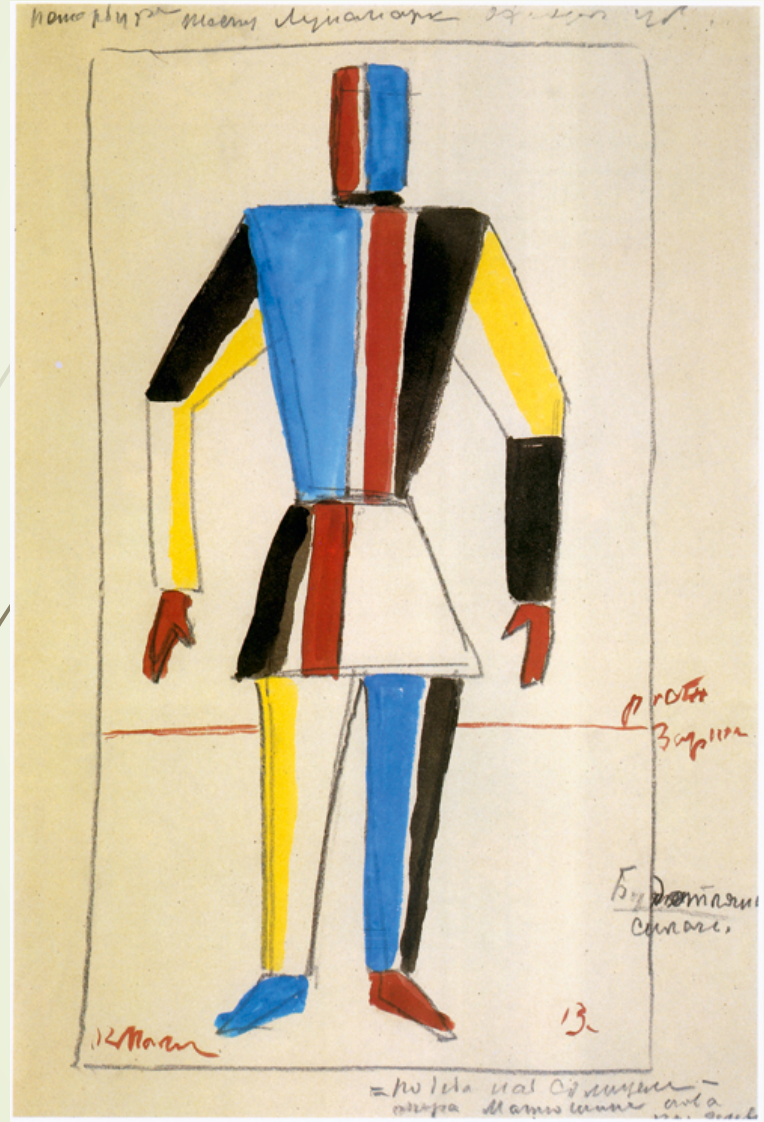
- Before 1917, several Russian avant-garde artists both were interested in alternative spirituality and found their patrons in the niche sharing similar interests. Malevich (*The Woodcutter*, 1912, left)was familiar with the works of Pyotr D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), who was a member of the Theosophical Society between 1907 and 1914
- Although critical of the Russian Theosophists' high society connections and «reactionary» politics, Malevich was exposed to their ideas through his association with artists and poets of Ouspensky's circle (Michail V. Matyushin [1861-1934], Velimir Khlebnikov [1885-1929], Aleksei Kruchenykh [1886-1968])

Revolutionary Malevich

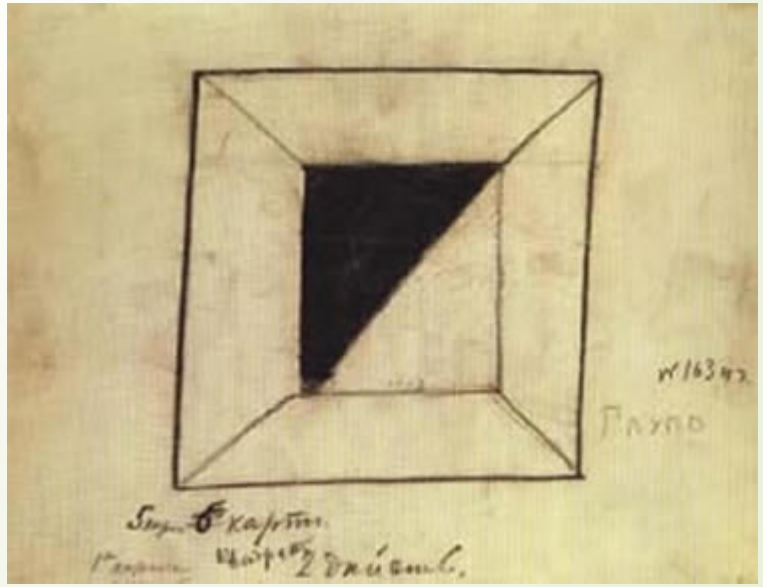


- Conversely, these artists were at odds with the religious mainline and the Orthodox Church. With the Revolution, a third actor emerged, the Communist Party. At first, Communist power understood the modernist artists, including Malevich, as fellow travelers inhabiting the same niche with respect to religion: they both opposed the Orthodox Church. Malevich paid his respects to the Revolution (*Red Cavalry*, 1928, left) and, upon Lenin's death, praised him as a «new spiritual banner»

Victory Over the Sun

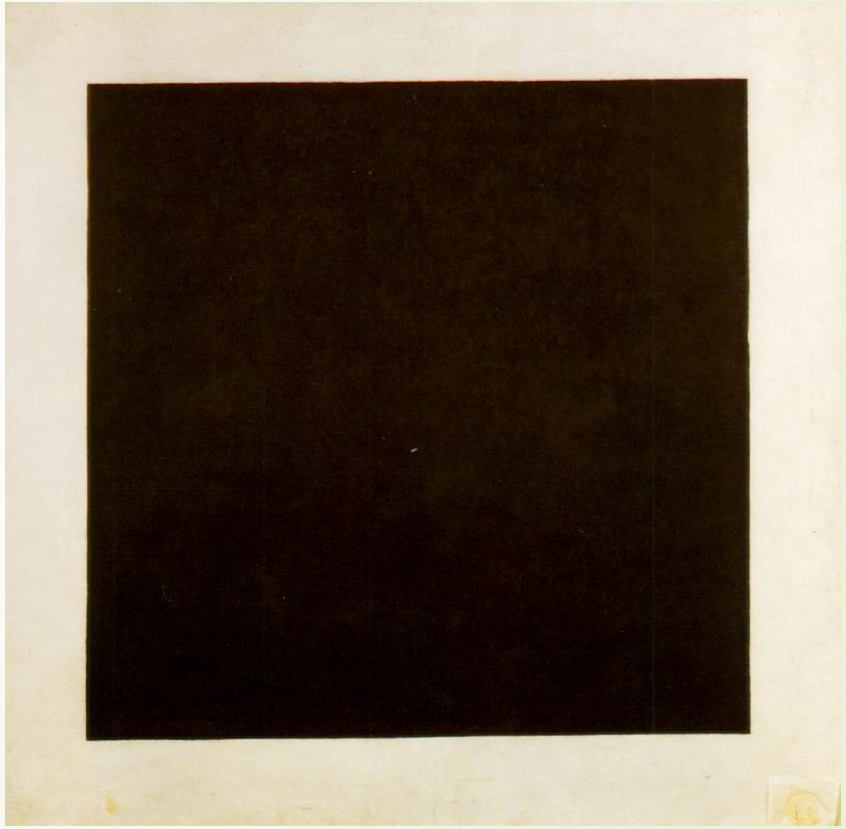


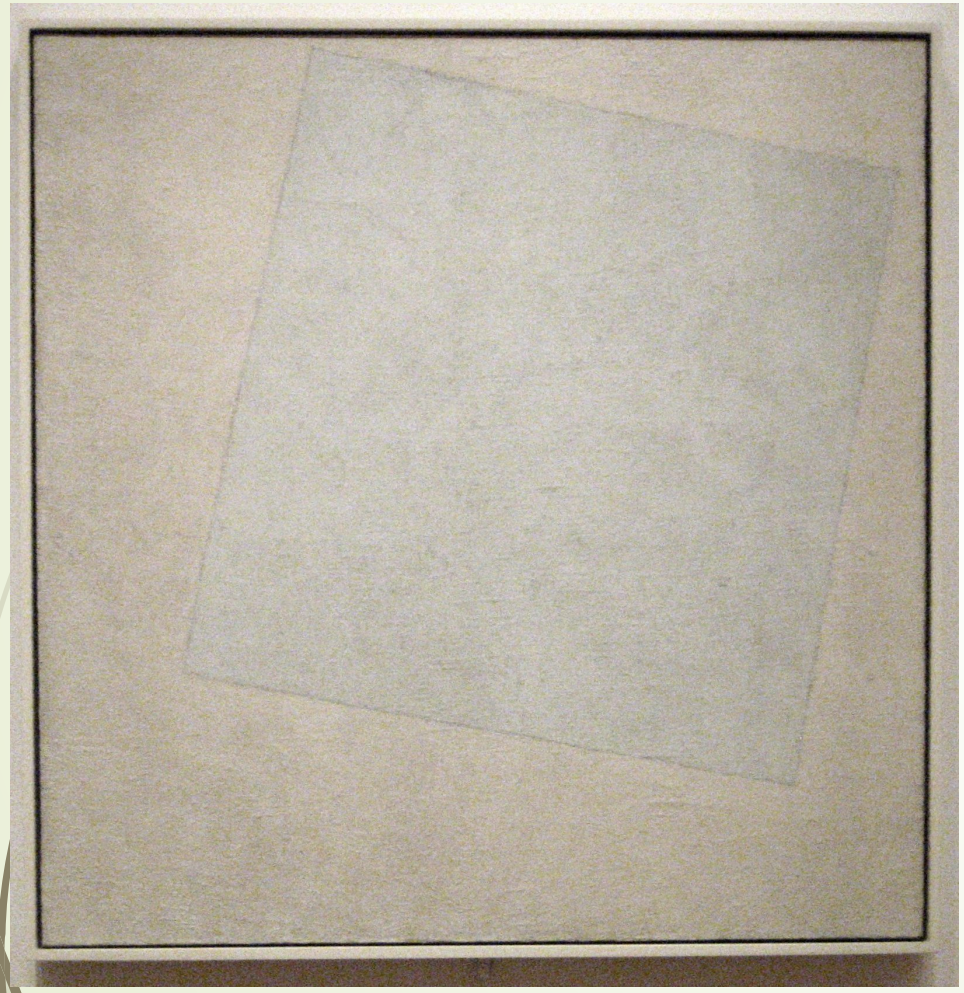
- In 1913, Malevich produced costumes and designs – including a three-dimensional predecessor of what would become his famous *Black Square* – for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* by his (and Ouspensky's) friends Matyushin, Khlebnikov, and Kruchenykh, partially written in a new Futurist language, Zaum. Although the opera was a fiasco, it vaguely included, with a touch of buffoonery, the idea of a new religion replacing the old, represented by the defeated Sun



The Black Square

- Although a controversy exists on when it was really painted, Malevich's *The Black Square* was dated by the artist itself 1915 and regarded as the beginning of Suprematism
- «Were humanity to draw an image of the Divinity after its own image – Malevich wrote –, perhaps the black square is the image of God as the essence of His perfection»

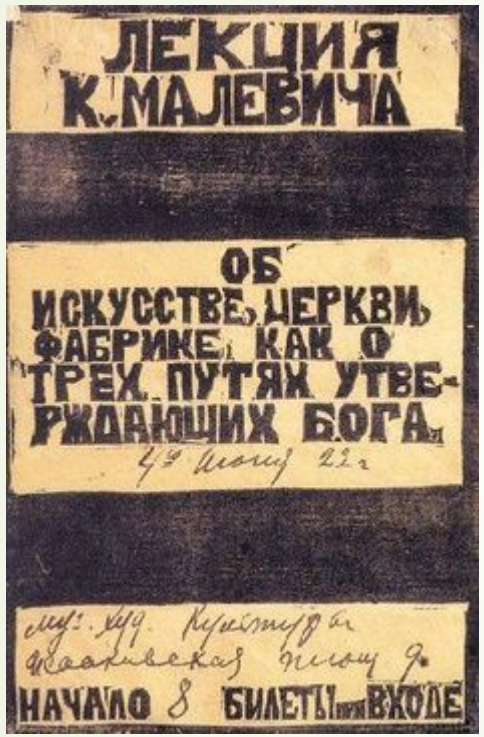




White on White

- After the Revolution, Malevich became a member of the Soviet art establishment and a university professor between 1918 and1930. By 1919, when he painted *White on White* (left), he believed he had shown how Marxist materialism was in fact preparing the way for absolute spiritual freedom

God Is Not Cast Down



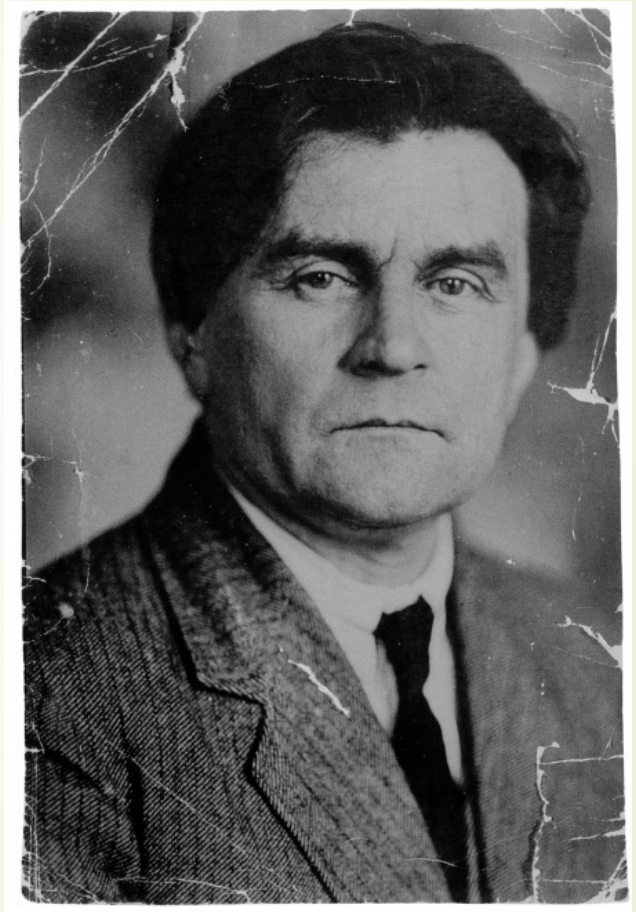
- In 1920, Malevich wrote *God Is Not Cast Down*, where he argued that the idea of God as spiritual essence and energy was compatible with the Revolution, and that only his own brand of art, Suprematism, opened the door to experiencing this new idea of God

Above: Poster for a 1922 lecture by Malevich introducing *God Is Not Cast Down*

«The Time for Religious Change is Coming»

- «Now I have returned or rather I have entered into the religious World; I do not know why it happened so. I visit the churches, look at the saints and the entire spiritual world in action, and now I see in myself, and perhaps in the world as a whole, that the time is coming for a change of religions» - Malevich, Letter to Mikhail Gershenzon [1869-1925], April 11, 1920

  (Gershenzon, an influential essayist and editor, was a member of Moscow's Academy for Spiritual Culture, which included several Theosophists)

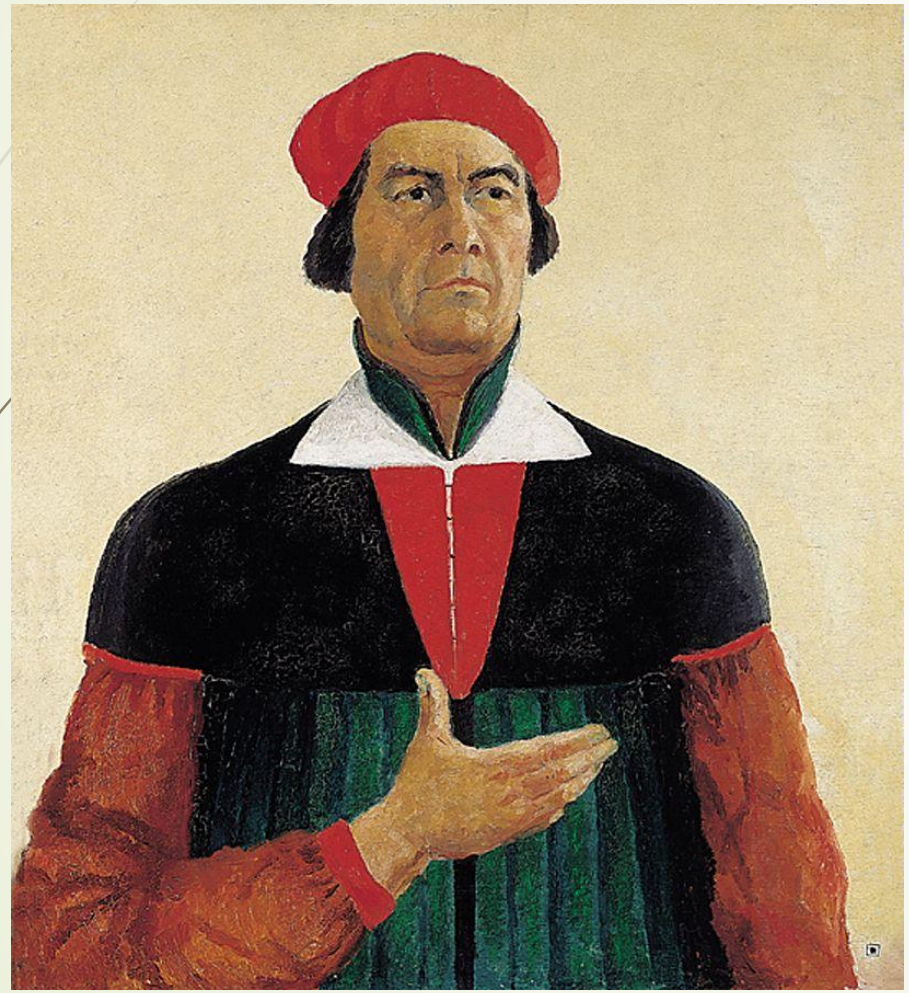


Malevich in the 1920s

Malevich vs The Regime

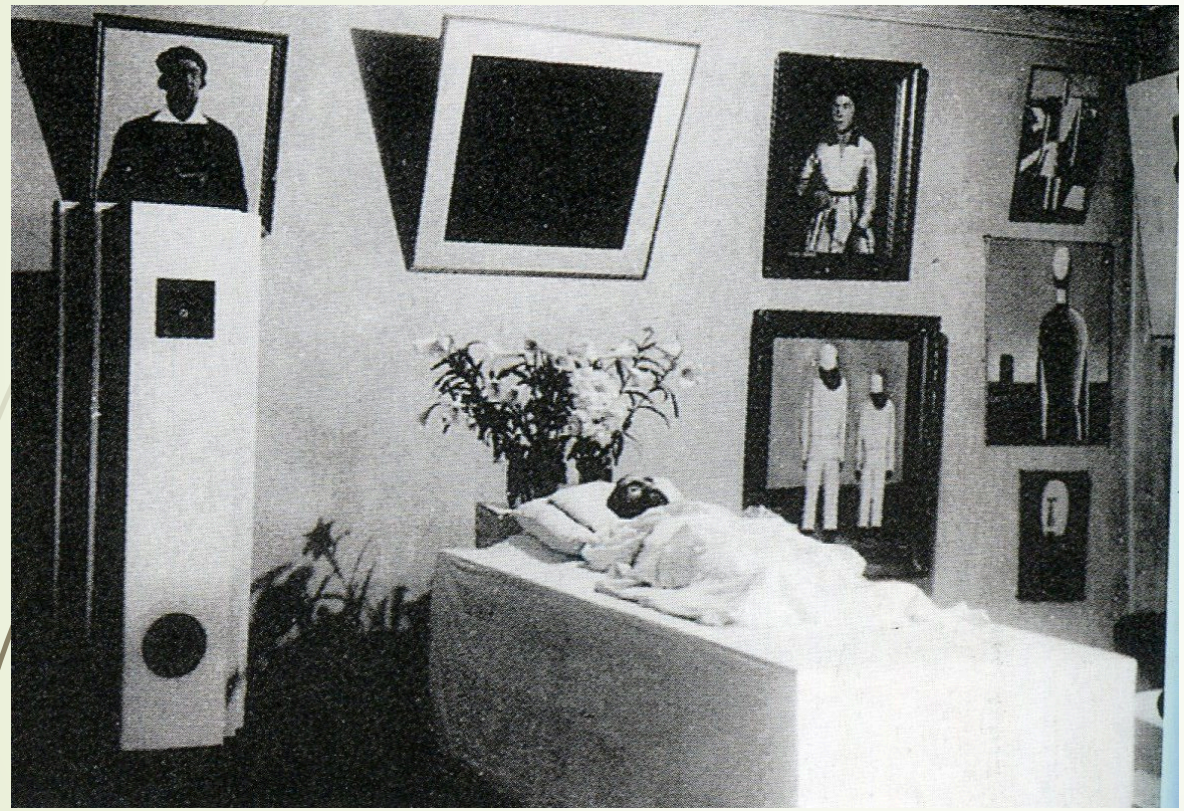
- Malevich (*Hieratic Suprematist Cross*, 1920-121) was offering his art, Suprematism, as a way to meet the still existing religious demand of those who had embraced the Communist Revolution
- Gradually, however, the Communists came to understand that modernist artists such as Malevich promoted an alternative to the old culture and Orthodox Church that was spiritual rather than materialistic. Their offer was in competition with the regime's own offer of Marxism as an alternative «spirituality», which included Communist weddings and other rituals, as well as a secular mysticism

Malevich in Jail



- On September 20, 1930, Malevich was arrested and remained in jail for six months. Upon his release he was virtually compelled to abandon his signature style and return to figurative paintings less far away from Stalinist official «Socialist realism» (including the ironical *Self-Portrait*, 1932, left)
- With a small circle of friends, however, he continued to privately cultivate Suprematism as a new spirituality

Malevich's Death

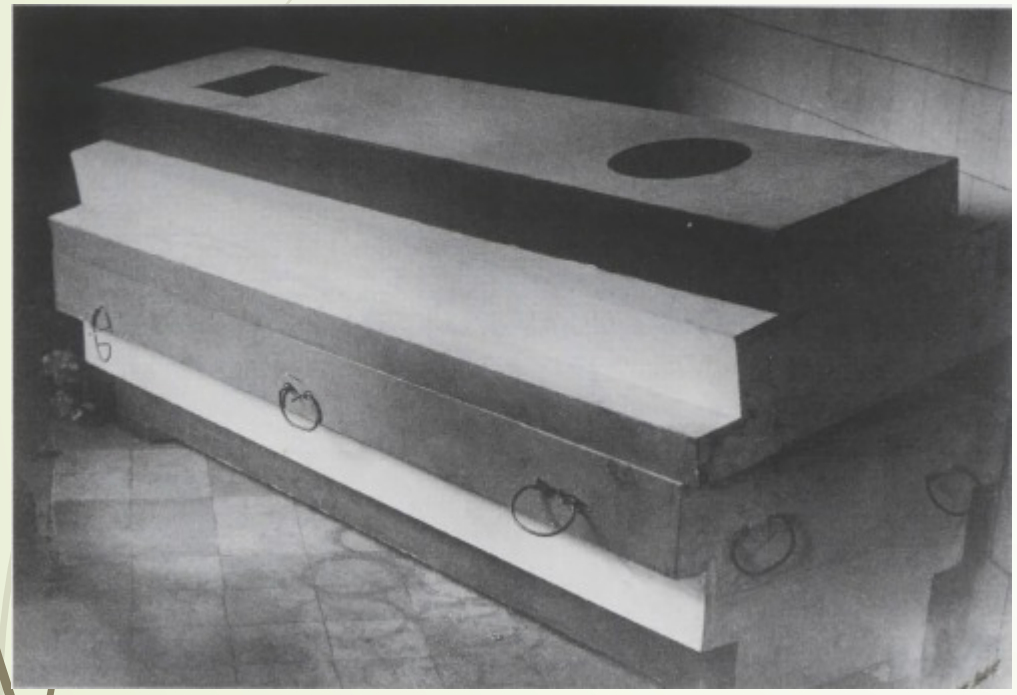


- Malevich died in 1935 and was celebrated as an important Soviet artist, with the *Black Square* hanging above his deathbed
- Although some believed he had been poisoned, probably he died of a cancer he had developed while in jail

Suprematist Rites

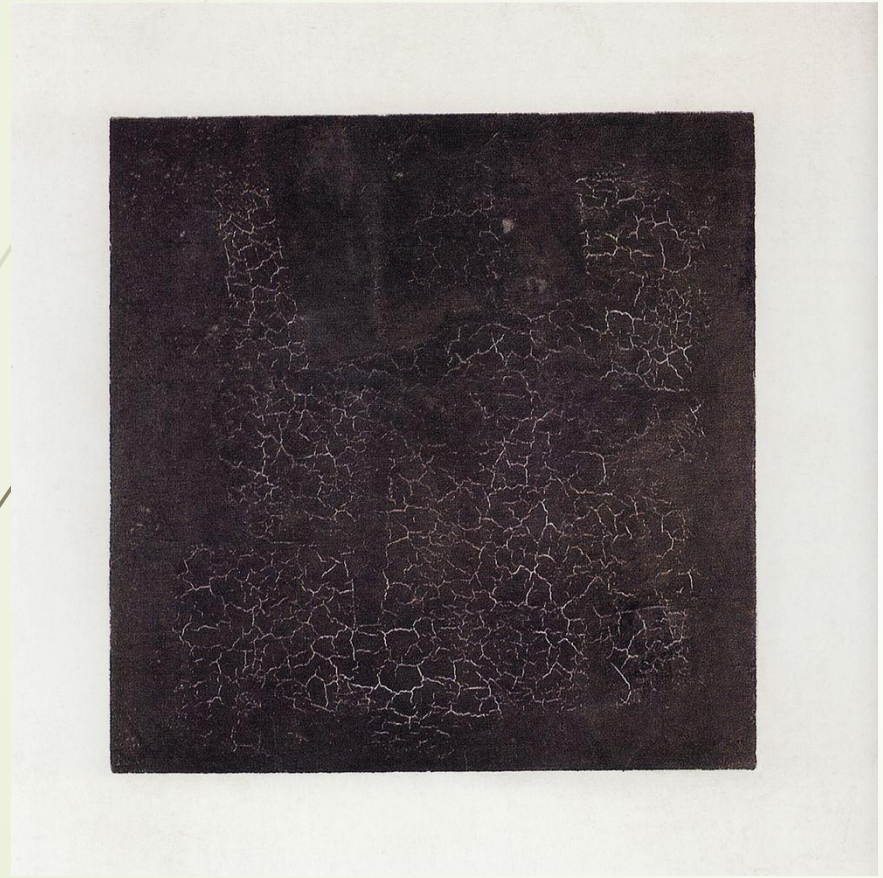
- At first, Malevich believed that rituals were typical of the old religion and should be abandoned. In his *Lenin* (1924), he also rejected rituals created upon Lenin's death as too similar to traditional religion. He did, however, propose alternative rituals. In 1929, the death of his Suprematist pupil Ilya Chashnik (1902-1929) originated the first attempt to create a Suprematist rite for the funerals. It was used for Malevich's own funeral in 1935 (right)

Malevich's Lost Grave



- Malevich's Suprematist coffin (left) was transported by rail from St Petersburg, where he died, to Moscow. There, he was cremated and his ashes buried under a small Black Square monument in his beloved Russian suburb of Nemchinovka. The monument was lost in World War II, and its location rediscovered during the works for building a luxury residential complex in 2013. The controversy between the developers and Malevich admirers, who tried without success to leave the area free of commercial constructions – they got, at least, a Malevich monument nearby –, highlighted the «religious» significance of the artist and his grave for a certain number of his followers

Aftermath



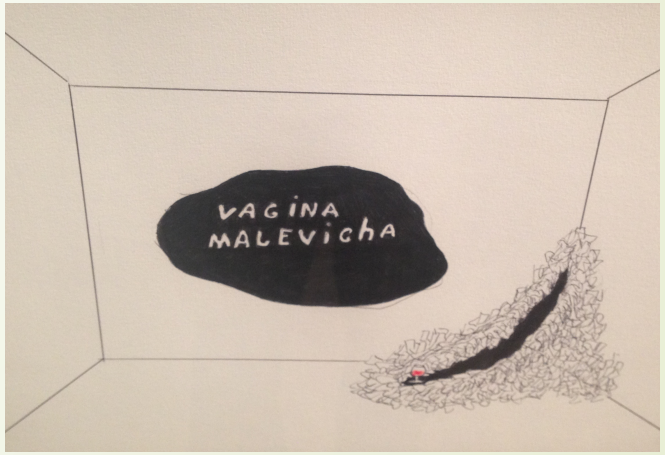
- For many years in Soviet Russia the *Black Square* was confined to the basement of Moscow's Tretyakov State Gallery (which was responsible for its eventual deterioration, left, revealing at the same time that the *Square* had been repainted by Malevich over a previous work). A special permission was needed in order to see it

The Cult of Malevich

- The *Black Square* became the forbidden icon for generations of Russian avant-garde artists dissatisfied with the official Socialist Realism. Paradoxically, Malevich's artistic religion, not particularly successful during the artist's life, became a real, viable alternative to both Marxism and Christianity after World War II for artists and intellectuals who were critical of the regime, yet regarded themselves as liberal and progressive
- *The Black Square* inspired dozens of works, particularly by artists involved in the Conceptualist movement such as Lidia Masterkova (left, 1927-2008). By the 1970s, it became the Holy Grail of a Russian progressive underground spirituality

Prigov and Malevich

- Dmitri Prigov (1940-2007) represented a new generation of artists, who shared for a while the cult of Malevich (left) and then poked fun at it (right), arguing that with the fall of the Soviet regime artistic «religions» became absurd and irrelevant



Malevich in the West

- In the meantime, in the West, thousands of people came to see exhibitions of this difficult artist (two in London and Amsterdam in 2014 attracted huge crowds), hailing him as a fighter for freedom and opponent of the Soviet regime (in fact, his relationship with Communism was more complicated)
- Most of them ignored Malevich's *God is not Cast Down* and his offer of abstract art as truly modern spirituality, although some exhibitions did note his connections with Ouspensky

The Brener Incident

- In 1997, Russian artist Alexander Brener went to jail for five months in the Netherlands after he spray-painted Malevich's *Suprematist Composition* in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum with a dollar sign. Brener claimed that he wanted to protest the conversion of Malevich's «religious symbols» into objects of «trade and merchandise», sold for $50 millions and more
- Although Brener's motivations were questioned (as a result of the publicity, his own works sold for better prices), the incident confirmed the struggle for Malevich's heritage between those interested in his ideas on spirituality and those assessing his work in aesthetic and formal terms only

Art as (Explicit) Religion

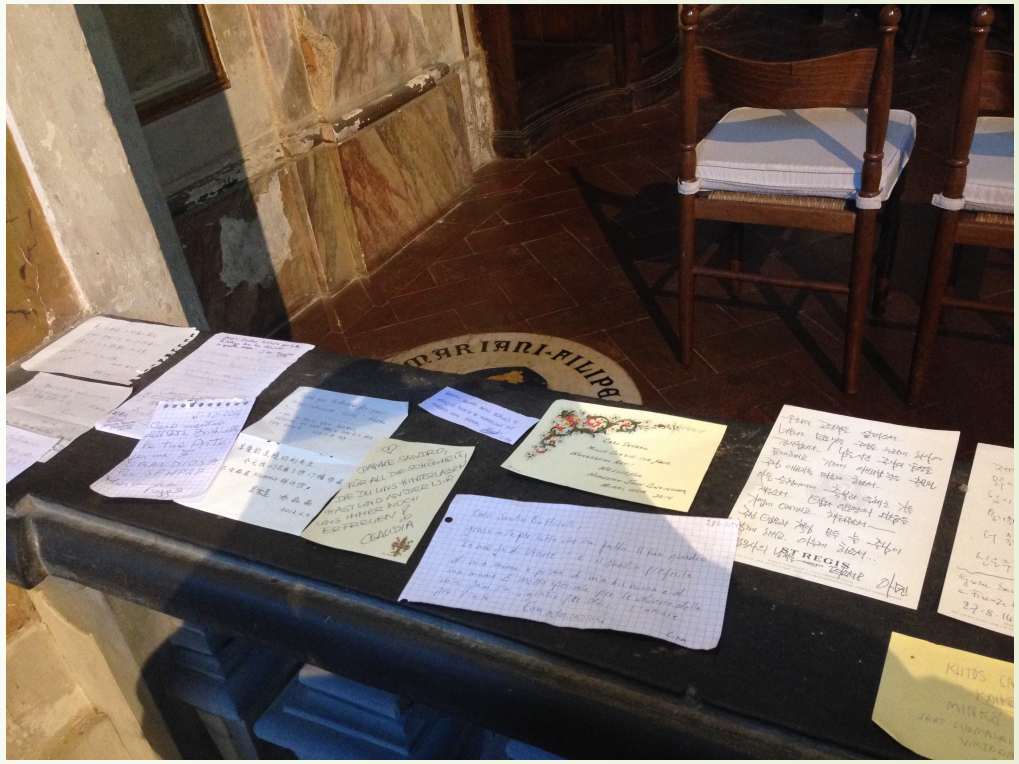
- Some artists, including Mondrian, Malevich *(Suprematism*, 1915, right), and Pistoletto dreamed of offering their art as *explicit* religion – although they would rather qualify their religion as 'secular' or use the word 'spirituality'
- Although generating an interesting artistic and intellectual following, the success of these proposals remained but limited

Implicit Religion?

- However, for a larger audience that may ignore the religious ideas of Malevich or Mondrian altogether, the strong spiritual experiences induced by the modern artistic dream of reducing the world to its essence may function as *implicit* religion. Increasingly, surveys find religious consumers (mostly in the liberal-progressive niche) who claim that they do not need organized religion but derive a strong spiritual experience from art
- Abstract artist Mark Rothko (1903-1970), who created inter alia the non-denominational Rothko Chapel in Houston (left), wrote: «The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them»

The Cult of Botticelli

- By no means is this limited to modern art. In December 2014, I visited the Ognissanti Church in Florence, where visitors from all around the world leave messages and requests for help at the burial place of Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), as they would do with a Catholic saint. But Botticelli was not a saint, and most messages are far away from Christianity and rather reflects a quasi-religious cult of beauty



A Final Word from Sotheby's

- «Art – even in its most secular form – has become the religion of the 21st century. Art meets a spiritual need in people that was previously met elsewhere. It has filled a vacuum in our society left by religion. The great art galleries of the land are its new cathedrals. A large number of the people who a generation or two ago might have taken their children to church on Sundays now take them to an art gallery instead»

  (Philip Hook, «From Millet's *The Angelus* to Rothko, why do some works of art make us cry? », *The Independent*, November 5, 2014. Hook [above] is a Senior Director at the international auction house Sotheby's)

Thank you for your attention