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Russian Opera Director Faces Criminal Charge for Offending Religious Believers

By Peter Spinella

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A theater director in the Russian city of Novosibirsk is under investigation for allegedly offending religious believers with his staging of a Wagner opera, art news site Colta.ru reported Tuesday.

Prosecutors are checking director Timofei Kulyabin's staging of the opera "Tannhauser," which transposes the action in the classic story of the struggle between sacred and profane love into the modern day, with the main character portrayed as a filmmaker.

The rendition features a scene where the Roman goddess Venus promises eternal love to Jesus Christ if would stay with her in a grotto. But he doesn't take the offer and destroys the grotto with the help of the Virgin Mary, according to a summary on the theater's website.

The investigation was launched following a complaint earlier this month by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region, Metropolitan Tikhon, the report said.

The new staging of the opera, which has been performed at Novosibirsk State Opera and Ballet Theater since December, is "an affront to the feelings of religious believers, an offense to the Orthodox Church and an incitement to religious hatred," Tikhon was cited as saying.

Russia made insulting the feelings of religious believers a crime in 2013 after shock-rock band Pussy Riot sang a scandalous "punk prayer" in Moscow's main cathedral calling for the Virgin Mary to banish President Vladimir Putin.

If charged and convicted, Kulyabin faces a fine of up to 50,000 rubles ($800) or up to 120 hours of community service.

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