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Article

Theosis in Soloviev and Berdyaev

Abstract

"*Theosis* in Soloviev and Berdyaev" will look at the deification concepts of these Russian philosophers. Deification ideas in both these writers had a strong social side, and included a sharp critique of institutional churches. Sources that influenced each author will be examined. In speaking of deification, both thinkers drew upon the philosophy of Jacob Boehme, along with other Eastern and Western Christian thinkers. Soloviev drew upon Boehme's concept of Sophia; Berdyaev upon Boehme's notion of the *Ungrund.* Jeremy Pilch and Ruth Coates have offered sophisticated analyses of Soloviev and Berdyaev, respectively, and most of their conclusions are sound. Pilch completely ignores Boehme, but this makes some sense when one realizes he is focusing on Soloviev's middle and late periods, when the patristic influence was greatest. However, the evidence argues against Pilch's view that Soloviev avoided the *apokatastasis* idea of Origen. I also reject Coates's view that Berdyaev's *The Meaning of the Creative Act* is fundamentally Nietzschean. Both Soloviev and Berdyaev affirmed Orthodox principles, but reacted against the authoritarianism of the Russian Orthodox Church, and sought to help the church return to its legitimate spiritual mission of fostering the Kingdom of God on earth. For both thinkers, spirituality had to be based on freedom and not on coercion. Both authors believed that deification was initiated by God, but that human cooperation was required for it to be realized. Both authors asserted that Christ made deification possible. Soloviev put a particular emphasis upon unity, while Berdyaev emphasized creativity and freedom. Both authors speak of a deification of the flesh, although their meaning is unclear.

Keywords: Nikolai Berdyaev; Vladimir Soloviev; Russian philosophy; Russian theology; Deification; *theosis*; Transformation of the world; God-manhood; spiritual freedom; Kingdom of God; Antichrist; Jacob Boehme; Maximus the Confessor; Origen of Alexandria; eschatology

Introduction

The important Russian thinkers, Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Berdyaev were crucial and influential—if somewhat idiosyncratic—figures in the history of Russian theology and philosophy. Both were highly original thinkers who nevertheless drew heavily on biblical, theological, and philosophical sources and believed that salvation and *theosis* had to be realized on the social level. As Berdyaev wrote, "Men must all be saved together."[1]

1. Vladimir Soloviev

1a. Soloviev's Place in Time and Thought

Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900) is one of the most influential thinkers in Russian philosophy and theology. He had many friends and correspondents among Orthodox and

[1] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 136.

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Catholics, he inspired the Russian Symbolist poets, and had a major effect on subsequent Russian theology.[2] Soloviev lived during a time of political turmoil and philosophic ferment. He was trained at the Moscow Spiritual Academy, studying both patristic thought and western philosophical thought. He "had a deep knowledge of the Church Fathers and the doctrinal teachings of the early Church Councils."[3] Further, he was writing at a time when "the retrieval of the patristic heritage" was underway in Russia.[4] I will designate the stages of his development thus: early period (1873–1880), middle period (1880–1890), and late period (1891–1900). A major study by Jeremy Pilch concentrates on a portion of one book from his middle period, another whole book from his middle period, and a book from his late period, effectively arguing that he built upon late patristic notions of *theosis*, especially those of Maximus the Confessor.[5] I will address Pilch's findings below.

There is some continuity throughout Soloviev's career, however. Nikolai Berdyaev finds that one idea runs throughout Soloviev's career; the "idea was divine-humanity . . . the free union of two natures, divine and human, in divine-humanity."[6] He "always understood [Christianity] as a religion of the transfiguration of the world, a social and cosmic religion."[7]

1b. Early Deification Teaching in Soloviev

In analyzing Soloviev's view of deification, we must distinguish between his early, middle, and late periods. He was much more optimistic, even naïve, in his early and middle periods than in his late period. His exploration of deification begins even in his early period, but he articulates his theology more thoroughly in his middle and late periods.

Deification, for Soloviev, is for the whole world, more than for individuals. "The incarnation of the divine idea in the world [is] the goal of the whole cosmic movement," but the world soul has freedom, and so can choose evil.[8] Only if the world-soul connects with God, is Christ's divine humanity inscribed into humanity. "The gradual spiritualization of humanity through the inner assimilation and development of the divine principle constitute the properly historical process of humankind."[9]

In his early period, Soloviev was optimistic about human progress. According to Berdyaev, he "was very much a gnostic-idealist, and his Christianity was rosy and optimistic. He did not yet feel the whole horror and power of evil. His understanding of evil was not mystical but overly rationalistic; interpreting it gnostically."[10] "Gnostic" here probably

[2] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea,* trans. Katharine Lampert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 166–67.

[3] Jeremy Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs": Deification in the Work of Vladimir Solov'ev* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 110.

[4] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 110.

[5] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 83–85.

[6] Nikokai Berdyaev, "Vladimir Solovyov's Fundamental," Idea," in *The Brightest Lights of the Silver Age: Essays on Russian Religious Thinkers*, trans. Boris Jakim (Kettering, OH: Semantron, 2015), 77–78.

[7] Berdyaev, "Vladimir Solovyov's Fundamental Idea," 80.

[8] Vladimir Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine*, *Humanity*, rev. and ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1995), Lecture 10, 138.

[9] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lecture 10, 147.

[10] Nikolai Berdyaev, """The Problem of East and West," in the Religious Consciousness of Vladimir Solovyov," in *The Brightest Lights of the Silver Age: Essays on Russian Religious Thinkers*, trans. Boris Jakim (Kettering, OH: Semantron, 2015), 86–87.

refers to an intellectualizing Christianity that interprets everything spiritual-intellectually, rather than to the specific anti-cosmic Gnostic philosophy of the second-century. However, some of Soloviev's writings *do* show some ideas that are Gnostic-looking (in the second-century sense).

Soloviev developed his deification concepts largely through his concept of Sophia, or the Wisdom of God. The roots of Soloviev's Sophia idea lie partly in Judaism (Wisdom as God's partner in creation, Prov 3:19; 8:22–31; Wis 7:25–8:1), partly in Pauline and Patristic Christianity, and partly in the thought of the German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575–1624)[11] and the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854).[12] Thus, the roots of his view of divine humanity are biblical, patristic, mystical (German), and idealist (German). Schelling spoke of a "fall or self-alienation of Sophia-humanity from the divine ground of being,"[13] and Soloviev picks up on this idea. Schelling himself draws on Boehme, but Soloviev also draws directly from Boehme, for whom Sophia is "the ideal nature of the world, and the instrument of human salvation. . . the external manifestation of God," and even the "Body of God."[14] Further influence on Soloviev's thinking on Sophia can be found in Kabbala, alchemy, Hermeticism, and Gnosticism, which he researched in 1875 in the British Museum,[15] and he seems to draw on these influences in the *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, at least in *Lectures* 1–9. He also builds upon Platonism (a highly Christianized Platonism). Middle and late Soloviev are much more orthodox, but also more ecumenical.

It could be that Soloviev's more positive Sophianic ideas lean heavily on Boehme, with some borrowing from Kabbala, while the ideas of a fallen Sophia lean on Schelling, and possibly Gnosticism. Zdenek David writes: "Together with Boehme, Soloviëv regards the rehabilitation of the world from its current fallen state as a gradual reincarnation of Sophia through man."[16] When the Kingdom of God comes, "Sophia will then have reabsorbed the World Soul which acted as its antagonist."[17]

Soloviev's Sophiology is fairly complicated. From the portions of the *Lectures on Divine Humanity* that come from his early period, he writes of the unity that *produces*, and the unity that *is produced*;[18] the former is the Word or Logos, the latter is the Sophia; however, Christ "is both Logos and Sophia."[19] "Sophia is ideal or perfect humanity, eternally

[11] Zdenek V. David, "The Influence of Jacob Boehme on Russian Religious Thought," *Slavic Review* 21 (1962), 60–61.

[12] Paul Valliere, "Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization," in *Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 184; Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 77.

[13] Valliere, "Sophiology as the Dialogue," 184.

[14] Zdenek V. David, "The Influence of Jacob Boehme on Russian Religious Thought," *Slavic Review* 21 (1962), 60–61.

[15] Kristi A. Groberg, "The Feminine Occult Sophia in the Russian Religious Renaissance: a Bibliographical Essay," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 26 (1992), 202–4.

[16] David, "Influence of Boehme," 62–63.

[17] David, "Influence of Boehme," 63–64.

[18] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lecture 7, page 107.

[19] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lecture 7, 108.

contained in the integral divine being, or Christ."[20] As "the world soul,"[21] Sophia can either incline toward God and unity or toward chaos and disunity.

In a peculiar work called *The Sophia*, from his early period, only published in English in 2009, he spells out his anticipation of the emergence of "the true universal religion . . . the real and spontaneous synthesis of all religions that takes nothing positive away from them, and instead gives them something more than they had had. The only thing destroyed by it is their narrowness, their exclusiveness . . . and their hate."[22] Instead, the principle of love will become dominant. There will be a transformation of the world in the triumph of "the universality of intellectual love."[23]

1c. Theology of Soloviev's Middle Period

In *Lectures on Divine Humanity* 11–12, Soloviev enters upon a new phase of his theological development, drawing more heavily on patristic sources, particularly Maximus the Confessor.[24] In an encyclopedia article, Soloviev says that Maximus is "celebrated [for his] struggle against the Monothelite heresy,"[25] a heresy that "more or less eliminated the *human* principle from Christ," thereby undermining the possibility for divine-human cooperation.[26]

Noting that the western theologian John Scotus Eriugena made use of Maximus's commentaries, Soloviev sees Maximus "as an intermediary link between Greek Christian theosophy and the medieval philosophy of the west."[27] It may be that Soloviev's view of Maximus expressed here and in *Lectures on Divine Humanity* 11–12 draws upon a five-volume work on Christology by a Lutheran theologian, Isaak Dorner, published in German in 1839.[28] Dorner wrote of an incarnation of the divine into humanity as part of the divine idea for mankind.[29] While Soloviev introduced the term *bogochelovechestvo* (God-manhood) into Russian thought, he may have been borrowing from Dorner's term *Gottmenschheit*.[30]

Soloviev begins his *Lecture* 11 by speaking about Christ, the second Adam, who embraces within himself "the whole of regenerated, spiritual humankind . . . Christ is the eternal spiritual center of the universal organism."[31] The Incarnation and the subsequent

[20] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lecture 8, 113.

[21] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lecture 9, 131.

[22] Soloviev, *Divine Sophia*, 122. Vladimir Soloviev (called "Solovyov"), *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt; trans. Boris Jakim, revisions by Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 122.

[23] Soloviev, *Divine Sophia*, 162.

[24] A major thesis in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs."*

[25] Vladimir Soloviev, *SS* Vol. XII, 598; quoted in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 86.

[26] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 86.

[27] Vladimir Soloviev, from *SS* Vol. XII, 599; translated in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 88.

[28] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 90–91.

[29] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 92.

[30] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 92.

[31] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lectures 11 and 12, 155.

deification of Christians were always part of the divine plan. "The incarnation of Divinity . . . is even an essential element of the overall plan of creation."[32] Christ is the pioneer for us. The Incarnation of the Word empowers mortals to become more than mortal. Soloviev saw human life as "theandric," wherein divine and human energies work together to transform the world.[33]

What Pilch doesn't want to accept is that Soloviev draws upon Origen's concept of *apokatastasis* perhaps as much as he draws upon Maximus's ideas. *Apokatastasis* is the "restoration" mentioned in Acts 3:20–21, which Origen uses to designate a universal restoration or recapitulation, when "God will be all in all,"[34] "the 'perfect end' after all eons,"[35] which will include the salvation of all souls. Soloviev writes that, in the end, the Church "will encompass all humankind and all nature in one universal divine-human organism."[36] This happens when there is full cooperation between human wills and the divine will, "a free harmonization of the divine and human principles."[37] It seems the Soloviev blends Maximus's deification with Origen's universal restoration. But Pilch's analysis lacks this insight, insisting that Maximus corrected Origen's "errors,"[38] that Soloviev followed Maximus in not upholding "Origen's version of *apokatastasis*."[39] Pilch seems to see *apokatastasis* "as not pertaining to deification,"[40] as "rarely linked to deification,"[41] but Origen's restoration and recapitulation concept is definitely part of his understanding of deification. Pilch wants to protect Soloviev from any association with Origen. "Rather than see Solov'ev's emphasis here on the unity of all things in God, or the *apokatastasis tōn theōn*, the recapitulation of all things in Christ, as not pertaining to deification, it is more accurate to think of this focus as reflecting key scriptural sources for cosmic deification."[42] However, *both* Origen and Soloviev are writing about cosmic deification, and Pilch does recognize this elsewhere when he acknowledges that Soloviev's Kingdom of God concept "equates" with the *apokatastasis ton theon*.[43] He quotes a *Justification of the Good* passage that affirms that equation: "the Kingdom of God is identical . . . with universal resurrection and αποκαταστασις των παντων."[44]

[32] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lectures 11 and 12, 157–58.

[33] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 105.

[34] Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich* (Eugene: Cascade, 2019), 56, citing *Comm. In Io.* (*Commentary on John*) 1:32.

[35] Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?*, 58, citing *Princ.* (*On First Principles*) 2:3:5 and *Comm. In Matt.* (*Commentary on Matthew*) 17:19.

[36] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lectures 11 and 12, 164. Quoted in Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 109 without referencing Origen.

[37] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lectures 11 and 12, 172.

[38] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 80, 104.

[39] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 230.

[40] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 136.

[41] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 229.

[42] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 136.

[43] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 229.

[44] Vladimir Soloviev, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. Nathalie A. Duddington (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005; English trans., 1918), 165; Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 225.

For Origen, in the recapitulation, "the intellect . . . *is restored to the image and likeness of God* who created it. This is why the Prophet says: 'All the earth will remember and *return to the Lord* and all the peoples will kneel before him' [Isa 45:22–23]."[45] "Evil will be wiped away from the entire world"; and creatures will "find themselves near to God."[46] "The end and perfection of all will be realized."[47] Ramelli says Origen developed his idea of *apokatastasis* against both pagan (Stoic) ideas that denied free will and "gnostic' conceptions which excluded some people and denied the resurrection of the body.[48] If this isn't a Christian concept of cosmic deification, then what is it? Russell summarizes Origen's deification teaching thus: "The Spirit makes us holy so that the Son can make us sons and gods."[49]

These beliefs are held in common by Origen and Soloviev. It seems that Pilch's real objection is to the universalism of Origen. The restitution, Pilch argues, "does not refer to the lot of the damned, but to the renewal of the world."[50] It is not clear to me whether or not Soloviev was a universalist, believing that all souls would ultimately be saved. Whether or not he was a universalist, he undoubtably picked up on Origen's idea of *apokatastasis*. This does not mean his thinking was identical with Origen's on all points, or that he was a universalist. Further, Pilch concedes that Soloviev, in contrasting Christianity with natural religion, affirms the Christian idea of αποκαταστασις των παντων.[51] What Pilch really wants to deny is that Soloviev could be considered heterodox in any way. Sometimes he overcompensates and denies an Origenist influence at all, though, in other passages, he admits that Origen's influence *does* exist. It would be better to admit that an important Origenist influence exists in Soloviev's work, and then to argue separately regarding whether Soloviev carries forward Origen's universalist ideas. These are two different points.

The goal for Soloviev is the deification of humanity; "we look for him to reign not only *over* all that is but *in* all, 'that God may be all in all' and 'that they all may be one' (1 *Cor*. xv, 28; *John* xvii, 21). . . that there may be a complete harmony wherein no creature wishes other than as God wills."[52] *Theosis* involves universal repair: "This reuniting of three parts of the world at present separated, its spirit (the Invisible Church or spiritual world), its soul (the Visible Church or living mankind), and its body (material nature), will be a remaking into one absolute whole, a universal *restoration* of all things"[53]; "the *restoration* of mankind and the universe by the renewal of their harmony with God in which all

[45] Origen, *On First Principles* 4:4:9–10; Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?*, 56 n49. Italics given in Ramelli.

[46] Origen, *Commentary on John* 1:32; 32:35; Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?*, 56–57.

[47] Origen, *On First Principles* 2:3:7; Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?*, 57.

[48] Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?*, 58.

[49] Norman Russell, *Theosis and Religion: Participation in Divine Life in the Eastern and Western Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 28.

[50] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 230.

[51] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 146.

[52] Vladimir Soloviev, *God, Man, and the Church: The Spiritual Foundations of Life*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: James Clarke & Co., 1938), 40–41.

[53] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 133–34.

creation becomes a faithful likeness of the Godhead."[54] Here again we see the echo of Origen's *apokatastasis* concept, wherein everything and everyone in the universe will be repaired and perfected.

Soloviev always emphasized the human collective, and yet he also stressed the importance of individual free will. The free cooperation of people with God was an essential pillar of Soloviev's philosophy. The church plays an active role in the deification process: "The free divinization of mankind is effected when the divine mother, the Church, is made fruitful by the action of the human power."[55] This work, *God, Man and the Church* (the title in English), comes from Soloviev's middle period, where his emphasis is "more theological, biblical, and ecclesiological than either early or late Soloviev."[56]

Pilch points out an important change within the middle period. *Lectures* 11–12 is where he shows a strong move toward patristic theology, with a certain Slavophile angle. The Slavophiles were a 19th century Russian movement that affirmed Orthodox values while reflecting on culture and ethics. Their great value was *sobornost*, "the idea of conciliarity" or "qualitative togetherness"; *sobornost* meant unity with freedom, and its advocates often made a distinction between unity and uniformity.[57] As Slavophilia evolved, however, it manifested a stubborn anti-Western bias.

In *Lectures* 11–12, Soloviev argues that some western theologians have missed the primary purpose of the Incarnation: "Christ's work is not a legal fiction, a casuistic resolution of an impossible 'lawsuit.' It is an actual exploit . . . not to carry out a formal juridical process but for the real salvation of humankind . . . for the actual revelation of the kingdom of God in humankind."[58] *God, Man and the Church* contains none of this criticism of the legal fiction of atonement, but acknowledges the necessity of sacrifice, both in Christ's life and in believers' lives. Further, human nature is damaged by sin, and it requires God's grace to lift us out of sin.[59] Deification is entirely God's doing, but we humans (especially we church members) have to cooperate in this work. This was a consistent idea throughout all his periods.

This dynamic theme of spiritual transformation is what makes Soloviev beloved by so many readers. "God's will is to communicate himself to everybody, to be their all in all, for he is limitless Good, the Love which knows no envy, the one Perfection."[60] But this change is not automatic. "Mankind has to *co-operate* with God in this work, for otherwise there cannot be a complete oneing of God with his creatures and a full expression of the meaning of existence, which requires . . . the concord and unity of all."[61]

[54] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 168.

[55] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 169–70.

[56] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 76.

[57] Madonna Sophia Compton. *Chaos and Freedom: Nicolai Berdyaev and the Encounter with the West* (Berkeley, CA: The Raphael Group and the Associates of the Order of St. Julian of Norwich, 2022), 118–19.

[58] Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Lectures 11 and 12, 155–56.

[59] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 126, 129–30.

[60] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 40.

[61] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 134.

With *God, Man and the Church*, he also demonstrates an openness to western theology. Eventually he starts to affirm a central unifying role for the Catholic Papacy.[62]

In *God, Man and the Church* Soloviev spells out three categories of human cooperation with God that are necessary for the deification process: prayer, alms-giving, and fasting, which may be restated as prayer, mercy, and restraint;[63] or as faith, love, and hope.[64] The Lord's Prayer opens with the hallowing of God's name and a prayer that God's will be done and his kingdom come. This amounts to a prayer that God may be all in all. It starts with a desire for one's own deification: "we must desire perfection for ourselves in union with God . . . we must become conformed to Him, so that his name is hallowed in us."[65] The prayer for forgiveness not only can benefit another, but it is an "interior spiritual activity itself" within the mind of the one doing the forgiving.[66] Alms-giving appears to be symbolic of loving deeds and service to others. This giving represents an inversion of previous understandings of sacrifice; Christ affirms "'mercy I want and not sacrifice' . . . no longer do we offer sacrifice to God to appease, to win mercy from him; rather . . . God wants not what we can give him but what he gives to us."[67] We can create a "grace-filled society."[68]

The third human act necessary for deification is fasting, which is symbolic of self-restraint, avoiding proud and selfish actions. It also corrects our relationship to nature. We are to bring "the fullness of life" to earth creatures.[69] "As the incarnate God saves humanity, so humanity united with God must save the whole nature."[70]

Throughout the rest of *God, Man and the Church*, Soloviev emphasized the role of the church in realizing deification. The sacraments help to "build up the divine-human communion."[71] The sacrament of baptism reunites us with the waters of creation. All the sacraments help us to bring about "the spiritually regenerated corporeality of the whole world."[72] The sacraments "sanctify man's physical as well as his spiritual life."[73]

The deifying role of the church and sacraments in *God, Man and the Church* seems to replace the role played by Sophia in the *Lectures*. Sophia is completely left out of *God, Man and the Church*; instead, the church is "the essential form of unity given to people."[74] In a few places, as when Mary is said to be the heart of the Church, then Mary seems to replace

[62] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 121.

[63] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 132.

[64] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 88.

[65] Soloviev, *SS* 317–18 (*God, Man and the Church*); translated in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 134–35.

[66] Soloviev, *SS* 323 (*God, Man and the Church*); translated in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 138.

[67] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 141–42.

[68] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 142.

[69] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 143.

[70] Soloviev, *SS* 345–46 (*God, Man and the Church*); translated in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 144.

[71] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 148.

[72] Soloviev, *SS* 400 (*God, Man and the Church*); translated in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 150.

[73] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 167.

[74] Soloviev, *SS* 384 (*God, Man and the Church*); translated in Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 153.

Sophia.[75] But more emphasis is placed on the church's role. The church is "divine-human," but not perfect (like Christ); it "still has not reached that glorious state" of unity with Christ.[76] Pilch says "deification is . . . also explicitly ecclesial."[77] The Church helps mediate deification, but it also *gets* deified (similar to Sophia's role in the *Lectures*): "Man is *healed*, he recovers health for his life when human personality takes its place in the Church, and the Church in turn is made fruitful and active."[78] This emphasis on the Church's role in deification goes considerably beyond what any of the Church Fathers say about the Church.[79]

Soloviev thought that there will be a "gradual changing of bodily life . . . a materialization of spirit and spiritualization of matter."[80] All this emanates from the person of Christ, who is "the centre of history."[81] With Christ's help, we can move "towards the recovery of that holy corporeality."[82] He believed "everything spiritual will be completely incarnated and everything material will be completely spiritualized. . . reunite[d] with the Divinity."[83] He wrote of the "lightsomeness . . . of transfigured matter."[84] However, we never get much detail about what spiritualized matter really is. What we hear is lofty and abstract theology: a destined uniting of "natural love" and "intellectual love."[85] "The divine Idea," penetrating humanity, will "vivify nature and immortalize its beauty," although he claims it would be "premature" to give more details.[86] At one point he says "the resurrection is a reconciliation of matter and spirit in which matter finds its real expression as a *spiritual body* . . . a divinization of the flesh"; God "assimilates" matter "to his own essence."[87] I see only two possibilities here: either matter is ontologically changed somehow, or matter remains matter but simply comes fully under God's control. It is not spelled out.

Either way, it is closely related to unity, a major theme in Soloviev's philosophy. God allows Chaos but intends to draw it back into harmony. "He is able to draw rebellious

[75] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 151.

[76] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 154.

[77] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 154.

[78] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 171.

[79] Pilch, "*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,*" 229.

[80] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 134.

[81] Oliver Smith, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Spiritualization of Matter* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies, 2011), 116.

[82] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 142.

[83] Smith, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Spiritualization of Matter*, 43; Richard F. Gustafson, "Soloviev's Doctrine of Salvation," in *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 43, citing *PSS* 3:381.

[84] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 142.

[85] Soloviev, *Divine Sophia*, 162.

[86] Vladimir Soloviev, The Meaning of Love," in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 132–33.

[87] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 129.

existence back to unity."[88] Soloviev's ultimate focus was on "the all-unity Idea."[89] Truth is universal: "The possession of truth cannot constitute the privilege of the nation just as it cannot be the privilege of an individual person. Truth can be only *universal*."[90] *Theosis*, then, means universal *theosis*; it is not for individuals alone.

Soloviev sharply criticized authoritarian and dogmatic tendencies in the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, a sickness that left the Russian nation "spiritually paralyzed in its totality."[91] Instead of injecting love and piety into society, the Russian church has served as a source of "division and enmity for more than two centuries" with a plethora of competing sects, while the Orthodox Church, instead of acting "by the great power of love, has [been using] coercion to bring back into unity those who have fallen away."[92]

In *God, Man and the Church*, Soloviev speaks of "the Church," implying a universal church since no historical church is usually mentioned. In a later book from his middle period, *Russia and the Universal Church*, Soloviev writes of "the permanent primacy of Peter as the foundation of the universal church," and says "the transference to Rome of the supreme ecclesiastical authority established by Christ in the person of St. Peter is a patent fact."[93] Non-acknowledgment of Peter (and, by extension, the papacy), in fact, constitutes, "rebellion against the steward that He has Himself appointed."[94]

Soloviev hoped that the Orthodox churches would realign themselves with Rome and submit to the papacy, believing that order and goodness would result, even something he called free theocracy. Rejecting the national pride of the Slavophiles, Soloviev, for a period, became devoted to the internationalism and the supposed unifying power of the Roman Catholic Church. Soloviev saw the east as having succumbed to tyranny and the west (aside from the Catholic Church) to secularism. He admitted that the West had allowed more "free and independent" thinking. He believed "eastern and western humanity should work together to realize a new divine-human cultural synthesis."[95] His theocratic idea has Church and State being mutually supportive: "The state has to be at the service of the Church in many fields of activity, as when it "spreads Christian manners among savages."[96] "The Christian religion alone has given meaning and value to the state, because it has lifted it above itself."[97]

[88] Vladimir Soloviev (called "Solovyev"), *Russia and the Universal Church* trans. Herbert Rees (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948), 161.

[89] Soloviev, "Meaning of Love," 126.

[90] Vladimir Soloviev, Three Addresses in Memory of Dostoevsky," in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 12.

[91] Vladimir Soloviev "On Spiritual Authority in Russia," in *Freedom, Faith, and Dogma: Essays by V. S. Soloviev on Christianity and Judaism*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 17.

[92] Soloviev "On Spiritual Authority in Russia," 18; and see 29.

[93] Soloviev, *Russia and the Universal Church,* 108, 121.

[94] Soloviev, *Russia and the Universal Church,* 200.

[95] Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 164.

[96] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 183.

[97] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 184.

Berdyaev considered these notions to be "illusions of progress. . . [his] theocracy is a complete utopia, which he himself rejected in the last period of life."[98]

1d. The Late Soloviev

In the long and thoughtful philosophic book of his late period, *The Justification of the Good*, Soloviev argues that the true value of persons lies in their divinization: "Human personality contains an element of intrinsic value, which can never be merely a means—the possibility, namely, inherent in it, of infinite perfection through the contemplation of and union with the absolute fulness of being."[99]

With *the Justification of the Good*, his emphasis "shifts to a primarily moral understanding of deification as progress in virtue."[100] He has shifted away from theocracy and toward an idea of "the perfect moral order . . . social deification."[101] He picks up on the moral deification ideas of Gregory of Nazianzen and Basil the Great and very strongly on the idea of grace as expressed by Augustine,[102] while rejecting the latter's "polemical" excesses, arriving at "erroneous extremities of determinism."[103] He insists that God's grace is saving, but humans need to cooperate with God's will. Underestimating either truth would be out of balance. He also drew back on some of the things he said about church-state cooperation in the previous book. He now recognizes that "*The Church must have no power of compulsion, and the power of compulsion exercised by the state must have nothing to do with the domain of religion*."[104] Soloviev's moral emphasis coincided with a personalist and moral emphasis in the Spiritual Academies, along with the translation of many patristic texts, and also incorporates western theological ideas making the rounds in the Spiritual Academies.[105] In writing of grace, he seems to have drawn upon Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and in writing of love, he drew upon Bernard of Clairvaux.[106] The love learned in marriage and family life is a valuable part of the deification project.[107]

Besides his continued use of Maximus the Confessor,[108] Soloviev also borrows from Origen and Basil the Great, using the language of the image and likeness of God.[109] Taking on this likeness, reaching for moral perfection, is a life-long project.

The deification he calls for is socially and individually transforming: "True Christianity is a perfect synthesis of . . . the *absolute event*—the revelation of the perfect personality, the God-man—Christ . . . the absolute *promise*—of a community conformable to the

[98] Berdyaev, "Vladimir Solovyov's Fundamental," 82–83.

[99] Soloviev, *Justification of the Good*, 196.

[100] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 76–77.

[101] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 225–26.

[102] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 182, 186.

[103] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 190.

[104] Soloviev, *Justification of the Good*, 394; see Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 195.

[105] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 198–201.

[106] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 190–91, 218.

[107] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 219–20.

[108] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 211 n.104 referring to Maximus's emphasis on mercy.

[109] Pilch, *"Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs,"* 205.

perfect personality, or . . . the Kingdom of God [and] the absolute *task*—to further the fulfilment of that promise by regenerating all our individual and social environment in the spirit of Christ."[110] But it must truly be in the spirit of Christ, and not a counterfeit thereof.

In his last book, *War, Progress, and the End of History*, in the section called "A Short Tale about the Antichrist," he has the Antichrist pose as a philanthropist and peacemaker.[111] This humanist Antichrist may be based in part on Soloviev's picture of himself at an earlier period, a "self-parody," but not a "self-negation."[112] According to Kornblatt, he still believed in a destiny of world unity. He was not repudiating everything he had believed in; he simply had become more aware that many people could be susceptible to a particular kind of charming demagogic falsehood. In the story, the Antichrist successfully deludes most people. The Antichrist represents a kind of false deification.

But Berdyaev says Soloviev was swinging to a negative extreme: "he was filled with an apocalyptic horror of the growing power of evil . . . He felt that history was falling into a dark abyss."[113] Although Berdyaev knew that evil could be deceitful and charming, he may not have appreciated this last great insight of Soloviev: the danger of a charming and *philosophical* Antichrist.

The Antichrist, in the story, expresses a false ecumenicism. A truly ecumenical spirit is embodied by the three individual leaders of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism (interestingly named John, Peter, and Paul) who work together to denounce the Antichrist. Soloviev never bought into the narrow-minded advocacy of one branch of Christianity with accompanying contempt for other branches. Nor did he accept the contempt for Jews that was widespread in Christian circles. In the story, he has the Jews rise up against the Antichrist,[114] just after the latter had announced "the unification of all cults" and claimed the role of being "your true leader in every enterprise undertaken for the well-being of humanity."[115] Soloviev openly denounced the anti-Semitism that was widespread in Russia.[116]

And so we discern a strong element of Christology and a major emphasis on ethics in Soloviev's mature philosophy.

1e. Christological Basis of Theosis

Soloviev's "story of the Antichrist" warns what can happen when people forget God, when religious belief is hollowed out, when humanity is willing to accept an egotistical fraud for a leader, and seek perfection without divine guidance. The story dramatizes the dangers of theological demagoguery. It shows that *theosis* without Christ is a self-

[110] Soloviev, *Justification of the Good*, 214.

[111] Berdyaev, "Vladimir Solovyov's Fundamental Idea," 82–83.

[112] Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "Soloviev on Salvation: The Story of the 'Short Story of the Antichrist,'" in *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 70.

[113] Berdyaev, "Problem of East and West," 87.

[114] Vladimir Soloviev, *War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ*, trans. Alexander Bakshy (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1990), 191–92.

[115] Soloviev, *War, Progress*, 179.

[116] Soloviev, "Appendix A: Jews in Russia," 291–92.

deception. Soloviev emphasizes the crucial importance of the literal Resurrection of Christ, having his character Mr. Z say "The resurrection, and not in its metaphorical, but in its literal meaning—here is its testimony of the true God."[117]

For Soloviev and other Christians, *theosis* was never meant to be a way to diminish or undermine Christology. It is Christ who makes *theosis* possible. "The purpose of the world-process is the revelation of the Kingdom of God or of the perfect moral order realized by a new humanity *which spiritually grows out of the God-man*."[118] It was only with "the coming of the God-man Jesus Christ that" people received "the possibility of a free divine-human society."[119]

It may be true that Soloviev emphasizes the human and social side, but he never loses sight of the Christological basis of *theosis*. It is not human initiative, but human *cooperation*, that makes *theosis* possible. "God acts only with and through man . . . God's work has become the work of man also."[120] "Humanity is obliged not to contemplate the divine, but itself to become divine."[121] The divinity of Christ is God's presence within the human race. Deification meant humans co-creating a new world *with* God. "Man can *become* divine only by the actual power of an eternally existing Divinity [and by] a *divinely human* process."[122]

It is only the Incarnation that made possible the divinization of humans and the transformation of humanity. The social order will reflect the spiritual progress that has been made. This was Soloviev's view throughout his career.

2. Nikolai Berdyaev

2a. Berdyaev's Background

Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) was a highly influential theologian and philosopher in his day and subsequently. He was not raised Orthodox and he felt more revulsion than attraction to traditional Orthodox worship,[123] yet he drew heavily upon Orthodox theological tradition in his writing. However, he always considered himself a philosopher, more than a theologian. The philosopher is free, and reasons upon a basis in experience and faith, whereas "the pure theologian is concerned with the nature of the Church and relies chiefly upon Holy Scripture and tradition, he is dogmatic in principle, and not open to doubts."[124] When posed this way, one can see why Berdyaev chose the label "philosopher."

[117] Soloviev, *War, Progress,* 155.

[118] Soloviev, *Justification of the Good*, 168.

[119] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 187.

[120] Vladimir Soloviev, "On [The Essence of Christianity]," in *A Solovyov Anthology*, ed. S. L. Frank, trans. Natalie Duddington (London: SCM, 1950), 47–48.

[121] Soloviev, *PSS* 3:376; quoted in Gustafson, "Soloviev's Doctrine," 39.

[122] Vladimir Soloviev, "Plato's Life-Drama" ," from *Politics, Law, and Morality: Essays by V. S. Soloviev*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), section XXVI, page 248; see also Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "The Transfiguration of Plato in the Erotic Philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ev," *Religion and Literature* 24 no. 2 (1992), 43.

[123] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 19.

[124] Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea,* 158.

The two main influences in philosophical circles in his young manhood were Kant and Nietzsche, and he frequently responded to their work. Russian academic philosophy, including at the Moscow Spiritual Academy, was heavily influenced by Kant, with an emphasis on rationality and moral perfection.[125] Berdyaev admired Kant, but frequently criticized his philosophy.

2b. Berdyaev's Immanent Religiosity

We see Berdyaev's deep understanding of Orthodox spirituality in his argument with Soloviev about the possible merger of eastern and western churches. Berdyaev sees Soloviev as correctly discerning that the "two Christian worlds will be truly united only by mutual love,"[126] but Berdyaev insists that this could not happen through ecclesiastical agreements, but only through mutual understanding. That would require the Catholic world to gain a better understanding of the deep, inward mystical life of the eastern church, and to recognize that eastern "mysticism is characterized by the idea of the theosis or deification of man's nature from within by the reception of Christ into oneself."[127] Soloviev was correct to reject the arrogance and pride of the Slavophiles, Berdyaev thought, but Russia further needs to acknowledge her sinful "national pride and national hatred."[128]

Berdyaev made an effort to share in the life of the Orthodox Church, but he retained an instinctive resistance to official Orthodoxy. He saw it as tyrannical and reactionary. Both religious tyranny and pseudo-religious socialist tyranny were demonic. "I saw this spirit of the *Grand Inquisitor* displayed both from the right and from the left, in authoritarian religion and statecraft as well as in authoritarian revolutionary socialism."[129] He looked into Baptist, Dukhobor, Khlysty, and other mystical meetings, but found the Baptists too proselytizing and the mystics too Manichaean.[130]

Berdyaev did many times affirm the *sobornost* idea found within Russian Orthodoxy. He wrote "*Sobornost* is opposed both to Catholic authoritarianism and to Protestant individualism. It indicates a unity which knows of no external authority over it, but equally knows no individualistic isolation and seclusion."[131] He had great respect for the two primary Slavophilic thinkers, Alexei Khomyakov and Ivan Kireyevsky, who emphasized both freedom and community.[132] However, the movement eventually became known for its hostility to the West, which Berdyaev did not support.

Berdyaev was frustrated with stern and controlling forms of religion. Recovery of the idea of divine-human cooperation is part of Berdyaev's critique of institutional

[125] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 63.

[126] Berdyaev, "Problem of East and West," 95.

[127] Berdyaev, "Problem of East and West," 100.

[128] Berdyaev, "Problem of East and West," 102.

[129] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), 16.

[130] Russell, *Theosis and Religion*, 147.

[131] Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea,* 164; Compton, *Chaos and Freedom*, 119.

[132] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, trans. George Bravey (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), *Reality*, 167; idem, *The Russian Idea,* 159–66.

Orthodoxy. He commended the "personally human element in love" found in Catholic saints like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Francis de Sales, in contrast to the impersonal asceticism of some eastern saints, exalting the love for God alone, seeing love for humans as dangerous.[133]

Coates notes that Berdyaev accepted much of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, but she mistakenly goes a step further and says "*Meaning of Creativity* is a Nietzschean work."[134] In that work, Berdyaev says that churches have allowed the negative virtues of humility and self-denial to eclipse the positive virtues of courage and honor. He calls for the Nietzschean values of "daring" and "manliness."[135] "His anti-clericalism and aversion to the contemporary ethos of the Russian Orthodox Church also find powerful expression in *Meaning of Creativity*."[136] She acknowledges that Berdyaev goes on to say that Nietzsche profoundly misunderstood Christianity, but she seems to agree with some contemporaries of Berdyaev who thought the book "blasphemed" in making humans the rivals of Christ; Lev Shestov thought that Berdyaev was possessed by the spirit of the Nietzsche of the Antichrist period.[137] Coates argues that Berdyaev broke from the church and asserted himself as a sectarian.[138] Russell finds this judgment "too harsh. . . to the end of his life he never broke with Orthodoxy."[139]

When I read the brash language and the exaltation of individual creativity in *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, I can partially understand Coates's criticism, but I think it fundamentally off-base to attach the label "Nietzschean," without qualification, to that book. It was an early work (1916), and reflected his youthful rebelliousness and intensity. The work seems like a shout of victory after escaping prison (he had recently turned away from some intellectual Orthodox groups in Moscow[140]), but even here he was able to deconstruct Nietzsche. Once in freedom, he matured. His works in the 1920s and 1930s contain more careful criticism of institutional Christianity. How can he be called "Nietzschean" if he rejected everything upon which Nietzsche based his philosophy? In fact, "whatever Nietzsche says about Christianity we must take and turn inside out . . . Christianity is the religion of the strong in spirit, not the weak. . . Those who have overcome the world, sacrificing this world's goods, are always the strongest."[141] Nietzsche's embrace of the will to power was really a "gesture of weakness," not of strength, and represented "a break with the ethics of the Gospel."[142] In Nietzsche's idea of superman, "both God and

[133] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Harper & Row, 4th edition, 1960), 188.

[134] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 133.

[135] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 133.

[136] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 138.

[137] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 133–34.

[138] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 139.

[139] Russell, *Theosis and Religion*, 147–48.

[140] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography,* trans. Katharine Lampert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 211.

[141] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier, 1962), 241; it is page 260 in Coates's edition.

[142] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 64.

man disappear"; Nietzsche's notion that truth is a by-product of the will to power made truth "trivial."[143]

Berdyaev's answer is radically religious: "Truth is God, it is the divine light, and at the same time truth is human. That is the fundamental theme of Godmanhood. The knowledge of God is a human thing."[144] "Truth [is] divine-human in principle . . . integral Truth, not partial, is a revelation of the higher world . . . it is not merely intellectual."[145] This sounds more like Soloviev than like the nihilistic German philosopher. "Truth is the voice of eternity in time."[146] Berdyaev's is a prophetic Christianity, as was Soloviev's. Berdyaev noted that Soloviev was "misunderstood because of his prophetic ministry. A prophet is always solitary, always in conflict with the religious collective."[147]

The main drawback to Coates's study of Berdyaev, in my view, is that she focuses on the bold expressions in one early work (*The Meaning of the Creative Act*), labelling them "Nietzschean" (focusing more on tone than on content), minimizes Berdyaev's principled critique of Nietzsche, and fails to notice the ways in which Berdyaev's expression was prophetic rather than Nietzschean, and that his critique of theologians and philosophers matured over time. Berdyaev himself admitted that this book was written in a heated moment, and that it was "an impulsive, unpremeditated and unfinished work."[148]

Berdyaev did write about an abyss or void, but this is not the void of Nietzsche, but the *Ungrund* of Jacob Boehme. This *Ungrund* can be called a Divine Nothing, but really it is a "potentiality,"[149] a "generative indeterminacy that precedes both the divine and the created order."[150] The *Ungrund* is "pregnant with potential craving for actualization."[151] For Berdyaev, both the Godhead and human freedom emerged from this *Ungrund*,[152] which certainly "unsettles classical theism,"[153] but can hardly be called Nietzschean. The *Ungrund* gives Berdyaev the opportunity for the very un-Nietzschean idea that God yearns for humanity: "God longs for man . . . who shall reflect His image. . . The birth of man in God is the answer to divine aspiration . . . The Kingdom of God is that of God-Humanity, in which God is finally in man and man in God, and this is realized in the Spirit."[154]

[143] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R. M. French (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 32–33.

[144] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 30.

[145] Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 31.

[146] Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 33.

[147] Berdyaev, "Vladimir Solovyov's Fundamental Idea," 81.

[148] Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 210.

[149] Compton, *Chaos and Freedom*, 215.

[150] Martijn Benders, "On the Latent Cosmology of Jakob Böhme's Ungrund and Its Ontological Implications." (www.martijnbenders.nl/jakob-bohmes-ungrund-mystical-ontology-and-cosmic-origins/)

[151] Compton, *Chaos and Freedom*, 47.

[152] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949; reprinted by Semantron Press, 2009), 31; idem, *Destiny of Man*, 25.

[153] Benders, "On the Latent Cosmology of Jakob Böhme's."

[154] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 197.

Nor can he be regarded as a Gnostic. He writes: "The Gnostics did not understand the mystery of freedom in Christ, any more than they understood the mystery of love"; they could not see that "the highest elements are organically linked with the lowest and thus assist the process of transfiguration."[155]

Berdyaev admired a number of mystics besides Boehme. There were Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, and Tauler. He admired the philosophic side of Dostoyevsky, and also philosophers like Kant, Kierkegaard, and Soloviev, though he also criticized them.[156]

2c. Divine Human Collaboration

Berdyaev emphasizes the real ontological changes that human beings undergo as they are spiritually transformed: "The meaning of the coming of Christ into the world lies in a real transfiguration of human nature, in the formation of a new type of spiritual man. . . an entry of the eternal and spiritual into this natural time-world of ours."[157] Does he, then, believe in spiritual evolution, despite his objection to the term?—yes, but only in sense of the inward—not outward—transformations of a new age. "The Kingdom of God comes not only at the end of time but at every moment."[158] So, is there actually an afterlife? Yes: "Real love is the affirmation of eternity."[159] This is not a matter of isolated souls: "A realized and completed personality is immortal. But in the spiritual world there are no self-contained personalities, they are united with God, with other personalities and with the cosmos."[160] This does not suppress personality, but is its social blossoming.

The gospel offers union between man and God, but we do not cease to be human, or surrender our nature. Rather, "Deification implies a distinction between God and man, a dialogical and dramatic relationship between them."[161]

I'll use a modern term to restate one of his points: Christ helps bring out the full human potential. "The religion of Christ is the religion of man's highest powers."[162] "With the appearance of Christ in the world, man's sonship with God, his likeness to God and his participation in the divine nature are all revealed."[163] With Boehme, Berdyaev agrees that deification means "a restoration of Adam's original status."[164] I would add that this has an Origenist sound to it. What we need to bring is courage: "If great obedience is needed for redemption, for creativeness there is needed great courage."[165]

This is why we cannot allow any submergence of personality within a group. "I cannot assent to any exteriorization of the personal conscience—to its transference to the

[155] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, xvi.

[156] Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 75, 83, 95, 99, 101, 177, 263; idem, *Spirit and Reality*, 121–23, 126–28.

[157] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 176.

[158] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 290.

[159] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Meridian, 1957. First published by Sheed & Ward, 1934), 132.

[160] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 255–56.

[161] Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 133.

[162] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 242.

[163] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 296.

[164] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 123.

[165] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 101.

collective. For conscience is within man, in the depth of his freedom where he enters into relation with God. . . The worship of the collective is . . . a form of idolatry."[166]

To understand Berdyaev's vision of the future, we have to grasp his tripartite concept of ethics. He envisioned a sequence, from an ethics of law, to an ethics of redemption, and to an ethics of creativity.[167] The ethics of law does not do justice to the complexity and inwardness of persons.[168] Higher than the ethics of law is the ethics of redemption, in which God is seen as co-suffering with humanity. The supreme worth of humanity is stated by Christ in his saying that man is higher than the Sabbath.[169]

The ethics of redemption, then, finds its fulfillment in the ethics of creativity, which is not primarily concerned with salvation, but with values, and always involves a victory over fear.[170] Out of the interaction of free and creative persons will come a new world. We will actually "create new values out of God-given gifts."[171] Berdyaev's ethics flows into his eschatology: "Ethics invariably passes into eschatology and is resolved into it. Its last word is theosis, deification, attained through man's freedom and creativeness."[172] His final ethical formulation is: "act as though you could hear the Divine call to participate through free and creative activity in the Divine work."[173] Unfortunately, many people prefer authoritarian order to "the great anxiety and terrible agony" of freedom.[174]

Berdyaev stressed that "God is a God who suffers with the world and with man. . . The Redeemer is the Liberator, and that not as settling accounts with God for crimes that have been committed."[175] Christianity is the religion of deification. "The interpretation of Christianity as the religion of God-manhood is radically opposed to the juridical interpretation of the relation between God and man, and the juridical theory of redemption."[176]

2d. Eschatology

There is an element of eternity in Christian love. "Love means seeing the other in God and affirming him in eternal life. . . No abstract idea of the good can be put above personality."[177] And creative life continues beyond this lifetime. As for *this* world, nothing will remain unchanged: "all must be transfigured and brought into the Kingdom of God"[178]

[166] Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 235241–42.

[167] Michel Alexander Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom: Life and Teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev*. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 223.

[168] Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom*, 227.

[169] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 107.

[170] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 133, 136.

[171] Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom*, 247.

[172] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 297.

[173] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 297–98.

[174] Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 194.

[175] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 85.

[176] Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 173.

[177] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 107.

[178] Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, 294.

He shows his linkage to Soloviev when he says: "The Kingdom of God is that of God-humanity, in which God is finally in man and man in God, and this is realized in Spirit."[179]

Eternal life is a blossoming of creativity and love in this life and the next. It will be a *collective* transformation: "Individual, isolated salvation is an impossibility. Salvation can only be achieved with the help of one's fellow-men."[180] "Men must all be saved together."[181] Berdyaev envisioned "a new world of justice and beauty."[182] Love is essential. "At its highest, love is always the vision of the face of the loved one in God."[183] As with Soloviev, we hear an affirmation of eternity, but get very little in the way of specifics.

The "saved together" passages suggest that Berdyaev was actually a universalist, reflecting the influence of Origen and of Gregory of Nyssa: "The vengeful and cruel instincts of people have built up a vengeful and cruel eschatology. . . Hell . . . would be the failure of all creation and a schism within the Kingdom of God."[184] "Nothing but a universal resurrection of everything that lives and has lived can reconcile us to the world process. . . Everything which is not eternal is unendurable."[185] "It is possible to have an ethic of anti-hell . . . which believes in the enlightenment and transfiguration not only of those who are evil . . . but even of the devil himself."[186]

I respect universalism for its noble hope and generosity of spirit, but I am not a universalist. I find it hard to imagine universal salvation as long as free will is honored. People have been given the freedom to be stubborn; it is hard to imagine *every* person eventually turning away from stubbornness and freely choosing to follow God, although it is easy to imagine *many* people making that choice, if they are given more time in the afterlife. Berdyaev does emphasize *free* cooperation between divine and human; deification will not be imposed upon anyone.

But what is the real nature of this transformed world? He describes it in terms of contrasts and principles. It will involve "triumph over the world of alienation, necessity, impersonality, and hostility."[187] He writes "Christ revealed in Himself the God-Man; the Holy Spirit will reveal divine humanity. In divine humanity the deification of humanity and the deification of the world's flesh will take place. But the new, holy flesh will not be the same flesh as the old, pagan, corrupt flesh."[188] What does this mean? *How* does our flesh change? He does not say. One wonders whether it has anything to do with his personal revulsion for the messiness of physical sex, and his choice of celibacy in his

[179] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 197.

[180] Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 166.

[181] Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 136.

[182] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Christian Existentialism*, , trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 216, originally from *The Russian Idea*.

[183] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 237.

[184] Berdyaev, *Beginning and End*, 235, 237. Positive remarks about Origen and Gregory: *Dream and Reality*, 165, 291.

[185] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 267.

[186] Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 136.

[187] Berdyaev, *Divine and the Human*, 197.

[188] Nikolai Berdyaev, "Christ and the World: In Response to Vasily Rozanov," in *The Brightest Lights of the Silver Age: Essays on Russian Religious Thinkers*, trans. Boris Jakim (Kettering, OH: Semantron, 2015), 124.

relationship with his wife.[189] Ruth Coates argues that Berdyaev carries forward some of the attitudes of Merezhkovsky and his circle. That group sought "to establish a new 'church' in opposition to the ROC. They themselves formed the nucleus of this church . . . This 'church of Flesh and Blood' anticipated a new Christianity of the 'Third Testament' in which flesh and spirit would be united rather than opposed.[190] Coates says "the Merezhkovskys were apparently ignorant of the Church's foundational theology of the divinized flesh of Christ."[191] Berdyaev "shares with Merezhkovsky's circle an interest in the transformative potential of erotic celibacy . . . though . . . he claims to surpass them."[192]

Berdyaev claims that Merezhkovksy went astray; he was tempted by "the idea of mystical monarchy and the grandeur of Caesar"; Merezhkovsky's veneration of "Napolean, a superman . . . shows that Nietzsche's influence is still present in him."[193] However, Berdyaev says that "I resented all their attempts to create a bogus, sectarian church [with] new sacraments."[194] So what *does* Berdyaev look for?—a kind of highly cultured but platonic admiration between the sexes? Or rather a juxtaposition of sexual love and spiritual love? "The meaning of love is personal, not generative. . . Sex is a fall, it is a disruption which seeks to reestablish wholeness but does not succeed in doing so within personal existence."[195] So, does he foresee a removal from the physical level altogether, or is it simply an intensification of spiritual quality so that sexuality helps to exalt rather than to suppress the personal element, or will there be a kind of profound glorification and change in the physical body? It is not clear.

Berdyaev explicitly criticizes Catholicism "which does not seem to expect the Christianization of the cosmos and the human race," as Orthodoxy does.[196] "Orthodoxy has preserved the eschatological view of the Kingdom of God better than Catholicism."[197] He affirms that "Orthodoxy deep down is essentially the religion of the Holy Spirit; the idea of sacrifice and of 'buying back' so dear to Catholicism remains alien to it,"[198] although he concedes that there are some Catholic authors with a more mystical viewpoint.[199] Berdyaev did not look for church unions, but for deeper understanding between Christians. Real unity will not be ecclesial but spiritual: "It is only by remaining in one's confession, and by deepening and broadening it, that one can work towards universalism . . . Only the Holy Spirit can unite the Churches."[200] The Kingdom of God is not a matter of church

[189] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 13, 127.

[190] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 13.

[191] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 13.

[192] Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 19.

[193] Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 163.

[194] Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 33.

[195] Berdyaev, *Beginning and End*, 244–45.

[196] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 350.

[197] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 354.

[198] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 351.

[199] Jeremy Pilch, "The Ecclesiology of Divine Humanity and Church Unity: Solov'ev, Berdyaev, and Bulgakov," in *One in Christ* 52 (2018), 199.

[200] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 355–56.

hierarchy or organization, but of spiritual quality. Further, the spirit of community solidarity, "the spirit of *sobornost* is better expressed in Orthodoxy than it is in Catholicism."[201]

Berdyaev *does* explain that the church must be transformed, it must let go of its ancient dualism of flesh and spirit. "The Church must include all that is dear and valuable to us, all that we have gained through our suffering in the world—our love, our thought and poetry, all our creative works which the old consciousness has excluded from the Church."[202] Further, the church hierarchy must give up its "sanctimonious worldliness" and its use of coercion.[203]

Deification in both this world and the next, then, will involve all the beautiful and lovely things that people create or do. There will be no self-laceration or laceration of others. Presumably there will be art, music, intellectual accomplishments, and a powerful atmosphere of love. In fact, "something will be changed in the life of sex. . . Love can transfigure the old sexual life . . . into creative channels . . . Both eros-love and agape-love will play such a part."[204] But we are left hungering for some more specific information, if any is available. What is transfigured sexual love? What is the new flesh? Is it in this world or the next? Will we undergo stages of transformation and growth? What will the afterlife be like? Will it be like a circle of religious intellectuals excitedly sharing their ideas? We are not told. He makes it clear that earth life will be characterized by love, kindness, and creative freedom, but how will love or marriage be changed?

Further, he makes it clear that "Man will never be replaced by the superman or by the spirit of other hierarchies, as the theosophists and occultists think. Man will inherit eternity in his humanness; he is called to life in God."[205] It is true love, kindness, and spiritual receptivity that will characterize the people who live in the Kingdom of God. "The fundamental difference among people is the difference between those who love and pity and those who do not love and do not pity; and this is the difference between 'good' and 'bad' people."[206]

2e. Christology

His Christology is sometimes in the background, but it certainly underlies everything he believes. He writes that part of human ancestry is the Old Adam, but part is the Spiritual Adam, Christ. "Through the birth of the Son in eternity the whole spiritual race and the whole universe comprised in man, in fact the whole cosmos, responds to the appeal of divine love. . . Through the Son we return to the bosom of the Father. . . He is the Vine and we are the branches. The whole regenerated human race dwells in Christ the God-Man."[207] We see a very strong Christology in the book that Coates describes as Nietzschean, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*: "Christ is God-Man. He redeems and restores *human* nature to

[201] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 355.

[202] Berdyaev, "Christ and the World," 125.

[203] Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 202.

[204] Berdyaev, *Divine and the Human*, 201.

[205] Berdyaev, , *Divine and the Human*, 126.

[206] Berdyaev, *Divine and the Human*, 125.

[207] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 198.

its likeness to God. . . Christ becomes immanent in man and man takes upon himself the whole burden of measureless freedom."[208] "Freedom without Christ the Liberator is the freedom of the old Adam, freedom without love."[209] "With Christ, God's autocracy ceases, for man as the son of God is called to immediate participation in divine life. . . Man is called to continue God's work of creation."[210]

It is in Christ that humanity has hope and destiny: "Through the Son we return to the bosom of the Father. With Him a new race of human beings begins, the race of Christ, born and regenerated in the Spirit."[211] Christ embodies the hope for human fulfillment: "The creative revelation of man is a continuing and completing revelation of Christ, the Absolute Man."[212]

Both Soloviev and Berdyaev expressed a profound Christian hope. Both philosophers put a big emphasis on the need for divine and human cooperation, even collaboration, leading to a "transfiguration of human nature."[213] They put a strong emphasis on communitarian spirituality, on the emergence of "a spiritual man,"[214] and not on individual salvation. Soloviev writes, "We can lay hold on his righteousness not as individuals but only collectively, *with the whole universe*."[215] However, from both authors, we crave more details. With both Soloviev and Berdyaev we are left with stirring statements, powerful contrasts, and mighty principles but with a very incomplete picture of how deification leads to "holy flesh" and "spiritualized matter." All that is clear is that there will be an end of religious bigotry and cruelty, and there will be heightened ethics, a perfecting of love, and an affirmation of eternity.

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[208] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 104–5.

[209] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 141.

[210] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 127.

[211] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 198.

[212] Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act*, 296.

[213] Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 176.

[214] See Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 172; Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 176.

[215] Soloviev, *God, Man and the Church*, 173.

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