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Universalising idealism: The cross-cultural case of Russian religious thought

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the idealist dimension of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian religious thought as it appears in key works by Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) and Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948). Under the impact of Schelling in particular, these thinkers took religious experience and human consciousness as a starting point for their projects. On the one hand, the article shows that this had a very significant impact also on the way in which they approached classical religious themes. More specifically, it examines how the transmission of idealist philosophy from Western Europe to Russia led to a reinterpretation in the works of these thinkers of certain themes of the Orthodox heritage as well as everyday cultural practices. On the other hand, it points to significant parallels between Russian religious idealism and idealist theology in the West, most notably Paul Tillich. Thus, the transfer of ideas from its Schellingian origin to Russia becomes, the article claims, an example of universalisation, in this case of Shellingian idealism, through the active use and application of ideas and concepts in new contexts.

KEYWORDS

Vladimir Solov'ev; Sergei Bulgakov; Nikolai Berdiaev; Paul Tillich; idealism; idea transfer

The historiography of modern Western intellectual history, of the twentieth century in particular, has been criticised for marginalising theology and religious thought.¹ In the study of Russian intellectual history, by contrast, the situation is by and large the opposite. Here it is precisely Russian *religious* thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – from the first generation of Slavophiles via Vladimir Solov'ev to the philosophers of the so-called Silver Age (1890–1917) – that has been canonised as Russia's main contribution to world philosophy. However, the juxtaposing of predominantly secular Western to religious Russian thought exaggerates the difference between the two, downplaying not only significant religious currents in modern Western (West-European) thought of a similar kind, but also that Russian religious thought is inconceivable without the encounter with West-European thought, secular not least.

This article thus argues that Russian religious thought is a less exclusive and exotic phenomenon than it traditionally has been understood as.² Rather, I

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suggest approaching it as an expression of the legacy of German idealism in a Russian context. The analysis below aims to contribute to the understanding of Russian religious thought as part of a broader transcultural nineteenth- and twentieth-century current of idealist theology, whose foundational text is the philosophy of Schelling. Although the impact of Schelling on Russian thought is well known, the traditional ways of conceptualising it need to be revised. Western philosophy in Russia has, I would claim, been studied mainly in terms of impact, whereby it is assumed that there exists a Russian indigenous core receptive to foreign philosophy. Or that 'Schelling in Russia' is a clearly identifiable, distinct current merely.³ The view proposed here is that Russian thought, or culture more generally, is as a rule an engagement with ideas of Western origin to the extent you cannot have one without the other, and therefore has a hybrid character that defies essentialist conceptions. Such hybridity, as Maxim Waldstein has pointed out, should neither be seen as an anomaly or handicap, nor the proof of Russia's *Sonderweg*, but an expression of, and perhaps even model for, nonessentialist thinking, capable also of shedding a critical light on Eurocentric ideas of the self-contained purity of western thought.⁴ By the same token, the cross-cultural perspective offered here seeks to capture this hybrid character better than the traditional approach of this or that Western thinker 'in Russia', without disregarding the importance of previous studies in advancing our understanding of the flow of ideas into, within as well as from Russia. Russian religious thought is an expression of a global or, perhaps more precisely, transcultural circulation of ideas in terms of 'border-crossing issue networks'.⁵

In order to explore this theme I will offer a reading of three classical works in Russian religious thought: Vladimir Solov'ev's *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (1878), Sergei Bulgakov's *Philosophy of Economy* (1912) and Nikolai Berdiaev's *The Meaning of Creativity* (1916). My focus is two-fold. First, I analyse these thinkers as *idealist* philosophers, meaning that I focus not only on their preference for ethics to utopianism, for ideas to matter or for the individual to sociological understandings of group identities. This is how the idealism of Russian religious thought has predominantly been understood, in keeping with the agendas of the famous collections *Problems of Idealism* (1902) and *Landmarks* (1909).⁶ By contrast, I will use 'idealism' in a more literal sense, that is as the belief in reality being the active creation of the mind or of consciousness.⁷ Even for Russian religious idealists, as I will show, the world is the 'concrete actualization of concepts whose proper home is the mind'.⁸ In keeping with this approach I will examine how these thinkers reformulated traditional Orthodox ideas in an idealist language, and how they applied them to cultural practices and production. This brings me to the second objective of this article, namely to argue that Russian religious thought was part of a broader idealist project that contributed to the transcultural spread of the idealist legacy, universalising it thereby through active use in a new context – not in spite of them engaging the Orthodox tradition within an idealist framework, but because of it.⁹ In order to facilitate this approach, the analysis will be framed by a presentation of some of the liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's ideas, an early twentieth-century German representative of religious neo-idealism and hence a Western parallel that the developments in Russia anticipated.

1. Tillich and the legacy of idealism

In 1919, at a meeting of the Kant Society in Berlin, Tillich read a lecture that bore the title ‘theology of culture’.¹⁰ The published version has been regarded as ‘Tillich’s most important piece of writing’¹¹ and formulates arguably the main idea of his intellectual legacy. Tillich distinguishes theology of culture from ‘church theology’ and its focus on dogmatic issues. Theology for Tillich is above all about religion, and theology of culture ‘carries out a general religious analysis of all cultural creations’,¹² focusing on their ‘substance’ or significance (*Gehalt*). It entails the idea that human culture, the secular and secularised spheres included, is penetrated by religion. This raises in turn the question as to what Tillich means by ‘religion’. Religion is defined by Tillich as ‘the experience of the unconditioned’, and the goal of a theology of culture is that these ‘religious experiences (*Erlebnisse*), which are embedded in every great cultural manifestation, be brought to expression and given prominence’.¹³ Infused by spirit, depth, significance, culture is ‘theonomous’ – an expression of God understood as the unconditioned, or Being-itself.¹⁴ Its ultimate goal is the ethical community, or the ‘church’ – a notion that for Tillich likewise includes the secular world.

Tillich opens his 1919 speech by defining theology of culture as a *Kulturwissenschaft*. For Tillich this implies that ‘culture’ is always actively construed, and that the interpretation of culture has a bearing upon its very object. Furthermore, it is also self-interpretation: It aims at showing how culture becomes meaningful for us. For Tillich, theology of culture is about meaning rather than reality strictly speaking, and it searches for this meaning also in secular expressions.¹⁵ At the same time, meaning is warranted by the religious dimension, as revealed through a specific approach to cultural creations, secular ones included. The focus is not only on explicit religious expressions but also on the historical legacy of religion, i.e. the duration of the religious past into the present, for instance through the use of concepts of religious origin in new cultural situations. It even takes into consideration what may be interpreted as analogies to religion. Religion for Tillich is also the human faculty of intuition, as distinguished from the critical, scientific use of reason.¹⁶ A concept that may sum up all these varieties of religion is ‘unconscious faith’.¹⁷

Intuition is a key category in idealist thought, and reveals the impact of the German idealism on Tillich, most notably Schelling. Schellingian themes in Tillich’s theology are, first, the understanding of God as the absolute or unconditioned and vice versa; second, the emphasis on religion as a historical process from an initial ‘fall’ to a reestablishment of unity; third, the human participation in this process of recovery, a participation that is grounded in consciousness.¹⁸ These aspects of Schelling’s philosophy, which became particularly prominent in his late period, had also strong appeal for Solov’ev and the succeeding generation of religious idealist philosophers in Russia.¹⁹ Russian religious idealism is fundamentally Schellingian, although this was not always explicitly acknowledged by the philosophers themselves, and so was Tillich. The Russian thinkers identified belief with philosophical idealism, for instance as confidence in our perceptions and experiences.²⁰ Moreover, like Tillich, they saw the field of culture as an expression of humanity’s divine-like nature, while at the same time understanding culture in a way that was, as I will argue in the following, profoundly constructivist. On the one hand, human culture in all its variety was something that they in their

own writings actively identified and construed as metaphysically meaningful.²¹ On the other, they were explicit about their confidence in the power of human thought in general to shape reality.

2. Vladimir Solov'ev and divine humanity

Solov'ev's *Lectures on Divine Humanity* start off with the proclamation of an 'unconditioned principle', which he identifies with God in terms of a 'divine principle' whose 'existence can be asserted only by an act of faith'.²² Our perceptions, the 'content of external nature', would be merely 'fantasy and hallucinations' if we did not believe in the existence of the objects of these perceptions. But neither the fact that objects exist is sufficient for us. Our experience provides us with psychical facts, facts of consciousness, while the 'objective meaning of these facts is determined by a creative act of faith'.²³ Creative, confident perceptions make the empirical world meaningful, and for Solov'ev this testifies to the impact of the divine principle on us, or its 'revelation'. Faith is, according to Solov'ev's idealism, both a precondition for knowledge and a faculty that actively produces knowledge by organising our experience and making it meaningful.

A key point that Solov'ev makes in his lectures is that human reflection on the divine principle is constitutive of it, an understanding that is enabled by the idealist approach that he adopts. By implication, human beings do play a role in the world historical process, or in the process of Divine Humanity, which is the active co-working between human consciousness and the divine principle:

The divine principle is the actual object of religious consciousness, that is, the object that acts upon and reveals its content in that consciousness. Religious development is therefore a positive and objective process, a real interaction (*vzaimodeistvie*) between God and humanity – a divine-human process.²⁴

The belief in a co-operation of the human and the divine is seemingly at odds with the otherwise Platonic character of Solov'ev's lectures, in which he defines the absolute (also) as the 'kingdom of ideas'.²⁵ The world as we see it is appearance, behind which there exists the reality of ideas. These ideas, or 'metaphysical entities (*sushchestva*)', are not our inventions, Solov'ev emphasises, but something that we may attain knowledge of by means of 'intellectual contemplation (*umstvennoe sozertsanie*)'. And yet, despite Solov'ev's belief in Platonic ideas and his rejection of them being our inventions, he nevertheless sees our perception of them as constitutive. According to his idealism, cognitive acts of representation shape the object of this representation significantly.²⁶

There is a significant implication of this point: Without the active contemplation of ideas, artistic or philosophical, universal history and progress would be inconceivable. It follows that there was a substantial amount of evolutionism in Solov'ev's religious thought, where positive developments in various worldly domains were seen as contributing to the same overall cosmological process and progress. For instance, Solov'ev accommodated Darwinism within the overall perfection of creation.²⁷ In a later text, Solov'ev emphasised, in an analogous vein, that non-believers may contribute to the religious process through their good deeds.²⁸ Meanwhile, *Lectures on Divine Humanity* evoked a broader historical perspective and aimed to show how human beings already

had contributed to this ‘interaction’ in the remote past and might contribute further in the future.

A key example in Solov’ev’s lectures is precisely the human discovery of ideas, which has its own history. This happened in Ancient Greece, not only by the philosopher Plato, but also in Greek art. Homer depicts the ideal cosmos that Plato was to elaborate on later philosophically. This means that Solov’ev, himself an idealist, sees idealism as having emerged historically. Furthermore, Solov’ev, a deeply Christian philosopher, even sees Christianity as an event in the same story. There is indeed something paradoxical in this – Solov’ev being a devout Christian and at the same time understanding Christianity as historically contingent and even as a further development of Indian, Greek and Jewish religion. The explanation is that Buddhism, Greek and Jewish religion and Christianity for Solov’ev are *human* history. Religion means the human ‘connection (*sviaz*)’ and ‘reunification (*vossoedinenie*)’ with the absolute, divine principle.²⁹ Thus, history for Solov’ev is the fulfilment in time of creation through humanity’s work on it, including its increasingly richer conceptualisation of it. The human discovery of divine truth is a historical process, a process that at the same time is formative of this truth. As an idealist, Solov’ev sees thinking as constitutive of its content.³⁰ Human culture, and religion more specifically, contributes to the process of creation and has therefore a religious meaning.

The decisive moment in this story is the emergence of Christ, the God-Man. Christ enabled the deification (*theosis*) of the entire creation, including not least humanity as the ‘image and likeness of the divine principle’.³¹ During the nineteenth century, the Orthodox doctrine of deification had attracted the attention of educated society in Russia, thanks to an extensive translation project of classical theological texts, whose transmission, as Patrick Lally Michelson has argued, ‘provided an array of vocabulary and ideas that generically informed liberal notions about human dignity and individual freedom’, which became particularly prominent in the reform era. It was therefore a ‘reinterpretation of theosis that made man’s unending moral perfectibility, not his one-time mystical transformation, the intent of deification’.³² Understood as moral perfection, deification became accessible to the entire community through the mundane strivings of its members, who possess reason and free will. Clearly, this understanding goes beyond the traditional patristic understanding of deification as attainable either through participation in the sacraments or ascetic practices.³³ In *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Solov’ev makes his contribution to the modern reinterpretation of deification, seeing it as a project of positive, ethical work grounded in consciousness.

Earlier in his lectures, Solov’ev did suggest in passing that all positive human activities – art, thought and politics – may contribute to the realisation of some ‘ideal principle’.³⁴ At the same time, *Lectures on Divine Humanity* culminates in an ecclesiology, and is thus far in conformity with traditional Orthodox theology. Divine likeness is attained though participation in the church. But what is meant by ‘church’? Solov’ev does not mean the actual Christian churches of his own age, be it the Western or Eastern one. He subjects both to criticism: While the Eastern Church has preserved the image of Christ, it has isolated itself from society and culture. Meanwhile, the Western churches have better defended the human being but they have lost their independence to the state and have also been secularised and rationalised in various ways. Solov’ev therefore calls for the creation of a new Christian culture, not yet realised

neither in Western nor in Eastern Christianity. He envisions it as a universal church in terms of the establishment by humanity of a 'true divine-human society, imagined according to the image and likeness of the God-man himself'.³⁵ More specifically, 'church' means a humanity capable of realising in the future a new community and a culture based on Christian ethical principles.

True, *Lectures on Divine Humanity* may seem to focus more on the unification of the divine and human in history than on the unification of a divided humanity. In his later writings, Solov'ev would expand on the latter aspect as central to the ethical project he termed the 'Kingdom of God'.³⁶ But although he in the lectures characterised Christ's teachings as not containing anything particularly original – the main thing about Christianity for Solov'ev was the full spiritualisation or divinisation of a human being – the final lecture describes the future unification of God and humanity as a realisation of the 'truth of Christ, namely the truth of eternal love and unconditioned kindness'.³⁷ This ethical utopia involves likewise personal self-denial, i.e. renunciation of egoism, in favour of the common good and the 'fullness of being' in accordance with the 'living divine image'.³⁸

Lectures on Divine Humanity is a work on the metaphysics of history, where the main agency is ascribed to a collective humanity (by way of the church), whose tasks are enabled, as Solov'ev believed, by the residing in this world of Divine Wisdom (Sophia). Solov'ev's philosophy was a critique of abstract principles, but as argued by Paul Valliere, the concept of divine humanity risks itself becoming an 'abstract principle'.³⁹ And yet his lectures suggest also that the positive, progressive historical process has already begun: Solov'ev's history of the evolution of religious consciousness – from Buddhism to Christianity – may be read as the story of humanity's response thus far to the divine principle. Through the gradual discovery by the world religions of the divine principle, humanity has already anticipated its final, imminent unification with God, or deification. The active widening of consciousness in terms of intellectual contemplation makes humanity eventually aware of its own, ethical tasks.

Solov'ev's religious philosophy was a response to the challenges of positivism, materialism and socialism of his age and society, whose 'partial truths' he recognised but lack of transcendental, ethical foundations he criticised.⁴⁰ By contrast, *Lectures on Divine Humanity* offer a vision of a divine-human interaction as a gradual approximation and integration grounded in our own consciousness. It was a fundamentally idealist philosophy of the absolute, or what Solov'ev himself conceptualised as the 'unity of all things' (*vseedinstvo*) – which is also another word for 'God'.⁴¹

3. Sergei Bulgakov and the philosophy of economy

Also the next generation of Russian religious idealists saw religion as key in providing the necessary transcendental foundation that was missing in positivism, materialism and socialism. At the same time they were faced with new challenges and prospects of modernisation, revolution (1905), reform and democratisation in Russia. Sergei Bulgakov's religious philosophy of economy was also an attempt to show the full meaning of human labour in a new context that called for civic mobilisation.⁴² While Bulgakov at this time had left Marxism and proceeded to idealism, as reflected in the title of a collection of articles he published in 1903 (*From Marxism to Idealism*), he retained his interest in labour, a key concept of the Marxist legacy. However, Bulgakov's main agenda with his

philosophy of labour and economy was to provide the reader with a meaningful perspective on human activity and labour more specifically, turning thereby Marx on his head so to speak.

Bulgakov conceptualises labour as ‘economy’ or ‘household’ (*khoziaistvo*), which involves both empirical, philosophical-transcendental and metaphysical dimensions. His starting point in *Philosophy of Economy* is to postulate the interaction of human beings with nature, which is also what economy in his broad understanding of the term is about. This relationship itself is more fundamental than either the empirical world of objects or the individual, thinking subject. This does not mean that it is economy or the ‘economic relationship’ that is the unconditioned reality for Bulgakov, although certain formulations tend to identify it as such.⁴³ The very precondition for economy, that is our active relationship to and engagement with the world, is simply *life* (*zhizn'*). It is life that makes up the ‘primordial principle (*pervonachalo*)’ for Bulgakov.⁴⁴ This implies, among other things, that life does not exist in time and space, but rather that time and space are inherent features of life.

Life is therefore also more primordial than philosophy, or even thought as such: ‘life is more immediate than, and prior to, any philosophical reflection or self-reflection’. Philosophy meanwhile is life’s self-reflection and self-consciousness. Thought is born of life and hence grounded in life. Still, life is not identical to thought (or ‘Logos’), it includes something more, which Bulgakov refers to as the ‘alogical’. Thought is life’s ‘hypostasis’.⁴⁵

By putting life first as the ultimate primordial principle, Bulgakov seems to depart from idealism in a strict sense of the term, engaging instead in some kind of *Lebensphilosophie*. According to Catherine Evtuhov, ‘idealism’ for Bulgakov meant first and foremost a pre-occupation with ethical questions and a critique of positivism, rather than a strict identification of reality with consciousness.⁴⁶ However, although he distinguishes his own worldview from those who equates consciousness with the absolute (the absolute for him is life), he contextualises his own philosophy of economy on the one hand in Christianity and on the other in the idealism of Schelling and Solov'ev. In the foreword he describes his project as a translation of the Church Fathers, and more specifically their ‘religious materialism’, into modern philosophical language. So while the ultimate reality is not consciousness, Bulgakov seeks to go beyond the dichotomy of idealism and materialism by proclaiming a philosophy of the ‘incarnated spirit’, the unity of spirit and flesh. ‘Christianity is a philosophy of identity’, he writes. In Schelling, likewise, ‘death is once more conquered by life in philosophical consciousness’. This Christian-Schellingian philosophy of identity is then the ground for economy, the development of which, according to Bulgakov, Schelling himself did not finish.⁴⁷

In a Kantian spirit Bulgakov raises the question: how is economy possible? The answer so far seems to be ‘life’. Life makes economy possible through the identity it creates between subject and object. What this identity enables, more specifically, is the ‘humanization of nature’, a new ‘product’ that is ‘subject-object’.⁴⁸ While this identity is primordial, it is our own recognition of it that enables us to see economic activity, or labour, as meaningful. Bulgakov is therefore also an idealist in a more strict sense of the term. Bulgakov’s emphasis lies on the *meaning* of human everyday efforts, a meaning that for him was, ultimately, religious. And in order to reveal this meaning we have to adopt the proper perspective. Thus, the philosophy of economy is not primarily a project that seeks to increase productivity – though it aims at that, too. First and foremost, it seeks to

understand productivity in the most appropriate way. At the same time, a new conceptualisation forges a new reality.⁴⁹

These are the basic outlines of Bulgakov's philosophical argument. In addition he provides two religious and cosmological arguments that serve to amplify the providentialist dimension that also characterised Bulgakov's visions.⁵⁰ For Bulgakov the two models represent different aspects of the same issue, but it is nevertheless useful to distinguish them in order to understand the logic of Bulgakov's reasoning.

The first is the vision of Divine Wisdom, of Sophia, which Bulgakov took over from Solov'ev. Sophia, Wisdom, is both associated with humanity at present and represents the goal of humanity. We possess it and possess it not yet in full. It is a very complex notion that draws on most various sources – Biblical, Jewish, Gnostic, theosophical – but in *Philosophy of Economy* Bulgakov relies in particular on Schelling's treatise on *Human Freedom* (1809). Schelling's work describes a cosmic or metaphysical 'fall', of which the Biblical fall was an expression. This fall provides, in turn, humanity with the task of overcoming it and restoring the unity, and wisdom is the principle that enables this restoration. There is a 'heavenly, timeless Sophia and an empirical Sophia'.⁵¹ Sophia becomes thereby the 'living link between God, man, and nature' – an idea that serves their unification.⁵²

The second model evoked by Bulgakov is more explicitly Orthodox. It is also about restoring what was lost in the Fall, namely the divine likeness of humanity. In *Philosophy of Economy* it may seem to be subordinated to Sophiology, since the latter is subject to more extensive discussions, but Bulgakov nevertheless evokes key elements of Orthodox anthropology and connects them directly with idealism. In economy, he writes, we 'reproduce a likeness of the images that are divinely given to us'. These (unspecified) images are primordial, they exist 'in the spiritual world, while we realize their likeness through our life'.⁵³ Or at least we possess the freedom to realise them, which also means that we are free to renounce them.

The second part of the chapter 'On the Transcendental Subject of Economy', which is entitled 'The Sophic Economy', introduces the notion of creativity, *tvorchestvo*. From the above it follows, however, that creativity for Bulgakov does not mean to 'create' in terms of creating an 'image', which in biblical terms means to create from nothing. 'Human creativity can only reproduce a likeness, not create an image'.⁵⁴ For Bulgakov the latter attempts would be 'Satanic'. *Tvorchestvo* is not *tvorenie* (Creation). Instead, creativity means 'reproduction' (*vosproizvedenie*) according to divine images. Human creativity thus understood draws on the existing world, and may 'incarnate its images'. The outcome is, in short, culture. 'In economic activity, the new world of culture takes shape'.⁵⁵

Thus, human creativity does not produce anything that is 'metaphysically new'; rather, it is replication of divine images. It is bound to what already exists or to that which is created. It is free re-creation of nature. For Bulgakov culture has therefore a religious meaning. The idea of *theosis* here fully blends with both idealism and with Sophiology, which hereby offer different responses to Bulgakov's question as to how economy is possible.

We may perceive in this philosophy a struggle with idolatry, but more important, in my view, is the shift of perspective that it seeks to accomplish – to perceive human labour in pertinent, meaningful terms. In order to capture the reproduction that labour is, Bulgakov

makes use of several interrelated terms: ‘expand’, ‘recreate’, ‘organize’, ‘restore’, ‘overcome the division’, all of which may be summarised under the very notion of culture. Culture is human work on, or ‘humanization’ of, nature and aims to make the relationship between humanity and nature organic again. It is a revolt against positivism and materialism, which see nature as dead and/or mechanical. Meanwhile, the task involves also the work of humanity on itself: to create solidarity within humanity by means of social ideals is mentioned as a key factor in the economic process.⁵⁶

So although Bulgakov sees life as more fundamental than thought, the question as to how economy is possible is above all a question of ‘widening the consciousness of life’.⁵⁷ The project of economy is not only action but also cognition. And the philosophy of economy, which seeks to make our everyday strivings meaningful in a metaphysical and cosmological perspective, becomes therefore an idealist project. While economy, labour and creativity are overlapping terms in his work, they overlap also with knowledge – active knowledge of divine images makes economy, and hence the expression of our divine likeness, possible. In turn, all these dimensions of human culture, from the cognitive to the practical, are different but complementary means to the deification of humanity.

4. Nikolai Berdiaev and the meaning of creativity

In contrast to Bulgakov’s *Philosophy of Economy*, the opening of Nikolai Berdiaev’s *Meaning of Creativity* (1916) presents us with a negative view of the world, or life. For Berdiaev the world, or ‘world’ as he repeatedly puts it in quotation marks, is ‘evil’.⁵⁸ Berdiaev was not a ‘sophiologist’ who saw the created world as potentially invested with wisdom. The ‘world’ for Berdiaev represents captivity, fixture (*dannost*), necessity, perhaps also an illusion, at least when taken to be the whole reality.

However, Berdiaev also operates with a more positive conception of the world, namely as ‘cosmos’. Cosmos, or ‘genuine being’, is not given, though; it is a human task that may be achieved through the human spirit’s self-liberation from this world. This means that Berdiaev’s thinking is dualistic. But it is also, according to himself, monist in its ‘immanent’ understanding of God, which again brings him closer to Solov’ev and Bulgakov.

The absolute is affirmed in the depths of spiritual life and not in the external conditional world, to which nothing absolute is applicable. The heroic struggle against the evil of the world is born in the liberating consciousness of immanentism, in which God is immanent in the human spirit and the world is transcendent to it.⁵⁹

Berdiaev’s starting point in *The Meaning of Creativity* is precisely the power of thought. Its first chapter is devoted to ‘philosophy as a creative act’, conceived by Berdiaev as a project that will overcome the ‘old passive philosophy of necessity’, a necessity imposed by philosophical thinking itself, most notably by Kant. By contrast, ‘the philosophy of the future will recognize the creative overcoming and transfiguring nature of knowledge (*poznanie*), for in knowledge it will see the dawn and flowering of being, itself. Philosophy is active knowledge that shapes reality, a process in which philosophical intuition is more decisive than discursive proof. ‘Philosophy is man’s self-consciousness of his imperial and creative role in the cosmos’.⁶⁰ By implication, consciousness is not only a precondition for knowledge but also a formative, creative endeavour – a shaping of the world by the mind. This is Berdiaev’s version of idealism.

Given his/her capacity to create cosmos in thought, the human being is a ‘microcosm’, that is, the ‘image and likeness of absolute being’. Human beings realise that they belong to two worlds – the ‘world’ of necessity or dependency (nature) and the cosmos of freedom. (Formulations like these suggest that Berdiaev is also very indebted to Kant.) The human being is the point where these two worlds meet, and in the domain of freedom the human being recognises itself as ‘the image and likeness of God’.⁶¹ For Berdiaev, this is not dogma but experience: Through our own creativity (*tvorchestvo*) we feel that we are in possession of the divine image and likeness, despite our dependency on the natural world. The power of thought enables our liberation from the captivity of necessity, or the transition from being an object of science to becoming a supernatural subject. Just as Bulgakov, Berdiaev too had proceeded ‘from Marxism to idealism’, but what Berdiaev retained from his early fascination with Marxism was its revolutionary spirit, now transferred to the domain of consciousness rather than collective action.⁶²

Berdiaev aims at a justification of the human being, not of God. ‘This book of mine is an essay on anthropodicy by means of creativeness (*tvorchestvo*)’. At the same time, he sees this anthropodicy as having been made possible by Christ – the Son of God and the Absolute Human Being – who revealed the divine likeness of every human being. Herein lies his deepest significance. For Berdiaev, Christology means anthropology and vice versa. ‘Only the Christology of man, the reverse side (*obratnaia storona*) of the anthropology of Christ, reveals in man the genuine image and likeness of God, the Creator’.⁶³ Traditional Christian theology, and the patristic tradition more specifically, did not really discover the Christology of the human being, its God-like creative potential. It did not sufficiently acknowledge human freedom and that the human being is a creator ‘similar to’ or ‘like’ (*podobnyi*) God the Creator and therefore also *creative*.⁶⁴

Thus, Berdiaev offers a religious understanding of human creativity by widely employing key categories of classic Orthodox anthropology, which at the same time serve to formulate an idealist philosophy. For the human being to be creative is a calling that follows from its active recognition and even adoption of the divine image of the Creator. Christianity represents for Berdiaev first and foremost the discovery in and by every human being of the Absolute Human Being. For Berdiaev, the human being is by definition creative, or at least is ‘predestined’ (*prednaznachen*) for creativity,⁶⁵ once it recognises itself as created in God’s image and likeness.

Human creativity, *tvorchestvo*, is for Berdiaev a ‘continuation (*prodolzhenie*)’ of God’s creation. It is a theurgic act, an ‘activity together with God’ on the ‘eight day of creation’.⁶⁶ Clearly, this idea goes further than Bulgakov’s understanding of creativity as reproduction. As observed by Regula Zwahlen, Berdiaev perceives an identity between the human being and God, whereas Bulgakov sees them as analogous.⁶⁷ Although Berdiaev, too, describes the creation of ‘new entities’ as ‘demonic’, the human being is able to create ‘from nothing’ since it creates ‘from freedom’.⁶⁸ Freedom is the ground of being. But what are the concrete manifestations of creative acts? Although art may serve as an ‘initial model’ for Berdiaev,⁶⁹ creativity comprises more than art. As we saw above, Berdiaev opened his book by defining philosophy as creativity. Even science, however critical Berdiaev is of it as a worldview, could be creative. So could family life and sex (*pol*).

Wary of accusations of being too anthropocentric, Berdiaev asks, ‘Have we any religious right to turn the Gospel truth into an instrument for justifying our life-values and our

creative impulses? And the answer that emerges from his book appears to be ‘yes’. For Berdiaev, the New Testament tells of redemption from sin through love and grace, and this makes up a second stage on the ‘spiritual road’, succeeding the first stage of the Old Testament. However, the purpose of life has to be more than simply salvation from sin and death. As such, the traditional Christian worldview provides merely a negative answer. The positive answer provided by Berdiaev is creativity, representing the imminent third age of spirit.

Berdiaev’s three-age theory drew on his contemporary Dmitrii Merezhkovskii’s idea of a ‘Third Testament’, and more generally on Merezhkovskii and Zinaida Gippius’s ‘new religious consciousness’, a prominent current in Russian symbolism. For Merezhkovskii and Gippius, the new religious consciousness was a critique of historical, ascetic and moribund Christianity, which was to be succeeded by a new Christianity in terms of a synthesis of spirit and flesh. However, their emphasis was on *new religious* rather than *consciousness* strictly speaking, whereas Berdiaev took the notion in a more idealist direction.⁷⁰ Berdiaev emphasised the role of our imagination: ‘Man’s creative activity has no holy scriptures: its ways are not revealed to man from above’. In fact, there cannot be any commandments or recipes for creativity, Berdiaev maintains in the spirit of Romantic aesthetics, since this would go against the very idea of creativity. Instead, the Gospel’s silence on this issue prompts the ‘highest self-consciousness’ of the human being. ‘The revelation of creativity does not come from above but rather from below – it is an anthropological, not a theological revelation’.⁷¹ The human being has to discover by itself how to acquire the divine likeness that was lost in the Fall. By implication, the creative person has to be a gnostic, just as Berdiaev’s work itself aspires to be a gnostic text, conveying knowledge about human creativity without providing its blueprint.⁷² It prompts human consciousness to seek this knowledge by its own means.

Berdiaev’s description of human creativity is very enthusiastic and yet tragic. To be creative is a ‘sacrifice’, a ‘renunciation’ (*otrenchenie*) of the world, but in the end Berdiaev’s philosophy of creativity brings us back to the evil ‘world’. Human culture is eventually a ‘failure’ (*neudacha*). Although Berdiaev distinguishes culture from civilisation and sees it as a bulwark against ‘barbarism’, culture is first and foremost a negative concept in Berdiaev’s thinking. Culture is associated with the ‘bourgeois middle ground’ and not the ‘end’ or the ‘fringes’ (of time, of space, of thought), the latter being very honourable, if enigmatic, notions in Berdiaev’s philosophy. Creativity is therefore also tragic: It aims at the ultimate but is doomed to failure by being inevitably objectified as cultural products. Thus, Berdiaev’s philosophy celebrates the creative act but regrets its outcome. Culture remains nevertheless the expression of – failed – creative acts. For Berdiaev, the cultural ‘failure’ is therefore also ‘sacred’ (*sviashchennaia neudacha*).⁷³ As testimonies of divine-like creativity, our failed efforts retain their value despite their objectification, a value that amounts to nothing less than human deification, which may be achieved through human creativity as grounded in the identity in our minds with the Creator. By implication, ‘creation and fall coincide’, which is a recurrent theme in idealist religious thought from Schelling to Tillich – and to Berdiaev: The desire for autonomy and liberation from God generates evil, while containing a God-like character.⁷⁴

5. Conclusion

As the above analyses have shown, Russian religious thought as it appears in Vladimir Solov'ev, Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdiaev is fundamentally idealist in the sense that it is grounded in consciousness and takes consciousness as the starting point (Solov'ev, Berdiaev), and that it is the mind which imparts meaningfulness to the world (Solov'ev, Berdiaev, Bulgakov). Tillich likewise saw human activity in this world as dependent on consciousness in order to be meaningful. For all thinkers, we possess an intuition of the outer world and ourselves in it that is prior to our rationalisation of it, and their religious philosophies are attempts to draw the full implications of this insight.

Idealist religious philosophy was not the only religious mode of thought of modernity. In the West, Tillich's liberal protestant theology was criticised by Karl Barth, whose 'dialectical' theology of personal revelation nevertheless too expresses a modern experience of God, but as fully transcendent and not immanent in culture.⁷⁵ The Russian religious idealism discussed here was likewise rejected later on by the neopatristic movement that emerged among Russian émigrés in the interwar period, whose critical relationship to Silver Age religious idealist philosophy may be seen as analogous to Barth's rejection of *Kulturprotestantismus*.⁷⁶

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, still, idealism opened up for a very prominent revision of traditional Christian ideas. Common to the philosophical projects analysed in this article is their idealist philosophical grounding of a religious worldview and the implications it had for the meaning of culture. A set of human practices that take place just as much outside the church (understood in a traditional sense) as inside it, culture was recast in the works of the Russian thinkers as the expression of a divine providential intention, a perspective that was enabled by the conceptual and ideational transmission across what Martin Malia has called the 'West–East cultural gradient'.⁷⁷ The works of these thinkers continue the interest in the classical Orthodox idea of deification, which was rediscovered in nineteenth-century Russia. Not surprisingly, though, these modern revisions of Orthodox ideas (deification) differed from classical Orthodox theological doctrines in several respects, not least in their privileging of autonomous human agency. The understanding of culture and of the Orthodox patristic heritage was in Russian religious thought informed by modern idealist philosophy and its language.⁷⁸ In addition, the ideas of Bulgakov and Berdiaev still bear the mark of their early engagement with Marxism, most notably in Bulgakov's persisting interest in labour, but also in Berdiaev's 'rebellious' ideas about human creativity and creation as a liberation from the necessity of worldly realities. Solov'ev's grand historical scheme, meanwhile, testifies to the impact of nineteenth-century evolutionism, Hegelianism included. Solov'ev, Bulgakov and Berdiaev all drew on multiple sources – from Orthodox theology as well as Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, via early modern German mysticism to contemporary thought both idealist and materialist. Modern idealism, however, appears to be the main conceptual framework for receiving and revising this manifold of ideas.

The example of Tillich shows that the religious idealism of Russian pre-revolutionary thinkers was part of a interconnected, transcultural idealist tendency, which at times, and more often than traditionally held, took a religious turn.⁷⁹ At the turn of the twentieth century, attempts to ground religion and culture more generally in human experience and consciousness occurred both in the Orthodox and in the Protestant world,

and the neo-Schellingian projects in the Protestant West (Tillich, Ernst Troeltsch, Rudolf Bultmann), which likewise sought to justify belief for a modern age philosophically, did not necessarily come first.⁸⁰ At the same time, the Russian projects were also part of processes of transcultural conceptual circulation and idea transfer, whereby their idealist grounding of Orthodoxy may have universalised idealism further, though without, in my view, succumbing to some Western hegemony. Universality is not an inherent quality of Western thought, in this case idealism, but is discursively constructed through active use outside the local context, through the claim that concepts of Western origin apply outside the West, too. It is the active use itself, and hence its applicability, that makes them valid outside of that context.⁸¹ For Russian philosophers Schelling may have had a normative power, since he represented a philosophical tradition that Russia was striving for, but he was at the same time seen as part of a broader, Christian tradition that they located just as much in the Christian East. Solov'ev, Bulgakov and Berdiaev actively connected with modern idealism while disconnecting it from its local, West-European origin.

Notes

1. See Koshar, "Where is Karl Barth?"; Gregory, "The Other Confessional History."
2. I consider myself in line here with Paul Valliere, according to whom

Concepts like Sophia, cosmurge, demiurge, theurgy, and so on, have often tempted scholarly interpreters of Russian religious philosophy to undertake ambitious programs of theological speculation in which the task of the theology of culture gets lost in a maze of gnostic and theosophical scholasticism.

Valliere, "The Theology of Culture in Late Imperial Russia," 382–3.

3. See for instance Setschkaeff, *Schellings Einfluß in der russischen Literatur*; Kamenskii, *Russkaia filosofia nachala XIX veka i Shelling*; Pustarnakov, ed., *Filosofia Shellinga v Rossii*.
4. See Waldstein, "Theorizing the Second World," 101–5. On Russia as 'subaltern in a Eurocentric world' lacking its 'own, uncontaminated voice,' see Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity*.
5. The notion is adopted from Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 110, as a more precise alternative to 'globalisation' when studying idea transfer.
6. See Read, *Religion, Revolution and the Russian Intelligentsia*, 15–16; Aizlewood, Coates and Zwerde, "Introduction," 12; Poole, "Editor's Introduction," 28–34.
7. On consciousness as the starting point of Solov'ev metaphysical system, see Smith, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, 30–6; Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 125. A Russian thinker who understood idealism above all as a philosophy giving primacy to human consciousness was Sergei Trubetskoi. See Poole, "The Neo-Idealist Reception of Kant." See also note 46 for different approaches to Bulgakov's idealism.
8. Sprigge "Idealism"; Singer, *Hegel*, 70.
9. On the universalisation of concepts and ideas through active use in new contexts, see Hill, "Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century."
10. "Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur" (1919), in Tillich, *Gesammelte Werke* 9, 13–31. An English translation is available in Nuovo, *Visionary Science*, 17–39.
11. Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture*, 8, n. 8.
12. Tillich, "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture," quoted in Nuovo, *Visionary Science*, 27.
13. *Ibid.*, 24, 26.
14. On Tillich's shifting conceptualisations of God, see Leiner, "Tillich on God."
15. Nuovo, *Visionary Science*, 125, 141, 144.
16. *Ibid.*, 146.

17. Paul Valliere describes Tillich's project as a 'theology of unconscious faith', and argues that a similar idea was advocated by Sergei Bulgakov. See Paul Valliere, "The Theology of Culture in Late Imperial Russia," 387.
18. Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture*, 84–96.
19. Valliere, "Solov'ev and Schelling's Philosophy of Revelation"; Gaidenko, *Vladimir Solov'ev i filosofija Serebriannogo veka*, 69–91.
20. Poole, "The Neo-Idealist Reception of Kant," 325–6.
21. Human culture as a continuation of creation in Russian religious thought has previously been discussed in Breckner, "Russian Philosophers on Continuous Creation," while Obolevitch and Rojek, eds., *Religion and Culture in Russian Thought* has emphasised its receptivity to culture more generally. These studies differ from mine, however, in that they pay less attention to the idealist, constructivist interpretation of both Christianity and human culture that I offer here. Closer to my approach is Valliere, "The Theology of Culture in Late Imperial Russia," which works with related material proceeding from Paul Tillich's notion of *theonomy* – the expression of a religious substance of culture. For instance, Valliere explores the 'religious use of cultural figures and cultural products' (390), such as Bulgakov's readings of Chekhov's stories as expressions of faith.
22. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 31 (*Sochineniia* 1, 35).
23. *Ibid.*, 32 (35).
24. *Ibid.*, 34 (36).
25. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 46, has 'realm of ideas' (*Sochineniia* 1, 48).
26. See Mjør, "Metaphysics, Aesthetics, or Epistemology?"
27. See Obolevitch, *Faith and Science*, 80–5; Gaidenko, *Vladimir Solov'ev i filosofija Serebriannogo veka*, 6.
28. I am referring here to the controversial speech that Solov'ev made in 1891, "O prichinakh upadka srednevekovogo mirosozertsaniia," quoted in Solov'ev, *Sochineniia* 2, 354–5.
29. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 1, 10 (*Sochineniia* 1, 5, 14).
30. Cf. Mochul'skii, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, 94.
31. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 131, 137 (*Sochineniia* 1, 131, 135).
32. Michelson, "The First and Most Sacred Right," 73. My emphasis.
33. As summarised in Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 26.
34. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 98 (*Sochineniia* 1, 98). See also Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 124.
35. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 172 (*Sochineniia* 1, 168).
36. See Poole, "Kant and the Kingdom of Ends."
37. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 105, 167 (*Sochineniia* 1, 105–6, 163).
38. *Ibid.* 157 (154). See also Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 162.
39. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 164.
40. See Gillen, "A Foggy Youth," chapter 5.
41. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 78 (*Sochineniia* 1, 80).
42. See Evtuhov, *The Cross & the Sickle*, 147.
43. E.g. 'Economy becomes a function of life that exists prior to any human activity'. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 147. Russian text in Bulgakov, *Sochineniia*, 161.
44. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 147 (*Sochineniia*, 161).
45. *Ibid.*, 46–8 (59–61).
46. Evtuhov, *The Cross & the Sickle*, 58. See, however, Valliere, "A Russian Cosmodyc," 174–6, for a different understanding of idealism in Bulgakov, closer to that pursued in this article.
47. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 38, 57, 84, 88 (*Sochineniia*, 51, 71, 96, 100).
48. *Ibid.*, 72, 108 (85, 121).
49. Bulgakov was, in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's words, 'a believer in the power of ideas to change reality'. Rosenthal, "The Search for a Russian Orthodox Work Ethic," 70.
50. On Bulgakov's providentialism, see Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*. 264.
51. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 123–41 (*Sochineniia*, 135–54).
52. Rosenthal, "The Nature and Function of Sophia," 155.

53. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 146, 203 (*Sochineniia*, 159, 219).
54. *Ibid.*, 146 (159).
55. *Ibid.*, 144 (157). ‘Incarnate its images’ (*vooploshchat’ svoi obrazy*) is missing from the English translation.
56. *Ibid.*, 134, 137, 141, 147 (146, 147, 149, 154, 161).
57. *Ibid.*, 153 (169).
58. On Berdiaev’s metaphysical model, which was drawn from various sources such as Gnosticism and Jacob Boehme (*Ungrund*), see Ruth Coates’s chapter on Berdiaev in her *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 110–39, which reads as a comparative analysis of Boehme and Berdiaev.
59. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 17. Russian text in Berdiaev, *Smysl tvorchestva*, 259. In my analysis, I have preferred to translate the title of Berdiaev’s book with *The Meaning of Creativity*, a term that is more open and less bound to the very act. In Russian, Berdiaev uses both the notion *tvorchestvo* and *tvorcheskii akt*.
60. *Ibid.*, 41, 42, 44, 52 (279, 280, 282, 288).
61. *Ibid.*, 51/62, 60 (288/298, 296).
62. Read, *Religion, Revolution and the Russian Intelligentsia*, 70–4.
63. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 19, 81 (*Smysl tvorchestva*, 261, 315).
64. *Ibid.*, 83, 101, 136 (317, 332, 361).
65. *Ibid.*, 137 (362).
66. *Ibid.*, 75, 126, 138–9 (309, 354, 363–4).
67. Zwahlen, *Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes*, 241, 277, 286, 293.
68. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 143–4 (*Smysl tvorchestva*, 368)
69. Cf. Clowes, *Fiction’s Overcoat*, 200. Compare Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 225 (*Smysl tvorchestva*, 437).
70. As indicated in Scanlan, “The New Religious Consciousness,” 22. On the ‘new religious consciousness’, see also Rosenthal, *Dmitrii Sergeevich Merezhkovskii*, 87–105.
71. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 94, 97, 98 (*Smysl tvorchestva*, 326, 328, 329).
72. At the end of his book, Berdiaev defines it as a prelude to creativity rather than creativity itself. See also Clowes, *Fiction’s Overcoat*, 201.
73. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 261, 323–4 (*Smysl tvorchestva*, 468, 521–2).
74. Cf. Nuovo, *Visionary Science*, 121.
75. Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden*, 21–2.
76. See Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*. A central point in Gavrilyuk’s study, however, is that Florovsky’s thinking was also deeply indebted to his idealist predecessors.
77. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes*, 13. See also Evtuhov and Kotkin, eds., *The Cultural Gradient*.
78. For a full analysis of the parallels and differences between classical and modern idealist understandings of deification, see Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*.
79. While Hughes’ classic *Consciousness and Society* first and foremost emphasised the revolt against positivism e.g. in neo-Kantianism, the example of Tillich shows that explicitly religious idealism, too, became a transcultural phenomenon. Cf. Evtuhov, *The Cross & the Sickle*, 246.
80. Cf. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology*, 81–3; Cremer, “Theology in Early Weimar Germany,” in particular p. 301 (on Bultmann). The focus of this article does not allow me to examine the reception of Tillich among Russian religious thinkers as it occurred in emigration from the 1920s onwards. It is noteworthy, however, that a piece by Tillich appears in the very first issue of the Parisian émigré journal *The Way*, whose editor-in-chief was Berdiaev. Tillich’s contribution was a critical discussion of the dialectical theology of Karl Barth (‘Dialekticheskaia teologiia’). The reception of Tillich among Russian emigres is briefly dealt with in Arjakovsky, *The Way*.
81. This conclusion is indebted to Hill’s “Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century.”

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