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Nikolai Berdyaev's Theology of Creativity

Abstract

The author analyzes Nikolai Berdyaev's theology of creativity within the context of Eastern Orthodox theology. While working in the Russian émigré community in Paris in the interwar period, he proposed a theology of creativity in opposition to a religion of salvation. The latter is a self-centered faith that worships on Sundays, prays on Feast Days, but neglects the six-day work week. Creativity aims to construct sanctified activities in the secular world as a response to God's call to create. A religion of creativity seeks deification based upon the Incarnation and is consummated in the coming age of the Holy Spirit. The author reviews critical assessments of



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Berdyayev's ideas and concludes that they represent an original contribution.

Keywords

Salvation, Creativity, Creation, Incarnation, Deification

1 The Creative Act

The aim of this essay is to expound and assess the theology of creativity embedded in Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical writings. Berdyaev was a Christian philosopher and a loyal member of the Russian Orthodox Church. In his study of artistic creativity, Davor Džalto acknowledges that Berdyaev was the first to explore human creativity within the Eastern Orthodox tradition but that he had "no interest in making a strictly theological argument."¹

Džalto explains that Berdyaev viewed creativity in terms of ontology, soteriology, and eschatology; and while his ideas were influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy, some of them were not theologically compatible with Orthodoxy, specifically his understanding of freedom, "third revelation in Spirit," and change within God.² This essay takes an alternative approach to Džalto's judgment.

In 1912 Berdyaev traveled to Italy where he experienced great inspiration in Florence, particularly with Renaissance art. He saw that the early 14th century in Italy produced a remarkable upsurge of creative activity inspired by St. Francis of Assisi and Dante Alighieri. In his autobiography written many years later

¹ Davor Džalto, *The Human Work of Art* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), pp. 15–16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Berdyaev realized that the Renaissance was “the dawn of a new age in which the Christian soul became conscious for the first time of a will to creation.”³ Admittedly, he was “carried away” by the creativity of the 13th and 14th centuries in Florence, but he disliked the art and architecture of 16th century Rome. By the end of the Renaissance creativity degenerated into lifeless art, as in decorating Rome with fountains and stairs and mixing Renaissance forms with Catholicism. His insights into the ascent and descent of Renaissance creativity illustrated his view of the ecstasy and tragedy of the creative act.

Four years after returning home to Moscow, Berdyaev published his seminal work *The Meaning of the Creative Act* in 1916. He linked creativity with freedom and clarified the latter as “the baseless foundation of being; it is deeper than all being.”⁴ Since freedom precedes being, it may be considered as nonbeing. Creation out of nothing means creation out of freedom, in which the creator moves from nonbeing to being. Freedom cannot be conceived rationally or within a closed circuit and its determinism.

The creative act begins from within the creator’s imagination, independently of any external factors. The creative act occurs ecstatically in a phase of self-transcendence, overcoming all self-centeredness. As explained by a scholar of Russian religious philosophy, creativity has two meanings. The primary meaning is that it “signifies the willful strengthening or perfecting of the individual’s personality,” which may be ethical or therapeutic.⁵ The secondary meaning is “the activity of producing sublime works of art or other significant contributions to civilization,” and these may be artistic,

³ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, trans. Katherine Lampert (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 207.

⁴ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 135.

⁵ Anna Lisa Crone, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 89.

intellectual, or scholarly. Berdyaev maintained that the “aim of every creative act is to create another type of being, another kind of life, to break out through ‘this world’ to another world, out of the chaotic, cumbersome and deformed world into the free and beautiful cosmos.”⁶ Creativity is the breakthrough to eternity since freedom is spiritual and supernatural.

While the goal of creativity is to create another world, the realization may fall short of the aim. Whether artistic, intellectual, or social, creativity produces objective materials in which the creative imagination cools, congeals, or coalesces into things or objects. Thus, creativity yields a gap between the aim and the outcome of the creative act. Berdyaev illustrated this dilemma in his preface to the 1926 German edition of his book. He admitted that when writing *The Meaning of the Creative Act* he was too optimistic; his “faith in the imminent dawn of a creative religious epoch was too high. To-day I am inclined to greater pessimism.”⁷ Nevertheless, he reaffirmed his belief in creativity as an expression of love toward God and response to God’s call for human creativity.

2 Religion of Salvation

In 1922, while living in Moscow, Berdyaev published an article entitled “The Pre-Death Thoughts of Faust” in which he rejected the Marxist doctrine of progress in history.⁸ Vladimir Lenin was enraged by the article, and he decided to expel Berdyaev from the Soviet Union. On the night of August 16/17, 1922 Berdyaev and 68 other intellectuals were arrested under Article 57 of the Soviet Penal Code for engaging in counter-revolutionary

⁶ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, p. 210.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸ N. A. Berdyaev, “The Pre-Death Thoughts of Faust,” trans. Stephen Janos, http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1922_059.html (Accessed February 26, 2013).

activities.⁹ They were placed with their families on two ships, each one called the Philosophy Steamer, and deported to Germany.

Berdyaev chose to live in Berlin, but with the collapse of the German currency in 1923 he immigrated to Paris in 1924 with his wife and sister-in-law and established a home in the suburb of Clamart. After settling in Paris, he assisted in founding a journal for the Russian Orthodox émigré community, and he became the editor. The journal was called *The Way*, and it published 61 issues from 1925 until 1940, when it was shut down by Nazi authorities in the German occupation of Paris.¹⁰ In his first editorial in September 1925, entitled "The Spiritual Tasks of the Russian Emigration," Berdyaev foresaw a renewal within Russian Orthodoxy. "A new make-up of the Orthodox soul is taking shape, more active, responsive, creative, more manly and fearless. In Russian religious thought, there have been brought forth creative ideas, which can make for a Christian renewal."¹¹ In the same context, he found a "lack of resolution" in questions of culture and social order, a lack of creative advancement in life.

In January 1926 he continued that line of thought by publishing in *The Way* a seminal paper on "Salvation and Creativity." He posed the question: Is Christianity a religion of salvation or a religion of creativity? Humans desire to be saved, but they are also builders, creators, and makers by nature. He asked: "Can a

⁹ Lesley Chamberlain, *Lenin's Private War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), pp. 81–82, pp. 107, 308, 334.

¹⁰ Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way*, trans. Jerry Ryan, eds. John A. Jillions and Michael Plekon (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), p. 2.

¹¹ N. A. Berdyaev, "The Spiritual Tasks of the Russian Emigration," trans. Stephen Janos, http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1925_302.html (Accessed February 18, 2015).

man be saved and at the same time creative, can he create and at the same time be saved?"¹²

In Berdyaev's view, the religion of salvation meets in church on Sundays and Feast Days, fasts during Lent, and prays to God mornings and evenings. Church members work in the non-sanctified world on six days of the week, but they regard the world as external to the church. The Church exists for the salvation of individual souls but is indifferent to the world and its productive work.

Within Orthodoxy, in particular, the religion of salvation "rests exclusively upon the Patristic ascetic literature" which is removed from the Gospels, Apostolic Epistles, and the whole of Patristic literature. This religion depends upon the passive angelic principle and not the active, creative principle. "The angelic principle is a principle intermediary betwixt God and the human, a principle passively intermediary, transmissive of Divine energy, conductive of Divine grace but not an active-creative principle."¹³

The religion of salvation demands humility to gain access to eternal life. One must be humble, and the rest takes care of itself. "Humility screens out and stifles love, which reveals itself in the Gospel and manifests itself as the foundational basis of the New Testament God with a man."¹⁴ Humility is thought to be the conquest of a self-centered, sinful tendency. In fact it is not the only source of the spiritual life because the life of the Spirit is more complex.

Humility correlates with a hierarchical institutional system and compulsory subordination that stimulates hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness without freedom. Humility opposes love, but the conquest of sin by humility is so strenuous that no time

¹² N. A. Berdyaev, "Salvation and Creativity," trans. Stephen Janos, http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1926_308.html (Accessed March 9, 2015).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

or energy remains for love and creative work. An authoritative system always requires obedience and generates a fear of hell, so that life comes under the threat of terror. Christianity as a religion of salvation is "a system of transcendental egoism, or transcendental utilitarianism and Eudaimonism."¹⁵

Transcendental egoism subverts love and is unfaithful to the Gospels. It denies unconditional love for God and the neighbor. Concern for personal salvation, obedience to a hierarchy, fear of hell and damnation presuppose a juridical form of salvation. These pertain to the Western Church but not to Eastern Orthodoxy.

The religion of salvation and its preoccupation with one's soul entails an individualistic conception of the church. This means that the church is a collection of separate individuals. In opposition to this point of view, Berdyaev maintains that reality is more than individual selves; society and nature are also realities created by God. The Church is a spiritual society and not a cooperation of individuals. Such an individualistic position is more appropriate for Protestant pietism than for an orthodox understanding. "I cannot be saved by myself, in solitude, I can be saved only with my brethren, together with all of God's creation."¹⁶

3 Religion of Creativity

In that same paper, Berdyaev proposed a religion of creativity. It comes out of the Gospels, Apostolic literature, and the Patristic writings of Christian mystics, such as St. Simeon the New Theologian and St. Maximus the Confessor. It affirms the full command to love God and the neighbor.

In support of a religion of creativity Berdyaev alludes to the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30; Lk. 19:12–27) and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

comments: "Various gifts are given by God to people, and no one possesses the right to bury them in the ground, for these talents all need to be creatively fulfilled, manifest in the objective vocations of man."¹⁷ He cites two more passages on gifts to support creativity: "And God appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then powers, next gifts of healings, helpers, guides, a variety of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:28). "Just as each one received gifts of grace, even serving one another as good stewards of various gifts of God" (1 Pet. 4:10).

A religion of creativity is not confined to Sundays or Feast Days because people are engaged in constructive work six days a week. All life "ought to be thought of, as church life. In the Church, all aspects of life enter in."¹⁸ This does not mean the subordination of the world to the church hierarchy; rather it means that constructive work should be sanctified. "It is impossible to endure any longer, that creative movement should remain outside the Church and in opposition to the Church, and that the Church should be unmoving and deprived of creative life."¹⁹

Humans are called to be creators and co-creators with God in the world. Creativity is necessary not for personal salvation but the realization of God's plan in the world. John 6:40 illustrates God's plan: "For this is the will of my Father that all who behold the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day." Humans are also called to perfection like that of their heavenly Father.

The religion of creativity is based on deification or theosis and not simply individual salvation. Berdyaev points out that transfiguration is central to Eastern Orthodoxy in contrast to "the juridical idea of justification" in Catholicism and Protestantism. "All the greatest of Christian mystics put a faith-

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

centered love towards God and union with God higher than personal salvation.”²⁰

Deification overcomes creaturely isolation and estrangement from God. Love of God correlates with the love of neighbor and creation. “On the way of my salvation enters in love for animals and plants, for each thing close by, for stones, for rivers and seas, for hills and fields.”²¹

Eight years after publishing his paper on “Salvation and Creativity” he referred to creativity as a new spirituality based upon freedom without compulsion.²² The new spirituality is grounded in early Christianity before the development of monasticism in the fourth century. It is neither a passive reception of grace nor a love of God without sensitivity to evil. The new spirituality reflects the Incarnation as a union of the divine and the human, and it does not de-emphasize the human dimension. He quotes St. Athanasius’ saying that God became a man, so that humanity may become like God.²³ This is deification as an illumination of an active, creative human nature.

Finally, Berdyaev summarized the religion of creativity in the chapter on “The New Spirituality” in his 1937 book *Spirit and Reality*. The religion of salvation is an objectification of the Spirit and an obstacle to pure spirituality.²⁴ Salvation cannot be individualistic, because every act has social consequences, and salvation occurs only by sharing the destinies of others. Personal salvation neglects vocation which includes concern about the world and creates new relationships.²⁵ Spirituality informs all social life in opposition to hierarchies, systems of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nicolas Berdyaev, “About the New Christian Spirituality,” *Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 25 (September 1934): p. 38.

²³ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁴ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, trans. George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), p. 149.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 152.

authority and determinisms. The life of the Spirit is not opposed to nature but objectification. The Spirit works in the context of freedom, in the depths of the divine life, without criteria or means and ends. Spirit is the criterion.

4 Creativity and Incarnation

As stated above, the religion of salvation is based upon the passive angelic principle, to which Berdyaev objected since Christ was the God-Man and not a God-Angel. In Christ was “united in one person the Divine nature with the human nature and by this human nature, was transported to live Divine.”²⁶ God-manhood is the foundation of the active, creative life.

Berdyaev expounded the doctrine of Incarnation in chapter six of his 1935 book *Freedom and the Spirit*, entitled “God, Man, and the God-Man.” The starting point of Christian theology is neither God nor humanity but God-humanity. This involves the movement of God toward mankind and the movement of humanity toward God. “The coming of Christ, the God-Man, is a perfect union of these two movements, the realization of unity in duality and the divine-human mystery.”²⁷ The two natures unite in Christ without losing their own distinctions.

This unity is expressed in spiritual experience. Humans yearn for and seek God, a higher reality, as indicated by the fact that they are created in the image and likeness of God. If the image and likeness were absent, then humanity would be diminished in freedom and dignity. Spiritual experience also reveals that God yearns and longs for humanity. God seeks humankind who reflects the divine image and likeness. The fact that God yearns for the other expresses divine fullness and perfection.²⁸

²⁶ N. A. Berdyaev, “Salvation and Creativity.”

²⁷ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), p. 189.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.191.

God-humanhood is neither static nor abstract. God does not radically transcend humanity as an abstract "wholly otherness." God's relation to humanity involves love and suffering. "The doctrine of the absolute immobility of God is a form of abstract monotheism which contradicts Christian teaching as the Trinitarian nature of the Divine and Its interior life."²⁹ The Son, equal in dignity to the Father, responds to the love of the Father; likewise, the Son yearns for and loves the Father. "The loving subject and the loved object find the fullness of their life in the Kingdom of Love which is the Third Person."³⁰ The Holy Spirit completes the drama of love.

Christianity is the religion of the Trinity and Incarnation. "God expects from a man his participation in the work of Creation and in the victory of being over non-being. He expects from him an activity which is both heroic and creative."³¹

Human creativity expresses humanity's love of God and facilitates the coming of the Kingdom of God. If humans were to renounce their duty to create, then the continuing creation of the world would cease and cause God to suffer and become dissatisfied with his other. "When a man thinks only of himself, his needs, his well-being, and human salvation, he restricts God's conception of what man should be and denies his creative nature."³² When humans think of God and God's longing for their love, they elevate themselves to a higher level, thereby realizing God's idea for them and fulfilling their creative mandate.

In his essay "The Problem of Man" Berdyaev emphasizes that creativity is a fulfillment of our life in God. "The creative act of man, therefore, is a self-discovery within the fullness of Divine life. But not every creative act of man is such, for there can also be an evil and diabolic creativity, but it is always a pseudo-

²⁹ Ibid., p. 192.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

³¹ Ibid., p. 212.

³² Ibid., p. 213.

creativity, always oriented toward non-being.”³³ He points out that the historic Christian consciousness has been devoted exclusively to the struggle against sin and closed to the creative mystery of human nature. Christian teaching should go beyond the preoccupation with sin and salvation and take up the vocation of creativity.

5 The Eighth Day of Creation

In *The Meaning of the Creative Act* Berdyaev acknowledges that “New Testament Christianity is a religion of redemption, the good news of salvation from sin, the revelation of the Son of God, the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity in the aspect of God suffering for the sins of the world.”³⁴ He asks, however, if redemption from sin is the sole purpose of the religion since this is negative. He suggests that like “its Creator, man’s life could not be created by God only for the purpose that, having sinned, he should atone for his sin.”³⁵ The idea of redemption alone diminishes “the godlike dignity” of humanity. Berdyaev admits that this is only one part of human life, and the other is that of creativity which is not found in New Testament Christianity.³⁶

The silence of the Gospels on creativity reveals the mystery of human nature. “If the ways of creativeness were indicated and justified in the Holy Scriptures, then creativeness would be obedience, which is to say there would be no creativeness.”³⁷ Creativity comes out of human freedom which is in itself like God. “In creativeness, the divine in man is revealed by man’s

³³ N. A. Berdyaev, “The Problem of Man,” http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1936_408.html (Accessed July 16, 2014).

³⁴ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, p. 90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

free initiative, revealed from below rather than from above.”³⁸ Creativity is a revelation of freedom within the Spirit and a sign of the image and likeness of God. God expects humanity to become courageous and active, and God awaits humanity’s response to his call to create.

The Trinity reveals both the inner life of God and the phases in the creation of the world. The three persons of the Trinity correspond to the three epochs through which the world passes. The epoch of the Father represents law and obedience, that of the Son redemption, and the epoch of the Spirit correlates with creativity.³⁹ These epochs are not chronological; they may co-exist and are experienced as phases of existential time, as in the Greek *kairos*.

The idea of these three epochs was influenced by Dmitri Merezhkovsky, who led religious-philosophical meetings in Moscow between 1905 and 1907, and Berdyaev participated in them.⁴⁰ Merezhkovsky’s circle attempted to renew Russian Orthodoxy by blending classical antiquity, as interpreted by Friedrich Nietzsche, and mystical Christianity. Merezhkovsky delineated three historical stages of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. The First Testament was the Judaism of the Old Testament; the Second Testament was the Christianity of the New Testament, and the Third Testament was Neo-Christianity of a new religious consciousness in which the earthly and heavenly worlds come together and transfigure the earth.⁴¹

For Berdyaev the first epoch is characterized by free will, as in having to choose between good and evil.⁴² This is the lowest form of freedom, because it is burdensome and not liberating. Choosing between good and evil is the basis of social morality

³⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 295.

⁴⁰ Anna Lisa Crone, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Renewal*, p. 153.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 154.

⁴² Nicolas A. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 81.

and is justified by the Old Testament, Aristotelian philosophy, and Stoicism.⁴³ Law determines what ought to be, and so it prescribes obedience as the moral task of the people. The religious law defines sin as disobedience and specifies its punishment. The function of law means that God transcends the world as a law-giver by prescribing ethical norms but does not participate in the world.⁴⁴

With the epoch of redemption, God enters into human life through the suffering of the Son and provides deliverance from sin. Sin is driven by self-centeredness which derives from transcendental egoism. The epoch of redemption is represented by the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels and Apostolic Fathers.

Berdyaev rejected the satisfaction theory of the atonement which descended from St. Anselm in the 11th century as too juridical. According to that doctrine, human sin violated the order of creation for which God demanded repayment. "He must receive compensation in order to pacify His wrath. No human sacrifice will satisfy Him or make Him yield. Only the sacrifice of the Son is proportionate to the crime committed and the offense it has caused."⁴⁵

Berdyaev thought that this doctrine viewed the God-human relationship in the form of a trial, discounting the fact that Christ came not for the reparation of sin but a continuing creation of the world.⁴⁶ Sin is not disobedience; it is the loss of freedom and a denial that humanity is the image and likeness of God made from the pattern of a higher world.⁴⁷ Grace is the disclosure of the divine aspect of human nature, making possible a higher type of spirituality.

⁴³ Ibid., pp.83–84.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁵ N. A. Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 173.

⁴⁶ Nicolas A. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), p. 117.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

The third epoch of the Spirit continues creation by imparting divine love to the world and is symbolized by the eighth day of creation.⁴⁸ Berdyaev called this epoch Neo-Christianity, as it goes beyond the Bible, Church Fathers, and the old mystics. The Church Fathers dealt with issues posed by sins and heresies, which are no longer present.

Today the issues involve constructive human advances, as with new technologies, unique forms of evil, problems of slavery, and the destruction of personality—problems that require creative resolutions not found in ancient dogmatic systems.⁴⁹ Facing new challenges in the epoch of the Spirit means that Christianity is not finished; it is waiting and working toward the final revelation at the end.⁵⁰

The epoch of the Spirit will surpass the religion of personal salvation and lack systems of authority, legalism, retribution, and hell. It will bring together freedom and love in a unity of divine-human cooperation. The epoch of the Spirit will end suffering, reverse historical time, and allow all living beings to share in the end. In an article written toward the end of his life and published posthumously, Berdyaev clarified that the purpose of life is “the seeking and attainment of the grace of the Holy Spirit as a means of the spiritual transfiguration of creation.”⁵¹ The Divine Energies, which act covertly in humanity and the world, are poured out upon the natural world, illuminating and transfiguring it.

⁴⁸ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, p. 128; Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R. M. French (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), p. 53.

⁴⁹ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, p. 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

⁵¹ Nicholas A. Berdyaev, “The Truth of Orthodoxy,” trans. A.S. III, <http://www.kosovo.net/ortruth.html> (Accessed February 16, 2013).

6 Conclusion

The Meaning of the Creative Act received two contrary book reviews. One early reviewer wrote that the book expressed “a mind nurtured and molded almost wholly within the ambiance, religious and philosophical, of Eastern Christendom.”⁵² He pointed out that Berdyaev’s book opposed the philosophy of Aristotle and relied upon St. Gregory of Nyssa and his idea of freedom. Thus, for Berdyaev the human being responds out of freedom “to God’s loving call to the realization of its true nature as an Image of Himself.”⁵³ Since creativity belongs to God, it is also a part of humanity who is created in the image and likeness of God.

An entirely different review came from Georges Florovsky, representing the neo-patristic school of Orthodox theology. He characterized Berdyaev’s work as follows: “In this book he again abandons ‘historical Christianity’ for the esoteric speculative mysticism of Böhme and Paracelsus, militantly pushing patristic tradition aside.”⁵⁴ Florovsky charged that Berdyaev was so caught up in the German mystical tradition that it “cut him off from the life of the Great Church.”

Florovsky’s criticism is not persuasive. In my reading of Berdyaev’s book I find only one sentence linking Paracelsus and Jakob Boehme, and it states that nature is alive according to these philosophers.⁵⁵ In another passage Berdyaev quotes one of Boehme’s sayings, and I quote it in pertinent part: “Now see, humanity, how you are earthly and then also heavenly, mixed in one person, and bear the earthly and then also the heavenly

⁵² John Trinick, “Nicolas Berdyaev and Human Creativity,” *The Eastern Churches Quarterly* XI/4 (1955–1956): p. 147.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁴ Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Part Two, Volume Six, trans. Robert L. Nichols (Belmont, MA: Notable and Academic Books, 1987), p. 275.

⁵⁵ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, p. 68.

image in one person.”⁵⁶ The quotation illustrates Berdyaev’s contention that the human being is both individual and universal, natural and spiritual, a being created in the image and likeness of God. In a further passage cited by Berdyaev Boehme claims that God is a person only in Christ, and Berdyaev interprets this to mean that the mystery of Christ is that of the God-Man. I judge that these assertions are not inimical to Eastern Orthodox theology.

Florovsky’s charge that Berdyaev was caught up in the German mystical tradition cannot be maintained. Berdyaev distinguished sharply between freedom and necessity as indicated by the following sentence: “Freedom is not consciously accepted necessity as the German idealists thought.”⁵⁷ Further, in chapter two of *The Divine and the Human*, entitled “The Dialectic of the Divine and the Human in German Thought,” Berdyaev surveyed the history of German mysticism and concluded that it cannot recognize “the mystery of God-manhood, the mystery of two-in-one, in which the union of two natures takes place without any confusion of them.” He goes on to say that the German tradition “has difficulty in recognizing the mystery of personality.”⁵⁸ Thus, the German mystics could not support Berdyaev’s principal theological doctrines, namely, those of the Incarnation, Trinity, and personality.

Berdyaev contended that creativity occurs in freedom which is a primal reality that proceeds being. In three major works, he appealed to Jakob Boehme’s vision of the *Ungrund* to support his understanding of liberty.⁵⁹ The *Ungrund* is an irrational

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 139.

⁵⁸ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ N. A. Berdyaev, “The Teaching about the Ungrund and Freedom,” trans. Stephen Janos, http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1930_349.html. (Accessed March 9, 2013); *The Destiny of Man*, p. 25; and Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R. M. French (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), pp. 105–110.

abyss outside of God and before the creation of the world. Both divine and human creativity arise from the *Ungrund*. Berdyaev clarified that the “irrational mystery of freedom independent of Divine creation and determination does not imply the existence of another being claiming equality with Divine Being, it does not in the least imply an ontological dualism.”⁶⁰ Traditionally in theology, the doctrine of creation out of nothing (2 Macc. 7:28) had the purpose of opposing any dualism. Despite Berdyaev’s clarification, John Meyendorff found that Berdyaev’s concept of the *Ungrund* was incompatible with the biblical doctrine of creation out of nothing.⁶¹

A close reading of Genesis 1:1–2 reveals that biblical creation was not out of nothing: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” (RSV) Darkness, land, and water already exist before the creation and belong to the “recreation chaos.” Thus, creation is “a process from confusion to distinction, from chaos to order” and not from absolute nothingness.⁶² I judge that the *Ungrund* is consistent with the watery abyss of the deep existing before the creation. The nonbeing of the *Ungrund* is not absolute nothingness or *oúk óv* in Greek; rather it is *μή óv* or meonic potentiality to become something.

As a reviewer stated above, Berdyaev’s book on creativity stands in the tradition of Gregory of Nyssa. For Berdyaev Gregory was the one Church Father, who deepened freedom and the worth of humanity as the image of God.⁶³ Gregory

⁶⁰ N. A. Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, p. 105.

⁶¹ John Meyendorff, “Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27/1 (1983): p. 33.

⁶² James Barr, “Was Everything that God Created Really Good?” in *God in the Fray*, pp. 55–65, eds. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 59–60.

⁶³ Marios P. Begzos, “Nikolaj Berdjajew und die Byzantinische Philosophie,” *Theologie* 64 (January–February 1993) <http://www.>

wrote that "I speak now of grace according to freedom (*adespaton*) and one's power (*auteksousian*)."⁶⁴ Meyendorff acknowledged Berdyaev's "actually very patristic identification of the image of God in man with freedom," and he explained that the image of God is "a potentiality and an *openness* of man: a potentiality for a growth in God toward an ever greater theosis, or 'deification,' but also for a free and expanding role in creation as a whole."⁶⁵

Berdyaev thought that Gregory's view of freedom was less developed in Western theology. The anthropology of St. Augustine shaped "both the Catholic and Protestant understanding of man,—almost exclusively this was an anthropology of sin and the saving by grace."⁶⁶ In neither the Thomistic tradition nor in the dialectical theology of Karl Barth in the 20th century are the image and likeness of God interpreted as human creativity.

"St. Thomas Aquinas in the classical form established the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the creature and the creator, between the world and God."⁶⁷ In the Thomistic tradition, reason expresses the image and likeness of God. Berdyaev rejected the split between natural and supernatural domains because the divine energies pervade the entire world. "After the appearance of Christ there has been a transformation of man and the world, and creator and creature have become united."⁶⁸

myriobiblos.gr/texts/german/begzos_1.html (Accessed January 30, 2014).

⁶⁴ James Herbert Srawley, ed. *The Catechetical Oration of Gregory of Nyssa* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1956), p. 26.

⁶⁵ N. Meyendorff, "Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology," pp. 32, 35.

⁶⁶ N. A. Berdyaev, "The Problem of Man."

⁶⁷ N. A. Berdyaev, "NeoThomism," http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1925_304.html (Accessed August 24, 2015).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Similarly, Berdyaev read in Barth's dialectical theology a radical separation between God and the world; "between God and man there opens up an abyss and in fact God-manhood becomes incomprehensible."⁶⁹ Barthianism is the result of lengthy processes of the profanation (*Entgottung*) of the world and of humanity.⁷⁰ By affirming a radical transcendence of God, Barth allowed human spiritual activities to disappear. Barth does not conceive of any way to God of humanity or the world. "There is only a way from God to humanity. However, the way of God to humanity, the way of revelation is not a becoming flesh and humanization of God as an objective cosmic process, as a physical or metaphysical process but is only God's Word, God's speaking to humanity."⁷¹ In opposition to Barth Berdyaev held that the "manifestation of Christ bears an objective cosmic character, and with it, a transfiguration binds itself in the world and in humanity, through which the transcendent abyss between Creator and creature will be overcome."⁷² The abyss will be overcome with human creativity

Berdyaev's linking the image and likeness of God with human creativity was consistent with the theology of Gregory Palamas. Gregory explained creativity in the following paragraph which I quote in pertinent part:

We are one of those creatures who in addition to our logical and intellectual substance also have sensuality. Sensuality, when united with the Logos, creates the variegation of the sciences and comprehension: it creates the ability to cultivate the field, to build houses and in general to create what does not exist

⁶⁹ N. A. Berdyaew, "The Problem of Man."

⁷⁰ Nikolaj A. Berdjajew, "Die Krisis des Protestantismus und die russische Orthodoxie," <http://www.borisogleb.de/krisis1.html> (Accessed March 27, 2015).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

(but not out of nothing which is the prerogative of God alone.) Moreover, all this is given to man alone.⁷³

In his article on “My Philosophic World-Outlook,” written late in his life and published posthumously, Berdyaev summarized his life-long way of thinking. The meaning of life is not explained by salvation from sin but by creative work in the world. “Creativity is always passing over from non-being to being, i.e. a creation from out of nothing. Creativity from nothing is a creativity from freedom.”⁷⁴ The creative act is an upward soaring, a conquest of the world; but in the products of creativity, there is a downward pull. Humans “create books, articles, pictures, social institutions, machines, cultural values. The tragedy of creativity consists in the non-correspondence of the creative intended design with its realization.”⁷⁵

In summary, Nikolai Berdyaev produced an original theology of creativity within the context of the Bible and Orthodox theology. Creativity originates in a primal freedom with which human nature has been endowed at creation. His analysis of the creative act indicates that creativity transcends self-centeredness in ecstatic phases, thereby anticipating the ultimate transfiguration of the world. God expects from humanity the highest level of freedom, including that which God has not foreseen.⁷⁶

As noted above, Davor Džalto believes that Berdyaev’s concepts of change within God, freedom, and “third revelation in Spirit” are not compatible with Eastern Orthodox theology. I offer the following responses to Džalto’s concerns. First, the love of God the Father for the Son and the Son’s response to that love lays a dynamic foundation to the Incarnation as an objective, cosmic

⁷³ Cited in Anna Lisa Crone, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Renewal*, pp. 190–191.

⁷⁴ N. A. Berdyaev, “My Philosophic World-Outlook,” <http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd.lib/1952.476.html> (Accessed March 9, 2013).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ N. A. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, p. 147.

event. For Berdyaev God's inner life consists of movement and love as modes of divine perfection in opposition to cataphatic theology and its doctrines of divine impassibility, immobility, and monarchial monotheism.

Second, Berdyaev appealed to the *Ungrund* regarding apophatic theology.⁷⁷ In his autobiography, Berdyaev states that by placing the *Ungrund* outside of God he wished "not to speak of the unspeakable and ineffable apophatic mystery of God's life."⁷⁸ He also intended to absolve God of responsibility for evil, and he assigned the origin of evil to freedom. In his experience, he knew that making God the source of evil led to atheism. "Russian atheism rejected every kind of God because to admit God was to justify evil, injustice, and suffering and give in to them."⁷⁹

Third, Berdyaev's vision of a "third revelation in Spirit" expressed the eschatological mysticism of early Christianity in a prophetic form.⁸⁰ Prophetic mysticism bears witness to the transformation of this world and points toward an ultimate deification. Berdyaev contended that the religion of creativity was a constructive factor in the coming of the Kingdom of God--in opposition to a religion of salvation and its self-centered passivity. As co-creators with God humans will be deified, and their deification will be consummated in the Holy Spirit when the Divine Energies will illumine and transfigure the world.

A contemporary scholar has recommended that Berdyaev "deservedly ranks as one of the most brilliant and creative twentieth-century exponents of Eastern Christian mystical

⁷⁷ For a discussion of this topic see my essay on "Nikolai Berdyaev's Apophaticism" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 58/4 (2014): pp. 441–455.

⁷⁸ N. A. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, p. 103.

⁷⁹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), pp. 11–12.

⁸⁰ Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Significance of Eschatology in the Thoughts of Nicolas Berdyaev* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 37–38.

theology and spirituality.”⁸¹ He suggests that the neglect of Berdyaev’s thought “has cost Orthodoxy originality and energy” and that his thought can reinvigorate Easter Orthodox theology.

⁸¹ Vigen Guroian, “Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948) Commentary,” in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity*, pp. 106–142, eds. John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 138.