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Theosis in Soloviev and Berdyaev

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Abstract

"*Theosis* in Soloviev and Berdyaev" will look at the deification concepts of these Russian philosophers. Deification ideas in both these writers had a strong social side and included a sharp critique of institutional churches. Sources that influenced each author will be examined. In speaking of deification, both thinkers drew upon the philosophy of Jacob Boehme. Both Soloviev and Berdyaev affirmed Orthodox principles but reacted against the authoritarianism of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy and wanted the church to return to its legitimate spiritual mission of fostering the Kingdom of God on earth. I first examine Soloviev, reacting, in part, to Jeremy Pilch's penetrating study of Soloviev's use of Maximus the Confessor during Soloviev's middle and late periods. Soloviev pictures deification as a restoration of harmony with God. I argue that Soloviev also drew upon Origen's concept of *apokatastasis*, which relates to *theosis*. Boehme's philosophy is briefly examined in order to highlight what the two philosophers utilized from him. Berdyaev's philosophy is studied, including his usage of Boehme's notion of the *Ungrund.* Ruth Coates offers a sophisticated analysis of Berdyaev. I argue that Berdyaev's work is prophetic rather than Nietzschean. Berdyaev articulates a strongly theistic and anti-Nietzschean philosophy of cooperation with God. For both thinkers, deification is initiated by God, but free human cooperation is required for it to be realized. Both authors assert that Christ made deification possible. Both authors speak of a deification of the flesh, although their meaning is unclear.

Keywords: Nikolai Berdyaev; Vladimir Soloviev; Russian philosophy; Russian theology; deification; *theosis*; transformation of the world; God-manhood; spiritual freedom; kingdom of God; Jacob Boehme; maximus the confessor; Origen of Alexandria; antichrist; antichrist; eschatology

1. Introduction

The important Russian thinkers, Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Berdyaev, were crucial and influential—if somewhat idiosyncratic—figures in the history of Russian theology and philosophy. Both were highly original thinkers who nevertheless drew heavily on biblical, theological, and philosophical sources and believed that salvation and *theosis* had to be realized on the social level. Both philosophers had a strong Christological aspect to their understanding of deification. Deification is, in fact, a fundamental Christian idea, being found throughout the gospels and epistles (Matt 5:48; John 10:34; Rom 8:16, 29; 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 John 3:2) (Finlan and Kharlamov 2006, pp. 2–4). Deification was a major theme throughout the patristic period. Here we will explore what two Russian philosophers wrote about deification and cooperation with God. Their views have philosophic and spiritual significance for Christians today.

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2. Vladimir Soloviev

2.1. Soloviev's Place in Time and Thought

Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900) is one of the most influential thinkers in Russian philosophy and theology. He had many friends and correspondents among Orthodox and Catholics, he inspired the Russian Symbolist poets, and had a major effect on subsequent Russian theology.[1] Soloviev lived during a time of political turmoil and philosophic ferment. He was trained at the Moscow Spiritual Academy, studying both patristic thought and Western philosophical thought. He "had a deep knowledge of the Church Fathers and the doctrinal teachings of the early Church Councils." (Pilch 2018a, p. 110). Further, he was writing at a time when "the retrieval of the patristic heritage" was underway in Russia (Pilch 2018a, p. 110). I will designate the stages of his development thus: early period (1873–1880), middle period (1880–1890), and late period (1891–1900). A major study by Jeremy Pilch concentrates on a portion of one book from his middle period, another whole book from his middle period, and a book from his late period, effectively arguing that he built upon late patristic notions of *theosis*, especially those of Maximus the Confessor (Pilch 2018a, pp. 83–85). I will address Pilch's findings below.

There is some continuity throughout Soloviev's career, however. Nikolai Berdyaev finds that one idea runs throughout Soloviev's career; the "idea was divine-humanity. . . the free union of two natures, divine and human, in divine-humanity." (Berdyaev 2015d, pp. 77–78). He "always understood [Christianity] as a religion of the transfiguration of the world, a social and cosmic religion." (Berdyaev 2015d, p. 80).

2.2. Early Deification Teaching in Soloviev

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

Deification, for Soloviev, is for the whole world, more than for individuals. "The incarnation of the divine idea in the world [is] the goal of the whole cosmic movement," but the world soul has freedom, and so can choose evil (Soloviev 1995, p. 138). Only if the world-soul connects with God is Christ's divine humanity inscribed into humanity. "The gradual spiritualization of humanity through the inner assimilation and development of the divine principle constitutes the properly historical process of humankind." (Soloviev 1995, lecture 10, p. 147).

In his early period, Soloviev was optimistic about human progress. According to Berdyaev, he "was very much a gnostic-idealist, and his Christianity was rosy and optimistic. He did not yet feel the whole horror and power of evil. His understanding of evil was not mystical but overly rationalistic; interpreting it gnostically." (Berdyaev 2015c, pp. 86–87). "Gnostic" here probably refers to an intellectualizing Christianity that interprets everything spiritual-intellectually, rather than to the specific anti-cosmic Gnostic philosophy of the second century. However, some of Soloviev's writings *do* show some ideas that are Gnostic-looking (in the second-century sense).

Soloviev developed his deification concepts largely through his concept of Sophia, or the Wisdom of God. The roots of Soloviev's Sophia idea lie partly in Judaism (Wisdom as God's partner in creation, Prov 3:19; 8:22–31; Wis 7:25–8:1), partly in Pauline and Patristic Christianity, and partly in the thought of the German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) (David 1962, pp. 60–61) and the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) (Valliere 1996, p. 184; Coates 2019, p. 77). Schelling, in his later works, believed in "the revelation of the divine principle over time." (Coates 2019, p. 78). "God's will is to universalize everything, to raise everything up toward unity with the light or keep it there." (Schelling

2006, p. 47). Thus, the roots of Soloviev's view of divine humanity are biblical, patristic, mystical (German), and idealist (German). Schelling spoke of a "fall or self-alienation of Sophia-humanity from the divine ground of being," (Valliere 1996, p. 184) and Soloviev picks up on this idea. Schelling himself draws on Boehme, but Soloviev also draws directly from Boehme, for whom Sophia is "the ideal nature of the world, and the instrument of human salvation. . .the external manifestation of God." (David 1962, pp. 60–61). Further influence on Soloviev's Sophianic thinking can be found in Kabbala, alchemy, Hermeticism, and Gnosticism, which he researched in 1875 in the British Museum (Groberg 1992, pp. 202–4), and he seems to draw on these influences in the *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, at least in *Lectures* 1–9. He also builds upon Platonism (a highly Christianized Platonism). Middle and late Soloviev are much more orthodox, but also more ecumenical.

It could be that Soloviev's more positive Sophianic ideas lean heavily on Boehme, with some borrowing from Kabbala, while the ideas of a fallen Sophia lean on Schelling, and possibly Gnosticism. Zdenek David writes: "Together with Boehme, Soloviëv regards the rehabilitation of the world from its current fallen state as a gradual reincarnation of Sophia through man." (David 1962, pp. 62–63). When the Kingdom of God comes, "Sophia will then have reabsorbed the World Soul which acted as its antagonist." (David 1962, pp. 63–64).

Soloviev's Sophiology is fairly complicated. From the portions of the *Lectures on Divine Humanity* that come from his early period, he writes of the unity that *produces*, and the unity that *is produced* (Soloviev 1995, lecture 7, p. 107); the former is the Word or Logos, the latter is the Sophia; however, Christ "is both Logos and Sophia." (Soloviev 1995, lecture 7, p. 108). "Sophia is ideal or perfect humanity, eternally contained in the integral divine being, or Christ." (Soloviev 1995, lecture 8, p. 113). As "the world soul," (Soloviev 1995, lecture 9, p. 131), Sophia can either incline toward God and unity or toward chaos and disunity.

In an idiosyncratic work called *The Sophia*, from his early period, partially published in English in 2009,[2] he spells out his anticipation of the emergence of "the true universal religion. . .the real and spontaneous synthesis of all religions that takes nothing positive away from them. . .The only thing destroyed by it is their narrowness, their exclusiveness. . .and their hate." (Soloviev 2009a, p. 122). Instead, the principle of love will become dominant. There will be a transformation of the world in the triumph of "the universality of intellectual love." (Soloviev 2009a, p. 162). The goal is "the incarnation of Divinity in the world. . .the deification (*theosis*) of all that exists." (Soloviev 1995, lecture 10, pp. 136–37).

2.3. Theology of Soloviev's Middle Period

In *Lectures on Divine Humanity* 11–12, Soloviev enters upon a new phase of his theological development, drawing more heavily on patristic sources, particularly Maximus the Confessor.[3] In an encyclopedia article, Soloviev says that Maximus is "celebrated [for his] struggle against the Monothelite heresy,"[4] a heresy that "more or less eliminated the *human* principle from Christ," thereby undermining the possibility for divine-human cooperation (Pilch 2018a, p. 86).

Noting that the western theologian John Scotus Eriugena made use of Maximus's commentaries, Soloviev sees Maximus "as an intermediary link between Greek Christian theosophy and the medieval philosophy of the west."[5] According to Pilch, Soloviev's view of Maximus expressed here and in *Lectures on Divine Humanity* 11–12 draws upon a five-volume work on Christology by a Lutheran theologian, Isaak Dorner, published in German in 1839 (Pilch 2018a, pp. 90–91). Dorner wrote of an incarnation of the divine into humanity as part of the divine idea for mankind; when Soloviev introduced the term

bogochelovechestvo (Godmanhood) into Russian thought, he may have been borrowing from Dorner's term *Gottmenschheit* (Pilch 2018a, p. 92).

Soloviev begins his *Lecture* 11 by speaking about Christ, the second Adam, who embraces within himself "the whole of regenerated, spiritual humankind. . .Christ is the eternal spiritual center of the universal organism. . .The incarnation of Divinity. . .is even an essential element of the overall plan of creation." (Soloviev 1995, lectures 11 and 12, pp. 155, 157–58). Christ is the pioneer for us. The Incarnation of the Word empowers mortals to become more than mortal. Soloviev saw human life as "theandric," wherein divine and human energies work together to transform the world (Pilch 2018a, p. 105).

Pilch argues that Soloviev does not draw upon Origen's concept of *apokatastasis*. I will assess this opinion in my "Conclusions about Scholarship on Soloviev" section. *Apokatastasis* is the "restoration" mentioned in Acts 3:20–21, which Origen uses to designate a universal restoration or recapitulation, when "God will be all in all," (Ramelli 2019, p. 56, citing *Comm. In Io*. (*Commentary on John*) 1:32) "the 'perfect end' after all eons," (Ramelli 2019, p. 58, citing *Princ*. (*On First Principles*) 2:3:5 and *Comm. In Matt*. (*Commentary on Matthew*) 17:19) which will include the salvation of all souls. Soloviev writes that, in the end, the Church "will encompass all humankind and all nature in one universal divine-human organism."[6] This happens when there is full cooperation between human wills and the divine will, "a free harmonization of the divine and human principles." (Soloviev 1995, Lectures 11 and 12, p. 172). Pilch insists that Maximus corrected Origen's "errors," (Pilch 2018a, pp. 80, 104) and that Soloviev followed Maximus in not upholding "Origen's version of *apokatastasis*." (Pilch 2018a, p. 230).

The goal for Soloviev is the "spiritualization of mankind," (Soloviev 1938, p. 172) which will be under Christ's spiritual authority. "We look for him to reign not only *over* all that is but *in* all, 'that God may be all in all' and 'that they all may be one' (1 *Cor*. xv, 28; *John* xvii, 21). . .that there may be a complete harmony wherein no creature wishes other than as God wills." (Soloviev 1938, pp. 40–41). Deification involves universal repair: "This reuniting of three parts of the world at present separated, its spirit (the Invisible Church or spiritual world), its soul (the Visible Church or living mankind), and its body (material nature), will be a remaking into one absolute whole, a universal *restoration* of all things" (Soloviev 1938, pp. 133–34); "the *restoration* of mankind and the universe by the renewal of their harmony with God in which all creation becomes a faithful likeness of the Godhead." (Soloviev 1938, p. 168). Maximus had written "truly authentic knowledge, gained only by actual experience. . .by this latter knowledge, we attain, in the future state, the supernatural deification (θέωσις) that remains unceasingly in effect."[7]

Soloviev always emphasized the human collective, and yet he also stressed the importance of individual free will. The free cooperation of people with God was an essential pillar of Soloviev's philosophy. The church plays an active role in the deification process: "The free divinization of mankind is effected when the divine mother, the Church, is made fruitful by the action of the human power." (Soloviev 1938, pp. 169–70). This work, *God, Man and the Church* (the title in English), comes from Soloviev's middle period, where his emphasis is "more theological, biblical, and ecclesiological than either early or late Soloviev." (Coates 2019, p. 76).

Pilch points out an important change within the middle period. *Lectures* 11–12 are where he shows a strong move toward patristic theology, with a certain Slavophile angle. The Slavophiles were a 19th-century Russian movement that affirmed Orthodox values while reflecting on culture and ethics. Their great value was *sobornost*, "the idea of conciliarity" or "qualitative togetherness"; *sobornost* meant unity with freedom, and its advocates often made a distinction between unity and uniformity (Compton 2022, pp. 118–19). As Slavophilia evolved, however, it manifested a stubborn anti-Western bias. Soloviev respects

the early Slavophile thinkers but does not follow the movement in an anti-Western direction. He does criticize a tendency toward excessive rationalizing in Western theology, which began as early as John Scotus Erigena (9th century) and Abelard (12th century) (Soloviev 1996, pp. 14–17), and which opened the door to secularism (Valliere 2000, pp. 163, 200), but he does not demonize the West. He says western philosophy has engaged in "the constant hypostasization of relative, abstract concepts." (Soloviev 1996, p. 104). He has just as much criticism of Eastern Christianity's "inhuman god" (Berdyaev 2015c, p. 91) as he does of Western philosophy's rationalism. The two have complementary failings: "eastern Christianity retained the dominance of divinity over humanity, whereas the West was marked by the dominance of humanity over divinity." (Berdyaev 2015c, pp. 91–92). In fact, Soloviev thinks it necessary that Russia "renounce nationalism in order to retain and grow within its nationhood. It can then become what it truly is: the reconciler of East and West, the cornerstone of the Universal Church." (Kornblatt 1997, p. 175).

In *Lectures* 11–12, Soloviev argues that some Western theologians have missed the primary purpose of the Incarnation: "Christ's work is not a legal fiction, a casuistic resolution of an impossible 'lawsuit.' It is an actual exploit. . .not to carry out a formal juridical process but for the real salvation of humankind. . .for the actual revelation of the kingdom of God in humankind." (Soloviev 1995, lectures 11 and 12, pp. 155–56). *God, Man and the Church* contains none of this criticism of the legal fiction of atonement, but acknowledges the necessity of sacrifice, both in Christ's life and in believers' lives. Further, human nature is damaged by sin, and it requires God's grace to lift us out of sin (Pilch 2018a, pp. 126, 129–30). Deification is entirely God's doing, but we humans (especially we church members) have to cooperate in this work. This was a consistent idea throughout all his periods.

This dynamic theme of spiritual transformation is what makes Soloviev beloved by so many readers. "God's will is to communicate himself to everybody, to be their all in all, for he is limitless Good, the Love which knows no envy, the one Perfection." (Soloviev 1938, p. 40). But this change is not automatic. "Mankind has to *co-operate* with God in this work, for otherwise there cannot be a complete oneing of God with his creatures and a full expression of the meaning of existence, which requires. . .the concord and unity of all." (Soloviev 1938, p. 134).

With *God, Man and the Church*, he also demonstrates an openness to Western theology. Eventually, he starts to affirm a central unifying role for the Catholic Papacy (Pilch 2018a, p. 121).

In *God, Man and the Church*, Soloviev spells out three categories of human cooperation with God that are necessary for the deification process: prayer, alms-giving, and fasting, which may be restated as prayer, mercy, and restraint (Pilch 2018a, p. 132); or as faith, love, and hope (Soloviev 1938, p. 88). The Lord's Prayer opens with the hallowing of God's name and a prayer that God's will be done and his kingdom come. This amounts to a prayer that God may be all in all. It starts with a desire for one's own deification: "we must desire perfection for ourselves in union with God. . .we must become conformed to Him, so that his name is hallowed in us." (Soloviev 1938, pp. 317–18; translated in Pilch 2018a, pp. 134–35). The prayer for forgiveness not only can benefit another, but it is an "interior spiritual activity itself" within the mind of the one doing the forgiving (Soloviev 1938, p. 323; translated in Pilch 2018a, p. 138). Alms-giving appears to be symbolic of loving deeds and service to others. This giving represents an inversion of previous understandings of sacrifice; Christ affirms "'mercy I want and not sacrifice'. . .no longer do we offer sacrifice to God to appease, to win mercy from him; rather. . .God wants not what we can give him but what he gives to us." (Pilch 2018a, pp. 141–42). We can create a "grace-filled society." (Pilch 2018a, p. 142).

The third human act necessary for deification is fasting, which is symbolic of self-restraint, avoiding proud and selfish actions. It also corrects our relationship to nature. We are to bring "the fullness of life" to earth creatures (Pilch 2018a, p. 143). "As the incarnate God saves humanity, so humanity united with God must save the whole nature." (Soloviev 1938, pp. 345–46; translated in Pilch 2018a, p. 144).

Throughout the rest of *God, Man and the Church*, Soloviev emphasized the role of the church in realizing deification. The sacraments help to "build up the divine-human communion." (Pilch 2018a, p. 148). The sacrament of baptism reunites us with the waters of creation. All the sacraments help us to bring about "the spiritually regenerated corporeality of the whole world." (Soloviev 1938, p. 400; translated in Pilch 2018a, p. 150). The sacraments "sanctify man's physical as well as his spiritual life." (Soloviev 1938, p. 167).

The deifying role of the church and sacraments in *God, Man and the Church* seems to replace the role played by Sophia in the *Lectures*. Sophia is completely left out of *God, Man and the Church*; instead, the church is "the essential form of unity given to people." (Soloviev 1938, p. 384; translated in Pilch 2018a, p. 153). In a few places, as when Mary is said to be the heart of the Church, then Mary seems to replace Sophia (Pilch 2018a, p. 151). But more emphasis is placed on the church's role. The church is "divine-human," but not perfect (like Christ); it "still has not reached that glorious state" of unity with Christ (Pilch 2018a, p. 154). Pilch says "deification is. . .also explicitly ecclesial." (Pilch 2018a, p. 154). The Church helps mediate deification, but it also *gets* deified (similar to Sophia's role in the *Lectures*): "Man is *healed*, he recovers health for his life when human personality takes its place in the Church, and the Church in turn is made fruitful and active." (Soloviev 1938, p. 171). This emphasis on the Church's role in deification goes considerably beyond what any of the Church Fathers say about the Church (Pilch 2018a, p. 229). The Church helps people in the process of spiritual perfecting, and it also gets perfected and healed as humans are perfected and healed.

Soloviev thought that there would be a "gradual changing of bodily life. . .a materialization of spirit and spiritualization of matter." (Soloviev 1938, p. 134). All this emanates from the person of Christ, who is "the centre of history." (Smith 2011, p. 116). With Christ's help, we can move "towards the recovery of that holy corporeality." (Soloviev 1938, p. 142). He believed "everything spiritual will be completely incarnated and everything material will be completely spiritualized. . .reunite[d] with the Divinity." (Smith 2011, p. 43; Gustafson 1996, p. 43, citing Soloviev 2009b, vol. 3, p. 381). He wrote of the "lightsomeness. . .of transfigured matter," (Soloviev 1938, p. 142) and of "a special kind of semicorporeal substance. . .nonmaterial matter." (Soloviev 2003a, p. 128). However, we never get much detail about what nonmaterial or spiritualized matter really is. What we hear is lofty and abstract theology: a destined uniting of "natural love" and "intellectual love." (Soloviev 2009a, p. 162). "The divine Idea," penetrating humanity, will "vivify nature and immortalize its beauty," although he claims it would be "premature" to give more details (Soloviev 2003a, pp. 132–33).

At one point, he says "the resurrection is a reconciliation of matter and spirit in which matter finds its real expression as a *spiritual body*. . .a divinization of the flesh"; God "assimilates" matter "to his own essence." (Soloviev 1938, p. 129). I see only two possibilities here: either matter is ontologically changed somehow, or matter remains matter but simply comes fully under God's control; it ceases to be a source of rebelliousness. It is not clear which alternative Soloviev envisions.

Either way, it is closely related to unity, a major theme in Soloviev's philosophy. God allows Chaos but intends to draw it back into harmony. "He is able to draw rebellious existence back to unity." (Soloviev 1948, p. 161). Soloviev's ultimate focus was on "the all-unity Idea." (Soloviev 2003a, pp. 126–27, 129, 132). Truth is universal: "The possession

of truth cannot constitute the privilege of the nation just as it cannot be the privilege of an individual person. Truth can be only *universal*." (Soloviev 2003b, p. 12). The full meaning of deification, then, has to include universal deification. "The perfect relationship of the Godhead with man's nature that is realized in the person of Jesus Christ had to be extended to the whole of humankind." (Soloviev 1938, p. 136).

Soloviev sharply criticized authoritarian and dogmatic tendencies in the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, a sickness that left the Russian nation "spiritually paralyzed in its totality." (Soloviev 2008, p. 17). Instead of injecting love and piety into society, the Russian church has served as a source of "division and enmity for more than two centuries," causing the emergence of a plethora of competing sects, while the Orthodox Church, instead of acting "by the great power of love, has [been using] coercion to bring back into unity those who have fallen away." (Soloviev 2008, pp. 18, 29).

In *God, Man and the Church*, Soloviev speaks of "the Church," implying a universal church since no historical church is usually mentioned. In a later book from his middle period, *Russia and the Universal Church*, Soloviev writes of "the permanent primacy of Peter as the foundation of the universal church," and says "the transference to Rome of the supreme ecclesiastical authority established by Christ in the person of St. Peter is a patent fact"; rejection of Peter's leadership constitutes "rebellion against the steward that He has Himself appointed." (Soloviev 1948, pp. 108, 121, 200).

Soloviev hoped that the Orthodox churches would realign themselves with Rome and submit to the papacy, believing that order and goodness would result, even something he called free theocracy. Rejecting the national pride of the Slavophiles, Soloviev, for a period, became devoted to internationalism and the supposed unifying power of the Roman Catholic Church. Soloviev saw the East as having succumbed to tyranny and the West (aside from the Catholic Church) to secularism. He admitted that the West had allowed more "free and independent" thinking. He believed "eastern and western humanity should work together to realize a new divine-human cultural synthesis." (Valliere 2000, p. 164). His theocratic idea has Church and State being mutually supportive: "The state has to be at the service of the Church in many fields of activity, as when it "spreads Christian manners among savages."[8]

2.4. The Late Soloviev

In the long and thoughtful philosophic book of his late period, *The Justification of the Good*, Soloviev argues that the true value of persons lies in their divinization: "Human personality contains an element of intrinsic value, which can never be merely a means—the possibility, namely, inherent in it, of infinite perfection through the contemplation of and union with the absolute fulness of being." (Soloviev [1897] 2005, p. 196).

With *The Justification of the Good*, his emphasis "shifts to a primarily moral understanding of deification as progress in virtue." (Coates 2019, pp. 76–77). He has shifted away from theocracy and toward an idea of "the perfect moral order. . .social deification." (Pilch 2018a, pp. 225–26). He picks up on the moral deification ideas of Gregory of Nazianzen and Basil the Great and very strongly on the idea of grace as expressed by Augustine (Pilch 2018a, pp. 182, 186), while rejecting the latter's "polemical" excesses, which had arrived at "erroneous extremities of determinism." (Pilch 2018a, p. 190). He insists that God's grace is saving, but humans need to freely cooperate with God's will. Underestimating either truth (grace or free cooperation) would be out of balance. He also drew back on some of the things he said about church-state cooperation in the previous book. He now recognizes that "*The Church must have no power of compulsion, and the power of compulsion exercised by the state must have nothing to do with the domain of religion*." (Soloviev [1897] 2005, p. 394; see Pilch 2018a, p. 195). Soloviev's moral emphasis coincided with a personalist and moral

emphasis in the Spiritual Academies, along with the incorporation of Western theological ideas making the rounds in the Spiritual Academies (Pilch 2018a, pp. 198–201). In writing of grace, he seems to have drawn upon Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and in writing of love, he drew upon Bernard of Clairvaux; the love learned in marriage and family life is a valuable part of the deification project (Pilch 2018a, pp. 190–91, 218–20).

Besides his continued use of Maximus the Confessor regarding deification,[9] Soloviev also borrows from Origen and Basil the Great, using the language of the image and likeness of God (Pilch 2018a, p. 205). Taking on this likeness, reaching for moral perfection, is a lifelong project.

The deification he calls for is socially and individually transforming: "True Christianity is a perfect synthesis of. . .the *absolute event*—the revelation of the perfect personality, the God-man—Christ. . .the absolute *promise*—of a community conformable to the perfect personality, or. . .the Kingdom of God [and] the absolute *task*—to further the fulfilment of that promise by regenerating all our individual and social environment in the spirit of Christ." (Soloviev [1897] 2005, p. 214). But it must truly be in the spirit of Christ, and not a counterfeit thereof.

In his last book, *War, Progress, and the End of History*, in the section called "A Short Tale about the Antichrist," he has the Antichrist pose as a philanthropist and peacemaker (Berdyaev 2015d, pp. 82–83). This Antichrist who poses as a humanist may be based in part on Soloviev's picture of himself at an earlier period, a "self-parody," but not a "self-negation." (Kornblatt 1996, p. 70). According to Kornblatt, he still believed in a destiny of world unity. He was not repudiating everything he had believed in; he simply had become more aware that many people could be susceptible to a particular kind of charming demagogic falsehood. In the story, the Antichrist successfully deludes most people.

The Antichrist represents a kind of false deification and a false ecumenicism. A truly ecumenical spirit is embodied by the three individual leaders of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism (interestingly named John, Peter, and Paul) who work together to denounce the Antichrist. Soloviev never bought into the narrow-minded advocacy of one branch of Christianity with accompanying contempt for other branches. Nor did he accept the contempt for Jews that was widespread in Christian circles. In the story, he has the Jews rise up against the Antichrist (Soloviev 1990, pp. 191–92), just after the latter had announced "the unification of all cults" and claimed the role of being "your true leader in every enterprise undertaken for the well-being of humanity." (Soloviev 1990, p. 179). Soloviev openly denounced the anti-Semitism that was widespread in Russia (Soloviev 2000a, pp. 291–92).

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

2.5. Christological Basis of Theosis

Soloviev's "story of the Antichrist" warns what can happen when people forget God, when religious belief is hollowed out, when humanity is willing to accept an egotistical fraud for a leader, and seek perfection without divine guidance. The story dramatizes the dangers of theological demagoguery. It shows that *theosis* without Christ is a self-deception. Soloviev emphasizes the crucial importance of the literal Resurrection of Christ, having his character Mr. Z say "The resurrection, and not in its metaphorical, but in its literal meaning—here is its testimony of the true God." (Soloviev 1990, p. 155).

For Soloviev, *theosis* was not a way to diminish or undermine Christology. It is Christ who makes *theosis* possible. "The purpose of the world-process is the revelation of the Kingdom of God or of the perfect moral order realized by a new humanity *which spiritually grows out of the God-man*." (Soloviev [1897] 2005, p. 168). Only with "the coming of the God-

man Jesus Christ" did people receive "the possibility of a free divine-human society. . .the renewal of human and world reality in the image and likeness of Christian truth, the divinization of man." (Soloviev 1938, p. 189).

It may be true that Soloviev emphasizes the human and social side, but he never loses sight of the Christological basis of *theosis*. "Christ as God freely renounces his glory and by so doing acquires as man the ability *to become a sharer* in that glory." (Soloviev 1938, p. 122). It is not human initiative, but human *cooperation*, that makes *theosis* possible. The divinity of Christ is God's presence within the human race. Deification meant humans co-creating a new world *with* God. "Man can *become* divine only by the actual power of an eternally existing Divinity [and by] a *divinely human* process." (Soloviev 2000b, sct. XXVI, p. 248; see also Kornblatt 1992, p. 43).

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

2.6. Conclusions About Scholarship on Soloviev

I find that Pilch's work is very helpful in understanding Soloviev's development and his points of emphasis over time. His pointing out a distinct change in focus in *Lectures on Divine Humanity* 11–12, in a more patristic direction, is quite helpful. The influence of Maximus the Confessor is well-demonstrated in Pilch's work. My objection is to Pilch's rejection of the possibility that Soloviev draws upon Origen's concept of *apokatastasis*. Soloviev, in fact, blends Maximus's deification with Origen's universal restoration.

Pilch has the ultimately insupportable idea that the patristic concept of *apokatastasis* "was rarely linked to deification," (Pilch 2018a, p. 229), but the restoration and recapitulation concept is definitely part of Origen's understanding of deification. Origen sees it as a time when every rational mind "will be wholly God. . .it will no longer behold or retain anything else than God. . .God becomes to him 'all.'"[10]

Although Pilch denies that Soloviev makes any use of Origen's concept of deification, he does acknowledge once that Soloviev's Kingdom of God concept "equates" with the *apokatastasis ton theon* (Pilch 2018a, p. 229). He quotes a passage from *The Justification of the Good* that affirms that equation: "the Kingdom of God is identical. . .with universal resurrection and αποκαταστασις των παντων." (Soloviev [1897] 2005, p. 165; Pilch 2018a, p. 225). Both Origen's and Soloviev's eschatology involve cosmic deification. Soloviev writes: "The ultimate end of all is not Nirvana but 'the restitution of all things,'" (quoting Acts 3:21) (Soloviev 1996, p. 148).

For Origen, in the recapitulation, "the intellect. . .*is restored to the image and likeness of God* who created it. This is why the Prophet says: 'All the earth will remember and *return to the Lord* and all the peoples will kneel before him' [Isa 45:22–23]."[11] "Evil will be wiped away from the entire world"; and creatures will "find themselves near to God."[12] "The end and perfection of all will be realized."[13] Ramelli says Origen developed his idea of *apokatastasis* against both pagan (Stoic) ideas that denied free will and "gnostic' conceptions which excluded some people and denied the resurrection of the body (Ramelli 2019, p. 58). This is certainly a Christian concept of cosmic deification. Russell summarizes Origen's deification teaching thus: "The Spirit makes us holy so that the Son can make us sons and gods." (Russell 2024, p. 28).

These beliefs are held in common by Origen and Soloviev. It seems that Pilch's real objection is to the universalism of Origen: the idea that *all* souls would ultimately be saved, even the devil's. The restitution, Pilch argues, "does not refer to the lot of the damned, but to the renewal of the world." (Pilch 2018a, p. 230). It is not clear to me whether or not Soloviev was a universalist. Whether or not he was a universalist, he undoubtedly picked

up on Origen's idea of *apokatastasis*. When Soloviev writes on "a universal *restoration* of all things" and all creation coming into harmony with God (Soloviev 1938, pp. 134, 168), we see the echo of Origen's *apokatastasis* concept.

This does not mean his thinking was identical with Origen's on all points, or that he was a universalist. Further, Pilch concedes that Soloviev, in contrasting Christianity with natural religion, affirms the Christian idea of αποκαταστασις των παντων (Pilch 2018a, p. 146). Pilch denies the influence of Origen because he wants to separate Soloviev from any idea of universalism. Sometimes he overcompensates and denies an Origenist influence at all, though, in other passages, he admits that Origen's influence *does* exist. It would be better to admit that an important Origenist influence exists in Soloviev's work, and then to argue separately regarding whether or not Soloviev carries forward Origen's universalist ideas. One can embody Origenist ideas without embodying *all* his ideas, such as universalism.

Berdyaev has an interesting take on Soloviev. We have already noted that Berdyaev considered Soloviev's early work naïve and utopian. He also reacted against Soloviev's last work. Regarding Soloviev's story of the Antichrist, he says Soloviev "was filled with an apocalyptic horror of the growing power of evil. . .He felt that history was falling into a dark abyss." (Berdyaev 2015c, p. 87). Although Berdyaev knew that evil could be deceitful and charming, he may not have appreciated this last great insight of Soloviev: the danger of a charming and *philosophical* Antichrist.

3. Jacob Boehme

It will be useful to take a brief look at the writings of Jacob Boehme, who was an influence on Soloviev (mostly in his early period) and on Berdyaev (throughout his career). I use the English spelling of his name, though he was a German born in Upper Lusatia, in Bohemian territory. His trade was shoemaker, but he started having profound visions early in life, and came to believe they showed him the truth about God, humanity, and creation. He wrote many books, which became a cause of doctrinal controversy but also earned him a readership.

Part of what drew Soloviev and Berdyaev to him was probably Boehme's emphasis on intense, first-hand religious experience, as opposed to accepting the opinions of others. God "openeth in man the internal constellation of the soul." (Waterfield 2001a, p. 69). "God is in heaven, and the *heaven is in man*; and if man desireth to be in heaven, then must heaven be manifest, and revealed in him." (Waterfield 2001a, p. 74). This means deification: "it was for the soul's sake that God became man, that He might bring the same again into Himself." (Waterfield 2001a, p. 76).

Both philosophers are probably attracted to Boehme's view that "the external world taketh its rise and original from the internal" (Waterfield 2001b, p. 181). Although they do not follow the extraordinarily complex genesis of reality that Boehme spells out, through the intertwining of the "two properties. . .the four elements. . .seven Forms [and] a threefold spirit" that emerge from "the eternal nature."[14] Boehme drew upon Kaballah and alchemy for some of his ideas, but his own original thinking shaped his philosophy. His essentially positive view of human nature undoubtedly commended itself to the two Russians. "It is lamentable, that since the fall of *Adam*, we should be so continually cheated and befooled by the devil, to think that we are not the children of God, nor of his essence."[15] Both Soloviev and Berdyaev believed in the fundamental dignity of human beings as children of God.

I think it is this positive anthropology, and not the dense and complicated theogony of Boehme, that attracted the two Russians. Boehme speaks of seven Forms of Nature that occur eternally and are the underpinning of all reality. The first form is Harshness, a passive and solidifying form. The second is Attraction, which is active and seeks relationships. The

tension between these two gives rise to the third Form, Bitterness. Out of this tension arises Fire, which contains wrath and pride. Next comes Light, the light of truth, which suppresses Fire. The sixth Form is Sound, which includes the harmony of the spheres. Finally comes Figure, the ideal configuration of the whole (Waterfield 2001e, pp. 28–30). Also from eternity come the three principles that become the Trinity, which have a complicated relationship with the seven forms. "Now you may well perceive that the birth of the Son taketh its original in the fire, and attaineth his personality and name in the kindling of the soft, white, and clear light, which is himself." (Waterfield 2001d, chp. IV, p. 104). Man seems to have some special relation with the Holy Spirit (Waterfield 2001e, p. 31; Waterfield 2001d, chp. IV, p. 100).

The forms and the principles all emerge from the *Ungrund*, which contains a continual yearning. "Thus there is a constant Will to generate and work, and the whole Nature stands in a great Longing and Anguish, willing continually to generate the divine Virtue, God and Paradise being hidden therein."[16] The Trinity is always "arising from nothing, always generated from and out of itself from Eternity."[17] The Virgin "longs in herself, and her Longing is the eternal Essences, which attract the holy Virtue to her, and the Fiat creates them, so that they stand in [or become] a Substance."[18] For Boehme, the awakening of Desire or Drive within the *Ungrund* helped to free God from the immovable, impassible state of the *Ungrund*. "Eros begins in God—more exactly, in the *Ungrund*." (McGrath 2021). This rejection of scholasticism's hostility to Eros or Desire was probably quite appealing to both Soloviev and Berdyaev. McGrath says "no thinker in the tradition is more affirmative of materiality than Boehme." (McGrath 2021).

Berdyaev picked up on the idea of an original, unmoved *Ungrund*, and of God emerging from a great longing in the *Ungrund*. We will see this when he examines Berdyaev's teachings. Berdyaev translated Boehme's lengthy work *Mysterium Magnum* into French, published in 1945.

What about Sophia? In several works, Boehme writes of "the noble Sophia. . .the true image of Christ." (Ellistone [1624] 2018, vol. 1, 34.25, p. 210). Sophia is "the Eternal Wisdom of the Holy Trinity." (Boehme [1654] 2009, commentary on Table IV). Sophia can be called "the inward humanity," (Ellistone [1624] 2018, vol. 2, 50.52, p. 46) a heavenly androgyne, wedded with Christ. Sophia represented "the manly virtue of God, which Adam was before Eve when he was man and woman, and yet neither of them, but a virgin of God." (Ellistone [1624] 2018, vol. 2, 50.48, p. 46). Perhaps most importantly, Sophia is a kind of prototype of humanity, and also the destiny of human spirituality: Sophia stands for "the tincture or the beginning to the new spiritual body." (Ellistone [1624] 2018, vol. 2, 52.8, p. 58). Sophia is the soul's "new-born image." (Ellistone [1624] 2018, vol. 2, 52.10, p. 58). God operates in Sophia: "In her stand the great wonders, which the Holy Ghost discovers [uncovers], and the Word of the Father creates." (Sparrow [1620] 2013, 5.44, p. 62).

4. Nikolai Berdyaev

4.1. Berdyaev's Background

Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) was a highly influential theologian and philosopher in his day and subsequently. He was not raised Orthodox and he felt more revulsion than attraction to traditional Orthodox worship (Coates 2019, p. 19), yet he drew heavily upon Orthodox theological tradition in his writing. However, he always considered himself a philosopher, more than a theologian. The philosopher is free, and reasons upon a basis in experience and faith, whereas "the pure theologian is concerned with the nature of the Church and relies chiefly upon Holy Scripture and tradition, he is dogmatic in principle, and not open to doubts." (Berdyaev 1950, p. 158). When posed this way, one can see why Berdyaev chose the label "philosopher."

During Berdyaev's young manhood, the main influences in philosophical circles were Kant and Nietzsche, and he frequently responded to their work. Kant was particularly influential at the Moscow Spiritual Academy, with an emphasis on rationality and moral perfection (Coates 2019, p. 63). Berdyaev admired Kant, but frequently criticized his philosophy.

4.2. Berdyaev's Immanent Religiosity

We see Berdyaev's deep understanding of Orthodox spirituality in his argument with Soloviev about the possible merger of Eastern and Western churches. Berdyaev sees Soloviev as correctly discerning that the "two Christian worlds will be truly united only by mutual love," (Berdyaev 2015c, p. 95) but Berdyaev insists that this could not happen through ecclesiastical agreements, but only through mutual understanding. That would require the Catholic world to gain a better understanding of the deep, inward mystical life of the eastern church, and to recognize that eastern "mysticism is characterized by the idea of the theosis or deification of man's nature from within by the reception of Christ into oneself." (Berdyaev 2015c, p. 100). Soloviev was correct to reject the arrogance and pride of the Slavophiles, Berdyaev thought, but Russia further needs to acknowledge her sinful "national pride and national hatred." (Berdyaev 2015c, p. 102).

Berdyaev made an effort to share in the life of the Orthodox Church, but he retained an instinctive resistance to official Orthodoxy. He saw it as tyrannical and reactionary. Both religious tyranny and pseudo-religious socialist tyranny were demonic. "I saw this spirit of the *Grand Inquisitor* displayed both from the right and from the left, in authoritarian religion and statecraft as well as in authoritarian revolutionary socialism." (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 16). He looked into Baptist, Dukhobor, Khlysty, and other mystical meetings, but found the Baptists too proselytizing and the mystics too Manichaean (Russell 2024, p. 147).

Berdyaev many times employed the *sobornost* idea found within Russian Orthodoxy. He wrote "*Sobornost* is opposed both to Catholic authoritarianism and to Protestant individualism. It indicates a unity which knows of no external authority over it, but equally knows no individualistic isolation and seclusion." (Berdyaev 1950, p. 164; Compton 2022, p. 119). He had great respect for the two primary Slavophilic thinkers, Alexei Khomyakov and Ivan Kireyevsky, who emphasized both freedom and community (Berdyaev [1937] 1939, p. 167; Berdyaev 1950, pp. 159–66). However, the movement eventually became known for its hostility to the West, which Berdyaev did not support.

Berdyaev was frustrated with stern and controlling forms of religion. He criticized institutional Orthodoxy for its neglect of the idea of divine-human cooperation. He commended the "personally human element in love" found in Catholic saints like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Francis de Sales, in contrast to the impersonal asceticism of some eastern saints, exalting the love for God alone, seeing love for humans as dangerous (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, p. 188).

Coates notes that Berdyaev accepted much of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, but she goes a step further and says "*Meaning of Creativity* is a Nietzschean work." (Coates 2019, p. 133). In that work, Berdyaev says that churches have allowed the negative virtues of humility and self-denial to eclipse the positive virtues of courage and honor. She sees him calling for the Nietzschean values of "daring" and "manliness." (Coates 2019, p. 133). "His anti-clericalism and aversion to the contemporary ethos of the Russian Orthodox Church also find powerful expression in *Meaning of Creativity*." (Coates 2019, p. 138). She acknowledges that Berdyaev goes on to say that Nietzsche profoundly misunderstood Christianity, but she seems to agree with some contemporary critics of Berdyaev who thought the book "blasphemed" in making humans the rivals of Christ; Lev Shestov thought that Berdyaev was possessed by the spirit of the Nietzsche of the Antichrist period

(Coates 2019, pp. 133–34). Coates argues that Berdyaev broke from the church and asserted himself as a sectarian (Coates 2019, p. 139). Russell finds this judgment "too harsh. . . to the end of his life he never broke with Orthodoxy." (Russell 2024, p. 147–48).

When I read the bold language and the exaltation of individual creativity in *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, I can partially understand Coates's criticism, but I do not think the label "Nietzschean" should be applied, without qualification, to that book. It was an early work (1916), and reflected his youthful rebelliousness and intensity. The work seems like a shout of victory after escaping prison (he had recently turned away from some intellectual Orthodox groups in Moscow (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, p. 211)), but even here, he was able to deconstruct Nietzsche. Once in freedom, he matured. His works in the 1920s and 1930s contain more careful criticism of institutional Christianity. How can he be called "Nietzschean" if he rejected everything upon which Nietzsche based his philosophy? In fact, "whatever Nietzsche says about Christianity we must take and turn inside out. . .Christianity is the religion of the strong in spirit, not the weak. . .Those who have overcome the world, sacrificing this world's goods, are always the strongest."[19] Nietzsche's embrace of the will to power was really a "gesture of weakness," not of strength, and represented "a break with the ethics of the Gospel." (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 64). In Nietzsche's idea of superman, "both God and man disappear." (Berdyaev [1947] 1952, p. 32). "To him man is a shame and a disgrace." (Berdyaev [1949] 2009, p. 35).

Berdyaev's answer is radically religious and anthropologically positive: "Truth is God, it is the divine light, and at the same time truth is human. That is the fundamental theme of Godmanhood. The knowledge of God is a human thing." (Berdyaev 1953, p. 30). "Truth [is] divine-human in principle. . .integral Truth, not partial, is a revelation of the higher world. . .it is not merely intellectual." (Berdyaev 1953, p. 31). This sounds more like Soloviev than like the nihilistic German philosopher. "Truth is the voice of eternity in time." (Berdyaev 1953, p. 33). Berdyaev's is a prophetic Christianity, as was Soloviev's. Berdyaev noted that Soloviev was "misunderstood because of his prophetic ministry. A prophet is always solitary, always in conflict with the religious collective." (Berdyaev 2015d, p. 81).

I think Berdyaev's *The Meaning of the Creative Act* can be called "Nietzschean" only in terms of its tone and not in terms of content. We must notice Berdyaev's principled critique of Nietzsche, and the ways in which his expression was prophetic and not nihilistic. His critique of theologians and philosophers matured over time. Berdyaev himself admitted that this early book was written in a heated moment, and that it was "an impulsive, unpremeditated and unfinished work." (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, p. 210).

Berdyaev did write about an abyss or void, but this is not the void of Nietzsche, but the *Ungrund* of Jacob Boehme. This *Ungrund* can be called a Divine Nothing, but really it is a "potentiality," (Compton 2022, p. 215) a "generative indeterminacy that precedes both the divine and the created order." (Benders 2025). The *Ungrund* is the source of "uncreated freedom. . .is pregnant with potential craving for actualization." (Compton 2022, pp. 43, 47). Berdyaev quotes Boehme approvingly: "'the cause of the Trinity is the single unfathomable will; and the cause of the will is the nothingness. . .nothingness is a craving for something'. . .Boehme's *Ungrund* goes deeper than God."[20]

For Berdyaev, both the Godhead and human freedom emerged from this *Ungrund* (Berdyaev [1949] 2009, p. 31; Berdyaev [1931] 1960, p. 25), which certainly "unsettles classical theism," (Benders 2025) but can hardly be called Nietzschean. It is indeed troubling, theologically, to read "In man God finally becomes conscious." (Berdyaev [1949] 2009, p. 31). But the *Ungrund* gives Berdyaev the opportunity for the very un-Nietzschean idea that God yearns for humanity: "God longs for man. . .who shall reflect His image. . .The birth of man in God is the answer to divine aspiration. . .The Kingdom of God is that of God-Humanity,

in which God is finally in man and man in God, and this is realized in the Spirit." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 197). This goes right against Nietzsche's philosophy.

Berdyaev admired a number of mystics besides Boehme. There were Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, and Tauler. He admired the philosophic side of Dostoyevsky, as well as philosophers like Kant, Kierkegaard, and Soloviev, though he also criticized them (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, pp. 75, 83, 95, 99, 101, 177, 263; Berdyaev [1937] 1939, pp. 121–23, 126–28). He preferred the mystics to the doctors of the church; what he liked was "Mysticism, understood as a mode of knowledge rather than a finished product." (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, p. 83).

4.3. Divine Human Collaboration

Berdyaev emphasizes the real ontological changes that human beings undergo as they are spiritually transformed: "The meaning of the coming of Christ into the world lies in a real transfiguration of human nature, in the formation of a new type of spiritual man. . .an entry of the eternal and spiritual into this natural time-world of ours." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 176). Does he, then, believe in spiritual evolution, despite his objection to the term?—yes, but only in the sense of the inward—not outward—transformations of a new age. "The Kingdom of God comes not only at the end of time but at every moment." (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, p. 290). So, is there actually an afterlife? Yes: "Real love is the affirmation of eternity." (Berdyaev [1923] 1957, p. 132). This is not a matter of isolated souls, but of persons uniting with God and with other personalities (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, pp. 255–56). This does not suppress personality, but is its social blossoming.

The gospel offers union between man and God, but we do not cease to be human or surrender our nature. Rather, "Deification implies a distinction between God and man, a dialogical and dramatic relationship between them." (Berdyaev [1937] 1939, p. 133). Berdyaev sees "mystical realism" as the way for a person to learn the truth about himself and "to divinize both himself and the world." (Stark 2011, p. 635).

I will use a modern term to restate one of his points: Christ helps bring out the full human potential. "The religion of Christ is the religion of man's highest powers." (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, p. 242). "With the appearance of Christ in the world, man's sonship with God, his likeness to God and his participation in the divine nature are all revealed." (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, p. 296). With Boehme, Berdyaev agrees that deification means "a restoration of Adam's original status." (Coates 2019, p. 123). What we need to bring is courage: "If great obedience is needed for redemption, for creativeness there is needed great courage." (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, p. 101).

This is why we cannot allow any submergence of personality within a group. "I cannot assent to any exteriorization of the personal conscience—to its transference to the collective. For conscience is within man, in the depth of his freedom where he enters into relation with God. . .The worship of the collective is. . .a form of idolatry." (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, pp. 241–42). Berdyaev seems to have a good and balanced view of the individual and social dimensions of personality. Here, he asserts the inward freedom of the individual. Elsewhere, we saw him affirm the sociality of personality, its need for love and communion. He especially emphasizes the sociality when he speaks of the future.

To understand Berdyaev's vision of the future, we have to grasp his tripartite concept of ethics. He envisioned a sequence, from an ethics of law, to an ethics of redemption, and to an ethics of creativity (Vallon 1960, p. 223). The ethics of law does not do justice to the complexity and inwardness of persons (Vallon 1960, p. 227). Higher than the ethics of law is the ethics of redemption, in which God is seen as co-suffering with humanity. The supreme worth of humanity is stated by Christ in his saying that man is higher than the Sabbath (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, p. 107).

The ethics of redemption, then, finds its fulfillment in the ethics of creativity, which is not primarily concerned with salvation, but with values, and always involves a victory over fear (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, pp. 133, 136). Out of the interaction of free and creative persons will come a new world. We will actually "create new values out of God-given gifts." (Vallon 1960, p. 247). Berdyaev's ethics flows into his eschatology: "Ethics invariably passes into eschatology and is resolved into it. Its last word is theosis, deification, attained through man's freedom and creativeness. . .Act as though you could hear the Divine call to participate through free and creative activity in the Divine work." (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, pp. 297–98). Unfortunately, many people prefer authoritarian order to "the great anxiety and terrible agony" of freedom (Berdyaev [1923] 1957, p. 194). Deification, which comes from hearing the Divine call and responding to it, is the work of a spiritually mature person, and Berdyaev's theology demonstrates maturity on this subject.

Berdyaev stressed that "God is a God who suffers with the world and with man. . .The Redeemer is the Liberator, and that not as settling accounts with God for crimes that have been committed." (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 85). Christianity is the religion of deification. "The interpretation of Christianity as the religion of God-manhood is radically opposed to the juridical interpretation of the relation between God and man, and the juridical theory of redemption." (Berdyaev 1950, p. 173). The juridical theory is infatuated with sin and payment for sin. The idea of God meticulously tracking and measuring human sinning is an inferior idea. More true is the idea of God being concerned with the deification and spiritual progress of persons. Our duty is, more and more, to reveal God's image and likeness within us (Stark 2011, p. 637).

Stark brings out how inward and personal the *theosis* process is. Christ's divinized human nature also touches our human nature, which "becomes fully integrated within the life of the Holy Trinity"; Christ lives within us, and *his* participation in the Trinity becomes *our* participation in the Trinity (Stark 2011, p. 639). We start living eternal life in the present moment. Redemption comes to mean "perfection of life" and "transformation of human nature." (Stark 2011, pp. 640–41). This is the maturation, not the obliteration, of personality. "The person achieves ultimate fulfilment when man has actualized his spiritual nature." (Stark 2011, p. 639).

4.4. Eschatology

There is an element of eternity in Christian love. "Love means seeing the other in God and affirming him in eternal life. . .No abstract idea of the good can be put above personality." (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, p. 107). And creative life continues beyond this lifetime. As for *this* world, nothing will remain unchanged: "all must be transfigured and brought into the Kingdom of God" (Berdyaev [1931] 1960, p. 294). He shows his linkage to Soloviev when he says: "The Kingdom of God is that of God-humanity, in which God is finally in man and man in God, and this is realized in Spirit." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 197).

Eternal life is a blossoming of creativity and love in this life and the next. It will be a *collective* transformation: "Individual, isolated salvation is an impossibility. Salvation can only be achieved with the help of one's fellow-men." (Berdyaev [1937] 1939, p. 166). "Men must all be saved together." (Berdyaev 1953, p. 136). Berdyaev envisioned "a new world of justice and beauty." (Berdyaev 1965, p. 216, originally from Berdyaev 1950). Love is essential. "At its highest, love is always the vision of the face of the loved one in God." (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 237). As with Soloviev, we hear an affirmation of eternity, but get very little in the way of specifics as regards the new body and the new world, which Soloviev calls "a free divine-human society. . .the renewal of human and world reality." (Soloviev 1938, pp. 187, 189).

The "saved together" passages suggest that Berdyaev was actually a universalist, reflecting the influence of Origen and of Gregory of Nyssa: "Nothing but a universal resurrection of everything that lives and has lived can reconcile us to the world process. . .Everything which is not eternal is unendurable."[21] "It is possible to have an ethic of anti-hell. . .which believes in the enlightenment and transfiguration not only of those who are evil. . .but even of the devil himself." (Berdyaev 1953, p. 136). "The vengeful and cruel instincts of people have built up a vengeful and cruel eschatology. . .Hell. . .would be the failure of all creation and a schism within the Kingdom of God." (Berdyaev [1947] 1952, pp. 235, 237).

Most theologians who object to universalism find it hard to imagine universal salvation as long as free will is honored; it is hard to imagine *every* person freely choosing to follow God, although it is easy to imagine *many* people making that choice if they are given more time in the afterlife. Berdyaev does emphasize *free* cooperation between divine and human; deification will not be imposed upon anyone.

What is the real nature of this transformed world? Berdyaev describes it in terms of contrasts and principles. It will involve "triumph over the world of alienation, necessity, impersonality, and hostility." (Berdyaev [1949] 2009, p. 197). He writes "Christ revealed in Himself the God-Man; the Holy Spirit will reveal divine humanity. In divine humanity the deification of humanity and the deification of the world's flesh will take place. But the new, holy flesh will not be the same flesh as the old, pagan, corrupt flesh." (Berdyaev 2015a, p. 124). What does this mean? *How* does our flesh change? He does not say. One wonders whether it has anything to do with his personal revulsion for the messiness of physical sex, and his choice of celibacy in his relationship with his wife (Coates 2019, pp. 13, 127). Ruth Coates argues that Berdyaev carries forward some of the attitudes of Merezhkovsky and his circle. That group sought "to establish a new 'church' in opposition to the ROC. They themselves formed the nucleus of this church. . .This 'church of Flesh and Blood' anticipated a new Christianity of the 'Third Testament' in which flesh and spirit would be united rather than opposed (Coates 2019, p. 13). Coates says "the Merezhkovskys were apparently ignorant of the Church's foundational theology of the divinized flesh of Christ." (Coates 2019, p. 13). Berdyaev "shares with Merezhkovsky's circle an interest in the transformative potential of erotic celibacy. . .though. . .he claims to surpass them." (Coates 2019, p. 19).

However, Berdyaev claims that Merezhkovksy went astray; he was tempted by "the idea of mystical monarchy and the grandeur of Caesar"; Merezhkovsky's veneration of "Napoleon, a superman. . .shows that Nietzsche's influence is still present in him." (Berdyaev 2015b, p. 33). Berdyaev says that "I resented all their attempts to create a bogus, sectarian church [with] new sacraments." (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, p. 163). So what *does* Berdyaev look for?—a kind of highly cultured but platonic admiration between the sexes? Or rather a juxtaposition of sexual love and spiritual love? "The meaning of love is personal, not generative. . .Sex is a fall, it is a disruption which seeks to reestablish wholeness but does not succeed in doing so within personal existence." (Berdyaev [1947] 1952, pp. 244–45). So, does he imagine widespread celibacy, or is it rather an intensification of spiritual quality so that sexuality helps to exalt rather than to suppress the personal element? Will there be a kind of profound glorification and change in the physical body? It is not clear.

Berdyaev sometimes praises Orthodoxy. "Orthodoxy has preserved the eschatological view of the Kingdom of God better than Catholicism. . .the spirit of *sobornost* is better expressed in Orthodoxy than it is in Catholicism." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, pp. 354–55). He affirms that "Orthodoxy deep down is essentially the religion of the Holy Spirit; the idea of sacrifice and of 'buying back' so dear to Catholicism remains alien to it," (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 351) although he concedes that there are some Catholic authors with a more mystical viewpoint (Pilch 2018b, p. 199). The Kingdom of God is not a matter of

church unions or reorganization, but of spiritual quality. Real unity will not be ecclesial but spiritual: "It is only by remaining in one's confession, and by deepening and broadening it, that one can work towards universalism. . .Only the Holy Spirit can unite the Churches." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, pp. 355–56).

Berdyaev *does* explain that the church must be transformed; it must let go of its ancient dualism of flesh and spirit. "The Church must include all that is dear and valuable to us, all that we have gained through our suffering in the world—our love, our thought and poetry, all our creative works which the old consciousness has excluded from the Church." (Berdyaev 2015a, p. 125). Further, the church hierarchy must give up its "sanctimonious worldliness" and its use of coercion (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, p. 202).

Deification in both this world and the next, for Berdyaev, will involve all the beautiful and lovely things that people create or do. There will be no self-laceration or laceration of others. Presumably, there will be art, music, intellectual accomplishments, and a powerful atmosphere of love. In fact, "something will be changed in the life of sex. . .Love can transfigure the old sexual life. . .into creative channels. . .Both eros-love and agape-love will play such a part." (Berdyaev [1949] 2009, p. 201). But we are left hungering for some more specific information, if any is available. What is transfigured, sexual love? What is the new flesh? Is there a physical change or just a moral one? Will there be stages of growth? What will the afterlife be like? Will it be like a circle of religious intellectuals excitedly sharing their ideas? We are not told. He makes it clear that earth life will be characterized by love, kindness, and creative freedom, but how will love or marriage be changed?

Further, he makes it clear that "Man will never be replaced by the superman or by the spirit of other hierarchies, as the theosophists and occultists think. Man will inherit eternity in his humanness; he is called to life in God." (Berdyaev [1949] 2009, p. 126). It is true love, kindness, and spiritual receptivity that will characterize the people who live in the Kingdom of God.

4.5. Christology

His Christology is sometimes in the background, but it certainly underlies everything he believes. He writes that part of human ancestry is the Old Adam, but part is the Spiritual Adam, Christ. "Through the birth of the Son in eternity the whole spiritual race and the whole universe comprised in man, in fact the whole cosmos, responds to the appeal of divine love. . .Through the Son we return to the bosom of the Father." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 198).

We see a very strong Christology in the book that Coates describes as Nietzschean, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*: "Christ is God-Man. He redeems and restores *human* nature to its likeness to God. . .Christ becomes immanent in man and man takes upon himself the whole burden of measureless freedom." (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, pp. 104–5). "Freedom without Christ the Liberator is the freedom of the old Adam, freedom without love." (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, p. 141). The perceived autocracy of God is ended: "With Christ, God's autocracy ceases, for man as the son of God is called to immediate participation in divine life. . .Man is called to continue God's work of creation." (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, p. 127). Christ embodies the hope for human fulfillment: "Christ. . .becomes the precursor of a new spiritual humanity." (Stark 2011, p. 638).

5. Christian Hope in Soloviev and Berdyaev

Both Soloviev and Berdyaev expressed a profound Christian hope. Both philosophers put a big emphasis on the need for divine and human cooperation, even collaboration, leading to a "transfiguration of human nature." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 176). Both wrote of persons taking on the image and likeness of God. They put a strong emphasis

on communitarian spirituality, on the emergence of "a spiritual man," (See Soloviev 1938, p. 172; Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 176) and not on individual salvation. Soloviev writes, "We can lay hold on his righteousness not as individuals but only collectively, *with the whole universe*." (Soloviev 1938, p. 173). Both thinkers embraced the *sobornost* idea of deep love and fellowship, found within Russian Orthodoxy. Soloviev sees the Church as helping in the process of spiritual perfecting, while Berdyaev calls for a church that affirms poetry and love and everything that is "dear and valuable." (Berdyaev 2015a, p. 125). Both rejected any coerciveness by the Church.

Both emphasized that Christ is the author and originator of deification, and that through Christ we return to the Father. Through Christ, the human race is renewed. Soloviev wrote "It was not till the coming of the God-man Jesus Christ that man had a foothold on an absolute plane. . .the possibility of a free divine-human society." (Soloviev 1938, p. 187). For Berdyaev, Christ is the hope of a new humanity. "Through the Son we return to the bosom of the Father. With Him a new race of human beings begins. . .Christ is in man and man is in Christ. . .He is the Vine and we are the branches. The whole regenerated human race dwells in Christ the God-Man." (Berdyaev [1926] 1935, p. 198).

Regarding the future transformed world, we crave more details from both authors. With both Soloviev and Berdyaev, we are left with stirring statements, powerful contrasts, and mighty principles but with a very incomplete picture of how deification leads to "holy flesh" and "spiritualized matter." All that is clear is that there will be an end to religious bigotry and cruelty, and there will be heightened ethics, deep communion among persons, and a perfect love that knows no envy.

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Notes

1 (Berdyaev 1950). Most of my citations of Soloviev and Berdyaev will be from the English translations (and English titles) of their works.
2 The parts of *The Sophia* published are discussed by Kornblatt 2009 (pp. 110, 114–15).
3 A major thesis in Pilch 2018a.
4 Vladimir Soloviev, *SS* (Soloviev 1966–1970, vol. XII, p. 598); quoted in Pilch 2018a (p. 86).
5 Vladimir Soloviev, from *SS* (Soloviev 1966–1970, vol. XII, p. 599); translated in Pilch 2018a (p. 88).
6 (Soloviev 1995, Lectures 11 and 12, p. 164); Quoted in Pilch 2018a (p. 109) without referencing Origen.
7 Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium* 60, from Maximus the Confessor 2003 (p. 126).
8 (Soloviev 1938, p. 183). Berdyaev considered these optimistic notions to be "illusions of progress. . .a complete utopia, which he himself rejected in the last period of life" (Berdyaev 2015d, pp. 82–83).
9 (Pilch 2018a, p. 211 n.104) referring to Maximus's emphasis on mercy.
10 Origen, *On First Principles* 3.6.3; quoted in Roden 2024 (p. 291).
11 Origen, *On First Principles* 4:4:9–10; (Ramelli 2019, p. 56 n49). Italics given in Ramelli.
12 Origen, *Commentary on John* 1:32; 32:35; (Ramelli 2019, pp. 56–57).
13 Origen, *On First Principles* 2:3:7; (Ramelli 2019, p. 57).
14 (Waterfield 2001c, chp. XIII, p. 136). My research located this work and its chapter; Waterfield excerpts this source but does not identify it.
15 (Waterfield 2001d, chp. IV, p. 96). Waterfield does not identify this work.
16 (Waterfield 2001d, 7.27, p. 37) (https://jacobboehmeonline.com/, accessed on 2 April 2026); Whitfield, 114.
17 (Waterfield 2001d, 14.84, p. 104); https://jacobboehmeonline.com/, accessed on 2 April 2026.

[18] (Waterfield 2001d, 14.86, p. 105); https://jacobboehmeonline.com/, accessed on 2 April 2026.
[19] (Berdyaev [1916] 1962, p. 241); it is page 260 in Coates's edition.
[20] (Berdyaev [1937] 1939, p. 130); he does not cite the work of Boehme he is quoting.
[21] (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 267). Positive remarks about Origen and Gregory: (Berdyaev [1949] 1962, pp. 165, 291).

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