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"The Kingdom of God Is Anarchy." Apophasis, Political Eschatology, and Mysticism in Russian Religious Thought

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Abstract

This essay examines the reception of Western mystical theology in early twentieth-century Russian religious thought, showing how leading Russian thinkers—such as Ivanov, Frank, Bulgakov, and Berdyaev—reinterpreted Meister Eckhart's central categories (*Gottheit*, *Abgeschiedenheit*), often in significant conjunction with Nietzschean and Tolstoyan doctrines. It reconstructs a distinctive philosophical current—"mystical anarchism"—emerging at the intersection of apophatic theology, political eschatology, and the critique of violence. Through a detailed analysis of primary texts, the essay argues that Russian philosophers radicalized the doctrine of detachment into a political ontology of freedom, aimed at challenging both metaphysical authority and social coercion. While drawing extensively on negative theological traditions, their most original contributions appear not in strictly speculative or metaphysical terms, but rather in the ethical and political domain. Particular attention is given to Berdyaev's notion of an "apophatic sociology," which articulates freedom as the negation of all power of man over man and as the condition of a communal life no longer bound by abstract categories of morality and knowledge. The article concludes that Russian religious thought offers an original contribution to understanding mysticism as a resource for ethical and critical philosophy.

Keywords: anarchism; apophatic theology; eschatology; Meister Eckhart; mysticism; mystical anarchism; Nikolai Berdyaev; political theology; Russian religious philosophy

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1. Introduction: Russian Political Mysticism

In 1912, the Moscow-based publishing house Musaget issued the first Russian edition of Meister Eckhart's German sermons, translated by Margarita Sabashnikova—an anthroposophist influenced by Rudolph Steiner and closely connected to Ivanov's Symbolist literary circle.[1] Jakob Böhme's *Aurora* followed two years later. This historiographical detail offers a sense of the deep resonance that the German Eckhart–Renaissance (culminating in parallel 1903 editions by Büttner and Landauer) had within the intellectual milieu of Russian religious philosophy, a context especially receptive to questions of speculative mysticism.[2]

Meister Eckhart's apophatic apparatus—previously circulating only in fragmentary form[3]—had a decisive influence on the intellectual formation of Russian philosophers, especially in shaping their ethical and socio-political conceptions. Indeed, many of these thinkers, including Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and Frank, came from intense revolutionary experiences. The reception of Eckhart among Moscow and St. Petersburg intellectual circles was thus contextualized by a moment of critical reflection on the relationship between religion and power, utopian apocalypticism and social liberation, redefining the concep-

tions of the messianic kingdom of freedom and the "theandric" fulfilment of history (see Scherrer 1977).

The originality of these interpretations—developed independently from the anarchist reception of Eckhart in the West[4]—lies not so much on the metaphysical–speculative plane, but rather on the ethical–political one. What emerges is a constellation of doctrines that, while drawing from Russian Populist (*Narodniki*) and Slavophile traditions, nonetheless delineates a sharp break with the previous generation of religious dissidents.[5]

2. Mystical Anarchism

A paradigmatic case is that of Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), who, during the 1905 revolts, advocated a unique form of "mystical anarchism."[6] Ivanov's political writings—mostly literary essays and short articles—reformulate the Populist antinomy between the individual and society in terms of a dynamic unity of the "personal" (*lichnoi*) and the "communal" (*sobornoi*): not as two opposed metaphysical principles, but as the poles of a tragic tension that runs through the entire history of culture.

On one hand, Ivanov embraces the moral content of libertarian individualism, rejecting all forms of state and authority; on the other, he identifies its limits in the absence of a religious perception of collective life, which must dissolve the "empirical Self"—the isolated modern individual—into the "mystical Self" consubstantial with its community.

Ivanov's ethics is essentially a philosophy of erotism, reclaiming the primacy of the sensual in the sphere of action; his metaphysics, a religious syncretism that freely juxtaposes Russian theandric ideas with Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, Orphic cults with Christian gnosis. He professes an "orgiastic liberation of the self" and calls for a "prophetic–liberatory mania," which he sees as linking Nietzsche to the great Western mystics. From Eckhart's anthropology Ivanov borrows the idea of a divine genesis within the soul, equating the revelation of a superhuman freedom of the self—the "Dionysian possession" of Zarathustra—with "the mystical moment, in Meister Eckhart's teachings, of the birth of Christ in me." (Ivanov [1907] 1979, p. 265). The result is an eclectic metaphysics focused on the liberation of creative and imaginative forces, true "powers of the divine–humanity that sleeps within us." (p. 265)

What Ivanov celebrates as mystical renewal is, above all, the transformation of ethics into aesthetics: "the new knowledge of God abolishes human sacrifices to the old idols of an externally imposed duty, lifting the yoke of discouragement and despair that weighed upon hearts, and liberating humanity from the bowels of the earth." (Ivanov [1904] 1971, p. 716). Even more decisively:

> "As Nietzsche understood, in order to enlighten the face of the earth (for he desired nothing less), our hearts had to change: a profound transformation had to occur within us—a restructuring of the entire mental architecture, a complete reconfiguration of the resonances of our feelings. It is a rebirth akin to the original state conveyed by the word 'metanoia', which is the condition for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Thus Nietzsche proclaimed two propositions—*mystical* in essence, *antireligious* in application: in the realm of knowledge, the abolition of truth and "objectivity," that is, their reabsorption into the "subjective"; and in the realm of morality, life beyond good and evil—which, in religious terms, coincides with the principle of mystical freedom, as also expressed by religious ethics in the shift of the moral criterion from the empirical world to the realm of intelligible will... hence the dissolution of all everyday moral judgments and norms." (Ivanov [1904] 1971, p. 721).[7]

The liberation of the subject—central to Ivanov's perspective—is conceived as a total transformation of life, encompassing not only the moral but also the socio-political

plane: "mysticism, as the sphere of supreme inner freedom, is already anarchy." (Ivanov [1906] 1979, p. 87). On closer inspection, Ivanov explains, "the perplexities raised by this unusual combination can be reduced to its oxymoronic nature—as if mysticism and anarchism were mutually exclusive concepts. In fact, rather than their incompatibility, one might more rightly suspect the hidden tautology within." (p. 265)

Mysticism and anarchism do not correspond to abstractly opposed spheres of ordinary political discourse—such as public and private, individual and social—but rather to two directions of a single "suprapersonal" impulse. Mystical experience of a shared intimacy to the divine—in contrast to the exterior relationship of authority and submission—should mark, in fact, the liberation of social relations and the dissolution of contractual and mechanical forms of *societas*, revealing in their place an inner community (*sobornost*) founded upon the mutual immanence of *I* and *we*.

Ivanov's use of the word *sobornost* is rather technical. In Slavophile tradition, this notion (coming from the Russian term *sobor*: "gathering, council"), broadly speaking, designates a community founded on religious principles. In Russian Populism, the concept merges with that of *obschina* (also known as *mir*), which designates the social ideal of agricultural communes. Finally, among religious thinkers of the revolutionary era, the term *sobornost* takes on various political and metaphysical meanings, predominantly indicating an idea of a collective body united and transformed by a mystical bond of consubstantiality (see Rosenthal 1993).

In Ivanov's view, the concept of *sobornost* leads to a decisive renewal of the idea of community, where sentimental and aesthetic elements—overlapping the paradigm of rural communities (*mir*) with Russian popular liturgical "chorality"—should contribute to the formation of a new morality. This transfigured sociality finds expression both in the Dionysian form of a "choral dithyramb" and in the messianic form of a "community of the flesh": "a synthesis of both principles—personal and conciliar [*lichnoe i sobornoe*]—in an anarchic community [*v obschine anarkhicheskoi*]." (Ivanov [1906] 1987, p. 284).

Despite his lyrical style, Ivanov lucidly interrogates the social function of mysticism, locating in it a specific ethical and epistemological stance—parallel to anarchism's relation to the social institutions it seeks to dismantle: religious institutions on one hand, political ones on the other.

> "To both—since both impose external norms and set boundaries on freedom—mystical anarchism answers by rejecting those norms. In both cases, it asserts purely negative signs. But even more tenaciously, it affirms the dynamic self–determination of religious and social principles: religion as living and inner experience, as prophecy and revelation; society as emergent conciliarity [*sobornost*]. Indeed, if mystical anarchism can be said to constitute a doctrine at all, it would belong to that field of inquiry known as "Odegetics", which is subordinated to philosophical reflection on the modes (not the goals) of freedom. After all, it would lose its essence if it predetermined the positive content of the inner experience it postulates, or sought to clothe the creative life of principles within static forms, which instead affirms as flowing energies of an infinitely free soul. [...] Mystical anarchism is not properly a moral doctrine, for it does not predetermine actions in any way; yet it nonetheless expresses a certain moral content insofar as it acknowledges only the imperative of a free and integral self–affirmation. This self–affirmation is already a rejection of the world—the first step in a new liberated life—understood as a given and present world. As such, mystical anarchism does not dictate how one should live or act socially, but regards the ultimate goal of every action as the final liberation of social relations."
>
> (Ivanov [1906] 1979, pp. 88–89).

Anarchic critique and mystical negation of the world are but two sides of the same coin, together constituting a moment of the liberatory process aimed at founding—or rather discovering—a new form of community. The coming community, as Ivanov envisions it, must wipe the slate clean of all metaphysics of state and government, admitting only a radical "religious adogmatism and socio–legal amorphism." Apophatic language is thus a strategy to overturn political theology and "dissolve every external bond" (p. 89)—moral, social, and legal.[8]

For Ivanov, mystical anarchists may be *politiki*, but only in a sense diametrically opposed to the conventional one: participation in public life is oriented exclusively toward the destruction of the state; civil life, toward the abolition of the socioeconomic order—and of any external order that structurally reiterates sacrificial violence. A "fire of absolute consumption"—the bonfires of Zarathustra's valleys—shall incinerate the bonds of subjugation that enchain human beings. The ancient regime of external constraint and abstract representation must be annihilated in the decisive event of a "great uprising and mutiny." The only possible standpoint in this "politic", ultimately, is apocalypticism: "outside the Apocalypse," Georgyi Chulkov wrote to Ivanov in a letter, "there cannot be a religious relation to the world. . . The entire edifice of history must be burned with spiritual fire." (Chulkov 1905, p. 201).

3. Detachment and Liberation

3.1. Frank's Critique of Power

A second compelling case is that of Semyon Lyudvigovich Frank[9] (1877–1950), who returns in several of his writings to Eckhart's conception of *Abgeschiedenheit*, "the highest detachment, which is God himself" (Eckhart 2009, p. 575)—a condition that constitutes both the most intimate proximity to the divine and the common essence of self and world. Frank interprets detachment as the noetic equivalent of Nietzschean pathos of distance: both doctrines, in his view, express a singular attitude of the subject, a unified gesture of withdrawal and sublimation of representation. This gesture must culminate in a "second–order affirmation," a "universal Yes. . . to the absolute self–evidence of life." (Frank 1939, p. 103). Western negative theology is decisive for Frank, who often returns to the key concepts of Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa. In his view, by overcoming oppositions through a double negation, negative noetic (*docta ignorantia*) entails a practice of liberation from enchaining knowledge. This practice aims to radically change our relation to the world such that "our reality is no longer given *to us*: it is given only to itself, and to us only insofar as we are this reality. It is not the object of contemplation, scrutiny, or meditation; it expresses itself in the absolutely original unity of I am—is." (p. 103).

Although Frank primarily limits himself to the epistemological status of apophatic knowledge, his contemporary reflections on power, moralism, and violence should also be read in light of his rejection of any objectified metaphysical principle. For Frank, as for Ivanov, anarchism is not merely a consequence of apophasis: it is one of its necessary and internal features. The free being cannot consent to the idealization of power, or to the political and moral norms of any prescriptive doctrine. This, for Frank, is the same fundamental misunderstanding committed indiscriminately by both reactionaries and revolutionaries, totalitarian regimes and democracies: "the same disregard for the spiritual foundations of social life, the same love for mechanical measures of external violence and draconian punishment, the same mixture of hatred for living individuals with the romantic idealization of abstract political forms and parties." (Frank [1918] 1967, p. 200).

In his critique of society, Frank substantially reinterprets Vladimir Solovyov's earlier reflections on *sobornost*, conceived as the spiritual condition for the creation of a paradoxical "free theocracy"[10]—a realm in which everything is divine, and in which collective norms

can only be realized through personal freedom. For Frank, the decisive moral task is to think a dimension of "togetherness" that alone grants access to truth. *Sobornost* thus appears as a "supra-individual communion among individuals," a "primary quality and a constitutive feature of every consciousness," a "heterogeneous unity," and even a "transcendental concord between the heart and being" (N. Lossky 1952, pp. 278–79). This ontological principle precedes and grounds every individual entity, displacing the external paradigm of society in favor of a radically interior collective dimension. In *sobornost*, personal intimacy becomes a space of indistinction from the Creator, where communication reaches its extreme limit and the Absolute Monarch pours himself entirely into the believer. At the same time, communal life reveals a space of circulation of truth, in which each single being becomes such only insofar as it passes over into other ones. In other words, according to Frank, free personality unfolds only on the condition of a higher spiritual unity. Individual solitude and religious communion thus collapse into one another. What is truly *communal* in this renewed social life is the immediacy of each person's religious experience, therefore the necessary recognition of the same divine presence in all, as the sole source of truth and freedom.

3.2. Bulgakov's "Divine Nothing"

This position is widely shared by Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871–1944) and reaffirmed in his major work *Svet nevechernii* (The Unfading Light, 1916). The long chapter "The Divine Nothing," devoted to the history of negative theology, includes extensive discussion of the German mystics, toward whom Bulgakov adopts a characteristically ambivalent stance. He embraces the demand—clearly formulated by Eckhart and his successors—for a renewal of morality through the stripping away of any representational object of knowledge ("neither this nor that"), and thus for the religious necessity of positioning oneself at the very point of emergence of being (*Ursprung*). Bulgakov describes this primal state as a "dialectical nothing," "a dialectical moment in Divinity," and "the self–revelation of God, the revelation of the self for the sake of the very self." (Bulgakov [1916] 2012, p. 172).

Here, the relation between God and world—if one can still speak of relation at all—is no longer one of command or authorship, but of necessary expression, both logical and ontological. In the primordial deity, detached from any reference to alterity, there are neither intentions nor operations: "[In God] there are no decisions; he wants and does in himself only one thing, namely he gives birth to himself in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the wisdom of his revelation; apart from this the one groundless God does not want in himself anything. [. . .] For here there is no command, only birth." (p. 174) This view abolishes any subordination between God and world: "He [Böhme] calls 'delirium about creation' (*creatürlicher Wahn*) the idea that God is something foreign," (p. 173) and that he might have eternally withheld the birth of the world and thus exercised some form of control over it, as if other options existed in God besides God himself. Once again, divine non-authority carries metaphysical anarchism.

However, the question of concrete freedom—the central ethical issue of Russian religious thought—becomes excessively ambiguous, Bulgakov warns, when conceived impersonally as one of the powers of nature, thereby sliding toward a kind of flat monism. By this view, liberation and renewal are reduced to an alchemical dissolution in the negative space of the principle (a mirror image of Eckhart's familiar "fermentations") and a return to "Freedom as Nothingness" (p. 177). Everything thus depends on the semantic weight attributed to that Nothing, which Bulgakov interprets in a rigorously kenotic sense:

> "The freedom of the creature rests on nothing as its basis: having called nothing into being, divine power limited itself, yielded place to the freedom of the creature. Divine self–exhaustion to the benefit of creaturely nothing forms the positive

> foundation of creaturely power and freedom. Divine omnipotence and eminent dominion outline a circle of their intentional inaction as the realm of creaturely freedom." (p. 209).

Taken to its ultimate consequences, this conception of freedom ends up resembling nihilism on both its ethical and cosmological levels: "The practical aspiration of the religion of *Abgeschiedenheit* is Buddhist nirvana, not only acosmism but also anti–cosmism: to break free from the world arising through the bifurcation of nature and God, into the original divine nothing." This view, Bulgakov argues, "makes no room for the idea of history, of the world process, of the world's perfection: the ideal of the restoration of the original state, apocatastasis, is here the naked denial of the world." (p. 169).[11]

Following the tradition of *sobornost*, like Frank and Ivanov, Bulgakov introduces a distinctly theological inflection to the question of freedom, which he conceives simultaneously as an ontological, epistemological, and ethical problem. In his view, the liberation of the human being demands an antinomic dialectic that unfolds through kenotic self-renunciation and the rediscovery of the self in otherness—a process that mirrors the intra-Trinitarian life. The single subject is thus neither an illusorily autonomous and absolutely sovereign ego nor a servile being subordinated to an external power; it recognizes itself as free only within this dialectical process. From this arises the dynamic character of the distribution of truth: in order neither to dissipate outward into an abstract multiplicity nor to withdraw into the suffocating confines of identity, a double and simultaneous movement of ecstasy and return is required. Freedom, in Bulgakov's conception, is therefore at once theocratic and communal, yet oriented toward a transcendent norm whose ultimate function is to dissolve all the laws of finitude.

4. Radical Freedom: Berdyaev's Political Theology

Among the key figures of twentieth-century Russian political theology, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdyaev (1874–1948) deserves particular attention. More than any of his contemporaries, he grasped the radical insight of German mysticism in revealing the fundamentally political stakes involved in the end of divine objectification and the uncompromising rejection of God as concept or institution.[12]

Already in a significant 1907 essay on the Russian "new religious consciousness" (*novoe religioznoe soznanie*), Berdyaev outlines the main features of his social eschatology. The text, which aims to examine "from a philosophical–religious point of view the problems of the state, socialism, anarchism, gender, and religiosity," through "an experiment in religious formulation of social problems", draws upon Ivanov's example to link Russian theandric conception to that of Eckhart, transforming it into the subject of a revolutionary prophecy:

> "The time has come for humanity to turn toward Divine–Humanity [*Bogochelovechestvo*], to overcome the apparent chasm between God the Father and the Son... The greatest of the mystics, Meister Eckhart, taught of the primordial Divinity (*Gottheit*), which is more original than God (*Gott*), deeper than all the hypostases of the Holy Trinity. Here we witness an epiphany that breaks through the boundaries of the religious dialectic of world history... Divine–Humanity is, above all, the overcoming of the dualism between the divine and the human, the spiritualization of the flesh in humanity and the incarnation of spirit: a synthetic moment in the mystical dialectic of existence. [...] And we, men of a new religious era now beginning, must proceed from mystical freedom, from the liberation of reason as revealed in German religious philosophy—not from external authority, not from blind and irrational obedience—in order to move toward the mystical revolution." (Berdyaev 1907, p. 5).

Berdyaev first considers Eckhart's historical role, which he regards as a crucial moment in the history of religious thought, praising its "immense liberating significance" within the broader horizon of a "rebirth of interior religious life." The mystical element of this rebirth is not to be traced to a specific notion of God, but rather in a more urgent amendment of the intellect with respect to the externalized divine—transformed, that is, into *obyektivacija* ("objectivization") by historical, ecclesiastical, and political institutions, against which the great movements of spiritual dissent have always rebelled: "The mystical current was still strong among the first reformers; the great German mystics were all more or less Protestant: Meister Eckhart was a forerunner of the Reformation, Jacob Böhme was Protestant; all of them renewed religious freedom." (p. 198).

The "mystical" sphere thus signifies, rather than a theological concept, an ethical and critical category: a specific mode of existence defined by the attitude of detachment and the negation of any fraudulent claim of objectivity, and a "free communication with the Divine, the immediate inner revelation of the Divine within us." Berdyaev calls this relation "gnosis": a knowledge that transcends all formal constructions and eludes the traditional model of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*.[13]

This liberatory awareness expresses itself practically in the impulse toward emancipation from both social and metaphysical servitude: the definitive destitution of the master–slave dialectic—indeed, the central theme of Berdyaev's entire philosophical work. In this view, the long-anticipated "mystical revolution" or "invisible revolution," on which it is worth lingering a while longer, essentially consists of "the end of the religious–metaphysical dualism": a veritable collective deification, and a liberation from every form of oppression and coercion.

Notably, Berdyaev compares Ivanov's mystical anarchism to the ideas of Stirner and Tolstoy, contrasting them with Bakunin's nihilism. He clearly distinguishes between "anarchism" as a critical pathos of revolt and "anarchy" as a social and political order properly speaking: anarchism is in fact the broader aspiration for "liberation from empirical slavery, a rebellion against violent power in this world that is externally enslaved and internally torn," so that "to achieve anarchism one must overcome anarchy." (p. 26). However, Berdyaev expresses his skepticism about Ivanov's formulation:

> "Mystical anarchism does not overcome the crisis of individualism, but consolidates it definitively. The anarchic tendency in mysticism transforms the private truth about mystical freedom into the complete truth. Thus mystical freedom turns from truth into falsehood. I am willing to call myself both a mystic and an anarchist, denoting by this, however, purely formal and partial aspects of my worldview and attitude, but least of all could I express my belief with the expression "mystical anarchism," for this would be an empty formula without meaning. . . "Mystical anarchism" is, so to speak, a minimal program, and the attempt to pass it off as the maximum, as something very radical, is a gross confusion of the formal and the material." (p. 27).

Failing to solve the problem it sets out to—that of overcoming individualism, perceived as a spiritual crisis—mystical anarchism remains irremediably inadequate on the path to authentic religious fulfilment. What is needed, Berdyaev argues, is a far more radical ethic and a much broader idea of freedom. For a truly profound transformation of all forms of human coexistence, the entire range of moral values must be changed. He thus links the notion of detachment to that of non-opposition to evil—developed extensively by Tolstoy on the basis of St. Paul's warning to overcome evil with good (*Rom.* 12: 21)[14]—in order to criticize all modern instrumentalism and its fallacious distinction between ends and means. Tolstoy's idea of "nonresistance," in Berdyaev's philosophy, is not merely a negative precept or a form of passivity. Rather, it is a highly particular form of *action*: to escape the

logic of moral vengeance and the patterns of violent struggle internalized in social life, according to Berdyaev, we must rethink a more virtuous mode of acting—one detached from both instrumental logic and the worldly interplay of forces. He writes, in a passage that closely recalls Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*:

> "True radicalism and true revolutionism lie in the greatest possible identification of means and ends. The path of struggle must resemble the goal of the struggle, the method of struggle must have the same spirit as the goal: this is radicalism, this is the fundamental attitude toward things. If the goal is freedom, then the means must be freedom; if the goal is love, then the means must be love." (Berdyaev 1907, p. 139).

A precise model of religious anarchism arises from this perspective: "theocracy," the Kingdom of God, can only be imagined as the end of all worldly power, a final break of the infinite chain of oppression—an idea previously suggested by (Buber [1932] 1967) and later developed by Gershom Scholem's notion of "revolutionary mysticism," conceived precisely as "the way in which the mystical experience of man's contact with the primal source of life could find its expression in a symbol implying the negation of all authority." (Scholem 1965, p. 28). Similarly enough, for Berdyaev:

> "Anarchism touches upon a problem of the metaphysical and religious order. The religious truth of anarchism consists in this, that power over man is bound up with sin and evil, that a state of perfection is a state where there is no power of man over man, that is to say, anarchy. The Kingdom of God is freedom and the absence of such power, no categories of the exercise of such power are to be transferred to it. The Kingdom of God is anarchy. This is a truth of apophatic theology, the religious truth of anarchism is a truth of apophatics." (Berdyaev [1939] 1943, pp. 147–48).

5. "Apophatic Sociology"

In his post–revolutionary writings, Berdyaev abandons the elements of national messianism that characterized his earlier work. His goal is building a philosophy of freedom upon the foundational concepts of mystical theology. As Nikolaj Lossky aptly notes, Berdyaev's ethics does not proceed deductively from metaphysical premises; rather, it seeks to ground the relation between God and the world in his doctrine of freedom (N. Lossky 1952, p. 235). This way, according to Taubes, Berdyaev's philosophy "marks a significant point of intersection between East and West." (Taubes [1944] 2009, p. 5; see also Lévyne 1977).

For Berdyaev, freedom (*svoboda*) is more primordial than the very world, more primordial even than God or being itself: it is the very same detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) Eckhart speaks of, an "uncaused and primordial freedom, irreducible to anything." (Taubes [1944] 2009, p. 5). This is not to be confused with a psychological or voluntaristic conception of freedom as a causal act of an agent, nor with the traditional doctrine of free will, still bound to a juridical conception of the subject and a logic of reward and punishment. It is, rather, an original freedom, prior to the formation of any world of objects or facts, and therefore definable only apophatically, as *Ungrund*.

According to Berdyaev, the abyssal figure of the uncreated groundlessness carries two decisive philosophical consequences: first, it puts an end to the idealist primacy of ontology by appealing to a negative non-substantial principle—one whose negativity, however, must be understood only in relation to the old language of Western ontology; second, by the same gesture, it severs all relation to an origin and with it the duality of God and world upon which the structures of dominion and servitude have been erected.

From negative noetic, Berdyaev derives a radical rejection of both anthropomorphism and "servile sociomorphism," which underlie worldly dynamics of subjugation and domination. As Berdyaev writes:

> "There is an immense distinction to be drawn between God and the human idea of God, between God in His Essence and God as Object. . . An objectivized God has been the object of man's servile reverence but here there is a paradox in the fact that the objectivized God is a God alienated from man and lord over him." (Berdyaev [1939] 1943, p. 82).[15]

Eckhart's *Gottheit*, Berdyaev insists, radically differs from the abstract foundations of Western traditional theology, which are themselves "ghostly" entities—like Max Stirner's "fixed ideas" or Alexander Herzen's "fetishes" (p. 147; cf. Stirner 1845; Berlin 1978)—and from which derive both monarchic conceptions of the divine and the moral constraints that typically rely on a sacrificial practice: a "tyranny of the abstract universal" over the concrete individual. He writes:

> "Religious slavery, slavery to God and slavery to the Church, that is to a servile idea of God, has been a most burdensome form of slavery for man. It has been slavery to an object, to the common, to externality and to alienation. It is for this reason that the mystics have taught that man should detach even from God." (Berdyaev [1939] 1943, p. 92).

By positing God and world as mutually exclusive objects—"alienated" and "reified"—freedom for the subject appears only as resistance against the external world, as the antithesis to a necessary and inescapable force. But a freedom defined in opposition to necessity is not yet freedom as such: it is merely the negative term of a dialectic of power, in which the contradiction includes its own negation. Rebellion against objectivization thus remains entrapped within the regime of objectivization itself, where it can never be victorious.

At this point, Berdyaev reveals the distinctly Nietzschean background of his argument:

> "Master and slave are correlatives. Neither of them can exist without the other. The free man, however, exists in himself, he has his own quality within him, without correlation to anything placed in antithesis to him. . . Consciousness which exteriorizes and alienates is always a slavish consciousness. God the master, man the slave, the church the master, man the slave, the state the master, man the slave, society the master, man the slave, Nature the master, man the slave, object the master, man–subject the slave. The source of slavery is always objectivization, that is to say exteriorization, alienation. It is slavery in everything: in the acquisition of knowledge, in morals, in religion, in art, in political and social life. Putting an end to slavery is putting an end to objectivization, and putting an end to slavery does not mean that new mastership will make its appearance, for mastership is the reverse side of slavery. Man must become not a master but free. Plato truly said that the tyrant is himself a slave. The enslaving of another is also the enslaving of oneself." (pp. 60–61).

Berdyaev's problem is thus to rethink an absolute freedom without opposition and without objectivization, or more precisely, to find the original identity of subject and freedom. He does so by returning once again to the doctrines of the divine ground of Eckhart, Silesius, and Böhme: the absence of any primordial external relation and the correlative abolition of the consciousness of principle, coherently expressed in the idea of a non-foundation (*Ungrund*), that is, of an "an–archic" freedom (see Berdiaeff 1945; see also de Gandillac 1979).

For Berdyaev, in fact, only a return to the original nothingness preserves the self from falling back into extrinsic relations—that is, into the relational structure between dominating and dominated entities that defines all forms of relation, whether cognitive or social: "the very structure of consciousness." The production of an illusory dependence leads to the servility of the self, which unhappily seeks outside itself—in history, in impersonal reason, in the sovereign society, or more simply in natural determinism—the norms by which to regulate its action.

In line with Ivanov's theses on anarchic community, Berdyaev contrasts his absolute personalism with modern individualism, which drains the subject of all vital content and reifies it once more as a legal–metaphysical principle. Liberated subjectivity, by contrast, "presupposes an opening out inwardly, not in the external, and an inward fulfilling by the concrete universal content. But this concretely universal content of personality (*lichnost*) never means that it deposits its conscience and its consciousness with society, with the state, with the nation, or a class, or a party, or with the church as a social institution." (Berdyaev [1939] 1943, p. 68).

A free community, in other words, has nothing to do with *society*, those formal bonds and the ghost of a purely conceptual collective entity. The convivial principle of togetherness—the Russian conception of *sobornost*—must finally be freed from the false antinomies: on one hand, it coincides intimately with the personal sphere; on the other, it cannot be dialectically opposed to social categories:

> "There is only one acceptable, non–servile meaning of the word sobornost, and that is the interpretation of it as the interior concrete universalism of personality, and not the alienation of conscience in any kind of exterior collective body whatever. [. . .] This presupposes a change of direction in the conflict against the slavery of man, that is to say it presupposes the personalistic transvaluation of values. . . The change of direction in the fight for freedom, for the manifestation of the free being, is above all a change in the structure of consciousness, a change in the scale of values. It is a profound interior revolution which is brought about in existential, not in historical, time. This change in the structure of consciousness is also a change in the interpretation of the relation between immanence and transcendence." (pp. 68–70).[16].

From a theological–political perspective, argues Berdyaev, transcendence has traditionally been conceptualized in two diametrically opposed ways: the first is "the degradation and servile abasement" of the slave–man before the master–God or his secular surrogates (Humanity, the State, Nature, Progress), which reproduce in the world the very same relation of lordship and subordination; and the other establishes a divine freedom from the world, a pure subjectivity unbound by cosmic, logical, or physical necessity—free from any given objectivity. This latter conception is, for Berdyaev, the only truly desirable form of freedom. "Virtuous" transcendence, then, must belong to the concretely free being detached from the ghosts of objectivization, which finds the reason for its existence without submitting to abstract hypostatized values. In this sense, negative noetic, through its impulse to liberate from the known, fully discloses its ethical potential:

> "In order to prepare the structure of consciousness which overcomes slavery and domination it is necessary to construct an apophatic sociology on the analogy of apophatic theology. Cataphatic sociology is to be found in the categories of slavery and domination. It has no issue in freedom. The usual sociological concepts are not applicable to thinking about society which is free from the categories of domination and slavery. Such thinking presupposes renunciation and a negative attitude in relation to everything upon which society in the kingdom of Caesar rests, that is to say in the objectivized world where man also becomes an object.

> A community of free people, a society of personalities, is not either a monarchy or a theocracy or an aristocracy or a democracy, nor is it authoritarian society nor a liberal society, nor a bourgeois society nor a socialist society, it is not fascism nor communism, nor even anarchism (as far as objectivization still exists in anarchism). This is pure apophatics as the knowledge of God is pure apophatics, free from concepts, free from all knowledge. For all this means that changes in the structure of consciousness in which objectivization disappears, in which there is no antithesis between subject and object, no master, no slave. It is subjectivity filled with a universal content, it is the realm of pure existentiality." (p. 71).

The "existential" realm of freedom, Berdyaev clarifies, is not a "beyond" in relation to some defined immanence—that is, to a status quo—which still falls within the narrow confines of the object. Objectivized transcendence is simply "an absolutely false understanding of eschatology." In the non-objective lived experience, existential time is nothing other than a temporality joyfully withdrawn from the dominion of abstract knowledge: a purely eschatological gnosis. "The end of the world, in philosophical language," he concludes "denotes the end of objectivization." (p. 75).

What in classical negative theology resulted in an attitude of surrender before an unreachable principle, or what in Western eschatology has underwritten all waiting and postponement, must finally become, for Berdyaev, an act of divine self–liberation from the object. If God himself "does nothing but stands utterly naked and free" (Silesius 1952) then in that very nakedness and detachment lies the true life of the soul, the joyful liberation of the subject.

Berdyaev reaffirms that the only possible freedom is divine freedom—absolutely creative because it is perfectly detached from the work. The mutual determination of God and world, master and slave—such that if one ceased, so would the other—makes them reciprocal terms of a formal relation, and in this distinction lies the key to their original inseparability. Conversely, the dissolution of relation implies *ipso facto* the dissolution of their respective determinations as formally separate entities.

Such a *solutio* is simultaneously an annulment of any operation directed toward a work—that is, toward an object external to the subject—as Eckhart himself claims: "God acts, the Godhead does not act. There is nothing for it to do, there is no activity in it. It has never sought to do anything. God and Godhead are distinguished by working and not–working" (Eckhart 2009, p. 294).

Untouched by any exteriority, unrelated to action or operation, the divine bottomlessness opens a liberated space prior to all thingness, which can only be named *Nichts* (*Nichevo*), the very term upon which Berdyaev grounds his theory of freedom, basing his cause on nothing.

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Notes

[1] See Eckhart (1912). During his exile in Paris, Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir N. Lossky (1903–1958) dedicated to Meister Eckhart his magnum opus, under the supervision of Étienne Gilson and Maurice de Gandillac (V. Lossky 1960).

[2] For an overview of the intellectual context, see Zernov (1963); see also Kornblatt and Gustafson (1996).

[3] Eckhart's corpus circulated mostly in the original Middle High German, and to a far lesser extent in Latin via the scholastic treatises studied by nineteenth–century scholars such as Lasson and Preger (see Grushke 1904). Also decisive for this reception was Lev Karsavin's work on spiritual movements of the Middle Age (Karsavin 1915).

[4] A particularly close affinity can be found, for instance, in the thought of Gustav Landauer, the German–Jewish anarchist who conceived mysticism—and particularly Meister Eckhart's teachings—as the ground of a lived, communal ethics (see Hinz 2000; see also Pisano 2018).

[5] See the two volumes by Venturi (1952) on Russian Populism.

[6] On the philosophical debate over mystical anarchism, see West (1970, pp. 132–45), see also Rosenthal (1977), and Nalimov (2001). For an intellectual biography of Ivanov, see Bird (2007).

[7] On the Russian reception of Nietzsche, widely welcomed as a "joyous liberator from the morality of servile resentment," see Clowes (1988).

[8] The urgency of rethinking the social problem through the prism of religion brings Ivanov closer to the positions of German–Jewish authors such as Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, the latter of whom Ivanov had a long correspondence with (see Ivanov 1995; see also Berdyaev 1933). In a letter from Avril 1932, Buber wrote to Ivanov: "I read your book on Dostoyevsky, for which I thank you very much, with a feeling of great spiritual closeness, as something that directly concerns me. This struck me as particularly remarkable at one point. I am referring to the note on pages 42 ff., where you quote your book on Dionysus—which, unfortunately, is not available to me. The view expressed therein coincides in an astonishing way, almost word for word, with a presentation I gave last year, without knowing your interpretation, in a lecture at the University of Frankfurt, in which I very decisively reject the usual etiological explanation of myth. You will also find some related material in the first volume of my book on the origins of Israeli Messianism, which you will receive this month, on pages 119 ff. I am very sorry that we were not able to see each other again. Hopefully, we will be able to do so again soon. I have often thought deeply about my visit. Please let me know how you are. With kind regards, also from my wife, yours sincerely, Martin Buber." (Ivanov 1995, pp. 40–41). In June 1934, Ivanov wrote to Buber: "Since the spirit of your magnificent investigation (*Königtum Gottes*) is so close to me, and since I am ignorant of the subject in question but philologically educated, I may well express my feeling that such an investigation must have a healing, cathartic effect on current research." (p. 45). The original manuscripts of this correspondence (1926–1934) are preserved in the Martin Buber Archives at the National Library in Jerusalem.

[9] On the close relations between Frank, Ivanov, Bulgakov and Berdyaev—witnessed, for example, by their joint participation in the St. Petersburg Philosophical-Religious Society created by Dmitry Merezhkovsky, in Ivanov's literary salon, as well as in various collective volumes, such as *Vekhi*—see Scherrer (1973). Many of them, moreover, were members of the "Brotherhood of Saint Sophia" (*Bratstvo Svyatoy Sophiy*) whose activities, continued during the years of exile, involved the application of religious ideals in the social field (see Struve 2000).

[10] Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) was the first and most influential systematic religious philosopher in Russia. He held that the historical emergence of a "truth of socialism" (*pravda socializma*) should finally lead to the creation of an authentic religious politic: a yet unrealized form of community, without authority or government, grounded in the metaphysical values of Orthodox philosophy. Conceiving history as a divine–human synergy (*bogochelovecheskii prozess*), Solovyov envisioned the end of every human order in the eschatological advent of the free theocracy—the social and ethical manifestation of all-unity (*vseedinstvo*). (see Solovyov 1995; see also N. Lossky 1952, pp. 81–133).

[11] Crucial aspects of negative theology, as read in Bulgakov's *The Divine Nothing*, filtered into contemporary artistic avantgardes—particularly in the work of Kazimir Malevich, who most likely drew from it the apophatic and eschatological elements so prevalent in his manifestos (see Levina 2024). Malevich speaks of a divine subject without operation or foundation: the "pure free nothingness" of a "God who does not act or operate," and of a "liberated God, retreating into rest." (Malevich 1995, p. 257). In this sense, his non-objectivity (*Bespredmetnost*) shares significant affinities with the apophatic doctrines of Russian theologians, particularly with Berdyaev's critique of objectification—who indeed recognized in *Suprematism* a liberatory power and the negation of the world as something given once and for all.

[12] See Tsonchev (2021); see also Richards and Garner (1970), who however fail to grasp the philosophical core of Berdyaev's social criticism. On the "new religious consciousness", see also Lippman (2020).

[13] On Berdyaev's account on Gnosticism, see Bourke (1939).

[14] See Tolstoy (1894). On Tolstoyism and Tolstoyans, see Avrich (1967); see also Christoyannopoulos (2020). On the relations between Tolstoy and the anarchist sect of the "Dukhobory," see Bienstock (1902). The political activism of the great Russian writer will have a great influence on the following generation of Russian religious thinkers, whose social philosophy can legitimately be considered a collection of revisions, criticisms and marginal notes on Tolstoy's texts.

[15] It is worth noting that this conception bears more than a passing similarity with Reiner Schürmann's later study on Eckhart, where detachment is defined precisely by the abolition of the relationship of exteriority and by the end of the objectification of God (see Schürmann 1972). A similarity which is all the more significant if one also bears in mind that Berdyaev was one of the first Russian reviewers of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (Berdyaev 1930).

[16] The notion of "personality" (*lichnost*) is central not only to Berdyaev's ethics and anthropology, but also—and perhaps above all—to his metaphysics, which he defines, together with Ern, Lossky, and many others, as "personalistic." The term has a long and tortuous history in Russian religious thought, where it often integrates its collective counterpart, *sobornost*. In Berdyaev's thought, the living person, broadly speaking, bears a transformative power which can overcome the abstract subjectivity and narrow individualism of modernity, through the embodiment of the universal in the concrete particular. The literature on this subject is quite extensive: Makarova (2024); and Slaatte (1997) investigated the political and social significance of Berdyaev's personalism. However, although the core of Berdyaev's reflections concerns primarily man and his liberation, the concepts of "person" and "personality" exceed the sphere of the human. In his work on *Slavery and Freedom* he writes: "The whole world order with the realm of the universal common, the impersonal, will come to an end and will be burnt. All concrete beings, human personalities above all, but also animals, plants and everything that has individual existence in Nature will inherit eternity, and all the kingdoms of this world, all the kingdoms of the 'common' which torment the individual personal will be burnt completely." (Berdyaev [1939] 1943, p. 88). "The world is the servitude, the enchainment of existences, not only of men, but of animals and plants, even of minerals and stars. 'This world' ought to be destroyed by personality, it ought to be set free from its enslaved and enslaving condition." (p. 95).

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