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The Vortical Anthropology of Nikolai Berdyaev

This article discusses the sources and principal ideas of Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical anthropology. The author argues against the recent trend of including Berdyaev among conservative Russian religious thinkers.

Recently, the name Nikolai Berdyaev has come back into fashion in Russia. It is heard more and more often, not only in university departments and academic discussions but also in the media. This has occurred once before in recent history.

Since the beginning of perestroika the names of émigré religious and social thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to be used as a litmus test, defining the political sympathies of those who quoted them, even though the reference was often outside the ideological and political context in which it was used.

Before the collapse of the communist empire, at the beginning of Gorbachev's democratic reforms, the largest spiritual authority of Russia was Vladimir Solovyev. The philosopher's inherent universalism, his calls for tolerance and claims for unity with Mediterranean culture and

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civilization were at the time apropos of Russia's reentry into the global community.

The second most popular figure at the time was Nikolai Berdyaev. His seminal works, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, *The Russian Idea*, and *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, with their characteristic investigation of the religious "truth of communism," assuaged the breakdown of socialist values and contributed to the country's transition from ideological crisis to self-determination and liberation. At the time, one of the philosopher's phrases became particularly popular as it fully articulated the spirit of that recent period of Russian history: "Besides disenfranchised abstract cosmopolitanism and disenfranchised violent nationalism there is a third, idealist position of nationality, which directs the nation not toward problems of government, but toward the distinct and creative implementation of universal human principles" (Berdyaev 1989b, p. 41).

After Russia's declaration of independence in 1991, the figure of Vasily Rozanov moved to the forefront. His moderate conservatism and nationalism, appreciation of traditional life, focus on the quotidian human problems of family and gender, and gratitude for simple comforts and the private homeland (which contained the universe), coupled with his intuitive language and ability to limn the faintest particulars of the soul, earned the author of *Solitaria* [*Uedinennoe*] (1911) and *Fallen Leaves* [*Opavshie list'ia*] (1913) immense popularity, which has continued to this day.

Russia's preceding self-determination toward sovereignty, and its subsequent problems, would produce in its ideological space two antagonistic camps: the liberal anti-imperialist camp, which found expression in the ideas of Georgy Fedotov, author of the widely cited essay "The Fates of Empire," [*Sud'_by imperii'*] and its opposition, the imperial-statist camp, whose champion was Ivan Ilyin, author of then most popular work "What Does Russia's Partitioning Mean to the World?" [*Chem ugrozhaet miru raspad Rossii?*] Ilyin, the well-known historian of philosophy, who wrote the finest study of Hegel in Russia, is even today associated primarily with patriotic-statist ideology, and is also regarded as a symbol of the current era of government. This happened largely as a result of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who called Ilyin his favorite thinker.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it became clear that although the teachings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers were popular, they did not manage to take root in their new environment. The new Russian myth, from which a new ideology and philosophy could have grown, was not realized. Personal consciousness became closed off within itself, developing along a monadological path, condemning people to live from themselves and for themselves alone. The need for socializing and

communication ceased to be necessary. But it is impossible to restore the vital link between then and now by simply imitating the past. This kind of return to the cultural headspring is merely phenomenal, and not in any essential way. A new synthesis of ideas is needed to unite the heterogeneous Russian society.

Today, it has again become popular to evoke Nikolai Berdyaev. He is often spoken of as an affiliate of conservative Russian religion and society. For example, on February 13, 2014, the *RBC Daily* published information concerning a series of seminars that would take place in the Presidential Administrative building (on Staraiia Square) titled: “The Ideology of Conservatism and Conservative Policy: The Domestic and Foreign Experience.” High-ranking government officials will be listening about the founders of Russian conservatism, particularly focusing on the philosophical works of Ivan Ilyin, Lev Tikhomirov, Nikolai Danilevsky, Metropolitan Philaret, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Konstantin Pobedonostsev.

This is an enigmatic list, as the name Nikolai Berdyaev is clearly out of place among such company. Conservatism is the commitment to traditional values and customs, to social and religious doctrines. The philosophical system of Berdyaev was not built on such principles. Consider the following ciceronian quotation from Berdyaev’s article “*Temnoe vino*” [Dark Wine] (1915): “A dangerous threat is posed to Russia by obsession over native-folk ideals, the idealization of Russian *stikhiinost*’* and the traditional Russian lifestyle—drunk on the natural ways of the Russian character. This type of idealization has a fatal bias toward reactionary obscurantism. The mysticism of the elemental and the folk must be opposed by the mysticism of the spirit, passing through culture” (1990b, p. 54).

On the 140th anniversary of Nikolai Berdyaev (March 18, 2014), the two major Russian newspapers *Izvestiia* and *Nezavisimaia gazeta* published voluminous articles dedicated to his work.

Vasily Vanchugov (professor of the department of Russian philosophy at Moscow State University) wrote the essay “*Dukhovnaia glubina konservatizma*” [The Spiritual Depth of Conservatism] for *Izvestiia*, in which he quotes a currently popular Berdyaev essay, “*Filosofia neravensta*” [The Philosophy of Inequality]. Vanchugov writes: “Conservatism does not prevent movement forward and upward, but impedes movement backward

**Stikhiinost*’ is an important concept translated as “spontaneity,” “deviancy,” “elemental force,” “chaos,” and a number of other ways. The indeterminacy of the term is in a way part of its definition. In Russian, it is often opposed to consciousness (*soznatel’nost*’).—Trans.

and downward, into chaotic darkness and a primitive state” (Vanchugov 2014). The author emphasizes that the definition of conservatism given by Berdyaev, in the current reality, may well be equally suited for both those who support the state and those who are opposed to them. “However,” Vanchugov continues, “the state supporters will be disappointed if they plan to find political conservatism in Berdyaev, mining Berdyaev’s fifth letter “O konservatisme” [On Conservatism] for isolated passages in order to build some prescriptive formula” (Vanchugov 2014). When Berdyaev discusses conservatism, he is not making a prescription for a political struggle, a political direction, or a political party, but is talking about one of the eternal religious and ontological beginnings of society. Vanchugov’s article states that those who hope to turn Berdyaev into an ideologue of conservatism will want to avoid reading his actual books, and those who read the books will be disappointed. Berdyaev’s political philosophy is useless for everyday politics, as he “considers all the ways of achieving one’s objectives through the absolute value of personality, and rejects everything that is merely politically expedient” (ibid.).

Vanchugov was echoed by Anatoly V. Cherniaev (head of the department of Russian Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Philosophy). In his article “Propovednik teokraticeskoi revoliutsii protiv gosudarstvennoi Tserkvi” [Prophet of theocratic revolution against the state church] (*Nezavisimaja gazeta*), Cherniaev comes to the radical conclusion that Berdyaev remained a lifelong revolutionary and believed that his calling was to preach the revolution of the spirit: “Yes, Berdyaev had not changed his early convictions and remained a revolutionary for life—it is no surprise that in his letters, he admitted that his ‘perpetual age’ was youth” (Cherniaev 2014).

It is important to identify the origins and essence of the central concept of Berdyaev’s philosophy, which I have referred to as “vortical anthropology.” The term belongs to Berdyaev, from his work *Dostoevsky* [*Dostoevsky’s worldview*]. As is often the case in the process of analyzing another’s work, authors provide clues into their own philosophical system. Although used to describe the work of Dostoevsky, the term is an apt characterization of Berdyaev’s own philosophical anthropology.

Explaining the specifics of Dostoevsky’s psychology as “Dionysian artistry,” Berdyaev sees in the “frenzied vortical” and “ecstatic-fiery atmosphere” of Dostoevsky’s work a means of accessing the existential mysteries of human nature, and understanding the phenomenon of freedom. According to Berdyaev, there is nothing static, frozen, or ossified in the anthropology of Dostoevsky; everything is dynamic and in a constant state of motion, like a stream of molten lava. Above all, Berdyaev is interested in

Dostoevsky's portrayal of human freedom, culminating in willfulness: "Dostoevsky takes a person that has been freed, unrestricted by law, released from the cosmic order, and explores the fate of that person, portraying the inevitable outcomes of the paths of freedom.... This is where human nature is revealed. Lawful, subordinate human existence on solid ground does not reveal the mysteries of human nature. Dostoevsky is especially interested in the destiny of man at the moment when man rebels against the objective world order, breaks away from nature, from organic roots, and declares his willfulness" (1989a, p. 39). Berdyaev appreciates Dostoevsky's insights into the human manifestation of freedom as the creative revelation of the birth of God within the human.

To analyze the specificity of Berdyaev's "vortical anthropology," I will use the method of proof by contradiction. One of the philosopher's favorite metaphors in discussions concerning the antinomy of Russian culture, the turbulence of the Russian spirit and its catastrophes, is the "never ending search for the errant, ever sought after, City of Rus"—Russian sectarianism. "Russia is a country of fantastic spiritual intoxication. A country of Khlysty,* self-immolation, and Dukhobors,** ... of imposters and Pugachevs," wrote Berdyaev in "Dusha Rossii" [Soul of Russia] (1990a, p. 13). This led his contemporaries (Zinaida Gippius, Vasily Rozanov, and Vasily Zenkovsky) to attempt to find the key to Berdyaev's philosophy by focusing on his enthusiastic study of sectarianism (Etkind 1998, p. 243).

Clearly, the comparison and even identification of high intellectual life in Russia with Russian sects is an important aspect of Berdyaev's historiosophy. The philosopher concentrated on "Roving Rus," indifferent to quotidian religiosity, and yet absorbed by questions of faith and righteousness. In "Dukhovnoe khristianstvo i sektantstvo v Rossii" [Spiritual Christianity and Sectarianism in Russia], Berdyaev wrote: "Not only people from the "folk," the peasants, are attracted to itinerant Rus, but people from all strata of Russian society, starting with the topmost layer, who felt they could no longer live in a false and godless world. Moral pathos is very strong in this type of Spiritual life, but here morality is drawn not from personal and public life, but from the depths of religion" (1989e, p. 447).

Berdyaev was keenly interested in sects, and his knowledge of the religious pursuit of the common Russian people was not, and could not

*An antiecclesiastical Christian folk sect that preached asceticism, circa 1600 (1900. —Trans.

**A pacifist Christian sect that believed the Bible was the sole source of divine revelation. It likely originated in the seventeenth century.—Trans.

have been, merely bookish, for common Russian God-seekers do not write books.

He did not highly value the available literature on Russian sectarianism, considering it superficial and ideologically biased. Most of the literature on the God-seekers focused on belying heresy, while the liberal literature focused on the legal and political protection of sectarianism. The phenomenon of “seeking God’s truth” was in both cases considered socially, and not from the religious point of view. At the center of inquiry was the creative religious life of the people.

The sedentary sectarian-peasants did not interest Berdyaev as much as the Beguny,* in whom he was the first to see the allegorical embodiment of the fate of the Russian intelligentsia and Russian diaspora:

The type of the wanderer is so characteristic of Russia and so beautiful. The wanderer is the freest of people. He walks the earth, and his movement is aeonian; he is not rooted for he does not settle. The wanderer is free from “the world”—the whole weight of the world and life on earth has been reduced to the small knapsack on his shoulders. The greatness of the Russian people, and its calling to higher life is concentrated in the type of the wanderer. The type of the Russian wanderer found its expression not only in the life of the people, but also in the life of culture, in the life of the best part of the intelligentsia. Here we can recognize the wanderers, free-spirited and attached to nothing, constantly seeking the invisible city. (1990a, p. 12)

Berdyaev stressed that the Russian soul is restless: “it is neither philistine nor grounded.” Among the spiritual wanderers—the wayfarers of the Russian land—Berdyaev included, the sage Gregory Skovoroda, Vladimir Solovyev, Mikhail Lermontov, Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, as well as, the Russian anarchists and revolutionaries who sought the absolute meaning that transcended the measured, quotidian, and suffocating aspects of life.

Berdyaev was able to identify the religious worldview of the wanderers-God-seekers, and to capture their spiritual essence, even though each of them had his own system of complete and final salvation.

One saw the salvation of the world in the complete denial of good and evil. Due to his burning thirst for the good, he denied the existence of

*Antiecclasiastical Old Believer sect that preached “eternal pilgrimage” or “wandering” as the path to salvation. The Russian word *beguny* means “runners” or “wanderers.” It existed for over three centuries -approximately from the early 1600s to the early 1900s’.—Trans.

evil, and saw the problem in the very distinction between good and evil. Another saw salvation in the complete “oneness of the moment,” and sought to exit time in order to conquer the past and the future. A third saw salvation in nonresistance, and that was all he would tolerate. The fourth had his own true doctrine of Christ, revealed for the first time to him alone, and considered this the only path to saving the world. And all were reluctant to know earthly experience, to associate themselves with the experience and thought of mankind. (1989d, p. 449)

Having lived through the temptation to join the sectarians, to merge with them, Nikolai Berdyaev highly valued the Russian seekers of God’s truth: “I know for certain that Russia is incomprehensible without these people, without them the Russian soul would be deprived of its most distinct, essential, and valuable features” (1989d, p. 447). Berdyaev’s personal experience is twofold: he interacted with rural sectarians and the Moscow God-seekers.

For several years Berdyaev spent the summer months in a village in Kharkov province; the village was adjacent to the spiritual center founded by the Tolstoyans and the theosophist Sheerman. God-seekers from all over Russia continually passed through this center. Many different kinds of sectarians stopped and lived there: Tolstoyans, who inclined toward mysticism, the Postniki, who adhered to long fasts, the Dobroliubovians, the free seekers of God’s truth, the spiritual Christians, and the free Christians.

Berdyaev had many conversations with the Moscow sectarians at the Sunday meetings regularly held in two well-known Chueva public houses, nicknamed the “Pit.” (One of them was located near the Church of the Holy Martyrs Florus and Laurus, and another at the head of Rozhdestvenka St.)

In *The Russian Idea* [*Russkaia ideia*] Berdyaev recalled:

Around the tenth year of this century, I was lucky to personally come into contact with wandering Rus, seeking God and God’s truth. I can talk about this characteristic, Russian phenomenon based not on books, but personal experience. I can honestly say that this was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. In Moscow, near the Church of Florus and Laurus, every Sunday there were religious folk gatherings A wonderful folk language presided at these meeting, which were attended by representatives of a wide variety of sects I attended them and took an active part in the discussions. I was surprised by the intensity of the spiritual searching of these people, many of them captivated by some single idea, the search for the truth of life, and at times, profound gnosis. (2008, pp. 173–74)

In *Self-Knowledge* [*Samopoznanie*], written six years prior to *The Russian Idea*, Berdyaev was more emphatic:

During a prominent year of my life, and one that I consider to be one of the happiest, I came in contact . . . with the God-seekers, an environment that was then new to me At that time, a Moscow public house . . . hosted religious and folk sectarians discussions on Sundays I took a very active part in the religious disputes and came into personal contact with several sects In general the conversation was noticeably sophisticated In terms of studying the Russian people, these meetings were invaluable. Some of the sectarians were real folk Gnostics Dualist motivations corresponded to something inside me as well. But I argued vehemently against the sectarian spirit (1990b, 186).

According to his wife Lydia Yudifovna, Berdyaev often said that of the intellectual salons of Moscow and St. Petersburg no one understood him as deeply and truly, as he was understood in the Pit (Donald 1960, p. 127). Apart from Berdyaev, there were other intellectuals who often frequented the Pit during the Sunday discussion, as for example, Pyotr Boborykin and Sergei Bulgakov.

Curbing his “fascination with sectarianism” (in the words of Marina Tsvetaeva), was difficult for the philosopher. Berdyaev admitted that “there is a dark wine in the folk sectarian element. There is something intoxicating and orgiastic about it, which once tasted is difficult to abandon” (1990c, p. 51).

Berdyaev’s admiration of the Russian people was never apologetic. “Sectarianism is a binary. It is religiously revolutionary and reactionary, drawn forward and backward, dynamic and static, mystical and moralistic, spontaneous and rational,” wrote Berdyaev in *Dukhovnoe khristianstvo i sektantstvo v Rossii* (1989f, p. 445). When Berdyaev discussed the historical reality of the sects, he was critical and stringent. As a mystic, he understood that what happened in Russia was rarely rational, and in fact he himself had experienced the “Russian temptation” of sectarian worship.

Berdyaev was completely averse to sectarianism’s radical negation of culture, isolationism, and lack of openness to the world. Sectarianism was the antithesis of the “universal spirit” as it rejected not only cultural traditions and the principles of creativity, but also the spiritual concept of *sobornost*.^{*} isolated within an insular truth, sectarian doctrine leads to

^{*}*Sobornost*: “spiritual harmony based on freedom and unity in love: ecumenicity; specifically: the principle of spiritual unity and religious community based on free commitment to a tradition of catholicity interpreted through ecumenical councils of the Eastern Orthodox Church—compare conciliarity.” Webster’s Online Dictionary. April 15, 2015. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sobornost>.—Trans.

separation from world thought and historical culture, which inevitably leads to atavism and primitivism.

Berdyayev believed that the most salient defect of sectarianism is its lack of religious dynamism: “Religious creativity is not a denial of old sanctities; their remaking and substitution by the new is associated with new religious themes and new revelations. But sectarianism disallows new revelations, it is always busy rehashing old revelations in the form of a fragmentary and partial truth, which is taken for the whole. Sectarians usually want to return to some bygone original purity, and not go forward” (1989f, p. 445). Berdyayev demonstrates the paralysis of sectarianism by discussing its obsession with the past and search for original lost purity, as opposed to creativity. He never tired of saying that a return to original Christianity is neither possible nor desirable, as it is neither possible nor desirable to return to a state of original nature.

Unlike most Russian intellectuals, Berdyayev discussed the folk [*narod*] (in most cases he used the words “folk,” “sectarian,” and *khlyst* interchangeably), not only in mystical or esthetic terms, but also as a political phenomenon of concentrated reaction: “In Russia, the reaction is always orgiastic, only superficially veiled by bureaucracy When intoxicated by the primeval *stikhiinost*’ of the Russian land, there is the predisposition toward *khlyst* No matter how deeply the enlightenment and culture affect the Russian land, there is always something left over that is resistant to change. In the life of the people, this special *stikhiinost*’ found a salient, I would even say brilliant, display in Khlystyism” (1990c, p. 52).

In Russian political life and statehood, Berdyayev saw a hidden, dark, and irrational force that counteracted any rational political theory. The effect of this force gave Russian policy an element of unpredictability, and turned Russian history into the “fantastic fiction” of an “improbable novel.”

This dark Russian *stikhiinost*’ is reactionary in the deepest sense of the word. It poses a timeless mystical reaction against all culture, against personality, against the rights and dignity of the person, against all value. This immersion in the *stikhiinost*’ of the Russian land, this indulgence in its orgiastic bacchanalia is not compatible with any cultural values, with any self-consciousness of the personality. Here the antagonism is irreconcilable. With us, idealization often comes in the form of intoxication on Russian being, the warmth of the Russian mire, accompanied by antipathy toward ascension. (1990c, 53)

The most dangerous moment occurs when the folk, khlystyian intoxication of Russian land reaches the very top of Russian life. Berdyayev

called this state the “khlystyism of power itself”—when the dark irrationality in the lower masses seduces and consumes the sovereigns.

Berdyayev emphasized that the folk were not fully amenable to enlightenment; that is, some culturally insoluble “residue,” a kind of “unenlightened and unenlightenable element” remained. Unlike many others, he gives this conclusion a sense of tragedy. The populist enthusiasm for self-destruction was alien to him.

In the canon of Russian political philosophy, Berdyayev is an unrivaled critic of populism. In his famous work “Russian Temptation: On Bely’s *Silver Dove*,” [Russkii soblazn: po povody “Serebrianogo golubia” A. Belogo] Berdyayev directly calls populism “the chronic illness that prevents the creative revival of Russia.” He resisted Russian populism in all its forms—including the Slavophiles, the Tolstoyans, and the Symbolists. “The spirit of populism is an ineradicable Russian quality,” he wrote in “Russian Temptation,” “No other country has such a cult of the “folk” like ours, such a thirst for folk truth and unity with the folk . . . Populism has been with us in different guises, constantly reincarnating in the form of Slavophilism, in the form of “populism” (in the conventional sense of the word), in the form of Tolstoyanism, it even crept into Russian Marxism, and recently has taken on a clearly mystical form. Mystical populism—the deepest aspiration of the national Russian spirit” (1989d, p. 419). Berdyayev contrasted all these ideologies with his version of personalism: “The folk is not outside of me, not in the *muzhik*, but inside me . . .”

Berdyayev avoided the circular arguments of Russian intellectuals who ascribed their own ideas to “the people,” and then supported their conclusions by appealing to the authority of the people. Berdyayev debunked the naively optimistic worship of the “people/*stikhiinost*” and “people/nature” adopted by the Rousseau populists and the Symbolists.

He repeatedly stressed that such religious revivals can only be popular. But the national character, according to the philosopher, is defined qualitatively, not quantitatively. The depth of the spiritual life of the people lies in select individuals, rather than in the collective masses, and not in the people’s way of life, which is only peripheral. Rejection of generic existence, disillusionment with the lies and falsehoods of life, and the search for authentic meaning occurs at the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy. Recognizing spiritual wandering as a major quality of the Russian spirit, Berdyayev emphasized that for the manifestation of genuine religious revival and religious creativity, there had to be liberation from the sectarian spirit—the misdirection of spiritual energy toward isolationism.

At the same time, Berdyayev did not accept other forms of *stikhiinost*—the Hellenic Dionysism of Viacheslav Ivanov or the mystical anarchism of

Georgy Chulkov—because like Russian sectarianism, these also dissolved the personality and disregarded culture.

As a profound thinker, Berdyaev never set up the dichotomy of absolute evil or absolute good. He did, however, emphasize the antinomy of Russian culture and the antinomy of the people. Human nature and nature in general can never be completely rationalized. The irrational remainder contains the source of life. But life is tragic. The irrationality of humanity and the khlystyism of the Russian people contain both the roots of evil and the promise of a prosperous future. This is the internal antinomic condition of human freedom as conceived of by Berdyaev.

I use the term “vortical anthropology” to describe Berdyaev’s doctrine of person as creator. As a philosopher, he rejected the substitution of the human with the problem of the subject, transcendental consciousness with the problem of the soul, and psychological consciousness with the problem of the spirit or even the problem of ideal Good, Truth, or Beauty. “Philosophical anthropology should be the fundamental philosophical discipline,” Berdyaev wrote in *O naznachanii cheloveka* [*On the Destiny of Man*]. “The negation of anthropology in philosophy is the demise of philosophy” (1989b, p. 24). The anthropological nature of philosophy stems from the fact that human existence is evidence of a higher reality. The breakthrough to *being* is possible only through the human—fundamentally inexplicable from the outside position of the world.

Berdyaev believed that the purpose of anthropology was “to investigate the human from within and inside the human.” Personality cannot serve as an object of philosophy, the main feature of which is that it has no object of knowledge. To investigate from the human and in the human for Berdyaev meant to *not* objectify. “Meaning is revealed only when I am in myself, that is, in the spirit, and when there is no objectivity, concreteness for me. Everything that is for me an object is meaningless. Meaning is only in that which is in me and with me, that is, in the spiritual world” (1989b, p. 29). When a cognizing person is considered outside of *being*, and cognizing *being* outside the person, everything turns into an object and becomes alienated, in opposition to personality. The world of philosophical ideas ceases to be its own inner world, and becomes a world alien to the human. Berdyaev’s new anthropology is an alternative to alienated, objectified knowledge. It is different from both patristic and scholastic anthropology, as well as humanistic anthropology, as it is founded naturalistically. The main issue at the heart of Berdyaev’s religious anthropology is that of creativity.

Human creativity in the process of disclosing the infinite within man, the transcending of man by himself, going beyond the boundary of immanent

reality—the rupture of freedom via necessity. Creativity overcomes the gravity, duality, and subjection of the external world, as it relates to the human. Man is focused on the birth of God within himself, just as God is waiting for the birth of man within Himself.

Berdyayev stressed that his original philosophical thought was first expressed in his book: *The Meaning of the Creative Act* [*Smysl tvorchestva*]. He considered it his most inspired work. In it, he defines his main theme, his “fundamental intuition about the human condition.”

The origin of *The Meaning of the Creative Act* is found in Berdyayev’s interest in sectarianism and the God-seekers. In 1910, *Russkaya mysl’* published Berdyayev’s article “*Khristos i mir*” [Christ and the World], a paper he delivered at a meeting of the St. Petersburg Philosophical Society. This was the first time Berdyayev raised the topic of the nature of creativity. The key idea of the article is that the justification of religious history and culture is the “transcendental thirst for another world,” which is a reflection of creativity.

By creativity Berdyayev did not mean the creation of cultural products, but the transformation and ascendance of the whole of human existence, toward another, higher state of new being. In a letter to Vladimir Erna, he explained: “When I wrote, and at times spoke, to you on the subject of creativity, I was not talking about ‘science and art’ or creativity in a ‘cultural sense’ or the personal gifts of each of us, but about a new religious era, about another religious consciousness and moral life” (Keidana 1997, p. 461).

At the same time, in 1910, Berdyayev published the essay, “The Spiritual Crisis of the Intelligentsia” [*Dukhovnii khrizis intelligentsia*]—which showed his realization that the intelligentsia would not develop into a future “religious community.”

The next crisis of unfulfilled expectations was linked with the philosopher’s disappointment with anthroposophy and the occult, which he seriously engaged for a number of years. In a letter to Viacheslav Ivanov, Berdyayev admitted: “There is something anti-Christian in my nature, but all my being is saturated with Christian mysticism. I am a heretic, but a thousand times more Christian than you—‘Orthodox’” (Keidana 1997, p. 618).

Berdyayev extrapolates his idea of a positive “vortical anthropology,” from personal mystical revelation and philosophical intuition. Among the important sources of the concept, he cites the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Andrei Bely. In Bely, Berdyayev primarily valued the artistic reproduction of folk *stikhiinost’*, and in Dostoevsky he valued the description of mystical *stikhiinost’* in the life of the intelligentsia. He emphasized that Bely found the folk equivalent for the passions that

Dostoevsky described in the life of the upper classes. In “Russian Temptation: On Bely’s *Silver Dove*,” Berdyaev wrote:

Andrei Bely’s remarkable and unexpected novel *Silver Dove* advances to a new way of depicting the age-old theme of the relation of the Russian intelligentsia and the people. In Bely’s novel, this subject is immersed in the mystical *stikhinost’* of Russia, and in this way is deepened, transferred to another plane The novel astounds one with its profound sense of Russia, with its deep insight into the life of the people. It has no false idealization of the people. No populist sugarcoating. Bely has discovered something new in Russian *stikhinost’*, in Russian folk life, some terrible passion hidden from Russian literature of the populist type. This terrible passion, this lustful languishing of the spirit, is hidden not only in Russian mystical sectarianism, but also in the *stikhinost’* of the Russian people. (1989d, p. 413)

Dostoevsky, on the contrary, never described the *stikhinost’* of popular sects or sectarian rituals. In Dostoevsky, fanatical fervor is embodied in the poetics of text. The turning of the vortical as described by Bely, was used by Berdyaev to understand the hidden mechanisms working inside Dostoevsky’s text. Drawing on the Bely and Dostoevsky, Berdyaev designed a new mystical science of humanity. Berdyaev infers the highest state of man, the mysticism of personal creativity, from the frenzied, ecstatic, and vortical elements of *stikhinost’*. Creative power is the result of contact with the vortical. “The depths necessarily attract the phrenetic and ecstatic elements. The vortex is a method of anthropological discovery Access to this science is possible only for those who enter the vortex” (1989a, p. 39).

Vortical ecstasy as a method, system, and metaphor is important for Berdyaev’s new religious anthropology, because it is the pledge of individualization and the result of man’s absolution; it is the path to the meaning of creativity. Man can justify his existence only through creativity, which is not the right or claim of man alone, but the requirement made by God of man—it is his duty. Creativity, says Berdyaev, is the hidden will of God. “Creativity is the opposite of egocentrism, it involves forgetting the self, striving for what is beyond the ego. This is the appeal to the transformation of the world. The creator is alone, and creativity is not the activity of the general and collective, but the specific and personal. However, the creative act is likewise directed at universal human and social nature. Creativity is a way out of oneself and into freedom” (Berdyaev 1989e, p. 200).

Freedom is dependent on divine grace, and is established so that a human may have responsibility before God; it opens in the mystical act of a religiously oriented personality. In the religious sense of creativity, God

expects human creativity to be the consummation of divine life. The idea of creativity is not openly revealed by God, but is instead an innermost secret, which God does not directly reveal, but waits for a person to make the revelation by themselves.

The creative activity—which Berdyaev describes as the human obligation before God—is the knowledge of God. A person cannot but create, otherwise they have no purpose; they do not “profit” the Divine.

Humankind has been fated to create of culture and civilization, but this type of creativity is only symbolic, only giving signs of the real transformation. Real creativity is the transfiguration of the world; it is eschatologically oriented toward the end of the world.

Berdyaev’s vortical anthropology is the existential investigation of human nature and its infinite capacity for freedom. It is a spiritual experiment of creative potential performed by entering the mysterious depths of human nature through ecstatic rapture.

Having achieved a state of vortical ecstasy, the personality does not get lost in the disaster; its purpose is the discovery of the meaning of human life, the meaning of human creativity, the enactment of the last human mystery—the birth of God within the human being.

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