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The Hidden Russia in Western Philosophy: An Outline for Future Research

by Ana Siljak

The field of Russian intellectual history contains no shortage of scholarly investigations into the impact of European thought in Russia. By comparison, the Russian influence on European thought receives far less attention, incommensurate with the extent of such influence, especially in the twentieth century. By providing a few concrete examples of the hidden Russian influence on philosophers as disparate as Jacques Maritain, Max Weber, and Leo Strauss, this article will speculate on the reasons for the invisibility of Russian ideas in Western philosophy and offer suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Lev Shestov, Jacques Maritain, Max Weber, Leo Strauss, Russian philosophy, Russian religion, European philosophy, 20th Century Europe.

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The Hidden Russia in Western Philosophy

An Outline for Future Research

Ana Siljak

In 1950, Isaiah Berlin gave one of the most concise but eloquent descriptions of the divide that still continues to separate the fields of analytical and continental philosophy:

> the great chasm between, on the one hand, the clear, dry world of Anglo-American ... empiricism, ... and, on the other, the darker and more personally anguished world of French and German religious or aesthetic or political metaphysics, was never deeper or more unbridgeable. Neither side recognised merit in the other, and no interpreters appeared to explain these apparently disparate activities to the other camp.[1]

With a simple replacement of a few terms, this could describe the gulf that presently exists between Russianists and scholars of Western intellectual history. Russianists, on the one hand, contend with the "darker and more personally anguished" world of Russian ideas, often completely foreign to those who study the much clearer and drier world of Western thought. Russianists have little cause to consider, in depth, the works of Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, or Alexis de Tocqueville; and Western intellectual historians have often never even heard the names of Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, or Lev Shestov. Concepts such as materialism, nihilism, rights, dignity, toleration, freedom, and even liberalism and socialism have, as it were, two separate histories—one that extends back through European history and the other that, if it has a lineage at all, traces into the Russian past. And interpreters between the two worlds are few and far between.[2]

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1. Isaiah Berlin, *Three Years: Cultural Politics in the Mid Twentieth Century*, Isaiah Berlin Online, https://isaiah-berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/ (Bib. 292), 38–39. For the purposes of this essay, I am mostly confining myself to a discussion of English-language scholarly literature.

2. A good example of this is the case of this is Samuel Moyn's history of human rights, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, which only briefly mentions the Russian influence on human rights, via Nikolai Berdyaev. The Russian history of human rights, on the other hand, is detailed in Ferdinand Feldbrugge, "Human Rights in Russian Legal History," in *Human Rights in Russia and Eastern Europe*: *Essays in Honor of Ger P. van den Berg*, ed. Ferdinand J. M. Feldbrugge and William B. Simons (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021), 65–90. Similarly, compendia on concepts such as "secularism" or "toleration," and general histories of "liberalism," rarely include Russian considerations of these terms. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen's *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) contain no men-

The divide should not be exaggerated, of course. Following in the tradition of the great intellectual historians such as Andrzej Walicki, many scholars have carefully traced the undeniable and pervasive impact of Western philosophers on Russia. Thanks to them, we understand the influence of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, German Idealism, and French socialism on Russian thought. In many ways, intellectual historians in the Russian field are obliged to consider, at least in passing, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche, and comprehensive histories such as Franco Venturi's *Roots of Revolution* are filled with casual references to Jean Jacques Rousseau, Charles Fourier, and, of course, Karl Marx. The reception of Sigmund Freud, John Stuart Mill, and Joseph de Maistre in Russia has been at least considered, if only briefly.[3]

Undeniably, however, it is far rarer to find scholarship that moves in the other direction—scholarship that traces the influence of Russian ideas on the intellectual history of the West. Michael Gillespie has considered the impact of Turgenev's nihilists on Friedrich Nietzsche; a few articles discuss the influence of Dmitrii Merezhkovskii on Thomas Mann. That the phenomenologist Karl Jaspers supervised a dissertation on Vladimir Soloviev written by Alexander Kojève is merely a fact to be remarked on, and scholars of Jaspers have little to say about what Jaspers might have thought of Soloviev. In the end, this is the main focus of this essay: Russian influence on European and American ideas remains mostly hidden.[4]

The blame for this state of affairs must rest partly on the shoulders of us Russianists. For too long, students of Russian thought have suffered from a kind of scholarly timidity, modestly accepting the sharp disciplinary boundary between Russian and Western philosophy, simply assuming that ideas may naturally flow from West to East but certainly could never travel upstream. With the robust exception of studies on Fy-

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tion of Russia, while Catherine Wanner's *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012) and my *Religion and Secular Modernity in Russian Christianity, Judaism, and Atheism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024) look at the concept from an exclusively Russian perspective.

3. Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution* (London: Phoenix Press, 1972); Kant and neo-Kantianism in Russia have been looked at in depth, see, for example, Thomas Nemeth, *Kant in Imperial Russia* (Cham: Springer, 2017) and Michael A. Meerson, "Put' against Logos: The Critique of Kant and Neo-Kantianism by Russian Religious Philosophers in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," *Studies in East European Thought* 47, no. 3/4 (1995): 225–43; Nietzsche's influence in Russia has been considered by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed. *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Nel Grillaert, *What the God-seekers found in Nietzsche: The Reception of Nietzsche's Übermensch by the Philosophers of the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). For Freud, see Alexander Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2019); for John Stuart Mill, see Julia Berest, "J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* in Imperial Russia: Modernity and Democracy in Focus," *Slavonic and East European Review* 97, no. 2 (2019): 266–298; for de Maistre, see Vera Miltchyna, "Joseph de Maistre's Works in Russia: A Look at Their Reception," in *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence: Selected Studies* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 241–270.

4. See Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Urs Heftrich, "Thomas Manns Weg Zur Slavischen Dämonie: Überlegungen Zur Wirkung Dmitri Mereschkowskis," *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch* 8 (1995), 71–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24743635. Trevor Wilson's recent book on Alexandre Kojève and his much-needed contextualization of Kojève and his Russian philosophical roots. See Trevor Wilson, *Alexandre Kojève and the Specters of Russian Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2025). It is worth noting that Evert van der Zweerde voiced similar concerns in his "The Place of Russian Philosophy in World Philosophical History—A Perspective," *Diogenes* 56, no. 2–3 (2009): esp. 171–173.

odor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy, scholars approach the question of Russian ideas in the West tentatively, and even apologetically. Similarities between Martin Heidegger and Nikolai Berdyaev, the Silver Age and European modernism, may sometimes be noted, but the question of influence is often avoided.[5] This is in sharp contrast, for example, to the discussions of Soviet philosophy in the West.

The conference on "Religion, Human Dignity, and Human Rights: New Paradigms for Russia and the West,"[6] and the current volume of *Northwestern University Studies in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought*, have, as their aim, the bridging of the chasm between these two adjacent, yet often separately viewed intellectual traditions—the Russian and the European/Western. These two traditions have considered, very carefully and from multiple perspectives, the questions of religion, human dignity, and human rights, but have often done so in separate contexts. It is to be hoped that the papers presented at the conference and published here will only be the beginning of a conversation. The purpose of my essay is to lay out, through a few examples, a kind of methodological blueprint for future bridge-building, and also to issue a plea: that Russianists take seriously the possibility of sustained Russian intellectual influence on Western thought.

An essential caveat is in order: mine is no argument for Russian exceptionalism. This would be very untimely, given Russia's multi-year invasion of Ukraine and Russia's general belligerence and hostility toward the West and all its values. The recovery of a hidden Russian influence in the West encourages neither Russian triumphalism nor messianism—quite the opposite. Instead, it is rather the unearthing of what Gary Saul Morson has called the "Russian counter-tradition."[7] This is a Russian intellectual tradition that is uniquely Russian but is not anti-Western, Russian but unflinchingly critical of Russian politics and cultural fashions. This Russian tradition is steeped in Western ideas, but it is also unafraid to critique Western errors and excesses. And I believe that it is this Russian counter-tradition, or in Randall Poole's elaboration, "the Russian counter-tradition of open humanism," that has hidden itself within the Western philosophical world.[8]

It seems that the best place to begin when considering this question is in a suburb of Paris, in Clamart, where the exiled Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, in whose

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5. Some examples of works that look at Russian influence on Western thought include Steven G. Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World: From Art to Anti-Semitism, Ballet to Bolshevism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); James L. Rice, *Freud's Russia: National Identity in the Evolution of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Adrian Wanner, "The Underground Man as Big Brother: Dostoevsky's and Orwell's Anti-Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1997): 77–88; and George R. Clay, "Tolstoy in the Twentieth Century," in Donna Tussing Orwin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 206–221.

6. Hosted by the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education, University of Florida, November 1–2, 2024.

7. Gary Saul Morson, "Tradition and counter-tradition: The radical intelligentsia and classical Russian literature," in *A History of Russian Thought,* ed. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 141–168.

8. Randall A. Poole, "Gary Saul Morson and *Vekhi/Landmarks*: Open Humanism in Russian Thought," *Northwestern University Research Forum in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought*, January 5, 2024, https://sites.northwestern.edu/nurprt/2024/05/01/gary-saul-morson-and-vekhi-landmarks-open-humanism-in-russian-thought/.

name this conference was organized, lived until he died in 1948. Berdyaev is an ideal illustration of Russian influence on European thought, an influence that was once universally acknowledged. Of course, Western ideas heavily influenced Berdyaev. He read voraciously in German and French and even some English, was conversant in all the major German and French philosophical schools, and followed European and American philosophical and theological debates throughout his life. This was unsurprising for a Russian of his generation. Far more surprising is the extent to which his ideas spread throughout the Western world. The theologian C.S. Lewis mentioned in passing that everyone was reading Berdyaev, Martin Heidegger inscribed a note of gratitude in a book he gave to Berdyaev, Aldous Huxley quoted him in his dystopian *Brave New World*,[9] and Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote about him in a long essay on "Continental Theology."[10] The breadth of his influence was confirmed by *Time Magazine* in 1948, declaring him "one of the great religious philosophers of his time," and by his serious consideration for the Nobel Prize.[11] To the extent that any Russian philosopher could be well-known in the West, Berdyaev had reached that status.

The contrast with the present day is striking—Berdyaev and his influence are now forgotten. Berdyaev does not even merit an entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the last English-language biography of him was published in 1960.[12] To the extent he is mentioned today, he is often simply listed as one of "Putin's philosophers," since Putin off-handedly recommended Berdyaev as light summer reading for Russian officials.[13] The question remains: why has someone once so influential now become mischaracterized and mostly forgotten?

In the wake of the 150th anniversary of Berdyaev's birth, it is timely to use him as a prominent example of Russia's influence in European, and even global, intellectual culture. In some of the most unexpected ways, it turns out, culture does in fact flow from Russia to Europe and beyond. For Berdyaev and his fellow Russian exiles, this was literally true, as they physically journeyed from Russia to Europe in the 1920s, carrying with them an entire tradition of religious and philosophical thought that they

9. Quote from Berdyaev in *Brave New World*: "We used to pay too little attention to utopias, or even disregard them altogether, saying with regret they were impossible of realisation. Now indeed they seem to be able to be brought about far more easily than we supposed, and we are actually faced by an agonising problem of quite another kind: how can we prevent their final realisation? ... Utopias are more realisable than those 'realist politics' that are only the carefully calculated policies of office-holders, and towards utopias we are moving. But it is possible that a new age is already beginning, in which cultured and intelligent people will dream of ways to avoid ideal states and to get back to a society that is less 'perfect' and more free." Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), title page. Translation in John Hoyles, *The Literary Underground: Writers and the Totalitarian Experience, 1900–1950* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 121.

10. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Contemporary Continental Theology," September 13, 1951–January 15, 1952, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Stanford Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/contemporary-continental-theology.

11. "Religion: Berdyaev," *Time Magazine*, April 5, 1948, https://time.com/archive/6600681/religion-berdyaev/.

12. Donald A. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960); M. M. Davy, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Man of the Eighth Day*, trans. Leonora Siepman (London: Bles, 1967).

13. A good overview of the controversy over Putin's philosophical reading list is found in Paul Robinson, "The Putin Book Club," *CIPS Blog*, Center for International Policy Studies, April 3, 2014, https://www.cips-cepi.ca/2014/04/03/the-putin-book-club/.

would proceed to share with Europeans for decades after. Berdyaev will be the first example of a hidden Russian counter-tradition in Western philosophy, one that reveals how Russian thought centered the question of what it means to be human in a modern world of secularism, scientism, rationalism, and totalitarianism.

With the recent availability of new sources, we can now definitively trace the effect of Berdyaev's distinctly Russian personalist and existentialist thought on Europe after 1922, especially its effect on interwar Western personalist justifications of human dignity and human rights. Even when they disagreed with him, French and German thinkers acknowledged his ideas as a challenge that revealed the limits of European rationalism and scientism, and that elevated the value of the person in a world that was rapidly eroding human worth.

Berdyaev was born in Ukraine in 1874, and he was raised in the iconoclastic and vibrant Ukrainian culture of the early twentieth century. Like so many of his generation, Berdyaev joined the Kyivan Marxist movement in the 1890s but was soon labeled a "dangerous individualist" for pointing out Marxism's tendency toward tyranny. Berdyaev eventually returned to the Orthodox faith of his youth, but only after years of experimenting with Nietzschean, occult, and sectarian movements.[14]

Berdyaev's particular Christian philosophy, in which there is a "religious comprehension of the Anthropos as a divine person," was rooted in a Russian tradition of personalism that drew upon a variety of sources, both European and Russian: the Kabbalah, Immanuel Kant, Vladimir Soloviev, Rudolf Steiner, Jakob Boehme, and the Eastern patristic theologians. Central to this personalism was the conception of the human person as the "image and likeness of God," and thus of incalculable value. As early as 1902, he wrote:

> We can formulate the absolute condition of the realization of the moral good: it is the recognition of the unconditional value and right to self-determination of the human person ... together with recognition of the equal value of people ... in the human person, we esteem the 'universal' ... a human being honors his God in another human being.[15]

Berdyaev's religious personalism and his commitment to the freedom and dignity of the person did not remain abstract. It led him to resist authoritarianism wherever he found it. Just to take a few examples: he was charged with blasphemy in 1913 for denouncing the Russian Orthodox Church's persecution of dissident monks, in 1922 he was arrested and interrogated by the Soviet head of the NKVD, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, to whom he denounced communism, and after which he was expelled from the Soviet Union for good. Much later, during World War II, he was interrogated by the Gestapo for his connections to Russians in the French resistance. He wrote articles against com-

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14. Much of the information on Berdyaev here and below is taken from my introduction, "A New Christian Humanism: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain," in Bernard Hubert, *An Exceptional Dialogue, 1925–1948: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025), 3–36.

15. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Meaning of the Creative Act* (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 19; N.A. Berdiaev, "The Ethical Problem in the Light of Philosophical Idealism," in Randall A. Poole, *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 161–197, 175–177; see also Siljak, "New," 9–10.

munism, fascism, and antisemitism. It is no wonder that Alexander Solzhenitsyn later praised Berdyaev as "a brilliant defender of human freedom against ideology."[16]

When Berdyaev arrived in France in 1925, he brought his personalism with him in the concrete form of a small collection of essays, entitled *The New Middle Ages*. First published in Russian in 1923, it was then immediately translated into German in 1924 and became popular among German and French intellectuals shortly thereafter. The book's critique of Enlightenment rationalism and rampant technological mechanization, its elucidation of Marxism and Fascism as secular religions, and its vigorous defense of human personality against modern bourgeois capitalism captured the French philosophical imagination. It also introduced Berdyaev to the neo-Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain.

The firmest proof of the full integration of Berdyaev's philosophical worldview into the intellectual life of Europe has been recently laid out in multiple editions of their correspondence, by Teresa Obolevitch and Bernard Hubert, published in French, Russian and Polish, and English. These publications reveal that Maritain and Berdyaev were very close friends, and they engaged in philosophical and theological conversation with other French intellectuals, including Emmanuel Mounier, Etienne Gilson, and Gabriel Marcel. Maritain openly praised Russian philosophers for bringing to France a "theandric" view of human beings, central to personalism. By the time Jacques Maritain wrote his highly influential *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* in 1942, his view of human dignity had been formed in encounters with Berdyaev's ideas. Personalism, it seems, was a "Russo-French" philosophy. Again, one must reiterate that this personalism did not remain abstract—Berdyaev and Maritain valiantly stood against Communism, Fascism, Franco's Spain, European antisemitism, and the worst excesses of techno-capitalism.[17]

Influence is sometimes revealed in disagreement. Maritain remained a Thomist and insisted on the grounding of his insights on intelligible, God-given reason. Berdyaev, on the other hand, was impatient with the Thomistic system and insisted that the path of the individual to the divine was often undefinable and mystical, transcending reason. Even though Maritain explicitly criticized Berdyaev's "irrationalism" and his "anti-intellectual existential philosophy," he nonetheless admitted in his journal that Berdyaev's thought served an important role: "It pushes me to write on these topics (Personality, Evil)." By introducing the concept of divine nothingness, by highlighting the irrational limits of reason, by confronting, head-on, the topic of evil, Berdyaev shaped the European philosophical conversation. In the end, Maritain openly praised Russian philosophy for introducing, into Europe, a distinct "theandric" view of humanity. The émigré Helene Iswolsky, who knew both philosophers, declared that "Christian humanism" was Berdyaev's lasting

16. Ol'ga Volkogonova, *Berdiaev* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2010), 29; Vitalii Shentalinskii, "Oskolki serebrianogo veka," *Novyi mir*, No. 5 (May 1998), http://www.nm1925.ru/Archive/Journal6_1998_5/Content.aspx; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 13, 15, 130.

17. Teresa Obolevitch and Bernard Marchadier, eds. *Velikaia druzhba: Perepiska Zhaka i Raisy Mariten s N. A. Berdiaevym* (Zielona Góra: Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, 2022); Bernard Hubert, ed. *Une dialogue d'exception (1925–1948): Jacques Maritain et Nicolas Berdiaev* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 2022). See also, Siljak, "New," 25.

contribution to Western thought.[18] In sum, via Berdyaev's intellectual biography, I am illustrating my original point: the hidden influence of Berdyaev in the West was the influence of a philosophical Russian counter-tradition. Berdyaev criticized Russian and Soviet despotism, as well as European rationalism and totalitarianism, in equal measure. Berdyaev's unique attention to the theological and existential grounding of personalism acted as a challenge to Western thought, one that demanded a more complicated understanding of the human person, human meaning, and human dignity.

From the 1970s on, the ideas of Berdyaev and Maritain grew increasingly obscure, as neo-liberalism grew and the dangers of totalitarianism faded, and as the idea of a Christian humanism seemed unnecessary. But their collaboration had its legacy in the philosophers whose importance is undeniable: Martin Buber, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and the popes John Paul II and Francis, just to name a few. Berdyaev's influence thus illustrates my general methodological point, which can be stated quite simply: if you look carefully, paying attention to correspondence, footnotes, and bibliographies, you will find Russians hidden under a number of Western philosophical rocks. Russians are often quietly present, especially when Western thinkers grapple with what it means to be human in the modern world, and this presence is a fruitful path for scholars to follow as they trace the impact of Russian thought on Western intellectual history.

But we must not think of Berdyaev as an isolated case of a Russian émigré in Europe. I am going to be bold now and illustrate the way in which we can find the Russian counter-tradition in some of modernity's most unexpected places—in the thought of those whom we think rather unlikely to embrace the existential and irrational. These are the philosophers Max Weber and Leo Strauss.

Max Weber is today best known for his classic text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he unearthed a hidden Calvinist anxiety over salvation at the heart of a worldly asceticism—an ethic of self-denial and hard work—that led to the flourishing of capitalism. In this work, as in many of his others, Max Weber has been accepted as he saw himself—a self-professed "scientist" and pioneer in the field of sociology.[19]

Is Max Weber a philosopher? In this matter, it is useful to read the testimony of Karl Jaspers, a philosopher of the continental school, who was categorical: "Over all these years, I never philosophized without thinking of Max Weber."[20] Even more eccentric is Jaspers's more detailed claim about Weber's philosophizing. In his "Max Weber as a

18. Siljak, "New," 27; the influence of Russian personalism on French thought is also discussed in Randall A. Poole, "Integral Humanisms: Jacques Maritain, Vladimir Soloviev, and the History of Human Rights," *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Filosofiia i Konfliktologiia*, 35 (2019): 92–106.

19. Space does not permit a full discussion of the scholarship on Weber, but a discussion of Max Weber as a founder of social science and sociology is found in Sheldon S. Wolin, "Max Weber: Legitimation, Method, and the Politics of Theory," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (1981): 401–424; Stephen P. Turner and Regis A. Factor, eds., *Max Weber and the Dispute over Reason and Value: A Study in Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), especially chapters 8 and 9; and in Anthony Giddens's classic *Politics and Sociology in the Thought of Max Weber* (London: MacMillan, 1972). A detailed discussion of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* is found in Peter Ghosh, *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

20. See John Dreimanis, ed. and trans., *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 140

Scientist," he wrote, "Max Weber's science is linked with the awareness of what is not known."[21] And it is worth quoting at length from his "Max Weber as a Philosopher":

> If science was once considered the way to true being, to true art, to true nature, to true God, and to true happiness, no one believes that any longer. Science has disenchanted everything. ... Therefore, as Tolstoy concluded, science is meaningless ... because it gives no answer to the only question important for us: What should we do? How should we live? Max Weber ... declares that it is simply indisputable that science has no answer to Tolstoyian questions of meaning, but contrary to Tolstoy, does not deny the meaning of science.[22]

For this reason, Jaspers concludes, Weber is "an existential philosopher."[23]

The above quote not only justifies seeing Max Weber as a philosopher (and perhaps even an existentialist!) but it also illustrates the main theme of this essay—Jaspers justifies Weber as an existentialist philosopher by referring to Russia (in the character of Leo Tolstoy). Tolstoy was, of course, widely known in Europe and throughout the world, but the larger question remains: how much did Weber know about Russia?

Scholars are not entirely ignorant of Weber's longstanding interest in Russia. Biographers have noted that Weber read Russian literature, including the works of Tolstoy, especially during a mental health crisis that lasted from 1898 to 1903. Weber's essays on Russian politics and society are well known (especially by Russianists). But most scholars of Weber have either ignored or dismissed the very idea of Russian influence on Weber. Weber's biographer Peter Ghosh, for example, outright asserts that "Russia was part of the Orient," and Weber's thought was "relentlessly Occidental;" and Joachim Radkau declares that Weber could not have learned much about Orthodoxy since "there were scarcely any Russian Orthodox theologians who offered Western scholars material for a worthwhile study."[24]

A more careful look at certain biographical details reveals that Weber was not as "relentlessly Occidental" as Ghosh claims. For example, from 1905 on, Weber studied the Russian language every morning before he got out of bed. In the early 1900s, he was closely involved with a group of Russian émigré students in Heidelberg, including Fyodor Stepun and Bogdan Kistiakovskii. Perhaps under their influence, Weber read not only Russian novels but also works of Russian philosophy, including Vladimir Soloviev (whose "The National Question in Russia" Weber published in translation) and the Slavophile Alexei Khomiakov (he was familiar with Khomiakov's defense of Orthodox conciliarity, or *sobornost'*).[25]

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21. Dreimanis, *Jaspers*, 99.

22. Dreimanis, *Jaspers*, 105–106.

23. Dreimanis, *Jaspers*, 9.

24. Fritz Ringer's *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography* and the *Oxford Handbook on Max Weber* contain no mention of Russian thinkers. On Weber and Tolstoy, see Guy Oakes, "The Antinomy of Values: Weber, Tolstoy and the Limits of Scientific Rationality," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2001): 195–211; Ghosh, *Weber*, quote 292. Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 246.

25. Two excellent articles that mention the possibility of a Russian influence on Weber are Hubert Treiber, "Die Geburt der Weberschen Rationalismus-These: Webers Bekanntschaften mit der russischen Geschichtsphilosophie in Heidelberg: Überlegungen anläßlich der Veröffentlichung des ersten Briefban-

Most revealing of Weber's "Orientalist" tendencies, however, was Weber's sustained interest in the philosophy of Sergei Bulgakov, especially in Bulgakov's book, *Philosophy of Economy: World as Household*. Weber had specifically requested that Bulgakov provide him with an excerpt from what Weber called his "great book." He then supervised the translation and publication of excerpts from the book in 1913.[26] Those who have read Bulgakov's book should be surprised by Weber's interest, since Bulgakov's central task in that work was the most un-Weberian redefinition of economic terms, including, for example, the consideration of "consumption" as "partaking of the flesh of the world"; "production" as "the liberation of creation from the imprisonment of thingness"; and economy as "the cosmic victory of beauty" on the pattern of the Divine Sophia.[27]

What did Weber learn from Bulgakov (or from Soloviev or Khomiakov, for that matter)? A full account of this has yet to be written. But there are two threads of influence worth following. The first appears in excerpts from a conversation among Weber and other sociologists attending the first meeting of the "German Sociological Society" in 1910. Let me quote what Weber told his colleagues:

> While the Calvinist church is permeated by sectarianism, the Greek church is saturated, in great measure, with a very specific classical mysticism ... brotherly love and charity, those special human relationships which the great salvation religions have transfigured (and which seem so pallid among us). ...
>
> ... From this acosmic quality, characteristic of all Russian religiosity, is derived a specific kind of natural right which is stamped upon the Russian sects and also on Tolstoy. ... Soloviev's specific concept of the church, in particular, rests on it. The concept rests on "community" (in Toennies's sense), not on "society."[28]

Could this quote reveal that, for Weber, the opposite of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism was an Orthodox ethic and spirit of community? The tantalizing reference to natural right here is also interesting—did he mean he saw a Russian version of natural right deriving from Orthodoxy?[29] We know that Weber planned, but never

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des der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe," *Leviathan* 19, no. 3 (1991): 435–451 and Andreas E. Buss, "Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the Other Spheres of Life in Max Weber's Russia," in Alan Sica, ed., *The Routledge International Handbook on Max Weber* (Boston: Routledge, 2022), 235–247. Treiber points out that Weber probably learned about Soloviev through Stepun, who wrote his dissertation on him. Treiber, "Geburt," 442. For his acquaintance with Stepun and Kistiakovskii and the publication of a translation of Soloviev see his letters to Paul Siebeck in M. Rainer Lepsius and Wolgang J. Mommsen, eds., *Max Weber, Briefe 1906–1908* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994), 110–111, 119, 127, 141. The reference to Khomiakov is found in Weber's speech to the "German Sociological Society," discussed below.

26. For Weber's interest in Bulgakov's book, see his letters to Edgar Jaffe in M. Rainer Lepsius and Wolfgang J. Mommsen, eds., *Max Weber, Briefe 1911–1912* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 550, 747. An excerpt was published as "Die naturphilosophischen Grundlagen der Wirtschaftstheorie," in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 36, no. 2 (1913), 359–393.

27. See Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, ed. and trans. Catherine Evtukhov (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 101–103, 122, 153.

28. Ferdinand Toennies, Georg Simmel, Ernst Troeltsch, and Max Weber, "Max Weber on church, sect, and mysticism," *Sociological Analysis* 34, no. 2 (1973): 140–149, 144–145. It is interesting that Weber used Tönnies binary of community/society [Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft] long before Andrzej Walicki did in his *Slavophile Controversy*, and he did so in the presence of Tönnies himself.

29. This is explored in Buss, "Eastern," 238–240.

wrote, a book on Orthodox Christianity. What would he have written? The answer is not at all clear, but this trace of Russia in Weber is worth exploring.

The second thread of Russian influence may well lead directly to Weber's conception of "the disenchantment of the world," which appears in his lecture "Science as a Vocation" given in 1917, and has become a cornerstone of the philosophical and sociological debates about modernity. Disenchantment was, for Weber, the disturbing rise of "intellectualization and rationalization" that replaced the understanding of the world as composed of "mysterious incalculable forces." In Weber's words:

> Increasing intellectualization and rationalization ... means ... that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage. ... Technical means and calculations perform the service. ...
>
> Now this process of disenchantment ... and, in general, this "progress," to which science belongs as a line and motive force, do they have any meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical? You will find the question raised in the most principled form in the works of Leo Tolstoi. ... Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: "Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live ...'"[30]

You will note that Russia, in the form of Tolstoy, is not even hidden but right at the center of Weber's disenchantment thesis.[31] It is worth asking, however, whether Tolstoy, given Weber's wider reading, was but the most prominent representative of Russian philosophical counter-tradition that included Khomiakov, Soloviev, and Bulgakov, a counter-tradition that forced Weber to examine the drawbacks of excessive scientism and rationalism, and which may have even helped him to formulate the concept of "rationalization" in the first place.

If Jaspers is correct that Weber, as a philosopher, utilized the scientific method while also articulating its drawbacks and limits, we can suggest that Russian thought helped him to do so. Perhaps it was the Russians that infected Weber with the anxiety at the heart of his "disenchantment" thesis, an anxiety that modernity was losing sight of the human, that dignity, and even "natural right" could not be achieved through modern science. Weber's "existentialism" may, in part, be of Russian origin.

The thinker most openly troubled by Weber's existentialist rejection of rationalism was the German-Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss, considered the founder of Straussianism and American neo-conservatism. For Strauss, Weber

> tended to see before him the alternative of either complete spiritual emptiness or religious revival. He despaired of the modern this-worldly irreligious experiment, and yet he remained attached to it because he was fated to be-

30. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 152–153.

31. A discussion of this is found in Oaks, "Antinomy," 201–205.

> lieve in science as he understood it. The result of this conflict, which he could not resolve, was his belief that the conflict between values cannot be resolved by human reason.[32]

In a way, Strauss's philosophical project endeavored to recover reason from the clutches of Weberian doubt. According to Alan Mittleman, Strauss's philosophy was animated by this question of reason and faith, and the struggle to recover reason in an age of doubt, because Strauss believed that "there is a truly just way of life capable of being known by natural reason and lived out in political society."[33] I will now hypothesize, however, that Leo Strauss recovered reason also by grappling with a hidden Russia at the heart of Western thought.

Strauss's contemporary legacy is primarily located in the Anglo-American philosophical world, but his early intellectual development took place in continental Europe. Before he emigrated to the United States in 1938, he met and corresponded with a kind of who's who of European philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Alexander Kojève. It was while in Europe that Strauss began to consider the philosophical question of the relationship between reason and religion.[34]

According to his biographer, Daniel Tanguay, however, Strauss came up with a novel formulation of the relationship in 1946. From that time, he referred to the conflict between reason and religion as one between "Jerusalem and Athens."[35] The binary is a reference to the well-known question of Tertullian, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" But Strauss did not formulate his binary in reference to Tertullian. Instead, careful reading of Strauss's various writings on the subject reveals a hidden Russian influence, specifically that of Lev Shestov, the Russian-Jewish philosopher who wrote his final book, *Athens and Jerusalem*, just before his death in 1938.

Shestov was born in Kyiv in 1866 and befriended Berdyaev long before they both emigrated to France. When Shestov came to Paris, he brought with him an existentialism far more radical than even that of Berdyaev. Shestov's philosophy intrigued the German interwar philosophical world, and Shestov met and corresponded with a number of German philosophers. He was a good friend of Edmund Husserl, who introduced him to Martin Heidegger and suggested that Shestov read Søren Kierkegaard (according to Samuel Moyn, Shestov reintroduced Kierkegaard into European thought). He was a part of the philosophical circles in Paris that included Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. Strauss and Shestov, therefore, shared a common philosophical community.[36]

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32. Quoted and discussed in Alan Mittleman, "Weber's Politics as a Vocation: Some American Considerations," *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 279–295, 281.

33. Mittleman, "Politics," 280.

34. For a discussion of the European foundations of Strauss's thought, see Samuel Moyn, "From Experience to Law: Leo Strauss and the Weimar Crisis of the Philosophy of Religion," *History of European Ideas* 33 (2) (2007): 174–94; and Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

35. Tanguay, *Strauss*, 144.

36. Biographies of Shestov in English are few, see Michael Finkenthal, *Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). Brian Horowitz has written excellent articles on Shestov's ideas, see Brian Horowitz, "The tension of Athens & Jerusalem in the philosophy of Lev Shestov," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 43, no. 1 (1999): 156–173; and Brian Horowitz and Bernard Martin, "The demolition of reason in Lev Shestov's Athens and Jerusalem," *Poetics Today* (1998): 221–233.

Strauss's connection with Russia, and with Shestov in particular, has been mostly invisible to Strauss scholars (and to Shestov scholars, for that matter). The possibility that Strauss read Shestov is often briefly raised, only to be dismissed.[37] But the evidence of a Russian connection exists. Strauss participated in a briefly mentioned "Russian course" in Berlin and a "Russian circle" in London. And there is no doubt that Strauss read Shestov—he specifically mentions the existence of "notes to Shestov" in his writings on Plato's Euthyphro. In sum, Strauss spent time with Russian thought in general and Shestov's philosophy in particular. This leads to the specific question: Could it be that Leo Strauss wrote "Jerusalem and Athens" partly in response to Lev Shestov's *Athens and Jerusalem*?[38]

Placed side by side, the writings of Strauss and Shestov on this subject come to diametrically different conclusions, but they share the same premise: the question of Athens vs. Jerusalem is central to modernity. Both philosophers suggest that modern people must make a choice between the cities, between, as Strauss calls it, "ways of life."[39] Importantly, moreover, they both trace the origin of the question to the same place. They both begin, not with Tertullian, but the Biblical book of Genesis and the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. More concisely, for both men, the dilemma between Athens and Jerusalem begins with the serpent in the garden.

In *Athens and Jerusalem*, Shestov makes the startling claim that Western philosophy is the legacy of the serpent. It was the serpent who told Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, so that they would ascend to a divine, impersonal, and comprehensive understanding of the world, to become "like gods, knowing." Modern philosophers, unlike Eve, do not even hesitate before eating of the Tree.

> All of us are persuaded that the serpent who enticed our primal forefathers to taste of the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil did not deceive them. ... If it is necessary to choose between God who warns us against the fruits of the tree ... and the serpent who extols these fruits to us, the educated European cannot hesitate; he will follow the serpent ... he

37. Jeffrey Bernstein has an astute summary of Shestov's Athens and Jerusalem but declares "whether Strauss was familiar with Shestov remains an open question." Bernstein, *Strauss*, 11. Remi Brague declares that Strauss could not have read Shestov's *Athens and Jerusalem* before Strauss's own formulation of the problem because Brague misdates the first publication to 1951 (it was published in French and German in 1938). See, Rémi Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss's 'Muslim' Understanding of Greek Philosophy," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (1998): 235–59, 236. https://doi.org/10.2307/1773441. The following works do not consider Shestov at all: Steven B. Smith, "Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 1 (1991): 75–99. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407552. David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (State University of New York Press, 2009); Orr, *Jerusalem*. The only sustained comparison of the thought of Shestov and Strauss on the subject of Athens and Jerusalem is found in Tikhon G. Sheynov, "'Athens and Jerusalem' of Leo Strauss and Leo Shestov," *Voprosy filosofii* 4 (2024): 126–136.

38. References to the Russian group and circle appear in Strauss's letters to Jacob Klein in Heinrich Meier, ed., *Leo Strauss: Gesammelte Schriften, Band 3: Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften. Briefe* Vol. 46. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 527, 530. Reference to Shestov appears in Hannes Kerber and Svetozar Minkov, eds., *Leo Strauss on Plato's Euthyphro: The 1948 Notebook, with Lectures and Critical Writings* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2024), 97.

39. Laurenz Denker, Hannes Kerber, and David Kretz, "Leo Strauss's 'Jerusalem and Athens' (1950): Three Lectures Delivered at Hillel House, Chicago," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 29, no. 1 (2022): 133–173, 138.

> who seeks to discredit knowledge in our eyes lies, while the truth speaks through the mouth of him who glorifies knowledge.[40]

Shestov, Hegel, Spinoza, and so many other philosophers crave the knowledge that would make the world predictable and understandable, a world which they could "know" in all of its complexity. Starting with Spinoza, philosophy wanted to "discover the rigorous and unchangeable order of being," and "the science which reveals this order to man." In a way, this sort of knowledge was the precursor to a kind of Stoic acceptance of life, and knowledge that leads to patient endurance of all that comes. This is why, for Shestov, Spinoza had a rule: not to lament, not to curse, but to understand."[41]

For Shestov, the tragedy of the Tree lies in a simple fact: *the serpent lied*. Philosophers hubristically chose knowledge over God, pursued the supposed omniscience of reason and fact, but did not become gods. Instead, they were imprisoned by their own rationalism, bound by the heavy chains of rational and material causality. In this manner, they lost their freedom and their human dignity, guaranteed by the God who created all that was reasonable and that stood above reason itself. "Adam exchanged the freedom which determined his relationship to the Creator who hears and listens," wrote Shestov, for "the indifferent and impersonal truths which do not hear and do not listen to anything." Humanity disobeyed God and became enslaved by necessity.[42]

For Shestov, controversially, freedom and dignity paradoxically require the absurd: "the relationship of man to God is freedom." This was Tertullian's statement of faith, which Shestov, though Jewish, quoted approvingly: "the son of God died: it is absolutely credible because it is absurd; and having been buried, he rose from the dead; it is certain because it is impossible."[43] Only an absurd God, wholly free from the tyranny of causality, creates a space for vertiginous human freedom, a space into which faith can leap. This Jewish existentialist faith became the cornerstone of Shestov's philosophical contribution to Western thought.[44]

In his talk entitled "Jerusalem and Athens," given in 1950, I think Strauss implicitly attacked Shestov: "What is to be done with those who assert and reassert their belief in revelation while claiming to see farther and higher than does the positive mind?" What is to be done, indeed! Only one thing: to rescue philosophy from the clutches of Shestov's absurdism.

To do so, Strauss himself turns to the serpent in the garden. Strauss defends the serpent: "The serpent spoke the truth." His evidence? "Everything happens exactly as the serpent had predicted. Adam and Eve do not die, their eyes are opened, they become similar to God by acquiring knowledge." Yes, Adam and Eve are punished, but there is only one lesson in this, according to Strauss: God is capricious and fickle, God, it seems, wants "simplicity of his obedience to God and trust in his maker" even in the

40. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), 80

41. Shestov, *Athens*, 83, 10

42. Shestov, *Athens*, 206

43. Shestov, *Athens*, 165

44. According to Sidney Monas, there was a strain of Hasidism in Shestov's thought. See Sidney Monas, "New Introduction," in Leon Shestov, *Chekhov and Other Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), v–xxiv, vii–ix.

face of His arbitrary whims. For Strauss, unthinking obedience was the Biblical road to Jerusalem.[45]

So how did Strauss rescue reason and philosophy from revelation? First of all, he resolutely declared his agreement with Shestov: "Philosophy is not *necessarily* the right way of life. Philosophy is not *evidently* the right way of life. The *choice* of philosophy by an individual is then based on *blind choice*, on blind faith."[46] Like Shestov, Strauss believes that people must choose between faith and reason, and that the choice of reason is, in fact, a blind leap. But in another place, he adds that there are a few who do make that choice. For this reason, inspired by Shestov, Strauss reread Genesis, but did so in his own peculiar manner: "esoterically."[47] Only a careful reading of the implications inserted by what Strauss calls the "Biblical authors," could a reader the meaning hidden for those capable and intelligent enough to see it. In one reading, God extols revelation and obedience, and for the unthinking many, this is enough. But for the few, chosen and unafraid, the serpent points the way to reason, to philosophy, to Athens. These, Strauss wrote, can become "kings," the very few, since "knowledge of the most important things will remain, as it always was, the preserve of the philosophers, i.e., of a very small part of the population."[48] Only a few, it seems, can be brave enough to follow the serpent.

Strauss thus inverted Shestov, but it seems that, as Berdyaev did for Maritain, and as Soloviev, Khomiakov, and Bulgakov did for Weber, so Shestov challenged Strauss to grapple with existential and theological questions at the heart of modernity, and to contend with what it means to be human in a world of science and progress. In other words, Strauss grappled with the Russian counter-tradition, and thus, this counter-tradition reveals new perspectives on his philosophical project.

In the hidden Russia in Western philosophy, we see a repeated, subterranean challenge to European and Western philosophizing. If we return to the Isaiah Berlin quote with which this article begins, we can propose the following: if continental philosophy is "impenetrably dark," "romantic," and "struggling" with "cosmic issues" upon which "salvation" depends, it is so partly because of the hidden Russian undercurrent within it. As Dostoevsky noted in *Brothers Karamazov*, nothing was more intellectually Russian than "the eternal questions, of the existence of God, and immortality. ..." The continental builders of systems—Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers, Maritain, and Strauss encountered in Russian philosophy an exploration of boundaries, an understanding of limits, a pointing toward the transcendent and the salvific—all of which could be countered, but none of which could be ignored. It is in this hidden Russian anti-rationalism and

45. Denker, et al., eds. "Jerusalem," 157–158.

46. Denker, et al., eds. "Jerusalem," 173.

47. Discussions of Strauss's esoteric method, primarily extolled in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) can be found in Robert Howse, "Reading between the Lines: Exotericism, Esotericism, and the Philosophical Rhetoric of Leo Strauss," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 32, no. 1 (1999): 60–77; and Shadia B. Drury "The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 13, no. 3 (1985): 315–337.

48. Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary Magazine*, June 1967, https://www.commentary.org/articles/leo-strauss/jerusalem-and-athens-some-introductory-reflections/.

anti-scientism that, I think, the best of the Russian counter-tradition resides, a counter-tradition whose as yet undiscovered streams we should not be afraid to explore.

It is fitting to close with parting thoughts from Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson on Mikhail Bakhtin, whose influence on the West has not yet been forgotten. According to them, Bakhtin's literary criticism attacked "theoretism," which was a modern "way of thinking that abstracts from concrete human actions all that is generalizable," and "takes that abstraction as a whole." Bakhtin saw that theoretism "blinds us to the particular person and situation, which is where morality resides." In this, Morson and Emerson argue, he was a part of the Russian counter-tradition, and it is as good a summary of the counter-tradition as any philosophical definition.[49]

The Russian counter-tradition may not have provided clear answers to how one must live, but sought instead for a philosophy of the particular, the existential, the transcendent, and the human. It insisted on freedom and dignity. It called for "a surplus of humanness" to undermine the parsimony of ideology. Born in the contest against the prevailing worldview of the twentieth century, concerned to defend the human personality against the totalizing ideologies of communism and fascism that threatened it, this counter-tradition retains its relevance in our present era. Our much-discussed present crises—of liberalism, of the humanities, of artificial intelligence—could benefit from a revitalization of the concept of personality that takes into account the whole human being: physical and spiritual, in its immanence and transcendence. It may be hidden and a counter-tradition, but in a time where the human person is devalued, human dignity is in question, and human rights are violated in the West and in Russia, this counter-tradition deserves to be resurrected to challenge us anew.

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49. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, eds., *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 7, 9.