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## Through Asceticism to Creativity: The Influence of Nikolai Berdyaev's Philosophy on St Maria Skobtsova's Spirituality

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**Abstract:** *This paper argues that for St Maria Skobtsova, creativity is connected with asceticism or rather a critique of a certain understanding of asceticism based on the anthropological claims of creativity developed by the Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev. Berdyaev warns of the dangers of a narrow view of asceticism that can lead to a struggle against life itself and not against its fallen consequences. This view is also shared by St Maria in her project for a new monasticism. This narrow view of asceticism that both Berdyaev and St Maria denounce lacks an authentic eschatological earning for the otherworldly and tries to adapt to the limited horizon of the fallen world in a one-sided rejection of its sinfulness that envelops it as a spiritual totality. The overcoming of this narrow ascetical spiritual vision is achieved in creative activity that also ennobles asceticism, thus giving it*

*its proper character in the Christian life. This understanding is grounded in an anthropology that recognizes the divine image of the human being that is called to a creative participation in God's creative work, a spiritual vision that both Berdyaev and St Maria share in their own particular ways.*

**Keywords:** *Asceticism, Creativity, Nikolai Berdyaev, Maria Skobtsova, Russian Religious Philosophy.*

## **Introduction**

In more recent years the thought of St Maria Skobtsova (1891-1945) has received a very well-deserved attention and study in the Orthodox theological world. Even her contemporaries recognized her as a remarkable spiritual and intellectual figure. Nicholas Zernov describes her as “the most original personality among the Christian leaders of the intelligentsia.”<sup>1</sup> Another prime representative of the Christian leaders of the Russian religious intelligentsia, mentor and close friend of St Maria was the Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948). Donald Lowrie in his biography of Berdyaev calls St Maria a close friend of Berdyaev, but

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai ZERNOV, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), 241.

also “that most unorthodox Orthodox nun”<sup>2</sup> which seems to fit very well with Berdyaev’s self-description as a not-so-typical Orthodox Christian as he claims in his autobiography: “I cannot, in all conscience, call myself a typical ‘orthodox’ of any kind; but Orthodoxy was nearer to me (and I hope I am nearer to Orthodoxy) than either Catholicism or Protestantism.”<sup>3</sup> As such an affinity between the two can be intuited. What is often overlooked, however, is not only the close friendship between St Maria and Berdyaev but also the affinity of their thought, and the influence that Berdyaev’s thought had on St Maria’s. Another overlooked fact is the meditative role that St Maria tried to have between Berdyaev and Fr Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), her confessor. As Antoine Arjakovsky argues, St Maria tried to provide a synthesis between Berdyaev’s anthropologic-dualist-prophetic thought and Bulgakov’s cosmological-monist-sacramental vision.<sup>4</sup> But on the issue of creativity,<sup>5</sup> St Maria sided with Berdyaev who

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<sup>2</sup> Donald LOWRIE, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974), 210.

<sup>3</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography*, tr. by Katharine Lampert (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 176.

<sup>4</sup> Antoine ARJAKOVSKY, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1924-1940* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2013), 81.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper I will be using the terms creativity and

saw creativity as primarily the human being's prophetic response to God, and less a sacramental fact of the world as Bulgakov saw it.<sup>6</sup> Others saw her more as continuing the anthropological tradition of Vladimir Solovyov and Bulgakov.<sup>7</sup> In any case, after the relationship between Berdyaev and Bulgakov has cooled down, St Maria remained a close friend to both; to the very moment she was deported to the *Ravensbrück* concentration camp where she died a martyr's death. Berdyaev describes her as "one of the most remarkable people whose friendship I gained in exile... she... embodied all the traits characteristic of Russian women saints—above all, an all-consuming solidarity with the pain and sufferings of the world and an undaunted readiness to serve and to sacrifice herself for her fellow-men."<sup>8</sup>

This paper attempts to argue that the relationship between Berdyaev and St Maria was not only one of friendship in the hardships of the Russian diaspora in Paris but also one of intellectual and theological affinity,

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creativity interchangeably respective to the context or the citations given.

<sup>6</sup> ARJAKOVSKY, *The Way*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Katerina BAUEROVA, "The Mysticism of Pan-Unity" in *Wrestling With the Mind of the Fathers*, ed. by Ivana Noble, Katerina Bauerova, Tim Noble, Parush Parushev (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 192.

<sup>8</sup> BERDYAEV, *Dream and Reality*, 279.

where the philosophical thought of Berdyaev found deep roots in the spiritual life and thought of St Maria. St Maria's spirituality is characterized by a strong contextual character in which she found herself and to which she responded in the most faithful way that she saw fit. In this sense, in order to better understand the character of St Maria's spirituality a brief sketch of her life will be offered at the beginning of this paper, pointing out her relationship to Berdyaev where relevant. The next point of the paper covers the critique of a narrow and limiting view of asceticism that we find in both Berdyaev and St Maria, where we can clearly see a strong affinity between the two. Building upon this the next point of the paper will explore the way in which they both saw the possibility of overcoming this narrow asceticism in creativeness that also brings with it a more authentic vision of asceticism. The final point of the paper explores the way in which Berdyaev and St Maria understand creativity as such. Underlined here is the difference between their understanding of the notion of creativeness. Whereas they agree on the importance of overcoming narrow asceticism in creative activity, they do not completely agree on the nature of creativeness. This only holds to show that they were both independent thinkers who despite some differences on certain aspects

of their understanding of this issue stayed close friends and can be seen together as representatives of a spirituality of creativeness.

### 1. Brief Sketch of St Maria's Life<sup>9</sup>

Born as Elizaveta (Liza) Yurievna Pilenko in Riga in 1891, she grew up close to the city of Anapa on the shores of the Black Sea. At the age of fourteen, she lost her father which led to her also losing her faith and becoming an atheist. At this time she became attracted to anarchism and left-wing radicalism, which stayed with her in one form throughout her entire life. At the age of eighteen, she married<sup>10</sup> and led a bohemian lifestyle in Petrograd, publishing her first volume of poetry in 1912, and became again interested in Christianity. The marriage broke down and ended in divorce before the beginning

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<sup>9</sup> The life of St Maria has been the subject of a number of books that have been consulted for this brief sketch of her life. In this sense see: Stratton SMITH, *The Rebel Nun: The Moving Story of Mother Maria of Paris* (London: Souvenir Press, 1965); Sergei HACKEL, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova 1891-1945* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982); Laurence VARAUT, *Marie Skobtsov. Sainte orthodoxe victime du nazisme (1891-1945)* (Paris: Éditions Salvator, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Her husband Dmitri Kuzmin-Karaviev also converted to Christianity and became a Catholic priest.

of the First World War and she moves back to Anapa. In 1916 she published a second volume of poetry. In Anapa, she joined the Social Revolutionary Party which became a competitor of the Bolsheviks. In the early months of the October Revolution, she was the secretary of Leon Trotsky, but because he dissolved the Socialist Revolutionary Party she considered assassinating him, but she never got the chance to do it. She also became the mayor of Anapa, being the first woman mayor in Russia, but soon after that the city was occupied by the White Army. She was arrested and tried as a Bolshevik but was found innocent by judge Daniel Skobotsov whom she soon married. Because the civil war was being won by the Bolsheviks they decided to leave the country and in 1922 finally settled in Paris. It was the same year that Berdyaev was exiled from Russia on the famous philosophers' ship. Although Berdyaev first settled in Berlin, after two years in 1924 he also settled for the rest of his life in Paris where they both collaborated in the Russian Student Christian Movement.

In Paris, she suffered great hardships which culminated in the death of her youngest daughter which led to an estranged relationship with her husband. But this situation has led her "to long for a change in her way of life so that she could be a mother to all those in need.



Together with this, there came the idea of monastic life, which would also be fulfilled in social work directed to Russian refugees in France.”<sup>11</sup> Despite Berdyaev’s advice to her to not embrace monasticism, as he feared that she will be relegated away from the world behind the walls of a monastery, she took the monastic vows in 1932 with the blessing of Metropolitan Evlogii that also granted her an ecclesial divorce. She took the name of Maria after Sf. Mary of Egypt. Berdyaev’s fears however did not come to fruition, as she pleaded that her acceptance of monasticism implied an understanding of monasticism different from that known in imperial Russia.

The context dictated the necessity to adapt monasticism to the context in which she found herself, a monasticism in the world in the service of the poor. She saw her condition as an opportunity to get to a more authentic and profound meaning of monasticism, to the heart of monasticism. Before taking the monastic vows she visited a few monasteries in Latvia but was disappointed about what she called a bourgeois way of life. As Olivier Clément has pointed out, “Mother Maria

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<sup>11</sup> Katerina BAUEROVA, “Going to the Very End: The Witness of the Martyrs” in *The Ways of Orthodox Theology in the West*, ed. by Ivana Noble, Katerina Bauerova, Tim Noble, Parush Parushev (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), 294.

wanted to become a nun, not to take on the monastic tradition of becoming a hermit or cenobite (less the former than the latter), but to manifest her commitment with no turning back. She was determined to consecrate herself and give herself totally.”<sup>12</sup> Her monasticism was not by any means bourgeois. She came to the conclusion that her context dictated the need for a new type of monasticism. She says in this sense that “today there is only one monastery for a monk — the whole world.”<sup>13</sup> Even though the new conditions required a creative reinterpretation of monasticism within the new context, the ethos of what she was aiming towards has always been at the heart of monasticism, particularly in the tradition of Russian monasticism. As Tim Noble has argued, St Maria “represented the tradition of Nil Sorsky in arguably its purest form in Paris, with her insistence on the centrality of non-possession and her attempts to re-draw the plans of monasticism in a new situation.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT, “Preface” to Mother Maria SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, tr. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 11.

<sup>13</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Tim NOBLE, “Hesychasm in Retreat” in *Wrestling With the Mind of the Fathers*, ed. by Ivana Noble, Katerina Bauerova, Tim Noble, Parush Parushev (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), 112.

From the beginning to the very end, she sacrificed herself for others, dedicating herself to the service of those in need without considering her well-being. She established hostels for the poor and refugees. Throughout this time, not only was she working for the poor, but was also very active in the literary and theological circles, writing poetry, plays, and theological articles, especially for the journal *The Way* (Put') founded and edited by Berdyaev. She was also embroidering icons for the chapels of the hostels. Her service to others has led ultimately to her martyr's death. After the Nazi occupation of France, she offered refuge and forged baptism certificates for Jewish people which ultimately led to her arrest and death in the *Ravensbrück* concentration camp sometime in 1945. Olivier Clément claims that "Mother Maria was part of the great Orthodox tradition that demonstrated love for neighbor to the point of total abandon, as did Christ."<sup>15</sup> For this reason, she was canonized as a saint by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2004.

## 2. The Critique of Narrow Asceticism

Berdyaev's critique of asceticism had a great influence on how St Maria understood monasticism and

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<sup>15</sup> CLÉMENT, "Preface," 9.

its ascetical dimension in her own life, but also in her writings. The concept of ascetic Christianity is the preferred way of Berdyaev to refer to a certain interpretation of Christianity, that is highly dominated by the ascetic ideal. Also, sometimes he uses the formulations of monastic Christianity, or historical Orthodoxy meaning the same thing, the concepts being interchangeable. Through the concept of asceticism attached to that of Christianity, Berdyaev does not want to talk necessarily about asceticism as such. He recognizes the merits of asceticism in spiritual practice if its role is properly understood. He says in this sense that “asceticism is one of the eternal ways of religious experience. And we cannot doubt the religious value and effectiveness of this way.”<sup>16</sup>

The critique of asceticism that he articulates refers to a way of envisioning spiritual life as restricted to ascetical practice or dominated by the ascetical ideal. Berdyaev usually connected the ascetic ideal in spiritual life with a legalistic, juridical view. The overly ascetic ideal in the spiritual life was the dominant attitude he found present in the monastic practice of his time, and he considered that this needs a thorough critique. In a very

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<sup>16</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, tr. by Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 150.

early article from 1908 shortly after he converted to Christianity, he writes that “monasticism continues to deny the values of the world, it condemns creative impulses, it is hostile to deliverance from the powers of this world, it esteems the evil of the world and the justification of its existence.”<sup>17</sup> The question of asceticism here is related to the spiritual path and viewed in a strictly negative and limited way. Although his attitude becomes more nuanced later on, the critique of a self-sufficient view of asceticism and of asceticism that puts itself at the center of the spiritual life remains a constant throughout Berdyaev’s entire life.

The question of the meaning and role of asceticism in the Christian life is a little bit more complex than just expressing a spiritual path. The question entails a particular understanding of the nature of the human being, his spirituality, and his dignity. At the basis of this problem lies a deficient anthropology, and a deficient Christology. Berdyaev thinks that “neither the anthropology of the Fathers, nor scholastic anthropology, nor yet the anthropology of the humanists, can satisfy us. The traditional Christian doctrine of man has not

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<sup>17</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, “Christ and the World” in *Russkaya Mysl’*, no. 1 (1908), 42-55, accessed on 10 February 2020, [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1908\\_149\\_4.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1908_149_4.html).

revealed the creative nature of man; it has been overwhelmed by the depressing consciousness of sin.”<sup>18</sup> This overwhelming consciousness of sin in the human being stands in contrast with the view that the human being is made in the image of God. This creates in Christianity a pessimistic attitude towards life that ultimately inhibits spiritual development and thus the realization of personhood. Berdyaev says in this sense that “within historical orthodoxy in which the monastic ascetic spirit prevailed, the subject of man has not been, and could not be adequately revealed. The tendency to deviate towards monophysitism predominated.”<sup>19</sup> He sometimes uses stronger language to describe his disagreement with the ascetic ideal: “I believe that mysticism of the ascetic type, as exhibited especially in Syrian asceticism, is a travesty of the teaching of Christ; it is intrinsically Monophysite and belies the Christian revelation of God-manhood.”<sup>20</sup> Monophysitism has always been a temptation for the Church according to Berdyaev.<sup>21</sup> The difficulty in understanding the relation

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<sup>18</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *The Divine and the Human*, tr. by R.M. French (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1949), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *The Russian Idea*, tr. by R.M. French (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 96

<sup>20</sup> BERDYAEV, *Dream and Reality*, 187.

<sup>21</sup> I must point out here that when referring to monophysitism

between the Creator and creation, especially in the event of the Incarnation of the Logos always had correspondences in the practices of religious life. In monophysitism, the creative calling of the human being is denied.

Through the rejection of the world in a strictly ascetical approach the ultimate reality that the world signifies, that it points to, is rejected, and together with it, the divine image of the human being is rejected as well. Berdyaev says in this sense “the spirituality which turns its back upon the pluralist world, as, for example, a certain form of spirituality in India, in Plotinus, and in monastic asceticism, cannot be regarded as Christian; it contradicts the divine-human character of Christianity and the command of Christ about love for one’s neighbour.”<sup>22</sup> The common danger that both Berdyaev and St Maria found in ascetical Christianity is the indifference to *the other*, the ignorance of Christ’s commandment: “love thy neighbor.” Berdyaev points out that it is in the monastic way of life that this danger is

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Berdyaev does not refer to the Oriental Orthodox Churches, but to a theological predisposition that he found in his own Russian Church at his time. He calls monophysite any attempt to eliminate or underplay the human creative dimension in the relationship between the human being and God.

<sup>22</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Divine and the Human*, 131.

most preminent: “monastic asceticism frequently encouraged not only indifference but also ill-will towards the creature and fellow-men.”<sup>23</sup>

St. Maria also describes how this indifference and egocentrism manifest themselves in the world of the monk: “egocentrism defines itself not so much by material miserliness and greed as by their spiritual manifestations. The egocentric accumulates spiritual riches and is greedy for them. He opposes himself to the world. The world comes out as some sort of background for his development”<sup>24</sup> A view of asceticism that aims at mastery over one’s nature and spirit oftentimes leads to egocentrism if it does not lead to love for the others. If asceticism remains an individual act that avoids the messy world where others are perceived as obstacles and temptations to one’s spiritual perfection, it is a spiritual dead-end. She says that “such ascetic renunciation of the world is an extreme form of egoism, an improper and inadmissible act of self-preservation.”<sup>25</sup> Also, she speaks about how “spiritual egocentrism replaces the goal of true asceticism.”<sup>26</sup> This narrow view of asceticism that

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<sup>23</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *Spirit and Reality*, tr. by George Reavey (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 74.

<sup>24</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 169.

<sup>26</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 172.



both Berdyaev and St Maria denounce lacks an authentic eschatological earning for the otherworldly, which should have been the prime motivation for asceticism, but tries to adapt to the limitations of the fallen world while rejecting its sinfulness. This understanding of asceticism ends up rejecting God's creation by conflating it with its fallen aspects, which also leads to the rejection of communion with other people out of the fear of losing the focus of the ascetic discipline.

### **3. The Overcoming of Narrow Asceticism in Creativity**

Both Berdyaev and St Maria are not necessarily against asceticism as such, but against the absolutization of asceticism. Berdyaev is of the opinion that "only when asceticism is combined with mysticism it acquires a different character."<sup>27</sup> St Maria also proposes as an alternative to the misleading and limited understanding of asceticism a notion of spiritual asceticism that does not reject the world and others for the accumulation of spiritual safety and riches. She says that "spiritual asceticism here consists in the most open, unequivocal, and conscious renunciation of oneself, in a readiness always to follow the will of God, in a desire to become

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<sup>27</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *The Destiny of Man*, tr. by Natalie Duddington (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 123.

the fulfiller of God's design in the world, a tool in His hands, a means and not an end."<sup>28</sup> Berdyaev even makes positive comments on the nature and importance of such an understanding of asceticism that could have positive effects in the spiritual life and creativity. Authentic asceticism implies self-sacrifice, which despite Nietzsche's protest does not imply a morality of weakness, but of strength. In this way, Berdyaev inverts Nietzsche's pronouncements about Christianity and claims that "Christianity is the religion of the strong in spirit, not the weak. Christian sanctity has always meant a selection of the strong in spirit, an accumulation of spiritual power."<sup>29</sup>

The very fact that God is a creator and made the human being according to His image draws the logical conclusion that the human being was created as a creative being and it is through this creativeness that the human being expresses his or her freedom. Berdyaev says that "God created man in His own image and likeness, i.e. made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience to His power."<sup>30</sup> God expects from the human being a creative

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<sup>28</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 241.

<sup>30</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 43.

response, a creative participation in God's creation. The call to creativeness is the call of God to human beings to achieve the fulfillment of their nature, divine perfection. It is the call from Matthew 5:48 where Christ says: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

St Maria in her way of living monasticism provides us with a critique of monasticism and asceticism and a model of overcoming its limitations and ennobling it through creative activity, in her project of a 'new monasticism.' Berdyaev already early on in his *The Meaning of the Creative Act* has written of the need for a new monasticism<sup>31</sup> and has later recognized that the way in which St Maria is living her monastic life concurs with his ideas.<sup>32</sup> But it is not only her life that testifies to this, but she also wrote articles that deal with these issues. In her article on the *Types of Religious Life*, she identifies and critiques four types of religious life: synodal, ritualist, aesthetic and ascetic. Although she recognizes the merits of each type, she argues that each of them is lacking or is wrongly oriented as an authentic expression of Christianity. We can also see here that she holds creativity as a standard against which she judges each of

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<sup>31</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 166.

<sup>32</sup> Grigori BENEVICH, "Mother Mariya (Skobtsova): A Model of Lay Service" in *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 27, no. 1 (1999), 102.

these types of religious life. When talking about the ascetic type she connects it with creativity as the way of authentic asceticism. She says here that “since religious life demands of man sacrifice in the name of higher spiritual values, it is always ascetic. At the same time, at its deepest, creative life is also a way of asceticism, since it also demands total sacrifice in the name of higher creative values.”<sup>33</sup> There is present here a dialectic relationship between true or authentic asceticism and creativity. The same dialectical relationship we can initially find in Berdyaev’s works as well quite early on in his career as we can see in *The Meaning of the Creative Act*.

True asceticism strengthens the spirit and helps bring forth the creative activity of the person, and as such become a person who is creative by definition according to Berdyaev. Berdyaev states that “creativity does not assert what asceticism denies. That world which asceticism denies is denied by creativity as well: what is affirmed by creativity is quite another world.”<sup>34</sup> This other world that creativity affirms is the Kingdom of God. True asceticism helps creative activity come forth and collaborate with God in the continuous creation and

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<sup>33</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 163.

<sup>34</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 153.

transfiguration of the world towards the Kingdom of God. But as there is a negative or inauthentic understanding of asceticism, there is also a negative understanding of creativity as well. Berdyaev warns that “authentic creative action supposes asceticism, purification and sacrifice; whereas fallen man in his state of self-satisfaction often creates not in God’s Name but in his own; he gives birth to a false and illusory being, to non-being. [...] It is for this reason that the religious justification of the creative act is not necessarily the justification of all creation whatsoever, for creation may possess a fatal character.”<sup>35</sup>

Authentic creativity that is based on true asceticism demands the sacrifice of one’s ego for the other, as the only way to make the Kingdom of God present is in communion with the other. Berdyaev says in this sense that “creativity requires that a man should forget about his moral progress and sacrifice his personality. It is a path that demands heroism, but it is different from the path of personal improvement and salvation. Creativity is necessary for the Kingdom of God—for God’s work in the world—but it is not at all

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<sup>35</sup> Nikolai BERDYAEV, *Freedom and the Spirit*, tr. by Oliver Fielding Clarke (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 214.

necessary for saving one's soul."<sup>36</sup> This idea is also present in the writings of St Maria, the idea that creativeness requires authentic asceticism. She says that "since religious life demands of man sacrifice in the name of higher spiritual values, it is always ascetic. At the same time, at its deepest, creative life is also a way of asceticism, since it also demands total sacrifice in the name of higher creative values."<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. The Nature of Creativity

Although Berdyaev and St Maria agree on the fact that narrow asceticism should be overcome in the creative act as an authentic striving against the consequences of the fall and for the realization of the Kingdom of God, they do not completely share the same understanding of the nature of creativity. One such disagreement that one might identify is on the Scriptural character of creativity that also has further implications as we shall see. Berdyaev in his book *The Meaning of the Creative Act* published in 1916 claims that "there is not one word in the Gospel about creativeness."<sup>38</sup> This however does not mean that creativeness is something

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<sup>36</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Destiny of Man*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> SKOBTSOVA, *Essential Writings*, 163.

<sup>38</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 63.

contrary to God's will or that it is a non-essential or non-important aspect of the human being's relationship to God. He nonetheless recognized that there is an indirect and implicit calling for creativeness in the Gospel message. He says in this sense for example that "creativeness accepts and follows the Gospel commandment not to love the world or the things of the world."<sup>39</sup> But still insists on the outward silence on it.

Berdyaev claims that it is in this silence that "the great wisdom of God is evident."<sup>40</sup> For Berdyaev, if creativeness would have been clearly formulated in the Scriptures, that would have made it an obligation. An obligation would have diminished the complete spiritual freedom which characterizes creativeness, resulting in something contrary to the nature of creativeness. He says in this sense that "if the ways of creativeness were indicated and justified in the Holy Scriptures, then creativeness would be obedience, which is to say that there would be no creativeness."<sup>41</sup> Later on, though, Berdyaev returns to this position and sees the parable of talents as a Scriptural reference to creativeness. He points this out in his book *Freedom and the Spirit* which was

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<sup>39</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 151.

<sup>40</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 92.

originally published in two volumes in 1927 and 1928. He says here: "It is the old question in the Gospel of the talents which must not be buried in the earth but put to profitable use. St. Paul also teaches us that the gifts of men are diverse and that men must be free in spirit and creative, not for themselves but for God, and for the sake of His Will."<sup>42</sup> Still, in the following, he continues to insist on the fact that the nature of creativity was not revealed in the Scriptures under the same reasoning as before: "But the mystery itself of creative genius and of the nature of creativity is unknown and is not revealed in Holy Scripture. If this mystery were there revealed the freedom of creative action and all that we call heroism would no longer exist, and what God expects from man would be impossible."<sup>43</sup>

In 1934 St Maria published an article in Berdyaev's journal *The Way*, called *The Origins of Creativity*. Here she spends a considerable amount of space arguing against Berdyaev's claim that the Scriptures do not talk about creativity. She claims that there is an implicit argument for creativeness throughout the entire Scriptures, in the Old as well as in the New Testament. She begins her article with the example of Samson. She says "Samson's

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<sup>42</sup> BERDYAEV, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 212.

<sup>43</sup> BERDYAEV, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 212..



strength, which defined and exhausted his human spirit, was not his human strength, but God's strength, God's creative spirit. If God wills, it is not in his strong muscles but in his long hair that his divine creative power is incarnated in man."<sup>44</sup> In the New Testament again she finds that it is full of references to creativity: "the whole Gospel of John is an absolutely complete and systematic treatise not only about human creativity, but also about the creativity of God."<sup>45</sup>

Through these references, she does not want to just show that the Scriptures indeed talk about creativeness but to support the idea that creativeness should be understood primarily in terms of God's power and that human creativeness is the power that is gained through the relationship to God, who is the source of all creativity. She says in this sense that "the Gospel of John puts creative processes in connection with the relationship between God and man—outside this relationship, creativity is not only incomprehensible, it simply does not exist."<sup>46</sup> St Maria's understanding of

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<sup>44</sup> Maria SKOBTSOVA, "The Origins of Creativity" in *The Way*, no. 43 (1934), 36, accessed on 10 February 2023, <http://www.odinblago.ru/path/43/3>.

<sup>45</sup> SKOBTSOVA, "The Origins of Creativity," 38, accessed on 10 February 2023, <http://www.odinblago.ru/path/43/3>.

<sup>46</sup> SKOBTSOVA, "The Origins of Creativity," 38, accessed on 10

creativity is that of power received from God to follow and conform to God's plan and will. Her model for this is in the person of Christ that revealed the creative power in the fullest sense. She says that "we do not have anywhere, except for the very example of the God-man, genuine creativity that reflects the Divine plan. We have one continuous chain of deviations, more or less distorting the Divine plan."<sup>47</sup>

This position seems to be articulated in contrast to Berdyaev's position on creativity, although Berdyaev is never mentioned here by St Maria. Berdyaev understands creativity primarily in terms of freedom, a notion of radical freedom that both God and the human being share, a freedom not determined by God as a determined freedom would not be freedom at all. It is what Berdyaev calls meonic freedom. This is connected with his fundamental anthropological claim that "man is the child of God and of non-being, of meonic freedom."<sup>48</sup> This position has also an important bearing on his understanding of creativeness as we can see that for him "creativeness by its very nature is creation out of nothing,

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February 2023, <http://www.odinblago.ru/path/43/3>.

<sup>47</sup> SKOBTSOVA, "The Origins of Creativity," 44, accessed on 10 February 2023, <http://www.odinblago.ru/path/43/3>.

<sup>48</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Destiny of Man*, 60.

i.e. out of meonic freedom.”<sup>49</sup> We can see that there is a clear difference between Berdyaev’s understanding of creativeness, and St Maria’s. But, at the same time, Berdyaev’s understanding of creativity can and does accommodate St Maria’s. Berdyaev as well talks about the necessity to submit to God’s will in the creative act, and bring one’s creative gift to God for the realization of God’s plan which is the Kingdom of God. He says in this sense that “man’s creative action [...] is the submission and surrender to God of all the forces of his spirit. [...] If man does not bring his creative gift to God, if he does not participate actively in building the Kingdom of God, if he shows himself to be a slave, if he buries his talents in the earth, then the creation of the world will receive a check and the fullness of the divine-human life conceived by God will not be realized; God will suffer and will remain unsatisfied in His relations with His other self.”<sup>50</sup>

For Berdyaev as well creativity is power coming from communion with God. But following his anthropological claim that “man is the child of God and of non-being, of meonic freedom”<sup>51</sup> there is implied radical newness in creativeness. For him, creativeness

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<sup>49</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Destiny of Man*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> BERDYAEV, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 212-213.

<sup>51</sup> BERDYAEV, *The Destiny of Man*, 60.

implies not only conformity to the divine plan but bringing forth new being from the depths of non-being. The radical newness of the creative act is what God expects of His creation, but not in a slavish manner, but as a free creative act towards the active building of the Kingdom of God as a loving communion with God, other people, and the entirety of creation. St Maria's concept of creativeness seems to be more limited than Berdyaev's, while Berdyaev's is much broader and more thoroughly philosophically articulated.

## **Conclusion**

Still, despite these differences, they can come together and agree on the fundamental importance that creativeness has in the life of the human spirit. Even when other friendships and relationships have broken down between other representatives of the Russian religious intelligentsia, this has not happened between Berdyaev and St Maria. As we just saw they agree on a lot more than they disagree, particularly on the place and meaning of asceticism in the spiritual life, as well as on the importance of creativeness in it, despite the differences in their understanding of its nature. It is without a doubt that Berdyaev's thought exercised a great influence on St Maria, but as we could see, she was

herself an individual and creative thinker in her own right.

Both of them have lived a spiritually creative life in service of God in their own particular ways. Berdyaev as a religious philosopher speaking with great authority on spiritual matters in the intellectual circles of Western Europe, writing a great number of books and articles through which he reached many people and brought them the good news of God's love and glory. St Maria found the opportunity to exercise her creative calling throughout her life as a poet, playwright, and embroiderer of icons, but also as a monastic living in an inhospitable context. She viewed her monastic calling as an opportunity for creative activity. Olivier Clement has rightly pointed out: "We should not forget that Mother Maria knew how to create these privileged spaces where life was lived and embraced. She embellished these spaces with icons and tapestries. She wrote continually — poetry, but also real mystery plays that were never performed. She was not an activist but a poet of life, always at the center of the creative space where her "holiness and genius" were played out."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> CLÉMENT, "Preface," 11.