

THE OLD AND THE NEW

Churching a Secular Age from
Solovyóv to Bulgakov

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Series in Philosophy of Religion



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For Anna

The history of Christianity reveals to the Christian what kind of presence Christ wanted to have in history.

To seek to erase that history, to return to the lone Christ of the gospels, is not a gesture of devotion but of pride.

Nicolás Gómez Dávila
Scholia to an Implicit Text II

The times of the desert have returned;

Christianity starts afresh in the sterility of the Thebaid, amidst a formidable idolatry, the idolatry of man for himself.

Chateaubriand
Epilogue to *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*

In an age of the worker, if he bears his name properly and not in the way in which all parties today call themselves labour parties, there can be nothing which is not understood as work. Work is the rhythm of the fist, of thoughts, of the heart, of life by day and night, of science, love, art, faith, religion, war; work is the oscillation of the atom and the gravity which moves stars and solar systems.

Ernst Jünger
The Worker: Dominion and Form

Through his poiesis, the human must humanise himself to fullness, before this eon meets its end.

Bulgakov
Sophia – The Wisdom of God

Table of Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	1
Part I – History	51
Chapter 1 Modernity between the Man-God and the God-Man	53
Chapter 2 The Prophetic-Theurgic Paradigm	91
Chapter 3 Progress and the Noumenon of History	137
Part II – Knowledge	157
Chapter 4 ‘Theosophy’	159
Chapter 5 Method and Technics	195
Part III – Work	225
Chapter 6 ‘Theurgy’	227
Chapter 7 Freedom in Oikonomia	239
Chapter 8 Beauty Will Not Save the World	271
Part IV – Power	297
Chapter 9 ‘Theocracy’	299
Chapter 10 The Erotica of Power	323
Chapter 11 Right, Law and Cult	353
Conclusion	379
Appendix – Eros and Gender	397
Works Consulted	419
Index	431

Preface

Although scholarly interest in Bulgakov has burgeoned over the past twenty-five years, sparked in large measure by the anthology translated and commentated upon by Rowan Williams¹, as yet few full-length expository works have appeared. Catherine Evtuhov's *The Cross and the Sickle* stands out as a definitive treatment of his intellectual biography in the period leading up to the 1917 revolution, her overarching aim being to "approach the Russian Silver Age as one would any cultural movement in European history."² The focus is on Bulgakov as a representative Silver-Age intellectual³, not as a systematic theorist, though significant attention is given to what Evtuhov takes to be Bulgakov's "main contribution to the history of ideas", namely the 'sophic economy'.⁴ In a similar vein, Ruth Coates' more recent study hones in on Bulgakov's early theology of deification, again looking to situate him within the pre-1917 thought-world.⁵ Both Evtuhov and Coates take *The Philosophy of Oikonomia* as the key text for understanding Bulgakov's place within the Silver-Age intellectual-cultural milieu.⁶ Given that the delineation of their subject-matter is chronological, this focus is entirely appropriate.

Other than the studies by Evtuhov and Coates, most of the remaining English-language literature focuses on Bulgakov's dogmatic theology from the Paris period, 1926-44. Sisto's monograph *The Mother of God in the Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* is a case in point, as are the two available synoptic introductions, Aidan Nichols' *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Fr Sergei Bulgakov* and Robert

¹ Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

² Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5: "in reconstructing the ideas of one of its most prominent and yet representative figures – Sergei Bulgakov, the Marxist-turned-religious philosopher – and tracing the vicissitudes of his intellectual and spiritual development, I have constantly borne in mind a provisional or working sketch of the Silver Age as a whole."

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵ Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905-1917* (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

⁶ For why this translation is preferable to 'the philosophy of economy', see below, pp. 66-67.

Slesinski's fuller *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*.⁷ This preferential concentration on the treatises and essays of the late '20s and '30s is understandable: Bulgakov is known primarily as an Orthodox theologian – Fr Sergii rather than Sergei – and virtually all of his properly *theological* writings (i.e. exegesis, homiletics and dogmatics) belong to his final two decades, lived in exile.

Another reason why the interpretative literature is confined to this later period is the inaccessibility of much of the rest of his oeuvre. The two major treatises that predate his ordination in 1918 and subsequent exile from the Soviet Union, *The Philosophy of Oikonomia* and *The Unfading Light*, as well as the systematic theological work of the late 1920s and the 1930s, have all been available in English for some time. But of the three remaining major treatises, translations of *John's Apocalypse* and *The Tragedy of Philosophy* have only appeared very recently (2019 and 2020, respectively). With regard to the latter, certain deficiencies have been identified, though the translation is serviceable.⁸ Nonetheless, a second is already underway. At the time of writing, *The Philosophy of the Name* has only just become available. Needless to say, it will take some time before these difficult works are fully 'digested' in the English-speaking world.

So much for the major treatises. In contrast, none of the three essay-collections have been translated in their entirety: *From Marxism to Idealism* (1903), *Two Cities* (1912), *Quiet Thoughts* (1917). In addition, there are a huge number of standalone essays, all of them interesting in their own right and important for understanding Bulgakov, that are not available. Of these, those that postdate 1918 have been coming out in a steady trickle. A complete four-volume set of Bulgakov's hitherto untranslated post-1918 writings is currently underway, though it will be a few years before publication. Nonetheless, for an appreciation of the 'late' or 'mature' Bulgakov, the situation is acceptable and will be significantly improved upon in the near future. But as for his essay-output prior to 1918, it is unlikely that this part of the corpus will become accessible in English any time soon.

As for Solovyóv, the situation is almost the reverse. Most, if not all, of the important essays have been translated, thanks to the studious dedication of Vladimir Wozniuk. But of the four major treatises, only two have been translated into English: *Russia and the Universal Church* and *The Justification of the Good*, both from the

⁷ Walter Nuncio Sisto, *The Mother of God in the Theology of Sergius Bulgakov: The Soul of the World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017); Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Fr Sergei Bulgakov* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005); Robert Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* (Yonkers, NY: SVS Press, 2017).

⁸ See Joshua Heath, "On Sergii Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*", in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2021), pp. 805-823.

1890s.⁹ The two earlier treatises, namely *The Critique of Abstract Principles* and *The History and Future of Theocracy*, remain inaccessible to those without Russian or German (a collected-works edition of Solovyóv was published in German in the 1920s.) The outstanding problem here is that *Critique* is by far the most important of Solovyóv's major treatises in terms of his influence on his Silver-Age successors, far more so than *Justification*. The situation is indeed unhappy for the non-specialist Russophile.

Similar issues exist with the other major figures of the Solovyóvian 'school', though they are not the focus of this study. Most conspicuously, of Semyon Frank's five major treatises, all except the *The Object of Knowledge* are available in English. But it is this first treatise that establishes the paradigm within which the rest of his thinking unfolds. Admittedly, a condensed form of the argument is given in the first part of *The Unfathomable* (published in English under the ill-advised title *The Unknowable*). But even so, appreciation of Frank as a philosopher is seriously hampered by the inaccessibility of his programmatic treatise.

Nonetheless, due to the relative preponderance of as-yet untranslated essays in Bulgakov's oeuvre – as compared with Solovyóv, Frank, Florensky, or Ivanov – it is not unreasonable to say that he remains *less accessible* to a non-specialist English-reading audience than the others. The treatises are decisively important, of course, but they do not give us the whole picture. As already mentioned, a large translation-project covering his post-1918 essays is underway (which will also include a fresh translation of *Tragedy*). For the pre-revolutionary period, however, it is unlikely that the non-specialist enthusiast will be in a position to engage with Bulgakov seriously unless they resort to the recent German edition of his collected works, published under the auspices of Barbara Hallensleben and Regula Zwahlen (University of Fribourg, Switzerland). Even for those with fluent German, the sheer quantity of material is daunting.

As indicated above, the work of Evtuhov and Coates, which is essential reading even for the non-specialist with an interest in Russian theology, focusses on situating and understanding Bulgakov within his Silver-Age intellectual milieu – that, as a cultural epoch in its own right, being the wide-angle object of study – and accordingly takes 1917 as the *terminus ad quem*. If our ultimate goal is to arrive at an overarching reading of Bulgakov-the-theorist, the greatest Orthodox thinker of the twentieth century, then an alternative thematic lens must be sought. As will be explained in the introductory chapter, the only heuristic option adequate to the task is to focus on the reception and transformation of Soloyóv. Even if we choose,

⁹ *The Justification of the Moral Good* (henceforth *Justification*), ed. and tr. Thomas Nemeth (Cham: Springer, 2015)

in undertaking such a reading, to register a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in Bulgakov’s intellectual biography then the more relevant break is 1924, as we shall see.

Thus, the intention of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to offer the Anglophone theological readership a one-volume reading of that part of Bulgakov’s corpus that will otherwise not be ‘in the picture’, due to the dearth of translations. But this is only ancillary. But more fundamentally, this study is intended as the first instalment in a two-part study of Bulgakov that seeks to show how the unifying matrix of his thinking consists in his reception and transformation of Solovóv’s systematic thought. By its very nature, a study of this kind is preliminary by design. Success is, therefore, to be measured in terms of the lines of questioning opened up, rather than exegetical closure.

There are four people without whose input, encouragement and patience this project would never have come to fruition, particularly given that the better part of the research and writing was done in the midst of the pandemic-lockdowns (with two small children in the house). The first is my supervisor, Rowan Williams, whose deep knowledge of the subject-matter was invaluable as I refined my interpretative approach. In fact, it was his little book *A Margin of Silence* – which remains the very best introduction to Russian theology out there – that first piqued my interest in Bulgakov. It has been an extraordinary privilege to work under the mentorship of the theologian who was single-handedly responsible for putting Bulgakov on the map in the non-Orthodox Anglophone world.

On several occasions, the frustration associated with the interrupted and unpredictable work-regime at home was sufficient to make me question the sense of continuing. Over-ambition and defeatism are obnoxious bedfellows. I am indebted to both of my parents, Charles and Judith, who, in all those moments, reestablished perspective and urged me to persevere. I am blessed to have such stalwarts behind me. I

Finally, I cannot adequately express my gratitude to Anna: ‘Just go on’.

Introduction

1

“The problem of theocracy in general...remains the central axis around which Russian religious thought moves”.¹ Such a judgement may be surprising for an English-speaking readership accustomed to equating modern Russian theology with ‘sophiology’, yet its author is none other than Fr Sergii Bulgakov (1871-1944). We hereby see that modern Russian theology, at least in the self-assessment of its most famous representative, is concerned in the first instance with something other than a speculative-metaphysical theology, one having the divine Wisdom as its architectonic theme. Instead, we have a ‘problem of theocracy’.

What does this problem consist in? The world was very different one hundred years ago, yet the very same theopolitical question that hangs over us now, the ‘problem of theocracy’ in Bulgakov’s formulation, was already known and well-understood in 1923. All the trailblazing figures of European thought that we preoccupy ourselves with – with the two notable exceptions of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt – were already part of the furniture. The nineteenth century had already concluded, even the long one. Its aspirations for the future had become agendas for the present. This was nowhere clearer than in Russia: the Reds had won the Civil War, the Soviet Union had been established. Bulgakov himself had watched it happen. His essay was penned just after leaving Russia, for good – an exile imposed by the revolutionary government. Its subject, ‘the old and the new’, is the end of Christendom. This, then, is the heart of the ‘problem of theocracy’: what does Christian politics mean after the end of Christendom? One hundred years later, the Orthodox world is being torn apart for want of an answer.

Thus, we can bracket all talk of ‘sophiology’ and instead identify the end of Christendom as the central preoccupation of Russian theology over the course of its 80-year flowering, roughly 1870-1950. The Russians, as everyone knows, are Orthodox. So, with a view to establishing an initial viewpoint, let us say that we are dealing with ‘an Orthodox response to the end of Christendom’. With the exception of *littérateurs* such as Dostoevsky and Konstantine Leontiev, this response issues in

¹ Булгаков, С. Н. Старое и Новое (henceforth *The Old and the New*) // Вестник ПСТГУ. Серия II: История. История Русской Православной Церкви. 2013, №1 (50). – С. 96-128. См. с. 125.

a vision of the divine Wisdom, or at least a speculative-philosophical surrogate for such a vision – somehow.

We have become habituated to a causal construal of this ending, the death of Christendom, as a transition to a ‘secularity’, for better or for worse. In this unreflective usage of that word, the accent usually falls on the idea that our societies in the West are religiously tolerant, pluralistic and perhaps most importantly *indifferent* in a way that they did not use to be – indifferent to ‘religion’, that is. They have left Christendom behind; they were once part of ‘Christendom’ but are no longer. A ‘secular’ society is, then, a post-Christian society. We can extend this notion to other parts of the world by making the relevant substitution. If we say that Turkey is ‘secular’, what we mean is that it has left the *ummah* behind.

What does this ‘leaving behind’ consist of? What, if any, is the difference between ‘post-Christian’ and ‘non-Christian’? Without an answer, ‘secularity’ is a signifier without a signified, little more than a rhetorical gesture. It would then be just as true to say that Russian theology is concerned with ‘secularity’ as it is to say that the exertions of great classical doctors were directed towards and against ‘paganism’ or ‘heterodoxy’. Yes – but what precisely has been said?

A further problem immediately arises. What is the ‘Orthodox perspective’ from which this ‘post-Christendom-ness’ is to be approached? What iteration of Christendom is to supply us with our term of comparison? One common way of understanding what is meant by ‘Orthodoxy’ is to say something like this: it is the set of answers given by the Christian hierarchy in the Graeco-Roman world to the crises, doctrinal and disciplinary, that the Church as a society recurrently underwent from the early second century until either the close of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, or else until the fall of Byzantium in 1453. We may call this the chronological-identitarian definition: its effect is to construe ‘Orthodoxy’ in terms of ‘Orthodox-ness’, to construe ‘Christendom’ as ‘Byzantium’, and it is to these that ‘secularity’ would then have to be juxtaposed.

Let us dig a little deeper into this ‘Orthodox-ness’ and the specific iteration of Christendom that it encompasses. Although in theological circles it is often heard that ‘the patristic period never ended’ (or something to that effect), there is no doubt that *de facto* the Orthodox theological identity depends on a prioritisation of Greek authorities of the classical era (broadly 300-800). This, along with its ecclesiastical-institutional pedigree as derived from the four Greek patriarchates, guarantees Orthodoxy’s entrenched Helleno-normativity: ‘Greek-ness’ becomes a kind of fifth mark of the Church (akin to *Romanitas* in the Catholic context). Admittedly, the role of St. Gregory Palamas and, to a lesser extent, St. Symeon the New Theologian in the twentieth-century revival might suggest a broader chronological outlook. But

this only tends to reinforce Greek-ness, since it was precisely in the post-classical/medieval period (800-1300) that the great decoupling between Latin West and Greek East took place.

Either way, the fact remains: Orthodox-ness is Greek-ness, with either 787 or 1453 as the cut-off. (This stands in contrast to Catholicism, where the thirteenth century is privileged in respect of both what preceded and what followed.) Conspicuously, the inauguration of the post-patristic period in Orthodoxy coincides with the transition of its geographical centre from Constantinople to Moscow, though the ‘Ecumenical Patriarchate’ stayed put and remained by the Bosphorus to this day, continuing to claim the primacy proper to the cathedra of the metropolis of the Christian *oikumene* as though the Theodosian Walls had never been breached.

Spatially and chronologically, the Slavonic tradition is a subsidiary appendage of Orthodoxy, and any thinking that is distinctively Russian must, therefore, be deficient in Orthodox-ness. Conversely, even if the Christianities of the (thoroughly de-Christianised) West have changed beyond all recognition in the last half-century, they are descendants of and successors to the Latin Christendom against which Orthodox-ness has always defined itself. Thus, they continue to fulfil the role they have played for more than a thousand years in the construction of Orthodox identity.

Such a chronological-identitarian construction of Orthodoxy as ‘Orthodox-ness’ is thus deeply institutionalised, and this applies both to the ecclesiastical-organisational format as well as to the broader ecclesial culture. It is unsurprising that both Bulgakov as well as his forerunner Vladimir Solovyóv (1853-1900) had troubled relationships with the institution in their respective contexts – interwar émigré Paris, late-imperial Tsarist Russia. There was a deep inevitability in this, which the rest of Solovyóv’s successors avoided either because they stayed clear of ‘theology’ and stuck to ‘philosophy’ (Semyon Frank) or else because they remained in the Soviet Union and the recently-restored patriarchate was not the institution they had to worry about (Pavel Florensky, Alexei Losev, Lev Karsavin); or else because they deliberately chose to abandon Orthodoxy constructed as ‘Orthodox-ness’ and left for Rome (Vyacheslav Ivanov) – a path Solovyóv himself had very nearly travelled, for much the same reasons. Yet the fate that befell Bulgakov in the 1930s could have happened to any of them.

To step outside the bounds of Orthodox-ness is to place oneself on the fringes of Orthodoxy, irrespective of one’s doctrinal, liturgical, or ethical commitments. Conversely – this is a point we will expand upon shortly – it is possible to remain within the bound of Orthodox-ness whilst, in fact, departing from and undermining the consensus and cohesion that it is supposed to safeguard. Bulgakov was himself keenly aware of the discrepancy: “the fulness of [O]rthodoxy is not the same as

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Index

- Antichrist, 72, 76, 104-106, 139-140, 154, 380, 392
- Arendt, Hannah, 244-246, 253, 266, 292, 309, 323
- Aristotle, 23, 197, 245, 263, 307
- Asceticism
- Podvizhnichestvo*, 123-126, 129, 132-135, 262, 292, 294, 317, 393
 - Podvizhnik*, 123, 124, 131-132, 251, 264, 267, 274, 283, 287-288, 380, 393, 394-396
 - World-affirmation, 110-111, 242-243, 247-251, 265, 288-290, 296
 - World-negation, 235-236, 243, 247, 250, 271, 288
- Augustine, 22, 34, 66, 93, 161, 221, 259-264, 271-273, 331, 347, 387, 401-402, 405, 412
- Bely, Andrey, 105
- Berdyaev, Nikolai, 12, 133, 141-143, 235, 274, 324-325
- Bergson, Henri, 31, 174-175, 192, 196, 199, 211, 214, 244, 382
- Blok, Aleksandr, 105
- Bogdanov, Alexander, 118-119, 121, 135
- Carlyle, Thomas, 124-129, 171-173, 204, 248, 283, 316, 324, 354-356
- Chaadaev, Pyotr, 32
- Chrysostom, 22, 263, 401
- Compte, August, 63, 69
- Dávila, Nicolás Gómez, 5, 15, 135, 394
- Deification, ix, 30-34, 59, 66, 74, 80-83, 98, 100, 103-104, 107, 120, 123, 130-132, 161, 257, 276, 285, 292, 295, 304, 395, 398, 412
- God-Man, 33-34, 53, 73, 122, 167, 236, 285, 312, 349
- Man-God, 33-34, 53, 73, 86, 118, 122, 127-128, 267, 285, 362-363
- Del Noce, Augusto, 12, 20, 86-89, 'New totalitarianism', 12, 20, 86, 87, 88
- Desmond, William, 38-42, 45
- Dialectic
- 'Residual immanentism', 36-38, 50, 72, 75, 113, 129, 139, 168, 179, 195, 227, 232-233, 237-239, 272, 276, 281-283, 300, 315, 382
- Antinomy, 42-44, 113, 138-142, 147-150, 153-155, 159, 180, 188, 198-199, 223, 251-253, 256, 259-261, 263-267, 269-272, 275-276, 283, 293-296, 316-318, 347, 357, 365-367, 380, 402, 407
- Monism, 37-38, 41, 45, 67, 139, 181, 219-221, 223, 318, 399
- Dilthey, 185, 189, 199, 203, 382-384, 387
- Dionysius the Areopagite, 31, 59, 66, 108, 111, 161-162, 227-228, 413
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 1, 30-35, 46-47, 65, 73-78, 96-101, 104, 107, 111-113, 126, 129, 133-134, 233, 281, 391
- Economism, 65, 118, 257-259, 263, 278-279, 293-294, 360, 392

- Eriugena, 40, 59, 66, 161-162, 401, 427
- Eros, 272, 347-348, 350, 387, 398-399, 401-402, 405
- Eucharist, 66, 227, 237, 282, 368, 374-376, 390
- Feuerbach, Ludwig, 33-34, 65, 78, 79-87, 118, 122, 127, 135, 237, 362
- Florensky, Pavel, xi, 3, 31, 66-68, 96, 117, 135, 184, 227, 233-234, 271, 284, 336-337, 358-360, 366, 372
- Frank, Semyon, xi, 3-4, 31, 43-45, 65, 85, 107, 119, 133-135, 153, 167-168, 173-175, 179-186, 192, 211-216, 227, 323, 326, 338-342, 345, 382
- Frankfurt School, 86
- 'God-building', 118-123
- Gorky, Maxim, 118-120
- Gramsci, Antonio, 86, 121
- Gregory of Nyssa, 66-67, 401, 405, 408
- Hegel, 13, 19, 31, 34-45, 56-69, 83-84, 143-147, 154, 160-163, 173-176, 179-182, 186-187, 196-198, 212, 220-222, 280, 306-308, 386
- 'Cunning of reason', 146, 154, 221
- Geist*, 13, 36-37, 40, 44, 53, 56, 57-59, 62-65, 186-187, 220-221, 280, 406-409
- Heidegger, Martin, 1, 16, 22, 65, 153, 164
- Hermeneutics, 11, 185, 203, 383-387
- History
- 'Apocalyptic turn', 72, 76, 93, 103, 106-108, 139-141, 154, 301, 315-316, 380
- Chiliasm, 142, 147, 150-155, 252, 265-268, 328
- Differentiation (process), 77, 92, 96, 109, 151-152, 230, 272, 279, 284, 366
- Eschaton, Eschatology, 76, 266-268, 281, 328, 392-393
- Industrialisation, 239, 354-356
- Intelligentsia, 31, 77, 114-117, 120-122, 129-135, 223, 317, 324-326, 331-334, 388
- Ivanov, Vyacheslav, xi, 3, 31-32, 48, 96-99, 105-119, 121-124, 135, 179, 182-187, 190, 227, 233-235, 239, 242, 250, 271-272, 279-290, 294, 315, 382, 391
- Jünger, Ernst, 5, 16
- Kant, Immanuel, 33-34, 57, 83, 120, 126, 142-143, 148, 163, 175-176, 180-181, 184, 198-202, 286, 290, 305, 308
- Kantianism, 143, 175, 185, 192, 196-201, 211, 218, 303-305, 353, 385
- Karsavin, Lev, 3-4, 18, 31, 43, 46, 142
- Khomiakov, Alexei, 32, 35, 55
- Kireevsky, Ivan, 32, 35, 64, 161
- Legitimacy, 5-7, 125, 263, 316-318, 323, 345, 353-364, 368, 371-376, 388
- Ius iuris*, 316, 346, 361, 370, 373
- Rechtsstaat*, 309, 310, 313, 324, 334, 354, 360-365, 374
- Leontiev, Konstantine, 1, 17, 62, 73-76, 133, 327
- Liberalism, 13, 25, 53, 58, 70, 85, 87, 265, 302, 310, 313, 316, 318, 320, 335, 344, 353, 360-361, 364, 367, 373-374

- Losev, Alexei, 3, 31, 58, 62, 185, 191-192, 232, 382
- Lossky, Nikolai, 166, 170, 192, 211, 382
- Lossky, Vladimir, 211, 413
- Lunacharsky, Anatoly, 119-122, 131, 135
- Marriage, 23-24, 86, 111-112, 285, 358-359, 399, 401, 406-407, 412, 415-417
- Marxism, x, 16-17, 29, 33, 37, 43, 67-68, 77-80, 83-89, 106, 117-122, 131, 138, 143, 154, 195, 199-211, 216-223, 234, 239, 241-243, 248-253, 265-271, 277-279, 291, 305, 324, 331, 360-361, 364, 394, 395, 422, 427
- 'Base' and 'superstructure', 79, 84, 85, 120-121, 220-222, 360
- Materialism
- 'Economic materialism', 66-68, 219, 222, 394
- 'Religious materialism', 65-68, 92, 97, 110, 271, 276, 360, 394
- 'Spiritualisation of matter', 30-31, 54, 91-92, 100, 107, 227, 232, 237, 242, 249-250, 271, 300, 314-315, 405
- Maximus the Confessor, 32, 60, 256, 280, 401
- Merezhkovsky, Dmitri, 103-104, 107, 135, 235, 327, 399
- Mikhailovsky, Nikolai, 117, 202-203
- Modernity
- Aufhebung*, 36, 65, 69, 77, 96, 288, 394
- 'Positive overcoming', 28, 36-38, 43, 46, 58-59, 65, 92, 95, 132, 195, 224, 233, 269, 386, 392-393
- Monasticism, 18, 61, 134, 243, 247, 250-251, 258, 268
- Mythopoesis, 113-114, 121, 183-192, 195, 210, 272, 275-276, 287, 350, 381-386, 391, 395, 402
- Narod*, 114-115, 119-122, 130, 134, 315-317, 325-326, 344, 372, 388-390, 393
- New Christendom, 28, 43, 46, 55, 56, 59, 68-70, 92, 95, 100-102, 114, 195, 224, 237, 269, 284, 302, 306, 307, 313-315, 349, 355, 379, 387
- New Constantinianism, 303, 317-318, 375-376, 380, 387, 390
- Nicholas of Cusa, 43-45, 180, 192, 212
- Nietzsche, 12-16, 47-48, 65, 72-73, 82, 103-112, 115-124, 127, 135, 174, 197, 234-237, 271, 283, 289, 316, 380, 392, 397
- 'Faithfulness to the earth', 235-237, 271, 392
- 'Last Man', 15-17, 380
- Overman (*Übermensch*), 106-107, 111, 117-118, 127-128, 131-132, 236
- Nihilism, 127, 131, 144, 283, 417
- Novgorodtsev, Pavel, 303-307, 354-357, 363, 364, 367, 373
- Oikonomia
- Animal laborans*, 244-247, 250-253, 265-268, 272, 278, 360
- Homo faber*, 244-247, 250, 253, 268, 272, 278, 357
- Technics, 204-205, 207-209, 213, 230, 249-250, 264-266, 274, 277, 360, 382, 392
- Origen, 31, 66, 401-402

- Pan-unity, 4, 30, 43, 46, 74, 91, 107, 162-166, 184-186, 198, 211
- Plato, 13, 67, 173, 183, 197, 242, 253-255, 348-350, 356, 397-399, 403
- Plotinus, 192, 212, 242, 253-254
- Pragmatism, 181-183, 199, 205, 211, 214, 217
- Romanticism, 14, 17, 114, 118, 128-129, 182, 187, 272, 277, 282, 289, 294, 391, 397
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 132, 350, 363
- Ruskin, John, 125, 204-205, 283, 354-359, 364, 367
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm
Joseph, 31, 39-40, 44-46, 56-57, 65-67, 108, 143, 149, 160, 174-177, 182-183, 187, 198, 211, 221, 230, 305, 381, 397
- Schmitt, Carl, 1, 6, 8, 22, 311, 372, 374, 390, 424
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, 14, 31, 57, 65, 174, 198, 199, 306, 397
- Shestov, Lev, 38-41, 45-47, 48, 72, 107-108, 135, 177-179
- Sobornost*, 31, 34-35, 55-56, 91, 114-115, 168, 180, 286, 300, 311, 319-325, 348-350, 389, 417
- Socialism
'Christian socialism', 124-125, 263, 317, 326
Zukunftsstaat, 267-268, 328
- Sovereignty, 7, 69, 73-76, 102, 300, 308-318, 327-328, 334-338, 353-354, 359, 363-364, 367-376, 386-391
'*Princeps legibus solutus est*', 369, 372, 376
'Will of the people', 69, 312, 345-346, 362-363, 367
- Spengler, Oswald, 16, 19, 62, 109, 118, 277
- Stirner, Max, 33, 80-82, 122
- Struve, Pyotr, 119, 133, 143, 326
- Symbolism, 103-109, 112-114, 117-118, 122-123, 179, 182-183, 227, 234, 239, 242, 271, 282, 287, 382
- Taylor, Charles, 4-20, 28, 34, 53, 92, 129, 182, 277, 316, 321, 382
'Direct-access society', 7-12, 20, 24, 36, 46, 72, 321, 353, 382
'Immanent frame', 4, 13-17, 20, 24-25, 29-30, 36, 46, 49, 53-54, 59, 72, 78, 92, 114, 117, 123, 129, 159, 181-182, 237, 277, 321, 337, 353, 371, 379, 382-385, 388-394
- Theandricity, 30-34, 78, 91, 138, 237, 295, 362
'Theandric organism', 60-63, 168
- Anthropodeity, 33-34, 54, 78, 127-131, 138, 237, 274, 288, 362
Divine humanity, 42, 59
- Threefold office, 93-94, 315
- Tolstoy, Lev, 73, 107, 111, 124-126, 129, 173, 204
- Trubetskoy, Evgenii and Sergei, 31, 399
- Tsar, Tsarism, 327, 334-336
- Vitalism, 16, 31, 211
Lebensphilosophie, 65, 174-177, 196, 199, 211, 295, 387, 397
- Wisdom (Sophia), v, ix, x, 1-4, 18, 27-50, 54, 59, 74, 108-112, 132, 137, 139, 177, 186, 210, 213, 224, 280-281, 290, 296, 299, 379-381, 385-386, 394-396, 399, 407, 411, 416

