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## **The Russian Origins of the So-Called Post-Secular Moment: Some Preliminary Observations**

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*This piece argues that there are a number of paths through which we might investigate Russian connections to the emergence of post-secularism, with the collapse of the USSR and the post-Soviet revival of Russian Orthodoxy representing only the most obvious. A thus far less developed but important approach involves unraveling an intellectual-historical trajectory by focusing on the influence of anti-Bolshevik Russian religious philosophers in the West. The article shows that after the founding of the Soviet Union, the anti-Bolshevik Russian emigration emerged as a significant vehicle for the transmission of Russian ideas in the West, contributing to the development of an anti-secular discourse with roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was able to achieve some prominence thanks to the Cold War. This discourse associated religiosity with freedom and atheism with unfreedom. Stroop argues that this discourse, in the development of which Russian intellectuals played an important role, emerged in reaction against the perceived cultural threat of nihilism, and he suggests that it is a similar concern over the possible consequences of nihilism that has led to the emergence of the post-secular moment.*

**Keywords:** religious, secular, post-secularism, nihilism, atheism, Communism, Russian Orthodoxy, Russian religious philosophy, Russia and the West, Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, Russian emigration, Cold War, anti-secular discourse.

**W**HILE my approach today will be more descriptive and interpretive than normative, my investigation into the Russian origins of the so-called post-secular moment is motivated in part by a conviction that our current debates about

secularism and the role of religion in the public sphere — which are themselves an expression of the post-secular moment — might benefit from increased awareness of the historical background from which they arose.<sup>1</sup> I’m convinced that the problematics of post-secularism, which I see as part and parcel of the ongoing broader rethinking of the categories “religious” and “secular” that has been blossoming in recent years, represents one of the most important intellectual tendencies of our time. I’m equally convinced that there’s plenty of work to be done in, if you will, cross-fertilizing Russian studies with this broader intellectual project, and that the time is ripe for it.<sup>2</sup> In fact, although it’s embryonic, this seems to be an emerging trend. For example, José Casanova was the keynote speaker at a conference called “Post-Atheism: Religion, Society and Culture in Post-Communist Eastern Europe and Eurasia” that took place at Arizona State University’s Melikian Center on February 7, 2013.<sup>3</sup> As some of you know, this June 7–9, we are also planning to host an international conference in Moscow at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration called “The Varieties of Russian Modernity: Rethinking Religion, Secularism, and the Influence of Religion in the Modern World.”<sup>4</sup>

This piece has been slightly revised from a lecture I delivered at the Institute for Human Sciences (*Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*) in Vienna, Austria on April 29, 2013 as part of the lecture series “Colloquia on Secularism.” I am grateful to IWM for the invitation, to Clemena Antonova for her able organization of the series and her hospitality in Vienna, and to the Austrian Science Fund for its financial support of the project. I would also like to thank the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration both for supporting the research laid out in this lecture and for allowing me to develop and teach an interdisciplinary humanities course during the 2012–2013 academic year called “Religion and Society: Contemporary Debates and their Historical Origins.” Teaching this course helped me to clarify my thinking on the issues explored in this lecture.

1. For similar thoughts on the ability of historians and other scholars to contribute to contemporary debates, see Strup (Stroop) (2012); Schmalzbauer and Mahoney (2012). Strup (Stroop) 2012 is available for download here: <http://www.academia.edu/2637606/>, accessed November 18, 2013.
2. Although the question of which aspects of Russian historical experience here should qualify as “non-Western” is one for further discussion, I see scholarly efforts to integrate the rethinking of secularism with Russian Studies in part as a response to the call put forth by some of the leading secularism scholars who have suggested that the best way forward may lie in exploring non-Western experience (Taylor 2011: 36; Casanova 2011: 73).
3. The program can be downloaded at the following url: [http://melikian.asu.edu/events/20130207\\_Post\\_Atheism](http://melikian.asu.edu/events/20130207_Post_Atheism), accessed November 18, 2013.
4. This conference did take place, and a continuation of the project involving a second international conference is planned for the 2013–2014 academic year.

Now, as noted in the subtitle of my lecture, the research I'll be presenting today is in a preliminary stage, so in discussion after the talk I'd particularly welcome suggestions for developing in it from here. I have worked on and am working on narrower projects that I have come to see as pieces of this larger puzzle, and I hope that today I'll be able to put together enough of those pieces to convince you that there are Russian origins of our post-secular moment and that they are worth investigating. By framing the question in terms of Russian origins I am of course by no means claiming exclusively Russian origins, as disappointing as that may be to any Russian messianists who may be in the audience. What I am claiming is that Russian actors and ideas, along with events of Russian history, have contributed to the emergence of the post-secular moment not only within Russia but well beyond it, and that their impact in this regard has not been fully appreciated.

I should stress here that the material I will be presenting today represents just one possible approach to the broader question of Russian origins and contributions; over the course of my lecture I will gesture toward others. My hope is that my preliminary observations might be received in a programmatic sense. My talk should not be regarded as the presentation of something finished, but rather as the initial framing of an important problem that has arisen from my previous research and research in progress.

The story about the Russian origins of the post-secular moment I've come here to tell today is perhaps really two interrelated stories. One has to do with the impact of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union; the other is an intellectual-historical trajectory that seeks to trace the influence of anti-Bolshevik Russian religious thinkers in the West. To relate these stories to the post-secular, of course, requires defining a term that over the last decade or so has taken its place among those cantankerous concepts, such as "modernity" and "religion," that are critically important to the humanities and the social sciences but at the same time notoriously difficult to define. But let me bracket that for now — I will return to it later — and for the time being simply make what I think will be a relatively uncontroversial claim.

The post-secular moment would not have come about without the historical persistence of anti-secular impulses that have become increasingly visible over the last few decades, resulting in a crisis of secularism (understood here as an ideology rather than a condition of disenchantment or consciousness of pluralism). Keeping this in

mind, the simplest story of the Russian origins of the post-secular moment is the story of how the Soviet Union, with its anti-religious persecution and officially atheist ideology, aroused the opposition of religious believers who increasingly defined themselves against the Communist Other. This process forged an important link between anti-secularism and anti-Communism.

The Cold War thus encouraged and sustained an anti-secular discourse that associated religiosity with freedom and atheism with unfreedom. As the superpower rival of the USSR in a bipolar world, the USA even went so far as to officially encourage at least moderate religiosity and civil religion (Bellah 1967). The most famous example of this is probably the Congressional insertion of the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag that was signed into law by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954. But prior to this time, the idea of a “Judeo-Christian” or “Tri-Faith” America had already begun to emerge (Herberg 1955; Schultz 2011).

While not all Cold War era US believers took a hard anti-Soviet line, many Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants and some Catholics certainly did, and American historians have recently begun telling the story of the American religious right — a group associated with contemporary discussions of “resurgent religion” — as a Cold War story. On Angela Lahr’s telling, the pervasive anti-Communism of the 1950s allowed Evangelicals, who had previously largely withdrawn from active political engagement, to reenter the American mainstream (Lahr 2007). The kind of anti-secularism they represented was in a certain sense largely latent from the 1960s into the 1980s, at least in the experience of elite Western scholars and intellectuals moved by the classic secularization thesis to think of religion as increasingly irrelevant, and therefore primed to ignore the Evangelical influence on the conservative resurgence. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, both emboldened exponents of conservative Christian political theology and caused them to become more visible to non-religious elites and advocates of classic secular liberalism.

Personally, I am surprised that the disintegration of the USSR, which can be understood in part as a reflection of the global crisis of secularist political ideology, has not received more (and more detailed) attention in interdisciplinary discussions of secularism and post-secularism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the revival of Orthodox Christianity in Russia are mentioned fairly often, but mostly in passing, while the exceptional religiosity of post-Communist Poland

is frequently noted.<sup>5</sup> If the end of the Cold War has received less attention in this regard than the developments in the Islamic world that preceded it, particularly the Iranian Revolution, this is likely in part because these earlier developments, which were of great interest to prominent philosophers such as Michel Foucault and John Rawls, had already sufficiently established the continuing relevance religion as a problem that philosophy needed to confront (Mendieta 2012).

Other factors are probably also in play. I suspect, for example, that the relative lack of sustained attention may have to do with skepticism toward the nature of the post-Soviet revival of Russian Orthodoxy. This revival is frequently viewed as representing mere window dressing for Russian nationalism or a replacement ideology for Marxism-Leninism that is not much more than skin deep (Young 2013; Mitrofanova 2005; cf. Greeley 2003: 89–121). Our failure to thoroughly assess the contributions of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR to the emergence of post-secularism may well also have to do with a certain insularity that the field of Russian studies unfortunately sometimes exhibits.

In any event, the end of the Cold War must certainly be credited with revealing the continuing social significance and political relevance of Catholicism in Poland and with giving Christian political theology a new lease on life, not least in Russia itself. As far back as 1973 Leszek Kolakowski suggested that regime change in Russia would result in the revival of Orthodox Christianity (Kolakowski 1990: 67); while the actual post-Soviet religious revival's breadth and depth are open to question, we have observed the reemergence of a tightly interwoven church-state nexus and the assertion by the Russian Orthodox Church of the right to a prominent place in the Russian public sphere. It is no coincidence that the topic of post-secularism has received attention in both the popular and more elite intellectual Russian press and blogosphere.<sup>6</sup>

5. In 1999, Peter L. Berger did take note of the post-Soviet revival of Russian Orthodox Christianity as well as Samuel Huntington's suggestion that the Cold War would be replaced by a clash of civilizations, but his analysis of "desecularization" focused much more on Islam, Catholicism, and the global spread of Evangelical Protestantism. In recent comments, Jürgen Habermas has put forth a list of important contemporary religious phenomena similar to Berger's, but Orthodox Christianity did not make his list (Berger 1999: 6–8, 14–15; Habermas 2010: 19–20).
6. The December 24, 2012 issue of popular Russian magazine *Expert* was dedicated to this issue, for example (<http://expert.ru/dossier/story/postsekulyarnyj-mir/>, accessed November 18, 2013). Religious studies and philosophy journals have also dedicated issues to the post-secular in relation to religion and philosophy (*Gosudarstvo, religiia,*

But now I want to return to America and the anti-secular discourse the Cold War helped to sustain there. After presenting some illustrations of American Protestant anti-Communist rhetoric, I will segue into the second — less fleshed out but probably more interesting — story of the Russian origins of the post-secular moment, and I will eventually bring that story back around to American Cold War connections. Here, however, the story becomes very sketchy, and the question of the extent of direct influence of Russian ideas on US anti-Communist rhetoric must remain one for further research. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, the parallels between early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian Christian anti-Communist rhetoric and mid to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century US Protestant anti-Communist rhetoric are striking, and I think I'll be able to show that the notion of diffuse genealogical influence, as opposed to mere convergence, is at least plausible. Let us turn to some of that rhetoric now.

On September 27, 1958, “America’s pastor” Billy Graham preached a revivalist sermon under the title “What’s Wrong with the World?” In this sermon, Graham confidently declared, “The race problem is a symptom. War is a symptom. Crime is a symptom. The sociological problem is a symptom. Something deeper is wrong.” He went on, “Man’s nature has a disease. (...) Wickedness, deceit, blasphemy, lies, foolishness — when you put all of these evil things together, they produce war and social tension. Jesus said these things come from inside the man.

“Now that is where communism and Christianity have a headlong clash.” In Graham’s description, Marxism saw the problems of the world entirely in social terms. Christianity, on the other hand, insisted that “social problems are only symptoms of a deeper problem” that came from within, a problem, Graham declared in his deep, booming fire-and-brimstone Southern American voice, that Jesus called “S-I-N, sin” (Graham 1958). While Graham’s understanding of sinful human nature has a strong Augustinian-Protestant flavor that is arguably incompatible with Orthodox ideas about original sin, the notion of social problems as symptoms of a spiritual disease that he lays out in this passage has antecedents in late imperial Russian religious thought. Nikolai (sometimes Anglicized to Nicholas) Berdyaev, for example, wrote the following in 1909: “Political liberation is only possible in

*tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* [State, Religion and Church in Russia and Worldwide] 30(2) (2012); *Logos: filosofsko-literaturnyi zhurnal* [Logos: A Philosophical-Literary Journal] 21(3) (2011). The issue of *Logos* in question was produced under the guest editorship of Dmitry Uzlaner, editor-in-chief of *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov'*.

connection with spiritual and cultural rebirth, and on this foundation” (Berdyayev 1967: 22 (footnote)). Berdyayev’s comment was part of a harsh critique of the revolutionary intelligentsia, which, borrowing Graham’s terms, certainly saw problems only as “social,” while Berdyayev, who would go on to achieve prominence in interwar Europe as a Christian existentialist and philosopher of freedom, continued to insist on the primacy of spiritual reality throughout his life.

Now let’s move on to the early 1980s to take a brief look at Francis Schaeffer’s *A Christian Manifesto*. One of the intellectual founding fathers of the American religious right, at this point Schaeffer, who spent most of his adult life in Switzerland, was concerned that increasing godlessness would lead America down the path of totalitarianism. In making the case, he often used the experience of Russia as a cautionary tale. According to Schaeffer:

The humanists push for “freedom,” but having no Christian consensus to contain it, that “freedom” leads to chaos or to slavery under the state (or under an elite). Humanism, with its lack of *any* final base for values or law, always leads to chaos. It then naturally leads to some form of authoritarianism to control the chaos (...). With its mistaken concept of final reality, it has no intrinsic reason to be interested in the individual, the human being. Its natural interest is the two collectives: the state and society.

Later in the book, Schaeffer asserted, “But the humanist world view with inevitable certainty leads in the direction of statism. This is so because humanists, having no god, must put something at the center, and it is inevitably society, government, or the state. Russia is the perfect example” (Schaeffer 1982).

These are not only arguments about Russia, but are in fact Russian arguments — or at least they were Russian arguments some seven decades before Schaeffer made them. The leading Christian intellectuals in late imperial Russia were deeply concerned with liberation and freedom, and equally concerned to show that freedom and the dignity of the individual could only be grounded in an integral religious worldview.<sup>7</sup> In the same 1909 piece quoted above, for example, Berdyayev intoned, “For our Russian intelligentsia valued

7. This is a major theme of the 1909 volume *Landmarks: A Collection of Articles about the Russian Intelligentsia (Vekhi: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii)*, which was widely read and debated. On its reception see Read (1979).

*freedom* and professed a philosophy in which there is no place for freedom”; he also accused the revolutionary intelligentsia of espousing a kind of ersatz religion in an attempt to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, one whose utilitarian and atheist premises would leave no room for valuing the individual (Berdiaev 1967: 18–20). When the actual events of the Bolshevik coup and its aftermath confirmed their predictions and seemed also to confirm the incompatibility of atheism with the protection of individual human dignity, Russian Christian intellectuals did not hesitate to say so, to both Russian and foreign audiences. The 1918 volume edited by Peter Berngardovich Struve *Out of the Depths: A Collection of Articles on the Russian Revolution (Iz glubiny: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii)* represents an early example.

Of course, not all the ideas found in Schaeffer’s statements quoted above were original Russian arguments, and by the time Schaeffer espoused these ideas, they had been “in the air,” if you will, for quite some time, making it difficult to parse out influences. If there was any direct Russian influence on Schaeffer’s view that apart from a system of higher values the state would put itself in the place of God, it may have come from Dostoevsky, directly or indirectly.<sup>8</sup> We recall Shigalev’s statement from the 1872 novel *Demons*, for example: “Beginning with absolute freedom I conclude with absolute despotism. And I would add that apart from my solution to the social question, there can be no other” (Dostoevskii 1990: 252). Of course, in the 1880s, Nietzsche also warned about the dangers of the state as “The New Idol” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and this idea — surely in part a reaction against Hegelianism — must have been picked up directly from Nietzsche by numerous religious and non-believing thinkers (Nietzsche 2005: 43–45). I do not doubt that Nietzsche as well as Dostoevsky had a direct influence on discussions of the problem among Russian Christians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, Schaeffer’s suggestion that a secular liberal society cannot last is also reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s 1940 *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in which Eliot presents liberalism as having served a useful historical purpose, but a purely negative, critical purpose, making liberalism inherently unstable and ultimately unsustainable.

8. Since making this comment I have been informed by Schaeffer’s son, Frank Schaeffer, that as far as he recalled his father “never got into any of the Russian religious writers. He would have had a working knowledge of their names/works but that’s all” (Personal Communication with Frank Schaeffer 2013). Francis Schaeffer himself died in 1984.

9. For an example see Trubetskoi (1917), and for the broader context see Kolerov (2000).

This representation of liberalism as exclusively negative in content also recalls Thomas Carlyle, who was himself an important influence on turn-of-the-century Russian Christian thinkers. According to Eliot, then, liberalism was destined to be replaced with some positive idea, and Eliot took the candidates to be either Christianity or “paganism,” by which he meant totalitarianism (Eliot 1940). The same concern over the inability to constrain the state from deifying itself in the absence of religion was shared by many prominent interwar and mid-century French intellectuals, not least Albert Camus, who, of course, did not believe in God, but was profoundly concerned with nihilism (Camus 1964; Siljak 2012).

In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot referred to one such French intellectual, the Neo-Thomist theologian and personalist philosopher Jacques Maritain, as a direct influence on his own thinking (Eliot 1940: 6). This will bring us back around to the Russians since, as we know from the research of Catherine Baird, Maritain, whose accomplishments include having a hand in drafting the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was directly influenced by Berdyaev, who played an active and visible role in interwar French intellectual life (Baird 1995).

Now, the point of this whirlwind tour, which I fear may have been a bit dizzying, has been simply to show that what we are dealing with here is a discourse, an anti-secular — some would say anti-modern — discourse with roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russian intellectuals have undoubtedly contributed to this discourse, which has gained new purchase and visibility in our current post-secular moment. What most fundamentally links the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with our present time, I think, is anxiety over what I have elsewhere referred to as “the perceived cultural threat of nihilism” (Stroop 2013). Here I do not mean only those schools of thought that have defined themselves as nihilistic, which were of course an important part of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian intellectual history (Kline 1969), but more fundamentally the problem of the inaccessibility of absolute truth that could ground absolute values.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many intellectuals perceived nihilism as the root of the social ills that had accompanied the decline of Western civilization, thereby connecting nihilism with the rise of Communism and fascism. Maritain, for example, is among those Catholic thinkers cited by James Chappel in a recent article called “The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe.” As Chappel points out, totalitarian theory — now largely superseded

as a scholarly model, but one that has framed an enormous amount of scholarship — is generally regarded as a secular discourse (Chappel 2011).

Thus, to uncover the religious origins of totalitarian theory is an exciting development, one of many new directions that has come about with the “religious turn” in modern historiography, which is itself an outgrowth of what has been called “the post-secular academy” (Clayton 2002; Howard 2006; Schmalzbauer and Mahoney 2012; Haberski 2013). Of course, theologians must have been well aware of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Christian criticism of totalitarianism all along. I’m afraid that we are only beginning to bring religious ideas out of the isolated divinity schools that became a hallmark of the secular academy and back into intellectual history, where, by virtue of their social significance, they certainly belong. In this regard, we have a lot of catching up to do. My own research is uncovering Russian Orthodox Christian origins of totalitarian theory.<sup>10</sup> These Russian origins may well be prior. It was, after all, to the Russian émigrés whom Europeans and Americans turned in and after the 1920s when they wanted to understand what was happening in the Soviet Union. I will now briefly tell the story of how this came to be.

Late imperial Russia’s politically unstable and revolutionary climate gave rise to an anti-nihilist and anti-secular discourse, a kind of Russian political theology, that was a socially significant phenomenon. In the waning years of the old regime, the nascent Russian public sphere, especially in the freer climate after 1905 (Costello 1978), was rife with discussions about modernization, secularization, and the relationship between religion, state, and nation. These discussions took place in a European context. The Russian participants spent considerable time abroad, conducting research and attending lectures of leading European intellectuals such as Wilhelm Windelband and Edmund Husserl. They published in European journals. For example, during this period Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (ordained Fr. Sergius in 1918), who would later become a leader in the interwar ecumenical movement, contributed to contemporary European debates about methodology in the social sciences (Evtuhov 1997: 184). Prominent West European intellectuals were also known to visit and present in the Russian capitals.

10. One interesting Russian text that deals with totalitarianism (using the term) at length is Bulgakov (1948).

The project of Russian religious philosophy, which is not nearly so exotic as it has been painted, was heavily involved in these discussions. Its leading representatives were Christian apologists attempting to defend the reasonableness of faith against the tide of growing atheism, and also advocates of a kind of Russian civil religion who believed that only a state resting on a religious moral foundation could properly provide for the welfare of its citizens. Finding the roots of social ills in secularization and nihilism, they longed for the reunification of the Christian Churches and the re-Christianization of Europe. For many of them, these goals were associated with Neo-Slavophile Russian national messianism, with the belief that Russia had a Providential calling to reawaken Western spiritual life and ultimately that of the entire world. As evidence that they or at least the Russian literary tradition has had some enduring success at popularizing this idea, we might point to pop culture references such as those in the “Hellboy” series of comic books and films, in which the title character’s destiny seems to be to usher in the apocalypse, which he can only do in Russia.

In any case, this Providentialist Russian national messianism led its exponents to perceive World War I as a battle between Christianity (primarily embodied in Russia) and the nihilism of modern civilization (primarily embodied in Germany).<sup>11</sup> Of course, the October Revolution quickly changed the equation. The divine judgment against modern godless civilization that was the war — a view of the war that could be found among religious believers not only in Russia — was now also a divine punishment on Russia in the form of revolution. As has been well documented, these events led Christians of various confessions to seek means of working together in the interwar period to stand against common threats, not least Communism (Geffert 2010: 30–48).

When the Bolsheviks came to power, they did not so much suppress these ideas, which were already part of broader European intellectual trends, as they did ship them abroad — by expelling over 100 of Russia’s foremost intellectuals in late 1922 (Finkel 2007). These intellectuals continued to develop their ideas not only in Russian émigré circles, but also in European intellectual and religious circles. Many Europeans were eager to hear their interpretation of unfolding events. Writing from Geneva in 1920, for example, the brilliant Russian-Jewish existentialist Lev Isaakovich Shestov put it this way:

11. On the responses of leading Russian Christian intellectuals to the First World War and other developments described in the preceding paragraphs, see my Ph.D. dissertation (Stroop 2012), which is available for download at the following url: <http://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/9616719>, accessed November 29, 2013.

Ever since I arrived in Europe, everyone with whom I've happened to meet, both my fellow countrymen and foreigners, poses the question: "What is Russian Bolshevism; what's happening in Russia? You've seen everything directly, with your own eyes, tell us; we don't know anything and don't understand anything. Tell us everything and, if possible, calmly and dispassionately" (Shestov 1920).

While Shestov wrote these words in Russian, the piece was made available in French the very same year (Shestov (Shestov) 1920). Another piece of evidence is provided by a letter of May 7, 1923 from Oswald Spengler to Shestov's close friend Berdyaev: "During my next stay there [Berlin]," he wrote, "I would be very pleased to be acquainted with you and your friends, and especially to speak with you about the religious problems of contemporary and future Russia" (RGALI, f. 1496, op. 1, d. 833, l. 1).

So, if you had asked these Russian emigrants about Bolshevism, what kind of answer might you have received? If Shestov's pamphlet *What is Bolshevism?* is any indication, from him you'd have heard that Bolshevism was parasitical, bureaucratic, reactionary, antithetical to freedom, essentially destructive, and incapable of construction — and he'd have added a warning that the ills it had caused could soon befall Europe. From Berdyaev, you might have heard — most likely with much rambling repetition — that "religion cannot be a private matter, as modern history wanted," and that Communism understood the comprehensive nature of religion. Communism thus "demands 'sacred' society, 'sacred' culture, the subjection of all aspects of life to the religion of the devil, the religion of anti-Christ." In this respect Communism had already gone beyond modernity into the "New Middle Ages," the essentially religious epoch into which Berdyaev believed the world was transitioning in the 1920s (Berdiaev 2002: 229–30).

From some Russian Christians, you would probably have gotten the answer that without belief in God, man is nothing but an animal and thus behaves accordingly — an idea that had roots in the late imperial Russian public sphere (Trubetskoi 1912: 9). Of course, you could have gotten a similar idea directly from Dostoevsky, a profoundly influential religious thinker in the West, not least with respect to nihilism. Dostoevsky's famous suggestion that if there is no God, everything is permitted poses a problem that many believers and non-believers alike have taken seriously.

But if, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you were the sort of person who took a serious enough interest in Dostoevsky to read not

just his own books, but also books about him, your understanding of Dostoevsky might well have been shaped by Berdyaev. In 1918, Berdyaev called Dostoevsky “a prophet of the Russian revolution” who had “understood that revolutionary moralism has as its reverse side revolutionary amorality, and that the resemblance of revolutionary holiness to Christian holiness is the deceptive resemblance of anti-Christ to Christ” (Berdiaev 1990). A few years later, in 1923, Berdyaev developed similar themes in a study of Dostoevsky’s worldview that included a chapter on revolution and socialism. The book was translated into German by 1925, French by 1929, and English by 1934 (Berdiaev 1923; Berdjaev 1925; Berdiaeff 1929; Berdyaev 1934).

Now, if you had posed your question about the meaning of the Russian revolution to Bulgakov, you might have heard that the revolution was an “irrevocable judgment of history” and a spiritual disease, along with the hopeful statement that: “Every serious illness which cannot be arrested has its crisis, dangerous and exhausting, but if all goes well, leading at last to recovery.” On the other hand, this analysis may well have come with a plea for financial assistance and a stern warning: “If (...) you do not wish the Red Leprosy sooner or later to devour yourselves, nations of Europe and America, you must even now bring us your Christian help” (Bulgakov 1924). There were Western Christians who were ready to do so.

Everything I’ve just quoted from Bulgakov comes from an article published in 1924 in English. The piece does reveal that the Russian emigration had, in the description of Marc Raeff, an internal “mission (...) to preserve the values and traditions of Russian culture and to continue its creative efforts for the benefit and ongoing spiritual progress of the homeland” (Raeff 1990; Finkel 2010). But the pursuit of this mission inevitably brought the leading Russian émigrés into contact with Westerners, who were themselves, as I’ve already shown, often eager for that contact. One of the most important partnerships was between Russian Christians and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), which played a prominent role in the ecumenical movement.

Thanks to the recent research of Matthew Miller and Robert Bird, we have an excellent general understanding of the relationship between the YMCA and the Russian diaspora (Miller 2012; Bird (Bird) 2000). In addition to providing a great deal of direct humanitarian aid, the YMCA helped émigré Russians preserve and develop Russian culture and Orthodox Christianity through the publication of books and also a journal called *Put (The Way)*. Berdyaev was the editor of *Put* and of

the Russian YMCA Press, and in that capacity he worked very closely with American YMCA leaders (called secretaries), people who were well connected in humanitarian and government circles.

My own current research project, based primarily on the Paul B. Anderson Papers and the Donald A. and Helen O. Lowrie Papers housed at the University of Illinois Archives, is concerned with showing just how influential Berdyaev was in shaping these American humanitarians' understanding of Communism from a Christian point of view. Time will not allow me to go into detail, but I do want to note that Lowrie, who translated some of Berdyaev's works into English, was deeply devoted to popularizing Berdyaev's ideas in the United States, and this will bring us back around to the Cold War.<sup>12</sup>

The YMCA was a moderate, ecumenically inclined religious organization, and Lowrie might be described as a moderate anti-Communist. When working with Soviet refugees from German prison camps in the 1940s, for example, he was capable of admiring their Soviet patriotism, which he described in a letter to unspecified friends as a "flaming fire." Worried about the younger soldiers' missed schooling, Lowrie also related how he was instrumental in getting the Swiss government to help establish a Russian school that used Soviet textbooks. According to his letters, during encounters with Soviet refugees, Lowrie discussed religion only if they brought it up. But for all that, he remained a devout Christian who was opposed to Soviet atheism (UIUC 15/35/53, box 4, folder "1944").

The Berdyaev that Lowrie presented to the United States was very similar in outlook. And this was not such a great distortion of the "real" Berdyaev; one can see how the two became close. Berdyaev, after all, never accepted that a nihilistic worldview could ground a healthy society, just as he had always opposed external military intervention in the Soviet Union, as he believed that Russian culture had to be renewed from within. After Berdyaev's death in 1948, Lowrie participated in the founding of an organization called the Berdyaev Society, whose constitution lists among its goals the support of those dedicated to developing Berdyaev's "ideology" (UIUC 15/35/54, box 5, folder "Nicholas Berdyaev Society, 1946, 1948–53, 1956–61"). Despite the moderate attitude of Lowrie and Berdyaev toward the Soviet Union,

12. The topic of my presentation at the Varieties of Russian Modernity conference was "Nikolai Berdiaev and the YMCA: A Case Study in Russian Contributions to Twentieth-Century Christian Anti-Communist Discourse." The publication of this essay is projected.

one can certainly surmise that more conservative anti-Communists would read their works in order to understand Communism.

In the 1960s, Lowrie published a Berdyaev anthology with commentary and a biography of Berdyaev that is frequently criticized for being hagiographic (Lowrie 1960; Lowrie 1965). In my view, we can make the best use of Lowrie's biography by ceasing to regard it chiefly as a secondary source with certain deficiencies and beginning to regard it as a primary source — not only for memoiristic firsthand information about Berdyaev, but also for investigating the influence of Russian Christian ideas in Cold War era America and Britain. How successful was Lowrie in his project of spreading Berdyaev's ideas? For now, I'm afraid, that must remain an open question, but for my part I plan to pick away at researching Berdyaev's reception in both the United States and Europe as I have the opportunity.

What I can say with confidence today is that the kinds of ideas Berdyaev espoused were part of a broad anti-secular and anti-nihilist discourse with roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that achieved some prominence in response to the horrors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To many exponents of this discourse, the Soviet Union eventually became the most threatening actually existing political and social embodiment of nihilism. This occurred even as this anti-secular discourse quietly retreated from the mainstream of public life. But today, in our post-secular moment — a moment of economic crisis, and also widespread identity crisis that can, I believe, be traced in part to the end of the Cold War and uncertainties surrounding globalization and the emergence of a multi-polar world — this discourse is back in force.

At the beginning of my talk I promised that I would not leave the term “post-secular” undefined, and so in place of a traditional conclusion I would like to spend the remainder of my time reflecting on the concept of the post-secular. I have, as you'll have noticed, dropped the cumbersome “so-called” from my subtitle. In the course of working on this project, I have warmed to the term, which need not be taken to suggest that the immanent frame, as described by Charles Taylor, has ceased by and large to set the parameters of modern experience, or that pluralism is no longer a fundamental condition of modernity, in which religious faith is just one option among many (Taylor 2007). Nor need the use of the term be associated with advocating anti-secular ideology, although this has been a worry. As Eduardo Mendieta has observed, for example, “The approving use of the term ‘post-secular’ incites visceral reaction because it is taken to

suggest that now religion can and should be mingled with the state” (Mendieta 2012).<sup>13</sup> While Mendieta is among those who consider the post-secular to be compatible with, and even integral to, post-metaphysical and post-foundational philosophy, political theology does have increased appeal in times like ours.<sup>14</sup> This is a historical and empirical observation about something that I consider to be an identifying feature of post-secularism. It is most certainly not a normative claim to the effect that, given the crisis of the times, we ought to embrace political theology.

The turn of the last century, during which European intellectual life underwent what the intellectual historian H. Stuart Hughes described as a “revolt against positivism” (1958), was similar to our current time in at least one critical respect.<sup>15</sup> Then as now there was a pervasive worry that with the secularization that accompanied modernity, Western civilization — and Russia, to the extent that it had followed this Western path — had lost its way, with potentially disastrous moral consequences accompanying the breakdown of traditional faith, traditional families, and strong communities. Consider comments made by Sergei Bulgakov in 1912 about “the decay of all the old supports: religion, family, morality, the traditional way of life,” all of which he linked directly to the rise of atheism among the youth under the influence of “intelligentsia nihilism” (Bulgakov 1912: 189–90).

Apart perhaps from the phrase “intelligentsia nihilism,” these comments do not sound out of place in our present moment, which is marked by what Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen have described as “the recent and full-throated return of political theology” (2011: 4). Indeed, political theology is a current concern among intellectual historians, philosophers, and advocates of secular liberalism, including, for example, Mark Lilla, who has traced a predominantly Protestant story of the emergence of 20<sup>th</sup>-century political theology; and Jürgen Habermas, whose recent references to political theology

13. For a refutation of the simplistic equation of using the terminology of post-secularism with espousing anti-secular ideology, see Uzlaner (2013).

14. In the words of prominent sociologists of religion, “Where identity is threatened in the course of major cultural transitions, religion may provide resources for negotiating such transitions” (Wallis and Bruce 1992: 18). For more on the important relationship between religious rhetoric and communal identity in the context of crisis, see Murphy (2009).

15. I am not the first to point to Russian participation in this European phenomenon. See Evtuhov (1997: 16, 153, 246).

have been framed primarily with regard to Catholicism in general and to Carl Schmitt in particular (Lilla 2007; Habermas 2011: 19–23).<sup>16</sup> Both Lilla and Habermas recognize the powerful appeal that political theology holds in a time like the present – a time of crisis and the breakdown of community. But by laying out ties between anti-liberal political theology and Nazism as cautionary tales, of course, both these intellectuals are attempting to warn us against succumbing to the temptation of political theology.

The temptation is real. Some scholars who are rethinking secularism call into question whether secularism is essential to democracy, and others who wish to “rehabilitate” secularism go well beyond what Habermas and other 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberal theorists would be willing to countenance with respect to the relationship between religion and the state (Stepan 2011; Bhargava 2011). I tend to think there are good reasons to push back against the clear-cut boundaries that would have been imposed by the early John Rawls, but a very important question remains: how far is too far?

Meanwhile, there are those who are arguing, *contra* Habermas, that in the wake of post-modernism’s undermining of all absolutes, there is no longer a rational basis for an absolute distinction between philosophy and theology. This is the argument of Dmitry Uzlaner, who is one of the leading contemporary Russian scholars of religion and secularism, and, given that this is a talk about the Russian origins of the post-secular moment, I should probably note in passing that very similar arguments were made by Russian Christians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Uzlaner 2011b; Ern 1913). Uzlaner is a key participant in a forthcoming research project supported by the John Templeton Foundation on “Rethinking the ‘Secular’ in Russian and Western Context” that will involve bringing leading Western theorists of

16. For interest in political theology in Russian intellectual history, see also Poole (2013). This piece remains forthcoming at the time of my revising this lecture; I thank Randall A. Poole for sharing his unpublished research with me. The distinction Poole (and others) draw between the old political theology, used for the “ideological legitimization of power,” and the new political theology, devoted to “the theological analysis, criticism, and justification of politics, society, and history,” is important. However, the distinction is not absolute or clear-cut, and we should be careful of an overly simplistic equation of old political theology with social harm and new political theology with social good. Both entail positive conceptions of liberty of the sort opposed by 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberal philosophy with its insistence on negative liberty. It is also the case that social justice Christianity is not immune to the temptations of what I call the “politics of Providentialism” (Stroop 2013), which can lead to the emergence of Christian nationalism, as the case of the Russian religious intelligentsia clearly shows.

secularism, including Taylor, to Russian and Ukrainian cities where they will deliver lectures.<sup>17</sup>

Undoubtedly, our post-secular moment is associated with the softening of boundaries between “autonomous” academic disciplines and a drive toward interdisciplinary exploration, which is often fruitful. With respect to the boundary between philosophy and theology, John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney have argued in a similar vein to Uzlaner. “In a postmodern era,” they note, “scholars are challenging the boundaries between faith and knowledge, acknowledging the importance of religion as a human phenomenon and as a way of knowing.” Observing an increasing visibility of religion “across the humanities,” they go on to point out: “Nowhere has the return of religion been more dramatic than in philosophy.” A note of caution may be in order here, since at least two thirds of American philosophers remain non-theists (Schmalzbauer and Mahoney 2012), and, while I don’t have comparable numbers for European countries, I would certainly be surprised if the philosophical profession in any of them turned out to be more theistic than in the US.

Regarding philosophy and the emergence of post-secularism, Uzlaner insists on the primacy of a story internal to philosophy, despite observing that the question of the post-secular can be approached from political and sociological angles. I do not doubt that there is a profoundly important story about the post-secular that is internal to the discipline of philosophy. We could even go looking for Russian origins within this story beyond those that have been laid out today, particularly with respect to the development of existentialism, in which Berdyaev would feature prominently, and also among Russian phenomenologists such as Gustav Shpet, who remained in the Soviet Union, and Evsei Schor, who did not. Schor, incidentally, was not only a phenomenologist and student of Husserl, but also an active promoter of Berdyaev in the German-speaking world who translated some of Berdyaev’s works into German. A Russian Jew and a great lover of German philosophy, Schor left for Palestine when the Nazis came to power; from there, he continued to correspond with Berdyaev (RGALI, f. 1496, op. 1, d. 831 (Pis’ma Shora Evseia Davydovicha N. A. Berdiaevu); Segal 1994; Iantsen 2006).

17. At the time of this revising, the project is actually ongoing. For more information, see: <http://russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Pereosmyslenie-svetskogo-v-rossijskom-i-zapadnom-kontekste>, accessed November 19, 2013.

In any case, to return at last to the question of what the post-secular is, while I recognize the importance of the philosophical story laid out by Uzlaner, I am not ready to recognize its absolute primacy. According to Uzlaner, “the phenomenon of the post-secular has a more fundamental philosophical measure, without which any social or political discussions would not have any foundation beneath them” (Uzlaner 2011b: 3). For my own part, while I believe ideas to be crucial to the post-secular, I would prefer to take more of a neo-Weberian approach, one in which the mutual interactions between ideas, institutions, economic conditions, and other social forces must be considered. Yet if I would not go so far as Uzlaner in recognizing the primacy of philosophy in the emergence of the post-secular (with the concomitant emphasis on the blurring of the border between philosophy and theology), I would go further than Habermas in recognizing the pervasive influence of religious ideas in the post-secular academy and post-secular society.

Habermas’s interpretation of post-secular society seems to rest, in the description of Michael Reder and Josef Schmidt, on “the fact that modern societies should (...) expect that religions will continue to exist and should seek to engage them in a constructive dialogue” (Reder and Schmidt 2010: 7). This formulation makes religion distinct from modern society, which is, on an empirical basis, manifestly inaccurate. Religion remains rather a part of modern societies, a part of the inherently dialectical phenomenon that we refer to as modernity (Pippin 1991). In times like the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and times like the present, discomfort with the modern project comes to the fore. An ideal-typical interpretation of the post-secular would have to take into account both the persistence of anti-secular religion and, to borrow Habermas’s phrase, the “awareness of what is missing” among non-believers (Habermas 2010). We see this awareness in thinkers like Camus in the interwar period and mid-century, and today we see it in thinkers like Alain de Botton, a leading representative of the so-called “new, new atheists” who are interested in exploring what religion might be able to offer non-believers (Derbyshire, et al. 2013).<sup>18</sup> If I had to take a stab at coming up with such an ideal type, I would describe the post-secular as fundamentally consisting in an intense confrontation with the problem of nihilism. When it comes to nihilism, of course, Russian history has given us a lot to think about.

18. I thank Erich Lippman for this reference.

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