CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION. TOWARDS CHRISTIAN RENEWAL:
EROS, SUBLIMATION AND CREATIVITY IN MODERN
RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

A Transvaluation of Christian Values
Conducted from Within

The fate of Freudian thought in Russia in medical psychiatry and even in political ideology in the early years of the Soviet Russian state has been studied extensively. The engagement with “proto-Freudian” and Freudian thought by Russian Orthodox religious thinkers has not had the same fate.

Nevertheless, there were four major Christian religious thinkers in Russia who considered all forms of higher human creativity to be a sublimation or transmutation of the sexual instinct or drive. These were Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov (1853–1900), Vasily Vasil’evich Rozanov (1856–1919), Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdyaev (1874–1948) and Boris Pavlovich Vysheslavtsev (1876–1954). The first two advanced a theory of sublimation similar to Freud’s before Freud first articulated his view in 1896, and did so with no knowledge of Freudian psychoanalysis. The latter two thinkers knew Freud’s works before they left Russia permanently in 1922, and they came to know psychoanalysis even better while in Paris as they were there at the height of the impact of Freudian thought in the Western world. Quite predictably, the majority of Russian religious thinkers, like their Western Catholic and Protestant counterparts, rejected most of Freudian thought as radically atheist, scientific, and materialist, and saw it as possibly useful only for the clinical treatment of the seriously mentally ill. Two notable exceptions were Berdyaev and Vysheslavtsev, both of whom were deeply interested in human creativity and saw Freud’s discoveries as valuable for a better understanding of man, i.e., for a more profound Christian anthropology.

In the face of Freud’s intransigent atheism and materialism, and despite their own, rather original but deep Christian allegiances, Berdyaev and Vysheslavtsev engaged seriously with the Freudian ideas of the dominance of the irrational/the unconscious and of the centrality of the sexual in man, in addition to accepting the basic premises of his theory of creativity, the so-called “sublimation hypothesis.” Berdyaev and Vysheslavtsev were both deeply influenced, positively and negatively, by the philosophies of creativity of their older contemporaries, Solovyov and Rozanov. Berdyaev and Vysheslavtsev attempted to incorporate what was useful and beneficial in Freud’s thought into their own theories of Christian creativity. Berdyaev did this at certain pivotal points in his career. His close associate and colleague of decades, Vysheslavtsev, made the “Christianization of Freud” virtually his life’s project. In fact, the views of these four religious thinkers on human creativity form a discrete, but continuous tradition on Eros and Creativity within Russian religious thought, one that is occasionally alluded to in part, but never treated as a 60-year developing tradition from the early 1890’s to the 1950’s. This “Christianization of Freud,” amounts to a translation of the pre-existing metaphysical-religious ideas about Eros of Solovyov and Rozanov into more modern psychoanalytic terms, while maintaining their strong religious emphasis—one already so marked in Plato—on man’s spirituality and ability to transcend his physical/biological nature.

It is the aim of the present book to trace this tradition of Eros and Creativity chronologically, inasmuch as each Russian thinker’s ideas polemicize with, incorporate and change those of his predecessor over the six decades. In the first movement of this ongoing tradition Solovyov and Rozanov made human sexuality a metaphysical and religious subject, an all-important one that had to be clarified in Christian metaphysics. When Freud, and even Otto Weininger, whose one major work *Sex and Character*, was known in Russia before Freud declared the centrality of sexuality to an understanding of man and his creativity. Berdyaev and Vysheslavtsev had inherited this view from Solovyov and

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2 Nikolai Berdyaev did this especially in the 1920s and 1930s, his first decade in the emigration.