

Towards a Reconciliation of the Carnavalesque with Bakhtin's
Christian *Weltanschauung*

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Abstract

The religious dimension of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin's work currently remains under-explored in Western criticism, where the image of Bakhtin as a literary critic overshadows his contribution as a Christian thinker. In this thesis, I reinterpret some Christian motifs, such as kenotic Incarnation, in Bakhtin's early as well as late works as foundations for some of his most important terminological innovations, such as the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin's latent religious discourse not only illustrates his familiarity with Orthodox theology, but also reveals his engagement in dialogue with some of the major religious philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia, among whom are Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov, and Berdyaev. Thus, one of the main aims of this thesis is to articulate a common intellectual paradigm loosely framed around the interpretation of Incarnation as *kenosis*. In this study, I mainly rely on the approaches of the Cambridge School for tracing the usage history of the term *kenosis*. An understanding of *kenosis* as a functional rather than substantive process, which can be applied to explain a variety of (substantively) different (but functionally similar) phenomena, grounds the celebration of matter one finds in the writings of both the fin de siècle Russian religious philosophers and Bakhtin.

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Introduction

General Introduction

A true atheist must concede that Dostoevsky, and not Russia's nineteenth-century progressives, was right. The latter were wrong in believing that the collapse of the tsarist regime would mean the end of willful arrogance, greed, the lust for power, guile, servility, and inhumanity whether through cruelty or quiescence. – Czeslaw Milosz

The religious dimension of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin's work currently remains under-explored in Western criticism, where the image of Bakhtin as a literary critic overshadows his contribution as a Christian thinker. Even when the presence of Eastern Orthodox theology is recognized at the periphery of Bakhtin's writings, it is often cast in a negative light as a theoretical limitation to his critical approach. Rather than viewing the echoes of Christianity in Bakhtin's thought as a defect, in my thesis I propose to reinterpret these motifs as foundations for some of his most important terminological innovations, such as dialogism, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin's latent religious discourse not only illustrates his familiarity with Orthodox theology, but also reveals his engagement in dialogue with some of the major religious philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia, such as Vladimir Soloviev, Mikhail Tareev, Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, and Nikolai Berdyaev.

Although the parallels between Bakhtin's newly invented terminology and Christianity are not immediately apparent, his literary terms nonetheless reach back and speak to one another through their common Christian base. A case in point is the carnivalesque, which subsumes heteroglossia and dialogism, as both are derived from carnivalistic folklore. On the surface, it appears that the Bakhtinian carnival is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity, which supports the "official seriousness" that carnival, and specifically carnival laughter, aims to overthrow. As a

liberating spirit, carnival seeks to undermine all structures of authority, the purpose of which is to terrify the subjects into submission. How, then, can an authority-suspending concept of carnival, which Bakhtin wholeheartedly supports in *Rabelais and His World*, and its pagan origins, be consistent with a Christian worldview? The primary purpose of this study is to reevaluate Bakhtin's concept of carnival and to point to possible ways of reconciling the carnivalesque with Bakhtin's religious inclinations in his early essays.

An analysis of Bakhtin's theoretical treatment of carnival and the derivative literary genre of grotesque realism seems to reveal that Bakhtin paradoxically supports the liberating power of the pagan carnival festivals on the basis of a particular perception of materiality, which has roots in the understanding of Incarnation as *kenosis* or emptying. Following the fin de siècle Russian religious philosophers' reading of the Incarnation, and similar, previously existing discourse on the nature of "God-Man," for early Bakhtin the divine *becomes* the material in the process of Incarnation; that is, the divine is not deposited within the material, but actually becomes flesh. Consequently, the Neo-Platonic distinction between the material and transcendent, of which the latter is deemed superior in every dichotomy, no longer makes sense, since there is nothing transcendent that has not become flesh. This functional process of validating the material is transformed in his later works into a defense of the Formalist insistence on the unity of form and content.

A similar understanding of the role of the physical body underlies Bakhtin's discussion of carnival. For Bakhtin, one of the main functions of carnival is to bring down the high and the abstract to the level of the body and earth, or materialize them – another form of incarnation. If, according to Bakhtin, "The Gospel, too, is carnival," perhaps the function of the New Testament for Bakhtin is embodied in the

materialization of God. In other words, through the incarnation of Christ, the Christian God becomes less abstract than the Judaic God of the Old Testament. This materialization, in turn, minimizes the distance that is used by power structures, such as the Church, to terrify its subjects. This kind of de-abstractification is important for Bakhtin precisely because abstraction is connected with monologism, whereas the polyphonic principle can only occur in the framework of carnival.

In the following chapters by arguing that Bakhtin exhibits elements of Russian Orthodox thought as it developed around his time, I do not mean to suggest that Bakhtin embraces Orthodox dogma unequivocally, and, even less so, that he embraces the institution of the Orthodox Church. Rather, he develops his own selective set of convictions, which he nevertheless perceives as Orthodoxy, not unlike his contemporaries viewed their own work when it came to contextualizing it within the existing framework of Orthodox thought. That is, emphasizing some themes while downplaying others, Bakhtin selectively reinterprets Orthodoxy in his own particular way, which may or may not reflect official Orthodox teachings. As Bakhtin's biographers point out, his religious views "came not so much from traditional Orthodox thinking within the church as from the religious revival in the early twentieth century among Russian intellectuals who sought to break new ground in theological thought".¹ Consequently, my concern is rather with the way Bakhtin perceived Orthodoxy, than with the reconstruction of official Orthodox doctrines. Moreover, the endeavor to reconstruct the aspects in which Bakhtin conformed to the Orthodox doctrine and those in which he departed from it is further complicated by the reinterpretation that Russian Orthodoxy had undergone in the English language

¹ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 120. Clark and Holquist continue with the following words, "Bakhtin's Orthodox theology was not the theology of the run-of-the-mill seminary, but of the highbrow intelligentsia" (120).

scholarship under the influence of scholars like George Fedotov² (1886-1951), and for this reason, is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will briefly return to this theme in my discussion of the influence of Dostoevsky's fiction onto the subsequent development in Russian religious philosophy in the first chapter, devoted to Russian religious thought in relation to the kenotic principle.

After decades of suppression during the Soviet period, Russian religious philosophy experienced a major revival due to a reemergence of interest in the field on the part of both Russian and western scholars in the years following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In trying to keep abreast with the current trends of the Russian academic tradition, or perhaps "under the influence of a liberal academic tradition skeptical of religion,"³ the scholars in the west, though not subjected to the same pressures of censorship, have likewise failed to give due attention to this aspect of Russian thought during the Soviet period. My project, then, like other literature on the subject of Russian religious philosophy which began to emerge in the 1990s, is an attempt to fill in some gaps in this marginal and for many years muffled sphere of Russian culture.

Before proceeding to examine specific issues involved in Bakhtin's conceptualization of carnival, I will briefly contextualize Bakhtin's writings in terms of the historical situation in which he was writing. The biography of Pavel Aleksandrovich Florensky (1882-1937) – a Russian religious philosopher to whom, as we shall see in due course, Bakhtin bears a special relation not only in terms of the convergence of their religious thought but, perhaps more importantly, in terms of the correspondence between philosophy of language and theories of Truth emphasized by

² As we shall see below, Fedotov was one of the first academics to popularize the concept *kenosis* in describing the "Russian religious mind".

³ Richard Gustafson and Judith Kornblatt, eds. *Russian Religious Thought* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 4.

both thinkers⁴ – is an example par excellence of the fate of Russian religious thought in the Soviet period. Following the loss of his academic appointments after the Revolution of 1917, Florensky was arrested in 1935 and sentenced to ten years in a Siberian labor camp, where he was executed two years later. Although Florensky was well known to the Russian Symbolists as well as in the circles of pre- and post-revolutionary intelligentsia, after his exile, his contributions were not rediscovered until the 1960s, marking almost a thirty year period of silence, by the Russian religious dissidents. In this sense, the life of Florensky, whose religious ideas will be examined in greater detail in a section on the kenotic principle within Russian religious philosophy, is representative of the fate of the entire field of Russian religious philosophy in Soviet times; that is, if it was not eradicated, it was deliberately forgotten.

Although Bakhtin did not share the tragic fate of Pavel Florensky and other “dissident” intellectuals who became victims of the Stalinist purges, the literary critic was arrested and exiled for his alleged participation in the Russian Orthodox Church underground movement in 1929,⁵ and like many of his contemporaries, was forced to produce his works under the constant fear of punishment for writing outside of the prescribed aesthetic canon. After his return to Moscow in the late 1930s, Bakhtin submitted a work entitled “Francois Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” as a thesis to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in 1940.⁶ Following his brilliant thesis defense,⁷ Bakhtin was awarded the lesser degree of

⁴ Although it is not my intention to claim direct intellectual influence, as little information about Bakhtin’s biography can be corroborated, for an example of such speculations, see Clark and Holquist 1984a, 29-30.

⁵ This charge remains uncorroborated to this day. See chapter five, entitled “Religious Activities and the Arrest,” of Clark and Holquist’s biography.

⁶ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

⁷ He did not receive the letter that he should appear to defend his thesis until 1947 primarily due to the outbreak of the war.

kandidat,⁸ rather than the more prestigious title of *doktor*, as was recommended by some members of the examining committee. One of the main subjects explored in Bakhtin's dissertation is the peculiarity of the novel as a literary genre, which, taking into consideration the increasing importance placed on it by the Communist Academy, is hardly surprising.

The novel genre was of particular interest to the Soviet government, which made great efforts to unify Soviet writers, irrespective of their individual style, under the banner of Socialist Realism. By 1932 membership in the Union of Writers became a mandatory requirement for all Soviet authors. In the same year, the Stalinist government issued the decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations," which proposed the liquidation of all existing art groups because of their "insular reticence" and alienation from the political tasks of contemporaneity,"⁹ thereby making Socialist Realism the official aesthetic doctrine of the Soviet state. The campaign for Socialist Realism, which gained steam by the mid 1930s, can be viewed as a maker of the establishment of the Soviet ideal of "one leader, one party, one aesthetic".¹⁰

In 1934 the Communist Academy, considering the novel as the most important genreic medium for the expression of Socialist Realism, organized a series of discussion panels on this subject,¹¹ the transcripts of which were subsequently published in the journal *The Literary Critic*. Taking this historical context into account as an extra-linguistic factor which could help one reconstruct the author's

⁸ A post-graduate degree awarded for a dissertation, and roughly corresponds to a Ph.D. in the west. Bakhtin did not receive this degree until 1951.

⁹ See the decree in *Na literaturnom postu* 12 (1932), available in *Na literaturnom postu: literaturno-khudozhestvennyi sbornik* (Leningrad: Gos. publichnaia biblioteka im. M.E. Saltykova-Shchedrina, 1988).

¹⁰ Michael Holquist, in the prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, xvii.

¹¹ See transcriptions of the first Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934. For a detailed discussion of what occurred at the Congress and how Socialist Realism was adopted, see Regine Robin's *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

intention behind the semantic meanings,¹² one could argue that in his dissertation Bakhtin is engaged in a polemic with the Socialist Realist aesthetic of his time, which he sees as an uncreative monological seriousness. Bakhtin's exaltation of the novel genre, which he values primarily for its linguistic and stylistic variety, and of grotesque realism, celebrated in his work on Rabelais as a genre which asserts human freedom in the face of monological seriousness, stands in direct opposition to the prescribed, static formulas of Socialist Realism.

Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* – a 1965 reworking of his 1930s PhD dissertation, which is the primary focus of my analysis – is an examination of the folk culture of carnival, as depicted in the novels of Francois Rabelais. With its emphasis on the earthly and the grotesque, carnival, according to Bakhtin, represents a symbolic overthrow of authority and its monological seriousness. In addition to being an important contribution to literary theory, *Rabelais and His World* is a profound reflection on Bakhtin's own times; written at the height of the Stalinist regime, one cannot help but recall Bakhtin's insistence on the unity of text and context, form and content in relation to this treatise on human freedom. In taking such a charged context into account, one must, at the same time, exhibit caution in making assertions about the "true" intentions of the author, as some critics have taken the extreme view that Bakhtin's writing is nothing but criticism of the Soviet regime disguised in the form of literary studies. In this thesis, I will approach Bakhtin's work on Rabelais in the spirit of carnival: although I will focus on certain Orthodox connections of Bakhtin's understanding of materiality, I do not mean to implicitly suggest that Bakhtin's work should be read monologically within a religious-philosophical context. The religious dimension of Bakhtin's work is only one voice in

¹² See the methodology section below.

the open-ended, polyphonic sound of his thought.

Certain unease and ambiguity characterize the reception of this work on Rabelais, especially in the Russian tradition where Bakhtin is often viewed as a religious figure, as at first sight the work appears to be an endorsement of paganism and anticlericalism. However, it must be noted that Bakhtin's overarching critique is directed not simply against the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which represents only one concrete manifestation of oppressive power structures, but rather against the general "enslavement" of the human spirit to fear.¹³ Bakhtin is *primarily* concerned with exposing the relation of power and authority to truth, and subsequently illustrating how a monological aesthetic can be overturned by laughter, than with constructing a critique of the institution of the Church. Moreover, Bakhtin's reservations concerning the Church as an institutional power in his *Rabelais and his World* are not to be confused with hostility towards Christianity in general. In order to discern the possible connections between Christian lines of thought and Bakhtin's concept of carnival, it is first necessary to explain what is it that Bakhtin means by the term carnivalesque, a task to which I will devote a section within the second chapter.

The general structure of the thesis, already hinted at above, can be briefly summarized as follows: the first chapter focuses on the religious context from which, as I will attempt to prove, Bakhtin appropriates his notion of carnivalesque degradation and derives his view of materiality. The second chapter, in addition to establishing a theoretical framework for the carnivalesque, is intended to raise the question of the origins of Bakhtin's terminology as a possible clue to the identity of Bakhtin's implicit interlocutor(s) in his texts. This chapter also provides a detailed

¹³ Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127.

linguistic and literary analysis of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, using the criteria established in the previous chapter in an effort to outline some traces of Orthodoxy, dogmatic and ritualistic, in Bakhtin's thought. Before I proceed to discussing the kenotic principle within Russian religious philosophy, I will briefly digress from my main subject to consider the methodology with which I intend to approach the religious dimension of Bakhtin's works.

Theoretical Framework

Only when the position is dogmatically inert is there nothing new revealed in the work (the dogmatist gains nothing; he cannot be enriched). The person who understands must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared view points and positions. In the act of understanding, a *struggle* occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment. – Mikhail Bakhtin

Before proceeding to discuss my own methodology for approaching Bakhtin's texts, it seems worthwhile to try to apply the author's own implicitly formulated hermeneutic method to his texts in an effort to reconstruct some possible authorial intentions, or, in the jargon of the speech act theory, the illocutionary force¹⁴ behind the semantic content of his works. Considering that Bakhtin invokes the name of Marc Bloch, one of the founders of the French school of historical writing, the *Annales*, in his notes on the methodology for the human sciences,¹⁵ let us briefly sketch some points of convergence between Bakhtin's roughly demarcated method and that of Bloch, as presented in his *The Historian's Craft*.

¹⁴ To be explained in more detail below.

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Methodology for the Human Sciences" in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 167. Elliptically but pregnant with meaning, Bakhtin writes, "Experiment and mathematical elaboration. One raises a question and obtains an answer – this is the personal interpretation of the process of natural scientific cognition and of its subject (the experimenter). The history of cognition in terms of its results and the history of cognizing people. See Marc Bloch." Bakhtin began to work on this piece, formerly entitled "On the Philosophical Bases of the Human Sciences," in the late 1930s or early 40s, but did not return to it until 1974, following the death of his wife.

In his *The Historian's Craft*, Bloch insists that “a civilization, like a person, is no mechanically arranged game of solitaire; the knowledge of fragments, studied by turns, each for its own sake, will never produce knowledge of the whole; it will not even produce that of the fragments themselves”.¹⁶ Therefore, Bloch concludes, one must view historical time in terms of the *longue durée*, or long-term historical structures. In his “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” Bakhtin comes to a similar solution to the problem of fragmentation,

The mutual understanding of centuries and millennia, of peoples, nations, and cultures, provides a complex unity of all humanity, all human cultures (a complex unity of human culture), and a complex unity of human literatures. All this is revealed only on the level of great time. *Each image must be understood and evaluated on the level of great time.* Analysis usually fusses about in the narrow space of small time...¹⁷

Bakhtin's attempt to reconstruct living wholes in terms of literary genres instead of dealing with otherwise hopelessly diffused fragments is evident in his approach to Rabelais and Dostoevsky in his two major case studies, both of which are concerned with a history of large-scale cultural transformations. Both of these works examine what the Annales School of historians has labeled transformations of “*mentalites*”.

As part of the study of *mentalites*, Bakhtin insists on the central role of culture in an analysis of a text, as is made evident in his praise of his contemporaries, the medievalist Dmitry Likhachev and the semiotician Yuri Lotman, both of whom, despite the individual nuances of their methodologies converge on the idea of the relevancy of cultural context in which a work is produced. Bakhtin's works are permeated with a sense of interest in the questions of human consciousness under particular cultural and historical conditions. Again, in the “Methodology,” Bakhtin argues,

¹⁶ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 155.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 167; my emphasis.

The text – printed, written, or orally recorded – is not equal to the work as a whole (or to the ‘aesthetic object’). The work also includes its necessary extratextual context. The work, as it were, is enveloped in the music of the intonational-evaluative context in which it is understood and evaluated (of course, this context changes in the various epochs in which it is perceived, which creates a new resonance in the work.¹⁸

In the above passage, Bakhtin stresses the importance of context for the understanding and interpretation of a work, which as a whole reaches out beyond the printed word. Moreover, the relevant context is not only the historical, cultural, etc. situation of the author, but also that of the interpreter – a point to which I shall return below. His emphasis on the contextualizing importance of culture manifests itself most strongly in his idea of the chronotope, which can be roughly defined as a spatio-temporal backdrop against which narratives and linguistic acts take place.

When an author favors a particular method in approaching his subject matter, it seems obvious that his writings on this subject matter should be read within this methodology (provided that one is primarily interested in reconstructing the author’s thought, rather than in the subject matter itself), as it consciously or unconsciously shapes, though not necessarily determines, his work. From Bakhtin’s insistence on this *Annales*-style method, it seems fair to conclude that Bakhtin would expect his own work to be treated in the same manner, taking into account the larger context in which it was produced, or in his own terminology, the chronotope of his works. Thus, my own approach to Bakhtin’s works will respect these principles by supplementing the cultural context, especially the religious-philosophical sphere of Russian culture in so far as it shaped some crucial categories of Bakhtin’s thought. That is, I want to emphasize that Bakhtin’s work, like that of Rabelais according to Bakhtin’s qualification, “grew out of the very depths of life of that time”.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 167.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c1984), 437. From here on referred to by its commonly accepted contraction *RAHW*.

One might ask, what is this unit of time? In my own study, Bakhtin's "level of great time," or the analogous concept of the *longue durée* entails the study of pre-revolutionary philosophical atmosphere in Russia. That is, rather than focusing exclusively on the post-1917 environment in which Bakhtin actually wrote, as has been the general tendency in secondary literature on Bakhtin, I will evaluate his work in terms of the continuation of intellectual thought, on the basis of the assumption that a change of political regimes does not necessarily imply discontinuity and, even less so, a complete severance in other spheres of life. This thesis will accordingly treat literary criticism of Bakhtin as intellectual history. To consider Bakhtin's work only within the Soviet context would be to draw a somewhat arbitrary dividing line in the intellectual history of twentieth century Russia. Thus, one of my aims, implicit in my methodology, is to articulate a common intellectual paradigm of those writing before (mainly, religious philosophers and Symbolists) and after (Bakhtin) the Revolution.

Furthermore, in taking the context into consideration, one must avoid falling prey to naïve "biographism," in which "social and political events lose their direct meaning and sharp implications, are minimized, blunted, and become mere facts in the author's own life story".²⁰ In the accumulation of personal biographical details, one must not lose sight of the time itself.²¹ Rather than the individual being a "monometer indicating the pressure of social atmosphere,"²² in the spirit of carnival let us turn this method inside out, and rather look at the influence of the social and political atmosphere on human consciousness. Therefore, one criterion of my own methodology will be contextualization, though not one which takes *individual* biography as its fundamental unit of measure – yet another popular tendency in

²⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *RAHW*, 438.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Osip Mandelstam, "Konets Romana" (*The End of the Novel*) in *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 199.

Bakhtinian hermeneutics, erected by Holquist and Clark's seminal intellectual biography of Bakhtin.²³

In applying the *longue durée* approach to linguistic concepts such as utterances, Bakhtin takes the Annales method for understanding and writing history a step further. Bakhtin's concern with language leads him towards another methodology in the vein of the Cambridge School of the history of ideas. In the previously mentioned set of notes, jotted down shortly before Bakhtin's death in 1975, the theme of time, which serves as a common link between all utterances according to Bakhtin, finds its greatest resonance. If one considers this interrelation of utterances as the unifying train of thought in Bakhtin's otherwise jumbled notes, the enigmatic evocation of Bloch's work in this context begins to make sense. For Bakhtin, taken to its logical conclusion, the postulation that different utterances are linked through the medium of time implies that subjects must be conceived in terms of living wholes. To translate Bakhtin's thought into the terminology of the Annales School: if one utterance is connected to all other utterances, in order to gain a more complete understanding of any given utterance, one must take into account the *longue durée* of the utterance. It is in this sense that in Bakhtin's thought the Annales method links up with the Cambridge School, which will serve as the main guiding methodological principle in my thesis.

In the chapter devoted to the history and reception of the term *kenosis* in Russian religious philosophy, I will try to trace the history of the word and the various concepts it has come to denote by Bakhtin's time using the Cambridge School approach to changing linguistic ideas, at times supplementing it with that of Reinhart Koselleck. In the chapter entitled *Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas*,

²³ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*. See the literature review section for an evaluation of this work.

one of the main representatives of the Cambridge School, Quentin Skinner argues, “[I]f we wish to understand a given idea, we cannot simply concentrate, à la Lovejoy, on studying the forms of words involved. For the words denoting the idea may be used... with varying and quite incompatible intentions”.²⁴ Bakhtin likewise recognizes that in different contexts, the same word or idea, such as *kenosis*, can come to signify entirely different concepts and that with each utterance²⁵ the meanings of words are regenerated.²⁶ As I will try to demonstrate below, the referential history of the term *kenosis* begins with the designation of the process of Incarnation, then becomes the fundamental principle behind love, and finally shifts to explaining Creation – variations which depend on the users of the term and their intentions. Following Quentin Skinner’s suggestion that the immediate context of the utterance cannot necessarily resolve the problem of reconstructing how an idea is being used and to what purpose, I will attempt to study “all the various situations, which may change in complex ways, in which given form of words can logically be used – all the functions the words [*kenosis*] can serve, all the various things that can be done with them”.²⁷ That is, I will focus on the use rather than the meaning of the term *kenosis*.

Bakhtin formulates his view of conceptual-linguistic changes in terms of the receiver’s²⁸ assimilation of words or speech, which, “creatively renewed in new contexts,” are “eternally living”.²⁹ That is, returning to a previously noted point regarding the context of the interpreter, or, as Bakhtin labels it, “context of understanding,” he views context as an “infinite dialogue in which there is neither a

²⁴ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in James Tully ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 55.

²⁵ Bakhtin’s terminology suggests that for him it is also a pragmatic rather than a semantic issue.

²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 170.

²⁷ Quentin Skinner, 55.

²⁸ The distinction between a disinterested reader, a critic, an interlocutor, etc. is not of importance here. By using the term “receiver” I mean to include anyone who comes into contact with a text.

²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 168.

first nor a last word,” and in which there are “no limits”.³⁰ On his view, contextual meaning “always includes a question, an address, and the anticipation of a response; it always includes two (as a dialogic minimum)”.³¹ The implicit suggestion is that a text always remains open due to variations in interpretative communities, which belong to the “context of understanding,” and consequently, it is not entirely up to the author to demarcate and determine the meaning of a work. Anticipating the work of Roger Chartier,³² Bakhtin views “interpretation as the discovery of a path to seeing (contemplating) and supplementing through creative thinking”.³³ Therefore, to avoid certain kinds of anachronisms, I will try to keep an eye on my own interpretative community – mainly, the post-Soviet community which is interested in giving voice to the previously suppressed or neglected religious issues. Belonging to this interpretative community, so different from Bakhtin’s, might have its own advantages,

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*.³⁴

To see the world through its eyes would “merely be a duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching”.³⁵

For Bakhtin, the previously noted concept of “great time” (sister-concept of the *longue durée*) implicitly carries connotations of openness, “great time – infinite and

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 169; 167-8; 170.

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 169-70.

³² See Roger Chartier’s notion of interpretation as appropriation, which occurs during the creative act of reading. Roger Chartier, “Texts, Printings, Readings”, in Lynn Hunt ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989). According to Chartier, the act of reading is not simply “submission to textual machinery,” but a “creative practice, which invents singular meanings and significations that are not reducible to the intentions of authors of texts or producers of books” (156).

³³ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 159.

³⁴ “Response to a question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff”, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 7; emphasis in the original.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies”.³⁶ He goes on to apply the notion of unfinishedness (*nezavershennost'*) beyond the individual works of authors to whole cultural systems. A bit further on in the “Methodology,” Bakhtin clarifies the meaning of “unfinalized” or “unfinishedness”,

Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. The problem of *great time*.³⁷

Because meanings are unstable and can never be rigid designators, tracing them down within a work is insufficient for interpretation. In the spirit of Quentin Skinner, we must also work towards reconstructing the possible intention, or the intended act behind the utterance. In an effort to reconstruct Bakhtin’s intentions in *Rabelais and His World*, I will try to address some questions, such as, who was Bakhtin in dialogue with, which discourses was he trying to appropriate or subvert?

In his call for “open unity,” Bakhtin argues that no major question should be treated in isolation. His own methodology in his studies on Rabelais and Dostoevsky is characterized by approaching the central issue through a number of different texts, each of which brings different nuances of the problem to the foreground. If Bakhtin himself felt that he was dealing with interrelated questions in most of his writings, it does not make sense to radically sever these texts from one another. Thus, I plan to approach the religious dimension of Bakhtin’s work by analyzing various early and late parts of his oeuvre, though *Rabelais and His World* will remain the center of my analysis. Due to time constraints, I cannot analyze each one of his works I perceive as relevant to my topic in great detail. In an effort to keep an eye on the whole, or on a

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 169.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

problem rather than a specific text, I will bring in the relevant works when I feel that they might enrich one's understanding of an issue in question.

Although I will employ the approach outlined by the Cambridge School when it comes to linguistic analyses of terms such as *kenosis*, in addition to contextualizing Bakhtin's writings in terms of his own cultural and social background in the spirit of Annales, I will not limit my interpretation to these approaches, as my primary goal is to reconstruct a frequently dismissed dimension of an Bakhtin's thought, rather than to promote a particular approach. Neither does the purpose of my study consist in applying Bakhtin's own methodological preferences to his works. That is, my intention is not to appropriate Bakhtin's methods with a goal of supporting or disproving a particular theory, as has often been done by different Bakhtinian schools, but to reconstruct certain aspects of his work that is rarely taken into account.

Literature Review

The religious dimension of Bakhtin's work is generally either ignored or contested in the field of Bakhtinian studies. The observation that Bakhtin may have been influenced by Orthodoxy, in western scholarship first made by critics like Julia Kristaeva and Tzvetan Todorov and by Holquist and Clark in their biography of Bakhtin, was met with much opposition from those who saw him as a non-traditional Marxist, who could rescue the fields of humanities and the social sciences from their ideological stagnation. In this sense, asserting Bakhtin's connection to Orthodoxy has often been perceived as a political attack on contemporary literary and cultural theory.

Although the majority of secondary literature on Bakhtin tends to approach him as a secular thinker – mostly in the form of applications or challenges to his

ideas, there are some critical works, which attempt to grapple with the religious aspects of his thought, especially in relation to his early texts. The major works of the 1980s and 90s by Todorov (1981), Clark and Holquist (1984), Morson and Emerson (1990), Gardiner (1992) and Bernard-Donals (1994) largely neglect the religious dimension of his thought, aside from pointing out a few biographical details about Bakhtin's religious convictions. For example, in their treatment of Bakhtin's writings on Dostoevsky, Morson and Emerson mention some Christian motifs in passing,³⁸ but do not develop these ideas any further. Clark and Holquist's work likewise touches on some Christian themes, but makes no attempts to provide a further analysis, perhaps due to the large scope of the work. Patterson's *Literature and Spirit: Essays on Bakhtin and his Contemporaries* (1988) does deal with Bakhtin's spirituality in more detail; however, it rather assumes what his beliefs must have been, without attempting to locate them in his texts.

In the very first biography of Bakhtin, he is unambiguously labeled as a "religious man"³⁹ – a title which since then has faced much opposition in the field of literary studies and which the authors of the biography have come to qualify in their later works. Clark and Holquist's biography emphasizes Bakhtin's "immersion in the Russian tradition of kenosis that highlighted Christ's descent to earth, his Incarnation as a common man, and his death on the cross".⁴⁰ The authors derive some of their evidence for their claim that he was "a highly religious man" from personal accounts and reminiscences of Russian scholars like Vadim Kozhinov and Sergey Bocharov, who rediscovered Bakhtin in the 1960s.

³⁸ They make the brief but significant (to my research) observation that "Bakhtin's theology, to the extent he had one, is not of resurrection but of incarnation" (1990, 61).

³⁹ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 120.

⁴⁰ Contino and Felch. *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*.

In a later, 1992 interview Kozhinov reported that Bakhtin was “a deeply religious man,” albeit in a “noncanonical” way.⁴¹ In a 1993 article, he went on to claim, “all Bakhtin’s ideas had a Russian Orthodox axis... The people who were close to Bakhtin understood this after the first frank conversation with him”.⁴² According to Kozhinov, Bakhtin believed that “the human being in communion with Russia could confess only and exclusively Orthodox Christianity”.⁴³ Similarly, in 1993 Sergei Bocharov, who collaborated with Kozhinov on gathering Bakhtin’s materials for publication, notes, “The religious aspect of Bakhtin’s aesthetics is deep but concealed, an unspoken, implicit theme, evidently because of the external conditions of writing in the Soviet period”.⁴⁴

Interestingly, the above-noted claims of both authors regarding Bakhtin’s religiosity were made more than twenty years after his death, and for this reason have been viewed somewhat skeptically, especially by western scholars. One of the main reasons for adopting a more careful approach to these remarks is not only the issue of the growing unreliability of memory with time, but also the context in which these particular utterances were made. That is, the close to twenty year period of silence on the part of Bakhtin’s interviewers interestingly comes to an end in the 1990s, a period, as I had already mentioned in the introduction, when Russian scholars fervently rediscover Russian religious thought and the general population begins to flock to Russian Orthodox churches to embrace their long-lost “national” religion. For this reason, such comments about Bakhtin’s biography should be approached with care, and possibly supplemented with what seems to be a more reliable source for

⁴¹ Nicholai Rzhnevsky, “Kozhinov on Bakhtin,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 434. The Holquist and Clark biography uses other, earlier sources of Kozhinov since their work was published in 1984.

⁴² V.V. Kozhinov, “Bakhtin i ego chitateli. Razmyshleniia i otchasti vospominaniia,” *Dialog, Karnaval, Kronotop*, no. 2-3 (1993): 120-34.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Sergei Bocharov, “Conversations with Bakhtin,” trans. Stephen Blackwell, *PMLA* 109 (1994): 1019.

reconstructing Bakhtin's early religious thought – the notes of Bakhtin's contemporary, L.V. Pumpiansky, on Bakhtin's lectures from 1924-25.

In his article “Carnival and Incarnation: Bakhtin and Orthodox Theology,” which although published in 1991, did not receive much attention from other scholars until recently, Charles Lock elucidates some fundamental tenets of Russian Orthodoxy as exhibited in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, and, in the process, attempts to situate him within Orthodox theological discourse. Lock insists that if the religious dimension of Bakhtin's works is taken into account, his oeuvre no longer appears fragmentary; that is, this dimension reveals a stable line of thought, which is consistently present at the peripheries of Bakhtin's writing, if not always at the center. The article also aims at constructing a possible explanation of the resistance in Western criticism to interpreting Bakhtin as a theological thinker. In my own work, I hope to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the relation of carnival categories to Christian themes, thereby supplementing the theological aspects, some of which are discussed in Lock's work, with ritualistic counterparts.

In more recent criticism, such as that of Coates and Felch & Contino, the interest in the Christian motifs of Bakhtin's writings has come to the foreground,⁴⁵ and for this reason I will primarily rely on the works of these authors as a point of departure for my own project, which deals with Christian themes in Bakhtin's carnival writings. In her *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*, published in 1998, Ruth Coates adopts a chronological approach to the examination of Christian motifs in the works of the literary critic. She assumes a broader Christian, rather than specifically Orthodox outlook on Bakhtin's work. Coates begins by addressing the more overtly outlined Christian framework of Bakhtin's early

⁴⁵ By “coming to the foreground” I mean to say that the religious dimension of Bakhtin's thought in English-language scholarship has become the primary subject of two fairly lengthy (at least 100 pages) books rather than of a few five-page articles.

philosophical essays, and then proceeds to consider the more muffled Russian Orthodox discourse of his later works. In Bakhtin's aesthetic theory, she finds a "coherent theistic framework,"⁴⁶ which undergoes a gradual development from his early to late writings. Coates' work is one of the few studies explicitly concerned with the Christian motifs in Bakhtin as its primary subject, and in this sense, represents one of their first reconsiderations of the religious dimension of Bakhtin's writing in a positive light.

Comprising a collection of essays which brings together scholars from both the English and Russian linguistic traditions, Felch and Contino's *Bakhtin and Religion: a Feeling for Faith* represents an attempt at providing a general overview of Mikhail Bakhtin's attitude towards religion. This recent study, published in 2001, succeeds in bringing into view the contested dimension of religion in Bakhtin's early as well as later texts by addressing various subjects ranging from Bakhtin's conceptualization of love to the religious components in his linguistic and aesthetic theories.

Felch and Contino's work draws a crucial distinction,⁴⁷ originally made by Bakhtin himself in reference to Dostoevsky, between "faith," which he identifies with abstractions – "a specific faith in orthodoxy, in progress, in man, in revolution, etc." – and a "feeling for faith" (*chuvstvo very*), which he defines as "an integral attitude (by means of the whole person) toward a higher and ultimate value".⁴⁸ In the introduction, the editors of this volume argue that rather than describing the religious dimension in Bakhtin's thought as "faith," thereby adhering to the traditional approach exemplified

⁴⁶ Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁷ Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino, *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 1.

⁴⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" (1961) in *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 294.

by Clark and Holquist's biography, it should rather be viewed as a "feeling for faith," in the same way Bakhtin viewed Dostoevsky's works. In my own thesis, I plan to maintain the same distinction, reconstructing Bakhtin's "feeling for faith" rather than the abstract notion of "faith," which would have been so alien to Bakhtin's concrete and corporeal worldview. In this sense, my thesis builds on these earlier studies, while at the same time expanding and specifying the importance of materiality in Bakhtin's writings on carnival.

Caryl Emerson's *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*, published in 1999, is an anthology of essays organized around a variety of topics in relation to Bakhtin's works as well as to his personal biography. The collection is split into two major parts – the first entitled "Who Was Bakhtin," which includes several polemical portraits of the literary critic, and the second entitled "Major Concepts and Core Polemics," which engages with Bakhtin's theories in a pro and contra dialogue. In this sense, the collection uniquely places the biographical next to the textual within a single medium; however, no attempt is made at a comparison of the two approaches or an integration of one into the other, as the work is meant to be a collection of essays rather than of unified book chapters. While the first part is focused on the question of effectiveness and appropriateness of various approaches (e.g. philosophical, religious, revolutionary, etc.) when it comes to interpreting Bakhtin's work, the second is concerned with examining Bakhtin's core concepts and terminological innovations, such as polyphony, carnival, novel, etc., before returning to the problems of the moral, religious, and philosophical dimensions of his writing. As a survey of various Bakhtinian subjects by both Russian and American Slavists, this anthology is a helpful representative of the varieties of existing critical literature on Bakhtin.

As I have tried to illustrate in my limited review of the vast available scholarship on Bakhtin, the examinations of the religious dimension of Bakhtin's thought in secondary literature tend to utilize either biographical or textual evidence. The representatives of the biographical approach attempt to read Bakhtin's religious biography into his texts,⁴⁹ while the representatives of the textual approach focus on Bakhtin's religion in so far as it is present in his writing. In examining the compatibility of Eastern Orthodox attitudes towards matter and the exaltation of materiality as a de-abstractifying force in Bakhtin's carnival, I will primarily make use of the latter approach not only because of temporal constraints on writing this thesis, but also due to the contested nature of the scant biographical evidence available on Bakhtin. That is, I will attempt to write Bakhtin's texts into his biography rather than his biography into his texts. For this reason, I primarily focus on the textual evidence of his religious convictions rather than on the facts about his life. I will use this textual evidence to make some commentary on his life, which, in turn, will help to reconstruct his authorial intentions.

⁴⁹ As I have noted in the methodology section of my thesis, the main problem with such approaches, according to Bakhtin, is their tendency towards "naïve biographism".

Chapter I

A Theological Perspective: The Kenotic Principle in Russian Religious Philosophy

In man creature and creator are united: in man there is not only matter, shred, excess, clay, mire, folly, chaos; but there's also the creator, the sculptor, the hardness of the hammer, the divinity of the spectator and the seventh day – do ye understand this contrast? – Friedrich Nietzsche

1.1 Introduction. The Dual Tendency of Russian Religious Philosophy and the Rebellion Against Abstraction

Russian religious philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be characterized by a twofold focus on the doctrines of Incarnation and Deification, and in this sense represents a continuation of the Eastern Christian medieval tradition,⁵⁰ which was likewise deeply concerned with these issues. Such a focus has certain implications for the Russian philosophers' perception of human nature and salvation, which, at least in their eyes, is juxtaposed with the Western Christian tradition.⁵¹ the materiality of human existence is viewed in their theological discourse in a positive light. That is, implicit in the process of Incarnation, they see vindication and validation of all matter. Although such an argument in favor of materiality is by no means novel, and dates back to the iconophile defenses of matter during the Iconoclastic debates of the eighth century, the view held by the majority of these religious philosophers contains an additional component, previously lacking in the discourse on the status of matter. For them, matter becomes linked with concreteness, while things beyond our earthly existence, which have no tangible expression in life, become identified with abstract thought. As I will demonstrate later

⁵⁰ Richard Gustafson and Judith Kornblatt, eds. *Russian Religious Thought*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

on in the next chapter, Bakhtin draws the same connection in his perception of materiality as liberation from abstractions.

Beginning with the staunch Slavophile P.V. Kireevsky (1808-1856), Western thought becomes increasingly more criticized in Russia for its “unbounded rationalism”.⁵² Kireevsky, who (ironically) drew on the Western philosophy of Herder and Hegel, views the problem of excessive rationalism in contemporary Western thought as a legacy of Aristotle, whose system “broke the wholeness of man’s intellectual self-consciousness and transferred the root of man’s inner convictions from the moral and aesthetic sphere into the abstract consciousness of deliberative reason,” thereby destroying “all motivation capable of elevating man above his personal interests”.⁵³ The syntactical structure of Kireevsky’s statement suggests that the “abstract” sphere of reason is contrasted with the moral and aesthetic sphere, which would be, by implication, concrete. As we will see later on, Bakhtin’s ethical theory is fundamentally grounded in the concrete actions of individuals rather than in abstract notions like Kant’s categorical imperative, which soars too far above quotidian life and leaves too much room for ambiguity in practical applications.

The same criticism is railed against the abstractness of German Idealism by one of the representatives of the fin de siècle Russian philosophical tradition, Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), who, like other representatives of Russian religious thought in the twentieth century, was expelled from Soviet Russia in 1922 for his “subversive” views. Similarly to Kireevsky, Berdyaev attributes the tendency towards abstraction in Western European philosophy to Hellenism, though, in his particular case, to Plato (and Neo-Platonism in the guise of Plotinus). He juxtaposes the Christian consciousness, distinguished by “spiritual concreteness,” with the Hellenist spirit,

⁵² Richard Gustafson and Judith Kornblatt, eds. *Russian Religious Thought*, 8.

⁵³ J.M. Edie, J.P. Scanlan, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, eds., *Russian Philosophy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 1:185-87.

which is characterized by “a thought process (*myshlenie*) that is removed from and cleansed of the concreteness of life”.⁵⁴ In his *Philosophy of the Free Spirit* (1929), Berdyaev argues that the Christian consciousness has to break free from the domination of this spirit, which tends towards abstraction because “spiritual concreteness” lies above and beyond such detached perspective. He accuses German Idealism, and (on his view) its primary representatives, Fichte and Hegel, of the same tendency to detachment from the concreteness of life and of an inclination towards “monism”.⁵⁵

In their rejection of “human nature,”⁵⁶ which is only a function of the Divine for them,” Berdyaev sees a kind of monophysitism or an inability to accept the mystery of Christ’s hypostasis, which cannot be comprehended rationally. He argues that in their work, “man in his concreteness disappears”.⁵⁷ In such “lowering” or outright “denial” of human nature, which he believes to be fundamentally tied up with a denial of human freedom and independence,⁵⁸ Berdyaev finds all the past “misfortunes” in the history of Christianity.⁵⁹ In his view, German Idealism sees only “the faceless (*bezlikoe*), the abstract, the Divine”.⁶⁰ The employment of the Biblical-

⁵⁴ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filosofia svobodnogo dukha: problematika i apologia khristianstva, chast' II* (*Philosophy of the Free Spirit: the Problematics and Apologetics of Christianity, Part II*) (Paris: YMCA Press, 1929), 15; my translation.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁶ For Berdyaev, human nature entails both a material component as well as a participation in divine life through Christ (30).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ For each of the discussed religious philosophers in this chapter, the freedom of human nature, gained through Christ’s sacrifice, is a crucial element in the human participation in the Divine. That is, freedom is tied to the presence of the divine element in human nature. Berdyaev in particular, citing *De servo arbitrio*, connects German Idealist thought with the Protestantism of Luther, who “denied the freedom of the human spirit... [and] rejected all independence of human nature” (30).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. Berdyaev argues that already in St. Augustine, one can find “inclinations, which provided ground for the debasing/lowering (*prinizheniye*) of human nature” (30). In arguing that human nature can “change for the better *only* under God’s grace,” St. Augustine rejects the creative freedom and nature of man, according to Berdyaev (31). The denial of such freedom gives cause for the “debasement of man” (31). Berdyaev goes on to argue that Catholic anthropology likewise debases man, though in a different way. For the nuances of his argument, see pg. 31 of his *Filosofia Svobodnogo Dukha*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

theological word for “face” (*lik* instead of *litso*), embedded in the word “faceless,” evokes the discourse of the eighth century iconophiles, who argued that the physical nature of Christ made his representation possible. With this connection in mind, it becomes clear how the three terms are interrelated – the Divine or the Godly is the faceless Logos before Incarnation. God who cannot be represented, a faceless God, is an abstract being or entity.

For Berdyaev, and, as we shall see later on, for Bakhtin, abstraction is linked with “detached and frozen static categories”.⁶¹ On his view, the “antinomical”⁶² within the incarnate God, or the “antitheses” inherent within his dual nature, cannot be comprehended “statically, detachedly (*otvlechenno*)”, but only “dynamically, concretely, as life, not as substance”.⁶³ Acceptance of life and of the material element of human nature thus becomes linked with concrete content, which stands in opposition to abstracted thinking. In other words, firmly planting one’s feet in the material world becomes a way of avoiding dangerous abstractions, devoid of concrete applications. What could be the theological basis of such a positive view of the material world, which, according to these Russian philosophers, has been looked down on and even despised so frequently in the western European tradition, with its tendency towards the abstract and transcendent?

1.2 Theological Basis for the Celebration of the Material World: Iconophile Defense of Matter on the Basis of Incarnation

Before proceeding to clarify the status of matter and, by extension, of the material world for the Russian religious philosophers in question, and its relation to

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶² Later on, we will see the same rebellion against “Western logic”, which finds its expression in the celebration of matter, in Florensky, who attempted to revise it so that it could accommodate antinomies, or the simultaneous affirmation of opposites.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 8, 9.

the principle of *kenosis*, let us briefly pause to consider the iconophile defenses of matter which are subsequently appropriated by these philosophers. Later on, I will discuss how each philosopher modifies these defenses to his own purposes. To begin with, there are two models of defense, the essentialist and the non-essentialist, which I shall take up respectively. Finally, I will consider the letter of Leo of Chalcedon, which was subsequently labeled as heterodox, as it contains one of the clearest pronouncements on this subject: the material of the icon is necessary for the presentation of form, and likewise deserves veneration.

1.2.1 The Essentialist Model

In order to free icon veneration from charges of idolatry, the early eighth-century iconophiles relied on the theory of Incarnation, the invisible and incomprehensible God assuming material form, to validate the icon as a legitimate medium for the transmission of Christian knowledge. By lending validity to the visible, the historical reality of the material body of Christ made it possible for God to be represented. As St. John of Damascus explains, “Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with human kind, I depict what I have seen of God”.⁶⁴ The implication of the Incarnation – God gaining a visible form which can be materially represented – is subsequently extended to validate the representation of holy subjects in a material medium. To be more specific, icons as purely material objects are considered analogous to the human nature of Christ. At the same time, by sharing in the divine essence of Christ, icons participate in grace, which raises them above their material

⁶⁴ Saint John of Damascus. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. Trans. Andrew Louth. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), I: 16, 25.

status. The following statement is representative of the way in which icon-making is justified on the basis of the analogy to the Incarnation, “Why should the icon not be honored and venerated, not as God, but as the image of God made flesh?”.⁶⁵ The various parallels between the icon and incarnate Christ,⁶⁶ drawn by the eight-century iconophile argument, imply that the icon *participates* in divine essence.⁶⁷ But how exactly did the early iconophiles envision this participation of the divine in the material icon?

For John of Damascus, the icon’s participation in holiness can be understood as its participation in grace, which in part depends on the one represented: “Divine grace is given to material things through the *name* borne by what is depicted”.⁶⁸ He insists that participation in holiness is not a property of the material, which transcends its own materiality only when it receives grace from the holiness of the one depicted. On his view, the participation in grace is defined as a twofold relation of the one depicted and the faith of the worshiper. In other words, the material receives grace not only because of what it represents, but also because of the faith that is brought to it by the worshiper. In this way, John of Damascus attempted to demonstrate that in worshipping the icon, he does not worship only the material nature of Christ, but the hypostatic union implied in the icon.

The implications of Incarnation, central to John of Damascus’s defense of icons, can be extended not only to icon-making, but also more generally to all matter,

I venerate the fashioner of matter who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from

⁶⁵ St. John of Damascus, I: 48.

⁶⁶ See the miniature with the destruction of images and the crucifixion in the Chludov Psalter; State Historical Museum, Moscow.

⁶⁷ Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 76. Bissera Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *Art Bulletin* 88/4 (2006): 633.

⁶⁸ Saint John of Damascus, I, 36, 43; I, 16, 30. Theodore of Stoudios offers similar arguments regarding how the name of the one depicted unites the image and its original, which are later rejected by Leo of Chalcedon (Carr 581).

reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked... Therefore I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace.⁶⁹

As evident from the above passage, for St. John of Damascus, the incarnation of God implies a change in the status of matter – it becomes filled with divine grace, which in turn makes human salvation possible. Therefore, he concludes, matter is to be revered and respected rather than despised. He continues, “Do not abuse matter; for it is not dishonorable... The only thing that is dishonorable is something that does not have its origin from God”.⁷⁰ In this statement, John of Damascus introduces a new dimension to his defense of matter as an appropriate medium of representation, the basic reasoning of which can be summarized as follows: matter has its origin in God because it is his creation; if matter does indeed originate in God, then, by implication, the divine has some sort of a permanent presence in matter. Again, in venerating matter, it is rather the hypostatic union of the material and the divine, implied in all creation, that is honored.

Moreover, John of Damascus argues that the divine hand will “lead us *through matter* to the immaterial God”.⁷¹ Echoing his previous assertion that Christ has already accomplished our salvation *through matter*, he views matter as the road leading back to God, or, at the very least, as a means of gaining knowledge of God or coming closer to Him. This latter idea underlies the ritual practices of Orthodox services, which presuppose that by overwhelming and exhausting the body physically, one can come closer to God. That is, the services likewise appeal to materiality in order to get at something higher; however, as this is not the place to develop this idea, I will return to it below in chapter two. Implicit in St. John of Damascus’ reasoning is a bidirectional process of God moving towards man (↓) and man moving towards

⁶⁹ St. John of Damascus, I: 29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, I: 30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, II: 77.

God (↑). That is, by coming down to earth as a human being, God allows man to be lifted back up to Him through the now validated medium of materiality, redeemed after the Fall by Christ's sacrifice. In this sense, already in John of Damascus one can find the seeds of the kenotic interpretation of Creation, which grounds the celebration of matter for the Russian religious philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

1.2.2 The Non-Essentialist Model

Although the later iconophiles like Patriarch Nikephoros and St. Theodore of Studios certainly draw on the writings of their predecessors, they develop a nonessentialist model for the icon. In his *On the Holy Images*, Theodore of Studios argues, “the archetype and image are not the same thing, because the one is truth but the other is a shadow”.⁷² In an attempt to confront the charges of idolatry that come with the essentialist model, they redefine the icon as imprint of Christ's visible form on matter.⁷³ On this view, neither “the nature of the flesh which is portrayed” nor “uncircumscribable divinity” is physically present in the icons; only “its relationship” can be found there. Uncircumscribable divinity is only present in the icon insofar as “it is located in the shadow of the flesh united with it”.⁷⁴ That is, copy and prototype are connected by the imprint of form, rather than essence, as was suggested by the early iconophiles.⁷⁵

⁷² St. Theodore, the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, Trans. Catherine P. Roth (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), I: 12, 33.

⁷³ Pentcheva, 633.

⁷⁴ St. Theodore, I: 12, 33.

⁷⁵ Pentcheva, 634.

As with the early iconophile arguments, the icon *participates* in holiness, as the holy persons represented participate in grace.⁷⁶ However, for Theodore of Studios, participation is something other than the sharing of the same essence. Divinity is present in the icons not by “a union of natures, for they are not the deified flesh,” but by “a *relative* participation, because they share in the grace and the honor”.⁷⁷ Similarly, for Nikephoros, participation is embodied in “the relation that is mediated by likeness”.⁷⁸ Consequently, because the icon is only an imprint of likeness rather than essence, it does not participate in transference of sacred energy through touch. Thus, the icon becomes an imprint of *absence* on matter, which reenacts essence through appearance.⁷⁹ Because of the emphasis placed on appearance, the icons gain a heightened sense of materiality. As absence is imprinted into a surface, the three-dimensional protrusion becomes the “materialization of the form of absence”.⁸⁰ This projection of absence into the physical space allows the icon to be experienced sensually and invites the senses to do so.⁸¹ Thus, the nonessentialist model also emphasizes the materiality of the icon, but rather as a way to communicate absence, while at the same time *reenacting* presence.

Although as indicated above, iconophile theories of the late eighth and early ninth centuries differ fundamentally from those preceding them, both views engage materiality of the icon, albeit in different ways. While in the earlier model materiality manifests itself in the understanding of icons as noncorporeal relics, which are capable of transferring sacred energy through touch, the later model emphasizes materiality through the saturation of the senses, which, at the same time, allows the

⁷⁶ Barber, 123.

⁷⁷ St. Theodore, I: 12, 33; my emphasis.

⁷⁸ Barber, 122.

⁷⁹ Pentcheva, 634.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 635.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 636.

icon to transcend its own materiality. It is in the context of these iconophile theories that Leo of Chalcedon expounded his views on the unity of the one represented and the matter employed for his depiction.

1.2.3 Leo of Chalcedon

The Metropolitan of Chalcedon⁸² was the first to provide a more detailed elaboration on the relation of the image to the material that bears it, and to argue for the sanctity of the material bearing holy images.⁸³ In his letter written in 1093 or 1094, Leo argues that the term icon “refers to visible form inscribed on matter,” a definition which on his view extends not only to the image inscribed, but also to the material itself.⁸⁴ Such definition allows him to sketch out the proper relation of the viewer to the inscribed image and the matter on which it is executed. According to Leo of Chalcedon, the indivisible visible form, which is one and the same in person and copy, may be inscribed on different kinds of matter, such as wood painting, ivory, etc. However, the variety of matter does not alter the constancy of the visible form, which could be that of Christ or his saints. The reasoning behind Leo’s assertion that Christ’s divinity is inseparable from his visible form can be traced back to the writings of John of Damascus, who, as we have seen, argued that because of Christ’s hypostatic nature, his divinity and invisible form are inseparable from the rest of his person.

In addition, Leo interprets St. Basil’s statement that “the imperial image, too, is called the emperor, and yet there are not two emperors: neither is the power cut

⁸² During the Komnenian Iconoclasm, Leo of Chalcedon advocated the protection of Church property from seizures by the government.

⁸³ Annemarie Carr, “Leo of Chalcedon and the Icons,” in *Byzantine East, Latin West: Art Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 579.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 580.

asunder nor is the glory divided” as supporting the idea that the visible form of the original and the image is one and the same and consequently indivisible.⁸⁵ The presence of the same visible form is precisely what makes it recognizable in both the prototype and the icon.⁸⁶ Leo concludes that the visible form of Christ “brings his divinity with it,” and consequently, icons must be worshipped because of the sanctity the visible image of Christ brings to them.⁸⁷ His argument certainly seems reminiscent of the early iconophile view of icons as noncorporeal relics containing divine energy within.

Moreover, according to Leo of Chalcedon, the material is necessary for bringing out the visible form, and draws a parallel between seeing Christ through his saints, and seeing him through the material of the icon. He concludes that similarly to the saints being worthy of veneration, the material of the icon itself is also deserving of veneration (*proskinesis*/προσκυνησις). He views the material as “a vehicle through which the visible form becomes accessible to us”.⁸⁸ Thus, the main difference between Leo of Chalcedon and the earlier iconophile writers is embodied in his concern with the specific relation of the image to the physical material on which it is inscribed – a relation that is intended to shed light on how a material object becomes holy.⁸⁹ This concern engages the material icon itself, rather than the absent prototypes to which the icon refers. Although there is some evidence that the earlier iconophiles like John of Damascus attempted to tackle the question of how holiness of the prototype is passed onto the material, the relationship between the material and the divine is left rather vague in both the early and later iconoclast debates.

⁸⁵ Carr, 581.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 582.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 581.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Although Leo of Chalcedon's arguments were declared heterodox, his letter nonetheless enjoyed wide circulation and influenced his contemporaries in spite of the differences from officially prescribed views.⁹⁰ Around the time of Leo's letter, icons become charismatic objects, which evidences that the essentialist theory of images, presented by the early iconophiles, still thrived in the minds of the tenth and eleventh century Byzantines. The story of Alexios I, who upon becoming very ill wrapped himself in a veil that hung before the icon of Christ in Chalke, is just one example of the power of the physical presence of an icon.⁹¹ Alexios's belief in the miraculous healing powers of the veil draws on the idea that divine energy can be transferred through touch. Through the 'touching' of the single, shared physical form, the holiness of the depicted Christ is extended to the icon, and through the physical touch between the material icon and the veil, the sacred energy is passed onto the veil as well. Again, the emphasis is implicitly placed on the materiality of the icon, rather than on the one represented. Alexios did not simply pray to the one represented in the icon; he wanted to physically touch something that has been in contact with the material surface of the icon. This instance not only exemplifies the increasing importance of presence rather than the reference of the material icon, but also connects Leo of Chalcedon's ideas with the eighth-century iconophile defense that relies on the idea of holiness being extended through touch.

Although chronologically, Leo of Chalcedon is closer to the second iconoclast period, his arguments nevertheless draw on both the essentialist and nonessentialist models. On the one hand, Leo's focus on the materiality of the icon is reminiscent of the later iconophile theory of image as imprint, which engaged the materiality of the icon in order to convey absence. At the same time, the early eighth-century iconophile

⁹⁰ Carr, 582.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 583.

emphasis on legitimation of the icon by asserting formal contact of the image with the archetype, which transfers divine energy to the icon, is not far from the special status that Leo accords to the material of the icon. In the example of Alexis's veil, we have seen that the focus on the icons themselves, rather than the ones represented in them, resonated with the rest of the public. Thus, though fin de siècle Russian religious philosophers were without a doubt intimately familiar with iconophile defenses, many of them frequently citing the work of John of Damascus in their writing, they need not to have been directly familiar with Leo of Chalcedon's letter to be affected by his heretical, from an official point of view, but nevertheless popular understanding of the icons.

Above I have presented two perspectives, the essentialist and non-essentialist, both emphasizing materiality: the essentialist accentuating presence and the non-essentialist stressing absence of the divine in matter. In other words, materiality plays a crucial role for both, but its status differs depending on the perspective. In the case of Leo of Chalcedon, I have tried to illustrate one possible application of these theories as one example of the way in which matter has come to be understood. The Russian religious philosophers, as we will see below, seem to take up and develop the former, essentialist view, which stressed the proximity of the divinity in matter rather than its absence, with some elements of Leo of Chalcedon's heresy.

Now that I have clarified part of the theological argument grounding the defense of matter, which in one way or another mediates access to divinity, I can proceed to discuss the relation of this emphasis on materiality to the concept of *kenosis*, which, though never explicitly identified in the writings of either the essentialist or non-essentialist iconophiles (but rather presupposed), plays a principal role in the defense of matter for the Russian philosophers in question. Relying on the

iconophile use of the doctrine of Incarnation for validating the icon as their starting point, Russian religious philosophers appeal to the etymological meaning of the term *kenosis*, which is used to describe the process of incarnation, and extend its usage beyond the specific reference to the Incarnation. That is, drawing on the explanation of the Incarnation as *kenosis*, they take over this (as we will see) rather pliable, non-substantive concept and mold it to their own purposes.

1.3 Conceptualizations of Kenosis

Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival. – Mikhail Bakhtin

I will begin my analysis of the changing pragmatic meanings⁹² of *kenosis* (κένωσις), a concept which will serve as a guide to understanding Bakhtin's celebration of matter in the subsequent chapter, by sketching out its development in Russian religious philosophy. The Orthodox theologian, M.M. Tareev (1867–1934), officially introduced the term *kenosis* into Russian theological discourse when he employed it for the first time in his *Iskuheniia Bogocheloveka* (*The Temptations of the Godman*) in 1892.⁹³ This introduction filled an existing terminological gap, as the general principle behind *kenosis* had been in circulation in Russia for “a generation or two,” without being linked to a particular name.⁹⁴

In demarcating the yet uncharted meaning of *kenosis* within the Russian religious-philosophical context, Tareev relies on the nineteenth century trend in German theology, which stressed the life of the *historical* Jesus, that is, his life as a

⁹² In this chapter, I focus on the pragmatic rather than the semantic aspects of the term because I believe that the *uses* of this term change, rather than the literal meaning, which relatively consistently denotes a process of emptying. In other words, though its literal meaning does not change, the term *kenosis* is applied to a variety of concepts and contexts. From here on, I refer to this change as a change in the pragmatic meaning of the term.

⁹³ See Paul Valliere, “M.M. Tareev” (Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 1974), 60-99.

⁹⁴ Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11.

man on earth, rather than his role as Christ or the Messiah.⁹⁵ Drawing on the Protestant debates of the sixteenth century, German Protestant theology in the nineteenth century revived the idea *kenosis* as “part of a new earth- and human-oriented Christianity”.⁹⁶ In the spirit of this tradition, Tareev, somewhat unconventionally, views humility in the temptation narrative of the Gospel as part of Jesus’ earthly ministry, leaving out traditional issues such as incarnation, passion, and resurrection.⁹⁷ In the second edition of his *Iskuheniia Bogocheloveka*, Tareev stresses Christ’s human status by pointing out that he is called “son of God,”⁹⁸ as opposed to *the* son of God.⁹⁹ From this lack of differentiation between Jesus and other sons of God, Tareev concludes that Christ, like all sons of God, must suffer. In order to understand the relatedness of *kenosis* to the earthly presence of Christ, his human nature, and the necessity of his suffering, one must go back to the original usage of the term within the Christological context.

The term *kenosis* reaches back to Saint Paul’s terminology in *The Letter to the Philippians* 2:7, where Christ is described as having “emptied himself” in order to assume the form of a servant,

[Christ], existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself*, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he *humbled* himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth...¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ This trend yielded a number of works by figures like David Friedrich Strauss and Albert Schweitzer, among others. The “quest for the historical Jesus” is said to have begun with the work of an 18th century German deist philosopher, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768). For a detailed list of these works, see Valliere 64-5 n. 3.

⁹⁶ Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky’s Religion*, 11.

⁹⁷ Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky’s Religion*, 11.

⁹⁸ Matthew 4:6.

⁹⁹ Cassedy, *Dostoevsky’s Religion*, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Philippians 2:7; my emphasis. Translation quoted from the American Standard Version of the Bible: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians%20%20;&version=8> (accessed April 3, 2008). In alternative, less literal and more exegetical suggestions, it is said that Christ “made himself of no reputation.” See, for example, the King James Version. Other translations suggest that Christ

In the Slavonic translation of the Greek, the term *unichizhat*¹⁰¹, roughly meaning “to humiliate”, is generally used to denote the concept of *kenosis*.¹⁰² The above passage has been subject to endless debates, for how could Christ be both human and divine, if he emptied himself of divinity to become human?

The interpretations of this passage have varied greatly, from an outright denial of Christ’s divinity during his earthly ministry to the idea that Christ limited himself only in the divine prerogatives which would be inconsistent with his inhabitation of the human world (*e.g.* omnipotence, omnipresence, foreknowledge, etc.), while his divinity remained intact. For example, in his reading of the Philippians passage, St. Augustine emphasizes that God emptied himself in the sense of Christ becoming a servant, rather than losing the form of God,

Christ... true Son of God in His divinity, and true son of man according to the flesh, not as He is God over all was born of a woman, but in that feeble nature which He took of us, that in it He might die for us, and heal it in us: *not as in the form of God*, in which He thought it not robbery to be equal to God, *was He born of a woman, but in the form of a servant, in taking which He emptied Himself. He is therefore said to have emptied Himself because He took the form of a servant, not because He lost the form of God.* For in the unchangeable possession of that nature by which in the form of God He is equal to the Father, He took our changeable nature, by which He might be born of a virgin.¹⁰³

“made himself nothing” – an interpretation more consistent with the emptying connotations of the verb *kenōō*. For a detailed list of the possible meanings of the verb, consult:

<http://cf.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G2758&t=KJV>

¹⁰¹ Dal’ defines the term in the following way: *unichizhat’ – unizhat’, stedit’, unichtozhat’ npravstvennem vliianiem, ulichaia pristezhat’, i smiriat’ etim, korit’ ili pozorit’ pered ludmi* (to humble, humiliate, etc.).

¹⁰² Russian translation of the Philippians passage goes as follows:

“Он, будучи образом Божиим, не почитал хищением быть равным Богу; но *уничжил* Себя Самого, приняв образ раба, сделавшись подобным человекам и по виду став как человек; *смирил* Себя, быв послушным даже до смерти, и смерти крестной. Посему и Бог превознес Его и дал Ему имя выше всякого имени, дабы пред именем Иисуса преклонилось всякое колено небесных, земных и преисподних...” (Фил 2:7; my emphasis). Quoted from the Russian Synodal Version of the Bible: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians%202%20;&version=13> (accessed April 3, 2008). Other, less common versions translate *ekénōse* as “унизил себя” (“degraded himself,” or lit., “lowered oneself”). As I will demonstrate below, Russian religious philosophers like Sergei Bulgakov translate the term more literally as *opustoshenie* or making empty.

¹⁰³ Saint Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 3.6. For interpretations in the spirit of the King James translation, where *kenosis* is understood as emptying of fame or reputation, see Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 37.

Augustine's interpretation seems consistent with translations which suggest that although Christ divested himself of his glory, thereby subjecting himself to the course of history, he nevertheless remained divine. Let us briefly put aside the nuances of each interpretation, and try to identify some general implications of the usage of the word *kenosis* in this context.

On the one hand, the concept of *kenosis* seems to imply a certain kind of emptiness of flesh or matter. That is, if to become flesh, Logos had to empty itself (whether it be of divinity or of divine prerogatives is irrelevant to the general process of emptying), then being flesh implies a certain kind of distance from divinity, characterized by a lack – just as for the non-essentialists the icon meant the absence of the divine. For this reason, matter has often been perceived as something lowly and unworthy. At the same time, provided that the emptying undergone by the Logos is not that of divinity, as is characteristic of Orthodox (among others) interpretations, and the person of Christ retains his divine nature, the very same process of emptying can be interpreted in a positive way, emphasizing divine presence in matter.¹⁰⁴ That is, rather than focusing on whatever may have been lost in the process of emptying, the emphasis falls on grace or presence which is implied by this process. As is evident at this point, in their subjugation to changing perspectives, the implications of the process of *kenosis* are unstable and context-sensitive. For this reason, it is important to take into account the variety of contexts in which the concept appears, focusing on the pragmatic meaning or the usage of the term *kenosis*, rather than on its literal meaning.

To return to the Russian context of *kenosis*, just how did this kenotic idea become popular in the nineteenth century, and in what ways was it already in

¹⁰⁴ Precisely this analogy, as I have tried to demonstrate, is extended to the icons by the essentialist defenders.

circulation before Tareev's work appeared? Has it always been engrained in the minds of the Russian Orthodox, beginning with the passion-bearers of Kievan Rus', Boris and Gleb, as the Russian émigré scholar George Fedotov suggests,¹⁰⁵ or is it more or less an import or a construct of the nineteenth century? In recent literature on the development of Russian religious philosophy in the twentieth century, Fyodor Dostoevsky has been recognized as a great contributor to (and sometimes, more accurately, the inventor of) the particular themes, in which Russian religious philosophers subsequently became interested.¹⁰⁶ A suggestion has been made that rather than drawing on Orthodox doctrines as their primary source, many of these religious philosophers were inspired by what they interpreted as true Orthodoxy in Dostoevskian novels. Although the term *kenosis* never appears in Dostoevsky's works explicitly, Christianity in his fiction is tied to the earth and man,¹⁰⁷ which makes up the first fundamental component of the dual process of *kenosis* – God coming down to earth to live among men, thereby validating the earthly existence.

¹⁰⁵ George Fedotov is responsible for introducing the idea of Russian kenoticism to the West. In 1946 Fedotov, Berdyaev's friend and disciple, wrote *The Russian Religious Mind*, which for the English speaking audience became one of the primary authoritative sources for Russian Orthodoxy. For Fedotov, "voluntary suffering" (as part of the imitation of Christ) is a fundamental feature of kenoticism, which he presents as a kind of a national feature of Russian Orthodoxy since its conception. Steven Cassedy, however, expresses his skepticism regarding the existence of an extensive kenotic tradition in Russia before Dostoevsky's "reinterpretation" of Russian Orthodoxy, "The Russian kenotic tradition that Fedotov refers to, or to put it more precisely the use of the word *kenotic* to denote broadly a cult of humility and more narrowly a cult of voluntary suffering in Russian Orthodox Christianity, appears to be very much his own contribution to the West's understanding of the religious tradition that allegedly appears in the works of Dostoevsky" (*Dostoevsky's Religion* 152-3). For Fedotov's thoughts on the Russian kenotic tradition, see chapter four, entitled "Russian Kenoticism" of his *The Russian Religious Mind*.

¹⁰⁶ For instance, see *Russian Religious Thought* (1996).

¹⁰⁷ For example, see Zosima's injunction to Alesha about loving life *in this world*, in F.M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 14:259, and to his fellow monks, "Love all God's creation and the universe and every grain of sand. Every leaf and every ray of light shall ye love" (PSS 14:289). Compare Zosima's statement to that of Ivan, "Maybe I don't believe in the order of things, but I treasure the sticky little leaves that blossom in the springtime, I treasure the blue sky, and I treasure certain people..." (PSS 14:209-210). Also of interest is Zosima's "earth worship," expressed in his frequent kissing, bowing down, etc. to the earth (PSS 14:291-92), and Alesha's adherence to Zosima's advice of leaving the monastery to "dwell in the world" and of loving the earth (PSS 14:328). The focus of *The Brothers Karamazov* in general seems to be on this world as the realm in which Christian ministry takes place (*Dostoevsky's Religion* 155). The same emphasis on the earth can be found in *Crime and Punishment*, in relation to Sonia's character, and in *The Demons* in the character of Mary Lebyadkin.

Tareev's article on Dostoevsky,¹⁰⁸ which pays special attention to the theme of Christian humility, is just one piece of evidence in support of such a view. Dostoevsky's fiction is by no means the only source for religious philosophers like Tareev; however, this source, so crucial for understanding the motifs which find expression in Russian religious thought, is not to be discarded simply because it is fiction. Moreover, taking into account how fervently Bakhtin felt about Dostoevsky's works, hailing him as the inventor of the polyphonic novel, and how carefully he studied them, it would be rather surprising if Bakhtin remained insensitive to the keen "intuition of the kenotic principle,"¹⁰⁹ which others found in Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky's thoughts on Christianity, as they are implicitly expressed in his novels (if one may somewhat naively assign real world truth-values to fictional ideas), found a particularly strong resonance in the writings of Vladimir Soloviev, who as a young man befriended the already middle-aged Dostoevsky. Similarly to many of his contemporaries, Soloviev was deeply influenced by the particular Christian themes, such as humility and voluntary suffering, which received careful attention from the fiction writer. A tendency to interpret Dostoevsky's works as being concerned with specifically Russian Orthodox themes, even when his discourse reveals its western European philosophical roots, characterizes Soloviev's approach to his fiction.¹¹⁰ Thus, when Tareev drew on Soloviev's *Lectures on Godmanhood* for his interpretation of *kenosis*, he was tapping into a rather eclectic source.¹¹¹

In Soloviev's work, one finds the first (in the Russian philosophical tradition) surfacing of the twofold focus of Incarnation and Deification, which henceforth, as mentioned above, becomes characteristic of Russian religious philosophical thought

¹⁰⁸ M.M. Tareev, "F.M. Dostoevsky," in *Osnovy khristianstva*, vol. 4, *Khristianskaia svoboda* (Moscow: Sergiev Posad, 1908), 245-314.

¹⁰⁹ Cassedy, "P.A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter", 95.

¹¹⁰ Though, it must be noted, he was by no means the only one guilty of such fallacy.

¹¹¹ Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion*, 12.

at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹² The fact that Soloviev views these two foci as inseparably united, the former always implying and entailing the latter, points to the intellectual affinity of his thought to the concept of *kenosis*, which holds that the two foci are but two sides of the same coin – man is uplifted to God (deification ↑) by the very same process that God comes down to man (incarnation ↓). By emphasizing the unity of the two poles and, more generally, bringing them both back into Russian religious discourse, he creates a certain terminological void, which Tareev and Soloviev's later disciples come to fill. Keeping this context in the back of one's mind, one should now be sufficiently prepared to consider my two main case studies, Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov, both of whom explicitly use the term *kenosis* not only to refer to the Incarnation but also to explain concepts and processes that reach beyond the traditional usage of the word.

1.4 Pavel Florensky. Kenosis as the Principle Behind Love

Although a literal reading of the term *kenosis* and an interpretation of the Philippians passage¹¹³ can be found in Pavel Florensky's magnum opus, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth* (1908-1924¹¹⁴), the extension of this concept through analogy is what is of primary interest to my analysis. Florensky's ideas on love, in part borrowed from Soloviev and both directly and indirectly (i.e. via Soloviev) from Dostoevsky,

¹¹² Gustafson and Kornblatt, *Russian Religious Thought*, 11.

¹¹³ "Christ took the idea of God's humility to its ultimate limit: God, by going into the world, sets aside the form of His glory and takes the form of His creatures (Phil. 2:6-8), submits to the laws of creaturely life, does not disturb the world's course, does not dazzle the world with lighting or deafen it with thunder... but merely glimmers before it with a modest light, gathering to Himself His sinful and weary creatures, showing them reason, but not chastising them" (289). P.A. Florensky, *Stolp i utverezhdenie istiny. Opyt pravoslavnoi feoditsei v devenadtsati pis'makh* (*The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*), 2 vols., (Moscow: Put', 1914; rpt. Moscow: Pravda, 1990). This literal interpretation emphasizes the traditional reading of *kenosis* as an act of humiliation. As we will see below, for Florensky *kenosis* also has a second meaning as a transitional stage to something higher.

¹¹⁴ This work was for the most part finished by 1908, but was not published in its complete form, as it is available today, until 1924.

presuppose a kind of kenotic process of self-emptying or annihilation (*opustoshenie*) of the individual self, derived from the idea of *kenosis* as Incarnation. In other words, Florensky applies the general principles behind *kenosis* to explain a new, though not an unrelated subject: the “mechanics” of love. In the chapter entitled “The Light of the Truth,” Florensky identifies spiritual love with “the overcoming of boundaries of selfhood... the going out of oneself”.¹¹⁵ In this “overcoming of the naked self-identity I=I,” love, which “tears apart in [man] the bonds of finite human selfhood,” can become “a passage to another... Divine life”.¹¹⁶ In becoming “consubstantial with the brother,” “I” becomes “not-I” in another.¹¹⁷ The self empties itself into non-self, or as Florensky puts it, in becoming “identified with the beloved brother,” the ‘I’ “‘empties,’ ‘exhausts,’ ‘ravages,’ ‘humbles,’ itself (cf. Phil. 2:7)”.¹¹⁸ The resulting impersonal non-self (not-I) allows one to become identified with the Other, “Every I is not-I, i.e., Thou, by virtue of the renunciation of oneself for the sake of another”.¹¹⁹

In passing let us note a small piece of evidence of Dostoevsky’s influence on the later development within Russian religious philosophy: in alluding to the Philippians passage and the kenotic Incarnation of Christ, Florensky seems to reflect on Dostoevsky’s written reaction to his wife’s death. In 1864, Dostoevsky notes,

¹¹⁵ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 67.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68. Although a comparison of Florensky’s “mechanics” of love to Bakhtin’s description of the affirmation of self through the other, as outlined in his “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” is beyond the scope of this thesis, I would like to point to it as to a possible future extension of my research. In this work, Bakhtin argues, “In this outside position, *I* and the *other* find ourselves in a relationship of absolute mutual contradiction that has the character of an event: at the point where the other, from within himself, negates himself, negates his own being-as-a-given, at that point *I*, from my own unique place in the event of being, affirm and validate axiologically the givenness of his being that he himself negates, and his very act of negation is, for me, no more than a moment in that givenness of his being. What the other rightfully negates in himself, I rightfully affirm and preserve in him, and, in so doing, I give birth to his soul on a new axiological plane of being. The axiological center of his own vision of his life and the axiological center of my vision of his life do not coincide. In the event of being, this mutual axiological contradiction cannot be annihilated” (“A&H” 129).

After the appearance of Christ as the *ideal man in the flesh*... it became as clear as day that the highest, the ultimate development of the individual person must progress precisely to the point... where man can... be convinced that the highest use he can make of his individual person, of the fullness of the development of his self, is, as it were, to annihilate this self.¹²⁰

Dostoevsky views this annihilation of the individual self as “an ideal eternal towards which man strives”.¹²¹ This idea of self-annihilation, explicitly linked to the Incarnation in Dostoevsky’s passage, is clearly echoed in Florensky’s conceptualization of kenotic love. Furthermore, by clarifying why the appearance of Christ in the flesh necessarily implies that self-annihilation is the eternal ideal and what the aim of such a self-annihilation would be, Florensky’s discussion of kenotic love offers an exegesis of Dostoevsky’s passage.

Florensky argues, “In this ‘emptying’ or ‘kenosis’, there occurs a reverse restoration of I in the norm of being proper to it”.¹²² In other words, one’s “I” can be affirmed only through the presence of another, who in his position as an outsider can affirm one as “he”.¹²³ Florensky further clarifies why this process of annihilation of the individual self might be an ideal worth striving for,

In another person, through its kenosis, the image of my being finds its ‘redemption’ from under the power of sinful self-assertion, is liberated from the sin of isolated existence... Instead of individual, separate, self-assertive I’s, we get a dyad, a di-unitary being...¹²⁴

As becomes evident in the above passage, the kenotic principle behind love makes possible the union of “the two worlds”¹²⁵ of two separate “I’s”, and allows one to avoid the imprisonment in one’s individual “I”. As I will demonstrate in the second chapter, carnival also aims at overcoming the boundaries of the individual by conceptualizing his body as a communal rather than an individual one.

¹²⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990), 20:172; original emphasis.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, 67.

¹²³ Gustafson and Kornblatt, *Russian Religious Thought*, 14.

¹²⁴ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, 68.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

On Florensky's view, in its effort to bring into unity the worlds of two separate individuals, love understood as a kenotic act can be said to have a bridging function. In Bakhtin's terminology, previously disunified things, such as the individual "I's" of two persons, are brought into contact with one another. Quoting Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Florensky develops this idea further, "The great thing is that there is a mystery here, that the fleeting aspects of the earth and eternal Truth have *come into contact here*".¹²⁶ This Dostoevsky quotation, which, unsurprisingly, appears in the section of Florensky's book which is concerned with *kenosis*, touches on one of the central ideas in Florensky's philosophy: transitional feelings, experiences, concepts, objects, etc.

As I have tried to demonstrate above, for Florensky, love, understood kenotically, has a mediating function, allowing one to transition from one's own "I" into the "I" of the Other. In this sense, it can be understood as a transitional feeling on the model of Florensky's transitional objects, whose the mode of being is marked by a transitional moment between the invisible divine world and the visible material world. Florensky describes these transitional objects, the primary representatives of which in Florensky's thought are words and icons, as mediators between two realms. In their mediating function, transitional objects, such as an iconostasis or a temple (*khram*), can be perceived as emphasizing either separation or distance from the divine, or contact or proximity to it, depending on the perspective. Florensky's definition of a symbol can be of help in conceptualizing just how these transitional objects function, "A symbol is a window to another, not immediately given essence".¹²⁷ The suggestion is that transitional objects function as windows looking out in the other realm.

¹²⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, "From the conversations and precepts of the *starets* Zosima" in *Brothers Karamazov*, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 337. Quoted in Florensky's *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth* on pg. 68; my emphasis. For Florensky's discussion of earthly truth and eternal Truth, see below.

¹²⁷ Gustafson and Kornblatt, *Russian Religious Thought*, 15.

The idea of the window can in turn be illuminated by Florensky's definition of dreams, which, as transitional experiences, take place on the borderline between the visible and invisible worlds and which "divide and at the same time unite these worlds".¹²⁸ On his view, a dream "from the heavenly [perspective is] a symbol of the earthly, from the earthly, a symbol of the heavenly".¹²⁹ This definition suggests that the world which is revealed through the window of transitional objects depends on the observer's point of view. That is, for human beings the other side would be the heavenly, while for God, it would be the earthly. Thus, the transitional object is a point where dialogue can occur between the divine and the earthly.

Although Florensky insists on the dualism of two worlds, the visible and the invisible (*mir vidimyi*, *mir nevidimyi*), refusing to erase or even blur the dividing line between them, for him the existence of this divide does not translate into the preference of one world over the other. That is, he does not privilege the divine over the material, but rather celebrates matter as a gift from God. On his view, matter shares in the traditionally exalted status of the divine because only in matter can "transition, mediation, or revelation of the divine" take place.¹³⁰

In order to further illuminate the status of matter for Florensky, let us consider his appropriation of and departure from the iconophile discourse of the eighth and ninth centuries. Florensky differs from the traditional non-essentialist defense of the icon, which is based on the idea that the icon points to something immaterial, suggesting that it is not the wood or paint that is venerated but rather the prototype behind them. On this view, as I indicated earlier, the prototype is connected to the one represented through a formal relation or likeness, rather than through essence. By

¹²⁸ P.A. Florensky, "Ikonostas," in *Sobranie sochinenii / sviashch. Pavel Florensky*, ed. N.A. Sturve, (Paris: YMCA Press, 1985), 202.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹³⁰ Gustafson and Kornblatt, *Russian Religious Thought*, 14.

contrast, for Florensky, matter has value in itself. That is, the function of matter is not only to serve as an index for something higher, as suggested by theologians like Theodore of Studios and Patriarch Nikephoros; rather, the material has its own purpose as part of God's creation. Florensky holds that icons allow unmediated access to the immaterial only because the immaterial prototype has been made flesh through the materials of icon-painting.¹³¹ Thus, the icon that is produced is material and fleshy, and yet it has a divine origin, which can paradoxically be accessed through its materiality.¹³² In this sense, Florensky's view falls between the essentialist and non-essentialist models, adopting some elements from each view.

The implication of Florensky's philosophical reflections on icons is that one can gain access to the immaterial only through the material medium. The closeness of the immaterial, which can be seen through the icon as through a window, points to the divine origin of matter on his view.¹³³ Florensky refuses to view "matter as wholly despicable" because he understands it to be a part of God's creation and in this sense an epiphany of God.¹³⁴ As an explanation of the meaning of a story he tells in *The Pillar of Truth* about a pilgrim who came to see the world in a new way through prayer, Florensky says, "In a word, all the world of creatures [*tvar*'] revealed itself to our pilgrim as an eternal, divine miracle, as a living being praying to its Creator and Father".¹³⁵ Implicit in this explanation is the belief that through the material world, the divine miracle of Creation can be seen. Just as the icon receives holiness from the one depicted on it on Damascus's view, matter received grace during Creation and is therefore imbued with holiness. Shortly, I will take up this justification of the value of

¹³¹ Cassedy, "P.A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter", 102. According to Florensky, icon painting is "the making flesh (*oplotnenie*), on a board, of the living cloud of witnesses that billows around the throne [of God]" (*Ikonostas* 225).

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Cassedy, "P.A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter", 102.

¹³⁴ Cassedy, "P.A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter," 96.

¹³⁵ Pavel Florensky, *Stolp i utverezhdenie istiny*, 317.

matter on the basis of *kenosis* – this time explicitly identified as the underlying process of Creation – in the section on Bulgakov. On the views that rely on Creation in defense of matter (both Florensky and, as we shall see below, Bulgakov), by celebrating the material, one also celebrates the divine, which is present in the material. In this sense, it is not pure materiality that is celebrated, but rather the hypostatic union of matter and divinity in *all* creation. On the kenotic view of Creation, it is not an individual specimen of matter that is imbued with holiness, e.g. a piece of wood, but matter as a whole.¹³⁶

In addition to bearing on the status icons, the principle of *kenosis* also has certain implications for Florensky's theory of truth: (immanent) truth is spread everywhere or present in all of creation, and each truth is but an aspect of the (transcendent) Truth. Interestingly, he views love, which, as we have seen, is based on kenotic self-emptying of oneself into the loved one, as an illustration of the principle of Truth. In this sense, *kenosis* can be said to also underlie Florensky's reflections on the nature of truth. In *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*, truth is presented as a rather ambiguous feature because its structure rests on the principle of contradiction. On his view, the antinomical nature of truth lends support to his belief that no individualized earthly truth, which is grounded in matter (*tvar'* – creature, created), can be held as the Truth; only the antinomical union of earthly truths can point to the Truth. In other words, all truth is antinomical, and the antinomies are but individuated parts of one greater Truth. On the analogy of transitional experiences, truth is a window to Truth, just as matter is a window to the immaterial.¹³⁷

As a mediating object or experience is always subject to a play of perspectives (proximity vs. distance, contact vs. separation, presence vs. absence etc.), truth is

¹³⁶ Florensky never explains why transitional objects like icons have a special status as mediators, if all matter is imbued with divine presence.

¹³⁷ Cassedy, "P.A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter," 103.

highly ambiguous. Hence, one can draw the Bakhtinian conclusion that there can be no privileging of discourses because no individuated truth, severed from its antithesis, can be the Truth.¹³⁸ Thus, one must (kenotically) humble oneself in not making authoritative truth claims as all discourses contain a part of Truth. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, for Bakhtin too, truth changes constantly, “It is an unfortunate misunderstanding to think that truth can only be the truth that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it”.¹³⁹ Just as all truths are potentially the Truth for Florensky, all words are potentially the Word for Bakhtin. For this reason, it is impossible to claim to be in possession of the ultimate truth or the final word, which is only an illusion maintained by monological discourse.

Florensky’s emphasis on materiality also manifests itself in the specific intellectual role in which he casts himself. Once again, materiality stands in opposition to the tendency towards abstraction. In consonance with the above-discussed views of Kireevsky and Berdyaev, Florensky rejects abstract thought and prefers to view himself as an “investigator”. In his *Avtoreferat* (1925-26), written for an encyclopedia entry on himself, Florensky states,

Florensky regards the continuation of the path toward a future integral worldview as his life’s task. In this sense he may be called a philosopher. But in contrast to the devices and objectives of philosophical thought that have become entrenched in the modern period, he rejects abstract constructs and a schematically exhaustive universe of problems. In this sense he should be regarded rather as a researcher or investigator.¹⁴⁰

The terms “researcher” and “investigator”, contrasted, in this passage, with the traditional understanding of the term “philosopher”, have scientific connotations,

¹³⁸ I will return to this idea and explore it in more detail in the second chapter on Bakhtin.

¹³⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 37.

¹⁴⁰ P.A. Florensky, “P.A. Florensky’s Review of His Work,” *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1989-90): 41.

which suggest some sort of an involvement on the part of the actor in the gathering of information about the material world.¹⁴¹ The idealist tendency towards abstractions in the philosophy of Florensky's times is thus implicitly contrasted with the concrete task of empirical investigation of the material world.¹⁴² Consequently, here too one finds an emphasis on the material world related to his theory of truth, which is in turn grounded in the kenotic principle.

The same aversion to abstraction can be traced in his linguistic thought as well. Again, in his "Avtoreferat," Florensky says of himself, "rejecting the idea that language follows the principles of *abstract* logic, Florensky sees the value of thought to lie in its *concrete* manifestation as the revelation of the personality".¹⁴³ Once again abstract logic is contrasted with concrete manifestation, and in this case, it is the very medium of communication, our language, without which he believes thought to be impossible, that is tied down to the concrete level. The suggestion that one of the most important mediating experiences, the usage of language, is grounded in the concrete hints at the relative importance of matter.

From the above analysis of Florensky's work, it should be evident that the concept of *kenosis* is circulating in Russian religious thought of the time in various forms to explain a variety of different phenomena, from the nature of love found in Florensky to Creation in Sergei Bulgakov, as we will see next. Moreover, the significance of *kenosis* for viewing matter in a positive light and for seeing the relativity of everything is by now becoming more apparent. The aim of the next section is to clarify the relationship of the concept of *kenosis* to validation of matter, which has been hinted at but not sufficiently explored in the current section section.

¹⁴¹ Cassedy, "P.A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter," 97.

¹⁴² In the same vein, Florensky criticizes mathematics for its "cultural bareness," insofar as it remains separated from "an empirical study of the universe" (45).

¹⁴³ P.A. Florensky, "P.A. Florensky's Review of His Work," 41; my emphasis.

1.5 Sergei Bulgakov. Usage extended: Creation as a Kenotic Process

In addition to the more traditional application of the term *kenosis* to explain the process of Incarnation, the Russian religious philosopher and Orthodox theologian, Sergei Bulgakov, employs the same concept to describe the process of Creation and the inner life of the Trinity, and thereby extends its usage beyond the ones I have already identified in Tareev and Florensky's works. In this section, I will focus specifically on Bulgakov's reading of Creation as a kenotic process since such an interpretation provides a theological basis for the emphasis on materiality found in Russian religious philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as in Bakhtin's work. Echoing St. John of Damascus' eighth century defense of icons, the implications of Bulgakov's kenotic view of Creation can be formulated as follows: if matter is the result of God's "pouring himself out," then, being part of God, matter is deserving of veneration.¹⁴⁴

Such an argument is similar to the one we have already encountered in Tareev in that it adheres to the view that divine nature is retained in *kenosis* and the divine prerogatives which are incompatible with human nature are shed when the Logos limits Himself to time and space. At the same time, Bulgakov's view differs in the addition of the idea that divinity can be felt through matter, which is implied by his new application of the term *kenosis*. Moreover, as I will try to demonstrate in the second chapter, this kind of interpretation has important implications for ritualistic practices of the Orthodox Church, which are implicitly constructed around the belief

¹⁴⁴ St. John of Damascus draws a crucial distinction between "worship" or "adoration" (*latreia/λατρεία*), which is intended only for God, and "veneration" (*proskinesis/προσκύνησις*), which can be applied to saints and icons alike.

in the possibility of coming into contact with God through experience of excessive materiality.

In order to understand how *kenosis* can be a feature of Creation, let us briefly examine Bulgakov's argument. In his *Svet Nevechernii* (*The Unfading Light*, 1917), Sergei Bulgakov argues, "World creation is an act of God's omnipotence and love-humility (*lubov-smirenje*). The world is created for the sake of man and in man..."¹⁴⁵ Without the love-humility dimension, which makes room for human freedom, allowing man to give in to sin or to avoid it, Creation would amount to a "play" on the part of "Godly creativity," or a "the will to create and destroy worlds".¹⁴⁶ According to Bulgakov, God "respects the freedom of man" because He wishes to "multiply himself" in the "sons of God" and "find friends in them".¹⁴⁷ In this sense, the concept of freedom, not surprisingly echoing "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," is implied in the kenotic process of world creation.

Bulgakov goes on to explain, "Creation of the world was already in its very basis a self-sacrificial act of Godly love, a voluntary self-exhaustion/depletion (*istoshchenie*) or self-annihilation (*opustoshenie*) of the Deity, His 'kenosis', which finds justification only in itself, in the bliss of self-sacrificing love".¹⁴⁸ In this statement, Bulgakov employs the previously discussed concept of *kenosis* in an entirely different context, implicitly expanding the role of matter as a medium through which one can come into contact with the divine. If God "emptied himself" into material things in his sacrificial act of Creation, then matter, taken as a whole, is pregnant with God's presence. The word *kenosis* once again becomes subject to a play of perspectives. The dominant perspective in Bulgakov's theology is one which

¹⁴⁵ Sergei Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii* (*The Unfading Light*) (Moskva: Folio, 2001), 515. All of the following translations of Bulgakov are my own.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 516, 517.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

stresses presence rather than absence or lack in matter, since God's love is ever-present in his self-sacrificing act. The love component in the self-emptying of God, which was developed by Soloviev without being explicitly identified with the term *kenosis* and echoed in Florensky, also finds expression in Bulgakov, though here it is specifically applied to the self-emptying act of world creation. Consequently, although the term *kenosis* retains the connotations of humility and love in Bulgakov's usage, its pragmatic meaning comes encompass the act of Creation.

Bulgakov goes on to argue that this "common and nascent 'kenosis' of Divinity in world creation always entailed within itself the concrete kenosis – the incarnation of the Son of God and Golgotha victim".¹⁴⁹ That is, the *kenosis* which occurred in the act of Creation entails the concrete kenosis of Logos which is described in the Philippians passage. Bulgakov's argument, drawing on the previously noted idea of freedom, can be reconstructed as follows: Creation is a bidirectional process, which God set in motion by putting the first "seeds of life" into the world, and which man, in his turn, must complete. Such conceptualization of Creation mirrors the bidirectional orientation of *kenosis*, which simultaneously implies a downward movement of divinity and an upward movement of man. That is to say, divinity descends onto the earth and man ascends up to heaven by the same kenotic process; the one side always implies the reverse ($\downarrow \leftrightarrow \uparrow$).

Since Bulgakov explains Creation in terms of the kenotic principle, the act of Creation on the part of God (\downarrow) obligates men to creation (\uparrow) by the same token. As Bulgakov puts it, man must "from his own side create himself through his own freedom".¹⁵⁰ This bidirectional conditional relationship (\leftrightarrow) between God and man's creation can be viewed as a kind of dialogue between them. Bulgakov argues that

¹⁴⁹ Bulgakov, 516-17.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 519.

precisely because man initially failed to accept his responsibility to create, “a new act of creation of the world,” which took shape “in the perfect human being through incarnation” or the concrete act of *kenosis*, was needed.¹⁵¹ It is in this sense that Bulgakov sees the entailment of Incarnation in the kenotic process of Creation.

Perhaps even more significantly, Bulgakov goes on to discuss the implications of these kenotic processes, “[now that] Incarnation has materialized, Jacob’s ladder has been erected between heaven and earth”.¹⁵² In the kenotic interpretation of the Incarnation, Bulgakov perceives the “proximity of Christ” and of the divine, rather than their distance.¹⁵³ He views the concrete act of *kenosis* as possessing a bridging function, which is inherent in all things that contain antinomies within themselves. Earlier he notes that under the “command” of Christ, everything “heavenly and earthly...unites,”¹⁵⁴ or in the words of Paul, “in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth”. Heaven and earth are joined in the figure of Christ, who unites “the absolute and the relative, divine and material (*tvarnogo*), ‘the whole fullness of God’ and materiality (*tvarnosti*), God and the world... the transcendental and the immanent”.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, in so far as Bulgakov sees *kenosis* as the process behind both Creation and Incarnation, he insists on the paradox of God being both creator and creature, “He who formed the world now Himself ‘takes form’ as a creature; the creator makes Himself to be created”.¹⁵⁶ In Bakhtin’s terminology, Bulgakov views Christ as full of carnivalistic *mesalliances*. As in the case of carnival, these *mesalliances*, such as Christ’s two “natures” (*estestvo*) and “wills” (*volya*), which are united indivisibly and

¹⁵¹ Bulgakov, 519.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 523.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 524.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 517.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 521.

¹⁵⁶ *The Festal Menaion: Service Book of the Orthodox Church*. Trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (Faber and Faber: London, 1969), 54.

unblendibly (*nesliyatno*),”¹⁵⁷ appear as “antinomies,” when an attempt is made to understand them rationally. I will return to this idea later on, after I clarify Bakhtin’s concept of carnival in the next chapter.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this section, the term *kenosis*, though it retains its literal meaning, undergoes a certain contextual change in Bulgakov’s work. In differentiating between various aspects of *kenosis*, such as humility and sacrificial love, its usage is extended to subsume Creation, in addition to the Incarnation. This extension provides a theological backdrop against which the celebration of materiality on the part of Russian religious philosophers can be explained in terms of their perception of divine presence in all matter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, my primary aim was to situate kenoticism within the context of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian theology. As I have tried to demonstrate, Russian religious philosophers like Florensky and Bulgakov appropriate the Biblical narrative of the Incarnation and the specific doctrine of *kenosis* to justify materiality, which, as we have seen in Berdyaev and Florensky, is key to overcoming abstract thought. In doing so, the Russian religious philosophers under discussion positioned themselves in opposition to western philosophy (religious and non-religious), and thereby attempted to create a space for themselves within the history of philosophy – one which gave due attention to the everyday and the “lowly”. In other words, they were not only concerned with creating a new, religious tradition within the Russian philosophical field, but also with defining the uniqueness of their

¹⁵⁷ Bulgakov, 521. *Nesliyatno* literally means “unblendibly,” but can also be translated as “without confusion,” according to the Chalcedonian formula regarding the coexistence of human and divine natures in Christ.

religious-philosophical position against “abstract” western philosophy. Their implicit intention could be identified as an attempt to rethink the categories of modern thought in terms of the Russian Orthodox tradition. For this reason, these Russian religious philosophers perceived religious and philosophical concerns as two sides of the same coin.

As I have tried to illustrate in my analysis of the usage of the term *kenosis* in different contexts, although this word refers to a specific process, it is an empty placeholder, which can be (and was) utilized to describe a variety of phenomena. Within this Russian philosophical tradition, *kenosis*, as my analysis discloses, appears to be fundamentally related to the celebration of matter. According to its main representatives, Florensky and Bulgakov, Incarnation reveals the compatibility and similarity of the human and the divine, and represents a confirmation of the pre-Incarnation belief that human beings are created in the image of God. On such view, it is not the distance or separation from the divinity that is revealed in matter, but rather its proximity or connection. Thus, matter becomes a medium through which it is possible to receive God’s grace, and is considered, for this reason, valuable. As I will try to demonstrate in the following chapter, Bakhtin’s emphasis on materiality is not at all inconsistent with Orthodox beliefs, if we take philosophers like Soloviev, Florensky and Bulgakov to be representatives of Russian Orthodox thought.

Chapter II

Towards a Reconciliation of “Antinomies”: Kenosis and Carnavalesque Degradation as Functionally Compatible Concepts

2.1 Introduction

As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapter, the value of matter is central to the philosophy of the fin de siècle representatives of Russian religious thought. In this chapter, I propose to read Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* and its celebration of matter within the religious-philosophical context that affirms matter based on the “word became flesh” paradigm. The main aim of this chapter is to illustrate how Bakhtin appropriates the beliefs and arguments of these Russian religious philosophers regarding the status of matter to his own discourse on materiality in carnival. Before I can establish this continuity, however, I must justify my reasons for choosing to read Bakhtin’s emphasis on materiality within the context of the Russian Orthodox tradition rather than within a Marxist context, for instance, as has been suggested by other critics. Although tributes to Marxism-Leninism, required of all authors publishing at the height of the Soviet times, can also be found in Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais¹⁵⁸ and might encourage a Marxist reading of Bakhtin’s materiality, these remarks seem rather contrived, and even deliberately inserted in certain places, sometimes breaking up the unity of the already existing text, or simply appended at the ends of certain chapters.¹⁵⁹

Even if these tributes are genuine confessions of Bakhtin’s support of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy, the grounding force of the work is nevertheless Bakhtin’s opposition to all kinds of monology within art *and* life, rather than his

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, pp. 101, 436 of *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁵⁹ See the end of chapter VI, for example.

belief the superiority of one philosophical system over another. That is, the main philosophical motivation of Bakhtin's work on Rabelais seems to be embodied in carnival's opposition to structures of authority, which profess supremacy on the basis of their claim to the possession of ultimate truth (i.e. through their monological discourse). Consequently, regardless of whether this work is intended as a criticism of the monological discourse of Marxism-Leninism, it seems that a thorough interpretation would have to place it in the context of his early, more overtly religious essays, which present monology as an ethical problem. I do not deny the possible Marxist parallels as a valid point for comparison of Bakhtin's concept of materiality; however, if one wishes to see *Rabelais and His World* as part of Bakhtin's oeuvre, in which Bakhtin's early concern with monology is connected to his later critiques of monological structures, a religious reading of his emphasis on materiality seems more appropriate.¹⁶⁰

Marxist readings of Bakhtin's work frequently fall into the trap of viewing 1917 as a complete breaking point in intellectual history – a division, which, as I will try to demonstrate, seems rather artificial, if one takes into account the continuity between fin de siècle Russian religious thought and post-Revolutionary philosophy, which is revealed in the dialogue of Bakhtin with Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov, and Berdyaev. Although the references to kenosis and other Christian doctrines find the greatest resonance in Bakhtin's early works – primarily because publications in the 1920s still enjoyed *relative* freedom from censorship¹⁶¹ – the general framework

¹⁶⁰ I do not wish to suggest that Bakhtin's thought did not develop over time; I simply want to point out that certain themes which were so important for the young Bakhtin also make an appearance in his later works.

¹⁶¹ As is evident from the publication dates of the several discussed titles in Russian religious philosophy, most of their works (with the exception of those which continued to be published abroad, like the work of Berdyaev) were published before the 1930s, when the Soviet censorship tightened its grip. Florensky's complete version of *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, for instance, passed censorship as late as 1924.

remains intact in his later work, though without the explicit connection to the Christian terms. For this reason, I would like to briefly review some of Bakhtin's early works to establish the link between the status of materiality in early philosophical essays and in *Rabelais and His World*.

2.2 Kenosis and Materiality as Ethical Responsibility in the Early Philosophical Essays

Bakhtin's first biographers, Clark and Holquist, qualify the religious situation at the time of publication of Bakhtin's early works in the following way:

During the 1920s, especially in the first five years after the Revolution... there was a remarkable amount of public religious debate and religious interest among intellectuals of all persuasions. For instance, there was a revival of interest in the Orthodox Church itself... Religion in these years was not even denied a public forum. Public debates took place between leading Bolshevik and religious intellectuals about the existence of God, the most famous of these being the debates between Lunacharsky and Vyacheslav Ivanov in the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow. Bakhtin and his friends had been involved in a provincial echo of the same phenomenon in 1918-1919 when they debated the local Marxists in Nevel.¹⁶²

From the above sketch of the 1920s, one can discern that although religion was by no means looked upon kindly by the Bolshevik government, it had not yet been completely banished from public discourse and the public sphere in general.¹⁶³ As the relatively large number of publications on religious subjects from that time suggests, religious thinkers felt that they could still express their ideas with *relatively* little reservation and caution. According to Clark and Holquist, in these early years after the Revolution, Bakhtin and his close intellectual friends still did not perceive any opposition between religion and socialist revolution.¹⁶⁴ For this

¹⁶² Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 123.

¹⁶³ Though, it must be noted that after 1918 "public discussion of theological questions in venues other than official debates became extremely difficult". Nevertheless, religious thinkers were able to find other public outlets for the expression of their ideas in the 1920s (Clark & Holquist 124).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

reason, Bakhtin's writings and activities from this period¹⁶⁵ express, more or less unrestrictedly, broad religious and philosophical concerns, which on his view went hand in hand with one another.

Similarly to the religious philosophers discussed in the previous chapter, already in his early works Bakhtin revolted against the tendency to abstraction, which, in his eyes, characterized modernity. For Bakhtin (Berdyayev, and Florensky alike), abstraction in philosophical thought was related to detachment from real life, which, in turn, meant a refusal of personal responsibility. He saw responsible acting as a way of tying abstract theory to concrete practice and thereby reconciling theory and life¹⁶⁶. The fragment published under the title of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-1921), which represents Bakhtin's first formulation of his later and more developed criticism of monologism, was one of his earliest essays concerned with defining ethical behavior in terms of "participatory thinking," in which moral actions ought to be authored by specific agents in concrete contexts rather than *a priori*. He resisted abstracted models such as that of Kant, which separates the intelligible world of ideas from the sensible material world, in which deeds take place. The responsibility for an act cannot be taken if the act cannot be "undersigned" (in the sense of a signature) as one's own *in the material world*. The image of the undersigning of one's name under a particular deed links the taking of responsibility to the written and in that sense materialized word, which alludes to the Word in flesh.

¹⁶⁵ Although these works were composed in the 1920s, some of them were not published for various reasons until Bakhtin was "rediscovered" by Vadim Kozhinov and Sergey Bocharov in the 1960s. The later publication date of some of his early writings, however, does not mean that Bakhtin did not originally compose them with the intention of publication.

¹⁶⁶ The problem of the division between theory and life is nicely posed in Bakhtin's very first essay, "Art and Answerability", where he argues that only if art and life mutually "answer" to each other (in the sense of being responsible), can the mechanical relationship between the three domains of human culture – science, art, and life – be brought into an organic unity. As Bakhtin goes on to point out in his later works, the desire for the unity of art and life is also expressed in carnival, which itself belongs to the "borderline between art and life" (RAHW 7).

As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapter, the image of Christ for the Russian religious philosophers of the late nineteenth-, early twentieth centuries served as a kind of tangible embodiment or, to put it more crudely, a visual aid for many of their major ideas. In Bulgakov's thought, for example, we saw that by becoming matter during the Incarnation, the figure of Christ further authenticated the material world – an authentication which was foreshadowed during Creation, when matter was impregnated with presence for the first time. In this sense, the image of Christ, bringing the divine and the human natures into contact, symbolically comes to stand for the validation of matter. Similarly, in Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Christ appears as a mediator who brings together the abstract and concrete through his descending (*niskhozhdenie*) act,

Self-renunciation is a performance or accomplishment that encompasses *Being-as-event*. A great symbol of self-activity, the descending [*niskhozhdenie*] of Christ. The world from which Christ departed will no longer be the world in which he had never existed; it is in its very principle, a different world.¹⁶⁷

The terms like “self-renunciation” and “descending” in a Christological context immediately evoke the Philippians passage which describes Christ's kenotic act during the Incarnation. If one assumes such terms to be allusions, one can interpret this passage as a kind of commentary on the Philippians quotation. Viewing Christ as the main representative of responsible acting, Bakhtin seems to have suggested that responsible acting must be rooted in the spirit of humility,¹⁶⁸ “One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person”.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, the act of self-renunciation is “answerable” and for this reason cannot be

¹⁶⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, Trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 16; emphasis in the original. From here on, this work is referred to as *TPA*.

¹⁶⁸ Ruth Coates, “The First and Second Adam in Bakhtin's Early Thought,” in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, c2001), 69.

¹⁶⁹ *TPA* 52.

the same as *complete* self-emptying, which would prevent one from “undersigning” an act as one’s own or from embodying it.¹⁷⁰

The undersigning of an act is presented as something deeply based in our own materiality, in our being in this world. Bakhtin argues that one must live “out of/from himself” (*iz sebya*) in order to act responsibly. In this work, concreteness is specifically linked to incarnation, “As *disembodied* [*razvoploshchennyi*] spirit, I lose my compellent, out-to-be relationship to the world, I lose the actuality of the world. Man-in-general does not exist; I exist and a particular *concrete* other exists – my intimate, my contemporary”.¹⁷¹ Disembodiment and the abstract perceptions of “man-in-general” are contrasted with concrete existence in this world as “I” and “the other”. When one lives as a disembodied spirit, he lives a “non-incarnated [*neinkarnirovannaya*] fortuitous life as an empty possibility”.¹⁷² In this sense, the “spatial and temporal limits of human existence” make possible the concrete incarnation of individual acts, which, otherwise floating in the abstract world of ideas, would remain insignificant and meaningless.¹⁷³

As I have tried to suggest in the above analysis, this particular early work of Bakhtin seems to be penetrated by a kenotic understanding of responsibility. In this sense, one can argue that Bakhtin, like the Russian religious philosophers discussed in the previous chapter, adopts the Incarnation model denoted by the concept of *kenosis* to his own purposes, which, as we will see later on, lead him to reject the apparent split between content and form.

¹⁷⁰ TPA 51.

¹⁷¹ TPA 47; my emphasis.

¹⁷² TPA 43.

¹⁷³ Ruth Coates, “The First and Second Adam in Bakhtin’s Early Thought,” 69.

In another unfinished essay, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”¹⁷⁴ (1920), Bakhtin states, “even God had to incarnate himself in order to bestow mercy, to suffer, and to forgive – had to descend, as it were from the abstract standpoint of justice”.¹⁷⁵ This quotation is of particular interest not only because it links the pre-incarnate God to abstraction, but also because it connects to Bakhtin’s discussion of ethics. The suggestion seems to be that the pre-incarnate God could judge human beings only from an abstract point of view, far removed from the realities of concrete human life. The descended Christ, on the other hand, by occupying a unique place *within* history and suffering with his people, was able to judge them from an embodied and concrete point of view, and for this reason, could not but forgive. Once again, for both the Russian religious philosophers and Bakhtin alike, abstractions seem to be linked with a refusal of responsibility for living life in this, material world.

The context of the above quotation clarifies the dangers inherent in abstractions,

The abstract cognitive standpoint lacks any axiological approach, since the axiological attitude requires that one should occupy a unique place in the unitary event of being – that one should be *embodied*. Any valuation is an act of assuming an individual position in being... The abstract standpoint does not know and does not see the movement of being as an ongoing event... as a still *open process* of axiological accomplishment... It is only from my own unique place that the meaning of the ongoing event can become clearer, and *the more intensely I become rooted in that place, the clearer that meaning becomes*.¹⁷⁶

In this passage, which forms the surrounding context of the above-quoted statement about God becoming incarnate, occupying a unique place or being embodied within the world or within a particular action is contrasted with assuming an abstract point of

¹⁷⁴ In this essay, (among other things) Bakhtin is concerned with the value of the body in connection with communion of bodies in Christ – an idea that links him thematically (not only biographically, as Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark attempted to show in their biography) with the Brotherhood of Saint Seraphim, which emphasized the importance of the carnal presence of Christ.

¹⁷⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability*, Trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 129. From here on, this work is referred to as “A&H”.

¹⁷⁶ “A&H” 129.

view. From this frozen, abstract standpoint, it is impossible to discern that being is in a constant state of flux or becoming. Because the abstract standpoint itself is closed, it is incapable of seeing the “open process” of being and the relativity of everything, implied in the “movement of being”. If one is unable to perceive this relativity and the arbitrariness of the present world order – how easily what is necessary could have turned out to be arbitrary, meaningful - meaningless, etc. – one’s self-expression will be reduced to a series of abstracted monologues. In Bakhtin’s world of movement and becoming, there can be no privileging of discourses because every discourse gains equal standing due to the fact that any dominant discourse can be overturned by its opposite at any moment. In this way, Bakhtin draws a direct link between the abstract point of view and monology. Moreover, Bakhtin suggests that the further away one moves from abstractions by becoming rooted in the materiality of one’s action, the clearer one can see the meaning and significance of that action. As I will illustrate later on, embodiment is also a precondition for a plural, relativistic world of carnival, which allows for dialogue to take place.

2.3 The Aesthetic Function of Kenosis in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art : The Problem of Authorial Incarnation

I do not know of any more profound difference in the whole orientation of an artist than this, whether he looks at his work in progress (at “himself”) from the point of view of the witness, or whether he “has forgotten the world,” which is the essential feature of all *monological* art, it is based on forgetting, it is the music of forgetting. – Friedrich Nietzsche

With the tightening of censorship restrictions in the late 1920s - early 1930s, crowned by the establishment of the Union of Writers, Bakhtin’s writing style underwent a certain change – literary criticism took the place of the previously favored genre of philosophical essays. Interestingly, Bakhtin

articulated his concept of carnival for the first time in his first major contribution to literary studies. First published in 1929 and later expanded in 1963, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*¹⁷⁷ proposes a radical reinterpretation of the role of Dostoevsky's novels in literary history, and accredits the fiction writer with the discovery of a new artistic form – the polyphonic novel, which emerges out of carnivalistic folklore. In its thematic concerns, which include religious issues (discussed as themes in Dostoevsky's fiction), this study represents a link between Bakhtin's early philosophical essays, in which the religious dimension is significantly more pronounced, and his later literary criticism, which further expounds his concept of carnival. Let us briefly review one explicit connection, established via the concept of monology, between the earlier essays just examined, and this piece of literary criticism.

The kenotic dimension in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* arises in relation to the idea of embodied, responsible authorship. Bakhtin's greatest (philosophical) fear can be described as the liquidation of all discourses into one single language,¹⁷⁸ otherwise known as monology. In this work, Bakhtin argues that in presupposing the superiority of his own point of view, a monological author has no real interlocutor and for this reason, is only capable of delivering monologues. Such an author exploits art to project his or her own worldview at the expense of others' – an irresponsible act, from Bakhtin's point of view. For him, "responsible, embodied authoring," (unsurprisingly) exemplified in the Christ-like characters of Alyosha Karamazov and Prince Myshkin, means that the characters representing the author's position should not "finalize" (*zavershat'*) those

¹⁷⁷ The title of the earlier publication is *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*.

¹⁷⁸ Susan Felch and Paul Contino, *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, 13.

representing other discourses; otherwise, the discourses representing the author's position would assume a position of authority and result in monology.

If polyphony, or a plurality of independent consciousnesses that can combine but not merge in the unity of the event,¹⁷⁹ is to be defined against monology, one must be careful to avoid falling into the trap of abstraction. If in monological discourse the author inserts himself into the text with an authoritative position, then it seems that, as the antipode of a monological author, a polyphonic author would have to remain outside of the text in order to avoid abusing his privileged position of "outsidedness". If the latter part of this conditional is considered true, however, the problem of abstraction arises: if the author remains completely outside of the text, he would be as abstract to his characters as a materially absent, transcendent God to His people.¹⁸⁰ To be understood by the other characters, the author's discourse must be incarnate.

Bakhtin's solution to this problem of abstraction is to insert the author into the text *on an equal level* with his characters, thereby making his characters "capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even rebelling against him".¹⁸¹ That is, in order not to remain an abstract and distant entity and fall into the trap of monology through a different route,¹⁸² the author must be materially present in the world of his characters. As Christ had to become material, subjecting himself to human sufferings by *making himself their equal*, the polyphonic author has to give up his authoritative outsidedness,

¹⁷⁹ The etymology of the Russian word "event" or "sobytie," which literally means co-existing or being at the same time, is crucial to understanding Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky "visualizes" the world primarily in terms of space, which, unlike time, does not have a progression, and thereby allows for the occurrence and interaction of all the opposing characters within the same plane or "carnival square".

¹⁸⁰ Ruth Coates, "The First and the Second Adam in Bakhtin's Early Thought," 74.

¹⁸¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6. From here on, this work is referred to as *PDP*.

¹⁸² That is to say, the insertion of the author into the text with an authoritative position and the complete withdrawal of the author from the text yield the same monological result.

subjecting his point of view to the “historical process” of the unfolding narrative. In this way, the principle of kenotic incarnation seems to lurk in the background of Bakhtin’s understanding of polyphony, without being explicitly alluded to as in his earlier writings, possibly due to the newly imposed censorship restrictions in the late 1920s.

Now that I have clarified why Bakhtin views abstraction in such a negative light – mainly because of its connection to monology – and insists on “embodiment” as a way of acting responsibly in this world, I can proceed to discuss the significance of carnival as a de-abstractifying force. Taking into account Bakhtin’s clearly articulated support of the ethic of responsibility, which is fundamentally tied to the figure of descending Christ, it is no surprise that when Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais first appeared, many critics saw it as both a rejection on Bakhtin’s part of his earlier ethical theory and of his Orthodox convictions. Those who interpret Bakhtin as a supporter of the ethic of responsibility are baffled by his celebration of absolute freedom, which in their eyes can be so destructive, while the Christian audience feels unsettled not only by the work’s anticlericalism¹⁸³ but also by Bakhtin’s heavy emphasis on matter, connected with the lower life of the body. In the following sections, I will argue that Bakhtin’s emphasis on materiality is neither inconsistent with Russian (philosophical) Orthodox thought, as represented by Florensky and Bulgakov, nor with his ethics of responsibility. In order to discern the possible connections between Christian lines of thought and Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, and reconcile the supposed opposition between the ethics of his early and later works, let us first briefly review what is it that Bakhtin means by the term carnivalesque.

¹⁸³ This criticism does not apply to the Orthodox Church, which is organized on the basis of *sobornost*’.

2.4 Carnival Defined

How can man take pleasure in nonsense? For whenever in the world there is laughter this is the case; one can say, indeed, that almost everywhere there is happiness there is pleasure in nonsense. *The overturning of experience into its opposite, of the purposive into the purposeless, of the necessary into the arbitrary*, but in such a way that this even causes no harm and is imagined as occasioned by high spirits, *delights us, for it momentarily liberates us from the constraint of the necessary, the purposive* and that which corresponds to our experience which we usually see as *our inexorable masters*; we play and laugh when the expected (which usually makes us fearful and tense) discharges itself harmlessly. It is the pleasure of the slave at the *Saturnalia*. – Friedrich Nietzsche

The fourth chapter of Bakhtin's *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* is devoted exclusively to the explanation of the carnivalesque as a literary genre in relation to Dostoevsky's novels. In the next section, I will use this formulation of the concept of carnival as a backdrop against which I can compare the Orthodox views of materiality, supplementing it along the way with Bakhtin's later elaborations on carnival from *Rabelais and His World*.

According to Bakhtin, carnival, or the popular festival of Europe, originating in pagan festivals celebrating the end of winter, penetrates world literature from Rabelais to Dostoevsky with its life-creating power not only externally as manifested in the plot, but also internally in the very construction of the characters and the world around them. The carnival sense of the world relates image and word with reality in a particular way, which not only permits the mixing of the serious and the comic, high and low, but also allows its subject to become the open-ended living present, which is so crucial for achieving polyphony. For Bakhtin, the importance of the carnivalesque lies precisely in the idea of the polyphonic principle can only be realized in a carnivalized structuring of the whole.

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin defines carnivalized literature as literature that is influenced either directly or indirectly by one of the variants of carnivalistic folklore. For Bakhtin, carnival itself, which includes all

festivals of carnival type, is not a *literary* phenomenon, but rather a “syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort”.¹⁸⁴ Carnival is responsible for the creation of symbolic language that gives expression to the carnival sense of the world, and although it cannot be translated into “verbal language,” it can be transposed into the language of literature or artistic images; it is this transposition that Bakhtin labels “carnivalization of literature”.¹⁸⁵ During the Renaissance, which was the high point of carnival life, carnivalization penetrated into almost all genres of artistic literature.¹⁸⁶ At this time, carnival proper still coexisted with carnivalized literature and influenced its development directly. Five fundamental features of Bakhtin’s carnival are the following: 1. In carnival, everyone is an active participant; that is, there is no participant-spectator division. Carnival is not performed; rather, the participants live in it. Carnivalistic life is “life turned inside out” or the “reverse side of the world”.¹⁸⁷ 2. The suspension of laws, prohibitions, restrictions, hierarchical structures and inequalities allows for free and familiar contact among people in the carnival square. 3. Carnival is a place for working out “a new mode of interrelationship between individuals”.¹⁸⁸ When behavior, gesture and discourse are liberated from hierarchical positions, they become eccentric and inappropriate from the point of view of normal life. 4. Carnivalistic *mesalliances* form as a result of the contact and combination of things that were previously self-enclosed, disunified, or distanced from one another. The sacred combines with the profane, lofty with the low, great with the insignificant, wise with the stupid.¹⁸⁹ 5. Profanation, which includes blasphemies, obscenities,

¹⁸⁴ *PDP* 122.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

parodies of sacred texts and sayings, is linked with the reproductive power of the earth and body.

The above categories are not abstract, but “concretely sensuous thoughts,” which are played out as real life via ritualistic acts and consequently survive in the European consciousness for ages.¹⁹⁰ Although carnival is limited only temporally, not spatially, free familiar contact and carnival acts can only take place without restrictions in the carnival square. The most important carnivalistic act is the crowning and the subsequent decrowning of the carnival king. The act of crowning, ambivalent from the very beginning because of carnivalistic *mesalliances*, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world. He who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester – a king turned inside out.¹⁹¹ This upside-down carnival world represents a common violation of the accepted life.¹⁹² Upon decrowning, the carnival king is ridiculed and even beaten, as his vestments are stripped away.¹⁹³ In this reversed world of carnival, the decrowning is inevitable from the very moment that the king is crowned, because all carnivalistic symbols include the prospect of negation within themselves. In this way, carnival is a celebration not of the item replaced, but of the shift or process of replacement itself.¹⁹⁴ Thus, as Bakhtin points out, because carnival is not “substantive,” but rather “functional,” it reflects “the joyful relativity of everything”.¹⁹⁵

Carnival laughter, which can be traced back to ritual laughter, is treated as another manifestation of carnivalistic ambivalence – one which gives rise to other

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125. As I tried to demonstrate in the previous chapter, kenosis is likewise a functional rather than substantive concept, and for this reason, can easily accommodate changes in pragmatic meanings. The comparison between kenosis and carnival as functional concepts will be taken up again below.

ambivalent images. In ritualistic laughter, ridicule of authority is merged with rejoicing, mockery with triumph, praise with abuse, etc.¹⁹⁶ Similarly to the juxtaposition of the original and its reverse in a single, unified image of the carnival king, carnival laughter presents the process of “change and transition” in *concrete* images of death and renewal.¹⁹⁷ It is responsible for creating ambivalent images of “pregnant” death, which “gives birth,” and of ‘Mother Earth’ as both a womb and a grave.¹⁹⁸ The production of these complex aesthetic images demonstrates the enormously powerful creative force of laughter, grounded in the concept of renewing changeability, “In death birth is foreseen and in birth death, in victory defeat and in defeat victory, in crowning a decrowning”.¹⁹⁹ This laughter is directly contrasted with “one-sided seriousness,” or monology, which absolutizes and freezes a single side of change, making the process substantive.

Carnival laughter is directed towards something higher, “a shift of authorities and truths”.²⁰⁰ The skeptical and distrustful attitude of laughter towards everything that is perceived as immovable or permanent challenges all hierarchies, and authority in general. This carnival laughter is universal; that is, it contains “a whole outlook on the world,” or a specific way of “comprehending reality”.²⁰¹ Laughter is concerned with crisis, or with the very process of change, which simultaneously represents negation and affirmation.²⁰² In this sense, laughter is indifferent to death and unafraid of authority.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127, 164.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 166. Bakhtin notes that our very distinction between death and birth, which implies some sort of a distance, is somewhat misleading since in carnival birth and death are two sides of the same coin.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 127, 164.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 127; *RAHW* 12.

2.5 The Material Bodily Principle: A Comparative Approach

The soul cannot be separated from the body that creates it, individualizes it, directs its activity, *lends it content*. – Pietro Pomponazzi

Carnival laughter is deeply tied with the body, the materiality of which is central to understanding carnival as a functional²⁰³ phenomenon. The ideas of change and renewal, expressed in ambivalent carnivalistic images like that of the carnival king, concretize on the level of the body, as carnival laughter overtakes a person's face and turns it into one big laughing mouth. Bakhtin remarks, "the people's laughter... was linked with the bodily lower²⁰⁴ stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes".²⁰⁵ Consequently, one of the main aims of carnival, and of the literary genres inspired by it, such as grotesque realism, is to bring down the high and the abstract to the level of the body and earth, or to materialize them,

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation [*snizhenie*, lit. coming down, lowering], that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body in their indissoluble unity... Not only parody in its narrow sense but all the other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, *turn their subject into flesh*.²⁰⁶

Similarly to the writings of the Russian religious philosophers discussed in chapter one and to Bakhtin's early works, in *Rabelais and His World* materiality, or the downward movement towards the material world is perceived as a way out of the abstractions. Diction such as "degradation" and "turn their subject into flesh" evokes Biblical and Apocryphal descriptions of the process of Incarnation, during which the abstract Logos becomes the material Jesus.

Bakhtin develops this train of thought further,

²⁰³ As noted earlier, functional is contrasted with substantive.

²⁰⁴ Lower is meant only topographically, not hierarchically, as there is no privileging of one over another when they come into contact.

²⁰⁵ RAHW 20.

²⁰⁶ RAHW 19-20; my emphasis. Elsewhere, Bakhtin notes, "Debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is scared and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum" (RAHW 370).

Degradation here means *coming down to earth*, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better...²⁰⁷

In this passage, degradation is explicitly identified with a descending movement towards the earth, which is characterized by certain fertility. Although this degradation may seem like a mere debasement or humiliation, it also has a positive, renewing function. The parallel to Christ's Incarnation becomes even more obvious: by making "himself nothing" or "emptying himself", Logos was able to "bring forth something more and better": the New Testament came to replace the Old, Truth – shadow of Truth, Grace – Law, freedom – bondage, etc.²⁰⁸ Moreover, the simultaneous downward and upward orientation (↓↑) of kenotic Incarnation is also mirrored in the process of degradation: an object, or, to be more precise, an abstract entity is brought down to the earth and swallowed up (↓) by it, only to be spat back out (↑) later. That is, the process of rebirth, visually represented by the image of the earth spitting the now renewed object back out, is an upward movement in so far as the degraded object emerges from the depths of the earth.

Bakhtin continues,

To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.²⁰⁹

As we can discern from this passage, degradation for Bakhtin is not an inversion of the hierarchy (turning it inside out, so to speak), privileging the material over the

²⁰⁷ RAHW 19-20.

²⁰⁸ See, for example, an eleventh century text of the first non-Greek Metropolitan of Kiev, Ilarion (or Hilarion), entitled *On Law and Grace* (*Slovo o zakone i blagodati*), which is a panegyric to Saint Vladimir contrasting Old Testament law with New Testament grace. Bakhtin would have certainly been familiar with this popular Orthodox text. Also see: Simon Franklin, *Byzantium-Rus-Russia: Studies in the Translation of Christian Culture* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate/Variorum, c2002), 532.

²⁰⁹ RAHW 21.

spiritual – which *would* mean “hurling it into non-existence”, but rather the *involvement the higher in the lower*. Recalling the discourse of the Byzantine iconophiles and fin de siècle Russian religious philosophers, in the process of *kenosis*, the divine and the human become indivisibly united; Christ does not empty himself of divinity (only of divine prerogatives in order to be able to enter history), but combines the two distinct natures in one hypostatic union, resulting in the involvement of the divine nature in the human, represented by the earthly figure of Jesus. As I have tried to demonstrate in the first chapter, the divine is not simply transposed or transferred into the material in a hermetically sealed package (which would allow the human and divine natures to be easily separated in the sense of establishing a clear distinction between which part is divine, which is human), but rather spills, following the logic of “pouring out,” and permeates with its presence all created, material things, making it impossible to pinpoint the exact location of the divine elements.²¹⁰ So in Bakhtin, degradation is not a complete eradication of the abstract in the sense of turning it into the concrete, but rather the tying down of the abstract on the concrete material level.

The symbolic involvement of the higher in the lower finds visual representation in the image of the physical contact between the head and the abdomen, representing the higher and lower parts of the body respectively, in Bakhtin’s description²¹¹ of a scene from the Italian *commedia dell’arte*:

A stutterer talking with Harlequin cannot pronounce a difficult word; he makes a great effort, loses his breath, keeping the word down in his throat, sweats and gapes, trembles, chokes. His face swollen, his eyes pop; “it looks as though he is in the throes and spasms of childbirth.” Finally Harlequin weary of waiting, relieves the stutterer by surprise; he rushes head forward and hits the man in the abdomen. The difficult word is “born” at last.²¹²

²¹⁰ As one may recall, in Bulgakov, for example, during Creation all of material world became imbued with presence. Such a process implies that to locate divinity within any specific object in the world would be a futile task.

²¹¹ Here Bakhtin is paraphrasing the description he finds in G. Schneegans’ *Geschichte der Grotesken Satyre*.

²¹² RAHW 304.

In this scene, the symbolic roles of the organs involved in speech production are, in one sense, reversed, when the parts which are normally involved in the production of speech are “hurled down” to the lower level of the body. That is, here word production appears to take place on the level of the abdomen rather than the head, where the tongue, mouth, etc. are located. At the same time, the abdomen is portrayed as unable to produce a word without the assistance of the head, though in this case, it is the head of a different person from the one who is involved in speech production²¹³ (i.e. Harlequin’s head rather than that of the stutterer). In this dependence on another’s head, it becomes clear that in this scene the abdomen is never *completely* transformed into the mouth and does not become the new head; if that were so – if the function of the head was truly replaced by the abdomen – it would mean that the head, mouth, etc. would be “hurled into the void of non-existence”. However, instead of a *complete* transformation of the higher into the lower, the higher organs are “degraded” or brought down to the lower level of the abdomen, which allows them (speech organs) and their products (words) to be reborn. Thus, in the symbolic act of the head pushing out the word from the abdomen, one can discern the involvement of higher in the lower. That is, the higher, through its involvement in the lower, makes possible word production. The parallel of this scene to the involvement of the divine in the material, implied in Christ’s kenotic act, is not only a functional one; it seems worth noting that what is “at last” born – the product of this involvement – is “the difficult *word*”.

The description of the comedy scene is followed by Bakhtin’s analysis, which can be of help in further developing the parallel between the involvement of the divine in the material and the higher part of the body in the lower,

²¹³ The head and the abdomen can be said to come into contact twice: the first time, symbolically, when speech production is transferred to the lower level of the stutterer’s body; and the second time, when the head of the Harlequin comes into actual, physical contact with the abdomen of the stutterer.

Harlequin... helps to deliver the word, and the word is actually born. *We specify that it is the word that is born*, and we stress this fact: *a highly spiritual act* is degraded and uncrowned by the transfer to the material body level of childbirth, realistically represented. But thanks to degradation the word is renewed; one might say reborn... Thus the entire mechanism of the word is transferred from the apparatus of speech to the abdomen.²¹⁴

In his analysis, Bakhtin also emphasizes that in this episode the word born on the lower level of the material body rather than in the more “spiritual” part of the body, the head. His description of the (child)birthing process suggests that the word is reborn in the flesh. He stresses that the “highly spiritual act” of word production in the head as “thought” is “degraded” in the process of becoming actual, material, flesh, that is, in the process of becoming a spoken word, an utterance. However, this degradation is not final, in the sense that it leads to a rebirth. Similarly to the abstract being reborn on the level of the material in the previously discussed passage, the word is renewed. Again, the diction alludes to Logos’ Incarnation, which allows the word of the Old Testament (Law) to be reborn in the New as the Word (Grace).

Let us briefly pause to consider a methodological difficulty in reading Bakhtin’s literary criticism as an exposition of his own ideas: how does one separate the contribution of the authors of the texts Bakhtin is discussing from his own? This problem is particularly relevant in the discussion of the *commedia dell’arte* episode. Since this episode is not of Bakhtin’s own invention, one could argue that the original text of the author of the *commedia dell’arte* is intended to be read as a travesty of the Incarnation, taking into account that travesty is a common feature of both carnival proper and carnivalesque literature. That is, the parallel to the birth of the Word in flesh, which seems to be alluded to in this episode, could belong to the original author of the comedy (or Schneegans, the interpreter) rather than to Bakhtin. However, Bakhtin’s reading of this scene suggests that he interprets the significance of the

²¹⁴ RAHW 309.

episode outside of the author's original intentions (whatever they may have been). In his analysis, Bakhtin makes no mention of the episode possibly being a travesty, even though the language of the passage seems rather pregnant with allusions to the Incarnation. Moreover, if the passage Bakhtin finds in Schneegans is in its early stages of pregnancy as far as its allusions extend, Bakhtin's own language is in its third trimester; that is, it is overburdened with allusions to the Incarnation, which one could not fail to notice.

The mention of the scene being a travesty of the Incarnation (probably) would not have aroused suspicion from the censors, since elsewhere in the work Bakhtin freely refers to and discusses parodies of Christian texts. The remaining reasons for leaving out an explanation of this parallel seem to be the following: 1) Bakhtin failed to see the original parallel intended on the part of the author of the comedy; 2) he did not find the parallel significant or worthy of explanation; 3) he himself was trying to make some sort of a commentary, deliberately leaving the parallel undeveloped, (possibly) to avoid tensions with the censors. The first option seems rather unlikely, taking into account that Bakhtin was a very attentive reader. The second option also seems improbable because: 1) the parallel is particularly relevant to the tradition of travesty in carnival and would have been an apt illustration of the fifth fundamental criteria of carnival noted above;²¹⁵ 2) Bakhtin appropriates the same charged words in his own discourse to a point that it becomes virtually impossible not to notice its pregnant belly. Given that the first two options seem unlikely, Bakhtin probably had some other agenda in drawing this parallel without explicitly labeling it. Let us now see if we can decipher or at least suggest what Bakhtin's possible intention in doing so could have been.

²¹⁵ Profanation, which includes blasphemies, obscenities, parodies of sacred texts and sayings, is linked with the reproductive power of the earth and body.

With the help of Bakhtin's analysis, this particular episode reminds one that speech production is a bodily process and illustrates how speech can be grounded in the bodies of the speakers. Here, one can discern an inversion of the semiotic axiom, whereby Bakhtin grounds the sign in the material of its representation, which becomes inseparable from it (the sign). In his *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics* (1975²¹⁶), Bakhtin argues that all content is formal, and that every form exists because of the content.²¹⁷ That is, form is an integral part of the message that a work of art intends to communicate. In this sense, Bakhtin visualizes the material and the body in this particular episode and elsewhere not simply as a medium or a means of getting at the content, but as a sign itself.²¹⁸ Similarly, in the previous chapter, I have tried to argue that for the Russian religious philosophers in question, the material is worthy in itself and possesses its own meaning, beyond being an index for the divine. The kenotic understanding of the Incarnation, as revived by Russian religious philosophers like Florensky and Bulgakov, also seems to support the view that the material through which content is expressed is itself a sign. If the material is viewed as a sign in itself (not just of something else), the form cannot be a degradation²¹⁹ of the ideal content (Plato²²⁰), but rather has an equal standing to content on this view.

If Bakhtin had presented such ideas openly in the 1920s or the 1930s, when he was working on his Rabelais book, he would have been charged with the "heresy" of

²¹⁶ Although this collection of Bakhtin's writings, outlining a historical poetics for the novel, was published in Russia only in 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death, many essays included in this anthology go back to the 1940s.

²¹⁷ *RAHW* viii.

²¹⁸ Charles Lock, "Carnival and Incarnation: Bakhtin and Orthodox Theology." *Journal of Literature and Theology* 5 (I) (1991): 69.

²¹⁹ Here I am using the word "degradation" in a non-Bakhtinian sense, devoid of any positive connotations of renewal.

²²⁰ Here I am alluding to the dualist Platonic view that pure ideas which remain in the realm of Ideas (the noumenal world) are more perfect than and superior to tangible expressions of these ideas in the material, physical world of sense experience (phenomenal world).

Formalism,²²¹ and may have been “gently persuaded” to join the “philosophers’ ship”²²² out of Russia. At the time of composition of *Rabelais and His World*, while still in internal exile in Kazakhstan,²²³ Bakhtin was well aware that the members of the Russian Formalist School in Moscow and Petersburg were suffering from political “persecution” (the so-called *gonenie na formalistov*) for their “unpatriotic” and ahistorical analyses of literature, represented by the founder of OPOYAZ,²²⁴ Viktor Shklovsky’s “anti-political” statement, “Art was always free of life, and its color never reflected the color of the flag which waved over the fortress of the City”.²²⁵ Thus, already fearing being grouped with the “subversive” Formalists (because of his insistence on the unity of form and content, implicit in many of his writings) and accused of “Vselovskyism,” a synonym for “kowtowing (*nizkopoklonstvo*) to the bourgeois West”²²⁶ in the vocabulary of the Central Committee (since Bakhtin’s thesis was about a *French* writer), Bakhtin was wary of any additional charges, which would finally exhaust the patience of the Soviet government.

In his mind, being accused of participation in underground religious activities for a second time²²⁷ could have been the last drop in the already overflowing pail of

²²¹ Valery Kirpotin, a theorist of Socialist Realism, who was appointed to Bakhtin’s PhD thesis defense committee (as one of the official opponents) at the Gorky Institute of World Literature, did, in fact, accuse Bakhtin of Formalism in the 1940s.

²²² Among those who were expelled from Russia on the *filosofsky parahod* in 1922 are Nikolai Berdyaev, Nikolai Lossky, Sergei Bulgakov, Ivan Ilyin, Semen Frank, Fyodor Stepun and many others. More than 160 Russian intellectuals were transported from Russia to Germany in the months of September and November of 1922. Expulsion abroad was Lenin’s suggested replacement for the death penalty for those “actively” protesting against the Soviet power.

²²³ On the account of his poor physical condition (osteomyelitis), in 1929 Bakhtin was sentenced to six years of internal exile, a milder punishment than the one he had originally merited, which included “relocation” to Siberia.

²²⁴ Founded in 1916 and dissolved in the 1930s under political pressure, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language was a prominent group of linguists and literary critics in St. Petersburg. Among its most famous members are Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum and Yuri Tynianov, who, along with the Moscow linguistic circle, developed the school of Russian Formalism and literary semiotics.

²²⁵ Shklovsky as quoted by Trotsky in Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1957), 164.

²²⁶ Michael Holquist, Prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, xx.

²²⁷ Bakhtin’s alleged participation in an underground Orthodox movement landed him in trouble for the first time in 1929.

his “heresies,” which could land him in permanent exile from the centers of Russian intellectual life in Moscow and Petersburg. Taking into account the grounds for his previous arrest and exile, one can conclude that Bakhtin would have to be especially cautious in expressing any religiously tinted ideas, since any overt references to religion or religious concepts could have easily been interpreted as proof of his continued involvement in subversive religious activities. Perhaps this fear of a sentence to permanent exile (in his poor health condition) is one of the main reasons why Bakhtin never developed any of the obvious parallels between the kenotic understanding of Incarnation, popularized by Florensky and Bulgakov with whom he was certainly familiar, and his functionally analogous concept of carnivalesque degradation.

2.6 Kenotic Incarnation and Degrading Carnival as Functionally Analogous Concepts and their Implications

Before I can proceed to discussing further parallels between Bakhtin’s carnival and kenotic Incarnation, I would like to articulate precisely what I have in mind when I use the expression “functionally analogous” in reference to these two concepts. From the linguistic analysis of the pragmatic usages of *kenosis* in the previous chapters, one can discern that the term *kenosis* in Russian religious philosophy comes to denote a process, rather than a finished state. For the Russian religious philosophers *kenosis* is not about frozen, static meanings, but about changing functional processes. Rather than having a specific meaning, the word *kenosis* denotes the process of emptying, or even more generally a direction (analogously to a vector), a downward movement (↓), which always implies its reverse (↑). In this chapter, I have tried to illustrate that carnival has nothing to do

with the content of shifts and replacements, but rather celebrates the process of shift and replacement, of change and becoming in all its forms and contents.

Moreover, similarly to *kenosis*, Bakhtin's concept of degradation entails a downward movement, which brings the abstract down to the level of the material, rendering it (the abstract) comprehensible by tying it to the real world in which human activity takes place. As in *kenosis*, the downward direction of degradation always entails an upward movement, by means of which the abstract is renewed through materiality.²²⁸ Thus, one can conclude that *kenosis* is to Incarnation as degradation is to carnival. Because both *kenosis* and degradation are *functional* processes rather than substantive, the pragmatic meanings of both concepts are rather flexible. Consequently, both terms can be appropriated to discuss a wide variety of phenomena.

As analogous functional processes, kenotic Incarnation and degrading carnival yield the same result: the distance between previously disunified things is minimized, and antinomies combine in a single image. Similarly to the functional role of carnival, where everyday boundaries between individuals are suspended in the carnival square, the process of divinity becoming flesh (Incarnation) also abolishes the distance between disparate and previously disunified subjects. While *kenosis* makes possible the coming together of divine and the human-material in the single figure of Christ, Bakhtin's degradation allows for the combination of opposites, which yields carnivalistic *mesalliances*, represented by ambivalent images.

Since I have already briefly touched on carnivalistic *mesalliances*, where opposites converge in a single image (e.g. Mother earth as the grave and womb), let us consider the role of the carnival mask, which, in catalyzing the breakdown of

²²⁸ Recall the upward movement of rebirth, represented by the image of emergence from the depths of the earth.

boundaries, represents the desire for renewal fundamental to all carnival celebrations.

According to Bakhtin,

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry *negation of uniformity* and similarity; it *rejects conformity to oneself*. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the *violation of natural boundaries*...²²⁹

A parallel could be drawn between the costumes and masks of carnival, and Christ's "dressing up"²³⁰ in human flesh. The diction of some Orthodox homilies and hymns dedicated to Christmas and Epiphany, with which Bakhtin as a churchgoer since childhood²³¹ was probably intimately familiar, seem to support this idea by describing Christ's birth as God "having dressed in material flesh" ("v *plot'* *veshchestvennyi odeiavsia*").²³² In this sense, the putting on of flesh by the Logos is also a "violation of natural boundaries," as the human and the divine impossibly (according to natural laws) converge in the single person of Christ. *Mesalliances* of the carnival type are inherent in the paradoxes of the Incarnation. Liturgical texts read at the time of the Christmas feast highlight the inherent paradox of God becoming man, "He who is divine Reason (*Logos*) rests in a manger of beasts without reason (*aloga*)".²³³ Such antinomies are intended to stress the miraculous nature of the Incarnation,

A Virgin bears child, and her womb suffers no corruption. The Word is made flesh, yet ceases not to dwell with the Father... How is he contained in a womb, whom nothing can contain? And how can He who is in the bosom of the Father be held in the arms of His Mother? ... For being without flesh, of His own will has He been made flesh; and He who is, for our sakes has become that which he was not. Without departing from his own nature He has shared in our substance.²³⁴

²²⁹ RAHW 39-40; my emphasis.

²³⁰ In a sense of being able to be physically perceived by others, which is not the case during Annunciation. D.S. Likhachev and A.M. Panchenko, "*Smekhovoi mir*" *drevnei Rusi* [*The Laughter World* of Ancient Rus'] (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 170.

²³¹ Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 120. According to this source, as a child, Bakhtin had a "conventional upbringing as a Russian Orthodox" (120). Viktor Shkovsky, who, it should be noted, may have exaggerated Bakhtin's involvement in the church, relates in an interview with Clark and Holquist (1978) that in the 1920s Bakhtin was known as a *tserkovnik* or a "churchman" in the sense of being "ideologically committed to the church" (120, 370).

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *The Festal Menaion* 54.

²³⁴ *The Festal Menaion* 264, 268.

In this passage from the Lity and the Mattins, one also finds a carnivalesque combination of opposites, which is made possible by the kenotic process of the divine coming down to the human and the human being lifted up to the divine. In this sense, Incarnation, like carnival, can be perceived as a destroyer of boundaries.

The liturgical prayers of the Orthodox Church accentuate the bridging function of the Incarnation, “Heaven and earth are united today for Christ is born. Today God has come upon earth [↓], and man gone up to heaven [↑]”.²³⁵ A bit later on, Christ is described as “bowing the heavens” in the process of his “coming down”.²³⁶ Further emphasizing the destruction of boundaries, in the Christmas Day service, Christ’s birth is described as a time when “the middle wall of partition has been destroyed”.

As yet another example of the bridging function of the Incarnation, let us consider the Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom, which emphasizes the destruction of hierarchies:

If any man be devout and loveth God, □
 Let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal feast!
 ...
 If any have labored long in fasting, □
 Let him now receive his recompense.
 If any have wrought from the first hour, □
 Let him today receive his just reward. □
 If any have come at the third hour, □
 Let him with thankfulness keep the feast. □
 If any have arrived at the sixth hour, □
 Let him have no misgivings; □
 Because he shall in nowise be deprived
 therefore. □
 If any have delayed until the ninth hour, □
 Let him draw near, fearing nothing. □
 And if any have tarried even until the eleventh
 hour, □
 Let him, also, be not alarmed at his tardiness.

For the Lord, who is jealous of his honor, □
 Will accept the last even as the first.²³⁷ □

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 263. The arrows are inserted to emphasize the simultaneous downward and upward movement of the kenotic process.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 263-4; 269, borrowing from Psalm 17:10.

²³⁷ St. John of Chrysostom, *Easter Homily*.

http://catholicism.about.com/od/thesaints/qt/Chrysostom_EH.htm (accessed February 10, 2008).

This homily suggests that the last are not any less worthy than the first in God's eyes, and thereby abolishes the hierarchy of merit, which would privilege the early comers. The point I would like to emphasize in this literary comparison of liturgical texts with Bakhtin's characterization of carnival is that carnival and Orthodoxy are not incompatible categories (at least not functionally), as Bakhtin's critics often insist. That is, carnival and kenotic Incarnation are not only analogous processes in terms of their movement along the vertical plane ($\downarrow\uparrow$), but even result in the same destruction of boundaries and hierarchies, which is part and parcel of the dual movement.

Although kenotic Incarnation and carnival clearly entail the bridging of distances between previously disunified, contradictory elements, consequently leading to the abolition of hierarchies, it is not yet entirely clear by what means kenotic Incarnation and carnival are able to minimize the distance between disparate things. The answer lies in the reconceptualization of the body that occurs in carnival and after the Incarnation.

2.7 Conceptualization of the Body in Carnival and Orthodox Services

Dostoevsky's world is profoundly pluralistic. If we were to seek an image towards which this world gravitates... it would be *the church as a communion of unmerged souls*, where sinners and righteous men come together.²³⁸ – Mikhail Bakhtin

The basic feature of the grotesque concept of the body is that, unlike the individualized bodies of the classic and naturalist images, it has no limits, "The grotesque body... is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed..."²³⁹ In carnival the limits between the body and the world and other bodies are redrawn in a completely different way from the classical cannon; they are

²³⁸ *PDP* 26-7; my emphasis.

²³⁹ *RAHW* 315, 317.

“weakened” and even “erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects”.²⁴⁰ In the grotesque “world of becoming,” “an object can transgress not only its quantitative but also its qualitative limits... it can outgrow itself and be fused with other objects” and consequently “cease to be itself”.²⁴¹ For this reason, the most important body parts in grotesque and in carnival, from which it derives, are protrusions and cavities, such as the nose and mouth.²⁴²

The grotesque is concerned with “that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines... prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside”.²⁴³ Closed, smooth, impenetrable surfaces are sterile in the logic of the grotesque body.²⁴⁴ Through the protruding or concaving parts “the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome” and a new, second body is conceived.²⁴⁵ The grotesque image “never presents an individual body” as a “separate and completed phenomenon,”²⁴⁶ but rather as a “of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception”.²⁴⁷

As I have tried to demonstrate in chapter one, in Russian religious thought one finds the same desire to transgress the confines of the individual body and psyche, to reach out and touch the other and the world, and thereby overcome the “sinful self-assertion” and “the sin of isolated existence”.²⁴⁸ The overcoming of one’s

²⁴⁰ RAHW 313, 310.

²⁴¹ RAHW 308.

²⁴² RAHW 316.

²⁴³ RAHW 316-7.

²⁴⁴ RAHW 317.

²⁴⁵ RAHW 317.

²⁴⁶ By contrast the new bodily cannon “presents an entirely finished completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual” (320). The individual body is impenetrable and “does not merge with other bodies and with the world” (320). The life of the body, including sexual activities, eating, drinking, defecation, are transferred to the “private and psychological level,” and in the process, they are “torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole” (321). As a result of the body being perceived as closed, all events acquire “one single meaning: death is only death, it never coincides with birth” and carnivalistic *mesalliances* and antinomies are abolished (321).

²⁴⁷ RAHW 318.

²⁴⁸ Florensky, *The Ground and Pillar of Truth*, 68.

individuality, for at least some of the representatives of the fin de siècle Russian religious philosophy like Soloviev and Florensky, is linked to *kenosis*, in the process of which, to use Florensky's terminology, one's individual "I" becomes the "I" of the loved one, and the unbearable isolation of individual existence is overcome. Such an understanding of the individual's body as unfinalized, as capable of extending into another person is certainly not an innovation on the part of the discussed Russian religious philosophers; the breaching of the boundaries of the individual body in order to take part in something beyond the isolated "I" can also be found as an implicit assumption in Orthodox Church²⁴⁹ services. In an effort to create a more complete comparison of the categories of carnival and Orthodoxy, as it is perceived by the Russian religious-philosophical tradition, I would like to supplement the theological aspects of Orthodoxy, such as the above-discussed concept of *kenosis*, with ritual practices in liturgical services, as rituals comprise a large part of Orthodoxy as well as of carnival.

The understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ and the communal body of carnival invite a comparison. In the introduction to *The Festal Menaion*, an anthology of the services of the Great Feasts of the Orthodox calendar, the theologian Georges Florovsky²⁵⁰ states, "to be a Christian means to be in the Community, in the Church and of the Church... Christian worship is at once personal and corporate, although these two aspects may be at times in tension".²⁵¹ He goes on to point out that

²⁴⁹ Although this understanding of the body may characterize Christian church services more broadly, in what follows, I focus on the Orthodox tradition since both Bakhtin and the Russian religious philosophers were primarily concerned with the Orthodox faith.

²⁵⁰ Incidentally, Florovsky is one of the many intellectuals who were forced to leave Russia in the 1920s.

²⁵¹ Georges Florovsky, Introduction to *The Festal Menaion*, 21-22.

“this basic duality” of personal and corporate modes of “Christian existence is conspicuously reflected in the realm of worship,” that is, in the Orthodox services.²⁵²

During Orthodox church services, a person is thought to participate in the whole through his individual body. In his introduction, Florovsky clearly articulates this process, “Those who are separated and estranged from each other by human frailty are brought together into the perfect and intimate unity of the *One Body* in Christ”.²⁵³ By imagining oneself as part of the Body of Christ during the Eucharist, one can be said to transcend the individual limits of one’s own body and become part of the communal Body of the Church. As we have already seen in carnival and in the Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom, when the previously “separated and estranged” individuals become part of the communal body, differences between them and hierarchies are abolished.

In the process of becoming part of the communal body during the Eucharist, Florovsky continues, “human exclusiveness and mutual *impenetrability* of men are overcome”.²⁵⁴ Such a description of the result of perceiving one’s body in its communal rather than individual form strongly echoes Bakhtin’s description of the grotesque body in carnival, one of the most fundamental features of which is its penetrability (in the sense that it can be penetrated) and penetration (in the sense that it penetrates). That is, during both the Eucharist and carnival, the previously individualized and closed off bodies become cavities and protrusions, blending the boundaries between themselves and the world and other bodies; everything becomes a single body mass.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35; my emphasis.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 35; my emphasis. Florovsky’s language is also clearly reminiscent of Florensky’s description of complete human isolation without kenotic love.

During the services, the members of the Church become “‘con-corporeal’²⁵⁵ with each other and with Christ in his body,”²⁵⁶ just as the individuals in carnival are con-corporeal with the other participants through the communal body. Moreover, like carnival, which embraces everyone, each Eucharist celebration is “universal”: the unity extends to “all generations and all ages”.²⁵⁷ This perfect unity of men in the “One Body of Christ” is, not surprisingly, “initiated and inaugurated by the Incarnate and Risen Lord”.²⁵⁸ That is, this kind of unity is made possible by the kenotic process, which reestablished the severed connection between the human and divine, restoring the value the material may have lost during the Fall. Similarly, the degradation of the abstract which occurs during carnival allows for the combination of individual bodies in the communal body of carnival. That is, in the process of degradation, the abstract is brought down to the material level (where there can be no privileging of discourses), thereby making everyone equally entitled to participate in the communal body and the dialogue of carnival.

On a psychosomatic level, Orthodox Church services aim at stimulating and overwhelming the physical senses of the body as a way of gaining knowledge of God and coming closer to Him.²⁵⁹ During the Liturgy, not only are the visual,²⁶⁰ olfactory and tactile senses actively engaged, but also, after hours of standing, the participants begin to consciously perceive the weight of their own bodies. It is precisely through such saturation of the bodily senses to the point of exhaustion that contact with the divine is thought to be achieved. Through his individual body’s participation in the

²⁵⁵ Phrase of St. Cyril of Alexandria quoted by Florovsky (35).

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ The idea that knowledge of God can be gained through matter relies on the assumption that God poured Himself out in the process of Creation (Bulgakov), imbuing all matter with presence. If the divine is present in the totality of matter, then some sort of knowledge of him can be gained through an examination of matter.

²⁶⁰ Consider the exalted status of icons in the Orthodox Church, which points towards its attitude to materiality during church services.

communal Body of Christ, which mediates contact with God, a worshipper is said to be regenerated. As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, regeneration, an indispensable component of carnival, is always implied in the degradation, which, like *kenosis*, is a bi-directional (↓↑) process.

To sum up, in the Orthodox services, the materiality of the worshipper's body allows him to experience his body as something greater, as part of a larger communal body; that is, it is the worshipper's very materiality that allows him to transcend the individual boundaries and limitations of his body. Such an understanding of the body, vacillating between the personal and the corporate, is analogous to the grotesque understanding of the body in carnival. Although the bodies of carnival participants are individual and personal, when they come together in the carnival square, as worshippers do in the space of the Church, natural laws are suspended and the bodies of the participants blend into one communal whole. By embracing the body, Orthodox ritualistic practices run parallel to kenotic theology, as understood by the nineteenth century Russian religious philosophers, and can be correlated, as I have just illustrated, with the function of the body in carnival.

Returning to the subject of carnival, the grotesque understanding of the body as unlimited and extending beyond itself to partake in the communal body is precisely why activities like "eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body"²⁶¹ are emphasized as the main events of the life of the body. That is, all of these activities involve either the body's extension into the world or penetration by it, and occur "on the confines of the body and the outer world

²⁶¹ RAHW 317.

or on the confines of the old [individual] and new [communal] body”.²⁶² As eating is an action that is described in greatest detail in Bakhtin’s work and naturally invites a comparison to the Christian feasts, I shall take up this element of the life of the body as my final point of comparison.

The “open unfinished nature” of the grotesque body manifests itself most obviously in the act of eating, during which “the body transgresses its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense”.²⁶³ In the act of eating,

Man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself... Man’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s advantage.²⁶⁴

According to Bakhtin, the feast is the conclusion of labor and struggle for food, and is in this sense food fundamentally related to work.²⁶⁵ Analogously, the Holy Communion, the climax and centre of Christian worship according to Florovsky, is the feast-like conclusion to the “prayerful labors” of the rest of the day, or to a preceding cycle of church services.²⁶⁶ In this sense, the liturgy seems to reproduce the carnival system of images, where “work triumphed in food,”²⁶⁷ but on a smaller scale. In both carnival and liturgy, labor and food become collective rather than individual phenomena. Like the carnival banquet, liturgy cannot be celebrated individually or privately, like other prayer services because it too represents “the triumph of the people as a whole”.²⁶⁸ If the banquet is “torn away from the process of labor and struggle” and “confined to the house and the private chamber,” it is no longer a

²⁶² RAHW 317.

²⁶³ RAHW 281.

²⁶⁴ RAHW 281.

²⁶⁵ RAHW 281.

²⁶⁶ *The Festal Menaion* 24.

²⁶⁷ RAHW 281.

²⁶⁸ RAHW 302.

“‘banquet for the whole world’ [*pir na ves’ mir*]”.²⁶⁹ This kind of a private celebration would be “deprived of any symbolic openings and universal meaning”.²⁷⁰

By overstepping the confines of one’s own body, one asserts his immortality. That is, because the body extends beyond the individual, individual death, which is only a small event in the cosmic whole, is not feared; the communal body continues to live on.²⁷¹ In this sense, the universal triumphal banquet represents the triumph of life over death, and is, in this respect, equivalent to conception and birth, “The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed”.²⁷² As in the carnival square, in church the worshippers become part of a single communal body, which, as any communal body is immortal, even if the individual bodies may perish. Moreover, the overcoming of death is one of the most fundamental elements in the Eucharist. The consumption of the body and blood of Christ is also imagined as a kind of conception, through which the body is renewed.

The Eucharist can be seen as a kind of celebration, or even commemoration of the triumph of life over death in the body of Christ, “Let no one fear death / For the Savior’s death has set us free,” as John Chrysostom’s previously discussed Homily, which, incidentally, invites everyone to a feast, the feast of feasts (*pir na ves’ mir*) one might even say,²⁷³ suggests. In this sense, the Eucharist and the carnival feast have a similar function in that they symbolically overcome death through ingestion. The Holy Communion, which involves the ingestion of the actual body of Christ (transubstantiation), ensures the continuation of an individual’s life through him. According to the words of Jesus himself,

²⁶⁹ RAHW 302.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ RAHW 341.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁷³ The Easter day, in particular, is described as “feast of feasts” in *The Festal Menaion*.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh... [H]e who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day, for my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.²⁷⁴

If one partakes in the body of Christ, as is the case during the Eucharist, one will “live forever” as part of the communal Body (until one is resurrected at the end of times). When the boundaries of one’s own body are transgressed, life continues, since the communal body is not subject to death in the same way individuals are. Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John and other similar passages point to a possible explanation of why Bakhtin once (allegedly) called the gospels carnivalesque.

Conclusion

To summarize the train of thought of the preceding few sections, without getting bogged down in the details: carnival seeks to undermine all structures of authority, the purpose of which is to terrify the subjects into submission. The simultaneous bringing down of the abstract and uplifting of the body that takes place during materialization (or “degradation”) eradicates the distance of abstracted forms that could be abused by power structures, such as the Church. Because abstraction is connected with one-sided seriousness of monologism, the polyphonic principle can only occur in the open-ended framework of carnival. If carnival concepts were not grounded in material forms, carnival would remain inaccessible without the mediation of a higher authority. However, because carnival is based in ambivalence, it perceives all authority in the spirit of “joyful relativity,” exposing the arbitrariness of prescriptions

²⁷⁴ John 6:51, 6:54-58.

and hierarchies.²⁷⁵

On the account of its hostility towards monological institutions such as the Church, which ignores the joyful relativity of the world in its imposition of one-sided, serious discourse, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* has often been perceived as a rejection of his earlier religious views. In this chapter, I have tried to argue that there exists a certain continuity between Bakhtin's perception of materiality in his later writings and the work of the Russian religious philosophers discussed in chapter one. In order to elucidate this connection, I provided a brief analysis of some of Bakhtin's early work, which relies on the idea of kenotic Incarnation more explicitly than his later writings.

One particular element I examined comparatively in this chapter is the role played by the physical body in Eastern Christianity and in carnival. As a note of caution, I must mention that some of the similarities I found in the above-discussed perceptions of materiality can in part be attributed to the idea that some elements of Christian rituals, such as the Holy Communion (the reenactment of the Last Supper), were deliberately parodied and travestied in carnival celebrations. However, this suggestion does not affect the functional similarity of the processes of *kenosis* and degradation as both are ultimately employed towards the same end – the justification and celebration of the material world.

²⁷⁵ PDP 107.

Conclusion

One of the main aims of this thesis has been to articulate a common intellectual paradigm of the fin de siècle Russian religious philosophers and the literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, loosely framed around the interpretation of Incarnation as *kenosis*. An understanding of *kenosis* as a functional rather than substantive process, which, as we have seen, can be applied to explain a variety of (substantively) different (but functionally similar) phenomena, grounds the celebration of matter one finds in the writings of both, the Russian religious thinkers in question and of Bakhtin. That is to say, as soon as *kenosis* was understood as a functional process at the end of the nineteenth century, it began to appear in a number of different spheres, leading to different terminological creations, which could accommodate the individual intentions of the authors.

As I have tried to demonstrate in the first chapter, for the Russian religious philosophers of the late nineteenth - early twentieth centuries, the *pragmatic* meanings of *kenosis* had come to encompass a number of different concepts, from Logos' Incarnation to the "mechanics" of love to God's self-sacrificing act of Creation. All these different pragmatic applications, however, have at least one feature in common: a reliance on materiality as a way of avoiding the frozen monology of detached-from-the-concrete-life abstractions. In this sense, matter comes to be celebrated not only for its participation in the divine, which is implied in the kenotic acts of Creation and Incarnation, but also for its deabstractifying power.

In Bakhtin's field of inquiry (at least in the 1930s and 1960s), that is, the carnivalesque world of Rabelais, the functional concept of *kenosis* or kenotic Incarnation found resonance in the notion of "degradation". The similarity between the two concepts is revealed in the bidirectional orientation ($\downarrow\uparrow$) of both processes

and in the stable result they unfailingly yield – a combination of disparate and previously disunified ideas, features, objects, etc. As a result of the bidirectional movement of the carnivalesque degradation and *kenosis*, hierarchies are abolished and individualized bodies begin to blend into one immortal, communal whole, which is inseparable from the world itself. In this sense, Bakhtin’s concept of degradation, as presented in *Rabelais and His World*, can be seen as an example of one paradigmatic application of *kenosis*.

If one takes into account the kenotic background of the celebration of materiality, then Bakhtin’s emphasis on the material bodily principle and its positive, fear-defying function can be understood within the framework of Russian Orthodox philosophy. With this religious justification of matter in mind, one does not have to perceive Bakhtin’s celebration of carnival in *Rabelais and His World* as a rejection of his earlier religious views and ethical theories. As my analysis has revealed, Bakhtin’s ethical theory relies on the same principle of materiality in arguing that responsible actions can only be based in concrete acts and not in some sort of abstract categorical imperatives, which have no connections to reality. As we have seen in the second chapter, for the young Bakhtin, a sense of obligation or “oughtness” (*dolzhestvovanie*) must be grounded in “the concrete instance, not in the general rule or the abstractly hypothetical situation”.²⁷⁶ What is important about any given act, then, is that one “undersigns” it in this material world.

Although the emphasis on materiality in both the Russian kenotic tradition and Bakhtin’s carnival may at first sight seem like a mere coincidence – a similarity which can be attributed to factors like parody or travesty of religious ceremonies common to all carnival celebrations – the specific linkage of materiality with the

²⁷⁶ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 69.

concrete, ethical sphere, with living life in *this* world seems to point to a common intellectual paradigm of Bakhtin and the Russian religious philosophers. The major philosophical challenge of Bakhtin's time, as he perceived it, is to resist the temptation of abstracted meanings, which, in their detachment, can only result in monology. Not surprisingly, for Bakhtin's favorite, Dostoevsky, who became a kind of cult figure in Russian religious philosophy, life in *this* world was of most urgent religious-philosophical concern.

Although Bakhtin claims to find concepts like "degradation" implicitly articulated in the images of Rabelais, he does more than simply analyze the images themselves; he creatively reconstructs the philosophy behind them and generalizes it to be applicable to carnival celebrations as a whole, beyond Rabelais' carnivalized works. Here Bakhtin's "Methodology for the Human Sciences" comes to mind with its insistence on the contribution of the interpretative community to a reading of a work. That is, the interpreter always creatively supplements his subjects of study with his own meanings, which are in turn creatively renewed in new contexts. For this reason, I feel justified in treating *Rabelais and His World* not only as a piece of literary criticism but also as a philosophical meditation, which in some ways represents the author's outlook on the world, though in a less direct and explicit manner than his earlier works.

In reconstructing the presupposed (rather than hidden) religious dimension of *Rabelais and His World*, I do not want to draw any naïve, not to mention, cliché biographical conclusions and formulas, such as "Bakhtin was a religious man,"²⁷⁷ so deeply opposed to Bakhtin's method in spirit. I want to emphasize that my thesis is not concerned with uncovering some sort of a disguised or encrypted Christianity in

²⁷⁷ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 122.

Bakhtin's writing – a notion which would imply that Bakhtin deliberately and cunningly concealed Orthodox elements within his later works to avoid the suspicious eye of the censors. As I have tried to reveal in my analysis, concepts such as *kenosis* seem to function as presuppositions rather than as encrypted messages with hidden meanings. If *kenosis* is a kind of presupposition or a model for Bakhtin's development of his own concepts, then his interest in the functional rather than substantive begins to make sense. That is, the idea of *kenosis* becomes a useful functional paradigm which he could utilize to his own purposes.

The following question, unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, remains unsolved: is the conceptual appropriation of *kenosis* just a useful theoretical paradigm or metaphor for Bakhtin, or does it serve a greater purpose? Does Bakhtin use this appropriated functional concept as a tool for political criticism of the one party aesthetic and its monological discourse, represented by Socialist Realism? At this point, with the lack of corroborated information about Bakhtin's personal biography, not to mention the lost manuscripts which, for various reasons, disappeared while Bakhtin was still alive, one can only make conjectures about Bakhtin's possible secondary intentions²⁷⁸ in writing his masterpiece of literary criticism on Rabelais.

Although I have tried to analyze Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* and its emphasis on materiality from a religious-philosophical perspective, in the spirit of Bakhtin it is important to keep in mind that no conclusions and explanations can be final and accepted by everyone. Since in this thesis I have tried to examine Bakhtin according to his own categories and prescribed methods, it should not come as a surprise that I have no intention of pronouncing the final word on the religious

²⁷⁸ I strongly believe that Bakhtin's primary intentions are those of writing a literary critique.

dimension of his thought. Let us conclude by recalling Bakhtin's words on the impossibility of endings,

There is neither a first nor last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival.²⁷⁹

In the spirit of Bakhtin, I will let my interlocutors continue the dialogue.

²⁷⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Methodology for the Human Sciences," 170.

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