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Understanding the Secular in the Philosophical Tradition of the Vekhi Group

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Abstract. The article analyzes the meaning of the category of the secular in the religious and philosophical collections of essays of the beginning of the twentieth century (“The Problems of Idealism”, “Vekhi (Landmarks)”, “From the Depths”). The authors of these collections – S. Bulgakov, P. Struve, N. Berdiaev, S. Frank, S. Trubetskoi, etc., and later their younger associate A. Losev – opposed positivism and nihilistic-revolutionary tendencies in the culture and strove to rethink the history of the development of the secular society, presenting secularism as a special religious phenomenon. Since the members of the Vekhi group almost never used the term ‘secular’, the subject of the study is revealed through reconstruction their attitudes toward the culture, the Church, and the intelligentsia. The article concludes that the authors of the Vekhi collections of essays immersed the secular philosophy completely in the religious, Christian discourse, and considered the secular as a specifically religious phenomenon.

Keywords: Vekhi (Landmarks), secular, religion, Russian religious philosophy, intelligentsia.

Research area: philosophy.

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Значение секулярного в веховской философской традиции

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Аннотация. Статья анализирует понимание категории «секулярное» в религиозно-философских «веховских» сборниках начала XX века («Проблемы идеализма», «Вехи», «Из глубины»). Авторы этих сборников (С. Булгаков, П. Струве, Н. Бердяев, С. Франк, С. Трубецкой и др., а позже – их младший соратник А. Лосев), выступавшие против позитивизма и нигилистически-революционных тенденций в культуре, пытались переосмыслить историю развития светского общества, показать секулярность как особое религиозное явление. Поскольку «веховцы» не употребляли сам термин «секулярное», предмет исследования раскрывается методом реконструкции, путём изучения их взглядов на проблему культуры, Церкви, интеллигенции. В статье сделан вывод, что авторы «веховских» сборников полностью погружали секулярную философию в религиозный, христианский дискурс, а секулярное мыслили как специфически религиозное явление.

Ключевые слова: «Вехи», секулярное, религия, русская религиозная философия, интеллигенция.

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Introduction

The «Vekhi (Landmarks)» collection is the central and the most famous part of philosophical collections of essays published in Moscow and is considered to be a part of a trilogy in the history of Russian philosophy. The trilogy consisted of «The Problems of Idealism» (Lopatin, Novgorodtsev, Bulgakov et. al., 2018 [1902]), «Vekhi (Landmarks)» (Berdiaev, Bulgakov, Gershenzon et. al., 1909) and «From the Depths» (Askoldov, Berdiaev, Bulgakov et. al., 1990 [1918]). All three collections share a common approach – a view of changes in the Russian and world culture that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, as spiritual processes that cannot be understood if examined in isolation from the idealistic and religious tradition of the Russian

thought. Being anti-positivist in spirit (Lopatin, Novgorodtsev, Bulgakov et. al., 2018 [1902]: 8–11), these publications were also in some sense anti-modern (an attempt to overcome the framework of the secular modernism). Although they almost never used the term ‘secular’, the «Vekhi (Landmarks)» collections, published from 1902 to 1918, largely set the framework for further discussions in the Russian religious thought from the twentieth century till the present day (Tolstykh, 2011; Shchipkov, 2013), namely, discussions of the problem of the ‘secular’, the importance of religion and the Church in the era of late modernity. It is no coincidence that the philosophy historian V. Zenkovsky described these collections as the beginning of a discussion of the problem of the secular ideology in the Russian thought. He noted: «In 1902, a collection

of articles was published under the title «The Problems of Idealism» (with the participation of Bulgakov, E. Trubetskoi, Struve, Berdiaev, Frank, S. Trubetskoi, Novgorodtsev, Askoldov, etc.). The collection was devoted, «first of all, to moral problems», and, in fact, raised the question of «restoring the living God to humanity that it has lost. <...> In 1909, another remarkable collection, «Vekhi (Landmarks)», was published, severely denouncing the Russian nihilism, spiritual vagueness and groundlessness of the secular ideology... « (Zenkovskii, 2001: 691).

Theoretical Framework

The problem of the ‘secular’/secularization only became a constant subject of a scientific discussion as late as the middle of the twentieth century, when the ‘classical’ theory of secularization was formulated (Uzlaner, 2019). It later began to be criticized towards the end of the century, under the influence of postmodern and anti-colonialist sentiments in the social sciences, either as “empirically unsupported” or as “biased”, opening the way for the current discussion about the “post-secular” (J. Habermas, H. Kazanova, T. Asad and others; see also the illustrative debate on the prospects of the theory of secularization recently unfolded between the post-secular approach proponent D.A. Uzlaner (Uzlaner, 2020: 162–173) and A.V. Appolonov (Appolonov, 2018), defender of the classical methodology of religious studies). Nevertheless, this post-secular discussion only served to once again attract researchers to the question of understanding the ‘secular’. At the same time, prior to becoming a special research subject and gaining the status of a scientific term, the discourse on the ‘secular’ had had a long history of development in the cultural and philosophical thought in the form of a complex of topics related to the definition of the place of religion and the Church in the life of the New European society (Lübbe, 1965). A certain turn in the development of this discourse occurred in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century, when the positivist trend of thought faced the problem of a lack of explanatory abilities and began to be subjected to the onslaught from the nascent political theology, phenomenology and existentialism. This pro-

cess also affected the Russian thought, giving an impetus to the development of the religious philosophy in Russia at that time.

Secular problems stayed relevant for both Russian and Western philosophy throughout the entire twentieth century. The October Revolution, the forced emigration of many philosophers from Russia, the establishment of the atheist ideology and the persecution of the Church in the USSR, the devastating war, the reduction of the social role of Christianity in Europe, especially since the 1960s – the understanding these processes and events required an answer to the question of the nature of the ‘secular’ and its connection with the religion. This topic was discussed in particular by S. Bulgakov, P. Florenskii, G. Florovsky, V.N. Losskii, A. Schmemmann, V.N. Trostnikov, A. Men, whose philosophical and theological works before perestroika were published only abroad. In their works, the term ‘secular’ and its derivatives – ‘secularism’ and ‘secularization’, were already used directly, especially in the works of the post-war period, when the term was finally fixed in the European scientific language. However, the impetus for the discussion of features of the border between the ‘secular’/‘wordly’ and the ‘religious’/‘spiritual’/‘sacred’, both in the social and mystical planes (and the dispute about whether this border exists) was given to the Russian thought on the eve and immediately after the revolution of 1917 – in the Vekhi collections.

Statement of the Problem

This article aims to reveal the meaning of the category of the ‘secular’ in the philosophical tradition of the Vekhi group, to show how the authors of these collections defined the boundaries and the nature of the secular culture.

Methods

Since the authors of the Vekhi collections practically never used the word ‘secular’ (which had not yet become a term at that time and had not entered into a wide scientific circulation), their texts contain no direct definitions of this phenomenon in the history of the philosophical thought. For this reason, the subject

of this study can be revealed by reconstruction: by studying the views of the authors of these collections on the problems of history, culture, the Church, and the intelligentsia, which discover their understanding of the meaning of the ‘secular’.

Discussion. Towards revealing the secular as religious concept

“The Problems of Idealism” collection (S.N. Bulgakov, N.A. Berdiaev, S.L. Frank, E.N. Trubetskoi, S.N. Trubetskoi, P.I. Novgorodtsev et al.), published in 1902, was a kind of preface to ‘Vekhi (Landmarks)’ and acted in the context of the philosophy of V.I. Solovyov and partly of Religious and Philosophical Meetings (1901–1903), that is, to a greater extent, summed up the philosophical results of the nineteenth century, passing a critical verdict on the positivist thought and defending from it the religious metaphysics as a whole. This very task on the way to its solution led to the need to explain the workings of the secular nature of the New European culture. For the present analysis, the opening article of Bulgakov is of particular interest, being the most conspicuous landmark of the entire collection.

Bulgakov’s interpretation of the secular principle in “The Problems of Idealism” collection was based on the expansion of the role of religion in culture. Based on the approaches of V.I. Solovyov, he proposed to infuse a religious dimension into the culture of modernity in order to break the monopoly of the positivist framework of philosophy. He did this by way of declaring the religious feeling to be intrinsic to every person at all times and unable to disappear (Bulgakov, 2018 [1902]: 16): therefore, the positive sociology (Kant and Feuerbach) believing in progress and denying the religion may itself be regarded as a religion (Bulgakov, 2018 [1902]: 30). According to Bulgakov, since religion and metaphysics were lost for many people of his era, they tried therefore to replace them with a “pseudo-scientific” theory of infinite progress. From this perspective, the ideology of progress is an immanentist teaching including elements of science, metaphysics and religion. It is, in fact, a new religion, the

doctrine of which, while forming, gave the key, “theological” role to sociology and social sciences (Bulgakov, 2018 [1902]: 23).

Bulgakov based this approach on Solovyov’s concept (Bulgakov, 1903: 147–148) that distinguished three areas of knowledge (theology, metaphysics, and science). Bulgakov also distinguished three key areas of culture: religion, philosophy, and science, or “intuitive thinking”, “discursive thinking”, and “precise knowledge”. He argued that they all came from a single, divine source and should be considered as parts of a harmonious whole (Bulgakov, 2018 [1902]: 18), at the same time implying that these principles could never completely merge.

Simultaneously, explaining the nature of the secular philosophy of religion and metaphysics, Bulgakov at the time gave no answer to the question about the nature of the ‘secular’, though implying its existence. Despite the criticism of the religious grounds of secular philosophical tendencies (positivism, atheism), Bulgakov fundamentally and methodologically admitted the existence of the “pure science”, which would not be based on any a priori assumptions, and even went so far as to admit the theoretical possibility of the human life “without religion”, although conceding that such a life would be pathetic and “ugly” (Bulgakov, 2018 [1902]: 17). This approach would enable Bulgakov in the future to make arguments in favor of overcoming secular tendencies not through their denial, but, on the contrary, through their justification and acceptance by the Church, through the closer approach of the church life to the world (in a certain sense – through the Great Apostasy) (Bulgakov, 2008 [1906]: 544). It should be noted that Bulgakov would retain this ambivalent approach to explaining the secular discourse in later periods of his work.

The issue of the secularism boundaries was raised with a renewed vigor and emotional tension in “Vekhi (Landmarks)” (M.O. Gershenzon, Berdiaev, Bulgakov, A.S. Izgoev, B.A. Kistyakovskii, P.B. Struve, Frank). This collection entered the history of the social thought as the first fundamental criticism of the “Russian intelligentsia” – for its fascination with the revolutionary movement, political

manoeuvring, Westernism and isolation from the civilizational principles of the Russian life (hereinafter the term “intelligentsia” is used in the meaning used by the Vekhi group members: not as a stratum of educated people or people who earn their livelihood by intellectual labor, but as a special institution characterized by utopian consciousness and a desire for revolutionary transformation). Despite this, the collection went down in the history of the philosophical thought precisely as an attempt to comprehend the fundamental intrigue of the modernity associated with the enlightened clash of the ‘religious’ (‘mystical’) and the ‘secular’ (‘rationalistic’) consciousness, and to indicate the impasse of their flat, positivist opposition. The theme of the intelligentsia had served as the bridge that led the collection to the problem of the modern historiography, to an attempt to change the established discourse on understanding the nature of the ‘secular’. Later Berger, who in the early 2000s criticized his old approaches to secularization, added nevertheless that the secular worldview is the basic one for today’s “international cultural elite, which... is an extension of the enlightened European intelligentsia to a global scale” (Berger, 2012: 10), that is, he implied that the category of the ‘secular’ can also be defined through the analysis of the worldview of the intelligentsia as a New European phenomenon. From this, we can again conclude that the discussion by the of the Vekhi group members of the intelligentsia’s “religion” is a reflection on the nature of a secular discourse.

An indication of the existence of a special type of religiosity inherent in the intelligentsia became a thesis passing through the most of articles. The authors stated that the intelligentsia had moved away from Christianity, and was often carried away by atheistic, socialist and positivist utopias, which contained no religion. At the same time, this stratum of people thought and acted fanatically religiously and possessed a special “religious nature” (Gershenzon, 1909: 4).

P.B. Struve, for example, pointed out the non-religious (and, in a certain sense, secular) nature of the revolutionary intelligentsia, which was driven by the revolution and the struggle

against any state foundations. Struve criticised all theses about the religious messianism of the Russian intelligentsia as a delusion endorsed by Vladimir Solovyov and noted that there was “not a grain of religious idea” in the (revolutionary) intelligentsia. Later, however, Struve offered a thesis about the intelligentsia being driven by some irrational motives (daydreaming and frivolity). Struve did not strictly determine the origin and the nature of these motives, but came instead to the conclusion that it was a kind of specific religious form without any religious content. “The gullibility without faith, struggle without creativity, fanaticism without enthusiasm, intolerance without reverence, – in a word, there used to be, and still remains, the entire form of religion without its content” (Struve, 1909: 142–143).

S.N. Bulgakov voiced a similar thesis in “Vekhi (Landmarks)” and later in the collection “From the Depths”: “[The intelligentsia] made godlessness the first member of its creed, the revolution – the second god, and the socialism – the third god” (Bulgakov, 1990 [1918]: 122). The same idea was echoed by Frank, who saw an intellectual as “a militant monk of the nihilistic religion of the earthly well-being” (Frank, 1909: 177). A similar thesis was found in the article of Berdiaev, who defined the religious state of the intelligentsia as the “unconscious religiosity” (Berdiaev, 1909: 11).

In the Vekhi collection and his subsequent works, Berdiaev shared many of Solovyov’s opinions on the nature of the religion, history and culture, adjusting them according to Leontiev’s view. Later, in “The Sense of History” (1922), Berdiaev associated the emergence of the first prerequisites for the differentiation and autonomy of cultural spheres (the emergence of secularism) with the Middle Ages and explained it by the struggle for “freedom” at that time. Berdiaev defined this process as the “secularization of culture” (Berdiaev, 2002: 128). Therefore, Berdiaev’s “secularization of the state and the public has a positive religious significance, it prepares for a free god-human life” (Berdiaev, 1989: 483, 522). Berdiaev portrayed the future development of culture based on the approaches by D.S. Merezhkovsky: he spoke about the arrival of a new religious era,

the “new Middle Ages”, in which the religion would cease to be a private matter, the New European humanism and individualism would end, the “autonomous and secular creativity” and all spheres of life would become religiously conditioned, and the religion itself would become a public (and political) matter. Along with Solovyov’s followers, Berdiaev assessed the secularization as a positive movement leading to the development and “liberation” of the individual and the society, to a combination of faith and reason, and to a theurgic form of creativity and knowledge (Berdiaev, 2002: 222–256). At the same time Berdiaev’s approach did not consider secular thought as autonomous from religious one. Berdiaev did not exclude religious metaphysics from any social or humanitarian knowledge (Silantieva, 2018).

The attention is drawn to the similarity of assessments of the religious state of the “intelligentsia” in all these authors (despite the fact that, according to the terms of the facilitator of the collection, Gershenson, the authors did not see the articles of their colleagues until the collection was published): the secular intelligentsia did not practise the religion in the traditional sense of the word, but still relied on some religious grounds. In actual fact, the authors of the “Vekhi (Landmarks)” collection spoke about the emergence of a special ‘secular’ religion, the pastors of which were representatives of the “intelligentsia” (Shchipkov, 2017). The Vekhi group members’ discussion about the intelligentsia continued throughout the twentieth century to periodically resurface today. At the same time, both critics and defenders of the “intelligentsia” still tend to touch on the topic of the special religiosity of this community, often calling it a special “religious order” (Gajda, 2011) that exists outside of any traditional religion (Desnitskii, 2011).

The subsequent discussion about the intelligentsia in the Russian religious philosophy and the related dispute about the nature of the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ tended to reproduce several recurring theses on the secular discourse. Such theses can be found in the works of different philosophers and include the struggle with the traditional religion, the formation of non-confessional religious forms of

thinking, the replacement of the Christian soteriology with utopianism (and the mythological nature of the secular discourse in general, replacing Christian myths with secular ones), the gnostic features of the secular discourse, its desire for neutrality and mediation, anti-traditionality and revolutionism, and marking the boundaries of the ‘religious’. These themes have now gained new relevance in the context of modern discussions about the “post-secular” (Uzlaner, 2020).

One of the key topics related to the definition of the secular discourse through the phenomenon of “intelligentsia” is related to the topic of mediation. The idea of the need for a universal and binding intermediary between God and the created world was articulated earlier by Solovyov in the concept of “Sophia” (not without the influence of the Protestant mysticism of J. Boehme, J. Gichtel, G. Arnold). Without going into sophiological disputes, it should be noted within the framework of this article, that the idea of Sophia as an epistemological mediation significantly influenced the writings of Berdiaev, Florenskii, S. Bulgakov, S. N. Trubetskoi and other Russian philosophers, each of whom in some form or another discussed the possibility of the existence of the divine power, in some extent autonomous from God. Florenskii saw it in the form of a hypostatic attribute (Florenskii, 1990 [1914]), S. Bulgakov – as non-hypostatic energies (Vaganova, 2011), Berdiaev – as a special side of God creating contradictions between the parts of the Holy Trinity, S. N. Trubetskoi – as the physics of the divine matter (Trubetskoi, 1995 [1885–1886]: 140), Struve – as “God-materialism”, etc.). The idea of mediation was intended to solve one of the main tasks of the Russian religious philosophy set by Solovyov – to find a way to build a connecting bridge between the religious theology and the secular philosophy, spirit and matter, metaphysics and physics, humanities and exact sciences, which often led the authors to use a third, neutral, connecting link, which could lead to the appearance of a gnostic element in the models (Shchipkov, 2019). In the Vekhi collections, the nature of mediation had so far been expressed exclusively in a negative connotation, as a “renegade” characteristic ex-

pressed by the lack of permanent involvement of the intelligentsia in the spiritual and social foundations of the society. This term was used by Struve [Struve, 1909: 142–143], and later by Novgorodtsev (Novgorodtsev, 1990 [1918]: 207).

Later, in the collection titled “From the Depths” (“Collection of Articles about the Russian Revolution”), the Vekhi group members considered the 1917 revolution as a result of the victory of one type of spirituality (secular, “socialist”, “liberal”) over the religious consciousness of the Church (Frank, 1990 [1918]: 268–269). Using the example of the reform of the spelling system, Vyacheslav Ivanov also designated the struggle of the revolutionary culture with traditional forms of culture as the “secularization”, or the “Great Apostasy” (Ivanov, 1990 [1918]: 149). Ivanov considered the secular intelligentsia as a social layer that still operated within the framework of religious consciousness replacing Christian theological plots with secular ones, for example, calling to serve the “people” instead of God (Gajda, 2020: 63–64).

A junior associate of the Vekhi group members, A. F. Losev (1893–1988), having been influenced by the Vekhi group members (Takho-Godi, 2014:43–58), joined this discussion later on (in the 1930-ies), denoting the religion of the intelligentsia as the “unconscious creed”, a special “subjectivistically mythology”, which included the religious worldview of European secular scientists from Descartes to the positivists (Losev, 2016 [1930]: 46). Early Losev developed the ideas of Soloviev and of the Vekhi group towards the philosophy of K. Leontiev and advocated for the revival of the medieval Byzantine ontology. He argued that any hierarchy is religious from its origins. This allowed him to put the thesis about the religious foundation of secular-atheistic socialism (that “communism” and “monastic charter” are “one and the same thing”) into the mouth of Vershinin, the main character of his fiction story “Meeting”. Losev also offered a thesis that communism is based on special “unity of faith” (Puschaeu, 2020: 153–155). Almost 60 years later, however, Losev had summed up his attitude to the intelligentsia

at the end of his life in a short article “On the Intelligentsia” (Losev, 1988: 314–321), in which he gave it a functional and ideological explanation: belonging to the intelligentsia is determined not by the level of education, moral qualities or social status, but by a person’s readiness to promote and serve the idea of a “universal welfare” (which in Losev’s presentation resembles the enlightened humanism). According to Losev, the intelligentsia should always be “critical”, “armed” and ready to “engage in battle” to protect the utopian ideal of the future. For the sake of comparison, the topic of the mediation of the intelligentsia was reflected at the same time (the beginning of the twentieth century) in the works of Western thinkers, in particular, in K. Mannheim, who saw the intelligentsia in a similar way, as an ideal intermediary between the social strata and historical epochs, simultaneously of all classes and of none, as both the main historical force of modernization, and also the only epistemological means, by which the society can know itself (Mannheim, 1929: 126).

In this regard, the theme of the intelligentsia was adjacent to the theme of the revolution, as a secular way of going beyond the boundaries of historical time. The revolutionary rupture of the tradition was interpreted in the Modern times (by both supporters and opponents) as a kind of a religious practice that solved a reconsidered soteriological task – the construction of an utopian future. The religious and theological justification of the revolution was found by Solovyov, A. A. Blok, D. S. Merezhkovsky (“Religion is a Revolution”), and V. P. Sventitsky (comparing terrorist revolutionaries to “saints”) (Kozyrev, 2016). S. Bulgakov critically pointed out this connection in the “Vekhi (Landmarks)” collection: “It is impossible to understand ... the main features of the Russian revolution, if you fail to keep your attention riveted on this attitude of the intelligentsia to the religion” (Bulgakov, 1909: 31).

It should be also noted that the preservation of the religious nature of thinking and actions of the “intelligentsia” while denying the defining function of the traditional religion (mainly Christianity) does not only allow us to conclude that attempts to reduce the reli-

gious sphere to a private public sphere carry no strength. It also serves as an indication of the dependence of the “intelligentsia”, the ‘secular’ or revolutionary consciousness upon the area to which they are opposed. It is about the struggle with the tradition (religious and mythological, ethical, etc.) by means of constructing your own forms of the ‘tradition’ through the reproduction of the rupture with the tradition (revolution). Since the discussion of the Vekhi group members about “intelligentsia” arose exclusively within the framework of historically Christian culture, the phenomenon of the religiosity of the “intelligentsia” without religious content (Struve) stands to mean the deconstruction of Christianity, in which Christian forms are used to reflect the non-Christian content. The reproducing situation of the constant separation of the Christian form from the Christian content creates what can be called an incomplete sign, which leads to the state of incompleteness and creates the complex of contradictions that renders the relations between the “intelligentsia” (in the sense used by the Vekhi group members) and the church, the people, tradition and itself extremely difficult.

Conclusion

The authors of “The Problems of Idealism”, “Vekhi (Landmarks)”, “From the Depths” collections and their later associates (A. F. Losev) encountered terminological difficulties, not having enough means to separate the religion in its traditional sense of the word (Christian) from the new understanding of the

religion (secular, quasi-religion), due to which their interpretation of the secular discourse requires reconstruction. This reconstruction could partially be based on how the Vekhi group members understood the “intelligentsia”, in which the secular discourse appears as a special religious worldview, which is essentially a non-religious religion, giving a new definition to the Christian understanding of the meaning of history and virtues, and claiming the status of a neutral and universal state outside of the society, history and traditional ethics, and the role of a universal intermediary and epistemological means. As a kind of an ethical reference point, it also makes use of the principle of a repeated revolutionary break with the tradition, which stands to replace the Christian soteriology and traditional ethics and reproduces the universalism of the ‘secular’, while at the same time trying to mark the boundaries of the ‘religious’ and, conversely, to erase the division between the spirit and the matter. Despite the many possible connotations that follow from these theses, the main conclusion of the line of thought developed by the Vekhi group members, which is characteristic of Russian religious philosophy as a whole – is that the ‘secular’ (and the ‘worldly’) does not mean ‘nonreligious’ or ‘irreligious’. It is difficult to find the connection between the ‘secular’ and the ‘formally rational’ among the Vekhi group members, but the unambiguous statement of the connection between the secular discourse and the religious, moral, Christian problems appears to be noteworthy.

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