

**Paper Title:** Aspects of Berdyaev's Theurgy in Sufi Religious Philosophy and Musical Poetry

The paper articulates around the following interrogation: what are the philosophical commonalities between Sufism and Theurgy and how do Sufi followers translate this philosophical pattern in their chanted performance of Islamic poetry? After providing an analytical response to this twofold inquiry, the paper offers a critique of the theurgic aesthetics by not only tracing the limits of its transcendentalist agenda, but also by explaining how, for instance, the theurgic dimension of Sufi poetry tends to fade into a paradigm of art for art's sake.

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Born in 1874 to a Russian aristocratic family, Nikola Berdyaev went through an eventful and turbulent life before he died at his desk in France at age seventy-four (Nicolaus, 2011). He was drawn to the Russian revolution at a younger age and was involved in the turbulences of the time. In 1898, his participation in revolutionary activities led to his exclusion from his university. Several years later, the development of his unorthodox Christian thought led to his accusation of blasphemy by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1913; and he was almost expelled from Russia after he was dubbed "an enemy of the state" (Nicolaus, 2011; VDS, 2010). Although he was against any form of aristocracy, he believed that the materialist postures espoused by the pioneers of the Russian Revolution distorted "the redemptive forces that were at that time trying to find expression in Russia" (VDS, 2010, p.1). It is in this context of revolution, disruption, and unrest that Berdyaev's "unapologetically Christocentric" Theurgy was born and harnessed.

***Next Slide*****Asceticism - Berdyaev & Medieval Sufi Rabia (d.801)**

Besides his artistic emphasis on the spiritual world, Berdyaev's asceticism also manifests through his *renunciation of the material world*, an approach which, he argues, will sublimate man's divisive pluralities. He sustains, "the negative way of renunciation" is the only means through which man's complex diversity can be overcome and turned into unified oneness (1916/62, p. 280). This is a direct echo of the ascetic values that the Sufi-Muslim thought has associated with renunciation. As Heck (2006) writes, "Sufism concerns itself with the relation of the soul to the other world," which makes it the spiritual dimension of Islam (p.149). In Karamustafa's *Sufism* (2007), Rabia al-Adawiyya (d.801) is depicted as a female Sufi renunciant who manifested her piety through love of God and a constant disinterest in the things of the material world. While Berdyaev's asceticism is based on a symbolist artistic creativity aimed at transfiguring and transcending materiality; in the case of Rabia, the role of the theurgic symbol is replaced by the development of a renunciant attitude where abstinence from worldly pleasures aims at "regulating" man's relationship with the temptations of the material world.

***Next Slide******Ecstasy as Theosis – Berdyaev and Medieval Sufis Kharraz (d.c.899) and Bayazid (d.c.848/875)***

Like Berdyaev, both Kharraz and Bayazid perceive ecstasy as the manifestation of divine love and an act of piety. In his book *Kitâb al-Shidq*, or *The Book of Truthfulness*, Kharraz argues that piety reflects the individual's manifestation of love of God. Based on that love, he identifies

four classes of human kind where the fourth group, that displays the greatest proximity with God, or absolute truth, is made up of those who seek truth beyond the literal meaning of the religious text. While those who content themselves with the exoteric Islamic prescriptions are only “granted certainty by God,” Kharraz argues that “others, the strongest ones, proceed beyond stations, beyond the path, so to speak, and are plunged into ‘ecstasy,’ or better yet, ‘pure being’” (Karamustafa, 2007, p. 9). Thus, the ecstatic experience coinciding with the final stage of the Sufi mystic’s spiritual journey is similar to Berdyaev’s ecstatic intoxication where, he argues, absolute truth is attained.

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**Music and Mysticism**

In the mystical context, the powers associated with music consist generally of its attributed ability to transfigure the materiality of man and his world. In this context of mystical relationship between music and reality, “[m]usic,” writes Marchenkov (2007), “enunciates what the world ought to be and thereby reveals how far its current state falls short of perfection.” “Music,” he adds, “lays bare, in other words, the imperfect state of immediately given reality” (p.27). The mystical essence of music as thus presented remains theurgic in that it becomes a transcendental artistic symbol through which the individual examines material reality in order to reconcile the domain of the latter with the nonmaterial realm that Berdyaev and both Rabia and Kharraz perceive as the domain of absolute truth, the Spirit.

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In Sufism, the mystical symbolism vested in music is even mythical and Hazarat Izzat Khan and Mavlana Jalal’uddin Rumi, both Sufi musicians and philosophers from respectively India and Turkey, trace music to the origins of humanity. In an ancient legend that Khan narrates, it is God who commands the angels to produce a song whose mystical melody convinces the “unwilling soul to enter the body of Adam.” “The soul,” Khan continues, “intoxicated by the song of the angels, entered the body which is regarded as a prison.” Khan’s legend confers upon music an original function in human creation. More interestingly, it also unveils the mythical grounds upon which music directly influences the human soul – the only human element whose lifespan is presented in divine texts as transcending the two worlds. Music, in its mystical essence, is thus presented as a fluid art form and a religious tool through which the human soul can be tamed. Creating music in this sense is creating a theurgic symbol which, Berdyaev argues, bridges over to the absolute. In this paper, I suggest that this spirituo-artistic paradigm in which music influences the individual’s attitude towards material reality is an artistic replication of the philosophical commonalities between Sufism and Theurgy. In this context, the mystic believes in music, particularly chanted sacred poetry, as pathway towards an ecstatic stage; hence it becomes an instrument of asceticism and piety, and a means for the mystic to avoid the traps of the egoistic lower self.

The connection between such symbolist music and theurgic truth is probably why Berdyaev perceives Scriabin as an artist who “prophesies the new world-epoch” although, on the other hand, he also sees the Russian composer as “foreboding an unconquered chaos” (1962, p.223). Composition of transcendental music is probably one of the artistic traits that best characterizes Scriabin’s persona. Scriabin, writes Taruskin, “is the sole musician of his time and

place to cast himself in the Orphic image, to invest his own art with the attributes of ecstatic and redemptive religion,” and he continues, “to channel through it intimations not merely of phenomenal appearance but of ultimate noumenal truth” (1997, p.308). Additionally, as Schloezer notes, Scriabin perceives the meaning of art in its transformative essence (cited in Taruskin, 1997, p. 309). In brief terms, as a symbolist artist, Scriabin sought to produce a theurgic musical symbol in which art converts into action. This redemptive form of artistic creativity is also common to Sufis, and the Senegalese *Baay Faal zikr* performance is one example.

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#### **The “*Baay Faal*” *Zikr* (invocation of God’s Qur’anic Names) as a Theurgic Symbol**

This *Baay Faal zikr*, or invocation, is substantially based on the *Shahadah*, which is the Islamic profession of faith and the first pillar of Islam. Indeed, the repetitive presence of the *Shahadah* in the performance is where the theurgic dimension of the poem lies. The *Shahadah* takes the form of a chorus, although its repetition by Alioune Ndiaye’s leading voice is audibly indefinite. In fact, for the Sufi *Baay/Yaay Faal* and in Islam in general, repetition of the *Shahadah* is an affirmation of *Tawhīd*, or oneness of God, which, for the Sufi, also produces a theosophical experience aimed at reconciling the follower with what Berdyaev (1939/2009) terms Spirit. Exploring the theurgic pattern of the *zikr* in this sense calls for examining the two parts that semantically make up the structure of the *Shahadah*. One is “*La-ila ha*,” meaning *there is no (individual) god*. In the Islamic sense, this part of the *Shahadah* negates the pluralization of divinity; at the same time, it also dissolves everything in the universe exactly like what Scriabin envisioned from an ideal performance of his *Prometheus*. Thus, through this *zikr*, the Sufi *Baay/Yaay Faal* also negates and suppresses all existence, including that of man. The second semantic half of the *Shahadah* is “*Il’lallah*,” meaning *except Allah*. Thus the absolute negation in the first semantic half leads spiritually into the dissolution of all existence, not into emptiness, but unto God. In general, this semantic composition of the *Shahadah*, which is emphasized in the *zikr* under study, is the metaphysical meaning that all Sufi-Muslims associate with the performance of a *Shahadah*-based *zikr*.

Further, in this spirituo-artistic context, the *Baay/Yaay Faal zikr* emerges as a theurgic symbol in that, for the *Baay/Yaay Faal*, it bridges between the Sufi performer and the absolute through a hierarchical mediation. In fact, the chanting mediates over to the *Baay/Yaay Faal* spiritual guide – Shaykh Ibra Faal – who, mediates over to Prophet Muhammad. The latter is viewed by all Muslims, in general, as the ultimate pathway to God, the domain of the Spirit and the mystic’s abode of absolute truth.

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#### **Conclusion: Limits in Theurgy Aesthetics**

In conclusion, it appears evident that philosophical commonalities exist between Berdyaev’s theurgic thought and Sufism and that those are replicated in the mystic’s artistic creativity, as exemplified in the musical poetry of the Senegalese Sufi *Baay/Yaay Faal*. Although the two forms of religiosity differ on doctrinal grounds, mysticism – as manifested through

renunciatory asceticism and yearning towards ecstatic self-realization – remains the overarching pattern of commonality.

Further, it must be noted that, for several reasons, Sufi musical poetry in contemporary Senegal is presenting itself as an art for art's sake; despite the fact that many *zikr* performers would claim the ritualized chanting as an integral part of religion. Their claim may not be totally wrong, given that drawing the boundaries between the religious and the non-religious is just getting harder. Yet there remains a purely artistic dimension of the *zikr* performance that begs to exist on its own, free from religion. This contention is relevant in the *zikr* performance used as examples in this paper. In fact, despite the theurgic textual content of the chanted poem, performativity still reflects an artistic tendency that fades the Sufi poetry into a hybrid zone of creativity where theurgic transcendentalism seems to lose its claimed essence to an overly emphasized profane artistic creativity. For instance, the collective *zikr* by the *Baay/Yaay Faal* draws its aesthetic acclaim not forcibly from its textual theurgic essence, but from a remarkable use of drumming, dance, and high-tech sampling which rather pertain to the profane domain. In the end, all that remains is art, although the latter may have its own philosophical essence that one can choose to associate with anything.

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