



# Defining nothingness: Kazimir Malevich and religious renaissance

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## Abstract

In the treatise “Suprematism. The World as Objectlessness or Eternal Peace” (1922), Kazimir Malevich positions himself as a “bookless philosopher” who did not consider theories of other philosophers. In fact, the treatise contains a large number of references to philosophers belonging to different traditions. A careful reading shows the extent to which Malevich’s theory is linked to the Russian religious philosophy of the early twentieth century. In my view, Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky—philosophers of “Religious Renaissance,” as well as some other intellectuals—acquaint avant-gardists with Neoplatonic conceptions of apophysis. Malevich had access to ideas of fourteenth-century theologian Meister Eckhart, and I will refer to two sources to demonstrate this, including Margarita Sabashnikova’s translation of Eckhart and works of Sergei Bulgakov. Without any reference, Malevich retells the concepts of Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Gregory Palamas. I will demonstrate parallels between the treatise on Suprematism and Meister Eckhart’s Sermons concerning the concepts of apophaticism, Platonism, and Nothingness. I will also touch on the theme of Divine Light in the theology of Palamas (fourteenth century) to show the diversity of the avant-garde’s sources of inspiration.

**Keywords** Apophaticism · Darkness · Sergei Bulgakov · Meister Eckhart · Light · Kazimir Malevich · Neoplatonism · Nothingness · Objectlessness · Gregory Palamas · Margarita Sabashnikova · Suprematism

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## Introduction

Kazimir Malevich<sup>1</sup> is usually perceived as a “subverter of art,” who substitutes an abstract “nothing” for traditional representational painting. In his well-known essay “On the Museum” (1919) he queries:

Do we need Rubens or the Cheops Pyramid? Is a depraved Venus necessary to the pilot in the heights of our new comprehension? [...] Do we need temples to Christ, when life has long since left the droning of vaults and candle soot, and then the church dome is insignificant by comparison with any depot of millions of ferro-concrete beams? [...]

Is the Roman pope’s cap necessary to a two-six-four engine racing like lightning over the globe and trying to take off from its back? (Malevich 1968, p. 69)

He concludes that modernity needs nothing from the past, suggesting that we build it by burning all bridges behind ourselves. Many contemporaries were shocked by Malevich’s exhibition of abstract art and called the artist a subverter of classical values. Alexander Benois wrote about the “Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10,” where paintings were placed in the manner of icons in peasant homes: “Everything sacred, everything intimate, everything that we loved and lived by, everything has disappeared” (Malevich 2004a, p. 314). Malevich in turn accused Benois of restraining free thought, calling him, in a letter, a symbol of stagnation, whose followers were “the spiritually impoverished but fame-hungry youth” (Malevich 1968, p. 45). Malevich acknowledged that the avant-garde did not have as much influence and power as Benois and the only advantage he saw “in not being like [Benois]” was that it pushed his work forward.

Mikhail Gershenzon (1862–1925), a thinker and historian of culture, encouraged the artist to commit his philosophical ideas to paper and, in 1922, Malevich produced his treatise “Suprematism. World as Objectlessness, or Eternal Peace.” It was first published in the form of a manifesto titled “God is Not Cast Down.” In it, Malevich denies the reality of the “world of things” and calls for humanity to move toward “Nothing.” The concept of Nothing, which Malevich regarded as “liberated,” became important for justifying the new art that he was crafting. Malevich argued for abstraction from any content and any form, because he regarded them as the product of human creativity. He believed that the material world was connected to humans; it was humanity that had cluttered the world with things and inventions, answering the question of “what?” to their own satisfaction, while the world itself remains a Nothing. Nothingness as Suprematism’s central concept did not emerge from nothing, though; it had a long history in both philosophy and theology.

Avant-garde art had been perceived as opposed to Symbolism and to the culture of the Silver Age for many years in Russia. Malevich contributed to this movement, while making almost no mention of his peers from that intellectual circle. Silver Age philosophers were in turn largely ignorant of Malevich. Nevertheless, Malevich often shared with Silver Age philosophers an interest in many subjects of a philosophical

<sup>1</sup> Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), Ukraine-born Polish artist, theorist, organizer of UNOVIS in 1920–1923, director of GINKHUK (1924–1926), professor at Kyiv Art Institute (1927–1930).

and theological nature. Following Rosalind Krauss, who questions the avant-garde's originality, I will interrogate the myth of the total separation between avant-garde artists and Symbolists and show multiple aspects of their common interests. In my view, Malevich's revolutionary rhetoric was not at all remote from Religious Renaissance concerns, interconnected with the Silver Age, despite the critiques leveled by both sides against each other. Did Malevich really burn all the bridges? Or was one left untouched?

## Avant-garde and icon painting

Many intellectuals of the 1910s described their experience of "contemporary art" as an encounter with a crisis. In 1914 an exhibition of Pablo Picasso's works took place in Moscow. At that time no private collector in either Europe or America could compete with Sergei Shchukin's Picasso collection (Semenova 2018, p. 204). Cubism made an indelible impression upon religious thinkers. Picasso's work was reviewed by Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky,<sup>2</sup> and others. Berdyaev expressed his feelings about the new painter as follows: "When you go into the Picasso room of the Shchukin Gallery, you are seized by a sense of horror. What you feel is connected not only to painting and the fate of art, but to cosmic life itself" (my translation) (Berdyaev 1914).<sup>3</sup> Florensky criticized Suprematism, linking it with Cubism. He connected Cubism with theosophical practices, nihilism, and the denial of spiritual values. He wrote that Suprematism aimed to construct of a magical reality, but fell short of the task (Florensky 2000, p. 156). However, Malevich did not fully reject classical values after all but embraced certain Platonic ideas. While in his manifestos he did call for the destruction of Renaissance and Classicist art, in his unfinished autobiography he pointed out: "We fought mainly against the classics of Renaissance art and against ancient art. <...> But we never fought against folk art and against icon-painters, against talented sign painters" (my translation) (Khardzhiev 1996, pp. 313–314). He recalled his childhood in the Ukrainian village of Parkhomivka (Kharkiv Oblast) at the end of the nineteenth century:

The village, as I said earlier, engaged in art (at the time I hadn't heard of such a word). Or rather, it's more accurate to say that it made things that I liked very much. These things contained the whole mystery of my sympathies with the peasants. I watched with great excitement how the peasants made wall paintings, and would help them smear the floors of their huts with clay and make designs on the stove. The peasant women were excellent at drawing roosters, horses and flowers. . . .

I imitated the peasants' entire way of life.

<sup>2</sup>Those religious philosophers are often referred to as the "Russian Religious Renaissance" (Gavrilyuk 2014).

<sup>3</sup>See also: Bulgakov S. "Russkaya tragediya" [Russian tragedy] (1914), Chulkov G. "Demony i sovremennost' (mysli o frantsuzskoy zhivopisi)" [Demons and contemporaneity (thoughts on the French art)] (1914).

... I continued drawing horses in the primitive spirit of the peasant women, who all knew how to draw flowers and paint murals. Art belonged more to them than to men. (Malevich 1985, pp. 29–30)

Peasant art, *lubok*, icons painted in a style far removed from representational painting—as you can see, all this was of concern to Malevich. In general, avant-garde painters were absolutely amazed by the colors and geometry of the cleaned old-style icons, which had a great impact on their art. In February 1913, the first *Exhibition of Old Russian Art* opened under the auspices of the Moscow Imperial Archaeological Institute. The event, related to the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, had unprecedented significance for the cultural life of Russia. It was the first public exhibition on such a grand scale of recently cleaned twelfth- to fifteenth-century icons. The process of the cleaning of icons in the search for old images started at the beginning of the twentieth century. This process is associated with an act of religious freedom, which Nicolas II signed in 1905, and an interest in Old Believers arose (Lazarev 2000, p. 13). This discovery of the old-style icons affected not only church painters, but also the avant-garde's first generation: Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchyonykh, and others (Gurianova 2017, p. 130). Nina Gurianova writes that, simultaneously with the icon exhibition in February 1913, avant-garde painter Mikhail Larionov organized his own "First *Lubok* [folk art] Exhibition," which was soon followed by a second one, where *lubki* and icon patterns were exhibited (Gurianova 2017, p. 136). Later in April, Larionov organized the *Mishen* (Target) exhibition (Hardiman and Kozicharov 2017, p. 28), an event of avant-garde art, with cubism, futurism, and *luchism* (rayism), in contrast.<sup>4</sup> In 1920, he explained how inspirational icons were for the avant-garde as Russian icon painters were very abstract, using a predetermined style to express the mystical sense of life (Spira 2008, p. 59).

## Russian philosophers

Berdyayev was more optimistic about "*Supramatism*," as he referred to it, drawing upon his own philosophy of creativity and stressing "the task of the final liberation of the pure creative act from *the power of the natural and material world*." He explained the movement toward abstractionism as liberation from a narrative, "from the whole created world, resting on creation out of nothing" (Berdyayev 1990, p. 15). Berdyayev's understanding of Suprematism likely appeared after he visited various exhibitions in which Natalia Davydova, a friend of his niece, showed her work. Alexandra Shatskikh supposes that the contact between Moscow's intelligentsia's two rival circles, the Silver Age philosophers and the radical avant-gardists, may have occurred through Davydova.

Malevich dedicated his treatise's second chapter on Suprematism to Mikhail Gershenzon. Gershenzon contrasted Malevich's "fresh blood" with the decline of classical culture. As Andrey Bely recollected: "He stood before the squares, as if praying to them; [...] he explained to me then: looking at these squares (black and red), he was

<sup>4</sup>For more information on *luchism* see (Parton 1993).

experiencing the fall of the old world: ‘Look at that: everything is breaking down’” (Bely 1989, p. 57). He is the “flesh and blood of the ‘original Russian’ philosophy,” as Shatskikh puts it (2000, p. 48), which is a persistent claim that is often made to disassociate Malevich from German and French philosophers. Shatskikh points to the synthetic, eschatological, and non-systematic nature of Malevich’s texts, evoking Aleksei Losev’s 1918 description of Russian philosophy as “purely internal, intuitive, purely mystical cognition of the being, its hidden depths, which can be comprehended... through the power of the imagination and inner vital fluidity” (Shatskikh 2000, p. 48). Russian philosophy is, in fact, a wide and complex phenomenon encompassing several movements, including religious philosophy, Cosmism, and Marxism, among other schools. Contemporary commentators have linked Malevich to the philosophy of Cosmism. Christina Lodder (2007), for example, compares Malevich’s Suprematist architecture with the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov. Boris Groys (1992) claims that Malevich saw the potential for revolution not in terms of technology, but in the concept of immortality and nothingness. Drawing Malevich closer to cosmism, Shatskikh notes that, although the artist did not belong to the cohort of the “Russian Cosmists,” his art resonates with their ideas. He is also frequently compared with left-wing philosophers and ideologists. For example, Nina Tumarkin has written about his “cult of Lenin,” (1983) and Groys’ “The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond” suggests that Malevich praised both Lenin and Stalin. Alexei Kurbanovsky also agrees with this interpretation, arguing that Malevich’s “new theology” developed from glorifying God into extolling Lenin’s virtues (Kurbanovsky 2007, p. 372). By contrast, Nina Gurianova (2012) sees in Malevich’s work closer parallels to anarchism. Charlotte Douglas discusses Malevich in light of Alexander Bogdanov’s theory of systems (2002). Natalia Smolyanskaya (2015) similarly claims that terminology borrowed from Bogdanov, Lenin’s ideological opponent, can be found in many of Malevich’s texts. To these interesting interpretations, I would like to add one more: Malevich’s connection to the Russian religious Renaissance. The study of Malevich’s theoretical legacy in the context of Russian philosophy in the beginning of twentieth century is important, because artists and philosophers often found themselves in the same cultural milieu. They may not have quoted one another directly, but one can often find references or reminiscent phrasing in their respective texts.

Malevich’s Suprematism is about the transcendence of reality. Derived from the Latin *supremus*, it refers to the highest being; it can also refer, via Polish, to *supremacja*, superiority or supremacy. In 1922 two works on transcendence were written simultaneously, one by Malevich, entitled “Suprematism. The World as Objectlessness, or Eternal Peace,”<sup>5</sup> and the other “The Iconostasis” by Pavel Florensky. Shatskikh believes that Malevich began writing his treatise in Vitebsk, now Belarus (previously Belorussia), in the autumn of 1921. Florensky dated his “Iconostasis” June 17, 1921, on the first page of the manuscript. Shatskikh suggests that Malevich finished the manuscript on February 11, 1922, whereas Florensky completed his manuscript on July 8 of the same year. In his article *On Symbols of Infinity* (1904),

<sup>5</sup>Note on the translation on Malevich’s terms: following Shatskikh, I will be using ‘objectlessness’ instead of ‘non-objective’ (Troels Andersen’s translation) and ‘peace’ instead ‘rest’.

Florensky, following mathematician Georg Cantor, employs the concept of the symbol as something related to the Platonic ascent to ideal forms.<sup>6</sup> Describing icons in *Iconostasis*, he contends that the symbols found in them, such as a depiction of a saint, are connected to what they represent, that is, the saints themselves. As he states the purpose of art, “Any instance of fine art (such as a painting) reaches its goal when it carries the viewer beyond the limitations of the empirically seen colours on a canvas and into a specific reality, for a painting shares with all symbolic work the basic ontological characteristics of seeking to be that which it symbolizes” (Florensky 1997, p. 66). Where did Malevich’s understanding of transcendence come from? In this paper, I attempt to weigh which source is more plausible in order to shed light onto what Malevich’s revolution in painting was all about.

## Malevich’s conception of nothingness

Malevich formulated his idea of objectlessness as a declaration of fact. He rejected visible reality as true existence, criticizing all forms of “practical realism.” He believed the world consisted neither of elements nor of anything that could be broken. “[N]o dishes, no palaces, no chairs,” he wrote. “Man possesses all those things, and that’s why they break, and his life is a heap of crockery, scrap” (Malevich 2004c, p. 193). He outlined a transcendent world of objectlessness, one that was opposed to the transcendental world, where objects were products of consciousness. Speaking as both an artist and a theorist, Malevich described the real world as free of things, in the spirit of the Platonic division into ideal forms and empirical phenomena, a conception to which Russian religious philosophers of that era often turned. Malevich’s human subject is a thinking being as opposed to an unthinking God. According to him, God created the world in order to get rid of it, to become a complete “Nothingness” or eternal peace, where everything is perfect and there is nothing more to think about. This God wanted to bestow the same non-world upon humanity, but the attempt failed. Man’s striving for perfection is an attempt to return to God, who is perfectly good, a view that is likewise Platonic in its motifs (Levina 2015, p. 22). Malevich’s God is radically opposed to the personalistic God of the Bible, a being thoroughly different and distinct from humanity, a Nothing. Abiding in Eternal Peace, this God is mindless, and no amount of reasoning helps one understand him:

God is peace, peace is perfection, all is accomplished, the construction of worlds is finished, the movement in eternity is established. His creative thought *is moving*, he himself has been liberated from insanity, for he no longer creates; and the universe, like a mad brain, moves in a whirlwind of rotation, without knowing where or why. So, the universe is the insanity of a liberated God, hiding in peace (my translation). (Malevich 1995, p. 257)<sup>7</sup>

Human beings fear eternity, insanity, and nothingness, Malevich inveighs; they cling to their reason and common sense. Humanity is busy attempting to comprehend

<sup>6</sup>Cantor provided the first definition of a set in 1883 in a letter to Richard Dedekind, linking it to Plato’s ideas (Dauben 1979, p. 170).

<sup>7</sup>In Troels Andersen’s translation: Malevich (1968, p. 214).

the non-existent, for there is only Nothing, but it only comprehends what merely appears to exist and human representations are images of the non-existent (that which is being) (Malevich 2000, p. 305). God resides beyond the constructs of rational human thought that attempts to grasp him. God is not a transcendent sense, because he is not a sense at all. In constructing the world, humanity has divided it into mutually unrelated parts, referring to them as reality (Malevich 2003, p. 89; 1976, p. 36). Malevich writes:

The world and its manifestation did not exist before in consciousness, for there was no consciousness, only abstractions. Hence, the world was “peace”, i.e., “nothingness”, and it was only through the developing organisation of man that “he”, man, began to distinguish “what” from this “nothing-world”, whereby he destroyed the world and did so in the name of the real, which originated in his consciousness as a representation in one form or another. But this was no longer the world, it was its destruction, its division ... (my translation). (Malevich 2003, p. 69; 1976, p. 35)

A “world of representations” unfolds in the human mind, he writes, and it is different from the “world of natural appearances.” What Malevich regards as the “liberation” of the divine Nothing is a call for humanity to return of the world “before consciousness” and to doubt the structure of its knowledge. Created by God, the human person wants to construct the world herself, to be its creator. Calling itself “the crown of divine creation,” humanity wants to create something that contains a kind of thinking that is opposed to unthinking nature. Malevich contrasts human restless activity to God who rested on the seventh day. In the meantime, the real world is on the other side of production. In order to merge with the Absolute, humanity must slow down and rest, too, but transcendence is frightening in its uncertainty and uncontrollable nature. Thus, humanity finds itself thrown “overboard from the ship of the Absolute,” (Malevich 2000, p. 290) inside the transcendental scheme of philosophizing, as I will refer to it. Malevich makes no direct reference to Kant, just as there are no direct references to any other philosophers, such as Descartes, Plato, or Schopenhauer, in his writings (Levina 2019, p. 36). However, a conceptual analysis of his texts allows us to uncover hidden references to other thinkers.

Florensky criticized Kant’s transcendentalism in *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth* (1914), a text that preceded the creation Malevich’s *Black Square*. Florensky, who taught at the Moscow Theological Academy in 1921–1922, believed that, when we set ourselves our own laws and become autonomous, we destroy our life in God. Florensky writes that it is time to be done with “illusionism and all kinds of nihilism, which end in flaccid and pitiful scepticism,” a by-product of individualism and relativism (Florensky 1997, p. 55). Florensky criticized the Kantian understanding of reason for its mechanistic nature, apart from any relation to reality. In the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claimed that he was instigating a “Copernican revolution” in thought. As he stated, “Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects ... (but, in reverse) ... the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the required possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us” (Kant 1998, p. 110). Florensky, on the contrary, asserted that our cognition, with its *a priori* forms of time and space, does construct a real world and viewed



Kant as being rooted in a “human” perspective, in contrast to Plato. Florensky’s proposal was to reclaim the transcendent, to return to the path that Kant abandoned and, as a result, found himself “overboard the ship of the Absolute.” Malevich was likewise critical of the transcendental paradigm. He restated, in fact, Plato’s scheme. In Malevich’s terms, when a human being separates itself from the Absolute, it finds itself victim of the Kantian autonomy.

Was Florensky the source of Malevich’s knowledge about negative (apophatic) theology and Platonism? It is hard to say with any certainty, given that there are no historical sources indicating that Malevich read Florensky. However, Florensky did read Malevich. Malevich’s books can be found in Florensky’s library, including *From Cézanne to Suprematism*, bearing Florensky’s mark “1922.IV.22,” and *God is not cast down: Art, Church, Factory*, published in Vitebsk in 1922 (Andronik 2018, p. 260).

## Eckhart in the avant-garde

Alexandra Shatskikh believed that the “deification” of man in Meister Eckhart’s<sup>8</sup> Nothingness is akin to Suprematist transcendence (Shatskikh 2000, p. 16). She mentions the Czech researcher Jurij Padrta (1983), who first compared Malevich’s theory with Eckhart’s sermons. This theme was later picked up by Edward Robinson (Robinson 2003), Kornelija Ičin (Ičin 2016), Tatiana Plankina (Plankina 2017), and others. Following Robinson, Plankina points to the basic problem of Eckhart’s mysticism: the fusion of the human soul with God. This fusion means that there is nothing other than God (Plankina 2017, p. 31). However, while Eckhart does not view objecthood negatively, Malevich rejects corporeality outright. According to Eckhart, however, matter is deified after the soul’s union with God. From this, Robinson concludes that, even though Malevich’s words recall themes from Eckhart’s work, there is no reason to believe that he ever actually read it (Robinson 2003, p. 42). Contrary to Robinson’s view, I am convinced that Malevich had access to Eckhart’s ideas, and I will refer to two sources to demonstrate this.

The first source is a translation of Eckhart’s work from Middle Upper German into Russian by Margarita Sabashnikova (1882–1973), published in 1912 by the Musaget publishing house. Sabashnikova herself belonged to the culture of the Silver Age, which the avant-gardists defiantly broke off from. She was Maximilian Voloshin’s wife, had a romantic relationship with Vyacheslav Ivanov, and was on friendly terms with Emil Metner, the founder of the Musaget. As she translated Eckhart’s sermons, Sabashnikova became a follower of Rudolf Steiner’s theosophy and urged her friends in the St. Petersburg circle to follow her example. After Eckhart, Metner published Jakob Böhme’s *Aurora or the Morning Dawn in the Ascent*, translated by Alexei Petrovsky in 1914. Thanks to Sabashnikova’s efforts, pre-revolutionary Russian society learned about many other mystics, including Johann Tauler (1300–1361), a disciple of Eckhart, and Heinrich Suso (Glukhova 2015).

Unfortunately, it is unclear when exactly Malevich read Eckhart’s sermons. This could have happened during or after the production of the opera “Victory Over

<sup>8</sup>Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), was a German theologian, a philosopher, influential Neo-Platonist in his day.



the Sun” (1913), which was also prepared by Alexei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matyushin. In any case, it is understood to be a fact that Malevich was in contact with the circle of Symbolists and Silver Age writers through Gershenzon. He also supported Malevich for many years, which is evident from their correspondence, published by Shatskikh in the third volume of Malevich’s collected works. In a letter dated December 21, 1919, from Vitebsk to Moscow, Malevich tells Gershenzon about his impressions of Sergei Bulgakov. Malevich criticizes Bulgakov, from which we can conclude that he either attended his lecture or read a text published later (Levina 2019, p. 42). To that end, Bulgakov might be the second source of inspiration for Malevich. Bulgakov and Florensky were both interested in apophatic theology and discussed ideas of Gregory Palamas, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Meister Eckhart in 1914–1915. Bulgakov became the first philosopher in the late Russian Empire to be acquainted with the writings of Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, and others (Biriukov 2019, p. 75). He referred to German mystics in his work *Unfading Light*, which was published in 1917 and included a section devoted to apophatic theology (“Section One: The Divine Nothing”). Given the unified cultural context of that time, one cannot rule out an encounter between avant-gardists and religious philosophers. Florensky, for example, taught a course as a professor at VKhUTEMAS in 1921–1927 and briefly mentioned Suprematism while working with Rodchenko, Popova, and Tatlin there. He wrote that, when he was invited to the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts by V. A. Favorsky to give a lecture course on “The Analysis of Perspective,” it became, in essence, his critique of pictorial perspective (Andronik 2018, p. 260).

## Malevich and Eckhart

Several researchers—Shatskikh, Robinson, Iĉin, and others—have noted that Malevich’s statements about divine Nothingness strikingly resemble Eckhart’s meditations and yet Malevich never mentions Eckhart or—nor, for that matter, any other philosophers from whom he borrows.<sup>9</sup> In this paragraph I will compare quotations from Malevich’s treatises with Eckhart’s statements.

Malevich’s goal was both to free himself from “whatness,” and to destroy nothingness. A fragment from Eckhart’s meditations resonates with his reflections: “you must be pure of heart, for that heart alone is pure that has abolished creatureliness... you must be free of *nothing*... Therefore, if you want to be perfect, you must be rid of *not*.” (Eckhart 1987, pp. 116–117).<sup>10</sup> The great mystic refers to Apostle Paul in his sermons: man deceives himself if he speaks of himself as something, while he is nothing. The whole world becomes nothing to him who is in bliss, including himself. Eckhart explains: “Since it is God’s nature not to be *like* anyone, we have to come to the state of being *nothing* in order to enter in to the same nature that He is. So, when I am able to establish myself in Nothing and Nothing in myself, uprooting and casting

<sup>9</sup>Regarding Malevich describing himself as a “book-less man” who does not need to refer to anyone, see Levina (2015, p. 19).

<sup>10</sup>I have tried to find citations from the English translation that correspond to the translation made by Sabashnikova, which Malevich may have used.

out what is in me, *then* I can pass into the naked being of God..." (Eckhart 1987, p. 66).

Pseudo-Dionysius says divine peace pervades and orders all things (Eckhart 1987, p. 201), but further Eckhart teaches that "all material things are created after nothing, far from God." This is followed by a reference to Augustine: "If the man would be holy, let him forsake mundane things" (Eckhart 1987, p. 202).<sup>11</sup> Malevich writes in the same vein: there are "no dishes, no palaces, no chairs." He speaks of the existence of "eternal nothingness" in the form of a weightless, dimensionless, non-spatial, and neither absolute nor relative infinity (Malevich 1995, p. 242; 1968, p. 188) in the language of apophatic theology. Let us compare a few other statements by Eckhart and Malevich that indicate the mutual proximity of their ideas. Eckhart states: "Having said that God is not a being [and is above being], I have not thereby denied him being; rather have exalted it in Him" (Eckhart 2009, p. 342; see also Reutin 2011, p. 57). Malevich echoes this sentiment: "Before God is the limit of all senses, but beyond the limit is God, in whom there is no more sense" (Malevich 2000, p. 296).

Further, one can see a clear parallel between both thinkers' ideas. Eckhart writes: "to know God divinely... your knowing must become a pure unknowing, and a forgetting of yourself and all creatures" (Eckhart 1987, p. 40). Malevich restated this as follows: "But if the world is abstract, then it can be cognized through the abstract, as the body is cognized through the body" (Malevich 1976, p. 38). Eckhart speaks of knowing God by apophatic means only that God can be seen by no other means than blindness and known by unknowing alone (Eckhart 2009, p. 500). Thus, I believe that Malevich's concept of Nothingness is directly linked to Eckhart's radical apophaticism, and Malevich seriously inherited this tradition, which came through the Russian religious philosophy of the early twentieth century.

## Light and darkness

Bulgakov and Florensky's exploration of apophaticism, in addition to Platonism and Nothingness, also opened up the theme of light and darkness, a theme of great importance to Malevich in both theoretical and painterly works. In "Sermon Nineteen," Eckhart recollects Acts of the Apostles. He cites: "Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing" (Eckhart 1987, p. 153). Eckhart discusses the many senses in which the citation might be interpreted. First of all, Eckhart says that St. Paul saw Nothing and that the Nothing was God. Secondly, when he rose to his feet, he saw nothing but God. Furthermore, he also saw nothing but God in things. And fourth, "when he saw God, he saw all things as nothing." He then notes that he had previously seen a light from heaven that made him fall to the ground. In the First Epistle to Timothy, St. Paul says that "God dwells in a light to which there is no approach" (Eckhart 1987, p. 154). Meister adds that the light in which He is seen must be God Himself.

As we can now see, the topic of Light is connected to the concept of Nothingness and to apophatic theology. Let us now turn to Malevich. He explains: "The devil is

<sup>11</sup>Also: "All creatures are pure nothing... All creatures have no being, for their being consists in the presence of God" (Eckhart 1987, p. 284).

a dark spot and God a light one” (Malevich 1976, p. 67). Malevich found evidence for his aesthetic theories by turning to the gospels. He wrote in his notebook in 1924 that “according to St. John the Divine: God is Light in which there is no darkness” (Malevich 1976, p. 315).<sup>12</sup> He also cites the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians: “But all things that are reprove are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light” (Malevich 2004b, p. 400).<sup>13</sup>

Malevich’s concentration on the Divine Light is, most likely, influenced by the ideas of St. Gregory Palamas, a Byzantine theologian from the fourteenth century, who taught Hesychasm, and whose influence in Russia was felt in the nineteenth century, after the revival of monasticism. Malevich most likely never read Palamas directly, but his ideas were part of the fabric of the nineteenth century intellectual landscape. Even prominent writers about the icon, such as Pavel Florensky, employed Palamite ideas when writing about iconography, without explicitly engaging with Palamas in a sustained fashion.<sup>14</sup>

Palamas sought to explain the Divine Light’s non-created nature and the associated inability of the intellect to comprehend God. He argued that the Divine Light is neither perceptible by the intellect nor by the senses. Contemplating the idea of Light, Palamas refers to the words of Dionysius the Areopagite. As God is beyond all seeing and knowledge, the way to perceive his Divine nature is only through light, such as that seen by Christ’s disciples on Mount Tabor (Levina 2011).

The well-known example of Hesychast icon-painting is Theophanes’ the Greek’s Transfiguration of God (1403). Lazarev writes that Christ floats on air in the icon, his “figure is clothed in a snow-white robe and has the greatest luminous power, [the image] is given surrounded by a halo with rays emanating from it” (Lazarev 2000, p. 88). As the religious scholar Alexander Petrov has noted, the motif of the shining garment is quite common in the description and iconography of the Transfiguration. Epithets such as “shining with divine glory clothes of the Savior” and descriptions of Christ appearing in a shining cloud are frequent (Petrov 2020, p. 92).

The glory of God bedazzled apostles on Mount Tabor. This light is “invisible because of a superabundant clarity, it cannot be approached because of the outpouring of its transcendent gift of light.” Moreover, Dionysius adds: “The divine darkness is that ‘unapproachable light’ where God is said to live ... (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 265) though indeed a darkness, it is yet beyond radiance, and, as the great Denys says, it is in this dazzling darkness that the divine things are given to the saints” (Palamas 36. I.iii.18).

In Dionysius’s words, we also observe the ambivalence mentioned by Shatskikh. Saints’ eyes are benighted, given that the light is simultaneously a darkness. Even the

<sup>12</sup>See Ephesians 1:5: “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

<sup>13</sup>See Ephesians 5:13.

<sup>14</sup>The “Palamite disputes” were related to the teaching of Hesychasm (the mystical tradition of prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Church) and continued for many years; Gregory Palamas responded to Barlaam’s criticisms and those of his followers, which found expression in the “Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts.” Pavel Florensky cites several works by Palamas in his bibliography in “The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth” (1914), but without any analysis thereof. Florensky acknowledges his ideas later, see Meien-dorf (1997, pp. 338–339).

saints, who are the only witnesses of the Glory of God, cannot perceive the Divine Light in its wholeness because of the “superabundant outpouring of light.” Instead, they are dazzled by it. They, who are so close to God, see only darkness. Dionysius explains that Light is the light as such, but for those who attempt to intelligibly understand it or perceive it, Light becomes darkness, given that it becomes invisible.

If the “Black Square” was made in accordance with this great theological tradition, could it symbolize “dazzling darkness”? Evidence for this can be found in the story of how the “Black Square” was painted. According to Shatskikh, it was unintentionally created on June 8, 1915. Malevich first painted a polychromatic abstract canvas, then had no time to either clean that canvas or to prepare another one, so the black figure was painted over an existing geometrical composition. Later, Malevich described this moment of creation as an ecstatic illumination to Ivan Kliun, who noted in his memoirs that “when he was drawing ‘Black Square’ ‘fiery lightning bolts’ were constantly crossing the canvas in front of him” (Shatskikh 2012, p. 45). Irina Vakar’s recent research into the “Black Square” is critical to this interpretation (Vakar 2019).

Malevich produced “Black Cross” (1915) and “Black Circle” (1920) after “Black Square.” The mystical significance of this series can, in part, be found in Malevich’s interest in both traditional culture and Christian symbols, at least according to art historian Alexey Kurbanovsky: the square, as the traditional symbol of the Earth in medieval iconography, designates all earthly things; the circle represents the skies or God; and the cross signifies the Church as the union of the earth and the heavens. The choice of a Greek-style cross pointed to the Orthodox tradition (Kurbanovsky 2007, p. 367). Kurbanovsky further suggests that “White Square” (White on White, 1918) was Malevich’s most radical painting. It is a symbol of the end of representation, after which there was nothing left to see: “Visuality was transcended by the artist’s quest for immaterial transcendence” (Kurbanovsky 2007, p. 369). Kurbanovsky uses Malevich’s own words: “the universe is the senselessness of God liberated and concealing himself in rest” (Malevich 1968, p. 214). In his opinion, Malevich’s “Black Square” is connected with a negative theological path, and “White on White” resembles divine light (or “rest.”) (Kurbanovsky 2007, p. 371).

## Conclusion

Alexandre Benois has claimed that “Black Square” is a “cult of emptiness, darkness, ‘nothing.’” It was certainly a representation of nothing, but it was another type of nothing. I attempted to trace its connection to the concepts of “nothingness,” “light,” and “darkness” in the theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Gregory Palamas and have demonstrated how an application of these theories is reflected in the Avant-Garde theory and paintings, and those by Malevich in particular.

Russian society in the early twentieth century was shaken by the revelation of the “old style icons.” As we have seen, this act of religious freedom affected its intellectual landscape—not only of the Silver Age, to which Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov belonged, but also Avant-Garde artists and poets.

The avant-gardists were often classified as a left-wing revolutionary movement, contrasting them with the intellectuals of the Silver Age. I have shown that the opposition is not so unambiguous by drawing parallels between the reception of the texts

by the Neoplatonists: Dionysius, Eckhart, and Palamas. The roles of Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, and other philosophers of Russian religious Renaissance in relation to the revolutionary avant-garde has not yet been fully examined. In the competition against Renaissance in art, the avant-gardists used the ideas of the “religious Renaissance,” turning to the pre-Kantian worldview and Neoplatonism following religious philosophers.

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## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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