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## BERDYAEV: FREEDOM AGAINST THE OBJECTIFIED WORLD

### A SUMMARY OF BERDYAEV'S PHILOSOPHY

A mystic eclectic Christian personalist and existentialist. Along with Leo Shestov, one of the most renowned representatives of Russian religious thought in the Western world. With a multitude of inspirations: Gnosis, Church Fathers, Rhine mysticism, Eastern Orthodox Church and Slavic traditions, as well as anti-Western philosophy.

According to Berdyaev, philosophy refers to the inexpressible through rational discourse (thus his criticism of Russian rationalism), acts of human spirit which, through myth and symbol (brought to full fruition in Christianity), disclose the meaning of the world and human existence as well as their mutual destiny.

The trinity that governs Berdyaev's thought are the myths of the Fall – Godmanhood – Eschaton, with a central motif of Godmanhood, the lost and regained essence of humanity. Sin – choosing the path of evil (the myth of the Fall) – stems from unlimited freedom, preceding God and man. Both can claim the same right to this freedom despite the fact that man has misused it. Freedom to do evil triggered multiple forms of enslavement, embedded in the 'kingdom of Caesar' – cultural sphere. The whole history of the world proves that calling for a creative, cooperative relationship with God (He expects it from us, as creativity, along with freedom, is our mutual distinctive feature), we can merely create culture or its technological extension – civilisation. This process, initiated in the Renaissance, peaks with developed capitalism and communism; their mutual features being objectifying and the disappearance of sacrum or its ill perception. History as a process of gradual negotiation of the godly element within man (the false myth of progress) made him dependant on the peripheral rather than core features of his own essence. Berdyaev calls this 'objectivation'. He criticises the European tradition of ontological philosophy and juxtaposes it against his own philosophy of freedom; he clearly juxtaposes man, meaning the Spirit, against the objectified world of history and culture. He differentiates between the freedom of man (activity) and necessity (social, political, biological, axiological and historical determinism, etc.) that lead to the enslavement of mankind. Man, being reduced to phenomenological order of objectivisation, loses his noumenal dimension of the Spirit transcending this world.

The recreation of the Godmanhood entity is possible thanks to the myth of Godmanhood. God's embodiment and sacrifice, erasing the effects of man's choice of evil, points to the ways of how to righteously use our freedom prerogatives, how to regain our lost path to God and creatively transcend the objectified world towards the infinity of the human spirit. It is Christ Godmanhood, whose tragedy symbolically takes place within the human soul, who mends the Godmanhood bond severed by our choice of evil; this is an example of sacrificing the fall of mankind and, therefore, the world, as it is the epiphenomenon of the soul (not the reverse).

History makes sense while building 'the Realm of the Spirit', which cannot be placed in cosmic or historical times (the concepts of man's salvation on earth e.g. millenarism or communism are false), but in the deep existential time in the eschatic dimension. In the era of the greatest schism with God and the deepest fall of man (developed capitalism, communism in Russia), a 'new Middle Ages' arises – a creative epoch transcending this world. Until then, man inappropriately steered his own freedom, however, after the fall, St. Peter's Church (sharp criticism of historical Christianity accused of losing the Christian devotion of man) will be replaced by the epoch of St. John's Church (geared towards eternity, rejuvenated spiritual Christianity).

A key role is played by the Russian nation, which, not having experienced the misleading Western path of development, preserving communal antagonistic attitudes towards the individualistic anonymous manner of cooperation, marked by the sense of apocalypse and messianic call, touched by the oppressive communist totalitarian system, is the first to restore the spiritual aspect of Christianity, which consequently leads to (through mainly God's saving deed) a complete deliverance from evil, to the general salvation, to apocatastasis.

The historiosophy of Berdyaev had a great influence on his understanding of the quintessence of communism (the wrong implementation of our inborn hopes, whose best place was Russia) and made him renown across the world"<sup>1</sup>. Berdyaev's best presentation of creativity was provided by Isaiah Berlin in his conversations with Raminem Jahanbegloo: "Berdyaev is a highly intelligent man and when he writes about the rise of communism or ideas of Russian thinkers can be very insightful, however I am not capable of understanding his theological writing"<sup>2</sup>. He is not the only one.

The matter becomes interesting due to the fact that we are discussing a philosopher who owes his Western fame to the Bolsheviks. These "aficionados of wisdom" in 1922 loaded a group of opponent intellectualists onto a ship, and, via Szczecin, brought them to Germany claiming that their return would be met with the death penalty. It was a precedent of humanitarian intervention in the USSR, soon improved by the use of aircraft, through which rebellious troublemakers were exiled. Due to this expulsion, preceded by the night time interrogation by the Cheka, in the presence of Feliks Dzierżyński, Berdyaev first managed to preserve his life and then achieve fame as a Christian existentialist and personalist, whose work

<sup>1</sup> M. Styczyński, Nicolai Berdyaev, (in) A. de Lazari (ed.), *Idee w Rosji. Leksykon rosyjsko-polsko-angielski*, vol. I, Semper, Warszawa 1999; id., *Umiłowanie przyszłości albo filozofia spraw ostatecznych Studia nad filozofią Mikołaja Bierdiajewa*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Ibidem, Łódź 2001.

<sup>2</sup> R. Jahanbegloo, *Rozmowy z Isaiahem Berlinem*, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 2002, p. 208, translated by M. Pietrzak-Merta.

was crowned in 1947 by his honorary doctorate in theology from the University of Cambridge. Furthermore, his work was translated into all major languages, including Japanese. Along with Berdyayev, lives of Siemion Frank, Ivan Ilyin, Mikołaj Łoski, Pitirim Sorokin, Fiodor Stiepun, Boris Vysheslavtsev were spared. Other paths of emigration were also chosen. Those who remained, like Paweł Floreński or Lev Karsavin, were shot or tortured in camps<sup>3</sup>.

#### SOME CONSEQUENCES

I devoted a place in my own work to the in-depth discussion based on this particular Russian's concept of freedom<sup>4</sup>. I agree with the opinion that "almost everyone who writes about Berdyayev commences with the statement that he was a 'prophet of freedom'. It is fully understandable and such an opinion is supported by the very philosophy of Berdyayev and his numerous declarations on his own works. The final source of knowledge of the existence of freedom, its nature and the perception of man as a creative being were for Berdyayev his own spiritual experiences"<sup>5</sup>. Let us remember that he philosophised *sub specie aeternitatis*, which finds the reason and its constructions (language, society, science, technology, etc.) an obstacle rather than an aid. Thus, he did not care for logic, the monothematic nature of his philosophy was eclectic, spiritually Christian, though Gnostic, mystic and prophetic, pathetic-rhetoric, catastrophic-eschatic, which favoured not only the cognition, but also the discovery of the sense of existence, freedom, deliverance from evil, time and the weirdness of the world. Most of all, it refers to the freedom from the world and its earthly determinism. He wrote: "freedom is not rooted in being. Human freedom cannot be determined solely through God's grace. Human freedom cannot stem from human nature, human substance and, as a consequence, the nature of the world"<sup>6</sup>. Why?

Disappointment awaits the one who in his works searches for the freedom shaped by John Stuart Mill or Lord John Acton, for whom, as Marcin Król writes, "freedom existed thanks to God's truth. Truth was the guarantee of freedom, the highest good which God gave to mankind"<sup>7</sup>. According to Berdyayev, even God could not endow man with freedom, as he did not have it at his disposal. In order to understand that both God and man are preceded by freedom, one should consult

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. Przebinda, *Powrót filozofii do Rosji (1989–1991)*, "Znak" 1994, no. XLVI, vol. 1 (464).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Styczyński, *Umilowanie przeszłości...*, op. cit.; id., *Berdyayev; Authentic Existence or a Negative Sociology*, "Studies in East European Thought", March 2010, vol. 62, no. 1; Cf. also P.P. Gajdenko, *The Problem of Freedom in Nicolai Berdyayev's Existential Philosophy*, "Studies in East European Thought" 1994, vol. 46; E. Matuszczyk, *O wolności*, (in) M. Bierdajew, *Filozofia wolności*, Orthdruk, Białystok 1995, translated by E. Matuszczyk.

<sup>5</sup> S. Mazurek, *Utopia i taska Idea rewolucji moralnej w rosyjskiej filozofii religijnej*, IFIS PAN, Warszawa 2006, pp. 197–198; Cf. also M. Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom Life and Teachings of Nicolas Berdyayev*, New York 1960.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bierdajew, *Metafizyczny problem wolności*, (in) id., *Głoszę wolność. Wybór pism, wybór, wstęp i przekład H. Paprocki*, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 1999, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> M. Król, *Historia myśli politycznej od Machiavellego po czasy współczesne*, Wydawnictwo Arche, Gdańsk 1998, p. 170.

one of the main sources of the philosophy of Berdyaev – a 17<sup>th</sup>-century mystic from Goerlitz – Jacob Boehme. This philosophy, or Gnosis, was described by Józef Piórczyński in his excellent monograph devoted to this cobbler from Goerlitz. Anyone who wishes to understand Berdyaev must read this book<sup>8</sup>. In his great history of Marxism and its sources, Leszek Kołakowski described Boehme's writing as "a swirl of dense and dark smoke"<sup>9</sup>. The reader of Berdyaev's writing has a similar impression, especially as the Russian never provides arguments, just statements. Therefore: "freedom – he writes inspired by Boehme – has no justification. Justification of freedom regresses into non-being [...]. The potency of the world's being is prior to the world's being [...]. Beyond God there is nothingness out of which God creates the world, so this nothingness is a source [...]. We are the children of God and free nothingness"<sup>10</sup> (nothingness – Ungrund in Boehme's writings). Naturally, we know it from the spiritual experience of what Kant erroneously claimed to be the unknowable 'thing in itself', and for which the world is but an epiphenomenon. What Kant found to be an unknowable *noumenon* is in fact an impulse of real life, i.e. freedom, while that which he took to be the subject of science is "secondary and inauthentic"<sup>11</sup>. "Person precedes being. This is the most fundamental proposition of personalism. Being is a fruit of abstract reasoning and this favourite cat of mine exists. Being has no existence"<sup>12</sup>. True freedom not only has nothing to do with any type of objectivisation of the social world (the kingdom of Caesar, the kingdom of necessity is the source of all human enslavement), but also precedes the traditional Christian concept of the freedom of St. Augustine. Even more: the problem of freedom is not solvable within the boundaries of rational philosophy.

It is not surprising that Western liberalism, whose source is found, among others, in John Locke and his followers, does not bring true freedom. Proclaiming freedom and human rights sanctions, in fact, not only economic inequality, but all others. "Freedom and equality remain contradictory"<sup>13</sup>, Berdyaev writes. It eliminates equality between people and their rights towards God, or God's image in every one of us. Liberalism puts forward our own 'superficial', social rights ignoring those stemming from a personal, noumenal dimension. However, "true liberation of a man refers to his freedom not only from external enslavement but also internal, from captivity that he finds himself in, the captivity of his passions and meanness. You didn't think about this, you people of enlightenment and liberation. You keep the man in his internal captivity and proclaim his rights of slaving nature"<sup>14</sup>. How is it possible that man fell into enslavement of his own lower nature, namely of himself? It can only be explained by the fact that – similarly to Boehme – "the true tragedy of the created world takes place in an individual soul (in Berdyaev in a human's spirit – M.S.), stretched between

<sup>8</sup> J. Piórczyński, *Absolut – człowiek – świat Studium myśli Jakuba Boehmego i jej źródeł*, PWN, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>9</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Główne nurty marksizmu Powstanie – rozwój – rozkład*, vol. I, Paryż 1976, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> M. Bierdajew, *Metafizyczny problem wolności*, (in) id., *Głoszę wolność*, op. cit., *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. G. Przebinda, *Rola kantyizmu w myśli Bierdajewa*, (in) id., *Między Moskwą a Rzymem Myśl religijna w Rosji XIX i XX wieku*, Universitas, Kraków 2003, p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> M. Bierdajew, *Niewola i wolność człowieka*, Antyk, Kęty 2003, p. 113 (English translation: *Slavery and Freedom*, London – New York 1939).

<sup>13</sup> M. Bierdajew, *Filozofia nierówności*, Antyk, Kęty 2006, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

oppositely directed forces. Its true homeland is God who planted there a grain of grace; however, it wishes to establish its own particular will"<sup>15</sup>, stemming from – let me remind you – uncreated freedom which preceded God himself.

Proclaiming the philosophy of uncreated freedom, even by God, Soviet collectivism and human enslavement were for Berdyayev as foreign as the Western cultural manifestations, which he called objectifying, and which encompassed all: from maths and science through history, nature, state, nation, class, technology, economy, church and family ("objectifying of the erotic and emotional life"<sup>16</sup>). For him, "Russian communism was nothing less than the foreboding and apocalyptic character of the final borders of the godless Western civilisation, which the West did not survive"<sup>17</sup>. Let us remember that the human spirit is primal and the world is the resultant. That is why it can be transformed into a personal community, which is linked with the liberation from unreal existence, from objectifying in the network of various enslavements, as "all the world's events are mere symbols of spiritual experiences"<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, Berdyayev insisted on shaping life according to communal personalism. Various forms of social communication based on 'bourgeois individualism' were foreign to him. He saw philistine culture everywhere, both in communist Russia and in the West. He considered Bolshevism a 'nouveau riche' violation and disdain for man, however it was the key to Russian historic opportunity: renovation of the pneumatic, spiritual, eschatological dimension of Christianity announced by Joachim from Fiore, but lost by historic Christianity. Thanks to this suffering "the Russian nation will liberate itself"<sup>19</sup>, as happened before with the Romans and the first Christians. His views were surprisingly interlocked with... Leo Trotsky, which was noticed by Alain Besançon. He lived along with his philosophy: lonely, not at peace with the world, though famous in the philosophic *milieu*<sup>20</sup>.

Therefore, according to Berdyayev, if the issue of human freedom is within the boundaries of rational philosophy unsolvable, then none of the existing political systems could ensure true freedom. It can be gained – in simple words – by the transcending of social reality towards 'a new Middle Ages', towards the eschatological dimension of Christianity, towards the state of a spirit freed from the burden of the social world, towards a simple exit from history. "History should end, as within history one cannot solve the problems of mankind, their absolute and highest values"<sup>21</sup>.

It would be a misunderstanding to seek praise for Western freedom and social order in Berdyayev's thinking, regarded before World War II and later as an expert on and critic of communism, which, in his view, as a typical apocalyptic and Russian product, is of religious origin. We will learn that Stalinism means almost

<sup>15</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Główne nurty...*, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Autobiografia filozoficzna*, Antyk, Kęty 2002, p. 267 (English translation: *Dream and Reality*, London 1950).

<sup>17</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Wojna i eschatologia*, (in) *Głoszę wolność*, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Rozważania o egzystencji. Filozofia samotności i wspólnoty*, Antyk, Kęty 2002, p. 164 (English translation: *Solitude and Society*, London 1938).

<sup>19</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Autobiografia...*, op. cit., p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. M. Styczyński, *Między uznaniem a filozofią: Bierdiajew w Paryżu*, "Roczniki Humanistyczne KUL" 1989–1990, vol. 7 (French translation: "Organon" 1988, no. 24).

<sup>21</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Wojna i eschatologia*, op. cit., p. 268.

the same as fascism, but also that “Russian communism is nothing less than the foreboding apocalyptic character of the final borders of the Western godless civilisation, which the West did not survive”<sup>22</sup>, and which is in danger of civilised barbarianism: “not from the forest but from machinery”. Communist Russia and the West suffer from a spiritual disfigurement, an illness called by him bourgeoisie or obscurity. This includes not only Lenin and his followers. “This is the time of technical, industrial and capitalist civilisation of Europe and America. It deludes the spiritual culture of the old Europe with its sacred symbolism and tradition”<sup>23</sup>, where “democracies are fictitious and volatile by nature”. In a nutshell, communism and the West are two sides of the same coin – the result of the lost Godmanhood dimension of a person and eschatological dimension of Christianity, which should be restored in order to overcome today’s cultural nihilism. Not so long ago similar views were also expressed by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and can be heard today in Putin’s Russia as well.

An anti-communist Berdyaev, who – as he claimed – conducted a spiritual not political fight with Soviet Russia, put the red flag outside his house in 1945, proud of the USSR’s victory in World War II. He was rightly called “a Soviet patriot without a passport”. He wrote: “Russia exited the Middle Ages, avoiding modern history with its secular and varied culture, with its liberalism and individualism, with a triumph of bourgeois and capitalist economy. The holy Russian state fell and a new one arose, also a holy one, inverted theocracy. An amazing transformation occurred, Marxism, so non-Russian in its original character and nature, acquired a Russian style, an Eastern style and almost touched on the Slavophiles [...]. Russian communism proclaimed again the old idea of Slavophiles and Dostoyevsky: *Ex Oriente lux*”<sup>24</sup>.

In conclusion, the greatest problem in accepting Berdyaev’s philosophy is that he broke from “earthly matters” in a Gnostic manner, which made his project exceptionally challenging, not to say impossible. Although “the fight against authority, against objectifying, namely against Caesar’s authority, takes place within the borders of the objectifying kingdom from which man cannot simply turn his back and depart”<sup>25</sup>. It is Berdyaev who incessantly claimed that man is not only able, but must, even in the name of his own salvation, thus eternal life, depart from this earthly kingdom. The alternative: freedom or objectifying excluded any compromise. Dostoyevsky comes to mind here: His Grand Inquisitor (who as we remember rules the world) says: freedom or “bread”. His Kirilov from *The Devils* concludes from the above: freedom, therefore death. Berdyaev, however, states: freedom, therefore Eschaton: transcending of time towards eternity. Here lies the fault of all these, not necessarily Russian, concepts arising from Christianity and operating according to the “either – or” principle. The criticism of imperfect human earthly contradictory values transforms into a strong conviction to resolve the history of this imperfect human tribe and commence a new era of the Spirit,

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Źródła i sens komunizmu rosyjskiego*, Antyk, Kęty 2005, p. 104 (English translation: *The Origin of Russian Communism*, London 1937).

<sup>25</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Królestwo Ducha i królestwo cesarza*, Antyk, Kęty 2003, p. 90 (English translation: *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, London 1952, New York 1953).

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where the empirical existence will finally converge with Godmanhood: the essence of man. Russian communism attempted to secularize this strive in its earthly circumstances. The outcome is known...

Translated by Agnieszka and Derrick Cook

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### *Summary*

This paper is a contribution to the constantly increasing Polish interest in Russian thought, especially in Nicolas Berdyaev's philosophy. It starts with a short synthesis of his philosophy. The differences between the Western way of thinking and Russian religious thinking are mentioned in passing. The author deals with Berdjaev's existential personalism, which, from the sociological point of view, can be described as freedom from the world. The thinker contrasts persons and their activities with the objectified world and emphasizes the existential strangeness of the person in the world of culture bound by different determining factors.

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