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BERDYAEV AND ORIGEN: A COMPARISON¹

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Canon Raven of the University of Cambridge, in his recently published book, expressed a significant, if somewhat startling, judgment regarding the historical trend of Western theology:

The first adequate theology, still perhaps the noblest ever formulated, [was] the Logos theology of the Greek Apologists, which had its fullest expression in the Christian Platonism of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. . . . It is one of the tragedies of history that the work of this brilliant succession of Christian thinkers was allowed not merely to come to an end, but to fall into neglect, oblivion and condemnation. If we are to handle effectively the task of elucidating a Christian theology for the twentieth century, we must, I think, ignore all the elaborate structures of later orthodoxy, Catholic and Protestant, which for today are literally irrelevant, and return to the point at which Origen was removed.²

Without necessarily sharing the sweeping generalization of the last sentence quoted—for I agree with Chesterton that all generalizations are wrong, including this one—I find myself in hearty accord with Canon Raven's opinion that Origen's system is one of the profoundest produced during the Christian centuries and deserves to find a worthy modern exponent. The latest writer on Origen, René Cadiou, likewise adjudges him a place among the greatest of Christian theologians.³

Fortunately, it is possible to recognize an exponent of much that is essential in Origenism in the modern Russian religious philosopher, Nicholas Alexandrovich Berdyaev. To be sure, as is the case with all real thinkers, Berdyaev's thought is in no sense a mere slavish restatement of any other man's views. Furthermore, this judgment is not invalidated, I think, even by the fact that Berdyaev does not too often refer to Origen in his writings, and when he does, not always favorably. The thesis propounded does not aim to prove that the Russian thinker is

1 The presidential address delivered at the meeting of the Society in New York on December 30, 1946.

2 Charles E. Raven, *Good News of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, n.d.), 98-99. Used by permission.

3 René Cadiou, *Origen: his life at Alexandria* (St. Louis, Mo., 1944), v.

consciously dependent upon Origen for his views; it only intends to point out that no matter how independently the two thinkers have arrived at their conclusions, they share to a considerable degree many essential tenets. Or to put it in another way, Berdyaev stands much closer to Origen than most religious thinkers of the present time. For his thought, exceedingly wide ranging and truly ecumenical, is basically faithful to the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition, a representative of which was Origen. Many characteristic views and emphases in interpretation by which the great Alexandrian's system is distinguished, are to be found, in a modern mode of expression, and in a form appropriate to one who had made the riches of modern philosophy his own, in Berdyaev's thought.

Nevertheless, to avoid a misunderstanding of Canon Raven's suggestion, it must be borne in mind that what he chiefly stressed was the Alexandrian Platonists' teaching that the Logos—the divine Reason—permeates nature and human history. He bewails the trend of the Barthian school toward restricting the divine revelation to the Bible, and the divine activity to the work of Christ in a narrow, non-cosmic sense of the word. Berdyaev's philosophy, although it includes Canon Raven's theological *desiderata*, ranges far beyond them. One suspects that in many respects Canon Raven would find in Berdyaev far more Origenism than he had bargained for.

Although Origen regarded the *regula fidei* as the basic requirement which was to be accepted by faith on the part of all Christians,⁴ yet the task of the theologian was to prove these beliefs reasonable. He was free to speculate about the fundamental truths in order to apprehend them intellectually, and to make them understandable to educated Christians. As is well known, Origen evolved a system which in its majestic sweep is breathtaking—from the eternity in which God alone existed, to the creation of the spiritual realm, to be followed by that of the world of time and space, and after an unimaginably long span of time, to be terminated by the return of all spirits to Him who had created them, in "the restoration of all things in Christ." He made the Platonic system, particularly in the interpretation which Ammonius Saccas had imposed upon it, tributary to his interpretation of the Christian faith. His thought refused to be bound by Tertullian's fulmination, "What has Athens to do with Jerusa-

4 G. W. Butterworth, tr., *Origen on the First Principles* (London, 1936), 2-6.

lem?" Moreover, he freely went beyond the scriptural canon. And within the canon, his allegorical method of interpretation gave him full freedom, if not license, in the exposition of the sacred text. He was a Christian Gnostic—to him, as to Clement of Alexandria, *all truth*, whether found among the Jews, Greeks, or barbarians, was derived from divine Reason, the eternal Logos. But Origen may be called Gnostic only in the sense here indicated, without implying that he shared the views of the current Gnostic sects. These he vehemently repudiated.⁵

The same majestic sweep of imagination, the same unrestrained freedom of seeking truth wherever it may be found, is characteristic of the mind of Berdyaev. In his *Slavery and Freedom*, the most autobiographical of his works, he tells us of the great minds which most stimulated his own thinking. He read philosophy ever since he was a boy. His was always the "existential type." Among his chief mentors he gratefully acknowledges Plato, Plotinus, Boehme, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Leontiev, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and many others.⁶ Of Origen, whom he regarded as too rationalistic, he says: "Origen was the greatest genius among the teachers of the Church, and he is justly compared with the greatest philosophers."⁷ These great minds all counted at one time or another, but none too much. Kant and Schopenhauer were among the first to impress him. But he never accepted their philosophy wholly. Tolstoy also influenced him greatly; nevertheless, he later repudiated the great novelist's religious views almost totally.⁸ As a student at the University of Kiev he came under the sway of Marx. But as he affirms, he has never been an orthodox Marxist, nor a materialist. Even while under the Marxian influence, he professed idealism in philosophy, and maintained that truth and goodness are values independent of outward circumstances. He believed that truth and justice determined the revolutionary attitude, but were not determined by it.⁹ Under these conditions, and despite his aristocratic family and connections—Berdyaev's father was governor of the Kiev province and a general—young Nicolas Alexandrovich rebelled

5 *Ibid.*, 19, 60, 133.

6 Nicolas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 8-9. Used by permission.

7 N. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody* (Moscow, 1911), 34.

8 N. Berdyaev, *O dostoinstve Khristianstva i nedostoinstve Khristian* (Warsaw, 1928), 21-23.

9 *Slavery and Freedom*, 13.

against his own social class and went over to the revolutionaries.¹⁰ Consequently, in 1898, he was arrested for subversive activities and exiled.

But the deterministic character of the thought of his more Marxian fellow-revolutionists soon compelled him to part company with them. He saw with grief that there was no more reverence for the dignity of personality among the Marxians than among the bourgeoisie. Nor did his fellow-Marxians have any more love for the freedom of the spirit than the other camp. This led to Berdyaev's conversion to the religious world view as alone consonant with true personalism. For one who had loved Dostoevsky ever since childhood, such a course was only to be expected. Ibsen taught him the significance of personality.¹¹ The earliest literary formulation of his views after the break with the Marxists, published in various journals and collected in 1907 in two volumes,¹² reveals him in his liberal phase of development. But even then the dominant characteristics of his mature world view—stressing spiritual freedom and the supreme value of personality—are already clearly discernible. In the *Sub specie aeternitatis*, which comprises articles published between 1900 and 1906, he declares that he passed from idealism to "mystical realism." He combats positivism, naturalism, hedonism, and utilitarianism and opposes Marxian historical materialism. As a former Marxist he was attacked by the orthodox defenders of that school. He replied to them in an article, "Critique of Historical Materialism," in which he concludes that "Only idealistic apprehension of history is possible. . . ."¹³ "Above all, we profess the absolute worth of man as an end in itself; it is not possible to reach that goal by the path of empiricism."¹⁴ That may be reached only by way of theanthropy. "I aim in my articles at theanthropy, the incarnation of the Spirit in society, at the mystical union of love and freedom. I proceed from the Marxist lie of universality, from the decadent-liberal individualism, to the universality of mystical neo-Christianity."¹⁵ Accordingly, Berdyaev opposed "the old, moribund church of the old reactionary religious orientation, and the government sanctioned by it: positivism and atheism of the old rationalistic orientation and the

10 *Ibid.*, 15.

11 N. Berdyaev, "Tri yubileya," in *Put'*, No. 11 (June, 1928), 82.

12 Nicolas Berdyaev, *Sub specie aeternitatis* (St. Petersburg, 1907).

13 *Ibid.*, 116.

14 *Ibid.*, 17.

15 *Ibid.*, 4.

false religion of social democracy sanctioned by it; and the anarchical irrationalism, chaotic mysticism, and the nihilism which is based on them. The new religious orientation, conventionally named neo-Christianity, lies at the basis of that which I place in opposition to the false tendencies."¹⁶ Berdyaev still regards himself a socialist, but would like to qualify the term by the adjective "Christian," were it not for the circumstance that Christian socialism is not recognized as true socialism by real socialists and is repudiated by them.¹⁷

It is clear from these early writings of Berdyaev that he ranged himself not only against the dominant naturalistic-rationalistic philosophical tendencies of the period, but also against the official Russian church. His "neo-Christianity" was derived from sources much wider than those recognized by the official church—the Scriptures and tradition. Like Origen, he referred to himself as a "Gnostic," or "Christian theosophist." He regarded himself as a Christian theosophist in the ancient sense of that term in which Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Jacob Boehme, Franz Baader, and Vladimir Solovev claimed that designation. His Origenism is expressly acknowledged in his statement: "I am infinitely close to Origen's gnosticism; I feel akin to such Eastern theologians-philosophers as St. Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Maximus the Confessor."¹⁸ Berdyaev deliberately transcended the limits of Western academic philosophical and theological sources of authority, both in Catholicism and Protestantism.¹⁹

Just as Origen's conception of the pre-existent spiritual world was among the chief stumbling blocks to later orthodox Christianity,²⁰ so are Berdyaev's views of the origin of freedom, and with it the origin of evil, the targets of criticism. Origen postulated two "creations," one of the spiritual world, the other of the space-time world. Berdyaev's view is similar. In his earlier phase of development, when he published his *Philosophy of Freedom* (1911), he affirms that the Creator endowed the crea-

16 *Novoe religioznoe soznanie*, vii.

17 N. Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time* (New York, 1935), 204.

18 Berdyaev, *Sub specie aeternitatis*, 436, footnote 1.

19 N. Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), xix. Used by permission.

20 At the Second Council of Constantinople held by Emperor Justinian in 553, Origen was condemned for holding, among other opinions, that prior to the creation of the space-time world, "all rational creatures consisted of minds, bodiless and immaterial . . ." Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles*, 125.

ture with freedom.²¹ This view does not differ from that of Origen, or from the currently accepted view. He furthermore denies God's responsibility for evil consequent upon freedom. Nevertheless, even at this time he thought of the origin of evil as being a preexistent act of self-assertion on the part of human spirit, and not an act taking place in the temporal world—let us say in the traditional Garden of Eden. Evil is “falling away from the absolute being which is accomplished by an act of freedom, and is a passage into the sphere of non-being. . . .”²² This is Berdyaev's early theory of the preexistent Fall.

Later, he accepted and made his own Jacob Boehme's concept of the *Ungrund*. He defines Boehme's *Ungrund* as “the primal, irrational, as yet dark and undetermined freedom. It is not evil, but makes evil possible; it contains potentiality of evil as well as of good. . . . It lies outside of God, outside of being, existing before all being which is already determined.”²³ Accordingly, freedom is uncreated. In fact, Boehme taught that God's freedom is as much derived from the *Ungrund* as man's. Berdyaev follows him even in this daring assertion. Thus his is a radical dualism, pushed back to ultimate beginnings. God created the world out of “meonic” stuff (Berdyaev distinguishes between the Greek terms *me on* and *ouk on*; the former possesses a potentiality of being, while the latter does not) which already comprised primal undifferentiated freedom prior to the distinction between good and evil.²⁴ It is the *Ungrund* which is the initial source of freedom. God, therefore, is not responsible for evil consequent upon, and inseparable from, freedom. God is supreme over being, but has no control over non-being, over the uncreated freedom. “Evil is non-being and has its roots in non-existence. But non-being can have no meaning, for meaning is always ontological.”²⁵

There are, therefore, similarities and dissimilarities between the views of Berdyaev and Origen. The basic similarity appears in the assertion of both thinkers that there exists a spiritual world which is prior to the temporal, and to which the origin of freedom, and therefore evil consequent upon it, must be referred. Both strenuously deny that God is responsible for evil,

21 *Filosofiya svobody*, 148.

22 *Ibid.*, 144-48.

23 *Put'*, No. 18 (September, 1929), 120.

24 N. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (New York, 1937), 47.

25 *Freedom and the Spirit*, 163; also *Filosofiya svobody*, 142, 145.

and ascribe evil to the wrong exercise of freedom on the part of human spirits. In fact, in an effort to guard against the charge that God is responsible for evil, Berdyaev proposes a remedy which is worse than the disease. It is at this point that he and Origen part company. Berdyaev, following Boehme, holds a doctrine of uncreated freedom comprised in the original "meonic" matter. There existed, therefore, prior to creation, a potentiality which God did not control. He is not Creator in the absolute sense of the word. The temporal world and human freedom have a double origin: God's creative activity *and* the *Ungrund*. Origen, on the other hand, holds that God is the Creator of the world in an absolute sense. He specifically denies, apparently against the upholders of the Aristotelian notion (also held by Marcion), that the world is eternal, and that matter is uncreated.²⁶ Even qualities of matter were created by God.²⁷

The notion of freedom of human spirits, which is fundamental to both thinkers whose systems are under consideration, must be further elaborated. Origen stressed the tenet that rational spirits, existing in the preexistent, spiritual world, were free and equal so that they could not be forced to any action except such as they freely chose.²⁸ The Scriptures, according to him, contain "ten thousand passages which with utmost clearness prove the existence of free will."²⁹ Similarly Berdyaev. Man's freedom is likewise fundamental to his world view, and he also traces its origin to the preexistent world. In fact, he may be regarded as the philosopher of freedom *par excellence*, as Count Keyserling, in the preface to the German translation of Berdyaev's *Meaning of History*, called him. A free man is necessary to God. Since God is love, and love cannot exist in a vacuum but must go out to an object and must be reciprocated, He desired a being capable of such a free response. Therefore, man must be a free agent. But because man is a free spirit, he is not only capable of responding to God's love, but also of rejecting God and of affirming himself instead. This self-affirmation is the "Fall," as has already been shown. Origen, following Plato, held that rational spirits had sinned in the preexistent world, "and on that account fell from the state in which they were, [and] in proportion to their particular sins were envelop-

26 Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles*, 321, 30.

27 *Ibid.*, 322, 323.

28 *Ibid.*, 77.

29 *Ibid.*, 166.

ed in bodies as a punishment.”³⁰ Berdyaev likewise places this fateful event in the preexistent, spiritual world, for it took place before time began and produced time.³¹ In fact, he even agrees with Origen in affirming that in the spiritual world all rational beings are equal,³² i.e., there was originally no distinction between men and angels, as Thomas Aquinas later taught.

Thus for him as for Origen the world, the place created purposely as the abode of fallen human spirits, is a place of discipline, redemptive opportunity. Accordingly, terrestrial history is preceded by a prologue in the spiritual, preexistent world—as it is in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But for Berdyaev this was at first true in a more radical—or more orthodox—sense than it had been for the Alexandrian philosopher: the latter, holding to the notion of plurality of worlds, which existed before the present one as others shall exist after this one passes away,³³ could afford to grant each fallen spirit almost endlessly repeated chances to find his way back to God. Not so Berdyaev. Since he limited the redemptive chance to this terrestrial life alone, he of necessity held that “the life of each man on earth is a moment of absolute being and another such moment for the work of salvation shall not be given.”³⁴ But later he changed his mind, and adopted a position closer to Origen’s. By 1927, when he published the Russian original of his *Freedom and the Spirit*, he already felt it difficult to hold a metaphysical system “which makes the eternal destiny of the soul dependent on this temporal life, which exists merely from the cradle to the grave.”³⁵ Moreover, he likewise rejects Origen’s theory of transmigration of unredeemed souls. Reincarnation on the earth appears to him incompatible with Christianity.³⁶

Berdyaev’s belief in the preexistence of souls exhibits some really astonishing features, for although he is perhaps alone among the religious thinkers of our day to hold the tenet, he makes no particular effort to establish it. He merely assumes it. I have found only one reference in his very extensive writings

30 *Ibid.*, 67, 126. Plato taught the doctrine of soul’s descent in *Phaedrus* (B. Jowett, tr., *The Dialogues of Plato* [New York, 1907], I, 553.) Origen alludes to it in *Contra Celsum*, IV, 40, where he says that the Christian doctrine far exceeds that of Plato.

31 *Freedom and the Spirit*, 22.

32 *Ibid.*, 344.

33 Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles*, 83, 239.

34 *Filosofiya svobody*, 151.

35 *Freedom and the Spirit*, 323.

36 *Ibid.*, 326.

(although a few are not accessible to me) where he blandly remarks that the commonly held view of the creation of each human soul at the time of physical conception is untenable.³⁷ To be sure, the belief in the preexistence of souls is perhaps as logical as any other theory which attempts to account for the origin of human personality. It is remarkable that if modern theologians ignore it, modern biological physiologists, with their theory of genes as the physical bases of personality, come closest to giving it aid and comfort. Moreover, the doctrine of the survival of human personality confronts the same objections as that of the preexistence of the spiritual world. But could not Berdyaev have made an effort to deal with the existing theories and grapple with the obvious objections to his view? Where has he himself found it? It is found neither in the Eastern nor the Western traditions, with the sole exception of Origenism. And if that be his source, one wonders why he did not say so.

But equally decisive is the role of human freedom in history. In fact, the tortuous, tragic development of mankind from the animal to the sage and saint is fundamentally the story of human freedom, of human self-affirmation. For the world of space and time is the training ground of human beings. Berdyaev, unlike Origen, for whom the present life was but one phase of the redemptive process, is greatly occupied with the problem of the meaning of history. As early as 1911 he presented his views on this subject in his *Philosophy of Freedom*.³⁸ He reworked the same theme in an expanded form eleven years later and delivered it during the winter 1919-1920 as a series of lectures in the Great Academy of Spiritual Culture in Moscow. Soon after, in 1922, he was expelled from the Soviet Union, partly on account of the views expounded in the lectures. They were published under the title *The Meaning of History*.³⁹ In the book Berdyaev ascribes the terrible tragedy of human history to the exercise of free will, or rather to the habitual choice of evil in the exercise of freedom on the part of "fallen" man. "The world process . . . implies a terrible tragedy, and history is a succession of calamitous events in the center of which stands the Crucifixion, the Cross on which the Son of God Himself was crucified, because God had desired freedom and because the primal drama and mystery of the world are those relations be-

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Filosofiya svobody* (Moscow, 1911).

³⁹ *Smysl istorii* (Berlin, 1923).

tween God and His other self which He loves and by which He desires to be loved. And only freedom endows this love with any significance."⁴⁰

But many of Berdyaev's critics object: if all evil is derived from man's will, and God cannot change it because of His self-limiting restraint in regard to human freedom, is not God really powerless to work out His purposes in the world? Is there nothing God can change? And if that be true, is not human freedom defeating God's purpose?

Berdyaev answers this challenge in a way in which he allies himself most closely with the "existential" philosophy. The following quotations are taken from his latest book, and presumably represent the latest phase of his thinking. But I believe it would not be correct to hold that his eclectic use of some premises of existential philosophy necessarily contradicts or invalidates his consistent adherence to an ontological type of world view. To return, then, to Berdyaev's defense against his critics, he counters by a radical denial that God is the Creator of the world order, which is but a product of objectivization on the part of "fallen" man. "God is not world providence, that is to say not a ruler and sovereign in the universe, not *pantokrator*. God is freedom and meaning, love and sacrifice; He is struggle against the objectivized word order." The problem of theodicy "is solved only on the existential plane where God reveals Himself as freedom, love and sacrifice, where He suffers for man and strives together with man against the falsity and wrong of the world, against the intolerable suffering of the world. There is no need to justify, we have no right to justify, all the unhappiness, all the suffering and evil in the world with the help of the idea of God as Providence and Sovereign of the Universe. This is a hard saying. One must turn to God for the struggle on behalf of freedom, on behalf of righteousness, on behalf of the enlightening and betterment of existence."⁴¹

Berdyaev summarizes the meaning of history as a process of redemption from sin and a return of the creature to the Creator, a free union of man with God, and the final relegation of evil to the sphere of non-being.⁴² By their fall away from the pre-existent state, all beings endowed with freedom have themselves

40 Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 58. Used by permission.

41 *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 89. Used by permission.

42 *Filosofiya svobody*, 150.

determined their place in the world of time and space. "The task of history is not a victory over suffering and unhappiness (result), but a creative victory over evil and sin (cause)."⁴³ Accordingly, history is "a progressive return of humankind to God in a direct line which is to be terminated by the end of this world."⁴⁴ This essentially agrees with Origenism.

Berdyayev then proceeds to discuss the course of Western European history from this philosophical point of view. The religious development of the pre-Christian period he characterizes as a preparation for the coming of Christ. The incarnation of the Logos is the focal point of world history—the revelation of God to mankind. But as for historic Christianity, that is but a compromise with paganism. Of such nature are "Christian government" and "Christian society."

The Middle Ages is a period of great cultural and religious creativity.

It is an epoch not only the most ascetic, but also the most sensuous . . . giving birth equally to the ideal of the monk and the knight, of the feudal anarchy and of the Holy Roman Empire; to the world denial on the part of the Church and the world domination by that same Church; to the ascetic exploits of monasticism and the knightly cult of the beautiful woman. This epoch emphasized dualism in all spheres of being and placed before future mankind unresolved problems: above all, the problem of comprising within the confines of the Church all activity, and the subjection of all human life to theocracy. . . . We know very well that medieval men not seldom were coarse and cruel, that medieval theocracy supplanted the rule of God by the rule of man; that with the age are bound the Inquisition and superstition; but all that only emphasizes the dual and complex character of the epoch.⁴⁵

As for medieval Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, Berdyayev condemns the former as papal caesarism

in which the divine rule was supplanted by human rule, the pope was acknowledged the vicar of Christ and was almost deified. The Catholic teaching regarding the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the pope at the head was a false religious anthropology and revealed the absence of true religious anthropology—the revelation of the Godmanhood, in which Christ Himself is emperor and high priest and has no vicar. . . . The Western papalism was a patent seduction of the ruler of this world, a continuation of the pagan empire—the *imperium romanum*—with which the Catholic Church has much in common.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁵ *Filosofiya svobody*, 176-77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 179; cf. *Freedom and the Spirit*, 344 ff; also *O dostoinstve Khristianstva i nedostoinstve Khristian*, 16-17.

Byzantinism, on the other hand, fell prey to the opposite temptation, that of caesaropapism. There man "acknowledged the emperor as the vicar of Christ, and almost deified him."⁴⁷ Thus papal caesarism and caesaropapism were but two false forms of Christian government. But "government cannot be a form of Christian society; accordingly, the Catholic papalism and Byzantine caesarism are vestiges of paganism, signs that humankind has not yet accepted Christ."⁴⁸

Berdyayev passes even more severe judgment upon the modern period, which he quite properly defines as the area of the Renaissance, and which he considers to be just ending. Its chief spiritual characteristic is humanism—the self-assertion of man. For it possesses a positive character of its own; it is not a mere rebirth of classical antiquity. The Renaissance man did not merely return to the world view of the Greek and Latin cultures—he could not do so even if he had wanted. For, after all, he had lived through more than a millenium of Christian culture which had become part and parcel of him. He only affirmed his newly-discovered individuality in terms of the ancient culture. But in it all he was consciously or unconsciously affirming or denying his Christian self. It was impossible for him to accept ancient paganism with all its original connotation: if the terms were pagan, the content was not.⁴⁹ At first, the humanistic self-assertion, the assertion of the mangod as against the godman, took the aesthetic form in the outburst of astonishingly powerful artistic creativity such as the Western world had not witnessed since the days of Phidias and Praxiteles. Boccacio and Dante, Giotto and Michelangelo, are the chief representatives of that glorious period of "the flowering of the Renaissance."

The same creative spirit manifested itself in the religious realm in the Reformation period. Man affirmed himself by repudiating the intermediary ecclesiastical organization which interposed itself between him and God. He insisted upon asserting the rights of his own conscience, upon his own immediate approach to God. Being a revolt, the Reformation was necessarily one-sided, over-emphatic. It is interesting to note Berdyayev's opinion of Protestantism, expressed as early as 1911:

Protestantism was not only a rupture with the Church, but also a healthy reaction against the deviations of Catholicism, against the degen-

⁴⁷ *Filosofiya svobody*, 180.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴⁹ "The End of Renaissance," in *Slavonic Review*, IV (1925), 5.

eracy within the Church. Protestantism attempted to renew the freedom of Christ which had been completely lost. In Protestantism was affirmed the principle of personality which lay at the basis of Christ's religion. The false teaching of medieval Catholicism regarding man, and the false debasement of man's personality, brought about the protest the relative correctness of which is beyond doubt. Protestantism was bound to make its appearance, because there existed in the history of Christianity no positive religious anthropology, and the vacancy was filled by a false anthropology. In the Protestant affirmation of personality and of freedom the new man was initiated, the man of modern history. In its beginnings, Protestantism was mystical,⁵⁰ but it did not possess within itself a creative religious force. It contained only a negative truth. In its further development it passed into rationalism. If there existed in Catholicism a false, misleading teaching regarding the Church, there still existed the Church; but in Protestantism the very idea of the Church gradually began to disappear. Rationalistic individualism, and the later positivism manifested themselves within the limits of that negative development.⁵¹

This rationalistic and moralistic tendency Berdyaev identifies particularly with Kant who, in his judgment,

was the continuator of Luther, the creator of philosophical Protestantism. . . . The Protestant rationalistic theology of the nineteenth century (Ritschl, Harnack) is founded on Kantianism. Protestantism broke the mystical threads which bound men to the Church. . . . Thereupon, Protestantism transferred the center of life's gravity and knowledge into the subjective world of man, into an isolated, self-contained soul.⁵²

Thus Berdyaev charges that Protestantism produced the Age of Enlightenment, rationalism, the French Revolution, positivism, and communism. But is this accusation just and fair? It does not appear so. For was it not the neo-pagan Renaissance, with its inherent humanism, its naturalistic and anti-Christian tendencies, which resulted in the Cartesian rationalism and Lockean empiricism, and the later movements deriving from these?

The third stage of human self-assertion is to be seen in the Age of Enlightenment, beginning with Cartesian rationalism and Lockean empiricism. In this phase, the creative force of the original impulse has exhausted itself. Thus we live in the last stages of the Renaissance era. Hume's skeptical philosophy is almost a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole empirico-rationalistic presuppositions, for Hume denies that there is either a thinker, or anything to think about, but merely a steady flux of thought. "Liberation from the false theocracy and denial of man led to

50 In a footnote Berdyaev asserts that German mysticism constituted the eternal principle of Protestantism.

51 *Filosofiya svobody*, 181.

52 *Ibid.*, 123; cf. *Freedom and the Spirit*, 354-55.

the overthrow of every religious sanctity, to the deifying of man and mankind, to atheism. Accordingly, all humanistic liberating process is of a dual character: it comprises a great truth, part of the religion of godmanhood, and a great lie, part of the emerging religion of human self-deification . . . Humanism, the religion of humanity, of human power and human superiority, become the pathos of the new humankind which has lost God."⁵³ The nineteenth century completed the process of negation: the philosophical development, culminating in Marx and Nietzsche, resulted in the negation of humanism. These two thinkers "have, with the precision of genius, defined the two forms of self-negation and self-destruction of humanism. Nietzsche shows us humanism destroying and denying itself individually; Marx . . . collectively . . . Nietzsche conceives man as degraded and ignominious; he aspires to his conquest; his will aims at the superman. The ethical teaching of Nietzsche does not admit the value of human personality. . . . In Nietzsche's teaching the superman replaces the lost God. . . . In the same way it [the human ideal] perishes in the super-human collectivism of Marx. . . . But in him, too, . . . humanism transforms itself into its opposite: into anti-humanism."⁵⁴

Thus the whole modern phase, particularly that beginning with the Cartesian "*faux pas*," as Archbishop Temple has called it, ended disastrously in the denial of man and of all authentic humanism.⁵⁵ This is the greatest failure in modern history, as all the preceding periods were likewise failures. "The Renaissance did not succeed; the Reformation did not succeed; the Revolution, originating in the Age of Enlightenment, did not succeed; its illusions lie scattered; the coming socialism will also fail of success."⁵⁶

Accordingly, "the fate of man in the modern world" is a paradoxical one; for modern man belongs to an age which began with humanism and ended in dehumanization. The dominance of technics in our modern society, the supremacy of our economic interests, philosophy of "futilitarianism" which actually treats spiritual life of mankind as "epiphenomenal," characterize our age. The capitalistic, bourgeois society is anti-personalistic; but the collectivist, socialist society is equally so. Both sacrifice personal values.

⁵³ *Filosofiya svobody*, 183.

⁵⁴ "The End of Renaissance," 16.

⁵⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 219.

⁵⁶ "The End of Renaissance," 12.

What remedy, then, can Christianity offer to this modern world which is collapsing and disintegrating before our eyes? Is salvation to be conceived in almost exclusively eschatological terms, i.e., is man to do nothing but quietistically wait for the divine judgment at the end of the world? Or is the Church once more to impose its control upon human society in order to save it by force, as the Roman Catholic Church conceives the task? Berdyaev rejects both these alternatives, although there are elements in the former view with which he would agree. His answer is in accordance with the ancient tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. He even uses the age-long terminology for it, although its connotation is relatively modern, having been wrought during the last one hundred years by the great lay theologians, Khomyakov, Solovev, and Dostoevsky. He terms it theanthropy—the godmanhood. The chief task of human life is to attain the transformation of the human into theanthropic. Accordingly, life is important.

If to Origen the world was created as the abode of fallen spirits and hence exists primarily as a place of discipline, it is not difficult to understand that he would not be greatly interested in the improvement of evil conditions. Each soul is undergoing a remedial treatment; each finds itself in an earthly environment commensurate with the sins committed by it in the preexistent world. The important thing is that such a soul find its way back to God. Moreover, there are other aeons, both in the past and the future, in which the work of purgation had gone on and will continue to go on.⁵⁷

Berdyaev was similarly criticized for lacking a real appreciation of the significance of this world. One of his Russian fellow-exiles accused him of “farsightedness,” of living on a “two-dimensional plane,” i.e., of dwelling in eternity rather than in the empirical world, emphasizing chiefly the spiritual existence prior and subsequent to our aeon.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Berdyaev in reality has a tremendous interest in formulating a Christian ethic. His book, *The Destiny of Man*, is devoted to this task.⁵⁹

His concept of salvation is that of transformation of human into divine-human, theanthropic personality. Christianity is a religion of redemption, of grace. But Berdyaev rejects all juri-

57 Butterworth, *Origen on the First Principles*, 78, 89, 126, 209, 237ff., 244ff., 249.

58 F. Stepun, “Po povodu pisma N. A. Berdyaeva,” in *Sovremennyya zapiski*, XXIV (1925), 304ff.

59 N. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (New York, 1937).

dical, forensic theories of justification, such as have been dominant in the West. He regards them as quite unworthy of the God who was revealed in Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ Redemption is not a judgment but a transforming process. This concept is wholly consonant with the dominant soteriological interest of the Christian East, beginning with Irenaeus and including Origen—an interest in transformation of human nature. Thus redemption is the work of divine love, not justice; of sacrifice on God's part, not propitiation of an angry Deity on man's part. It is a dual process; both God and man share in it. Moreover, it aims not merely at the restoration of the original state of man before the Fall, but at elevating man to a higher state. For man who had fallen away from God and afterwards voluntarily returns to Him, is ethically on a higher plane than the "innocent" spirit which has never sinned at all.

The process here spoken of is often referred to by the favorite traditional Eastern term of "deification," *theosis*. Berdyaev, like Irenaeus, does not shrink from using this daring language. But although to the sober Western taste such usage appears intemperate, as tending to obliterate the everlasting distinction between the creature and the Creator and landing one in the pantheistic "night in which all cows are black," Berdyaev's ecstatic vision of transformed humanity falls just short of the extremes of mystical pantheism. Nevertheless, one may find many expressions scattered throughout his writings which could better have been couched in less extravagant terms.⁶¹ In this respect, it is difficult to save Berdyaev from a justifiable stricture, at least for lack of clarity in statement, and perhaps for fuzziness of thought.

But Berdyaev condemns exclusive preoccupation with one's own salvation as "a satanic caricature of Christianity," or "minimum morality"—that of transcendental egoism. The purpose of the transformation of the individual believer is the transformation of society. For everyone is responsible for everyone else. In the realm of the spirit there is no such thing as a self-contained and isolated personality. "True heavenly bliss is impossible for me if I isolate myself from the world-whole and care about myself only. . . . Hence there can be no individual salvation or salvation of the elect only."⁶²

60 *Freedom and the Spirit*, 172.

61 *The Destiny of Man*, 106, 377; *Slavery and Freedom*, 45.

62 *Ibid.*, 25.

Thus man is saved in order that through his creative energies, sanctified and freely yielded to God, he may be used by God toward the transformation of human society. When man's energies are not so utilized, they are abused and finally work his destruction. Striving to become a mangod instead of Godman, man destroys himself, after having wrought havoc, misery, and suffering to others by his titanic efforts. Such is the paradox of humanism: to affirm oneself is to destroy oneself.

Transformation of society cannot be effected forcibly. The Church, which has for its aim the transformation of man and society, and which is the society of transformed persons, works not through outward, forcible means, but by inner regeneration of men. To charge Christianity with failure to dominate society is to misunderstand completely its nature.⁶³ The "failure of Christianity" is chargeable only to the failure of Christians, or the failure of non-Christians who refuse to accept Christianity.⁶⁴ God compels no one to believe in Him or to obey Him. He will force no one into communion with Himself. But to reject Him is only to choose evil and its consequent suffering.

But in view of this strong and constantly iterated emphasis on man's freedom, one may understand why Berdyaev does not share the expectancy of the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. In the first place, such expectancy is often based on the mechanical notion of "progress" which he scornfully rejects. Secondly, since God does not force anyone to choose good, the possibility of rejecting God to the bitter end must be admitted and expected.

Accordingly, Berdyaev concludes that the realization of God's purpose—both in Christianity and human history generally—is not possible within time, but only in eternity. Christianity is a historical religion; but it has never been realized in history, and never shall be. It transcends history. Thus the destiny of the human spirit began prior to the creation of the empirical world, and shall be consummated beyond the span of that world. This is again a characteristic Origenistic notion. Nevertheless, history has a positive significance. It matters tremendously what one makes of his life.

But does Berdyaev share the sweeping speculation of Origen that ultimately all souls, including even the first and chief of

63 Emery Reves, *The Anatomy of Peace* (New York, 1945), 76ff., does it with a vengeance!

64 *O dostoinstve Khristianstva i nedostoinstve Khristian*, 9.

those spirits who had fallen away from God, shall find their way back to the Great Spirit, when "the goodness of God through Christ will restore his entire creation to one end, even his enemies being conquered and subdued"? For "the process will go on through the innumerable ranks of those who are making progress and becoming reconciled to God from their state of enmity, until it reaches even to the last enemy, who is called death, in order that he, too, may be destroyed and remain an enemy no longer."⁶⁵

Berdyaev does not appear to have reached full clearness upon this matter. His prevailing opinion is against it. His oft repeated view of immortality implies a repudiation of the doctrine of universal restoration. Although each human soul begins as a spiritual being, yet, having fallen to the level of the terrestrial plane, it may become so completely dominated by self-will as to destroy itself. In other words, the natural man possesses immortality only potentially. He acquires it by a process of struggle which is identified with the development of personality. The eternal and immortal part of man is not his body or soul, but the spirit. It is the latter which, by realizing the image of God, and by dominating the natural elements, attains to personality.⁶⁶ Accordingly, personality is the highest value in the world.

Furthermore, Berdyaev's radical doctrine of human freedom likewise argues against Origenistic universalism. For man must have the possibility of defying God forever, or, as Berdyaev put it, man "has a right to hell, as it were."⁶⁷ Since he often speaks of evil as being by nature self-destructive, it would appear that instead of thinking of the process of human defiance of God as endless, he would logically assert that it is terminated by man's self-destruction. But Berdyaev does not say so. In one passage, he expresses himself critically about Origen's attempt to elaborate a dogmatic theory about the tenet,⁶⁸ and goes on to say that a definite dogmatic solution has not yet been found. He prefers to think that it is a mystery incapable of solution by human reason.

Nevertheless, Berdyaev has many times expressed himself enthusiastically regarding the "destruction of the last enemy," death. He appears to have formed some concrete theory regard-

65 Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles*, 52; *cf.* also 251-52.

66 *The Destiny of Man*, 325; also *Freedom and the Spirit*, 54-55.

67 *Freedom and the Spirit*, 324.

68 *Ibid.*, 323.

ing the *modus operandi*, which he frankly confesses to have derived from N. F. Fedorov.⁶⁹ But what this theory is I have never been able to understand, for the works of Fedorov are not available to me. From the summary statements of Fedorov's views which appear in Berdyaev's writings I have an impression that it is even more of a mystery incapable of solution by human reason than is the Origenistic universalism.

Such is the grandiose world view of the most radical modern exponent of spiritual freedom. But it is scarcely likely that Berdyaev will exercise a wide influence upon Western philosophical and theological thought. Nevertheless, a truly ecumenical approach to modern Christianity requires that the whole Christian tradition be sympathetically considered. In this Christian tradition, Origenism certainly holds a secure place. And I hope it has been made sufficiently clear that among the exponents of this tradition may be counted Nicholas Alexandrovich Berdyaev.

⁶⁹ Berdyaev writes about Fedorov in "Tri yubileya (L. Tolstoy, H. Ibsen, N. Fedorov), in "Put", No. 11, June, 1928; there is an utterly unenlightening excerpt from Fedorov's work in the same magazine (No. 10, April 1928).