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Nikolai Berdyaev On Liberalism and the Dignity of the Human Being¹

God without man, an 'inhuman' God,
would be Satan, not God the Trinity.

-Nikolai Berdyaev

Because of the event of the Incarnation, it is probably not so difficult to accept that God is *in* time, as much as it is challenging to admit that time is *in* God. By the same token, it is less inconceivable to think that God is *in* man than to consent that man is *in* God.

Time is movement, but the perfect and self-sufficient God of theism is immobile. God of theism is also a God of monism and subordination. Since theism cannot find motive for movement in God it has confined itself to monism because the begetting of the Son and the spiration of the Spirit are a theogony, movement in the innermost life of God. It inevitably follows that the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father. If movement is by definition

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unthinkable, even if it leads to two other Hypostases, how to explain the movement towards the creation of the multiple worlds? Monism thus leads to monophysitism and acosmism. For monism, this world is nothing but an appearance and illusion, and it has no real, ontological existence. Monism associates movement only with the plural and illusory world and leaves the divine life unaffected by it. This bears grave consequences both for the concept of God and the notion of the human being. God is depicted as the creator of delusions whilst the human person is only a victim of his heartless experiment.

How are we to explain the origin [of the plural world] in this so-called absolute life to which no form of human movement... is applicable? Neither the pantheistic monism of the Hindoo type... nor Parmenides; nor Plato, who was unable to bridge the dualism of the unique-immobile and the plural-mobile world; nor Plotinus; nor, finally, the abstract monism of German idealism, were able to achieve it. It remains an insoluble mystery to them all.²

Contemporary European democracies, and Liberalism, in particular, are established upon the foundations of Humanism. Humanism, as its name entails, denotes the elevation of the human being and setting up of the person in the centre of the universe. Humanism was a reaction against the mediaeval view of the omnipotent and omniscient God of theism and monism we have just described. Humanism searches for an understanding of man that would

² Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie, (San Rafael, CA, 2009), 46.

fulfil man's intuitive desire for self-confidence and self-esteem – genuine human dignity. What kind of freedom would be sufficient and adequate for true human dignity? What is the 'myth' that would embody the ultimate fulfilment of our inmost desire for dignity?

Whilst affirming human self-respect against the theistic image of God, humanism contained an opposed principle, that of man's abasement. Humanism found itself in a major philosophical cul-de-sac: how to reconcile the all-powerful and perfect God with the dignity of the human person, i.e., the doctrine of the omnipotent God with the teaching of *imago Dei*. It seems that classical teaching on divine omnipotence is irreconcilable with the idea of *imago Dei*. As we know, the Church Fathers describe God's icon as the *autoexousion*. That one is created according to the divine image means that one owns absolute power of self-determination. Nothing and nobody determines my freedom, not even God. Berdyaev explains, 'personality determines itself from within... and only determination from within and arising out of freedom is personality.'³ Although human personality is created, it possesses the capacity for autonomous self-determination.

Humanistic concept of individual

³ N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (San Rafael, CA, Semantron Press, 2009), 22. *O rabstvye i svobodye chelovyeka*, (Paris, YMCA-Press), 24.

Faced with this radical understanding of freedom, which originates from, and is dictated by, the deepest realms of the human being, most of the humanistic thinkers chose to reject both God and the idea of the divine icon. Within the framework of the omnipotent God, the doctrine of *imago Dei* seemed to be nothing but a flamboyant metaphor, a consolation for the redundant and unneeded creature. Humanism, therefore, denied man's divine sonship and proclaimed that man is the son of nature. Hence, Humanism not only avowed man's self-confidence, but it also debased him, by defining him as a product of natural necessity, as a being that shares all defects and limitations of nature. The natural man was divorced from the spiritual. The Christian view of man began to lose its strength, but instead of leading to the liberation, the death of the Christian doctrine only gave rise to a self-destructive dialectic within humanism.

European democracy, in Berdyaev's view, rests upon the humanistic principle of sociological positivism according to which true freedom has a social origin. Even the most liberal of all democracies have never known the spiritual bases of freedom. Liberalism, argues the Russian philosopher, has created a 'one-planed' being, it has separated the citizen from the integral personality, by refusing to admit the spiritual dimension of the human being.

Freedom of the individual, as defined by Liberalism, is about atomistic, particular liberty, mainly depicted as freedom *from* the oppression of society. But freedom *for* or positive freedom of Liberalism is by definition confined to the subjective or psychological level. It is a 'leave me alone' type of freedom, freedom the essence of which is self-defence of the individual from the collective subjects of society, state or nation. Defining him as a completely natural creature, Liberalism forever condemns the individual to one-plane enslavement by the natural and sociological necessities.

Liberalism is exclusively a social philosophy: the liberals are social-minded and for them, liberty means only a form of political organisation for society, whereby society grants certain subjective rights to its citizens. Liberalism is a one-planed world-concept: it fails to see that man belongs to two planes of being.⁴

Berdyayev stresses that true freedom cannot be simply a formal self-defence, that it must lead to creative activity. This is why the transition is inevitable from formal liberty, which protects us and defends us, to true freedom capable not only of creatively transforming the human society but also of creating a new world.⁵ The problem of freedom, therefore, is vastly deeper than that of Liberalism.⁶ It concerns the question of the origin, the meaning, and the destiny of the human being.

⁴ FMMW, 48.

⁵ FMMW, 46.

⁶ FMMW, 45.

Humanism has given birth to the notion of *the individual*, which resembles very much a windowless, Leibnitzian *monad*. For Leibnitz, a monad is a simple substance, 'it is closed, shut up, it has neither window nor doors', explains Berdyaev.⁷ One may even argue that the structure of the monad is akin to the perfect and self-sufficient, immovable and changeless God of theism. As we know, theistic God is *actus purus*, God who does not change because his entire potential is equal to his actuality. God-*actus purus* is perfect and he cannot become 'more perfect'. He is free because he does not have to move. He is free because he does not need, and will never need, to create something new. He is free not to have to create and move. Movement is considered as a sign of imperfection, it does not have an ontological value, and is reserved solely for the realm of the created world. The movement towards the creation of the world, therefore, has no ontological consequences. By creating the world, God does not add anything to his being, nor would he lose anything should the world cease to exist. In this sense, God *does not need* the world.

Individual or monad is a being with no ontological potential or implication. Freedom of the individual cannot be conceived of as uniqueness or ontological otherness. To be unique, or to have 'absolute ontological

⁷ SF, 22; RSCH, 20.

otherness',⁸ implies that there is in one's identity something that does not exist in any other identity, including God's. But how can there be something that does not exist *in* God, that God does not have if He has created everything that is? Or, perhaps, there *is* something that God *did not create*?

Freedom of the individual is therefore illusory as much as his ontological otherness. One is free to dwell in a temporary redundancy, and one is free to be 'saved' from it, but 'to be saved' means to jump from the frying pan into the fire, that is, to exchange historical and fleeting redundancy for the eternal one.

Fleeing from the theistic God, who expresses his omnipotence by the absolute power of determination and control, Humanism chose to entirely reject God as well as the idea of the divine image. As a result, Humanism embraces the notion of the individual, which connotes a 'one-planed' being, being that belongs only to the realm of nature and is limited by natural laws.

The Christian concept of personality

Berdyayev claims that Christianity, on the other hand, found a way to resolve the problem of human freedom by creating the concept of personality.

⁸ For John Zizioulas, freedom means to be other in an absolute ontological sense. John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 11.

Personality belongs not only to nature but also to the spirit. In Berdyaev's vocabulary, nature denotes determination whereas spirit signifies freedom. To be free means to be created in the divine image, that is, to possess radical power of self-determination. Berdyaev is, of course, aware that the conventional notion of God's omnipotence is in stark conflict with the concept of *imago Dei*. Why, then, is he promoting Christianity as a religion of freedom?

Well, he is not. He discerns between two types of Christianity: between historic Christianity, which is 'the work of man' – and this 'work has been both bad and good'⁹ - and the renewed and transfigured Christianity. Historic Christianity is not fit to be the leader of the revolution for the sake of personality because it has betrayed God's very idea of *man and His image, as has that of the God-man and Divine-human life*.¹⁰ This Christianity, in Berdyaev's words, "has not yet revealed itself as a religion of freedom".¹¹

He believes that history now judges Christianity in all the domains of human life and culture. This is essentially judgement upon false *monism* and false *dualism*, upon extreme immanentism as well as extreme

⁹ FMMW, 118.

¹⁰ FMMW, 122.

¹¹ N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. by Donald A. Lowrie, Semantron Press, San Rafael CA 2008, 158. *Smysl tvorchestva: Opyt opravdaniia cheloveka* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1991), 191.

transcendentalism.¹² The divine has been torn apart from the human.¹³ Christianity has been all too often anti-human, insisting more on the commandment to love God than to love the human being.¹⁴

Christian piety all too often has seemed to be withdrawal from the world and from men, a sort of transcendental egoism, the unwillingness to share the suffering of the world and man. It was not sufficiently infused with Christian love and mercy. It lacked human warmth. And the world has risen in protest against this sort of piety, as a refined form of egoism...¹⁵

Christians have drawn false conclusions from the doctrine of original sin and have denied human creative capacities. As a result of an incorrect concept of asceticism, Christianity has been antagonistic to cultural creativity. It was too late when Christianity decided to endorse creativity in culture, and hence - human creative culture got out of Christian hands.¹⁶

In short, Berdyaev detects a fundamental setback in Christian teaching, which is responsible for the debacle of historical Christianity.

Most of the deformation and clouding of Christianity has come about because man found it difficult to take in *the full truth of God-manhood*. Now man has turned to God and away from man, now toward man and away from God... The problem of Christian anthropology, *the religious question of mankind*, is the basic problem of our epoch. And *only the fullness of Christian truth* can fight successfully against dehumanization, and prevent the final destruction of man.¹⁷

¹² FMMW, 120.

¹³ FMMW, 122.

¹⁴ FMMW, 122.

¹⁵ FMMW, 123.

¹⁶ FMMW, 123.

¹⁷ FMMW, 125.

In spite of two-thousand years-long history, Christianity has so far failed to produce the fullness of truth about the human being. In other words, Christianity has not yet produced an *ontological justification* of the human being, and this is because it could not absorb the full truth of God-manhood.

In the Christianity of the early Fathers, there was a *monophysite tendency*, a hesitancy about the revelation of *Christ's human nature* and hence of the *divine nature of man*, his oppression under sin and his thirst for redemption from sin (...) And the task of humanity's religious consciousness is to reveal the Christological consciousness of man (...)¹⁸

The Church Fathers indeed write about the deification by which the human being becomes, in the words of Maximus the Confessor, 'without beginning and end'¹⁹ or - in an even more daring expression of Gregory Palamas - 'without origin'. But even in this teaching on *theosis*, which aims at describing the glorified and deified character of human nature, it is not clear what would be the specific difference of created nature in comparison with divine nature.

The teachers of the Church had a doctrine of the *theosis* of man, but in this *theosis*, there is no man at all. The very problem of man is not even put. But man is godlike *not only because he is capable of suppressing his nature and thus freeing a place for divinity*. There is godlikeness in human nature itself, in the very human voice of that nature. Silencing the world and the passions liberates a man. God desires that not only God should exist, but man as well.²⁰

¹⁸ Berdyaev, MCA, 81. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Maximus the Confessor, Ambigua 10, PG 91: 1144c. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* 3.1.31, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, transl. N. Gendle, (New York, Paulist Press, 1983).

²⁰ MCA, 84. STv, 114. Emphasis mine.

What would be, in Berdyaev's view, the full truth of God-manhood? This is the question the renewed and transfigured Christianity needs to answer to reveal the Christological consciousness of man.

The full truth of God-manhood

Berdyaev writes that Christ was God-man from all eternity. There was never a 'moment' in the life of the Divine Being when Christ was not both God and the human being. Berdyaev avers that 'the creation took place in eternity as an interior act of the divine mystery.'²¹ Furthermore, 'through the birth of the Son in eternity the whole spiritual race and the whole universe comprised in man, in fact, the whole cosmos, responds to the appeal of divine love.'²² Therefore, the creation of human personality must have taken place in meta-history or theandric time-eternity, which are synonyms for the traditional term eternity.²³

²¹ N. Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (San Rafael CA, Semantron Press 2009), 198. *Filosofiya svobodnogo duha* (Moskva: Hranitel, 2006) 236.

²² FS, 198. FSD, 236.

²³ 'But it is absolutely impossible to conceive either of the creation of the world within time or of the end of the world within time. In objectified time there is no beginning, nor is there any end, there is only an endless middle. The beginning and the end are in existential time.' *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R. M. French, (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009) 207. OEM, 180.

One can penetrate the mystery of the creation only if one grasps the inner life of the Divine Being.

Traditional affirmative theology has been closely confined within rational concepts and that is why it has been unable to grasp that inner life of the Divine Being, *solely in which* the creation of the world and man [that is to say, the attitude of God towards His other self] can be understood.²⁴

There is a strong parallel between the reasons why God is the Trinity – why the Father begets the Son and makes the procession of the Spirit - and the creation of the human. Although the human person is created, God needs her almost in the same way as the Father needs the other two Hypostases.²⁵ And since God needs his creature, the traditional concept of the creation has to be rejected.²⁶ Berdyaev claims, ‘rationalistic and exoteric religious thought is obliged to maintain the cruel idea that God created the world capriciously, without necessity, and entirely unmoved from within.’²⁷

²⁴ FS, 190. FSD, 227. Emphasis mine.

²⁵ Berdyaev is aware that due to the limitations of human language it is difficult to express the exact character of God's 'need' for man. He writes, 'in the depths of spiritual experience there is revealed not only man's need of God but also God's need of man. But the word 'need' here is an inexact expression, as indeed are all human terms when applied to God.' FS, 210. FSD, 249.

²⁶ If we again take Maximus the Confessor as an example of the Patristic teaching, we find that, despite his teaching on the human as microcosm and mediator, he does not understand the creation of the person as 'necessary' for God, or as a part of the interior life of the Divine. Maximus emphasizes that God is immovable and that movement pertains only to creatures. The goal of the creation is that creatures find rest in God's immobility. Although this rest is conceived as 'perpetual striving' (*ἐπέκτασις*), it is clear that only creatures strive towards God whereas God Himself is utterly immovable vis-à-vis His creation. See Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 60, CCSG 22:73-81; *Amb.* 7, PG 91:1069A-1077B.

²⁷ FS, 190. FSD, 227.

If the creation was unnecessary for God, the world and the person, the entire creation, is without significance and is going to perish, contends Berdyaev.²⁸ To secure a genuine basis for human liberty, we need to see the mystery of creation 'as the interior life of the Divine'. We can grasp what human freedom is only if we understand that we are intrinsically connected with the life of the Trinity.

Just like a human person is a part of the inner life of the Trinity, time is not essentially different from eternity. In a mysterious sense, eternity *is* history. God is *in* time. On the other hand, if history is more than a mere external phenomenon, if it holds absolute significance with absolute life, if it is, moreover, based upon a true *ontological* principle, then it must have both its origin and its fulfilment in the inmost depths of the Absolute.²⁹ Time is *in* God.

In his often criticised prophetic style, Berdyaev maintains that God the Trinity and God-Man are inseparable to such an extent that God without the human would not be God the Trinity. 'God without man, an 'inhuman' God,

²⁸ It is clear that for Berdyaev we cannot ground human freedom solely on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, on the doctrine according to which the creation of the world was not an act of necessity. If God creates freely, His creation, according to Patristic teaching, also possesses freedom and is even 'equal of honour' (*ὁμότιμος*). *A Greek Patristic Lexicon*, (Oxford at Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 209-210.

²⁹ N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, trans. George Reavey (San Rafael CA, Semantron Press 2009), 44.

would be Satan, not God the Trinity.³⁰ This is the answer to the ultimate philosophical question, 'why there is something rather than nothing', or why the primordial Nothing yearned to become something?³¹ God became God only for the sake of creation.³² Both God and the human being originate from the same source, from the primal void of the divine nature or Nothingness where, before the first movement, they existed in an undifferentiated union.

In the primal void of the divine Nothingness [of Godhead], God and creation, God and man disappear, and even the very antithesis between them vanishes. 'Non-existent being is beyond God and differentiation.' The distinction between the Creator and creation is not the deepest that exists, for it is eliminated altogether in the divine Nothingness that is no longer God.'³³

The human being is, therefore, a part of the inner movement of the divine life. Anthropogonic and the theogonic process started together and neither of them had ontological primacy over the other since the Son was never conceived otherwise but as God-Man. The idea of God-humanity requires a literal interpretation of *perichoresis*: the two natures in Christ ought

³⁰ FS, 189. FSD, 225.

³¹ Jacob Böhme poses a unity that in its absolute lack of distinctions, is Nothing, *ein Ewig Nichts*, the *Ungrund*. But this *Ungrund* possesses an inner *nisus*, striving for self-realization, which establishes itself as a dialectical force to the primal Nothing, and sets the otherwise static unity in motion. In this way, the Nothing is transformed into Something and the source of all existing things. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), 161.

³² FS, 194. FSD, 291.

³² G. Nikolaus, *C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person* (London: Routledge, 2011) 125.

³³ FS, 194. Using Whitehead's terminology, this would mean that in the divine Nothingness the antithesis between God's conceptual nature and derivative nature disappears. See, A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Corrected Edition, New York: The Free Press, 1985) 345.

to be seen as ontologically reciprocal, equally enlarging each other, mutually dependent. This is why Berdyaev stresses, 'God exists if man exists. When a man disappears, God will also disappear...' And quoting Angelus Silesius, "'I know that without me God could not endure for a moment. Were I brought to nought He would yield up the Ghost for lack (of me).'"³⁴

During his second sojourn to the US, C.G. Jung visited a village of Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. He had a conversation about religion with an elderly member of the tribe. The Indian told him:

We are the sons of Father Sun and with our religion, we daily help our father to go across the sky. We do this not only for ourselves but for the whole world. If we were to cease practising our religion, in ten years the sun would no longer rise. Then it would be night forever.³⁵

Jung straightaway realised on what the "' dignity", the tranquil composure of the individual Indian, was founded.'" 'It springs', the Suisse writes, 'from his being a son of the sun; his life is cosmologically meaningful, for he helps the father and preserver of all life in his daily rise and descent.'³⁶

After this discussion, Jung envied the elderly Indian,

³⁴ FS, 194. FSD, 231. As I have already argued in the Introduction, one of the meanings of the death of God is the multiplication of life. Intro, 8. God's death implies the descending of the Son of God into the original void of freedom. FS, 135. FSD, 165. By descending into meonic freedom, the New Adam empowers and resurrects human nature without acting as nature's determining cause.

³⁵ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Fontana Press, London 1995), 281.

³⁶ Jung, 281.

I had envied him for the fullness of meaning in that belief, and had been looking about without hope for a myth of our own.'

It seems that, eventually, Jung found out what the myth he was looking for was about: man is indispensable for the completion of creation. He is the second creator of the world, in the sense that he feels capable of formulating valid replies to the over-powering influence of God.³⁷ He can render back something essential even to God.

That he can render back *something essential even to God*, induces pride, for it raises the human individual to *the dignity of a metaphysical factor*. 'God and us'... this equation no doubt underlies that enviable serenity of the Pueblo Indian. Such a man is in the fullest sense of the word in his proper place.³⁸

³⁷ Jung, 285, 282.

³⁸ Jung, 282. Emphasis mine.