

BY METHOD OF WITNESS:

revelation in Nicolas Berdyaev's religious philosophy

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¹ After the first citation of each, works by Berdyaev are cited in the footnotes by their titles. Works by other authors, after the first citation of each, are cited by the author's name, supplemented by the title when necessary.

Abstract

Nicolas Berdyaev's understanding of the self-revelation of God to humankind is a point of connection between the central ideas of his religious philosophy. This essay seeks to describe and explain Berdyaev's ideas on the interrelationship of the divine and the human in revelation, and to place these ideas within the context of his philosophy. Berdyaev says that God's self-revelation occurs within the inner person, through divine-human spiritual cooperation. It brings about a revolutionary transformation of the human consciousness. Yet, the degree to which revelation can occur depends on human spiritual development. The eschatological culmination of this development will be the revelation of God in humankind and humankind in God – fulfilling the Godmanhood of Christ. The content of revelation is the Truth that is Godself, expressed in relational knowledge of God. Because, in Berdyaev's view, revelation occurs as an activity of divine-human cooperation, it is affected by human limitations. Therefore, revelation must be open to critique, in particular to purge from it human categories of dominance, power and enslavement. For Berdyaev, Truth is its own criterion. Nevertheless, in the *sobornost* idea can be found a sense of the communal discernment of Truth. Truth can be found only where there is freedom. Freedom is therefore a precursor to revelation. The essay does not attempt a thoroughgoing analytical discussion of the merits or otherwise of Berdyaev's views on revelation in comparison with other views. However, criticisms of the general idea of revelation as experience are employed to strengthen exposition of Berdyaev. The essay concludes with a reflection on the category of witness as a characterisation of Berdyaev's life, his religious philosophy, and his concept of revelation.

"In discussing philosophical problems I have chosen the method of witness ..."

"... my vocation is not to proclaim a doctrine,
but a vision ... I work and desire to work by inspiration
..."

Nicolas Berdyaev
Dream and reality: an essay in autobiography.
Macmillan, New York, 1951, 90, 289.

1. INTRODUCTION

§1. *Motivation, purpose and scope*

In the preface to his anthology of Nicolas Berdyaev's writings, Donald Lowrie writes that, "Any attempt to organize Berdyaev's thought is somewhat like trying to discover system in New York's weather."¹ Nonetheless, Berdyaev's understanding of the self-revelation of God is a point of connection between the central ideas of his religious philosophy. Revelation is not *the* integrating concept of Berdyaev's religious thought.² Yet, to approach Berdyaev's concept of revelation, one must look at his ideas on truth, freedom, spirit, knowledge, objectification, the human subject and the very nature of God.

In reading recent and contemporary (Western) theology of revelation, I have found little reference to the person and role of the Holy Spirit except in discussion of the Spirit's inspiration of the writing and interpretation of scripture – on which there has long been debate and theological development.³ Similarly, (Western) writers on pneumatology make little mention of revelation. There would seem to be opportunity for further investigation of the 'pneumatology of revelation'. Here, Berdyaev is interesting because of his association of revelation with the spiritual, including the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, extensive bibliographic research identified

¹ *Christian existentialism*, 7.

² Freedom and humanity fill this role, though it is interesting that the last book Berdyaev completed before his death in 1948 was *Truth and revelation*. (Trans R. M. French. Bles, London, 1954.)

³ Of course, if scripture is seen as the sole medium of revelation, particularly 'special' revelation, the Spirit's role in revelation would necessarily be limited to some form of association with scripture. But what then, for example, of charismatic gifts? (I Cor. 12.7ff.; I Cor. 14.26).

very little work on Berdyaev's concept of revelation.⁴ (Secondary sources that I have used relate to the context within Berdyaev's philosophy of his concept of revelation, rather than his ideas on revelation itself.)

This essay seeks to explore Berdyaev's idea of revelation and to place it within its context in his religious philosophy. However, the essay does not attempt a thorough analytical discussion of the merits or otherwise of Berdyaev's view in contrast to other views of revelation – that would require a much larger study than can be attempted here.

Chapter 2 begins the main body of the essay with a description of the principal ideas that make up Berdyaev's concept of revelation. Revelation occurs in the inner person, through divine-human spiritual cooperation. Revelation occurs to differing degrees, depending on the ability of the human consciousness to receive it. It is involved in the transformation of human consciousness. This transformation will be completed in the eschatological revelation of the God-man – the divine in humankind and the human in God.

Chapter 3 looks at the content of revelation and the question of establishing the truth of what is received as revelation. The role of the community in discerning revealed truth is important. As revelation is a work of divine human cooperation, it is affected by humanness and is therefore subject to critique. The chapter outlines Berdyaev's basis of and priorities for this critique.

For Berdyaev, truth can be found only where there is freedom. Chapter 4 looks

⁴ Fuad Nucho gives a concise summary of aspects of Berdyaev's concept of revelation in *Berdyaev's philosophy: The existential paradox of freedom and necessity, a critical study*, Gollancz, London, 1967, 127-133. Though he touches briefly on a number of the points made chapters 2 and 3 of this essay, in my view Nucho also sometimes misstates Berdyaev's position. Also relevant is Klaus Bambauer's study *Offenbarung, Sprache und Bewusstsein nach Nikolai Berdjajew im Kontext gegenwärtiger Religionsphilosophie*. [2002] [http://groups.msn.com/78466/berdjajew.msnw?action=get_message&mview=0&ID_Message=442], not available in English.

I have not been able to see M. Casanas. *Éthique et révélation: La philosophie religieuse de Berdiaev. Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 79, 350-366, 198, the title of which implies some discussion of revelation.

at his understanding of freedom as a precursor to revelation. In chapter 5, some contrasting ideas of revelation and criticisms of the general idea of revelation as experience are used further to strengthen exposition of Berdyaev's ideas. Chapter 6 offers some concluding reflections connected to the essay's title, *By method of witness*.

§2. *Berdyaev's philosophical style and the need for exposition*

Berdyaev says that 'the problem of man' is at the centre of his creative work in philosophy and that his philosophy, is "to an utmost extent anthropologic."⁵

To posit the problem of man – this means at the same time to posit the problem of freedom, of creativity, person, spirit and history. Therefore I have chiefly concerned myself with the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of history, social philosophy and ethics.⁶

Berdyaev typifies his philosophy as "of the existential type"⁷ and also as a philosophy of spirit. He describes it as dualistic – though of a particular sort. It is a dualism of spirit and nature, of freedom and determinism, of the personal and the general, of the kingdom of God and the 'kingdom of Caesar'. "I define my own philosophy as being of the subject, of spirit, of freedom; as being dualistically pluralist, creatively dynamic, personalist and eschatological."⁸ The basis of Berdyaev's worldview, he says, is the primacy of freedom over being. Even God cannot determine freedom. It is rooted in non-being.⁹ Most of these themes arise in the course of this essay.

Berdyaev describes himself as not being sceptical or doubting in nature. Nor

⁵ N. Berdyaev. My philosophic world-outlook [Translated title]. *Vestnik Russkogo Studentcheskogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniya*, 4-5, 1952, trans. S. Janos. http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1952_476.htm

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "Existential philosophy is a cognition of the meaning of being through the subject. The subject is existential, existentialised. In the object, on the contrary, the inner existence is concealed. In this sense philosophy is subjective, and not objective. It is based upon spiritual experience." *Ibid.*

⁸ N. Berdyaev. *The beginning and the end: An essay on eschatological metaphysics*, trans. R. M. French. Bles, London, 1952, 51.

⁹ My philosophic world-outlook. (See note 5).

does he see himself as dogmatic.¹⁰

God is, he is existent, and I am able to think of him only as such, that is to say, existentially and symbolically. ... My relation to, and thinking of, God are existential and dramatic acts, and the wrestlings of the spirit which denote this relation enter into my certainty concerning God.¹¹

Berdyaev declares that he suffers religious doubt only when "compelled to admit the force of traditional, static dogmatism, which exasperates me and arouses me to protest."¹² His writing comes from "passion and a 'point of view'," driven by will more than intellect and imagination.¹³

Berdyaev's writing reflects ideas and scholarship drawn from very many sources. Nevertheless, Oliver Clarke, English translator of *Freedom and the Spirit*¹⁴ and of *Towards a new epoch*,¹⁵ says that it would be a mistake to call Berdyaev eclectic.¹⁶ Rather, he says, Berdyaev brings a prodigious wealth and variety to the understanding of the truth that is God in Christ.

There is a massive simplicity, a transparent reality behind all the complexities of Berdyaev's thought. The centre of things is the God-man, and here we find the meaning of man's life, of man's history, the source of a dynamic and creative approach to the world about us.¹⁷

F. H. Heinemann, on the other hand, though he praises Berdyaev as, "one of the most human, personally modest, most substantial, catholic and spiritual philosophers of our age,"¹⁸ says that Berdyaev did not manifest true genius because in his "intoxication with freedom,"

he did not understand that creation calls for industry and work. He did not bother to reduce the vast material to its simplest and most perfect form. He did not see that creation implies the production of form, of

¹⁰ *Dream and reality*, 66.

¹¹ *Dream and reality*, 68.

¹² *Dream and reality*, 68.

¹³ *Dream and reality*, 87.

¹⁴ N. Berdyaev. *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. O. F. Clarke. Bles, London, 1935.

¹⁵ N. Berdyaev. *Towards a new epoch*, trans. O. Clarke. Bles, London, 1949.

¹⁶ Clarke, 176-77.

¹⁷ Clarke, 179.

¹⁸ F. H. Heinemann. *Existentialism and the modern predicament*, A. & C. Black, London, 1953, 154.

structure ...¹⁹

Berdyaev himself was well aware that there is,

... always a tragic discrepancy between the burning heat of the creative fire in which the artistic image is conceived and the cold of its formal realization. ... The aim of creative inspiration is to bring forth new forms of life, but the results are the cold products of civilization, cultural values, books, pictures, institutions, good works. ... a philosophical book means the cooling down of the creative fire of knowledge in the human spirit. This is the tragedy of human creativeness and its limitation.²⁰

In all his books, Berdyaev struggles against this limitation. The loose structure of his work as a whole does not gainsay the creativity of Berdyaev's ideas, nor the power and elegance of much of his writing. However, it does create a challenge for the student.²¹ Work with Berdyaev must begin with synthesis and extended exposition of his thinking, based on a wide reading of his publications. This has been a common approach in the relatively small number of published English language scholarly monographs dedicated to particular aspects of Berdyaev's thought.²² Similarly, I have taken synthesis and exposition to be primary tasks of a short dissertation such as this, especially when dealing with an aspect of Berdyaev's

¹⁹ Heinemann, 162.

²⁰ N. Berdyaev. *The destiny of man*, trans. N. Duddington. Second edn. Bles, London, 1945, 129.

²¹ "The reader may have difficulty in following my repetitive manner. My only justification is that I see the same theme arising in different contexts." *Dream and reality*, xiii

²² Thus, for example: C. S. Calian. *Berdyaev's philosophy of hope: A contribution to Marxist-Christian dialogue*. Brill, Leiden, 1968; J. M. McLachlan. *The desire to be God: Freedom and the Other in Sartre and Berdyaev*. Lang, New York, 1992; Richardson, *op. cit.* To prepare his valuable yet highly selective 300 page anthology of Berdyaev's religious philosophy, Donald Lowrie states that he read twenty-nine books by Berdyaev and hundreds of untranslated articles as well as unpublished letters and notebooks. Lowrie, 7.

religious philosophy on which there has been little work (at least in Western languages).

2. REVELATION, THE SPIRIT AND THE HUMAN

§1. *Revelation within, through divine-human spiritual cooperation.*

For Nicolas Berdyaev, the nature of God as God necessitates revelation in some form. "If there is a God, he must reveal himself and provide some means by which men may know about him."¹ God actively "goes out to meet man"² and the presence of revelation is a defining characteristic of religion.³ Berdyaev does not attempt a concise, complete definition of revelation, except to say that, "where the divine is manifested, there is revelation."⁴ "The revelation of God to the world and to man takes many forms, and every other way of looking at the matter is less than human."⁵ Nevertheless, Berdyaev makes clear his ideas on revelation's essential character.⁶

In Berdyaev's concept, revelation is always a spiritual occurrence. It occurs by the Holy Spirit, neither in the objective realm, nor within the subjectivity of the soul, but in the human spirit.⁷ "Revelation is the fact of the Spirit in me, in the subject; it is spiritual experience, spiritual life."⁸ Similarly,

The revelation of God is not a transcendent event taking place on the objective and natural plane of reality, nor is it an illumination from without. It is on the contrary something which transpires within us ..."⁹

Thus, revelation is not an external event, happening in nature or history. However, the inner spiritual event of revelation can be symbolised in an external, objective

¹ *Truth and revelation*, 46.

² *Truth and revelation*, 46.

³ "Religion is the revelation of God and of the divine life in man and in the world." *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.

⁴ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 88. Consequently, (1) in an incomplete form, revelation can occur in non-Christian religion; (2) the content of revelation is the divine.

⁵ *Truth and revelation*, 46.

⁶ Particularly in chapter III of *Truth and revelation* and in section I of chapter 3 of *Freedom and the Spirit*.

⁷ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.

⁸ *The divine and the human*, 14

⁹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.

event or institution.¹⁰

For Berdyaev, the "most important thing to keep in mind is that revelation is divine-human,"¹¹ not solely divine. It is essential to Berdyaev's concept that revelation requires conscious human involvement and cooperation. "A lump of stone or wood cannot be in any sense be a recipient of revelation"¹² Consequently, the notion and existence of revelation depends on humanity. "The very idea of revelation is made meaningless if he to whom God reveals himself is a creature of worthless significance who in no respect corresponds to the One who reveals himself."¹³ Only when the human spirit meets the Holy Spirit in existential encounter is there an intuitive apprehension of God. For Berdyaev, this is the only 'proof' of God.¹⁴

Berdyaev's understanding of revelation depends on his philosophy of spirit. "Spirit cannot be identified simply with the Holy Spirit ... Spirit is the sphere in which the divine and the human are united"¹⁵ The divine element in humanity, Berdyaev says, is the spiritual element. Though spirit is not the Holy Spirit, the difference is but one of degree.¹⁶ Consequently, a distinction between the two at times seems blurred in Berdyaev's writing.

Spirit emanates from God but it is not a Divine creation like nature; it is a divine infusion, an inspiration. That is the biblical image. But spirit emanates from not only the deity but also from the primal pre-existential freedom from the *Ungrund*. That is, indeed, the fundamental paradox of spirit; it is a Divine emanation, and at the same time it can reply to the deity in terms not dictated by it ... it is freedom in God and from God.¹⁷

The centrality of freedom in Berdyaev's thought and the idea of the *Ungrund* are

¹⁰ *Truth and revelation*, 46-47; *Freedom and the Spirit*, 91,

¹¹ *Truth and revelation*, 46.

¹² *Truth and revelation*, 46.

¹³ *The beginning and the end*, 234.

¹⁴ "The one and only reason for belief in God is the existence of the divine element in man." *The beginning and the end*, 234.

¹⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 47

¹⁶ *Truth and revelation*, 141.

¹⁷ *Spirit and reality*, 34.

discussed later. Here, we can note with David Richardson that, "Inasmuch as Berdyaev's doctrine of man holds that man is an incarnate spirit, this passage shows that it is through spirit that the primordial freedom is communicated to man (the human spirit)."¹⁸ Much else also is communicated through spirit,¹⁹ including the self-revelation of God.

In a 1968 lecture, Bishop John Robinson questioned how theology of the Third Person of the Trinity could be done and found the way in Berdyaev speaks about "spirit" (especially in *Spirit and reality* and *Freedom and the Spirit*) to be a contribution to modern theology. Robinson said, "As long as we go on speaking of the Spirit as a separate metaphysical entity or 'Person' I doubt whether we shall ever begin to communicate."²⁰ However, Berdyaev does not go so far as to set aside the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Personality is an important category in Berdyaev's thought that also relates to spirit – divine and human.

Man has to realise personality. Personality is spirit, free spirit and the link between man and God. It is a link of man with God which is also outside the false submergence of man in his own closed circle.²¹

Richardson says that for Berdyaev, "Spirit is the link of man with God because it transcends objectivized knowing through the primacy of the will; and because it transcends a pure subjectivity through the divinity of the human spirit."²² Berdyaev distinguishes sharply between the human soul and the human spirit.²³ The former pertains to our humanity and the latter to our divinity. The soul knows only objectively, but in and through spirit there is an apprehension of subjective reality,

¹⁸ Richardson, 63.

¹⁹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 27; N. Berdyaev. *Slavery and freedom*, trans. R. M. French. Bles, London, 1943, 32.

²⁰ J. A. T. Robinson. Church and theology: From here to where? *Theology Today*, **25**(2), 149-168, Jul., 1968, at pp. 156-157. (Initial lecture, Gallahue Conference on Theology, Princeton, 17 Apr., 1968.)

²¹ *Slavery and freedom*, 246,

²² Richardson, 108.

²³ Cf. I Thessalonians 5.3; Hebrews 4.12.

including the self-revelation of God.

Berdyayev criticises the traditional understanding of revelation as communication from an externally objective God to a receiving, knowing, subject. God is subject and is revealed *to us within us*. As an "inward and spiritual event,"²⁴ revelation occurs within us through the action of God. Outward events, as in history and nature, are but symbols of a spiritual reality. We can understand and receive revelation only within the depths of the human spirit. To become revelation, an historical event must be realised within us as a "spiritual manifestation."²⁵ Because revelation is the self-disclosure of God, Berdyayev asserts, its content is God's very self, rather than knowledge about God. Knowledge and truth are important to Berdyayev's understanding of revelation and are discussed in the next chapter.

A distinction between revealed and natural religion is neither profound nor useful, in Berdyayev's view.²⁶ God is revealed in nature but, in itself, this affords an incomplete knowledge of God. Nature completely devoid of the divine does not exist, but "the revelation of nature is only a stage in the revelation of God."²⁷ The revelation of divinity in nature merely reflects that which takes place in the spiritual world, as "revelation is in essence an event of the spiritual life and religion is a manifestation of the Spirit."²⁸ Revelation may be received *via* natural phenomena and historical events (especially the Christ event). However, it is to do with meaning, "and does not consist of outward events in themselves apart from a spiritual interpretation."²⁹

Revelation cannot be used as an external authority. To oppose freedom of thought because of a supposed 'objective necessity' of revelation stands against what

²⁴ *Truth and revelation*, 47.

²⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 93.

²⁶ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 88.

²⁷ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 89.

²⁸ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 89.

²⁹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 94.

Berdyayev regards as an essential principle – that God is revealed only within the inner consciousness. "[F]aith always has a spiritual precedence over authority. It is simply a form of materialism to regard revelation as authority."³⁰ Berdyayev says that revelation requires both divine grace and human freedom. Revelation and faith are impossible without each other.³¹ Thus, revelation is not something done *for* us, but requires faith by which we cooperate with the divine.³² "Revelation takes my freedom for granted, my act of choice, my faith in something which is still invisible and which uses no force upon me."³³ Faith is, as in Hebrews, "a demonstration of things invisible" and is "always directed towards the mysterious and hidden world".³⁴ Faith redirects towards the spiritual realm, "involving an extension of experience to an unprecedented degree."³⁵

Revelation affirms the *imago Dei*. "Revelation, because it is a spiritual phenomenon of the inner life, can only be understood in the light of the indwelling spirit, which is itself the affirmation of the divine image in man."³⁶ Berdyayev criticises those Catholic theologians who, he says, assert that humans as spiritual beings resemble God only by grace rather than by virtue of their nature. To regard revelation as purely transcendent, denying the immanence of spirit and the inward revelation of God by the Spirit is, in Berdyayev's view, a denial of the relationship between God and humankind. Revelation has an affective consequence for *both* God and human. As God and humanity are disclosed in each other, revelation makes known the yearning of God for us as much as it illuminates us in our yearning for God. Thus, Berdyayev stands against the traditional theological viewpoint that God is

³⁰ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 94.

³¹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 103.

³² *Freedom and the Spirit*, 93.

³³ *Truth and revelation*, 48.

³⁴ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 104.

³⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 104.

³⁶ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 95.

impassive and complete in Godself.³⁷

Though revelation is a spiritual event, Berdyaev emphasises that only through humanity has revelation reached humanity – through lawgivers, prophets, apostles, teachers and saints, and especially through Jesus. Even when one hears God's voice in the inner self, one hears it through one's own humanity. Thus, revelation reflects the human condition and is affected by human limitations.³⁸ "Revelation, the word of God, has always passed through man and the condition of man has been reflected in it; it is marked by the limitations of the human mind."³⁹ Our ability to discern is limited and impacted by the natural realm – we are social beings living in the natural order. The presence of this natural, limited, element requires of revelation that it be "purified and emancipated"⁴⁰ from anything that is not of the truth or the Spirit. Here Berdyaev tends to use the word 'revelation' in two ways. He uses 'revelation' in the usual sense of the disclosure of God. However he also uses 'revelation' for that which humankind in whatever way understands to be God's self-disclosure. It is in the latter sense that revelation may be criticised. This critique of revelation is discussed in the next chapter.

Berdyaev is not alone in describing revelation as a personal, immanent encounter in which the divine is made known. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote,

³⁷ Jürgen Moltmann discusses Berdyaev's views on the 'tragedy of God', in the context of a wider argument by Moltmann on the suffering of God, in *The Trinity and the kingdom of God: The doctrine of God*, trans. M Kohl. SCM, London, 1981, 42-47. Berdyaev's objection to the concept of impassibility of God is Trinitarian, "For it is impossible to assert the tragic destiny of the Son of God and his expiatory death without at the same time admitting movement in the divine life." N. Berdyaev. *The meaning of history*, trans. G. Reavey. Bles, London, 1936, 48.

³⁸ "[I]t must be remembered that man has always been the one and only organ which revelation has used in order to reach man. Moses and the prophets have spoken, the God-man Jesus Christ has spoken, the Apostles, the Saints, and the Mystics, the Doctors of the Church, Theologians and Christian Philosophers – all have spoken. We have heard no other voice, and when we have heard the voice of God in ourselves that voice we have heard through ourselves, that is to say through man." *Truth and revelation*, 7-8.

³⁹ *Truth and revelation*, 8.

⁴⁰ *Truth and revelation*, 18.

What is revelation? Every original and new communication of the Universe to men is a revelation, as, for example, every such moment of conscious insight as I have just referred to. Every intuition and every original feeling proceeds from revelation. ... [E]ach one himself knows ... what is original and new.⁴¹

Schleiermacher describes revelation as being generated in the individual and recognised as original and new. "[T]he man in whose heart no revelation of his own arises ... has no religion."⁴² Early twentieth century modernists also saw revelation as an encounter with the redeeming presence of God. Thus, for example, Albert Sabatier writes,

I see very clearly that the revelation of God never needs to be proved to anyone. The attempt would be as contradictory as it is superfluous. Two things are equally impossible: for an irreligious man to discover a divine revelation in faith he did not share, or for a truly pious man not to find one in the religion he has espoused and which lives in his heart.⁴³

Sabatier and Berdyaev also agree in denying that revelation is a source of unchangeable dogma.⁴⁴

§2. *Revelation and the transformation of the consciousness.*

Berdyaev argues that there are differing degrees of God's revelation. God cannot be revealed fully because of our fallen nature and the limitations of the natural realm. At present, we could not withstand God's full glory.⁴⁵ Inasmuch as it contains the Truth, the self-revelation of God, Christian revelation is in principle absolute. Yet, in receiving the revelation of God, made known in the world,

⁴¹ Schleiermacher, F. D. E. *On religion. Speeches to its cultured despisers*, trans. J. Oman. Kegan Paul, Trench Trübner, London, 1893, Second speech, 89.

⁴² Schleiermacher, 90

⁴³ A. Sabatier. *Outlines of a philosophy of religion*. Pott, New York, 1902, 35-36, quoted A. Dulles. *Models of revelation*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1983, 254.

⁴⁴ Dulles, 253-4. Similar beliefs were held by the Catholic Modernists early in the twentieth century, who held that the task of apologetics was to lead a person to faith by bringing them to personal experience of it. The Roman Catholic Church was sufficiently perturbed by this to require clergy to ascent to an *Oath against Modernism* (Pius X. *Motu proprio Sacrorum antistites*. 1910). The oath rejected inner experience as a foundation of faith and required reliance on the external signs of revelation, including miracles and prophecy. (Dulles, 254-255).

⁴⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 92.

humankind is aware of limitations on its apprehension of God.⁴⁶

Revelation is transforming – a "catastrophic transformation of consciousness."⁴⁷ It is revolution rather than evolution – a spiritual awakening and reorientation of the self toward the spiritual realm in which God is revealed. The revelation of God empowers a transformation of human consciousness, releasing and making known the depths of the human spirit.⁴⁸

Berdyayev argues that the extent to which we can receive revelation depends on the nature and capacity of the human consciousness and our receptiveness to the spiritual realm. He draws a distinction between a 'static consciousness' and a 'dynamic consciousness'. "The fact of revelation and the possibility of religious experience, of the entry of the other world into ours," Berdyayev asserts, "can only be understood through the medium of a dynamic consciousness."⁴⁹ This is despite the static conception of consciousness he believes to have been held by most schools of philosophy and theology. "Revelation always means a spiritual awakening and it is accompanied by a fresh orientation of consciousness towards another world."⁵⁰ Many concepts of philosophy,⁵¹ Berdyayev argues, do not admit that the human consciousness can be enlarged, and thereby deny that the human can connect with the divine life. They deny, he says, "the possibility of spiritual experience of an original quality."⁵² This limited perspective leads to, "a transcendent and external interpretation of revelation which is the product of a naïve and naturalist realism."⁵³ A static, unchanging, state of consciousness cannot grasp the reality that is known

⁴⁶ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 93.

⁴⁷ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 96.

⁴⁸ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 95.

⁴⁹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 97.

⁵⁰ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 97.

⁵¹ Berdyayev instances, "rationalism, transcendental idealism, empiricism, evolutionism, and theological positivism." *Freedom and the Spirit*, 100.

⁵² *Freedom and the Spirit*, 100.

⁵³ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 100.

only by the spirit.

A dynamic human consciousness can deepen and change from within the inner being. This change is empowered by the life of the spirit, within which revelation is given.⁵⁴ Because the spiritual reality is limitless, active and dynamic, it can be revealed only to a consciousness with the same dynamism. The spiritual awakening of the consciousness occurs through movement of the divine towards the human and the human towards the divine. "Revelation ... reshapes our consciousness, and removes its limitations."⁵⁵

Because it is a divine-human process involving the inner human consciousness, without this process revelation does not occur, does not exist. There are degrees of revelation itself, according to the development of the consciousness. Revelation is not a fixed external phenomenon received in varying measure. "The pouring forth of the divine illumination corresponds to the changes to which consciousness is subject and to the various tendencies and manifestations of the spirit."⁵⁶

Referring to Old Testament history, Berdyaev argues that, "Revelation necessarily presupposes development in the world and implies also a dynamic development of consciousness."⁵⁷ Even Christianity itself has degrees of revelation, Berdyaev finds, and its history has had its special times of change. At times Christian truth has been less known, "owing to the existence of diverse structures of

⁵⁴ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 101-2.

⁵⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 102.

⁵⁶ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 111.

⁵⁷ "[E]ven in the revelation of the one God there are also various stages and degrees. The revelation of Moses represents a totally different historic period from that of the prophets. The religious consciousness which regarded the one God as the Jewish national Deity was of quite a different order from that which saw in Him the God of the whole world and every nation. ... A very deep spiritual crisis had to take place in prophetic circles, for the consciousness of the Jew had to pass through a period of individualism, by freeing itself from religious nationalism and racialism, and by experiencing those spiritual processes which are reflected in the books of Job and Solomon, while, parallel to the increasing rigidity of the religion of the Law, an intense apocalyptic strain had also to make its appearance." *Freedom and the Spirit*, 112.

consciousness and the differing degrees of spirituality."⁵⁸ Thus, Berdyaev extends changes in consciousness and degrees of revelation not only to personal development in the lives of individuals, but also to the history of Christianity.

§3. *The eschatological revelation of humanity.*

Christian revelation has become too rigid, Berdyaev declares, as if the Spirit had departed. Revelation must be understood more mystically. As this happens, a new period in Christian history will begin. God's self-revelation, Berdyaev insists, is not an unchangeable 'given', but an ongoing, developing, spiritual encounter between God and humanity – in individuals and in humankind at large.⁵⁹

The greatest error of which historical Christianity is guilty is due to the circumscribing and deadening notion that revelation is finished and that there is nothing more to be expected, that the structure of the church has been completely built and the roof has been put on it.⁶⁰

One can object to the possibility of new and ongoing revelation only if one takes a static view of humanity, which would allow humankind to receive revelation only passively.⁶¹ Such a view would resist any possibility of revelation being a divine-human cooperation.

Particularly in *The meaning of the creative act*, Berdyaev expresses the idea of a continuing unfolding of God's revelation in dispensational terms, as three epochs of divine revelation: the revelation of the law (the Father), the revelation of redemption (the Son) and the revelation of creativity (the Spirit). These 'epochs' are co-existent and all relate to humankind.

In the first epoch man's sin is brought to light and a natural divine force is revealed; in the second epoch man is made a son of God and redemption from sin appears; in the third epoch the divinity of man's creative nature is finally revealed and divine power becomes human power.⁶²

⁵⁸ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 113.

⁵⁹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 114-116.

⁶⁰ *The divine and the human*, 183.

⁶¹ *The divine and the human*, 19.

⁶² N. Berdyaev. *The meaning of the creative act*, trans. D. A. Lowrie. Gollancz, London, 1955, 320.

This new Third Epoch – the epoch of the Spirit – will see the reversal of the effects of the Fall and a revelation of the intended divinity of humankind.

The third creative revelation in the Spirit will have no holy scripture; it will be no voice from on high; it will be accomplished in man and in humanity – it is an anthropological revelation, an unveiling of the Christology of man.⁶³

Thus, the primary question in contemporary religious discussion, Berdyaev says, is "the possibility of a new revelation and a new spiritual era."⁶⁴ This will be not a new religion, but the fulfillment and universalisation of the Christian revelation.

It is insufficient simply to wait for the revelation of the Spirit. The new epoch also depends upon human creativity. The revelation, the openness, of God and humanity to each other by the Spirit will remove the contradiction between the divine and the human. This new epoch of the Spirit presupposes a radical reorientation in human consciousness, a maturity of the human spirit. The basis of the new epoch will not be judgment and retribution but creative development and assimilation to God.⁶⁵ The culmination of revelation as a divine-human process will see the full disclosure of God and humankind in each other.

Thus far, Berdyaev says, the world has seen only Old Testament law and New Testament redemption. We are yet to see a religious epoch of creativeness – the epoch of the Spirit. God has thus far concealed what humankind may create in true freedom⁶⁶ (*cf.* I Cor. 2.9⁶⁷). The exercise of creative freedom is an act of courage.⁶⁸ It will continue creation and become an instrument of revelation, showing the

⁶³ *The meaning of the creative act*, 107.

⁶⁴ *The divine and the human*, 183. In a later work, *The destiny of man* (pp. 84-153), Berdyaev deals in depth with the three 'epochs' in the context of ethics – The 'Ethics of law', the 'Ethics of Redemption' and the 'Ethics of Creativeness'. There, however, he does not elaborate the relationship of revelation to creativity beyond what he exemplifies in *The meaning of the creative act*.

⁶⁵ *The divine and the human*, 185.

⁶⁶ *The meaning of the creative act*, 100.

⁶⁷ "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." I Cor. 2.9 NRSV.

⁶⁸ *The meaning of the creative act*, 107.

resemblance of the creature to the Creator⁶⁹ (*cf.* I Jn. 3.2⁷⁰). Berdyaev argues that Christianity has sought to reveal God but has revealed little of the nature of humankind, teaching mostly of human weakness and sinfulness. Yet, Christian anthropology also recognises the divine possibilities of human destiny.

... Christianity never revealed in its fullest what one might dare to call a Christology of man, that is the secret of man's divine nature, a dogma of man, analogous to the dogma of Christ. ... And yet in Christian revelation the truth about man's divine nature is really only the reverse side of the medal of truth about Christ's human nature.⁷¹

For Berdyaev, humankind is more than a mere component of creation:

The Christian conception of man is hierarchical and not evolutionist. Man is not a transitory fragment of the cosmos, a mere step in its evolution; he is superior to the cosmos, independent of its infinity, and in principle embraces it completely.⁷²

Humanity now embraces the cosmos 'in principle', and will do so fully in Christ, in whom all of creation is embraced.⁷³ Berdyaev draws on the doctrine of

Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*), which is,

the union of two natures, the Divine and the human, while the distinction between them and their independence is preserved. The doctrine of Godmanhood presupposes commensurability between God and man, the presence of the divine principle in man, and at the same time it does not admit monistic identity.⁷⁴

As Christ is God-man, the revelation of Christ is the revelation of both God and human. "The Christological revelation is also an anthropological revelation."⁷⁵

Berdyaev draws on the idea of Godmanhood particularly as developed by Vladimir Solovyev.⁷⁶ However the idea has early origins in Eastern Orthodoxy⁷⁷ and

⁶⁹ *The meaning of the creative act*, 120-121.

⁷⁰ "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." I Jn. 3.2 NRSV.

⁷¹ *The meaning of the creative act*, 80-81.

⁷² *Freedom and the Spirit*, 276.

⁷³ Richardson, 49ff.

⁷⁴ *The beginning and the end*, 36.

⁷⁵ *The meaning of the creative act*, 81.

⁷⁶ Cf. V. Solovyev. *Lectures on Godmanhood*. Dobson, London, 1948. For Berdyaev on Godmanhood, see for example, *The beginning and the end*, 36 and The idea of God-manhood in
(note continues ...)

also appears in Western thinking, particularly when labeled, as by Valliere, 'the humanity of God'.⁷⁸ 'The humanity of God' at first seems a contradiction in terms, for humanity is created in God's image, not *vice versa*. In a sense, however, it implies whatever it is in God that humanity and God have in common, as a consequence of God's creation of humankind in the image of God.

We can compare this briefly, for example, to Karl Barth's explanation of the title of his essay, *The humanity of God*.

The humanity of God! Rightly understood that is bound to mean God's relation to and turning towards man. It signifies the God who speaks with man in promise and command. It represents God's existence, intercession, and activity for man, the intercourse God holds with him, and the free grace in which He wills to be and is nothing other than the God of Man.⁷⁹

Berdyaev's proposal seems more radical than this for, as we have seen, he sees the idea of Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*) as a completed revelation of God and humanity in each other - God as humanity and human as divine. Barth, however, prefers to say simply that God's deity "encloses humanity in itself."⁸⁰ Though this may give a certain added perspective to theology,⁸¹ which Barth invites those who come after him to pursue, it does not of itself imply the human as subject in Berdyaev's terms. On the contrary, Barth remains with objectivity, "which is

VI. Solov'ev (on the occasion of 25 years from the day of his death). *Perezvon*, 7/8(9), 180-182, 240, 1925, trans. S. Janos. http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1925_307.htm

⁷⁷ "[T]he idea of the divinization of man is the fundamental concept of Orthodox mysticism, the object of which is the transfiguration of everything created." *Freedom and the Spirit*, 254-5.

⁷⁸ See the discussion in §2 of the Preface.

⁷⁹ K. Barth. *The Humanity of God*, John Knox Pr., Richmond, 1960, 37.

⁸⁰ Barth, 50. In this lecture, delivered late in his career, Barth reaffirmed the importance of the emphasis in his theology of the deity and apartness of God – epitomised in phrases such as "wholly other" and "infinite qualitative distinction". (*Ibid.*, 42) However, he acknowledged that in that essential break with what had gone before, there had come about a lack in consideration of the humanity of God. Certainly, "God does not need a partner," but as well, "God requires no exclusion of humanity, no non-humanity, not to speak of inhumanity in order to be God." *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸¹ "Since God in his deity is human, [theological] culture must occupy itself neither with God in Himself nor with man in himself but with the man-encountering God and in the God-encountering man and with their dialogue in history, in which their communion takes place and comes to fulfillment." Barth, 55.

indispensable to good theology" and to avoiding anthropocentrism.⁸²

Writing on Berdyaev and the theology of hope, Frank Senn⁸³ suggests that the important influence of Orthodox theology on Berdyaev's thought, especially his eschatology, is fostered by two important elements in Eastern theology. The rejection of the *filioque* in the Creed links the Holy Spirit to the mystery of God the Father, rather than to the Son. Thus, the Spirit is not limited in action to the manifestations of the body of Christ, the Church. Secondly, the invocation of the Spirit in the *epiklesis* of the eucharistic prayer also suggests that the Spirit is not at the disposal of the church. The fulfilling presence of the life-giving Spirit must be awaited in prayer. The advent of the Spirit brings a longing for *theosis* – divination of humankind – that is at the heart of an Orthodox understanding of salvation. The eucharistic liturgy enshrines God's promise of the transfiguration of the whole world.

Jürgen Moltmann suggests that 'deification' or 'divinisation' as understood in the Orthodox tradition does not mean that humans will 'become like God' as promised to Adam by the serpent. Moltmann quotes an axiom of Athanasius, "God became human so that we human beings might be deified."⁸⁴ He argues that this refers to people who, as children of God, take on characteristics of their parent – the divine nature.

'Deification' therefore does not mean that human beings are transformed into gods. It means that they partake of the characteristics and rights of the divine nature through their community with Christ, the God-human being. The divine characteristics of non-transience and immortality therefore become benefits of salvation for human beings.⁸⁵

⁸² Barth, 56. "And what can be the meaning of the "over coming of the Subject-Object-Scheme," recently proclaimed with such enthusiasm, so long as it is not made clear and guaranteed that this enterprise will once more lead to the anthropocentric myth and call into question anew the *intercourse* between God and man and thus the *object* of theology?" *Idem*. Emphasis original.

⁸³ F. C. Senn. Berdyaev, Orthodoxy, and the theology of hope. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 7, 455-475, 1970.

⁸⁴ Athanasius. *De inc.*, ch. 54. quoted J. Moltmann. *The coming of God: Christian eschatology*, trans. M. Kohl. Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996, 272.

⁸⁵ Moltmann, 272.

Berdyaev goes further than this to speak of an interpenetrating union of God and humankind in Christ.

In the context of a discussion of competing doctrines of the ultimate fate of the world, Moltmann describes how the Orthodox doctrine of the deification of humankind might be extended to the deification of the cosmos. Somewhat similarly, Berdyaev foresees a time when human creative potential will increase so that humankind will work with God in the re-creation of the world and be divinized in the process. For Berdyaev, divine-human cooperation in revelation and its outworking in human creativeness are vital preparation for this work. His vision is of humanity overcoming separation from God, by creative acts in and through the Spirit. Berdyaev is motivated by this expectation. Meanwhile, we do not know when this will be and Berdyaev hesitates between pessimism and optimism.⁸⁶

§4. *Summation*

The first two sections of this chapter outlined essential ideas found in Berdyaev's concept of revelation, which may be summarised as follows.

- a. The self-revelation of God is always spiritual in character.
- b. Revelation occurs through divine-human cooperation.
- c. Revelation occurs within the human subject; outward things, such as historical events, are symbols of inner spiritual reality.
- d. Freedom is an essential precursor of revelation and revelation cannot be used as an external authority inhibiting freedom.
- e. Revelation affects both God and human, affirming the *imago Dei*.
- f. Revelation occurs to differing degrees according to our human ability to receive it.

⁸⁶ "I am not at all an optimist. Rather I am inclined to think that we are entering an epoch of darkness and of vast destruction." *Truth and revelation*, 134. "I am not an optimist, but it would be wrong to characterize me as a pessimist ... I do not think that man's fate is quite hopeless." *Put*, 46, Jan.-Mar., 1945, translated in *Christian existentialism*, 324.

- g. The revelation of God radically transforms the human consciousness, and without dynamic involvement of the consciousness, revelation does not exist.

As will be discussed in chapter 5, the model of revelation formed by these statements can be accommodated within a general category of revelation-as-experience. Those preferring a differing model of revelation would contest the statements, but they can be argued as a coherent whole. In chapter 5, some general criticisms of the revelation-as-experience model will be examined in the light of Berdyaev's concept.

Berdyaev's ideas on the eschatological revelation of humanity (summarised in §3 of this chapter) seem more speculative, especially to the Western reader. But they are less out of the ordinary in the context of an Orthodox theology of redemption and the deification/divinisation of humankind. Berdyaev is in the mainstream when speaking of humankind being brought to perfection in the likeness of the God-man, Jesus Christ. However, he is distinctive in the way in which he speaks of an epoch of the Spirit, creativity, and an eschatological revelation of God and human in each other.

3. KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH AND CRITIQUE

As revelation is the self-disclosure of God, Berdyaev reasons, its content is God. Therefore, the content of revelation must also be Truth.¹ The outcome of revelation may be knowledge. In Berdyaev's conception, however, this is spiritual knowledge *of* God, rather than knowledge about God. This chapter looks at knowledge and truth as aspects of Berdyaev's understanding of revelation.

§1. Knowledge

For Berdyaev, knowledge is not something that exists outside of oneself. "Men delude themselves in believing that to know is to shed one's skin."² Rather, knowledge approximates the truth that is gained through inner experience. Knowledge of the things of the spirit (as distinct from scientific, objective, knowledge) has a mystical element. Matthew Spinka sums up Berdyaev's understanding of our knowledge of God, thus:

Our knowledge of God is ... basically intuitive, subjective, experiential, or, if you will not blanch at the word, mystical. It is neither exclusively intellectual, emotional, volitional, nor intuitional, but rather integral, combining all these four together with the indefinable additional element which results from this integral approach.³

In speaking of mysticism, Berdyaev refers more to spiritual knowledge and processes rather than orthodox mysticism, which he asserts has "frequently been identified with asceticism and thereby deprived of its genuinely mystical character."^{4,5} His interest in Christian mystics concerns not so much their teaching as

¹ Others, however, would see revelation as a God-directed means to the disclosure of God – in the Scriptures, for example.

² *Dream and reality*, 83.

³ Spinka, M. Nicholas Berdyaev. In *Christianity and the existentialists*, ed. C. Michalson. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1956, 63.

⁴ *Dream and reality*, 83.

⁵ There are echoes of Gregory of Palamas here. Gregory affirmed the theology of experience and meditation, defending the mystical stance of Hesychasm. By coming into contact with God's 'energies', especially God's light, Gregory taught that one could have a relationship with God, even though God is in essence unknowable. G. Gaicumakis. Hesychasm. In *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas. Paternoster, Exeter, 1974, 467.

their method.⁶

The indubitable result of meditation about God is this: it is impossible to think about God in rational terms, which are always borrowed from this world, which is not at all like God. Only apophatic theology was right: you cannot construct an ontology of God.⁷

When he writes about knowledge in his books, Berdyaev assigns decisive importance, "to the affective element, however difficult it may be of articulation in intellectual propositions" ⁸ Extreme rationalism, Berdyaev asserts, springs from oppression and in the last analysis usually originates in intuition and emotional commitment rather than intellectual argument.⁹

I cannot help thinking that those who hope to attain knowledge would be better employed in trying to communicate with the mystery of being than in analyzing and defending the truth of logical propositions.¹⁰

Revelation is not of itself knowledge. "There is no essential affinity between revelation and knowledge, since the former contains no cognitive element."¹¹

However, revelation can be important to knowledge as it may bring a distinct experience which, "philosophy can transform into an immanent datum."¹² Such knowledge comes about as a creative understanding, a dynamic process involving, "a movement of the spirit, a direction of will, a sensitivity, a search for meaning, a being shaken, elated, disillusioned and imbued with hope."¹³ True philosophy, a love of wisdom, is preeminently spiritual and emotional.

Knowledge does not eliminate mystery – indeed it has mystical elements – but it destroys false mystery and mysticism that originate in ignorance. "Mystery abides even on the summits of knowledge: indeed it is made more real and significant in

⁶ A point made by Senn, 459.

⁷ *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, 36.

⁸ *Dream and reality*, 87.

⁹ *Dream and reality*, 87.

¹⁰ *Dream and reality*, 88.

¹¹ N. Berdyaev. *Solitude and society*, trans. G. Reavey. Bles, London, 1938, 5, cf. Richardson, 165ff.

¹² *Solitude and society*, 5.

¹³ *Dream and reality*, 89.

knowledge."¹⁴ God is the ultimate mystery and the highest knowledge participates in the mystery of God.¹⁵

Berdyaeu upholds the value of scientific method in matters of objective study, including history.¹⁶ He vigorously denies, however, any claim that science may be a means of all knowledge or a solution to all human problems. Berdyaeu desires of philosophy that it, "should not be *about* something or somebody but should be that very something or somebody, in other words that it should be the revelation of the original nature and characteristic of the subject itself."¹⁷

Berdyaeu acknowledges indebtedness to Kant, particularly in Kant's dualism of the realm of phenomena and the noumenal realm of 'things in themselves'. However, he disagrees with Kant's view that the real but noumenal world ('things in themselves') is unknowable and that the phenomenal world is the only subject matter of knowledge. On the contrary, for Berdyaeu it is an apprehension of things in themselves that is more real. He posits 'primary' and 'secondary' forms of knowledge and associated 'primary' and 'secondary' states of consciousness. The secondary consciousness relates to the phenomenal realm and to objective understanding. The primary consciousness, "pertains to the subject, and proceeds from it as from a fountain of living water."¹⁸

§2. *Truth*

Berdyaeu speaks of Truth as being distinct from truths.¹⁹ Capital-letter Truth is reality itself, and is supernatural. God is Truth. Small-letter truths are knowledge about reality, based in the objective. The notion of truth is presently under the spell of objectivisation, Berdyaeu declares. Only what can be objectively verified is

¹⁴ *Dream and reality*, 90.

¹⁵ *Dream and reality*, 90.

¹⁶ *Dream and reality*, 286-287.

¹⁷ *Dream and reality*, 93, emphasis original.

¹⁸ *Dream and reality*, 97.

¹⁹ *The beginning and the end*, 42-49.

generally considered true, genuine, and trustworthy. The dominance of objective thinking, played out as science and technology, alienates and suffocates the life of the spirit and of the individual.

How then is a criterion of Truth to be found? Berdyaev asks. Too often, this is sought in something inferior to Truth, in the objectified world. Yet, in the objective realm, proof ultimately rests on assumptions. Truth cannot be guaranteed. "The freedom of the spirit knows nothing of guarantees."²⁰ Truth is disclosed, not proven.

Whence came this firm conviction that the truth is that which is most completely proven? Who knows but that proof is an obstacle of necessity encountered in the way of knowing the truth? Creative philosophy must free itself from the tempting power of proof, must fulfil the act of renouncing this safe adaptation to necessity.²¹

Berdyaev discards pragmatism and utilitarianism as criteria of truth. Nor does he allow reason to be absolute in assessing truth.²² "Truth, integral Truth, not partial, is a revelation of the higher world, that is of a world which is not objectified."²³ "The one and only standard of truth is Truth itself ... all other criteria exist for the objective world of the commonplace..."²⁴

For Berdyaev, pure truth has a prophetic edge. No religion is above truth and revelation must reveal truth.²⁵

The pure and undistorted truth of Christianity which is not adapted to the interests of anything whatever might well be highly dangerous to the existence of the world, to mundane societies and civilisations. It might be a consuming fire which descends from heaven. But this truth which is revealed from on high has been adjusted in the spirit of pragmatism to the interests of organized societies and churches.²⁶

Pragmatic adjustment of God's revelation in the service of human institutions makes purported 'revelation' subject to critique. The criterion of this critique, again, is truth,

²⁰ *The beginning and the end*, 46.

²¹ *The meaning of the creative act*, 48.

²² *Truth and revelation*, 37.

²³ *Truth and revelation*, 28.

²⁴ *The beginning and the end*, 46-47.

²⁵ *Truth and revelation*, 31.

²⁶ *Truth and revelation*, 30.

but this is not the same as formal proof. There can be no criterion of true knowledge of God outside of Godself. Nor can any person's inner spiritual experience be proven true.²⁷

When a logical proof is demanded in matters of religious faith, then faith is dragged down to the lowest level of spiritual unity. [...] Only those who are far removed from the spiritual and who are victims of interior conflict have recourse to scientific and juridical proofs in order to achieve mutual conviction.²⁸

To demand proof of the vision of God, Berdyaev says, is to place under authority something given in freedom. "Faith ... knows nothing of necessity in the logical or juridical sense."²⁹

To seek an external standard of truth in revelation is not only futile but harmful. "The quest of standards of truth leads us into a vicious circle from which there is no way out."³⁰ To assume any objective authority for religious truth will ultimately require a subjective belief in the authority, though this may be disguised by its social or traditional character.³¹ To the question, "Where then is a fixed and abiding standard of truth?" Berdyaev declines to answer, as, "truth always stands in doubt, it is not fixed, it is problematic."³²

The acceptance of truth always involves an element of risk. There is no guarantee and ought not to be any. This element of risk lies in every act of faith, which is the unveiling of things not seen.³³

Observing that, for Protestants, Truth is found in the Word of God, Berdyaev similarly suggests that, "it remains unexplained by what criterion it is to be decided what is the Word of God and what is the human contribution."³⁴ In Barth, for example, a near-contemporary of Berdyaev, "it is left obscure to what extent the

²⁷ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 110.

²⁸ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 108.

²⁹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 111.

³⁰ *Truth and revelation*, 39.

³¹ *Truth and revelation*, 39.

³² *Truth and revelation*, 40.

³³ *Truth and revelation*, 40.

³⁴ *Truth and revelation*, 49.

Word of God is a historic fact." Berdyaev says that this is because Barth seeks to be free of philosophy – an impossibility in Berdyaev's view.³⁵ Berdyaev affirms that God is revealed in scripture,³⁶ but not in scripture alone. The revelation of God to the world and man takes many forms. The crucial criterion for attainment of the knowledge of God is that God is at work, seeking to meet with women and men.³⁷

§3. *Truth and community*

Truth, Berdyaev says, is communal, but he sharply distinguishes the 'communal' from the 'collective'.³⁸ Collectivism is compulsory social organisation, in which 'truth' is dictated from outside as if it were the common will and view. It is people being together in a coerced, merely outward, way. Community life, on the other hand is a "brotherly communion in truth of human beings whose freedom is an accepted fact." Community life brings into reality the free life of each personality.³⁹

Berdyaev and others in the Russian Orthodox tradition describe such a communal life as *sobornost* – a difficult to translate idea meaning roughly 'alltogetherness' or 'qualitative togetherness'.⁴⁰ "Communality, *Sobornost*", is a society that is spiritual, which is hidden away from an externalised and objectivised society."⁴¹ Berdyaev writes that, through the experience of *sobornost*, "... I am not alone, for I am one with all my brethren in the spirit, in whatever place or time they

³⁵ *Truth and revelation*, 49.

³⁶ Here one might comment that Berdyaev is not completely consistent, for elsewhere he regards external, objective phenomena such as the written word as not being revelation. A clearer statement of his view might be that the Scriptures *symbolise* the inner spiritual reality that is God's self-revelation.

³⁷ *Truth and revelation*, 46.

³⁸ *Truth and revelation*, 25.

³⁹ *Truth and revelation*, 25. Cf. *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, 123.

⁴⁰ "... the Russian noun *sobornost* might be translated as qualitative togetherness. In this particular instance it can also be understood as *koinonia* – a fellowship of sharing and participation created by the power of the Holy Spirit. That the church is *soborny* means, according to Berdyaev, it is neither a lofty ideal nor a mere aggregation of individuals but rather a living community gathered around the Messiah." M. A. Vallon. *An apostle of freedom: Life and teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev*. Philosophical Library, New York, 1960, 212.

⁴¹ N. Berdyaev. The problem of man: Towards the construction of a Christian anthropology. *Put*, 50, 3-26, 1936, trans. S. Janos. http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1936_408.html, §V.

may have lived."⁴² Here Berdyaev gives a hint of a possible path to discerning Truth. "To community life", he says, "truth can be revealed."⁴³

Berdyaev argues that the process of finding truth and meaning is a process of the whole person – will and intellect as well as spirit – and that the process of thinking and discernment cannot take place in isolation.

It is the whole man who receives and interprets revelation ... Truth is apprehended not by the abstract, partial man who is referred to as reason, mind in general and universal spirit; but by the whole man, transcendental man, the image of God; and God may be entirely unrevealed in any given empirical man ...⁴⁴ [T]he person who thinks cannot be separated from the corporate experience of his brothers in spirit.⁴⁵

Knowledge is personal, but knowledge is a form of communication between people and each person comes to know things through community.⁴⁶ "The degrees of spiritual community which hold among men are here of very great importance."⁴⁷

Berdyaev's understanding of *sobornost* draws on the ecclesiology of Aleksei Stepanovitch Khomyakov (1804-1860). According to Khomyakov, *sobornost* is the free unity of the members of the Church in a shared understanding of truth and salvation. Those who love truth and find it in Christ accept it freely, and this creates unity. Though God may be law for the unregenerate, God is freedom for the righteous. Enforced conformity is a lie. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is for Khomyakov a demonstration of the connection between revelation and holiness. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the gathering united in prayer, revealing God to them as inner presence.⁴⁸

There are other instances in the New Testament suggesting communal

⁴² *Freedom and the spirit*, 329.

⁴³ *Truth and revelation*, 25.

⁴⁴ *Truth and revelation*, 19-20.

⁴⁵ *The beginning and the end*, 37.

⁴⁶ *The beginning and the end*, 39-40.

⁴⁷ *The beginning and the end*, 40. This is a central theme in *Solitude and society*.

⁴⁸ A. S. Khomyakov. *The Church is one*. SPCK, London, 1948, as discussed by K. Leśniewski. *The notion of Sobornost' in Russian Orthodox theology*. <http://www.theo.kuleuven.ac.be/ap/pdmdocs/Sobornost - Leuven1.doc>

discernment of the mind of God. Following the Council of Jerusalem, James's decision was recorded as seeming, "good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15.28). Paul instructed that when prophets speak, others should weigh what is said (I Corinthians 14.29). In Acts 13.2, the Holy Spirit is described as speaking, presumably in some way that was discerned by the group as indicating the mind of God. These instances seem to show that communal discernment can be a means of confirming the truth by the Spirit.

The *sobornost* relationship is one of unity in spirit, not of organisational authority. Just as Truth is made known spiritually in the life of one human being, it would seem that Berdyaev suggests that revelation might be experienced spiritually by a community united in the Spirit. "*Sobornost* represents a kind of collective individual which, in Berdyaev's view, can enter more effectively into communion with God than through the separate and often destructively competitive effort of human beings."⁴⁹ Unity in the revelation and knowledge of God and humankind is part of the eschatological hope. Its outworking in practice is not easy in the daily life of a community of faith. Yet, a number of Christian gatherings would testify to having experienced a collective sense of the mind of God.

Of course, communal discernment of truth is what the councils of the church have often claimed for themselves – most notably the great councils of the Roman Catholic Church, last instanced in Vatican II. Berdyaev would not allow that such processes necessarily lead to *the* Truth. He insists that a single believer may be more correct than a host of bishops.⁵⁰

When the Pope was fallible, and he was often fallible in history, it would appear that he was not acting like an infallible Pope. ... The Pope is infallible when inspired by the Holy Spirit. But there is no criterion to

⁴⁹ T. A. Idinopulos. Intersections of spirit: Berdyaev, Meland and Dagenais on what it is to be human. *Encounter*, **46**, 289-307, 1985 at p. 294.

⁵⁰ N. Berdyaev. Discord in the Church and freedom of conscience. *Put'*, **5**, 42-54, Oct./Nov., 1926, trans. A. V. Smirensky. <http://www.holy-trinity.org/ecclesiology/berdyaev-discord.html>

decide when he is so inspired. ... A council is infallible only when it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and gives utterance to truth. But there is, again, no criterion for judging when the council is so inspired. Nor is there any criterion of the Holy Spirit. And in any case the Holy Spirit is not a criterion ...⁵¹

These remarks are not entirely facetious, for they go to the point that there can be no deterministic causal chain in the establishment of spiritual truth, including the truth of revelation. Berdyaev repeatedly insists that *sobornost* occurs in and through freedom – the freedom of spirit in which Truth is made known.⁵² "Church *sobornost* does not mean authority ... rather it is the communion in love of the church people with the Holy Spirit."⁵³ The Holy Spirit dwells in the people of God as a whole, though there can be no proof. "The Spirit – the Holy Spirit – is incarnated in human life, but it assumes the form of a *whole humanity* rather than of authority."⁵⁴ The whole people of God are the keepers of truth and the Holy Spirit works in the community of believers (*sobornost*) to divide truth from untruth.⁵⁵

Community is a spiritual quality of person, a being together, a brotherhood of men Community leaves judgement and conscience in the depths of man's heart. Consciousness may be at once personal and communal.⁵⁶

Truth exists for the good of all, but is revealed only under certain spiritual, intellectual and cultural conditions. It requires a "certain level of spirituality."⁵⁷ There is a sense in which a community united in spirit is like a single person and is able to discern truth and speak prophetically.

§4. *The critique of revelation*

Because revelation occurs through human mediation, it is affected by human

⁵¹ N. Berdyaev. *Spirit and reality*, trans. G. Reavey. Bles, London, 1939, 186.

⁵² *Dream and reality*, 54.

⁵³ *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, 122.

⁵⁴ *Spirit and reality*, 187. Emphasis original. On the same page, Berdyaev declares this to be the 'pivotal idea' of *Spirit and reality*.

⁵⁵ Reliance on the Spirit in community as the teacher and guardian of the truth is a theme in John's gospel in particular (14.17, 14.26, 16.13).

⁵⁶ *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, 123.

⁵⁷ *Truth and revelation*, 24.

limitations and is received and recorded humanly. Therefore, Berdyaev says, it is subject to critique. In *The divine and the human*,⁵⁸ he claims that to that date (1945) no critique of revelation had been written that might be analogous to Kant's *Critique of pure and practical reason*. Such a critique of revelation would show the human content of revelation, for all revelation is a divine-human partnership. It is a partnership between the self-revealing God and the women and men to whom God is revealed.⁵⁹

The critique of revelation is a spiritual task assisted by critical scholarship, including biblical criticism. Revelation has always been subject to the judgment of human reasoning and conscience, albeit judgment enlightened from within by the same process of revelation. Alongside tradition, there has long been a desire to understand and explain revelation, but an uncritical acceptance of 'revelation' is dangerous.⁶⁰

The old and frequently fossilised manner of accepting and interpreting revelation clashes not only with the philosophical and scientific mind, but also with the moral sense, with humanity. ... The point is this, that in historical revelation we find much that is human, too human, and certainly not divine.⁶¹

We tend to create God in human image. However, Berdyaev contends, the important task in response to anthropomorphism is to seek to make the images of God that we create for ourselves as near as we are able to the divine likeness. The revelation and proclamation of the image and likeness of God is, as in all revelation, a divine-human dialectic.⁶² The critique of revelation includes the purging of anthropomorphism and sociomorphism – the transference to God's relationship with

⁵⁸ *The divine and the human*, 2-3.

⁵⁹ *The divine and the human*, 3

⁶⁰ Note again that Berdyaev is using the word 'revelation' in two ways – in its usual sense as the disclosure of God but also to signify that which humankind, rightly or wrongly, understands to be God's self-disclosure.

⁶¹ *Truth and revelation*, 49-50.

⁶² *The divine and the human*, 3.

humanity of "conceptions derived from the slavish social relations which contain, among human beings, the relation of master and slave".⁶³

What has been wrong with anthropomorphism is not that it ascribed to God the traits of humanity, or sympathy, or that it sees in Him a need for responsive love, but rather that it ascribes to Him traits of inhumanity, cruelty and love of power.⁶⁴

Thus, 'revelation' may be criticised when it transfers to God human social categories of dominance, power, and enslavement. The critique of revelation is, for Berdyaev, a basis from which to attack dogma that is inconsistent with the nature of God – for it is God who is the subject of revelation. Thus, for example, revelation of God must be an instrument of freedom and dogma cannot purport to be based on revelation if it is inimical to freedom. Berdyaev argues that "social categories of dominance and power have been transferred to God", and that this is "evil sociomorphism."⁶⁵ Here, Berdyaev argues not from evidence of the character of God as such, but from the premise that God does not act against freedom.⁶⁶

Berdyaev criticises a juridical interpretation of the redemptive relationship between God and humankind, as though it were a legal process. Such an approach, he says, is based on ancient pagan religion in which humanity, bound by the cycles of the natural realm, sought to propitiate the gods with material sacrifice.⁶⁷ With respect to redemption, Berdyaev is frankly universalist. "The idea of personal salvation is a transcendental egoism ... Individual isolated salvation is an impossibility."⁶⁸ Berdyaev is severely critical of the "element of cruelty in the

⁶³ *Truth and revelation*, 8

⁶⁴ *The divine and the human*, 3.

⁶⁵ *The divine and the human*, 4.

⁶⁶ Of course, there is much biblical data on the powerful, even vengeful, nature of God. Berdyaev thus agrees that, "the pure monotheism upon which Judaism set so high a value was still a monarchical despotic understanding of God." Thus, "It is only the God Who reveals Himself in His Son, in the God-man, Who ceases to be God the despotic monarch, and becomes the God of love and freedom, and this is a revelation of God in spirit and truth. The divine Trinity marks the triumph over the monarchical ideas about God ..." *The divine and the human*, 6.

⁶⁷ *The divine and the human*, 5.

⁶⁸ *Spirit and reality*, 166.

interpretation of Christianity" which he observes in, among other places, Roman Catholicism and Calvinism. From these, "one might derive the impression that the coming of Christ had worsened the position of man."⁶⁹ In similar vein, Berdyaev asserts that the traditional doctrine of God as an all-powerful ruler has led to atheism, for it has rendered theodicy impossible. It is impossible, he says, to find the presence of God in the cruelties and inhumanities of the present world. To make God responsible for these evils depends on a false doctrine of divine providence. God does not govern the world in the commonly understood sense, but is present in freedom and love.⁷⁰ These examples concerning redemption and theodicy illustrate the way in which Berdyaev is persuaded that an incorrect use of revelation, or misapprehension of its content, leads to false dogma that is destructive of faith and freedom. Objectification is often at heart a misapplication of 'revelation.'

In the case of revelation, which is fundamental in the religious life, the same thing has happened as with all manifestations of the Spirit; it has been objectified. ... God is not an object. ... One cannot enter into communion with the mystery of the Spirit in any sort of objectivization.⁷¹

Berdyaev claims that, in most theology, revelation has been objectified and wrongly interpreted with naïve realism. (The problem of objectivisation is discussed more fully in the next chapter.) The critique of revelation, Berdyaev says, must begin by addressing this naïve realism. Revelation is spiritual, not a disclosure of material and social reality. Only as symbolism is any form of objectivisation of the Spirit possible, Berdyaev says.⁷² He seeks a critique leading to, "the triumph of spirituality, to the liberation of spirit from naturalistic and materialist distortions."⁷³ Such a critique would also liberate revelation from objectification and the

⁶⁹ *The divine and the human*, 5-6.

⁷⁰ *The divine and the human*, 7-10.

⁷¹ *The divine and the human*, 13-14.

⁷² The concept of revelation as symbol is taken up by Avery Dulles in his *Models of revelation*. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1983, referred to later in this essay.

⁷³ *The divine and the human*, 14.

consequences of the subject-object relationship. It would be a "critique by the spirit"⁷⁴ in which division between subject and object, between humankind and 'things in themselves', is overcome. In Christ himself, the God-man, is found the resource for this critique and its conclusion.⁷⁵

The only true response to revelation, Berdyaev believes, is an intuitive response to a spiritual encounter. Rationalistic abstract reasoning deadens the interior life of the Spirit and deprives God of dynamic interior life. Nonetheless, intelligent thought should be applied to critique.

Revelation as Truth presupposes the activity of the whole man and to assimilate it demands our thinking also. ... Revelation cannot be something which is finished, static, and which requires a merely passive attitude for its reception.⁷⁶

Reliance on the Spirit and critical assessment as a source of truth, rather than naïvely accepted authority, has links to Berdyaev's central concept of freedom, for divine power is spiritual and does not rely on coercive authority. "Spiritual power is freedom. Spiritual power has no need of the authorities of this world ..."⁷⁷ Freedom and its relationship to revelation begin the next chapter.

⁷⁴ *Truth and revelation*, 67.

⁷⁵ Cf. R. T. Osborn. Subject and object in Barth and Berdyaev. *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 9(4), 160-170, 1965, at pp.162-3.

⁷⁶ *Truth and revelation*, 48-49.

⁷⁷ *Spirit and reality*, 185.

4. FREEDOM AND OBJECTIFICATION

§1. *Revelation requires freedom.*

Berdyayev's philosophy begins with freedom, which for him is the basis of all else.¹ For Berdyayev, God is present and revealed only in freedom. "I have come to Christ through liberty and through an intimate experience of the paths of freedom."² Any relationship between God and human must be based in freedom. Freedom is the context of our existence. It cannot be determined by anything else, for otherwise it would not be freedom.

Freedom is the ultimate: it cannot be derived from anything: it cannot be made the equivalent of anything. Freedom is the baseless foundation of being: it is deeper than all being.³

We are not forced to recognise God, as God's purpose is freedom and God is revealed only through the freedom found in spiritual life. The action of divine grace presupposes human freedom and without freedom, faith is impossible. By faith, by voluntary exercise of choice, we open ourselves to the spiritual realm in which God is freely revealed.⁴

Berdyayev notes that some argue that freedom and truth are opposed, for truth commands human recognition and allegiance. But such power-wielding 'truth', Berdyayev argues is, by its very objectified nature, a denial of freedom and no longer truth. (Thus, for example, the idea of hell can only be a cruel nonsense. For if one is forced to recognise God's sovereignty only because of fear of damnation, how could that be a free choice?)⁵

I come of my own freedom to know the truth which (in its turn) liberates

¹ In his intellectual autobiography, *Dream and reality*, Berdyayev declares his book *Freedom and the Spirit*, to be the best expression of his views on freedom. – *Dream and reality*, 100. There is an overview of the centrality of freedom in Berdyayev's life in *Dream and reality*, 46-54.

² *Freedom and the Spirit*, x.

³ *The meaning of the creative act*, 145.

⁴ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 105-7.

⁵ Berdyayev gives a full account of his rejection of the idea of Hell in *The destiny of man*, 266-283. See also, *Truth and revelation*, 134-139.

me. There is no authority in the world which has the power to constrain me to truth. I cannot be liberated by force.⁶

Close association between freedom and truth brings Berdyaev's idea of freedom into a study of his concept of revelation. Revelation is a divine-human cooperation in knowledge and truth, and truth cannot be received except in freedom.

I cannot agree to accept any truth otherwise than out of, and in, freedom. ... Truth can make me free, and yet I can accept truth only through, and in, freedom.⁷

For Berdyaev, "All things in human life should be born of freedom and pass through freedom and be rejected whenever they betray freedom."⁸ This applies to revelation, which is an aspect of human life as well as the divine life.

Berdyaev believes that human freedom is rooted in the "nothing" out of which God created the world. The "nothing" is not emptiness. It is an undifferentiated, mystical, primary principle, prior to God and the world.⁹ Berdyaev draws on the seventeenth century German mystic Jacob Boehme's idea of the *Ungrund* (the groundless, the abyss) that is the basis of everything, though sometimes Boehme identifies it with God. Berdyaev seeks to refine Boehme's concept. He separates the *Ungrund* from God and identifies it with an irrational, incomprehensible, and impulsive freedom, which cannot be defined, save only as nothing. Berdyaev says that even God the creator is born out of this divine nothing. Freedom, Berdyaev says, is not created by God, but rooted in the *Ungrund* from eternity.¹⁰

We should probably be right in thinking of *Ungrund* as the primary existential freedom. For freedom precedes being. Freedom is not *created*. That is the definition I personally should propose.¹¹

⁶ *Dream and reality*, 53.

⁷ *Dream and reality*, 47.

⁸ *Dream and reality*, 48.

⁹ Berdyaev describes this freedom as 'meonic' – an adaptation of *me on* (Gk.), meaning non-being.

(Thus, "Victory over meonic freedom is impossible for God, since that freedom is not created by Him and is rooted in non-being ..." *The destiny of man*, 281.)

¹⁰ *Spirit and reality*, 144-6, emphasis original. Cf. J. M. McLachlan. Mythology and freedom: Nicholas Berdyaev's uses of Jacob Boehme's *Ungrund* myth. *Philosophy Today*, **40**(4), 474-485, 1996.

¹¹ *Spirit and reality*, 145. Emphasis original.

Ungrund is nothingness, preceding God, who is, of course, not nothingness. In the *Ungrund*, the distinction of freedom from God the Creator is transcended. Humanity is the child of God and of freedom.

Thus, as mentioned, Berdyaev proposes a theodicy that denies that God is omniscient. God has no power over freedom, for it is not God's creation. Thus, God cannot be responsible for evil that arises from freedom. Berdyaev maintains that God does not create our freewill, but helps that will to become good. Freedom cannot be created. If it were, theodicy would be impossible.¹² For Berdyaev, even God requires freedom to be God. "God is love and without infinite freedom there cannot be infinite love, infinite movement, infinite possibilities."¹³

N. O. Lossky, a fellow exile and friend of Berdyaev's, describes the concept of the *Ungrund* as one of a number of ideas philosophers have taken on from Solovyev (and Boehme before him) that, "disagree with the data of religious experience and intellectual intuition, and should therefore be rejected in the course of further development of the Christian world conception."¹⁴ Lossky argues that "neither mystical experience nor intellectual intuition" find any evidence of a 'nothing' existing independently of God and utilized by God in creation. (That God created the world out of nothing cannot be taken to mean that God used a 'thing' called "Nothing" as material from which to create.) Rather, God created without use of anything from within Godself or without. Freedom, Lossky declares, is a created

¹² *Spirit and reality*, 112-114. Cf. N. Berdyaev. A consideration concerning theodicy [Translated title]. *Put'*, 7, 50-62, 1927, trans. S. Janos. http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1927_321.html. Elsewhere, Berdyaev says, "The problem of theodicy is not solved by objectivising thought in the objectivised world order. It is only solved on the existential plane where God reveals Himself as freedom, love and sacrifice, where He suffers for men and strives together with man against the intolerable suffering of the world." *Slavery and freedom*, 89. "God is a God who suffers with the world and with men. He is crucified Love; he is the Liberator. The Liberator appears not as power but as Crucifixion. *Slavery and freedom*, 85.

¹³ O. F. Clarke, *Introduction to Berdyaev*. Bles, London, 1950, 180.

¹⁴ N. Berdyaev. In Lossky, N. O. *History of Russian Philosophy*. Allen and Unwin, London, 1952, 233-250 at 248.

attribute of the human will, entirely compatible with divine omniscience. Lossky argues that Berdyaev's idea of the *Ungrund*, and of freedom not being created by God, is not acceptably Christian.¹⁵ Lossky is quick to add that his criticism by no means implies rejection of the rest of Berdyaev's system. However, Berdyaev would not accept as truly free a human freewill potentially subject to God – let alone a 'freewill' constrained by the possibility of eternal hell and damnation. For Berdyaev, freedom is "primordial, undetermined and underived."¹⁶ Without a freedom of this kind, Berdyaev's concepts of truth and revelation would seem to fall to the ground.

Evgueny Lampert calls Berdyaev's uncreated freedom, "the most disastrous conclusion in his whole philosophy, and one which seems in fact no way warranted by his own fundamental presuppositions."¹⁷ Lampert finds 'uncreated freedom' to be a disastrous idea because it implies an ontological dualism. However his criticism is not exact, because the priority of freedom is itself one of Berdyaev's "fundamental presuppositions." Berdyaev, aware of criticisms such as this, asserts that 'groundless freedom' does not imply ontological dualism.¹⁸ His philosophy is existential, "and existential philosophy cannot be ontological."¹⁹ "If uncreated freedom implies a dualism, then, according to Berdyaev, such dualism would be existential and not ontological, the dualism comprising God and man as the two experienced realities."²⁰

Oliver O'Donovan is a contemporary theologian who takes up the idea of freedom in an interesting way that has echoes of Berdyaev's idea while also differing

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 249

¹⁶ *Dream and reality*, 47.

¹⁷ E. Lampert. Nicolas Berdyaev. In *Modern Christian revolutionaries; an introduction to the lives and thought of: Kierkegaard, Eric Gill, G. K. Chesterton, C. F. Andrews and Berdyaev*, ed. D. Attwater. Devin-Adair, New York, 1947, 309-390 at 346, n. 4.

¹⁸ *Dream and reality*, 179.

¹⁹ *Truth and revelation*, 68.

²⁰ Nucho, 173.

from it.²¹ He speaks of freedom not as a primordial pre-existent, but as a work of the Holy Spirit. O'Donovan's concern is the essential importance of freedom to a man or woman's autonomy as a moral agent. The Spirit makes Christ's work of redemption present to us. In doing so, the Spirit restores to us our position as subjects rather than objects. "The Spirit evokes our *free* response as moral agents to the reality of redemption. ... This assertion makes it clear in what sense 'subject' and 'subjective' ... are the appropriate terms to use of the Holy Spirit's work."²² "The effect of the Holy Spirit's presence to man-as-subject, individual or communal," O'Donovan writes, "is *freedom*."²³ To say someone is free, O' Donovan adds, is to speak of the person, not his or her circumstances.

This discussion addresses Lossky's concern that, in a Christian framework, freedom must be a created work of God while also identifying the connection, important to Berdyaev, between freedom and the human person as subject. What it does not do (at least in the extract I have read) is deal with the problem of theodicy that, in Berdyaev's view, does not allow freedom to be the creation of God.

Berdyaev's concern for freedom leads him to reject ontology. A discussion of this at any length is beyond the present scope, but it relates to Berdyaev's analysis of objectification. Berdyaev's rejection of ontology flows from his assertion of the primacy of freedom over being. "[W]ith regard to Being, man is not free at all; and this signifies, at the same time, the primacy of spirit, for it is with regard to spirit that man is free."²⁴ Primacy of being, over which humanity has no control, would lead to determinism. Freedom cannot be determined except by itself. The category of being, which is the concern of ontology, is itself "a product of intellectual

²¹ O'Donovan, O. Freedom and reality. In *Theology after liberalism. A reader*, ed. J. Webster & G. P. Schner. Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, 132-151. Excerpted from his *Resurrection and moral order*. Inter-Varsity, Leicester, 1986, 101-120.

²² O'Donovan, 137. Emphasis original

²³ O'Donovan, 138. Emphasis original.

²⁴ *Dream and reality*, 99.

objectification" and a "transcendental illusion."²⁵

'Being' in isolation from the subject of Being is, existentially speaking, an unreality. The real 'object' of knowledge is not this or that Being or this or that predicate, for they do not exist in themselves, but that to which they (Being and predicate) belong or, rather, that subject to which they are related.²⁶

Reality in its original state is not undifferentiated Being, but creative act and freedom, to be found in the person, the subject, and in spirit.

§2. *Revelation and objectification*

Throughout his work, Berdyaev asserts the priority of the subject over the object. It is this, he says, that makes him an existentialist.²⁷ He describes the critique of objectification as one of his, "fundamental philosophical intuitions"²⁸ and disbelieves in a stability of the natural and historical, 'objective' realm.

'Objective' things are devoid of ultimate reality; they are an illusion of our consciousness; they exist only in proportion to their remoteness from the sources of being, a remoteness which in turn is dependent on a certain state or orientation of the spirit. Such remoteness is at any rate a mark of diminution in reality.²⁹

For Berdyaev the objectified world is not the true and real world, but a condition that has come about particularly because of the Fall.

Man's mind may never be free from compulsion exercised by 'objective realities', but this only goes to show his fallen condition, which can be properly understood and evaluated only from the point of view of a philosophy of freedom, of creativity and of communion in love.³⁰

Thus, objectification is a consequence of estrangement, in which we are alienated from the subject of our knowledge. "Objectivity signifies the enslavement of the spirit to external things: it is a product of disruption, disunion, estrangement and enmity."³¹ Only the subject is real and able to know reality.

²⁵ *Dream and reality*, 286.

²⁶ *Dream and reality*, 287.

²⁷ *Dream and reality*, 93.

²⁸ *Dream and reality*, 286.

²⁹ *Dream and reality*, 286.

³⁰ *Dream and reality*, 287.

³¹ *Dream and reality*, 286.

The world truly exists in the unobjectified subject. ... Knowledge, which is an activity of the subject, depends on the victory over disunion and estrangement, on the extent and intensity of spiritual communion.³²

To affirm the transcendent alone, Berdyaev asserts, is a form of naturalist objectification that restricts the inner spiritual life. A tendency towards the transcendent, "separates God and man, isolating man in himself and dividing the spirit from the soul ..."³³ Rather, Berdyaev looks for a "kind of immanentism, in which consciousness is regarded as immanent in being. The knowing subject is merged in the infinite life of the spirit."³⁴ In the ultimate, however, God's self-revelation is neither transcendent nor immanent and the distinction between two will become unnecessary.³⁵

Berdyaev asserts that enslavement to the objective is present in Christian theology no less than in secular disciplines.³⁶ But God is *not* object, not an external reality, but immanent in us.³⁷ This understanding of God, and thus of theology, has profound implications for revelation. Revelation brings knowledge of God but does not thereby do away with mystery. It discloses the depths of mystery, in all of the ineffability of God. The element of mystery always remains and revelation does not imply the apprehension of God by reason.³⁸

Berdyaev's strictures notwithstanding, there are contemporary theologians concerned with the human self as subject. Thus, for example, writing on "Revisionists and liberals", James Buckley finds that theologians of as diverse

³² *Dream and reality*, 286

³³ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 96.

³⁴ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 96.

³⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 91.

³⁶ "The new path that philosophy is following takes for granted a revision of the traditional philosophy upon which Christian theology and the interpretation of Christianity have rested ... which I call objectified. The idea of God, of Providence, of Authority, the naïvely realistic conception of the creation of the world and of the Fall, the notion that a rational ontology is a possibility, all these have been due to the same process of objectification." *Truth and revelation*, 13-14.

³⁷ *Dream and reality*, 300.

³⁸ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.

backgrounds and views as Edward Farley, Gordon Kaufmann, Schubert Ogden and David Tracy, "are concerned with human beings as free *subjects* embedded in a physical and social and historical world, radically threatened by ambiguity and suffering and evil and seeking ways to overcome this situation."³⁹

The resolution of humanity's enslavement to the objective is ultimately eschatological. The unity of subject and object, as Robert Osborn expresses it, "is a heavenly reality before it is an earthly possibility, and this heavenly reality which has become an earthly possibility is the God-man Jesus Christ."⁴⁰ As objectification's difficulties arise because of human estrangement from God,⁴¹ so will they be resolved when all things are ultimately brought together in perfect freedom in Christ.⁴²

³⁹ J. J. Buckley. Revisionists and liberals. In *The modern theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, ed. D. F. Ford. 2nd ed. Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, 327-342. Emphasis original. For Tracy, for example, Christian freedom is, "the real but limited freedom of the prophetic-mystical subject-as-agent-in-process." D. Tracy. *Dialogue with the Other*. Louvain, 1990, 102.

⁴⁰ Osborn, 163. Osborn finds in Barth and Berdyaev similar understandings of relationship between subject and object and its resolution in Christ.

⁴¹ "Sin is life without Christ, and life without Christ is life in which the original unity is split into subject and object" Osborn, 165.

⁴² Cf. *The beginning and the end*, ch. 9.

5. CONTRAST AND CHALLENGES

Not until eighteenth and nineteenth century German idealism do we find a strict identification of subject and content in the understanding of God's self-revelation. However, the idea of revelation as the self-revelation of God has a long history and wide acceptance.¹ Yet, there is strong divergence on the manner and form of revelation. There is little published criticism of Berdyaev's concept of revelation as such. However, criticism of the concept of revelation-as-experience is a reasonable proxy. This chapter examines such criticism and attempts to respond to it using, when possible, a response that Berdyaev himself might offer. The purpose here is not to engage in a thoroughgoing critical analysis of Berdyaev (space is insufficient for that) but to strengthen exposition of his idea.

The first section of the chapter looks very briefly at the idea of 'revelation as history', as a way to sharpen understanding of Berdyaev's idea through contrast with a differing concept. The second section looks at some potential criticisms of Berdyaev's concept drawn from Avery Dulles's work, *Models of revelation*.²

§1. *A contrasting perspective*

Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests that the concept of revelation as God's self-revelation became important with the decline of the Protestant view of revelation as divine inspiration supporting the authority of scripture. A second reason was the decay of the natural theology of the Enlightenment. If the inspiration of scripture is not a direct expression of divine revelation, Pannenberg argues, God's reality can be established only (1) by metaphysical reflection on human experience in history or (2) by independent religious experience of which God is shown to be the basis.³

For knowledge of God based on religious experience to be more than

¹ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic theology*. Vol. 1., trans. G. W. Bromiley. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, 222-223.

² Dulles. *Op cit*.

³ Pannenberg *Systematic theology*, 1, 222-224.

subjective, it is argued, God's self-revelation needs to be linked to external and public manifestation of God in specific historical events. Richard Rothe formulated thinking on this 'outer' revelation in the mid-nineteenth century. He argued from scripture that God's revelation is not inspiration but a related series of miraculous historical facts and institutions, redeeming us by purifying our knowledge of God. Revelation must be outward, as we are sensory beings. It must lead the human consciousness, by ordinary processes of thought, based on evidence, unambiguously to a true idea of God.⁴ Development of these and other ideas led, for example, to Pannenberg's well known seven theses on revelation as history.⁵

The contrasts between this approach and that of Berdyaev are clear. Berdyaev would not find the subjectivity of a religious experience to be a weakness. As we have seen already, he would not accept the idea of revelation as an 'outer' phenomenon and he would not allow sensory perceptions or argument based on those perceptions as a ground on which to know God. Only in the inner person, in the human spirit, by the work of the Holy Spirit, can God be known. Nor would Berdyaev accept that the veracity of religious experience can be proved by argument and objective evidence.

Berdyaev says that its relationship to history is the most important aspect of 'revelation' open to critique, as Christianity is the revelation of God in history.

Truth is not only capable of passing judgement upon historical revelation, it is indeed bound to do so. Revelation in history has value only in so far as it is a revelation of truth, an encounter with truth, in other words if it is a revelation of the Spirit.⁶

As objects, the events and institutions recorded in the Bible are symbolic of revealed spiritual realities. They are revelation only in a symbolic sense, not as realities.

"History," Berdyaev says, "is an objectivization and a socialization of revelation; it is

⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic theology*, 1, 224-225

⁵ W. Pannenberg & others. *Revelation as history*. Sheed & Ward, London, 1969.

⁶ *Truth and revelation*, 38.

not the primary life of the Spirit."⁷ For Berdyaev, it is important to the faith that the coming of Jesus happened as a historical fact. Nevertheless, Christianity arose in an age when mythical events were accepted as factual. The biblical authors did not distinguish as sharply as we might today between history, meta-history and the 'supra-historical' – in Scripture they are intermingled. 'Scientific' history and biblical criticism may dispute things that Scripture relates as fact.

Can my faith be preserved if historical inquiry, owing to the appearance of new facts and new material, proves scientifically that certain things which Holy Scripture relates as facts, had no existence, that they are not historical events but myths, legends, theological doctrines created by the believing Christian community?⁸

A truly spiritual religion cannot set itself above truth. Berdyaev concludes that the idea of 'historical' revelation is contradictory and the acceptance of revelation as history is a product of naïve materialism. Historical revelation can only be a "symbolization in the phenomenal world of events which take place in the noumenal historical world."⁹ There is an element of mystery in the manifestation of a real, noumenal, spiritual event in a way that is adapted to the limits of time and place. "The infinite God speaks with a finite human tongue"¹⁰

To establish certain 'facts', in Berdyaev's view, it is insufficient that they have long been accepted as historical. "The Christian conception of the divine Incarnation ought not to mean the deification of historical facts."¹¹ Christian 'truth' must not rely on unattested history. Nor does acceptance of something by the many signify truth. (Here Pannenberg would agree, but would add that attestation of the historical fact most essential to the faith – the resurrection – is indeed feasible.) Berdyaev accepts the great importance of tradition in religious life. However, of itself, tradition is not

⁷ *Truth and revelation*, 48.

⁸ *The divine and the human*, 16.

⁹ *The divine and the human*, 17.

¹⁰ *The divine and the human*, 17

¹¹ *Truth and revelation*, 47.

an indicator of truth and it is not an external authority. "To trust in it requires a continuation of the creative process."¹² Acceptance of tradition, whether based in revelation or not, invokes the communal discernment found in the *sobornost* principle.

Historical criticism must be free and can be enlightening but, of itself, Berdyaev believes, it cannot decide spiritual questions. The historicity of events concerning Jesus ultimately cannot be determined by history. The truth of the Christ event, "is a mystery which is not visible from without in history, but has been disclosed in the religious experience of the Christian community."¹³

§2. *Challenges to revelation as experience.*

In *Models of revelation*, Avery Dulles identifies models into which theological concepts of revelation may be grouped: (1) revelation as doctrine; (2) revelation as history; (3) revelation as inner experience; (4) revelation as dialectical presence and (5) revelation as new awareness. For each of these models, Dulles includes a discussion of its merits and weaknesses. Berdyaev's ideas on revelation fit well within Dulles's third category – revelation as inner experience. Thus, Dulles's work is useful as resource against which to test Berdyaev's ideas. In Dulles's third model, revelation is an immediate interior experience – a direct unmediated encounter with the divine.¹⁴ The content of revelation, in this model, is God's self. Such revelation imparts a saving experience of union with God.¹⁵

Dulles argues that this experiential model of revelation makes selective use of the Bible and even contradicts it.

By shifting from the Biblical categories of the deeds and words of God to the psychological categories of religious genius and mystical experience,

¹² *Truth and revelation*, 41.

¹³ *The divine and the human*, 18.

¹⁴ Dulles notes, however, that, "some affirm, with the Biblical and Christian tradition, that this experience is to be found in communion with the prophets and especially with Jesus, whose familiarity with God was unsurpassably intimate. Thus faith possesses a kind of 'mediated immediacy.'" Dulles, 76-7.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

this model rejects the self-understanding of the prophets, many of whom, from Moses to Jeremiah, insist on their ineptitude for the task to which they had been called.¹⁶

This does not seem to be a strong argument. Many, perhaps all, of the Biblical prophets had some form of personal encounter with God (experience) which led to their prophetic activity. In Berdyaev's conception, this inner experience was revelation, not their prophetic words. (The question at issue here arises in part because the revelation-as-experience model does not identify revelation with objective word.) The prophet may well have felt unworthy, but this does not gainsay the presence of an experience of God and a prophetic gift. Moses protested his inability and unworthiness, but had a powerful experience of God. 'Religious genius' is not a matter of ego. The humblest, most self-effacing, person may be great in his or her inner experience of God, which Berdyaev would associate with revelation.

The next criticism offered by Dulles is that to make revelation, "the prerogative of the religious genius ... substitutes a natural elitism for the biblical idea of election." This can be applied as a criticism of Berdyaev's view that revelation is a matter of degree that depends on the development of the human consciousness. Dulles goes on to say that making revelation an immediate interior experience seems to restrict revelation, and consequently faith, to a minority, limiting the operation of divine grace.¹⁷

This argument is stronger and more complex. Berdyaev would take issue with any suggestion that, at least in the ultimate, God's grace is applied selectively. For him it is inconceivable that *anything* could cause the grace of God to be applied selectively in a way that might cause the redemption of some and the hellish damnation of others.¹⁸ However, Berdyaev does observe that, in this present life,

¹⁶ Dulles, 78.

¹⁷ Dulles, 79.

¹⁸ Cf. *Truth and revelation*, 134-139.

there are men and women who partake more fully in inner experience of God than do others. Christian history knows many such. But, "This does not mean that we have to follow the ancient gnostics and recognise the existence of different classes of men ... That would be to contradict universal Truth and the freedom of man."¹⁹ At issue, of course, is whether such inner experience is indeed revelation. Dulles's concern is based in part on an identification of revelation with word – the Word that brings about faith (Romans 10.17).²⁰ Berdyaev, however, would not identify word with revelation, saying rather, that objective word is *symbolic* of the revealed, inner, subjective, and spiritual reality.

The "now but not yet" paradox applies to revelation. Berdyaev's vision is fulfilled in the *eschaton*, when God will be revealed in humankind and humankind in God.²¹ The human limitations of the present life that restrict our ability to receive revelation will be set aside in Christ, the God-man. Although, in the present, individual people may have greater experience of the revelation of God, Berdyaev looks for God to be disclosed in the inner spiritual life of the community (*sobornost*) – not, however, through objective, external authority.

By standing against the view that revelation consists in external deeds and divine doctrines, Dulles observes, the concept of revelation as inner experience opposes church teaching – Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – though it has some support in mystical tradition. Dulles argues that, by separating revelation from doctrine, the revelation-as-experience model, "says in effect that there are no divine answers to the human questions about the origin and ultimate destiny of humanity and the world." If doctrine is not revealed, how can the church offer the godly

¹⁹ *Truth and revelation*, 145-146.

²⁰ "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Romans 10.17 - NRSV)

²¹ Berdyaev would endorse the eschatological perspective of Pannenberg's Thesis 2: "Revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history."

wisdom and instruction that religion is supposed to provide?²² To this, Berdyaev's 'short answer' would be that, in revelation, it is not doctrine that is revealed, but God's very self, which surely is more profitable.

Of itself, Berdyaev does not require revelation to *signify* anything. Rather, it is the reality of God. It is not knowledge, and "contains no cognitive element."²³ This does not mean that Berdyaev avoids 'doctrinal' questions of ethics²⁴ and ecclesiology, for example – quite the contrary – though he declines to call himself a theologian. As discussed in chapter 2, moreover, Berdyaev suggests that the revelation experience can be transformed by creative philosophical endeavour into data on which to build knowledge.²⁵ This philosophy is a spiritual task, grounded in a love of godly wisdom. Data may be derived from revelation, but revelation is not knowledge, still less doctrine. (Of course, some Christian traditions, including Roman Catholicism, of which Dulles is a distinguished representative, are more comfortable than others with philosophy in religious understanding.)

Dulles also mentions, of course, the question of evaluating what has been discerned and resolving conflicting interpretation of it. Do such experiences, he asks, "really signify anything except the soul's experience of itself?"²⁶ The quality of a 'religious' experience does not necessarily demonstrate that God is experienced.²⁷ There is a discussion of the questions of truth and discernment concerning revelation earlier in this essay, which need not be repeated here.

Dulles is also concerned about the practical implications of the experiential

²² Dulles, 79.

²³ *Solitude and society*, 5.

²⁴ Berdyaev's *The destiny of man* is devoted to ethics.

²⁵ *Solitude and society*, 5.

²⁶ Dulles, 80.

²⁷ Dulles cites philosopher William James, who analysed numerous religious testimonies to conclude that religious experience arises from the human psyche, and also to conclude that it is "probable that this region is closely attuned to the higher part of the universe and in that sense with God." Dulles, 81, summarising W. James. *The varieties of religious experience*. Mentor, New York, 1958.

model, as the quest for private religious experience has sometimes resulted in harmful religious excesses and isolation from the life of the Church. However, the risk of excess and error is a risk of freedom. So much so, that Berdyaev speaks of a tragic aspect to freedom.²⁸ He argues that this risk is both unavoidable and essential, as the alternative is the certitude of enslavement. The Spirit is our guarantee and "we walk by faith and not by sight." (2 Cor. 5.7)²⁹

Dulles concludes that a characteristic defect of the revelation-as-experience model, "is not its emphasis on experience but rather its excessively narrow concept of experience." When a too-narrow, immediate, individual and instantaneous understanding of experience is evident,

revelation comes to be seen as a bare, unanalysed datum that imposes itself on the human spirit as a *tabula rasa*. God becomes a strange phenomenon perceived without any reliance upon community, tradition, and other forms of worldly mediation.³⁰

Dulles seeks to illustrate that recent philosophy has shown this to be an inadequate view of experience. The human subject brings many learned concepts, instincts, memories, and emotions into play in the formation of even the most apparently straightforward experience. Experience is continuous, cumulative, and subject to interpretation through many complex criteria. All this is true for religious experience as for any other. "The rootedness of a religion in tradition," for example, "does not make it any less experiential."³¹

In part, this is a strange argument. Berdyaev would not gainsay the existence of tradition as experience, still less community as experience. The question at issue, however, is not whether there are valuable Christian experiences available other than

²⁸ *Truth and revelation*, 137.

²⁹ "He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Cor 5:6-7 NRSV)

³⁰ Dulles, 81.

³¹ Dulles, 82, drawing on J. E. Smith. *Experience and God*. Oxford U. Pr., New York, 1968.

revelation, but whether revelation itself occurs as experience and as a unique kind of experience. For the purposes of his study, Dulles seeks to typify the revelation-as-experience idea as a whole – a difficult task. Berdyaev would contest Dulles's generalisation that revelation, when perceived as experience, "comes to be seen as a bare, unanalysed datum." Indeed, as already seen, Berdyaev argues that revelation is not data at all, but an encounter with God that, through philosophy, may lead to human creation of data.

Dulles speaks of 'community' as a form of 'worldly mediation' of the experience of God. He probably has in mind an idea of community differing from that of *sobornost*. Berdyaev would agree that community can indeed contribute to discernment of Truth. However, he sees this as occurring through the community's shared subjective, spiritual, life. He would not accept 'worldly mediation' if this were to be a form of objectified process.

Berdyaev is not unusual in expressing the desirability and wonder of inner experience of God. Debate begins, of course, when he goes further to identify revelation with such experience. Moreover, stronger questions of difference arise when Berdyaev characterises the inner, spiritual and subjective revelation of Godself as the true reality and outer, objective, phenomena as but symbols of reality. Those who argue that God's self-revelation must be objectively testable do so because they believe that revelation must be testable to achieve its purpose of making God known. Conclusions, they would say, must be repeatable and communicable. The grace of God is extended as God is made known to the human senses and through human reason. The motivation of this approach has many aspects, including unity, authority and intelligibility. The need for apologetics is especially important and revelation is seen as the essential information, which, by the work of the Spirit, brings us to knowledge of God.

Overall, the challenges to revelation-as-experience summarised by Dulles reflect such a desire for testability, certainty and authority in the discernment and interpretation of revelation. Thus, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg strongly argues the inability of personal experience to assure certainty, while acknowledging that personal experience can indeed be real and true.

Individual experience can never mediate absolute unconditional certainty. At best it can offer no more than a certainty which needs clarification and confirmation in an ongoing process of experience. This subjective certainty does indeed experience the presence of truth and its unconditionality, but only in an ongoing process. The conditionality of all subjective certainty is part of the finitude of the human experience. To claim unconditional, independent certainty is forcibly to make oneself, the believing I, the locus of absolute truth.³²

A claim of certainty based on experience, Pannenberg argues, is irrational fanaticism. There can be no prior guarantee of the truth. The absence of such a guarantee, however, requires not an abandonment of the truth claims of the gospel, but making these truth claims the subject of systematic theology.³³

So long as one thinks the truth of Christian doctrine must be established in advance of all discussion of its content ... there is little choice but to appeal to the act of faith, whether as experience or as risk or venture.³⁴

For Berdyaev, the search for certainty is illusory. We rely not on information or argument about God, but on God's very self, made known in us. "Revelation is the fire which proceeds from the divine world, which kindles our souls, reshapes our consciousness, and removes its limitations."³⁵ The message of the Gospel is empowered as God is revealed in the human spirit.

³² Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, 1, 47.

³³ Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, 1, 48.

³⁴ Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, 1, 47.

³⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 102.

6. WITNESS AND VISION

In discussing philosophical problems I have chosen the method of witness, of intuitive description and of characterization. I always desired to discern and to express the ethos, the character or quality of the object of my inquiry, rather than to present others with fragments of ideas and phenomena. ... Knowledge in the sense of objectification, of objective study ... is an unreality to me.¹

My philosophy has never been 'scientific': rather, it was prophetic and eschatological in manner and orientation.²

[M]y vocation is to proclaim not a doctrine but a vision ... I work and desire to work by inspiration ... I do not think that philosophy will ever be able to speak the truth if it does not take full account of the mysterious element of inspiration. ... I am concerned to show that creative ecstasy, vision, prophecy and inspiration are a pledge of the living reality of God and man.³

It seems to me that the phrase, "method of witness," sums up, in Berdyaev's own words, his purpose in life, his manner of writing and something of his views on revelation as well. The three things reflect each other.

Oliver Clarke observes that Berdyaev's work is, "the thinking of a man who in freedom found Christ and whom Christ in turn released."⁴ Clarke suggests that this Christian experience – the experience of Christ in freedom – is the inner consistency and unifying mark of Berdyaev's religious work. The divine-human encounter with which Berdyaev begins, "is as concrete as primitive Christianity."⁵ One begins not with God, nor with humanity, but with Jesus Christ, the God-man. All else comes out of this. Berdyaev seeks not to prove the reality of God but to bear witness to the freedom he knows in Christ.

In his essay, *The hermeneutics of testimony*, Paul Ricoeur begins by asking, "What sort of philosophy makes a problem of testimony?" It is,

... a philosophy for which the question of the absolute is a proper

¹ *Dream and reality*, 90.

² *Dream and reality*, 91.

³ *Dream and reality*, 289-290.

⁴ Clarke, 174.

⁵ Clarke, 175.

question, a philosophy which seeks to join an *experience* of the absolute to the *idea* of the absolute, a philosophy which finds neither in example nor in symbol the depth of this experience.⁶

Berdyaev's philosophy of revelation meets this description of a philosophy concerned with testimony. Ricoeur's discussion relates particularly to testimony as found in exegesis of the New Testament. However, I believe that it can be applied to testimony in other places where God is made known, including revelation as Berdyaev expounds it.

Ricoeur concludes that, "We must choose between philosophy of absolute knowledge and the hermeneutics of testimony."⁷ An examination of Berdyaev's hermeneutic would have been an interesting way to extend the scope of this essay. I anticipate that it would be found to be a 'hermeneutic of testimony'. Berdyaev's description of revelation portrays it also as testimony, in which the message and substance are one. It is the Spirit of God, "bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." (Rom. 8.16 NRSV) It is God bearing witness to Godself.

Berdyaev does not ask us to agree with arguments, objectively or in the abstract. He seeks to be a witness and urges us to consider his testimony – to join, by God's grace, in the experience of the mystery of God.

God is Mystery, and the knowledge of God denotes participation in a mystery ... That is why apophatic theology, the theology which bears witness to the *Deus absconditus*, is the only adequate theology. The knowledge of God obtained by ratiocination, on the other hand, cannot be called a true knowledge of God, since it betrays and destroys mystery.⁸

⁶ P. Ricoeur. The hermeneutics of testimony. *Anglican Theological Review*, 61(4), 435-461, Oct., 1979, at p. 435. Emphasis original. I thank Dr Garrett for reminding me to think about this.

⁷ Ricoeur, 461. "The impossibility of absolute knowledge is marked by three indices, first, it expresses the impotence of fixing the criteriology of the divine in a closed system. ... Next, the impossibility of absolute knowledge expresses the impotence of consciousness to bring all the signs together in a coherent whole. ... Finally, the impossibility of absolute knowledge expresses the impotence of identifying absolute reflection and absolute testimony itself raised to the rank of proof in the grand trial of meaning." Ricoeur, 460-1.

⁸ *Dream and reality*, 90.

As we have seen, Berdyaev does not set aside critique and sound reasoning – quite the contrary – but knowledge of reality is an inner knowledge by the spirit.

In his study on the resurrection, Thorwald Lorenzen asks what kind of knowledge is appropriate to the event of the resurrection of Jesus. This question, Lorenzen says, invokes a well-recognised principle in science, philosophy, and theology. The way of knowing should not be predetermined and universally accepted, but should correspond to the object of inquiry.

Our inquiry, as does all scientific inquiry, takes place in a circular relationship between the object of our research and ourselves who are engaged in the research. Yet within that circle, priority must be ascribed to the object of inquiry. In that sense the object of inquiry must also be its determining subject.⁹

For his inquiry into revelation and the very question of God, Berdyaev chooses an apophatic approach, a "method of witness, of intuitive description and characterisation."¹⁰

Continuing his discussion of the "dialectic of Christian knowing"¹¹, Lorenzen considers ways of knowing appropriate to the resurrection event, including witness.¹²

To avoid distorted application of the scriptural witness, he says,

We will not objectify the resurrection of Christ, but remember that it aims for a concrete manifestation in our life and in the world. We will not limit the resurrection reality to our experience of it, but remember that it is Jesus Christ, not ourselves, who is risen and who wants to shape our life. We will not limit verification to a theoretical proof, but we will remember that we must confess our allegiance to Christ with our whole existence. The category of witness therefore enables us to think the resurrection (*sic*) of Jesus Christ as determining our life and our future, without being dissolved into our experience.¹³

⁹ T. Lorenzen. *Resurrection and discipleship. Interpretive models, biblical reflection, theological consequences*. Orbis, Maryknoll, 1995, 192.

¹⁰ *Dream and reality*, 90.

¹¹ Chapter heading, Lorenzen, 191ff.

¹² The other categories of knowing discussed by Lorenzen are faith, word, promise, remembering, partnership, worship, praxis and knowledge. Lorenzen, 191-235.

¹³ Lorenzen, 222.

These words also encapsulate the approach that we might take to God's self-revelation, should we seek to respond to Berdyaev's testimony. We should not objectify revelation, but remember that its purpose is "a concrete manifestation in our life and in the world" (bearing in mind that, for Berdyaev, the inner reality is concrete). We should not limit the reality of revelation to individual experience of it, remembering the primacy of Christ as he is made known in the *sobornost* community. We should not "limit verification to a theoretical proof" and "remember that [in response to God's self-revelation] we must confess our allegiance to Christ with our whole existence." Agreeing that the category of witness enables revelation to determine our lives and futures, Berdyaev would say, however, that this is because God's self-disclosure is an integral part of our innermost experience.

Adoption of the *sobornost* principle safeguards Berdyaev's conception of revelation from false gnosticism and makes it a challenge for the church. Are we able, as a community, to find consensus based not on adversarial debate but on a shared discernment of the inner witness of the Spirit?¹⁴ Will we be able to testify that our belief and action, "has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"? (Acts 15:28 NRSV) Berdyaev's vision is of the development of revelation as divine-human cooperation. It belongs to the "now but not yet", pointing to a prophetic, eschatological vision of divine-human oneness in Christ.

God chose to make known how great ... are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. I Col. 1.27, NRSV

¹⁴ For me, this is a real question in the context of continuing, seemingly endless, church debates concerning the role of women, the ordination of homosexuals, etc.

Appendix – Translations and inclusive language

Two matters need to be mentioned by way of preface: use of English translations, and use of inclusive language when translating and discussing Berdyaev's¹⁵ writing.

§1. *Use of English translations*

This essay is based on English language translations. Most of Berdyaev's books that are important from a religious perspective have been translated into English but the translations are largely out of print. An increasing number of Berdyaev's many essays are also being translated and made available through the Internet.¹⁶

There is criticism of some of the available translations of Berdyaev's books. Some are translations from translations. Matthew Spinka describes the English translation of Berdyaev's important intellectual autobiography, *Dream and reality* as "essentially a paraphrase" and prefers his own translation.¹⁷ Donald Lowrie also found many of the existing translations unsatisfactory and made new translations for his Berdyaev anthology.¹⁸ Explaining his preference for a literal style in his translation of *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, Lowrie says that,

this is just as Berdyaev wrote it, with his somewhat staccato style (the rush of his thoughts is too rapid to be caught in the small dipper of his pen), his frequent repetition of a given word, even the words he invents himself, sometimes almost impossible of translation.¹⁹

¹⁵ 'Berdyaev' is the most commonly used English romanisation and the one appearing on published English translations of his books. 'Berdiaev' also appears frequently in English. Romanisations in other languages include: Berdiaeff, Berdiajew, Berdjaev, Berdjajef, Berdjajev, Berdjajew, Berdyáev, etc.

¹⁶ See especially, the work of translator Stephen Janos at <http://www.berdyaev.com>.

¹⁷ M. Spinka. *Christian thought from Erasmus to Berdyaev*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1962, 215, n. 27.

¹⁸ N. Berdyaev. *Christian existentialism: A Berdyaev anthology*, translated and compiled by D. A. Lowrie. Allen and Unwin, London, 1965, 7.

¹⁹ Translator's Preface. N. Berdyaev. *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, trans. D. A. Lowrie. Gollancz, London, 1952, 9. Berdyaev said of his writing that, "When I begin to write I am sometimes carried away to the point of dizziness. My thought flows so fast that I hardly have time to write it down. ... I never think much about the form it takes: it seems to pour forth of its own accord"

(note continues ...)

The limitations of translation make it unwise to rely too heavily on an 'exegetical' analysis of extracts from Berdyaev's text. In any case, Berdyaev's style of writing is not well suited to such a method. When writing on religious philosophy, he weaves most of his important themes into every book, often avoiding a formal style. David Richardson, introducing his monograph on Berdyaev's philosophy of history, asserts that the philological limitations of working through translations are not overwhelmingly serious, as Berdyaev's terms should be defined (as is common in philosophy) in the light of his own theory.²⁰

§2. *Inclusive language*

Existing English translations of Berdyaev's books do not use inclusive language. In an attempt to use inclusive language, it is not accurate simply to refer to 'human' in place of 'man', for these terms are not identical in Berdyaev's writing. Thus, Berdyaev says, for example, "Pure humanity ... actually is the divine in man"²¹ and, "I should prefer to say not God-humanity, a favourite expression of Vladimir Solovëv, but rather God-manhood."²² It is important for Berdyaev that the idea of 'man' is a potentially higher one than the merely human. It is in a sense genderless. Thus to render 'man' as 'man and woman' often does not work.

Paul Valliere discusses an example of a gender-related translation problem in translating from Russian. The expression 'Godmanhood' appears in translations of Russian religious writers (including Berdyaev) as a rendering of *bogochelovechestvo*. This word is based on the abstract noun *bogochelovek*, meaning 'God-human', referring to Christ as the one whose humanity embraces all humankind. But *chelovek* means 'human being', not 'man' (male) and implies no gender. Thus,

N. Berdyaev. *Dream and reality: An essay in autobiography*, trans. K. Lampert. Bles, London, 1950, 219.

²⁰ D. B. Richardson. *Berdyaev's philosophy of history: An existentialist theory of social creativity and eschatology*. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1968, xvii.

²¹ N. Berdyaev. *Truth and revelation*, trans. R. M. French. Bles, London, 1954, 50.

²² N. Berdyaev. *The divine and the human*, trans. R. M. French. Bles, London, 1949, 22.

'Godmanhood' does not render well the broad humanity implied by *bogochelovechestvo*. Valliere opts to experiment with the translation 'the humanity of God'. However, this fails to render the divinity of humankind, also implied in 'Godmanhood' / *bogochelovechestvo*.²³ The importance of *bogochelovechestvo* in Berdyaev's thinking, and that of some other Russians, makes this translation problem significant.

When using indirect speech I have generally used the word 'humankind' where Berdyaev's translators would have 'man' in the higher sense and I have used 'humanity' or 'human' when referring to the humanness of 'man'.

²³ P. Valliere. *Modern Russian theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox theology in a new key*. Clark, Edinburgh, 2000, 11-15. Valliere suggests that Boris Jakim's 'divine humanity' is another possibility. *Ibid.*, 11 n. 10.

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