

Nikolai Berdyaev: Philosophy, Prophecy, Eschatology

Writing *about* the philosophy of Nikolai Berdyaev is something of a betrayal. Indeed, his distrust of academic philosophy – a thinking, a critique *about* philosophy but actually not philosophy in deed – condemns me as his betrayer, or worse: condemns me as one who betrays Sophia, philosophy in its true being. This is not to say there are no inconsistencies in his philosophy. Every philosophy bears the weight of its own improbability. Berdyaev knew this and openly admitted it. As he writes in *Slavery and Freedom* (1939), “The inconsistencies and contradictions which are to be found in my thought are expressions of spiritual conflict, of contradictions which lie at the very heart of existence itself, and are not to be disguised by a façade of logical unity.”¹ Any attempt to characterize Berdyaev’s thought, protean and creative as it is, will by necessity be plagued by contingency. Nevertheless, I would like in this essay to at the very least inaugurate a contemplation of the role of prophecy in Berdyaev’s thought. For the philosophy of Berdyaev perhaps more than that of any other modern philosopher – even Solovyov and Shestov – dwells in the future and the realm of the eschaton. In this, his philosophical project is thoroughly and unapologetically, even defiantly, Christian.

For Berdyaev, philosophy is many things, but it is in no way an academic exercise performed for one’s peers. The idea of conformity to the opinions of even a highly cultured group repelled him, as it always compromises the essential freedom of the philosopher who sells his birthright for a plate of lentils by appealing to the crowd, however sophisticated its opinions. Berdyaev holds that philosophy is primarily a creative act, and as such it must resist the temptation of acceptance promised by professional approval. As he writes,

The highly cultured man of a certain style usually expresses imitative opinions upon every subject: they are average opinions, they belong to a group, though it may well be that this imitativeness belongs to a cultured élite and to a highly select group [...] Genius has never been completely able to find a place for itself in culture, and culture has always striven to turn genius from a wild animal into a domestic animal.²

The philosopher, as wild animal, has no proper place in the domesticated world of the academy.

Because of the wild and creative vocation of the philosopher, Berdyaev begins *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (1916) with a chapter entitled “Philosophy as a Creative Act.” Annoyed by the tendency for some philosophers and philosophical schools to treat philosophy as a science, Berdyaev reclaims the rightful province of this art:

Philosophy is an art rather than a science. Philosophy is a special art, differing in principle from poetry, music, or painting – it is the art of knowing. Philosophy is art because it is creation. Philosophy is art because it predicates a calling and a

¹ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R.M. French (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 8.

² Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 123.

special gift from above, because the personality of its creator is impressed upon it, no less than on music or poetry.... Philosophy is the art of knowing in freedom by creating ideas which resist the given world and necessity and penetrate into the ultimate essence of the world. We cannot make art dependent upon science, creativeness upon adaptation, freedom upon necessity.¹

As an art, then, philosophy like all arts is characterized by acts of intuition, “the *sine qua non* of philosophy” (*Solitude and Society*, 1934).²

As intuitive act, philosophy for Berdyaev is simultaneously a revelatory act. Because it is a revelatory act, philosophy, as in the Scholastic tradition and its modern iterations in Idealism and Positivism, need not be restricted in its freedom by a claustrophobic obedience to rationality. Revelation transforms philosophy.³ Nevertheless, the philosopher cannot simply surrender to atavistic acceptance of religious claims – for then he would no longer be a philosopher: “The philosopher’s tragedy has its origin in the attempt to restrict his pursuit of knowledge by the invocation of Divine Grace or by the appeal to the universal character of natural necessity.”⁴ In his occupation of a metaxu between religion and science, the philosopher finds himself in conflict with both, yet participates in the milieux they explore.

Nevertheless, for Berdyaev, philosophy is at its core a religious striving, a striving with ontology, a struggle with God, despite atheistic, materialist, or rationalistic claims to the contrary: “It is quite useless for philosophy to disguise its true nature,” he writes in *Freedom and the Spirit* (1927), “for it is always positively or negatively religious.”⁵ Like Pierre Hadot, for Berdyaev philosophy is a spiritual exercise; but, even more does he emphasize its reality as spiritual activity: “In the creative, knowing act of philosophy there is an upsurge towards another being, another world, daring to approach the ultimate mystery.”⁶ Furthermore, intellection is itself (or should be) a creative act in search of Being, though not “simply the illumination of Being, it is the light itself in the innermost depths of Being. In fact, knowledge is immanent in Being, rather than Being in knowledge.”⁷ One aspect of this Being occurs in the disclosure of Sophia.

Influenced by Vladimir Solovyov and in conversation with Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky (among others), Berdyaev’s sophiology nevertheless distances itself from this stream of Russian sophiology, which he saw as somewhat contaminated by Platonism and a conscious (or unconscious) compulsion to make sophiology congruent with patristics and theological dogma – and therefore uncreative and unimaginative.⁸ Berdyaev’s sophiology, though in many ways sympathetic to that of his compatriots, is rooted in Boehme and in theosophy, a domain in which he finds greater freedom than that to which Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky confined themselves.

As a pursuit of truth and love of wisdom, philosophy is inherently sophianic for Berdyaev. The philosophic act itself indicates both a sophianic movement in the soul and points to a sophianic telos. “Sophia moves all true philosophy. At the summit of philosophic consciousness,

¹ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 30.

² Nikolai Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, trans. George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles/The Centenary Press, 1947), 13.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁵ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles/The Centenary Press, 1935), 3.

⁶ *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 42.

⁷ *Solitude and Society*, 43.

⁸ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R. French (1947; repr., Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), 189 and 252–55. See also Mikhail Sergeev, “Sophiological Themes in the Philosophy of Nicholas Berdyaev,” *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the U.S.A.* 29 (1998): 59–72.

Sophia enters man.”¹ The sophianic, furthermore, approaches from the future and what Berdyaev anticipates as “the new middle ages.” As he writes in *The End of Our Time* (1924), “It is the *eternal feminine* that has so great a future in the coming history.”² Sophia is also fundamental to Berdyaev’s understanding of *transfiguration* – of society, of culture, of religion, of man, and of the earth itself – so important a theme for his philosophy: “The transfiguration of the earth is possible only through the sophianic aspect. The total denial of any sophiology leads to a deadened dualistic theism, and ultimately to deism.”³ The prophetic strain that plays so profound a part in Berdyaev’s thought is unimaginable apart from his sophiology.

That prophecy as participation in the eschaton forms an integral part of Berdyaev’s thought is to state the obvious. The titles of many of his books – *The Fate of Russia* (1918), *The End of Our Time [a.k.a. The New Middle Ages]* (1924), *The Destiny of Man* (1931), *The Fate of Man in the Modern World* (1934), *The Beginning and the End* (1947) – make this abundantly clear. As Matthew Spinka has observed, Berdyaev “is perhaps unique in his emphasis upon the creative, dynamic interpretation of eschatology.”⁴ That may be, indeed, a bit of an understatement.

Connected to his ideas on creativeness, Berdyaev’s describes his attention to philosophy as revelation in terms of “active eschatology.” “Active eschatology,” he writes, “is the justification of the creative power in man.”⁵ This is so because, “The outpouring of the Spirit, which changes the world, is the activity of the spirit in man himself.”⁶ Berdyaev’s active eschatology, then, speaks to the regeneration of all things, or, to adopt explicitly religious terminology, their glorification. The idea of theosis, indeed, tinctures (to use Boehmian language) all of Berdyaev’s thought. This glorification approaching from the future, furthermore, resides in the Coming of Christ which moves toward the present just as history moves toward its arrival, the two converging almost in the way of a supercollider.⁷

But the coming of the eschaton announces itself through anxiety. And while Berdyaev is assured of the final victory of Christ, he not as confident in man’s willing participation in the transformations implicit in His arrival. Man, it appears, would prefer to hold onto the dead forms of the past, their shells and ghosts, than cooperate with Christ in the regeneration of all things. Certainly, something of Boehme’s notion that God’s love feels like terror to the sinful as it burns away the impurities of the soul haunts Berdyaev’s metaphysic here. “Man is entering a new cosmos,” he writes:

All the elements of our epoch were present in the past, but now they are generalized, universalized and revealed in their true aspect. In these days of the world’s agony we feel keenly that we are living in a fallen world, torn asunder by incurable contradictions....

The world is living in a period of agony which greatly resembles that of the end of antiquity. But the present situation is more hopeless, since at the close of antiquity Christianity entered the world as a new young force, while now Christianity, in its human age, is old and burdened with a long history in which Christians have often sinned and betrayed their ideal. And we shall see that the judgment upon history is also a judgment upon Christianity in history.⁸

¹ *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 29.

² Nikolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933), 118. Berdyaev’

³ N.A. Berdyaev, “Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme, Etude II: The Teaching about Sophia and the Androgyne; J. Boehme and the Russian Sophiological Current” (originally appeared in *Put’* 21 [April 1930]: 34–62), trans. S. Janos http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1930_351.html

⁴ Matthew Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 196.

⁵ *Slavery and Freedom*, 265.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 304.

⁸ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1935), 21–22 and 23.

Christianity, that is, in its amnesia has forgotten how to make all things new.

But theosis is not the only thing that characterizes the future: there exists also what we might call a “passive eschatology,” and great danger accompanies it. The defining feature of this passive eschatology has everything to do with the ways in which technology and mechanization transfigure (or, more accurately, disfigure) man as their innovations and methods are blindly and uncritically welcomed and incorporated into human life. This movement thoroughly compromises the being of man: “We face the question, is that being to whom the future belongs to be called man, as previously, or something other?”¹ Given the subsequent colonization of the human person by genetic engineering, hormone treatments, and plastic surgery – just for starters – one would have to conclude that Berdyaev was more than prescient.

Berdyaev, like his contemporaries Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Steiner, warned about the rise of technology and its impact on human flourishing. Though he died in 1948, before the advent of television and well before the totalization of the technological and technocratic which has become the information revolution and the dominance of social media, his words are startlingly (and to some degree terrifyingly) poignant:

The greatest victories of man in the realms of science, as in that of the technical mastery over nature, have become the principal cause of man’s dehumanization. Man is no longer master of the machines which he has invented. Our contemporary mechanized civilization is fatal to man’s inner life, for it destroys his integrity, disfigures his emotional life, makes him the instrument of inhuman processes, and takes away from him all possibility of contemplation by a rapid increase in the tempo of life.²

Recent warnings from repentant social media entrepreneurs Chamath Palihapitiya and Sean Parker have done nothing but affirm Berdyaev’s observation, and the situation must now be far worse than he ever could have imagined. Such a dehumanized world, according to Berdyaev, “puts man under the sign of demonic possession and loss of balance.”³ As we have become all too aware, both capitalism and communism participate in this dehumanization, and no existent political structures offer an alternative. “The world threatens to become an organized and technicized chaos in which only the most terrible forms of idolatry and demon-worship can live.”⁴

For Berdyaev, though, the rise of the technological colonization of man did not simply happen by accident. Rather, it is the result of the breakdown of culture and the failure of Christianity to transfigure society. Influenced by Solovyov’s conviction that Western Christianity, while it created a culture, did not create a *Christian* culture, whereas Eastern Christianity failed to create a culture at all, though its society was Christian,⁵ Berdyaev lays the blame at the feet of a Christianity mired in its many sins and more invested in preservation of the past than concern about the future. His critique is scathing:

We are witnessing a judgement not on history alone, but upon Christian humanity.... The task of creating a more just and humane social order has fallen into the hands of anti-Christians, rather than Christians themselves. The divine has been torn apart from the human. This is the basis of all judgement in the moral sphere, now being passed upon Christianity.⁶

Christianity, furthermore, failed to save culture, because it failed to be Christian:

¹ Ibid., 25.

² *Towards a New Epoch*, 15.

³ *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, 126.

⁴ Ibid., 127.

⁵ Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, trans. Peter Zouboff [1948], rev. and ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995), 170–73

⁶ *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, 118 and 122.

In this visible world there is no external unity in the Church; its œcumenicity is not completely actualized. Not only the division of the Churches and the multiplicity of Christian confessions but the very fact that there are non-Christian religions in the world at all, and that there is, besides, an anti-Christian world, proves that the Church is still in a merely potential state and that its actualization is still incomplete.¹

In addition, Christianity, for Berdyaev, is too enamored of its own past, thereby neglecting its true vocation:

In historical Christianity the prophetic element inherent in it has become enfeebled and this is why it ceases to play an active and leading role in history. We no longer look to anything but the past and to past illumination. But it is the future which needs lighting up.²

And not only has the prophetic element become enfeebled, but, because it has, so has Christianity *tout court*:

Christianity in the course of its history has too often been submissive to brute facts; the leaders of the churches have too often adapted themselves to various political and social orders, and the judgement of the Church is only pronounced after the event. The result of this has been a loss of messianic consciousness and an exclusive turning towards the past.³

Even the accommodationist approach to Christianity's "engagement with the world" focused on the present proves sterile: "The adapting of Christianity to the social structure and to the forces which dominated it has disfigured Christianity in the course of history and naturally provoked resentment. The spiritual depths of Christianity are no longer to be seen."⁴ The picture he paints is a dire one rendered in a pallet of grey.

Faced with the realities of Christian history and culture and the impending demonic technicization of man, Berdyaev can only conclude that, "Either a new epoch in Christianity is in store for us and a Christian renaissance will take place, or Christianity is doomed to perish," though he knows full well that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.⁵ Berdyaev wagers on behalf of the Church Triumphant, but he condemns degenerate Christianity when he sees it because he knows a failure of culture is at its core a failure of Christianity. He recognizes the paradox.

The paradox is that only Christianity can save the world from Christianity. Thus Berdyaev prophesizes the arrival of "the new Christianity" which will "rehumanize man and society, culture and the world" because "[o]nly in Divine-humanity, the Body of Christ, can man be saved."⁶ But such regeneration is not without conditions:

The future depends upon our will and upon our spiritual efforts. This must be said about the future of the entire world. The part to be played by Christianity will certainly be enormous on condition that its old fictitious forms are left behind and that its prophetic aspect is revealed as the source of a different attitude towards the social problem.⁷

In language resonant to some degree with Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the Omega Point, Berdyaev's thinks of all history, all life, as moving "towards a central even of absolute importance, the Second Coming of the Saviour."⁸ Furthermore, for Berdyaev, Christianity, though it has in large part abdicated its vocation in this world, has still not completed its mission; it still

¹ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 348.

² Nikolai Berdyaev, *Towards a New Epoch*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 46.

⁶ *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, 129.

⁷ *Towards a New Epoch*, 117.

⁸ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 304.

has untapped reserves of creativity and revelation, which lie dormant through the accretion of centuries and centuries of acquiescence to worldliness: “When there is no sense of creative mission in the Church, spiritual decadence follows.”¹ Berdyaev, among other things, saw that his task was to reawaken Christianity to this mission:

Every question has not yet been settled and Christianity is not a finished product, nor will it be finished till the end of time; its fulfilment corresponds to the coming of the Kingdom of God. But if we are looking for this Kingdom of God and moving towards it, we cannot be in a static condition. The existence of a static Orthodoxy or Catholicism is pure fiction, a piece of mere auto-suggestion, and it arises from the objectification and ‘absolutization’ of what are simply temporary periods in Church life.²

But one must wonder if in this task he failed.

The current Christian landscape suggests that, for the most part, he has. While conservative elements in Christianity look to preserving an imagined past (in some forms of traditionalist Catholicism, for example, certain High Church forms of Anglicanism, and throughout the Orthodox world) more liberal elements of Christianity look to the present (for example, in homosexual marriage, the role of women in the Church, hospitality to LGBT people.) The future, it seems, is of no one’s concern. Out of sight, out of mind. For Christianity, Berdyaev would no doubt observe, this is a very real tragedy.

Complacency and the bourgeois sensibility that “one must be busy doing something” alike afflict the Christianity of which Berdyaev was so critical. Only revelation, an inherently creative movement, can remedy this. But revelation, as the stories of the prophets attest (and of which John the Baptist is perhaps the paradigmatic example), is usually unwelcome and the love it offers is interpreted as a threat: “Revelation is a catastrophic transformation of consciousness, a radical modification of its structure, almost, one might say, a creation of new organs of being with functions in another world. Revelation is not evolution but revolution.”³ It is far easier to turn away, get lost in religious nostalgia, find distraction in the politics of the moment, or engage in mindless infotainment and celebrity gossip. So stand we.

I cannot decide whether Berdyaev’s thought is pessimistically optimistic or optimistically pessimistic. He believes in the regeneration of Christianity, of man, of culture, of nature, but sees little evidence of it in the world and even less interest. Yet he knows that, bidden or not, the Messiah comes. Like William Butler Yeats, Berdyaev is attentive to the tragic nature of revelation as it destroys the falsity of our various temptations and our bourgeois complacencies; for, “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand.”⁴ Berdyaev’s radical Christian vision, his prophetic madness and absolute clarity, offer much to a postmodern milieu entrapped in its own excesses and excrescences. But will anyone have the time or inclination to listen?

¹ Ibid., 305.

² Ibid., 305.

³ *Freedom and the Spirit*, 96.

⁴ William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” *The Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), lines 9–10.