

world. Not until history is ended can there be a peaceful earth and victory for the spirit of God and of man, although, paradoxically, at any given moment man is called upon to represent creatively this end and thereby, at any given moment, to end this world so full of estrangement, tyranny and tedium. This is eminently a vision, not a 'remedy' or 'solution', and it has to be judged as such: a vision which can be explained and understood only, as Berdyaev himself explained and understood it, in prophetic terms. . . .

When I saw Berdyaev for the last time, already on his death-bed, with the shadow of the spirit still resting upon his face, it seemed as if a veil of immense lassitude, patience and faint perplexity was covering the fiery intensity of an agonised, Promethean soul, engaged in a terrible struggle with the powers of this world. Such indeed was his living face: the face of a man, always serene, always kindly, always generous, and yet animated by some profound disquietude and aware of the greatness and the terror which attend human existence.

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NICOLAS BARDYAEV AND THE RUSSIAN IDEA

THE birth of an innumerable quantity of new generations cannot reconcile us to the death of one single man.' These words of Nicolas Berdyaev come towards the end of one of his latest works to be translated into English, *The Russian Idea*¹; and it has since transpired that they were written also near the end of his own life. They may serve as a fitting epitaph to the life and work of one who will not easily be replaced, and whose labour of interpreting the Russian world to the West was among the most pressing tasks of our generation in a field in which the labourers are still tragically few. His passing, therefore, is at once a blow and a challenge. We have lost one who undertook what few are willing, and fewer still are equipped, to do. But because the work must be done, it behoves us indeed not to be reconciled to his death, but rather to be emboldened by it.

It is difficult in the stormy moment of an historical crisis to reflect at all calmly on the deeper issues below the surface of the political and military hubbub. Thought about the Russian question is almost paralysed by the very fact that everybody is thinking about it. The temptation to reduce a complex conflict to the simple categories of friend and enemy, of 'them' and 'us', necessarily destroys that effort to find common ground or at least to understand the motives

¹ Geoffrey Bles; 18s.

and purposes of the beloved enemy. It is a temptation which must be sternly resisted, especially by Christians who believe that they are called upon at all times to assist in the building of bridges, that it is never their office to strike off the ear of the servant of the High Priest.

Berdyaev was himself a bridge between Russia and the West; and in his books he will remain so perhaps for more than one generation after his death. Many will feel moved to re-read once more his earlier works; but of his latest publications none is at once more apposite as a memorial to the task of interpreting Eastern and Western Europeans to one another and more stirring as a call to continue this work with the same sincerity and devotion as the essay on the inner being, the Platonic essence of the Russian soul as Berdyaev knew and conceived it, which is translated in English as *The Russian Idea*.

Berdyaev himself bestrode the two worlds. In his idea of freedom, the fundamental creative freedom of spiritual man in virtue of which he is called upon to co-operate with God himself in the furthering of the divine purpose, he speaks a language which can be understood by many in the West, though its accents are clearly Russian. This freedom is distinct both from the Western secular, liberal idea, and from that of traditional Catholic thought; but because Berdyaev speaks out of the depths of the Eastern Christian past, his words have not the alien sound in the Christian West which secular pronouncements are wont to have in the same context. 'Dostoevsky', he writes, 'does not want a world without freedom; he does not want even Paradise without freedom, he raises objections above all to a compulsory happiness'. But by the standard of this ultimate freedom, 'not ease . . . [but] . . . a burden', both East and West are condemned, because both East and West have fallen short in their respective characteristic ways and given themselves over to slavery to external necessity. Berdyaev criticises Belinsky for sounding 'that ill-omened sinister note: "people are so stupid that it is necessary to bring them to happiness by force"'. But he is equally critical of utilitarian morality, which is still the mainstay of the Western secular world, despite all the academic disproofs to which its theoretical basis has been subjected. 'Utilitarianism is a principle of adaptation for the safeguarding of life and the attainment of happiness, but the safeguarding of life and happiness may be inconsistent with the freedom and dignity of personality. Utilitarianism is anti-personalist'. We are reminded too by Berdyaev of Marx's profound accusation against the economic order which enslaves its makers, an accusation applicable as pointedly to latter-day Marxists as to the bourgeois world against

which it was originally levied, 'Man accepts as the exterior reality, and it ends by enslaving him, that which is his own product, an objectivisation and alienation which is produced by himself'.

It is a sobering thought to those intent on a quarrel to discover that they are both in the same boat; and it may go far to rendering the present overriding conflict in the world first intelligible and finally manageable, if we pay attention to the profound judgment of the sins of both parties which Berdyaev delivers in his essay *The Russian Idea* in the light of his own fundamental doctrines of freedom, creativity, and the sanctity of personality.

The Russian Idea itself, as Berdyaev sees it, is truly Platonic in that it is bodied forth imperfectly, distorted by the gross resistance of the material to which it struggles to give form. 'The Russian Idea', he writes, 'found itself in profound conflict with Russian history as it was built up by the forces which held sway in it. In this lies the tragic element in the historical destiny of Russia. . . .' But despite the failure to achieve perfect expression, a failure surely as human as it may be Russian, Berdyaev believes in the deep truth and abiding reality of a recognisable Russian character, faced with a struggle against the satanic temptations proper to itself as we in the West are similarly beset by our own characteristic demons.

'The Russians', he tells us, 'are not sceptics, they are dogmatists'. It is their property 'to indulge in philosophy'. 'There is enshrined deep down in the Russian people greater freedom of spirit than there is among the more free and enlightened peoples of the West. There is enshrined a greater freedom in the heart of Orthodoxy than there is in Roman Catholicism.' 'The Western cult of cold-blooded justice is not to be found among them. To them man is a higher principle than property, and this is the defining factor in Russian social morality.' 'The Russians are not striving for a kingdom which is of this world; they are not moved by the will to power and might. In their spiritual structure the Russians are not an imperialist people; they do not like the State.' At the same time, however, we must not forget the strong Russian communal sense, opposed to Western individualism but not to Berdyaev's own personalism. 'It is a Russian idea that individual salvation is impossible, that salvation is corporate, that all are answerable for all.' Again, he writes: 'Corporate experience of love, *sobornost*, is the criterion of apprehension. Here we have a principle which is opposed to authority; it is also a method of apprehension which is opposed to the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*'. And yet, Berdyaev will write, in castigating Western formalism and legalism and in particular 'official Roman Catholicism which has

distorted Christianity into a religion of law', 'To us it is man who is the important thing; to them it is society, civilisation'.

Here we touch not only on one of the most important distinctions which Berdyaev himself draws between the contrasted viewpoints of Russia and the West, but on one which imposes itself in every quarter where the contrast, or conflict, is making itself felt: there are two views abroad in the world of the way in which men are properly united together, of the way which most truly and most profoundly permits man among men to be free. It can be argued, as Berdyaev has done, that present-day Russia is not fully true to its real self, to its formal Idea. But the same argument applies surely to the West. We lack, unfortunately, the proper precision of vocabulary to differentiate these two views in public discussion. Words like society, community, state and individual are hopelessly compromised. There is not even any agreement in the West concerning what we mean by the Church. But if Berdyaev's thesis be the truth, and it is the most encouraging one to be found in a darkening world, then the ultimate dissension is still only a question, we will not say of words, but of means rather than ends. It is not possible to come to terms with a man whose ends are different from our own, though neither is it necessary to annihilate him; but it is possible to make peace (and the word make is used here advisedly) with one who has gone astray from a road along which we are ourselves trying and perhaps failing also to travel.

'The self-assertion of man leads to the denial of man.' In this, we all stand under the same condemnation. But Berdyaev continues: 'In Russia the last word in this dialectic of humanism was communism. That also had humanitarian sources; it desired to fight for the liberation of man from slavery, but in the result, the social collective, within which man ought to be liberated from exploitation and violence, becomes an agency for the enslavement of personality. The primacy of society over personality is affirmed, the primacy of the proletariat, or rather of the idea of the proletariat, over the worker, over the concrete man. Man in liberating himself from the idolatry of the past falls into a new idolatry'. In Russian communism, 'the Russian messianic idea has passed into a non-religious and anti-religious form'.

But have we no secular heresies in the West? Or are our Western values, about which we write and talk so much today, immune from criticism, and properly to be defended merely because they are ours? Berdyaev was one of the Western world's profoundest critics. He would have none of the comfortable bourgeois ethics which have supported the Renaissance order during the four centuries of its flowering. The hatred of the bourgeois spirit of the West is, he

thinks, a characteristic Russian *motif*. 'If he [the Russian] hates progress, liberalism, democracy, socialism, it is simply because all this leads to the sovereignty of the bourgeois and to a dull earthly paradise'. But the disesteem of Western values is more far-reaching and profound than this rejection of the modern age and its dominant secularism. Berdyaev quotes Aksakov as writing: 'In the West they kill souls and replace them by the perfecting of political forms and the establishment of good order and by police action. Conscience is replaced by law; regulations become a substitute for the inward impulse; even charity is turned into a mechanical business in the West; all the anxiety is for political forms'. Kireevsky, moreover, held in Berdyaev's words that 'in the West everything has arisen from the triumph of formal reason; the tendency to rationalistic segmentation was, so to speak, the second fall of man'.

That there is material for serious pondering in these accusations is not to be denied, and the more so as some of the phrases used bear an oddly precise resemblance to those we are wont to employ ourselves today about the spiritual condition of Russia. Can it possibly be true, then, that the real alignment of opposing forces in the modern world is the same as it always has been in the past, since Eve faced the serpent by the apple tree, since Jacob wrestled in the dawn and Job found himself alone in a whirlwind? This would seem to be the conclusion to be drawn from contemplating Berdyaev's portrait of the eternal Russian which is at the same time so admirable a sketch of the eternal Westerner. That such a truth needs to be emphasised itself requires no emphasis. But we shall sorely miss the loss of one most able pen which has for so long borne witness to the life of the Spirit. There are not in these days so many who fight under this banner; and if it were not for the fact that the holder of the pen lives on in a way denied to the sword-bearer, that slender instrument might never have made good its claim to be the mightier of the two.

In remembering with respect the work of this singularly impressive writer and in recalling how many idols, at whose feet we have perhaps ourselves bowed in passing, he has cast down and dethroned, it would perhaps be significant and apposite to remember an earlier writer, still read, who in deprecating his readers' addiction to meaningless sacrifices and vain fetishes said to them: 'For the law having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things, they can never with the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect them that draw nigh.' Rather, he asked: 'How much more shall the blood of Christ . . . cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?'

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