

Christianity in the Times of Postmodernism?

A Reconstruction of Answers by S. N. Bulgakov and N. A. Berdyaev

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Postmodernism, as a *terminus technicus*, enhances a random number of individual lifestyles adding up to social life. It hints at a striking liberation of the individual. Individual lifestyle responds to individual self-actualisation. Lifestyles differing from each other evolve in parallel and act in various, even contradictory, directions.

European and American postmodern societies are organized by a sort of collective rationality. This rationality defends the idea of usefulness. The rating and appraisal of life's multiple forms and expressions seek and find legitimacy by democracy and human rights, guaranteeing equal spheres of freedom and security for everybody: these spheres represent the condition of self-actualisation. Postmodernity raised the ideas of democracy and human rights into absolute value whose valency stage is to some extent comparable with religious virtues. Yet, today's pseudo-belief comes down to a sort of rationalized faith in an arithmetic sum: the sum of individual liberties organises multifaceted society. Secondly, postmodernity denotes high speed in many respects: capitalism promoted the general increase of velocity concerning communication and all other means of transport. It permanently stimulates the increase and exchange of products: growth rate easily outnumbers imagination. Thirdly, social heterogeneity has also significantly grown. Social heterogeneity turns into a challenge, for individual self-actualisation by individually creating a particular codex of life and estimation of the self—the sense of dignity—as a general rule, needs endorsement by the non-I, be it another person, a (religious) myth, or some sort of community.

Rationalised belief in democracy guaranteeing personal liberties does not serve the purpose. There is no merit beyond communication on the horizontal sociological line and/or vertical line of mystical belief in personalised absolute values endorsing one's personal creativity, decisions, and endeavours. Personal and/or communication within the horizons of mystically personalised belief overcomes pure subjectivism and generates a certain objectivism of personal dignity.

Without any doubt (post-) modern societies lack confidence in Christianity's central personalised myth. As a general consciousness, Christian belief is not exactly at a high point either in Europe or the USA. Nevertheless, Christian traditions have functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst of the (post-)modern normative self-understanding. Especially the ideas of personal dignity, self-estimation, and self-actualisation take their origin in Christian values.

This essay then takes a brief look at recent discussions on the future of Christian theology and the question whether Christian belief needs to be modernized in order to amplify its impact anew on people's life at times of postmodernism. Answers on this crucial and extremely difficult question range from denial of axiological dogmatic beliefs (J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, G. Word; *Radical Orthodoxy*) to more practical solutions in the sense of the *Aggiornamento* (J. Ratzinger, R. Bultman, K. Rahner et al.): there are proposals that a revival of "social Christianity" and/or the theological demystification of eschatology might significantly add to Christianity's attraction.

Interestingly these questions have been thoroughly debated already by Russian theologians and philosophers (V. Soloviev, N. Berdyaev, N. Bulgakov, and others) at the beginning of the twentieth century, a dramatic point in Russia's history which led to immense and sudden civilizational change. The idea of "social Christianity" along with the attempt to introduce new eschatological concepts to (ecumenical) Christianity surely represent the identifying features of Bulgakov's (1871–1944) and Berdyaev's (1874–1948) works completed under the influence of European theology.

After the Bolshevik revolution, both emigrated to Paris, the mecca of revolution, where in 1925, Bulgakov—formerly one of Russian leading Christian socialists—became the founding dean

and professor of dogmatic theology at the Orthodox Theological Institute of Saint Sergius. This institute owed its existence to the collaboration of three religious networks: the Western European diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, secondly, Russian scholars in exile, and protestant ecumenists, especially the American Methodist clergyman and Young Men's Christian Association leader, John Mott. Initiatives for theological updates and for ecumenism in the 1920s and 1930s were initially taken by the Protestant Church seeking to coordinate mission abroad. Simultaneously the social question had arisen and concerned Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Protestantism alike.

At this time Bulgakov continued to develop his lifelong issue of "Social Christianity" and/or "Christian Humanism." Bulgakov, dismissed by Russian Orthodoxy because of his "heretical" sophiology, maintained that from a metaphysical point of view the Church is prior to all creaturely existence: "Creation was raised to its perfection in the Godmanhood, and the realisation of this Godmanhood is the Church in the world." The Church is both Uncreated and created. She is the world's "*entelechia*." Therefore, she receives "*social, historical*" in addition to "cosmic significance." "Christian life cannot be limited to an individualistic life; it is communal or social, yet not violating the principle of Christian freedom." The Church's tasks hence include not only ways of personal salvation but also of the transfiguration of the world, obviously including the history of humanity, which is the "history of the Church." She must embrace not only the sacramental, mystical life, but also the prophetic spirit, as a call to new activity, to new tasks, to new achievements. The Church must constantly proofread and eventually reformulate its dogmatic corpus that reflects the collective religious experience of a certain time in history.¹ "Social Christianity," or which is the same, "Christian humanism" presumes the "development of all creative capacities of man" and it "may be understood as a new revelation of Christianity."²

Bulgakov brings the Eucharist into discussion: bread and wine, as he asserts, give

¹ Cf. Bulgakov, *Social Teaching*, 5–27. For Bulgakov's justification of "Godmanhood" see Breckner, "A Comparative Study."

² Cf. Bulgakov, *Social Teaching*, 19.

benediction to the natural elements and this sacramental act should find extension to the entire domain of economic production and consumption.³ life is the “capacity to consume the world” our bodily organs being “like doors and windows into the universe, and all that enters us through these doors and windows becomes the object of our sensual penetration and becomes in a sense part of our body.”⁴ Nourishment is the most vivid means of “natural communion,” because it allows man to partake “in the flesh of the world.”⁵ It is immanent to our world, whereas the “medicine of immortality,” the Eucharist meal, “nourishes immortal life, separated from our life by the threshold of death and resurrection.”⁶ Production’s and consumption’s sanctification by the Eucharist would signify the sacramental embedment of human creative economic power transfiguring his economic toil nature.⁷ In fact, his theology of the Eucharist postulates that the every single Eucharist act finds doubling in the bosom of the Trinitarian God. And so, man’s laborious economic activity in transforming nature and God’s creativity working above human power but not outside it, are wholly reunited by the Eucharist that brings benediction into the natural world.

His reinterpretation of the world as a household comprises Bulgakov’s particular definition of labour. Labour is meant to elevate Creation and bring it to the promised perfection, viz. re-unite the created and the Uncreated. “Thanks to labour, there can be no subject alone, as subjective idealism would have it, nor any object alone, as materialism holds, but only their living unity, the subject-object, and only when we inspect its one or another aspect by means of methodological abstraction, do a subject and object separate out from it.”⁸ Economy as a constant modelling of reality, as the objectification of the “I”s’ ideas, is a real bridge from the “I” into the “non-I,” “from the subject to the object, their living and immediate unity that needs no proof.”⁹

Instead of pleasing luxury, production—dependent on labour and sanctified by the

³ Cf. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 168.

⁴ Cf. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 99–105.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 103f.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 104.

⁷ Cf. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 69 and footnote 5.

⁸ Cf. Bulgakov, *Philosophy*, 114.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 111.

Eucharist—would become a serious and responsible way of laborious preservation and reconstruction of life, the *common work* of the whole of humanity.¹⁰ If Christianity is to generate “social Christianity”—whereby the Church should play a vanguard role—it should confess this new impact of the Eucharist meal. Yet, “*social Christianity*” is “rather a dogmatic postulate than a completed program of life, more *prophecy* than actuality.”¹¹

One of most famous Russian modern prophets was Nikolai Berdyaev. He was extremely critical of the historical Church and worked out a particular form of Christian existentialism that does not need the Church in any respect.

A new day is dawning for Christianity in the world. Only a form of Socialism, which unites personality and the communal principle, can satisfy Christianity. . . . The true and final renaissance will probably begin in the world only after the elementary, everyday problems of human existence are solved for all peoples and nations, after bitter human need and economic slavery of man have been finally conquered.¹²

Yet, Berdyaev’s main religico-philosophical concern was not so much Christianity’s social perspective, but its *eschatology of salvation*. He agreed with the New-Testament *Kairos* as understood by P. Tillich, denoting the influx of eternity into time. This is when objectification ends, viz. when

causal connections of nature are changed into connections of spirit, which are full of meaning and purpose. . . . In time everything appears as already determined and necessary. . . . But a free creative act is not dominated by time . . . and belongs to a different order of existence. . . . The creative act is

¹⁰ Cf. Bulgakov, *Social Teaching*, 23.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 20.

¹² Cf. Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man*, 130–31.

an escape from time, it is performed in the realm of freedom.¹³

As Will Herberg correctly formulates:

personality is the coming into being of the future, it consists of creative acts. Objectivization is impersonality, the ejection of man into the world of determinism.¹⁴

Freedom in Berdyaev bears the features of salvation. However, the form of salvation he reasons about finds ways and means of healing during man's lifetime on earth already and not as late as after his death. Freedom in him denotes inner freedom from slavery, the slavery experienced by man because of his dependence on historical time.

Berdyaev discerns "cosmic," "historical," and "existential time." The first is based on "mathematical calculations" depending on objects beyond the range of man's immediate perception; mathematical calculations encompass the cosmic movement, the planet's motions in orbit, the change and succession of years, seasons, months, days, and hours. The symbol that best describes it is the circle. "Historical time" needs the symbol of a "line which stretches out forward into the future," for history did start at a certain point and presumably ends at another. It is embedded into the "cosmic" time¹⁵ and it signifies the realm of what "Heidegger calls *in-der-Welt-sein*," viz. the "rule of the humdrum and commonplace, of *das Man*."¹⁶ By contrast, "existential time" is measureless by definition, it escapes arithmetic calculations. It is as if a point, "telling of movement in depth." It is substantial—even everlasting: it is subjective by definition and thus scarcely finds an adequate externalised expression.¹⁷ By simple logic, only in existential time man gets a hold of freedom, namely the freedom to create new personal realities, the creation of one's

¹³ Cf. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 20–59, and other places.

¹⁴ Cf. Herberg, *Theologians*, 118.

¹⁵ Cf. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 206f.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 206.

own salvation included. Man's creative vocation is of eschatological import., however, what is eschatology in other philosophers is the *eschaton* in Berdyaev. Eternity is, as we have seen, qualified existentially. His *telos* is supra-temporal as well as temporal. Eternity is decomposed, for while it implies an end to time that end is not limited to future as in a weak temporal teleology, but belongs to eternity-in-time.

Christianity must, therefore, revise its eschatological perspective of salvation. It must face salvation not as something in the unknown future but as something always present in potential terms. Salvation in Berdyaev comes with the Kairos, the end of objective time and the beginning of eternalness bringing forth man's co-creative powers.

His later writing *The Fate of Man in the Modern World* (1934) reflects his deep sorrow that European societies have ended in a totally proletarian status.¹⁸ He refers to Oswald Spengler as having trenchantly distinguished between culture and civilisation¹⁹ and discussing the role of the gigantic technical progress that erases culture and melts it down to civilisation. He agrees the present was in a cup for technical progress displays "cosmic power" and reduces man to an animal. The "technical epoch" is characterised by life's "dehumanisation" and an idolatry to atavistic instincts, to economics, and to technical progress, as well as to many other fetishes ruling the people's life. Impersonal masses socially compose modernity, the "plebs" whose "bourgeois" members lack inner "aristocracy" dominate social life. Egotism sets political paradigms. Parliamentary democracy comes down to a farce, for it merely serves the welfare of diverse interest groups. Modernity stands for a soulless "organised chaos."²⁰

Berdyaev's blueprint for the world was that it should become a "spiritually joined federation," a federation of loosely associated "fraternal units." This is what he called "personalist socialism" in its political order.²¹ Considering how this political order could possibly be achieved, it has to be said that in his eyes it was absolutely impossible to reformulate Christianity into a state

¹⁸ Cf. Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man*, 90ff.

¹⁹ Cf. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 223.

²⁰ Cf. Berdyaev, "Man and Machine," 31-67.

²¹ Cf. Berdyaev, "Problema khristianskogo gosudarstva," 278.

doctrine. The “crucified truth” would have to be converted into a “doctrine of crucifying”.²² As it were, he believed in a radically new type of revolution. For him the true basis of life and its organisational forms are of spiritual quality and the acknowledgement of this fact leads to a change of the focus for any revolution: The “personal revolution” was proclaimed a way out of the crisis of modern times. No matter if you looked at the East or the West, it was the same “spiritual crisis.” The “personal revolution” would be the consequence of man’s efforts to elevate his spiritual values²³ by discovering the *eschaton* as a bearer of salvation, co-creativity, and liberty.

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²² Cf. *ibid.*, 280.

²³ Cf. Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man*, 83, and many other places.