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BERDYAEV'S THEODICY AND THE NATURE OF GOD

LLOYD CADDICK

Nicolas Berdyaev saw the mystery of evil at the heart not only of Christian thought, but of religion of every kind, for every religion offers the promise of freedom from evil and its consequent suffering. The rationalistic mind of modern man is especially burdened with the problem of how to reconcile the existence of God, an all-merciful, all-powerful being, with that of evil.

"Theodicy can judge God only in the light of what God has revealed to us about himself. It defends God against human conceptions of him, against human slander."¹

To wrestle with this problem Berdyaev began not with God or man, but with "the God-Man", Jesus Christ, for the Christian experience of the Incarnation is the most concrete and fullest expression of the basic phenomenon of religious life, which

"is the meeting and mutual interaction between God and man, the movement of God towards man, and of man towards God."²

Here we are shown the birth of God in man and man in God, by which the divine love and human freedom are reconciled. It accepts evil as a mystery which cannot be resolved conceptually, although it can be lived redemptively. Any attempt to think out a justification for God transmutes the mystery of evil into a problem. In the demand for an explanation of suffering and evil we see a "Euclidean spirit" which is unable to accept that a world which allows freedom, has to include the irrationality of evil. The Christian answer shows even God accepting and grappling with this irrationality, although some traditional formulations of the doctrine of God do not allow us to do justice to this answer.

Berdyaev accepted the elements of freedom and irrationality as inescapable, if God made man in his own image. He understood this to mean that man is made to be a creator, called to free spontaneous activity, rather than formal obedience to God's power.³ Berdyaev was not so much concerned with the problem of free-will, which he regarded as a recognition of man's responsibility without which he could not be held innocent or guilty, as with freedom which is part of the structure of reality. In talking of this he was confusing and perhaps confused, because he used the language of speculative mysticism derived from Jacob Boehme to describe the mystery which bounds human knowledge.

In the beginning was the abyss of "the Divine Nothing" or the Absolute of negative theology, which Berdyaev identified with Eckhart's *Gottheit* (Godhead, or the God beyond God) and with Boehme's *Ungrund* (the groundless abyss of being)⁴. From this abyss was born the Creator God and "meonic freedom". This latter concept is difficult if not impossible to express; it is almost like the remainder of the Divine Nothing, left over after the Creator God has been born. It represents the possibility of all things, but is literally nothing, hence Berdyaev's term, "meonic" (*me on*, nothing) freedom. With the Creator comes simultaneously the creation of the world and the invitation to men to cooperate with the Creator through the use of freedom. The offer of freedom, however, involves the possibility of

rebellion, and, as rebellion, the nothing of freedom becomes evil. God then descends into the abyss of freedom become evil, and by manifesting himself in sacrifice not power, overcomes misused freedom, not by external force, but by enlightening it from within, so that the whole world regains freedom. Berdyaev sees this "theogonic process" as the acting out in eternity, in the hidden life of the Deity, of what is expressed historically in the Incarnation in Christ⁵. Such talk is confusing, and no more than speculation. Even if we accept Berdyaev's protest that he is attempting to express mystical insights in rational language, and to describe a living God with whom man has an affinity, one may question its usefulness.

It can be argued that in talking about the "theogonic process", Berdyaev projects human speculation to describe what is essentially unknowable, the inner life of God, in a way which is not helpful, and may be quite literally nonsense, because it goes beyond anything that can be called knowledge. Berdyaev, however, distinguished the Godhead (Eckhart's *Gottheit*), which is the inexpressible mystery of God as he is in himself, from God, who reveals himself in the ways we recognize as the Trinity (*Gott*). Not that Berdyaev was postulating more than one God. The distinction is rather in our experience and talk of God. There is one God. In cataphatic theology we are able to say positive things about the God who reveals himself as Trinity. We are concerned with God's own self-objectification to make himself knowable. In describing this we use analogies and pictures taken from society and man's own being. Man also finds himself in communion with the Mystery which makes itself known in mystical experience. When he tries to describe this, he is forced back into the negative ways of apophatic theology. This recognition that God is beyond our concepts and symbols should liberate us from distorting anthropomorphism which becomes imprisoned in analogies drawn from human authority, legal processes, and punishment.

The usefulness of the concept, the *Ungrund*, the abyss of Nothingness, is also questionable. Like Boehme, Berdyaev called it the divine chaos, not in the sense of confusion, but as the source from which life could develop, e.g. an egg is the "chaos" of the bird. The *Ungrund* is that undeveloped complex totality from which all things comes. Berdyaev did not want to absorb all things into God, but it is hard to see how he can avoid this, even if he follows the way of negative theology. Further, if the *Ungrund* is absolutely Nothing, it is difficult to see how it can be chaos in Boehme's sense. If it is an undeveloped totality in Boehme's sense, it cannot be totally undetermined. It must have already built into it certain characteristics which will guide its development. How is it that the God of love emerges from the groundless chaos? It must already be that kind of being, which we apprehend in terms of creation, liberation, and fulfillment. Berdyaev here tried to get behind the human projections we call God to the reality we seek to express by them. In the attempt he merely substituted one set of models for another.

The positive element which comes out of Berdyaev's attempt to do justice to the mystery of God and freedom, is his recognition that freedom introduces the possibility of the irrational and of evil into the world. Both pantheism and pure theism are unable to deal adequately with the problem of evil for both deny the reality of freedom. Pantheism on the one hand can find no other source for evil apart from

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God, and God is good. Evil therefore becomes a moment in the development of good, which appears evil to us because we cannot see the process of development as a single whole.⁶ Berdyaev fiercely rejected any theodicy which argued that suffering could be justified as the inevitable means by which the individual contributes to the creation of a perfect order. Such a subordination is incompatible with freedom and the creation of personality, and justifies not God but injustice, evil and suffering, by rationalizing the inexplicable doctrine of providence in terms of an autocratic monarch. On the other hand, theism, which also sees God as good, can find no origin for evil in God. Because it takes evil seriously, it is forced to postulate the existence of another being alongside God. This is seen, for example, in forms of dualism which see God as spiritual and evil as material. Evil, however, is spiritual in the Satan myth, for Satan is not 'the autonomous source of evil' but

"the manifestation of irrational freedom

at the highest spiritual levels",⁷

objectified in mythological form.

Here we see again the concept of the autocratic God who overrules all that opposes his authority and purpose. Both pantheism and theism fail to apprehend God revealing himself in freedom, love and sacrifice, which is the kernel of the Christian answer to the request for a theodicy⁸.

In this way, Berdyaev argued that the Christian revelation presupposes the existence of freedom and the possibility of evil and suffering. He denied that the source of evil is to be found in God or in a being which exists alongside God, but in the very nature of freedom. In the beginning was the Logos, but correlative with it was freedom which makes both good and evil possible. Evil, however, has no independent and positive existence. It is a negative and destructive caricature of the Divine. It is caused by the self-affirmation and spiritual pride which separates man from the divine source of life, and creates a disharmony which disrupts the material world.⁹

In considering the privative theory of evil Hick has distinguished "a valid theological insight arising out of the Christian revelation" and "a questionable theological conceptuality" used to present it¹⁰. The insight, and inference from the Christian doctrine of God and Creation, regards evil as the going wrong of something which is good. It denies the ultimate reality of evil and warns against dualism as a way of theodicy. The theory built on this insight uses a philosophical tradition which goes back through medieval mysticism to Ancient Greece and regards evil as nothingness and non-being. This does not mean that such things as non-being or nothingness exist. When the good goes wrong or fails to achieve its potential, it becomes twisted and warped, and ultimately ceases to exist. There is no need to postulate a realm of non-being as a kind of mirror-image alongside the realm of being. But this is what Berdyaev does. He seeks to avoid an ultimate dualism by this *Ungrund* doctrine which takes both the creator God and the meonic freedom into the Godhead. It is, however, unnecessary to resort to this kind of language, if we recognise that freedom is not a thing which exists, but the condition which is essential for all spiritual existence and activity, including God's. By using what "can be useful as a piece of poetic diction"¹¹ as a metaphysical concept Berdyaev hypostatized a reality in a way which is both false and misleading.

Christianity, as a religion of redemption, presupposes the reality of evil, but it distinguishes suffering from evil. Although suffering is inescapable, it is not necessarily evil, for it can become a path of salvation and so answer the "tormenting question of theodicy".¹² Of the three fundamental answers to questioning about suffering, Buddhism and Stoicism both reject suffering and seek release from it. Christianity however "in the enlightened bearing of suffering seeks liberation and salvation". Buddhism seeks to escape suffering by repudiating the world and rejecting the cross in a life of detachment as the road to enlightenment. Stoicism accepts the world but offers liberation by changing the attitude to the world and everything capable of bringing suffering. Buddhism seeks detachment, Stoicism apathy, but neither seeks to change the world. Christianity, on the other hand, "teaches us to bear the cross of life," by which the world is freed from evil¹³. This means not that we have to seek out suffering or impose it on ourselves and others, but that we accept the enlightened bearing of suffering which falls to our lot. Much sadistic and masochistic suffering in Christian history has been imposed from a mistaken assumption that human suffering pleases God as punishment for sin. Man's real problem, however, is not the intellectual problem of explaining suffering but the spiritual problem of so bearing suffering that it is changed from a gloomy and destructive experience into an enlightened following of the path to salvation. Man is unable to do this himself, but "the God who has become Man and taken upon himself the suffering of Man and the whole creation can vanquish the source of evil which gives rise to suffering".¹⁴

Thus the God-Man shows us a theodicy which does not rationalise the mysteries of evil or of freedom. At the same time it has important implications about the nature of God and his relationship with man and the world.

Berdyaev's theodicy presents God not as the divine autocrat, as "Lord", but as "the Saviour and Liberator from slavery of the world"¹⁵. The concept of God as master and man as slave is derived from our relationship in human society, although the relationship of God to men can not be described adequately in terms of social relationships of dominance and subjection. Equally, the relationship is not to be conceived in terms of power borrowed from nature, for God does not operate through necessity or impose himself by force. God does not dominate man or exhibit himself as a power which demands a subservient and slavish reverence. He does not treat us as slaves, who must obey his will without question, but as sons called to fulfil his will freely¹⁶. Such a concept, however, is possible only when God reveals himself not as the despotic monarch of monotheism but as the Son, the God-Man, and as Spirit. God shows himself in the world always *incognito* and preserves man's freedom by his self-emptying in Christ. But "it is with difficulty that men bear the *incognito* of the Divine and the *kenosis* of Christ. They would like an imperial majesty of God, and the God-Man".¹⁷

Thus Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor is right, men want a God who rules by miracle, mystery, and authority, and wish to escape the God who offers freedom.

Berdyaev, then, accepts that Feuerbach was right to say that man has been enslaved by his own projections, which he creates from the world of nature and from society. Feuerbach for example, says that man derives from his own political regime the belief that "God is author, preserver

and ruler of the world”¹⁸. If this is so we would expect changing concepts of God with changing political arrangements. Feuerbach was prepared to recognise a change from a patriarchal to a despotic concept of God, but dismissed as an absurdity the idea of a constitutional God. Now it is true, as Berdyaev suggests, that the understanding of what we mean by God is coloured by survivals and influences from earlier times, but there seems to be no reason why we should not use the ideas of constitutional monarchy to express our experience of God. Feuerbach was perhaps willing to accept only a despotic view of God because that was an easier idol to smash. Berdyaev’s concept of God-Manhood, however, which seeks to do justice to Christian experience of God in Christ, makes the despotic image of God unnecessary and points to a more democratic or constitutional model, which is preferable, not on political grounds, but because it is more in accord with our understanding of personality and morality. Or rather, the political model should be replaced by one taken from personal and loving relationships.

The question remains, however, whether in giving this interpretation Berdyaev has not abandoned or lost an important element in the Christian understanding of God. Indeed the crux of the mystery of suffering and evil lies in the assertion that God is both good and almighty. Berdyaev said,

“God is not world providence, that is to say, not a ruler and sovereign of the universe, not *pantokrator*. God is freedom and meaning, love and sacrifice”.¹⁹

Such an assertion seems at first glance to contradict the Christian understanding of God, and certainly Berdyaev could here have expressed himself with more care. When we look more carefully both at Berdyaev’s meaning and at the Christian concept of omnipotence, we shall see that the disparity is more apparent than appears at first sight. However, there seems to be an inconsistency in Berdyaev’s thought, for although he denied that God is to be thought of in terms of power, he wrote

“God the Creator is all-powerful over being, over the created world, but He has no power over non-being, over the uncreated freedom which is impenetrable to him”.²⁰

Alongside the creator God he sees freedom as something which emerges with him from the primeval abyss of the *Ungrund*. The condition of freedom determines the kind of world which God can make, but if God does not work by necessity, nor force himself on man, then it is difficult to see how Berdyaev can speak of him as all-powerful over being.

The trouble is that he has not spelt out clearly what he means by calling God omnipotent. Both the Greek *pantokrator* and the Latin *omnipotens* are not so much philosophic terms as “adjectives of glorification”, used outside the Bible of the pagan Gods, and in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew “Sabaoth”, “Lord of Hosts”²¹. In the New Testament the basic idea is to denote the sovereignty of God shown in his activity to control the world, by preventing chaos from destroying the cosmos, and avoiding the triumph of wickedness and disorder. More positively, the divine sovereignty is seen in God’s work to watch over his Word and bring it to fulfilment. Now sovereignty can be maintained by the exercise of physical force, but this is destructive. Instead, God seeks to win over those who oppose his rule not by force, but by love which is

prepared to give itself. While love is powerful, it is not omnipotent, for it can be rejected. Nevertheless, we believe that in the long run it will overcome all rejections of its claims. The Christian assertion of the omnipotence of God is a declaration of faith and hope.

Berdyaev’s rejection of the idea of God as power and his assertion of the Creator God’s omnipotence over the created world have to be understood in these terms. The Christian God is not the God of pantheism who includes all things in himself, nor the divine autocrat who demands and enforces submission, but the God who longs for a free response from men in love, and is prepared to share the work of dealing with the evil in the world. He is not, as Barth said, power-in-itself, for that would be chaos, but power whose character is shown as love in Jesus Christ²². When we speak of God as Almighty or *pantokrator*, we are affirming our faith in the divine sovereignty thought of as “love endowed with power, power subordinated to love”²³. Berdyaev’s meaning could be expressed more accurately if we said that God is not *force* but *love*, and this would leave us free to speak of the power of God shown in Jesus Christ.

The question arises then, whether the weakening of the concept of omnipotence does not remove the need for theodicy altogether. It is often said that unless God is both good and almighty, there is no problem. This, however, is too simple, for evil, even if it is a mere fact of existence, appears to contradict the conviction that the world ought to make sense. Here Berdyaev’s discussion of the problem is valuable in its recognition that in both human and divine life there is an element of inescapable tragedy²⁴. There is the tragedy of Fate which so exercised the Greek mind. Fate is “the solidified, hardened outcome of the dark meonic freedom”, and it imposes itself on men as tragedy in situations for which they are not responsible. It is possible to rise above such tragedy. But the primary kind of tragedy is not that of Fate, but the tragedy of Freedom, when there is a conflict between principles which are equally noble and lofty. At times it appears almost as if the very existence of freedom made evil inevitable. Certainly Berdyaev saw tragedy as an essential part of the Divine Life, for the innocent takes responsibility for dealing with evil in the world. Berdyaev’s interpretation of omnipotence points to the Christian doctrine of the loving God who gives himself for the world, but it raises, too the question of divine passibility.

Berdyaev argued that the doctrine that God is self-sufficient, immobile, and impassible, is inconsistent with the Biblical tradition which speaks of God’s jealousy, wrath, and love. Admittedly, in talking of the emotions of God we are speaking symbolically, and when we use negative theology we have to deny that God is angry, or even that he is good. But these symbols point to some characteristics of God as men have experienced him. To speak of him in terms of love and sacrifice is more worthy than to speak in terms of self-sufficient immobility. In his denial of divine impassibility, however, Berdyaev would appear to be in conflict with the mainstream of Christian tradition. Lossky criticises Berdyaev for teaching that tragedy has an essential part in the divine life. He sees it as the improper influence of 19th century romantic philosophy²⁵. While it must be admitted that Berdyaev inevitably reflects his 19th century background and the influence of German philosophy, nevertheless his rejection of a simple divine impassibility points to a difficulty in the traditional doctrine of God. In

hellenistic thought God is essentially immutable, insusceptible to any suffering or passion, and incapable of mutual relations with his creatures²⁶. This belief in ontological unchangeableness is contradicted if we believe that God enters into the kind of relationship with men which is proclaimed in the New Testament. Attempts during the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the first five centuries to reconcile the Greek doctrine of God's impassibility with the Biblical doctrine of the Incarnation were unreal. If we insist on the impassibility of God in some sense, we have to say that Christ suffered only as man which is to divide his personality.

Three kinds of passibility can be distinguished²⁷. The first, external passibility, concerns the Divine capacity for suffering in relation to creatures outside himself. Aristotle rules this out absolutely. Aquinas tried to reconcile the Bible with Aristotle by saying that the creation does not exist outside of God. This, however, seems to be inconsistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition that God has created the world as an independent realm alongside himself, and could lead to a kind of pantheism. We should, rather, see in the creation of other beings God's voluntary self-limitation to allow these beings freedom. God, then, is relatively passible, i.e. he can suffer in relation to the things he has created. In the second sense God is properly described as impassible for he is "without passions", that is, is not subject to movements of mind contrary to reason as a result of emotion. Instead, impassibility signifies "the absolute steadfastness of will" which might be better called the integrity of God. There is a third sense which Quick calls "sensational passibility", intermediate between the other two. Traditionally, it is denied that God is susceptible to pain or pleasure, but if this is so, he ought to be "insensitive to human sin or virtue, unsympathetic with the sufferings of his creatures". Again this is inconsistent with the Biblical doctrine that God loves the world and is grieved by sin. This ability to suffer is part of the divine activity to overcome evil, and is the consequence of the divine self-limitation. Berdyaev would seem to go beyond this, however, for he sees this passibility within the Trinity itself. He could speak, for example, of "suffering within the inner life of the Trinity", although for this, he admits, there can be no clear analogy drawn from life in our natural world²⁸. If, however, we accept Berdyaev's argument that the Trinity is God in relation to the world, he would appear to be justified in speaking of God's passibility, provided that this is not taken to infringe the integrity of the divine working. When, however, we speak of the internal life of God in himself we must show a greater reticence and agnosticism than Berdyaev thought necessary, and recognize limits to what we can know.

In all his wrestling with the problems of theodicy, Berdyaev was attempting to do justice to the Christian conviction that in Christ we see God at work to deal with evil. He shows us a God who accepts the limitations of freedom and, by his enlightened bearing of suffering, overcomes evil.²⁹ In this God shows himself not in force but in sacrificial love which accepts the tragedies of Fate and Freedom and triumphs over them. This mystery of redemption, which answers the mystery of evil, has been rationalised in Christian thought because it has been treated as a judicial process, or a business deal. But,

"In Christianity Redemption is the work of love and not that of justice, the

sacrifice of a divine and infinite love, not a propitiatory sacrifice, nor the settlement of accounts".³⁰

This understanding of redemption overcomes the concept of what Berdyaev calls "the vampire God"³⁰ who demands blood-sacrifice as a condition of forgiveness. Nevertheless, "vampirism" still persists within Christian thinking, for it fails to recognise that the sacrifice of Christ is the life and love with which we are called to co-operate. There are within Christianity two spiritual types. One understands the mysteries of redemption juridically as pardon and justification which delivers men from perdition; this is connected with the old Covenant and is typical of St. Augustine. The other sees redemption as the making of the New Covenant in which creation is transfigured and a new spiritual man appears. Clement of Alexandria presented redemption in these terms. In his treatment of redemption, Berdyaev gave powerful expression to this second line of interpretation within the Christian tradition, but, as so often, he asserted one by denying the other. Here justification, sacrifice, debt, all have their place within the exposition of the mystery of redemption seen as the work of love. Nevertheless, his theodicy underlines the inadequacy of any doctrine of a pantheistic God which absorbs man and the world into the deity, or a dualistic God who is so exalted above the world as to be indifferent to it.

The clue to theodicy must be found in what God has revealed to us about himself, as the God who makes us in his image, seeks to win us to share his work, and work in us to fulfill our efforts. In expounding this Berdyaev tried to clarify our understanding of God, and defend him against the slanders that he is a cruel tyrant or an indifferent power. He faced squarely the reality of freedom, although he spoke of it as some kind of object which exists rather than a condition of our being. He reminded us that ultimately God is an ineffable mystery who chooses to reveal himself through creation and through experience of what we call the Holy Spirit, and that all of this is focussed in the Incarnation, where man and God meet. This is the starting point from which we can begin to understand ourselves and God, and also find the answer to the mystery of evil and suffering. This answer does not enable us to comprehend these mysteries, in the sense that we can give a complete, rational explanation of their existence. Rather, it shows us how they can be taken over and conquered by the weakness which Christ shows us to be an expression of the divine love.³² Much of our difficulty in finding that answer comes from a mistaken understanding of the mystery of God, and Berdyaev helps us in the necessary work of clarification.

NOTES:

Much of the material in this article is derived from the author's unpublished Ph.D. thesis *The Reality of Spirit: the response to reductivist critiques of theism in the later work of Berdyaev*, presented to the University of London in 1978. In its present form it was first read as a paper at the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research, Tantur, Jerusalem.

1. Nicolas Berdyaev *Destiny of Man*, N.Y. Harper (1960), p. 43.
2. Nicolas Berdyaev *Freedom and the Spirit*, London, Bles (1935), p. 185.
3. *Destiny of Man*, p. 32.
4. *ibid*, p. 25.
5. *ibid*, p. 29.
6. *Freedom and the Spirit*, pp. 163ff.
7. *ibid*.
8. Nicolas Berdyaev *Slavery and Freedom*, London, Bles (1944), p. 89.
9. *Freedom and the Spirit*, pp. 166-171.

10. J. Hick *Evil and the God of Love*, London (1968), pp. 185-193.
11. *ibid*, p. 193.
12. Nicolas Berdyaev *The Divine and the Human*, London, Bles (1949), p. 73.
13. *ibid*, p. 74.
14. *ibid*, p. 74.
15. Nicolas Berdyaev *Dream and Reality*, London, Bles (1950), p. 177 cf. *Slavery and Freedom*, pp. 82-4.
16. *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 149.
17. *Divine and Human*, p. 13.
18. *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 82, cf. Ludwig Feuerbach *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* N.Y. Harper and Row (1967), pp. 144-149.
19. *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 89.
20. *Destiny of Man*, p. 25.
21. J. Burnaby *The Belief of Christendom*, London, S.P.C.K. (1959), p. 27.
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