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A Discussion on Christian Socialism: Semen Frank's Forgotten Paper

The reason for the present study is the discovery of a paper of Semen Frank's which had previously never appeared among the bibliography of his works before. The paper bears the title: *Christianity and Socialism*. It was published in "Vestnik russkago studencheskago Hristianskago Dvizhenia" ("The Herald of the Russian Students' Christian Movement") in 1930 (Issue 4.) There is also another paper of Frank's on the same topic: *The Problem of "Christian Socialism,"* which was first published in journal *Put'* ("The Way") in 1939. This latter looks like it is intended to make a positive statement, but the afterword written by Nikolai Berdyaev, reveals its polemical involvement. The newly discovered paper, which Frank had written almost a decade before, could help to recreate content of this implication. This paper explicitly involves a discussion: Semen Frank responded to Sergey Bulgakov's *The Orthodox Christianity and Socialism (Letter to Editor)*, which had been printed before in both—*Vestnik* and *Put'*. The text is relatively short but important in order to specify the different approaches of the Russian religious philosophers to this important issue, as well as the discussed subject.

However, we must acknowledge the fact that the "discussion on the Christian socialism" mentioned in the title is not a particular event in the history of philosophy. In a wider context, we speak about the relation between Christianity and socialism which European thinkers have been discussing at least since the 1830s. On the other hand, along with a number of other sources, this paper still belongs to a concrete historical situation (the Russian emigration of the late 1920s and early 1930s), and it can be called a "discussion." However, this discussion never crossed the line to become a polemic; it remained within the frameworks of stated positions, with the positions of thinkers that were close to each other, but somehow still substantially different.

The discussion began with a *Letter to the Editor* written by Fr. Sergey Bulgakov.¹ It might seem as though it was merely by chance that Bulgakov's responded to *High Church Administration of the South of Russia Records of Proceedings* (Crimea, 1920) that had been published in the Soviet Union. He was participating in the work of the High Church administration himself, and was entrusted with the task to "compose a draft of a dogmatic constitution on the nature of socialism."² It is scarcely to be believed that Bulgakov's intention was to respond to the author, B. Kandidov, or somehow justify himself in face of the Soviet authorities. It was rather personally important for him, who was at the moment not only a priest and religious thinker, but (in a certain sense) a spiritual leader and innovative dogmatic theologian. It was important for him to adjust his own position, formulating that which, due to the tragic circumstances of the late 1920s, he had not formulated before .

However, it is possible that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, certain tendencies of the spiritual development, both the European as well as those of the Russian emigration, had become the nourishing source that fed this personal need.

Firstly, the Stockholm conference (1925) must be mentioned, which focused on practical, social Christianity within the ecumenical movement. It is also to be remembered the big change within the Roman-Catholic Church to focus on social questions, which had begun in the late nineteenth century with Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and whose principles were ingeniously developed by Pope Pius XI in his own Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). After series of revolutionary perturbations in Europe; on the background of the first results of the communist experiment in Soviet Russia; and the great depression in the West: either general social question or particular question on socialism (communism), both acquired a new meaning, which had queerly woven together sinister zombie marches of social utopias, social demagoguery (including fascist and Nazi) as well as the growing counterpoints of the future "welfare state." Then, there emerged original theories, combining religious and social ideas, e.g. the Religious socialism by Leonhard Ragaz and Paul Tillich.

Concerning the Russian emigration, it is to be said that the *modus vivendi* during a few years after the revolution was rather discouraging for an objective (theoretical) attitude towards the idea of socialism. Berdyaev wrote:

¹ The letter, dated 13 December 1929, had been sent simultaneously to the editors of *Vestnik RSHD* and *Put'*, but, due to different periodicity of the issues, it first appeared in *Vestnik* (Issue 1, January 1930), and then in *Put'* (Issue 20, February 1930).

² Bulgakov, "Pravoslaviye i sotsializm," 7.

Psychological atmosphere was very discouraging for understanding the ideal world of communism. In Russian emigration, the communism evoked against itself a passionate affective reaction of gravely injured people. Too many people, answering the questions “what is communism?” would say: “this is something that destroyed my life, this is my unfortunate fate.”³

However, the necessity to organize a life under new conditions, and the unavoidable integration within the social environment of countries of residence, especially for emigrant youth, gradually put forward the daily tasks that had already required not just emotional, but also intellectual and practical position with regard to the contemporary intellectual movements and political trends.

In this sense, the evolution of the Russian Student Christian Movement (RSCM) is quite unique. We should also remember that the first place where the “discussion on Christian socialism” began was the RSCM journal. During the later twenties, due to the urgent need of rethinking its tasks and goals, RSCM was in crisis. There were people who said that the movement could not confine itself only to religious and moral education of the Russian emigrant youth, and their spiritual education for “the future work in Russia,” as had been thought before. They thought there was a necessity to turn towards the social reality, to solving particular life problems, to doing practical social work. Firstly, the question was brought up so sharply during the seventh RSCM meeting, held in Boissy, in September 1929.⁴ A discussion on the ideology of RSCM preceded the meeting. During the meeting, Nikolai Berdyaev argued over the program paper prepared and offered by Vasily Zenkovsky. Berdyaev clearly declared that “neutrality” relating to social problems, justified by a fear of political involvement, utterly contradicts the ideas of the churching of life and creation of Orthodox culture, proclaimed by RSCM ideologists. The life churching does not mean a diverted liturgism and spirituality that cut off from the fullness of life, but “creative answer of Orthodoxy to the painful questions of life,” among which “and the attitude towards social question, towards the question of labor management is the world question of Christian conscience, but not politics.”⁵ Different viewpoints had been stated during the Conference, but among the most distinctive were the words of Bulgakov, who stated that despite all the eschatologism of Christian conscience “we have no right to

³ Berdyaev, “Pravda i lozh' kommunizma,” 3.

⁴ However, Berdyaev had already articulated the similar ideas before, in the RSCM meeting in Argeronne (1925) wherein his appeals to make Orthodoxy “an active religion to transform the world” met strong objections from Bishop Benjamin (Fedchenkov).

⁵ Berdyaev, “K voprosu ob ideologii R.S.Kh.D.,” 13.

move away from those Christian tasks to which history have bequeathed us, which are our ecclesiastical duty today," in which "social question, which must entirely become a matter of Christian conscience and responsibility, it must be excluded from the authority of socialists and communists, who have monopolized it."⁶

Thus, Bulgakov's *Letter to the Editor* was not only reflections of the past, but a lively response to the problems of the day. However, we should have mentioned here that during the first period of the Russian Revolution Sergey Bulgakov acted as one of the most conspicuous supporters of the idea of Christian socialism in Russia.

Having made his "conversion from Marxism to idealism," with the freshness of a neophyte, in 1905, Bulgakov felt a deep rupture between Social and Christian in contemporary politics. He asks the question: Is it true that politics, in a broad sense, is something strange to Christianity, as the letter deals with the world of moral issues? The answer was unambiguous:

Christianity, however, as any other religion, claiming to be an absolute one, spreads its interests and influences to the whole life. ... There can be no excuse for principal indifferentism in politics and social matters.⁷

In fact, he stands for Christian politics as a solid political program and as a political party. His plans to create Christian party ("Union of Christian politics") were unsuccessful. It should be noticed that later, in 1917, Bulgakov himself avowed that Christianity should not become a party.⁸ However, he continued to believe that social and economic program of socialism was completely in accord with Christian values.

Thus, Bulgakov's position, expressed in the *Letter to Editor*, is that socialism as such is not a matter of faith and therefore it is not to be anathematized.

⁶ "Tserkov', mir, dvizheniye," 5. The discussion on RSCM ideology and its internal crisis was continued in September 1933, during the eighth RSCM meeting. Again, it was prompted by Berdyayev who had sent a letter, addressed to the meeting, where in the strictest terms he had been accusing the movement of tolerating the ultra-nationalistic, and even militaristic and fascist tendencies within itself, ending with appeal for "awakening of Christian conscience in relation to social life" (Berdyayev, "Ob ideologicheskom krizise dvizheniya," 29–33). The meeting responded with having elaborated articles *On Relation Between Religious and Social Work of the Movement*, wherein though it had been said about the "work to create social and legal circumstances for (everyone's) spiritual personal growth," yet, the priority of religious and liturgical life over social service of a Christian prevailed ("Ob otnoshenii religioznoy i sotsial'noy raboty dvizheniya," 33–35).

⁷ Bulgakov, "Neotlozhnaya zadacha," 30–31.

⁸ Bulgakov, "Khristianstvo i sotsializm," 228.

Bulgakov distinguishes the social and economic nature of socialism from the militant atheism, which often (and in Russian in particular) accompanied it. It is clear that the latter is unacceptable for him as for a priest and orthodox thinker, but the former seems quite a Christian thing for him. “The goal of socialism, understood as execution of social justice, defense of the weakest, struggle against poverty, unemployment, exploitation is to such an extent morally evident that any discord may only be in relation to practical expedience or practicability of this or that measures”⁹ (but he certainly does not approve of “untimely and enforcedly urged forms of the state socialistic bondage”).

Separating this way social content of socialism from its political forms, Bulgakov joins together under the same notion “all the diversity of forms from the soviet communism to social control of capitalist industry.”¹⁰ On the other hand, he believes it is wrong to say that the inviolability of private property is grounded on Christian morality. In other words, it is evident for Bulgakov that Christian doctrine cannot be associated with any defined social and economic system if regarded as a number of historical forms and property institutions. Even less can it be associated itself with a system that is an “organization of class exploitation” (the Marxist understanding of capitalism lasted far longer than the Marxists period of Bulgakov’s spiritual biography). However, it is also doubtless for him that Christianity proclaims the ideal of truth and social justice, commanding social love and charity to all those who work and are heavy laden, “everyone will be questioned in the Last Judgment.” Therefore, his thought is that the Church cannot condemn anyone for social activity, whoever they are, but, what is important, must “fully possess its royal freedom and justice, in social matters as well,” i.e. practically support social reforms.¹¹

Frank fully agrees with Bulgakov’s principal statement of this issue, and first of all with the fact that “both Gospel and the Tradition of the Church demand an active attitude of a Christian to social question, obliging him to strive for social justice.”¹² Although, he also believes it is necessary to make an important correction. Bulgakov’s main point is that the social and economic nature of socialism is beyond the doctrine of the Orthodox Church. The only thing that is to be really condemned is the militant atheism with which it is confused. However, Frank insists that not only must openly professed atheism be rejected, but also the condemnation must be spread to latent atheism: the grounds on which the dominant type of the socialistic mood rises.

⁹ Bulgakov, “Pravoslaviye i sotsializm,” 8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Frank, “Khristianstvo i sotsializm,” 15.

At the same time, Frank formulates a “substantial difference” between the Christian (and religious in general) attitude towards the issue of “social justice” and the socialist one. For religious conscience, the social injustice that rules the world “is a mere part of the common injustice among people,” as for socialism it is the only substantiation of “every evil in the world.” Religion believes that the source of injustice—and the social injustice too—is in sinfulness, human wickedness, as for the socialism “the only source of injustice is the social organization.” For a religious believer “the major way” to overcome every injustice lies in Christian education and self-discipline, as for a socialist, respectively, such a way is seen as the way of changing the existing social order. So here comes the conclusion: if for socialism the existing social order—bourgeois and capitalist—is “the absolute hindrance to truly human relations,” and another one—socialist—as though automatically brings to complete triumph of goodness and justice. For the Christian outlook, then, “there is not such, yet the worst order, which could hinder doing good and just, and there is not such a social order, which could prevent human relations from evil and injustice.”¹³

It should be noticed that this position is the position of Christian realism. Christian realism states a relative value of politics and state as such, as well as a specific social or political order (it is a value in sense of persistent need to guard it against the outer evil, but it is relative, since it cannot make you do good.) This idea is present in Frank's works of that period (*The Religious Foundations of Society*, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*), as well as in the latter ones (*The Light Shineth in Darkness*, *Heresy of Utopism*, etc.) It may be noticed that here we are dealing with a position that was probably inherited from Vladimir Soloviev, and connected with his idea of Christian politics.

The latent atheism of socialism, according to Frank, is that the human responsibility for the evil that predominates in human relationships whenever taken away, ceases to be the matter of human conscience and becomes completely a casual one, depending on circumstances—on “the social order.” A human being is not considered to be a creator of his/her social life, but an irresponsible “product” of his/her “environment.” Frank's opinion is that this per se atheistic thought is common both for the open cynicism of the Marxist socialism as well as for the modern European humanism (the “humanitarianism”). The latter, as a philanthropy and compassion to those who are oppressed and those who suffer, rises from Christianity and obligatory for a Christian. Yet, as far as it considers a human beings to be mere victims of extrinsic powers that

¹³ Ibid.

are outward to them and do not call him/her above all to the moral perfection, it turns to be an anti-Christian mood.¹⁴

The philosophical and moral foundation of Christian realism for Frank is the idea that it unifies personal and social moral (duty). On one hand, he calls it a spiritual blindness to move away from the duty of social service for the sake of justice, devoting oneself completely and uniquely to self-perfection. On the other hand, it is no less than blindness to believe in “the mechanical enhancement and perfection of life with the help of social reforms and revolutions.” The philosopher emphasizes that “Social service is merely a special form of personal service; the success of social reforms ultimately depends on the morals of those who carries them out.”¹⁵ It is worth noticing that later, in his book *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, Frank, as though continuing and complementing the thought about the unity of morals and politics, writes: “Social reforms are fruitful and lead to the good only insofar as they take into account the given moral level of the people for whom they are intended.”¹⁶ Therefore, he does not concern himself only with personal service and the duty of certain public figures, but anyone, since nobody can deny responsibility for moral evil only on grounds that he (or she) is “an ordinary person,” and there is “nothing that depends on the common people.” Denying the social utopianism, revolutionism and “the satanic idea of class struggle,” Frank states: “True—i.e. Christian—politics are always sensibly, meets the living needs of the living people, and means a specific activity for the benefit of neighbors.”¹⁷ Their task is the living moral education, and gradual, harmonious bettering of life, realized with the spiritual means and efforts. The idea of personal and social unity in morals means that any social reform must follow the moral enhancement. It is no matter however hard and slow it seems—due to the unavoidable human wickedness. However, the social reform is by all possible means to avoid opening the “Pandora’s box” of the fundamental human passions that eventually become sinister tools of social preparation to undertake projects for creating a paradise on earth, which long beforehand had been proven to be utopian ones.

Mainly agreeing with Fr. Sergey Bulgakov that the social and economic nature of socialism is not a matter of religious dogma, Frank believes it is possible to specify the attitude of Christian conscience towards one or another social order. This attitude (it is discussed in detail in the book *The Spiritual Foundations of Society* that had just been published a day before) based on a religious

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Frank, *The Light Shineth*, 222.

¹⁷ Frank, “Khristianstvo i sotsializm,” 16–17.

understanding of society as a catholic service to execute justice that “require of social life to observe two fundamental principles on which the service depends: the personal freedom and social solidarity.”¹⁸ From the Christian point of view, social order, whose appearance had been wholly forced by the power of the state, even for the sake of social justice; as well as an order of unlimited economic individualism, even for the sake of freedom: are deviant. It is not a dogmatic issue to decide in which form and how far under a concrete social order, the principle of personal freedom and the one of the state and social control must be joint and operate together, “but the regime, which absolutely denies either of these principles, is to be utterly and fundamentally, i.e. religiously condemned.”¹⁹

We should say that Bulgakov did not answer to Frank directly. Although, in the Seventh issue of the *Vestnik* in the same year, two readers' letters were published with criticism of Bulgakov's position, as well as his answer to them. However, the editor warned that these responses were “printed with a considerable delay.” We can make an assumption that they had been received and handed over to Bulgakov, who had written his answer immediately, yet before Frank's article appeared. After Frank's publication had appeared, the editor could have expected that Bulgakov would develop his recent answer or write a new one, but it never happened: either because the position of one of the correspondents was similar to that of Frank, and Bulgakov, having answered to the former, believed he could have said the same to Frank himself, or because the editor of *Vestnik* in fact accepted the side not of their Paris inspirer, but of his Berlin opponent.²⁰

The discussion in *Vestnik* had not been continued, but in *Put'* we could trace a number of articles that directly or indirectly touched on these issues. In Issue 28 (1931) N. Alexeev's paper appears, which bears the same title as the former by Frank, i.e. *Christianity and Socialism*. The editorial note not only directly refers it to the discussion, but also states the position of the chief editor, i.e. Berdyaev:

The editor of *Put'* believes that the problem of relation between Christianity and socialism is to be discussed from different points of view. The only exception is the

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 18.

²⁰ In the editor's introduction to the next Issue 5 of *Vestnik*, it is observed that in the last year, the interest of authors in social issues has multiplied exceedingly, yet only one author is mentioned: “In S. L. Frank's paper ... in classical formulations have been given the general, fundamental foundations of Christian attitude towards socialism. After this paper of his, we would merely like to stress the sharpness and urgency of the problem itself” (“1 maya 1930 g.,” 2).

defense of the capitalist system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the Christian viewpoint.²¹

The paper *Religious Socialism and Christianity* by Fedor Stepun, published in the next Issue 29 (1931), can be regarded as an important satellite of information. There is a critical analysis of religious Christianity movement ideology on material of Paul Tillich's works. In his own turn, in Issue 30 (1931), Berdyaev published his own paper *Justice and a Lie of Communism*, which, however, did not have a direct polemical intention either (it should rather be regarded as preliminary outlines for a book, which would be published later in German, in 1937: *Sinn und Schicksal des russischen Kommunismus*.) In early 1932, there was a meeting in the Academy of Religion and Philosophy in Paris "Christianity and the contemporary social reality," where Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Il'in, Georgy Fedotov, Sergey Bulgakov had presented their reports, which were published in *Put'* (in appendix to Issue 32, 1932.) We can also mention an article by I. Hofstetter, entitled *Social Christianity* (Issue 41, 1933.) At last, a bit delayed, but vivid final chord had been played by Frank's paper *Problem of "Christian socialism,"* which had also been commented by Berdyaev in his *Christianity as a Social Order*: both the paper and the comment were published in the penultimate Issue 60 (1939) in *Put'*. This new Frank's paper is bigger and more systematic in comparison with the previous one, and apparently had no polemic intention. Although the reference to Berdyaev's statement that success and attractive power of the atheistic socialism, first of all, is determined by original (historical) sins of the Christian world, its indifference about social need. The statement that "contains a part of doubtless truth,"²² but from which Frank draws somehow different conclusions. It could indirectly bear witness to the fact that the new, longer explication of Frank's position had been provoked by Berdyaev's book mentioned above.²³

As though summarizing the discussion with Bulgakov, Frank states that the concept of "Christian socialism" "contains dangerous confusion of ideas and is *contradictio in adjecto*," however, as well as the notion of "Christian social order."²⁴ It is doubtless for him that true Christianity means the virtue of love to one's neighbor, a vital attitude towards social injustice and need. Yet he insistently distinguishes two horizons of salvation: spiritual salvation in

²¹ Alekseyev, "Khristianstvo i sotsializm," 32.

²² Frank, "Problema 'khristianskogo sotsializma,'" 19.

²³ On "sins of Christians, sins of historical Churches" in social question Berdyaev writes in the last chapter of his book *Communism and Christianity*. See Berdyaev, *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma*, 139.

²⁴ Frank, "Problema 'khristianskogo sotsializma,'" 29.

the Kingdom of God, and material salvation in earthly life. This distinction brings him to certain statements which can be comprehended even as a certain justification of social exploitation: “we ought to be patient now to be saved in the Kingdom of God”—Berdyayev’s understanding and criticism of this position had been namely of that kind. The latter, however, with his personalistic socialism seems to be more utopian (with Marxist leaven), than Bulgakov’s, at that time Frank represented himself as a Christian realist.

As opposed to Bulgakov, Frank does not confuse the socialistic and social state, i.e. the socialism as a social (legal) order, founded on forced collectivization, on one hand, and the social reforming on base of free market, on the other. Having included to the former not only Russian Communism, but also German Nazism, Frank gives Berdyayev an opportunity to say that “he as though does not recognize any other socialism, but the one of a fascist type.”²⁵ Meanwhile as Berdyayev’s opposition of personalistic socialism to state socialism, yet, reveals the ultimate contrast between Christian freedom and socialistic enforcement, stated by Frank.

Semen Frank distinguishes socialism as an idea of forced justice and brotherhood of people, from the social legislation as a limitation provided by the state against unacceptable exploitation. “Prescribed by authorities.” Social solidarity and forced social justice have been regarded as “antichristian socialism,” since they have denied the Christian ideal of free brotherly love. However, the social reforms, i.e. measures forced by officials, to defend and support poor and exploited, seem to be just and essential. Although, the state must not infringe on the initial spiritual freedom, which the only earnest force that enables people “to freely fulfill the covenant of Christian love.” Comparing socialism and capitalism under such conditions, Frank comes to a conclusion that provoked a negative reaction from Berdyayev:

From the viewpoint of Christian religion and Christian understanding of life, the priority is to be given to that social regime or an order, which in the highest degree acceptable to strengthen the free brotherly love among people. Although, it can seem paradoxical, but such an order is not “the socialism,” but namely the order based on economic freedom of personality and the freedom of individual disposal of property.²⁶

Berdyayev does not accept the term “Christian socialism” rather because of his general distrust of historical Christianity and the outward the Church as one of the forms of social objectivation, but avows himself as close to religious

²⁵ Berdyayev, “Khristianskaya sovest’ i sotsial’nyy stroy,” 35.

²⁶ Frank, “Problema ‘khristianskogo sotsializma,’” 30.

socialism, represented by Leonhard Ragaz, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr. Justifying personalistic, anti-state socialism, Berdyaev rejects capitalistic economic forms as such. It is doubtless for him that bourgeois property is always inseparable from oppression, and therefore: “only personal labor activity, which does not enable capitalization, can be justified.”²⁷ Economic freedom means slavery of working people for him, and therefore the utter destruction of capitalism would be more like a Christian undertaking than, though partial justification. Berdyaev says, “theoretically, the Cross could rather be associated with the symbols of hammer and sickle than with Roman law or bank notes.”²⁸ He is accompanied by Bulgakov, who believes that “labor symbols” can be signed with “the sign of the Cross,” instead of opposing themselves to it.²⁹

Thus, the problem of Christian socialism is one of the ever-present and ever-discussed topics among the Russian religious philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. The attempts to solve the problem were connected with general social, philosophical, religious, and metaphysical premises, as well as peculiarities of spiritual development of specific thinkers; it has already presupposed (and explained) some disagreements between them. There are many positions within the general scope: from extrasocial, but fundamentally anti-capitalistic, personalistic socialism of Berdyaev, on one hand, and Christian realism of Frank that fundamentally rejects the social revolutionism and collectivism, advocating the priority of personal spiritual freedom in face of any outward forms of social organization, on the other. The position of Christian socialism, represented by Fr. Sergey Bulgakov, appears to be inconsistent and utopian. Therefore, we can make a general conclusion that the study of the correlation between Christianity and socialism in Russian religious philosophy convincingly demonstrates the shallow and artificial character of their “symbiosis.” It is obvious enough that the ultimate social ideal of Christianity can hardly be correctly formulated in predicaments of an ideological program, confining their vision of the salvation mystery to the narrow bounds of the material organization of earthly life.

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²⁷ Berdyaev, “Khristianskaya sovest’ i sotsial’nyy stroy,” 35.

²⁸ “Khristianstvo pered sovremennoy sotsial’noy deystvitel’nost’yu,” 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

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