

The Tragedy of Politics in the Religious Philosophy of Nikolai Berdyaev

Raul-Ovidiu Bodea

Abstract. — *The Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) has struggled to articulate the relationship of the human person with social and political realm. By giving priority to the person, a particular understanding of the political emerges as fundamentally tragic. Berdyaev reflects on this from his own experience of persecution under both the tsarist and communist regimes, but also as an exile in the alienating capitalist societies of Western Europe. He points out that there is a danger in viewing politics as an autonomous self-sufficient realm. The danger of falling into totalitarianism is very close in this understanding of politics. Christianity is the one that offers an understanding of the distinction between what Berdyaev calls the kingdom of the Caesar and the kingdom of God. Christianity itself is also in danger of totalitarianism through the establishment of theocracies, which has been a temptation of Christianity throughout history. In Berdyaev's view, the two realms must be kept in a creative tension. The truth of politics is merely a partial truth, but only to the extent that it recognizes what Berdyaev calls 'integral truth'. The recognition of the values of the political order can only be recognized as such if the political order gives precedence to the value of personality. In such a recognition, despite the fallen nature of humanity, the improvement of the social condition is truly possible.*

1. Introduction

Christians have found themselves from the very beginnings of Christianity in a special relationship with their social and political world. Their self-consciousness as a particular group called to be citizens of another world, of an eternal kingdom of God, has had great influence on how they have acted and made sense of themselves within this world; within their earthly social and political realms. Christianity still struggles to articulate its position in relation to the contingencies of the political world, and with society at large. For the Orthodox Church this endeavour has a distinctive peculiarity because of its historical context, which is connected mostly with the countries of Eastern Europe and its experience of oppression under the Ottoman Empire and communism, while being nostalgic after the glory days during the Byzantine empire. “Eastern

Christians still prefer monarchy to democracy, strong men with unchecked political power to the rule of law, archaism to modernity, and so on.”¹ This attitude reveals a certain theology that goes usually unchecked by the scrutiny of internal coherence with its own principles. Although, more recently, Orthodox theologians have engaged with these issues, we must remember that “Orthodox social and political theology is still in its infancy.”² Despite this, we have in the recent history of the Orthodox Church the case of the Russian religious renaissance, where thinkers actively engaged in the tumultuous social and political life of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and left us deep personal reflections on their political reality. “The important legacy of the social and political thought of the Russian religious renaissance is half-forgotten, but nonetheless offers invaluable insights for Orthodox thinking in the early twenty-first century.”³ One such thinker is Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), whose religious philosophy could still offer points of interest to Christian political theology in general, and Orthodox political theology in particular. Cyril Hovorun rightly observed that “theology and ideology sometimes look like twins. [...] Modern political Orthodoxies fall in between theology and ideology: they pursue either secular agendas in the name of God, or religious agendas by political means.”⁴ Berdyaev was very well aware of this as he equally condemned the totalitarian tendencies in both church and state. For Berdyaev, the criterion of discernment for a critique of this totalitarian tendency is the notion of personality. As such, the question of the role of personality in politics in the religious philosophy of Berdyaev is at the forefront of this paper.

In order to answer this question, I firstly situate Berdyaev in his social, political and cultural context. Then, I outline his evolution from a young Marxist philosopher in Russia, to an exiled Christian philosopher in Paris, focusing also on his struggle for social justice and on his influence in French personalist circles. Second, I explore his notion of personality, trying to assess its particularity in relation to other important notions in Berdyaev’s philosophy relevant to his political thought. Third, I apply that notion of personality to Berdyaev’s understanding of the political realm where I derive an understanding of the political realm as fundamentally tragic in its relationship to personality. The tragic character

1. Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 5.

2. Paul Ladouceur, “Social and Political Thought in the Russian Religious Renaissance,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 10, no. 2 (2018): 141-155, at 155.

3. Ibid.

4. Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 7.

of politics is revealed as both truth and falsehood in the tension between what Berdyaev calls the Kingdom of the Caesar and the Kingdom of God. As such, the notion of personality stands as a critique of the totalitarian tendencies of the Kingdom of the Caesar.

2. A Religious Philosopher Engaged in His Political Context

Nikolai Berdyaev is one of the prime representatives of Russian religious philosophy from the first part of the twentieth century. Although primarily a religious philosopher, he was also a political thinker, writing and contemplating both his current political context and the fundamental realities of social and political life. Despite his writings having a political dimension, it is difficult to pinpoint his thought in a spectrum of political positions, directions or ideologies. The circumstances of his life made him aware of the complexities of human interactions in history, where he tried to fight for the affirmation of human worth and dignity. He went from a young Marxist intellectual in pre-revolutionary Russia, to a committed Orthodox Christian thinker in Western Europe.⁵ Although he keeps a socialist orientation in his political thought, even after rejecting Marxism and embracing Christianity, he was still critical of other contemporary socialists, and gives a personal interpretation to what he understands as Christian socialism, to which he subscribes. For him, “the social problem is [...] a matter of ethics rather than of economics and politics.”⁶ The difficulty of identifying a particular political position of his is because of his aphoristic style of writing, the antinomic character of his thought, and his conscious effort to stand against clear-cut categories of political doctrines or ideologies, which he viewed as artificial conventions that are only a mere shadow of the complex human existential situation and relationships between persons.

His type of religious philosophy is very much grounded in what we may call the existentialist kind, and as an existential thinker he sees himself as necessarily aware of his world: “An existentialist philosopher should be aware of an identity between his thinking and his personal and the world’s destiny.”⁷ This world that he inhabits is also a social and

5. The most complete account of Berdyaev’s life available in English is Donald A. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1960).

6. Evgueny Lampert, *Nicolas Berdyaev and the New Middle Ages* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1945), 77.

7. *Ibid.*, 106.

political world, and it would be a mistake to neglect or reject it. Not only did he not ignore the political dimension of his day, but he was greatly concerned and involved in its process, especially in his Marxist youth, but also after his conversion and exile. I must point out that from the very beginning his interest in the political was not in itself of prime importance for him. His interest in the political is derivative of the interest he had in the affirmation of the freedom, creativity, and personality of the individual human being. The assertion of the dignity of human beings is the prime driving force of his religious philosophy and of his social thought. This aspect of his thought was also found in his Marxist youth before his conversion to Christianity, but, after his conversion, it only became stronger and more articulate.

Berdyaeв had his differences with Marxism from the very beginnings of his involvement in pre-revolutionary Marxist intellectual circles in Russia. He had suffered the consequences of being associated with it, and also that, at the time, imperial Russia had tried to destroy such revolutionary movements. Some accused him of not being radical enough, especially in the latter part of his Marxist phase. Truth be told, he was never a fully-fledged Marxist: that is, seen as accepting Marxism in the totality of its worldview. Olivier Clément correctly points out that “Berdyaeв’s Marxism has always been critical, open and non-totalitarian.”⁸ Ultimately, he embraced Christianity, where his social critique and involvement did not diminish, but came from a now Christian worldview. After being exiled in 1922 from Russia, he settled in Paris where he came to be recognized as a leading voice of the Russian exiles, and a critical voice against the Bolsheviks.

It was during his activity in ecumenical circles, and his work with the YMCA beginning in the 1930s, that the influence of his thought grew and was promoted as a Christian response to the current social and political situation, especially against communist Russia, although, he was equally critical of Western capitalism. “Berdyaeв’s involvement with the YMCA and with the ecumenical movement in the 1930s meant that he was often called upon to represent the Orthodox voice at theological and Church conferences. For many Western Christians, he was one of the defining voices of Russian Orthodox spirituality.”⁹ During the same

8. Olivier Clément, *Berdyaeв: Un philosophe russe en France* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 15.

9. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson, “Introduction: Reading Dostoevsky Religiously,” in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-28, at 16.

period, he became close to French Catholic intellectuals, such as Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier. He was influential in promoting a Christian socialism, while also being critical of communism. “Berdyayev participated in the creation of *Esprit* and the French Personalist movement of the 1930s and 40s. His thought, along with that of Maritain and Mounier, was one of the inspirations of the movement.”¹⁰ It has been observed that “Berdyayev characterizes his philosophy as personalistic, but this term itself is vague; it applies to several philosophic schools whose basic principles are different.”¹¹ It might be true that personalism as a movement could be applied to multiple schools of thought, but the emergence of it shows that there was a common concern at the time, the concern that gave the movement its name: the human person. “At the heart of the new personalist movement is Mounier’s statement of the primacy of the person, which has to be defended against all that is antihuman.”¹² This common concern united different thinkers under a common name. It has been noted that “Berdyayev’s personalism diverged from that of either Mounier or Maritain in important ways.”¹³ Undoubtedly, Berdyayev’s originality comes forth from his Russian Orthodox background, his past allegiance with Marxism, and the creative way in which he interacted with his sources of thought. Even after his death in 1948, his thought would continue to influence Western anti-communism throughout the Cold War with the support and propagation of his thought by YMCA leaders, such as Donald A. Lowrie and Paul B. Anderson, and also by one of the founding fathers of the World Council of Churches, John R. Mott.¹⁴ Although a critic of communism, he was nonetheless a harsher critique of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. He considered that the spirit of Marxism with its socialist orientation has some redemptive qualities, while capitalism lacks any such qualities.¹⁵ Berdyayev embraced no particular political system throughout his life, but he helped to build bridges and possibilities of dialogue in his time between

10. James McLachlan, “Nicolas Berdyayev’s Existentialist Personalism,” *The Personalist Forum* 8, no. 1 (1992): 57-65, at 57.

11. Vincent J. McNamara, “Some Basic Notions of the Personalism of Nicolas Berdyayev,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 16, no. 2 (1960): 278-302, at 278.

12. Johan De Tavernier, “The Historical Roots of Personalism,” *Ethical Perspectives* 16, no. 3 (2009): 361-392, at 369.

13. McLachlan, “Nicolas Berdyayev’s Existentialist Personalism,” 57.

14. Christopher Stroop, “‘A Christian Solution to International Tension’: Nikolai Berdyayev, the American YMCA, and Russian Orthodox Influence on Western Christian Anti-communism, c.1905-60,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 2 (2018): 188-208.

15. See Raul-Ovidiu Bodea, “Imago Dei as a Critique of Capitalism and Marxism in Nikolai Berdyayev,” *Studies in East European Thought* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-020-09379-x>.

Eastern and Western Europe. Berdyaev sees in political doctrines and ideologies an objectified human activity that inevitably comes against limitations and errors, and especially has a tragic dimension. For him the Christian response is to not choose a side, but to transcend them through the affirmation of the mystical dimension of the human personality.

3. The Mysticism of Personality

Much like any other aspect of Berdyaev's thought, his political thought must be related to his fundamental anthropology. Personality is the axiological concept in Berdyaev's anthropology, although there always seem to be multiple concepts that contend for being the key concept for their centrality in his thought. Another major concern of Berdyaev was freedom, but it is specifically the freedom of the person. He has been rightfully called the "philosopher of freedom."¹⁶ It has been claimed that freedom "constitutes the backbone"¹⁷ of his philosophy. One may wonder: what is the role of a backbone? The backbone upholds the human body, makes it stand up, gives the person the possibility to stand high with dignity. In this case, we have a 'philosophical backbone'. This acts in the same way, but for the concept of personality. Freedom upholds personality. We cannot achieve personality without freedom. In this view, any restraint of freedom is a restraint of personality, a diminution of it.

Fundamental for Berdyaev's understanding of personality is the distinction between the person and the individual, a distinction that has also the highest applicability in a social and political context. Berdyaev is definitely not alone in making this distinction, for it is a common characteristic of the personalist movement. "Berdyaev insists on this distinction and, in this, recognizes his agreement with the French Thomists."¹⁸ The distinction emerged and gained popularity mostly because of Emmanuel Mounier's development of, in his *Manifeste au service du personnalisme*, "a dialectical critique on both liberal bourgeois individualism and all forms of collectivism, all, in his opinion 'inverted theocracies' with shared dehumanizing tendencies."¹⁹ It is without a

16. Mary-Barbara Zledin, "Nicholas Berdyaev: Creative Freedom," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (1969): 207-215.

17. Fuad Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1967), 6.

18. McNamara, "Some Basic Notions of the Personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev," 279.

19. De Tavernier, "The Historical Roots of Personalism," 361.

doubt that Berdyaev was also motivated in making this distinction by social, political, and cultural reasons. We need only to remember that his primary reasons for becoming a Marxist, and then leaving Marxism for Christianity, had to do with how the situation of the person was acknowledged differently within both systems. For Berdyaev, the distinction between the person and the individual entails, moreover, a spiritual dimension. It has to do mainly with clarifying what the spiritual life should be in contrast with what it should not be. In order to understand what personality is one has to look also at what personality is not, and what both states of existence encompass. Berdyaev himself recognizes this way of approaching the problem: "In order to understand what personality is, it is very important to establish the difference between personality and the individual."²⁰

Thus, we will first look at how Berdyaev understands the individual. He says that

Individuality is a naturalistic and biological category [...] An individual is part of the species; it springs from the species, although it can isolate itself and come into conflict with it. The individual is produced by the biological generic process; it is born and it dies.²¹

From this, it looks as if all biological life is individual. Humans also share a biological body, so with no exceptions we are all under the category of the individual. What he tried to emphasize here with the biological aspect of the individual is the deterministic character of individuality. It is the lack of freedom that is experienced in biological life. "The individual, as the product of a generic process, is related intimately to the material world; born of parents, the individual with its biological origin bears the determinations of heredity, as well as of the genus and of society. There is no individual without the species, and no species without the individual; the individual evolves in the categories which imply its distinction from the specific, and carries on the struggle for existence in the biological and social processes."²² The lack of freedom is encountered in every natural act of self-preservation.

Berdyaev's fundamental anthropology is constructed upon a metaphysical dualism of freedom, on one hand, and necessity, on another. This dualism points to the dual nature of the human being. He says that

20. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (London: Centenary Press, 1943), 35.

21. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Centenary Press, 1937), 71.

22. McNamara, "Some Basic Notions of the Personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev," 279-280.

“Man is the meeting-point of two worlds. [...] Man recognizes that he belongs to two worlds: his nature is dual and, in his consciousness of himself, now one of these natures, now the other, seems to prevail [...] Man is conscious at once of his greatness and power, and of his worthlessness and weakness, of his imperial freedom and his slavish dependence: he knows himself as the image and likeness of God, and as a drop in the ocean of the necessities of nature.”²³ We must be careful not to confuse Berdyaev’s dualism between freedom and necessity with other types of dualisms he does not claim. His dualism is not between spirit and body. “Christianity – Berdyaev argued – does not stand for a bodiless spiritualism: rather than be a faith in an otherworldly salvation of the immortal soul, it is a faith in a universal salvation within history, requiring an active participation in the world.”²⁴ Berdyaev’s view of mysticism is intimately connected with this view of the free and synergic relationship between God and human being in the fallen world towards the manifestation of a new world of spiritual meaning underpinned by freedom and creativity. “Berdyaev recognized the ‘flesh’ of Christianity as well as its spirit; he did not think of it as an abstraction but as a living thing whose flesh is illuminated by the spirit.”²⁵

The dualism between the human being and nature is well-established within political theology, with the two major tendencies being personalism and naturalism. According to Peter Scott,

the tendency of personalism seeks ways of showing the difference of humanity from nature. Within such a tendency, two strategies are detectable: the claim of the *discontinuity* of humanity from nature, and the claim that nature has no proper *autonomy*. Thus, nature is either different from humanity or serves humanity. [...] The second strategy in personalism seeks to deny the self-sufficiency or autonomy of nature. [...] The tendency of naturalism reverses the priorities of personalism.²⁶

Within this scheme of things Berdyaev’s position seems to lean strongly, if not in its entirety, towards the personalist tendency. Although Berdyaev in his personalism follows the first strategy of supporting the discontinuity between person and nature, he does not

23. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 60.

24. Andrzej Walicki, *The Flow of Ideas: Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to the Religious-Philosophical Renaissance* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 836.

25. Marie Magdaleine Davy, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Man of the Eighth Day* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1967), 93.

26. Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 33-34.

follow the second one of denying the autonomy of nature; if nature is understood as necessity.

Berdyayev's thought is a theory of personality which stresses its social nature, whilst simultaneously maintaining that the good itself is not social. Through this theory, one might say, Berdyayev is trying to lift socialism out of the tradition of 'one city', totalizing political thought that runs from Plato to Marx, and relocate it in the tradition of 'two city' [sic], or 'limited,' political thought that runs from Augustine to de Tocqueville.²⁷

4. Truth and Falsehood in Political Life

For Berdyayev, intimately connected with personality is the experience of truth, more precisely what Berdyayev calls 'integral truth'. He says that

the truth, on which all partial truths must be made dependent, is not abstractly reasonable, but spiritual. [...] Integral truth is neither a reflection of, nor a correspondence with, the reality of the world, but rather the triumph of the world's meaning. Meaning is not the triumph of logic, adapted to the world's fallen state and held down by the laws of logic, particularly the law of identity. The divine Logos triumphs over the meaninglessness of the objective world. Truth is the triumph of Spirit. Integral truth is God.²⁸

In this sense each partial truth, in order to be true, even as partially true, must be in connection, or recognition of the integral truth of God. The person, in order to be truthful to itself, must recognize the integral truth in which it takes part as a unifying principle of its transcendence and possibility of being a person. "The truth exists only in the subject (the knowing person). [...] the external world is an objective (and rather falsified) world because it has fallen away from the unity of the microcosm, man. The fall of man involved the fall of the world."²⁹ In other words, there is an apophatic reality to personality that has priority, and cannot be reduced to the external, partial truths that determine its being within the fallen nature. We recognize these truths as truths, even though partial, only because of their communion with the integral truth.

27. Noël O'Sullivan, "The Tragic Vision in the Political Philosophy of Nikolai Berdyayev," *History of Political Thought* 19, no. 1 (1998): 79-99, at 99.

28. Nikolai Berdyayev, *The Realm of Spirit and The Realm of Caesar* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 18-19.

29. David Bonner Richardson, *Berdyayev's Philosophy of History: An Existentialist Theory of Social Creativity and Eschatology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 144.

In the fallen world, a view of the human being, only from below, would mean for Berdyaev an objectification of the human being, a reduction to the necessities of nature's deterministic mechanisms. Viewed only from below, humanity is a meaningless apparition in an immense and indifferent universe. Berdyaev acknowledges the fact that there is some truth to the view of the world from below, but if it ignores 'integral truth', it is a false worldview. He says that

the world is not meaningless and absurd, but is in a meaningless state. This world, the world as it appears to us, is a fallen world: in it, death, absurd and meaningless, triumphs. Another world, that of reason and freedom, is revealed only in spiritual experience [...] We must view the meaningless and absurd world in which we live, but at the same time believe both in spirit, which includes freedom, and in reason, which overcomes meaninglessness and transforms the world.³⁰

One such domain of partial truths is according to Berdyaev the political realm. He says that "the natural world, society, the State, the nation and the rest are partial, and their claim to totality is an enslaving lie, which is born of the idolatry of men."³¹ The problem with politics, as with other human activities within the fallen world, according to Berdyaev, is its autonomy without the recognition of any transcended order higher than itself. We can see the same thing in the fields of economics and science. In all these fields there is a danger of absolutizing the partial truths as absolute or integral truth. "Personality is superior in significance to either class, economic system or the state, because it belongs to an eternal world of spirit. Failure to respect this leads to the continued enslavement of man to sheer materialism."³² With politics this is more dangerous, as there is the temptation of totalitarianism. He says that

contemporary totalitarianism limits the independence of the different spheres of human life, which having begun to be independent then became enslaved. For example, since the Renaissance the sphere of politics has become autonomous. Being no longer subject to any religious or moral principles it is natural that Machiavellianism should triumph, and that finally politics should achieve an absolute hegemony and enslave man.³³

30. Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit*, 28-29.

31. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Beginning and The End* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 136.

32. Howard Alexander Slatte, *Personality, Spirit and Ethics: The Ethics of Nicolas Berdyaev* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 104-105.

33. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Towards a New Epoch* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 18.

The enclosure of politics as an autonomous self-sufficient domain leads not only to a degradation of human interactions at the level of society, and also personality, but to totalitarianism, which is an enslavement of the human being through the non-recognition of its distinctiveness. “Personalism in social life is essential for Berdyaev, if only, because man is irrevocably endowed with the image and likeness of God, which cannot be said of the state, the nation or the social collective as such. The latter have a transcendent value only in the power of man’s relation to God.”³⁴

For Berdyaev, democracy is also not seen so much favorably, precisely because the notion of personality with its transcendent value does not exist in it, but only the notion of the individual. As Aristotle Papanikolaou points out, recent Christian political theology argues that “without a transcendent horizon, a liberal democratic polity would implode on itself.”³⁵ In trying to justify liberal democracy as a suitable political system for Orthodox theology, Papanikolaou agrees with the need of a transcendent referent for liberal democracy, but he does not think that this referent needs to be God, or the divine. He states:

While I think that a liberal democratic polity without some notion of the transcendent would be threatened by an ever-expanding possessive individualism and consumerism, which would thus threaten the liberal democratic notions of equality and freedom, the form of the transcendent necessary for a liberal democracy to be true to itself is some notion of the common good.³⁶

From the point of view of Berdyaev’s thought, this position is too optimistic, overlooking the tragic dimension of politics as “there are no guarantees in democracy that the will of the people shall be directed toward good, that they shall desire freedom instead of destroying all freedom altogether.”³⁷ This is because “the character of democracy is purely formal, it knows nothing of its own essence and, within the limits of its affirmed principle, has no consistency. It does not want to know in what name the people’s will is expressed, or to subordinate that will to any higher end.”³⁸ Democracy for Berdyaev is the rule of the *das ‘man’*, to use Heidegger’s terminology, that also Berdyaev himself used to describe it.³⁹ Although

34. Lampert, *Nicolas Berdyaev and the New Middle Ages*, 85.

35. Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 132.

36. *Ibid.*, 133.

37. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time* (San Rafael: Semantron Press, 2009), 176.

38. *Ibid.*, 174.

39. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 93, where he adopts Heidegger’s use of the German indefinite pronoun in *Being and Time*, Division one, Chapter 4: *Being-in-the-world as being-with and being-one’s-self. The ‘They’*.

Berdyaev is not as optimistic as Papanikolaou about democracy, he still believes that “democracy suits the fallen man perhaps better than any other form of social order and enables him to express himself most.”⁴⁰

For Berdyaev there needs to be a connection between the political world and the recognition of the irreducibility of personality. Totalitarianism is the temptation of politics without a reflection beyond its realm. As aptly remarked by Hannah Arendt,

totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within.⁴¹

Because politics deals with human beings that are inherently religious, as in the fundamental anthropological constitution, politics has either way a religious dimension, even if it is not recognized. In this way, Berdyaev points out that

totalitarianism is a religious tragedy: in it is revealed man’s religious instinct, his need for an integral relation to life. But the autonomy of various spheres of human activity, the loss of a spiritual centre, have led to a situation where the partial, the divided, claim totalitariness, integrality. [...] The dualism of the realm of Spirit and that of the Caesar is taking on ever more acute forms. The realm of Caesar refuses to recognize any neutral sphere: it thinks in monistic terms.⁴²

Here, we find a dualism between the realm of God and the realm of the Caesar. This dualism is correspondent to his dualism between freedom and necessity, which is also reflected in his anthropology; in the distinction between the person and the individual. In the fallen world this is not an extreme dualism of separate existences, but within the same person there is a fight between freedom and necessity, between personality and individualism. “Berdyaev prefers to replace the matter-spirit dichotomy with a distinction between choices that liberate the human spirit and those that enslave it.”⁴³ The same tension exists also in society, in the existential reality of human organization. Neither dualism and monism are satisfactory to understand this relationship as

40. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 223.

41. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), 325.

42. Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit*, 53-54.

43. Patrick Grant, *Personalism and the Politics of Culture: Readings in Literature and Religion from the New Testament to the Poetry of Northern Ireland* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 111.

both are rationalizations and objectifications of a deep existential and mystical reality. He says that

it must be admitted that in the antinomies of the Creator and the creature, freedom appears as a paradox that cannot be subsumed under any category. A monistic or a dualistic interpretation of the relation between the Creator and the creature equally leads to a denial of freedom.⁴⁴

Berdyayev prefers to keep this tension between monism and dualism. In this view there is a constant struggle for freedom and against the forces of necessity and objectification. This tension cannot be overcome in the fallen world. Berdyayev credits Christianity with pointing out to this reality:

Christianity reveals and confirms man's belonging to two planes of being, to the spiritual and to the natural-social, to the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the Caesar. Christianity affirms that man belongs at once to the realm of liberty and that of necessity, and maintains that these two are incommensurate and incapable of complete fusion.⁴⁵

Berdyayev also sees Christianity as being easily tempted to fall into the temptations of the Kingdom of the Caesar, particularly through the establishment of theocracies. We must keep in mind that all the pitfalls of the political, viewed as an autonomous domain, apply also to the institutional Church that has had through history the tendency of establishing itself as a kingdom of the Caesar in the name of the Kingdom of God. The temptation of theocracy comes, according to Berdyayev, from an erroneous understanding of the relationship between God and the world. Thus, he says:

I cannot, therefore, apply to God in himself or in his relation to the world the categories of force, power, government, or of anger, jealousy, vengeance and even justice. While repudiating the application of these anthropomorphic categories to God, I cannot think of divine life except in terms of sacrificial love, of an eternal movement towards the loved one. And this relative anthropomorphism is in turn bound up with a recognition of the central place of man in the world.⁴⁶

In this way, the temptation of the Church is much more subtle and, at the same time, much more dangerous. Berdyayev sees theocracy as a

44. Berdyayev, *The Destiny of Man*, 45.

45. Nikolai Berdyayev, *Fate of Man in the Modern World* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 51.

46. Nikolai Berdyayev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography* (New York: Collier Press, 1962), 174.

special form of falling into the temptation from the forces of necessity, as it is a perversion claiming to be the opposite of what it actually is:

Theocracy in all its forms, both Eastern and Western, has been a betrayal of Christianity, it is a betrayal and a lie. And theocracies were doomed to perish. The thing to which they gave effective realization was opposed to the Kingdom of God, to the Kingdom of freedom and love. The spirit of imperialism, and the will to power have been the breath of life to theocracies, and their controlling force.⁴⁷

The worldview of Berdyaev regarding politics entails an inherent tragic dimension. “Life in the world, Berdyaev consistently teaches, is inherently tragic.”⁴⁸ There seems to be an impossibility of fully realizing the highest human values of freedom and communion in the conditions of the fallen world. The Kingdom of God cannot be fully realized as an earthly kingdom, but despite this his worldview is not pessimistic. He points out that there should be a constant fight to improve the present situation, inspired by the values related to the Kingdom of God. “In the philosophy of Berdyaev, a balance is demanded between interior and exterior forms. God is not reached by exclusive concentration upon God. Rather, the goal is reached by man’s maximum application of his creative energy to all phases of his being, interior and exterior.”⁴⁹ The potentiality of uncreated freedom permeates through the entire creation and could enable a constant transfiguration of the lower into the higher. He says that “what must be supported throughout to the end are those forms, relative as they are, which provide the greatest possibility of real freedom, of the recognition of the value of personality, and which acknowledge the supremacy of truth and right over the State.”⁵⁰ This is not at all a pessimist worldview, but a worldview that believes in the creative potentiality to improve the world of politics.

5. Conclusion

What would be the Christian attitude in the face of our fallen social and political condition? Berdyaev proposes a heroic opposition to the realm of the Caesar. As I pointed out earlier, Berdyaev’s dualism is not extreme,

47. Berdyaev, *The Beginning*, 204.

48. George Pattison, *Berdyaev: A Mysticism of Freedom*, in *The Mystical Sources of Existential Thought*, ed. George Pattison and Kate Kirkpatrick (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 176.

49. Edward B. Richards, “Nicholas Berdyaev: Christianity and History,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 28, no. 4 (1960): 432-436, at 434.

50. Berdyaev, *Towards a New Epoch*, 217.

in the sense of an impossibility of communication between the two realms. We cannot abstract ourselves from our existential conditions, from the fallen world. We cannot abolish the constant tension between the two realms. Any attempt of abolishing this tension contains the danger of totalitarianism, on one or the other side. There is a dual process that needs to take place according to Berdyaev at the same time: “The Christian Church cannot tie itself up with specific political manifestations, nor depend upon them. [...] But it is impossible for the Christian Church not to adopt some line towards the life of society and the struggle raging in its midst.”⁵¹ We should not view Christianity’s involvement in the social struggles as just an inevitability. There is an inherent duty of Christianity to improve it. He says in this respect that “Christianity must from its own inner depths give its blessing to the social reorganization of society instead of opposing it under the pretext of preserving its ties with old forms of society, which are unjust and in no sense Christian.”⁵² The historical process is, according to Berdyaev, a phenomenon of the fallen world, but it was within this historical process that the revelation of Christ was made. In Christ and through Christ, the human being has received the power and help to transcend the fallen world, and affirm the Kingdom of God although still living in the kingdom of the Caesar.

Raul-Ovidiu Bodea is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, Belgium. His research studies the relationship between Orthodox theology and existentialist philosophy with a focus on the thought of Russian Religious Philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev and Greek Metropolitan John Zizioulas. He published “Nikolai Berdyaev’s Dialectics of Freedom: In Search for Spiritual Freedom,” *Open Theology* 5 (2019): 299-308, “*Imago Dei* as a Critique of Capitalism and Marxism in Nikolai Berdyaev,” *Studies in East European Thought* (2020), and “Existential Theology as a Challenge to a Patristic-Based Methodology in Orthodox Christianity: From Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky to John Zizioulas,” *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020): 335-351. Address: Naamsestraat 100A, box 03.08, BE-3000 Leuven, Belgium. Email: raulovidiu.bodea@student.kuleuven.be.

51. Berdyaev, *Towards a New Epoch*, 38.

52. *Ibid.*, 37.