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SOCIAL FREEDOM AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON ACCORDING TO NIKOLAI BERDYAEV

ABSTRACT

Contemporary European democracies, and liberalism in particular, are established upon the foundations of humanism. Humanism, as its name entails, denotes the elevation of the human being and setting up of the person to the centre of the universe. Humanism was a reaction against the mediaeval view of the omnipotent and omniscient God, and seeks an understanding of the human being that would fulfil his/her intuitive desire for genuine human dignity. What kind of freedom would be sufficient and adequate for true human dignity? Faced with this radical understanding of freedom, which originates from, and is dictated by, the deepest realms of the human being, most humanist thinkers chose to reject both God and the idea of the divine icon. Humanism denied man's divine sonship and proclaimed that man is the son of nature. Hence, Humanism not only declared man's self-confidence, but it also debased him, by defining him as a product of natural necessity. Liberalism, argues the Russian philosopher Berdyaev, has created a 'single-plane' being, it has separated the citizen from the integral personality, by refusing to admit the spiritual dimension of the human being. Berdyaev stresses that true freedom cannot be simply a formal self-defence, but that it must rather lead to creative activity. This is why the transition is inevitable from formal liberty, which protects us and defends us, to true freedom capable not only of creatively transforming the human society but also of creating a new world.

KEYWORDS

Freedom, humanism, liberalism, God's omnipotence, imago Dei, human dignity, person, individual

Prologue

Because of the event of the Incarnation, it is probably not so difficult to accept that God is *in* time, as much as it is challenging to admit that time is *in* God. We can imagine without difficulties God *in* time because he is eternal and he can abide in history without being mixed with it. However, it is far more challenging to imagine time *in* God – to accept that time is one of God's essential qualities without which God cannot be what he is.¹

1 About different concepts of time see more in Knežević 2011 and Knežević 2020a.



By the same token, it is less unimaginable to think that God is *in* human being, because God can share his grace with the creature without having to participate in the created nature. But it is more daring to consent that human being is *in* God, because why God, who is perfect and omnipotent, would need human person in his being?

Time is movement, but the perfect and self-sufficient God – and we talk here about the God of theism – is immobile. God of theism is also a God of monism and subordination. Since theism cannot find motive for movement in God it has confined itself to monism, because begetting of the Son and the spiration of the Spirit represent a theogony, a movement in the innermost life of God. It inevitably follows that the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father. If movement is by definition unthinkable, even if as a result it now has two other Hypostases, how to explain the movement towards the creation of the multiple worlds? Monism therefore leads to monophysitism and acosmism. For monism, this world is nothing but an appearance and illusion, and it has no real, ontological existence. Monism associates movement only with the plural and illusory world and leaves the divine life unaffected by it. This bears grave consequences both for the concept of God and the notion of the human being. God is depicted as the creator of delusions whilst the human person is only a victim of his heartless experiment.

How are we to explain the origin [of the plural world] in this so-called absolute life to which no form of human movement [...] is applicable? Neither the pantheistic monism of the Hindoo type [...] nor Parmenides; nor Plato, who was unable to bridge the dualism of the unique-immobile and the plural-mobile world; nor Plotinus; nor, finally, the abstract monism of German idealism, were able to achieve it. It remains an insoluble mystery to them all. (Berdyayev 2009b)

Humanism and Concept of the Individual

Contemporary European democracies, and Liberalism in particular, are established upon the foundations of Humanism. Humanism, as its name entails, denotes the elevation of the human being and setting up of the person in the centre of the universe. Humanism was a reaction against the mediaeval view of the omnipotent and omniscient God of theism and monism that we have just described. Humanism searches for an understanding of man that would fulfil man's intuitive desire for self-confidence and self-esteem – genuine human dignity. What kind of freedom would be sufficient and adequate for true human dignity? What is the 'myth' that would embody the ultimate fulfilment of our inmost desire for dignity?

Whilst affirming human self-respect against the theistic image of God, humanism contained an opposed principle, that of man's abasement. Humanism found itself in a major philosophical cul-de-sac: how to reconcile the all-powerful and perfect God with the dignity of the human person, i.e., the doctrine of the omnipotent God with the teaching of *imago Dei*. It seems that classical teaching on divine omnipotence is irreconcilable with the idea of *imago Dei*. As

we know, the Church Fathers describe God's icon as the *autoexousion* (Knežević 2020b: 62). That one is created according to the divine image means that one is bequeathed with absolute power of self-determination. Nothing and nobody determines my freedom, not even God. As Nikolai Berdyaev, a renowned Russia religious philosopher explains, "personality determines itself from within... and only determination from within and arising out of freedom is personality" (Berdyaev 2009a: 24.).² Although human personality is created, it possesses the capacity for autonomous self-determination. "Personality is emancipation from dependence upon nature, from dependence upon society and the state. It opposes all determination from without, it is a determination from within. And even within, the determination is self-determination, not even God can do it" (Berdyaev 2009a: 26). In addition, Berdyaev maintains that we cannot say that the suprapersonal is higher than human person.

Man as a personality cannot be a means to God as Personality. The theological doctrine that God created man for his own glory and praise is degrading to man, and degrading to God also (Berdyaev 2009a: 39).

Faced with this radical understanding of freedom, which originates from, and is dictated by, the deepest realms of the human being, most of the humanistic thinkers chose to reject both God and the idea of the divine icon. Within the framework of the omnipotent God, the doctrine of *imago Dei* seemed to be nothing but a flamboyant metaphor, a consolation for the redundant and unneeded creature. Humanism, therefore, denied man's divine sonship and proclaimed that man is the son of nature. Hence, Humanism not only avowed man's self-confidence, but it also debased him, by defining him as a product of natural necessity, as a being that shares all defects and limitations of nature. The natural man was divorced from the spiritual. The Christian view of man began to lose its strength, but instead of leading to the liberation, the death of the Christian doctrine only gave rise to a self-destructive dialectic within humanism.

European democracy, in Berdyaev's view, rests upon the humanistic principle of sociological positivism according to which true freedom has a social origin. Even the most liberal of all democracies have never known the spiritual bases of freedom. Liberalism, argues the Russian philosopher, has created a 'one-planed' being, (Berdyaev 2009b: 50.) it has separated the citizen from the integral personality, by refusing to admit the spiritual dimension of the human being. Freedom of the individual, as defined by Liberalism, is about atomistic, particular liberty, mainly depicted as freedom *from* the oppression of society. But freedom *for* or positive freedom of Liberalism is by definition confined to the subjective or psychological level. It is a 'leave me alone' type of freedom, freedom the essence of which is self-defence of the individual from the collective subjects of society, state or nation (Berdyaev 2009b: 45). Defining him as a completely natural creature, Liberalism forever sentences the individual to one-plane enslavement by the natural and sociological necessities.

² For Berdyaev's concept of the human person, see Knežević 2020a, especially pp. 160–179.

Liberalism is exclusively a social philosophy: the liberals are social-minded and for them, liberty means only a form of political organisation for society, whereby society grants certain subjective rights to its citizens. Liberalism is a one-planed world-concept: it fails to see that man belongs to two planes of being (Berdyayev 2009b: 48).

Berdyayev stresses that true freedom cannot be simply a formal self-defence, that it must lead to creative activity. This is why the transition is inevitable from formal liberty, which protects us and defends us, to true freedom capable not only of creatively transforming the human society but also of creating a new world. (Berdyayev 2009b: 46) The problem of freedom, therefore, is vastly deeper than that of Liberalism. (Berdyayev 2009b: 45) It concerns the question of the origin, the meaning, and the destiny of the human being.

Humanism has given birth to the notion of *the individual*, which resembles very much a windowless, Leibnizian *monad*. For Leibnitz, a monad is a simple substance, “it is closed, shut up, it has neither window nor doors”, explains Berdyayev (Berdyayev 2009a: 22). One may even argue that the structure of the monad is akin to the perfect and self-sufficient, immovable and changeless God of theism. As we know, theistic God is *actus purus*, God who does not change because his entire potential is equal to his actuality.³ God-*actus purus* is perfect and he cannot become ‘more perfect’. He is free because he does not have to move. He is free because he does not need, and will never need, to create something new. He is free not to have to create and move. Movement is considered as a sign of imperfection, it does not have an ontological value, and is reserved solely for the realm of the created world. The movement towards the creation of the world, therefore, has no ontological consequences. By creating the world, God does not add anything to his being, nor would he lose anything should the world cease to exist. In this sense, God *does not need* the world.⁴

Individual or monad is a being with no ontological potential or implication. Freedom of the individual cannot be conceived of as uniqueness or ontological otherness. To be unique, or to have “absolute ontological otherness”,⁵ implies that there is in one’s identity something that does not exist in any other identity, including God’s. But how can there be something that does not exist *in* God, something that God does not have, if He has created everything that is? Or, perhaps, there *is* something that God *did not create*?

Freedom of the individual is therefore illusory as much as his ontological otherness. One is free to dwell in a temporary redundancy, and one is free to be “saved” from it. But “to be saved” means here to jump from the frying pan into the fire, that is, to exchange historical and fleeting redundancy for the eternal one.

3 More about God conceived as *actus purus* in my essay Knežević 2020a.

4 For more about different views of the meaning of creation, and in particular about the concept of *analogia entis*, in case of Sergius Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyayev, see my Knežević 2022.

5 For John Zizioulas, freedom means to be other in an absolute ontological sense (Zizioulas 2006).

Fleeing from the theistic God, who expresses his omnipotence by the absolute power of determination and control, Humanism chose to entirely reject God as well as the idea of the divine image. Nietzsche rejected God on the same grounds. He “burned with creative desire” but “knew only the law and the redemption in neither of which is the creative revelation of man”, and hated God because he believed that if God exists man’s creativeness is impossible (Berdyaeu 2009: 106).⁶ As a result, Humanism embraces the notion of the individual, which connotes a “one-planed” being, being that belongs only to the realm of nature and is limited by natural laws.

Christian Concept of Personality

Berdyaeu claims that Christianity, on the other hand, found a way to resolve the problem of human freedom by creating the concept of personality. Personality belongs not only to nature but also to the spirit. In Berdyaeu’s vocabulary, nature denotes determination whereas spirit signifies freedom. To be free means to be created in the divine image, that is, to possess radical power of self-determination. Berdyaeu is, of course, aware that the conventional notion of God’s omnipotence is in stark conflict with the concept of *imago Dei*. Why, then, is he promoting Christianity as a religion of freedom?

Well, he is not. He discerns between two types of Christianity: between historic Christianity, which is “the work of man” – and this “work has been both bad and good” (Berdyaeu 2009b: 118) – and the renewed and transfigured Christianity. Historic Christianity is not fit to be the leader of the revolution for the sake of personality because it has betrayed God’s very idea of *man and His image, as has that of the God-man and Divine-human life* (Berdyaeu 2009b: 122). This Christianity, in Berdyaeu’s words, “has not yet revealed itself as a religion of freedom” (Berdyaeu 2009e: 158).

He believes that history now judges Christianity in all the domains of human life and culture. This is essentially judgement upon false *monism* and false *dualism*, upon extreme immanentism as well as extreme transcendentalism. The divine has been torn apart from the human. (Berdyaeu 2009b: 120). Christianity has been all too often anti-human, insisting more on the commandment to love God than to love the human being (Berdyaeu 2009b: 122).

“Christian piety all too often has seemed to be withdrawal from the world and from men, a sort of transcendental egoism, the unwillingness to share the suffering of the world and man. It was not sufficiently infused with Christian love and mercy. It lacked human warmth. And the world has risen in protest against this sort of piety, as a refined form of egoism [...]” (Berdyaeu 2009b: 123).

Christians have drawn false conclusions from the doctrine of original sin and have denied human creative capacities. As a result of an unseemly concept

⁶ Berdyaeu probably here has in mind Nietzsche’s assertion, “Away from God and gods this will lure me; what would there be to create, after all, if there were gods?” (Nietzsche 2006: 67).

of asceticism, Christianity has been antagonistic to cultural creativity. It was too late when Christianity decided to endorse creativity in culture, and hence – human creative culture got out of Christian hands. (Berdyayev 2009b: 123).

In short, Berdyayev detects a fundamental setback in Christian teaching, which is responsible for the debacle of historical Christianity.

Most of the deformation and clouding of Christianity has come about because man found it difficult to take in *the full truth of God-manhood*. Now man has turned to God and away from man, now toward man and away from God. [...] The problem of *Christian anthropology, the religious question of mankind, is the basic problem of our epoch*. And *only the fullness of Christian truth* can fight successfully against dehumanization, and prevent the final destruction of man. (Berdyayev 2009b: 125)

In spite of two-thousand years-long history, Christianity has so far failed to produce the fullness of truth about the human being. In other words, Christianity has not yet produced an *ontological justification* of the human being, and this is because it could not absorb the full truth of God-manhood.

“In the Christianity of the early Fathers, there was a *monophysite tendency*, a hesitancy about the revelation of *Christ’s human nature* and hence of the *divine nature of man*, his oppression under sin and his thirst for redemption from sin [...]. And the task of humanity’s religious consciousness is to reveal the Christological consciousness of man [...]” (Berdyayev 2009e: 81).⁷

The Church Fathers, indeed, write about the deification by which the human being becomes, in the words of Maximus the Confessor, “without beginning and end”⁸ or – in an even more daring expression of Gregory Palamas – “without origin” (Palamas 1983: 3.1.31). But even in this teaching on *theosis*, which aims at describing the glorified and deified character of human nature, it is not clear what would be the specific difference of created nature in comparison with divine nature.

The teachers of the Church had a doctrine of the *theosis* of man, but in this *theosis*, there is no man at all. The very problem of man is not even put. But man is godlike *not only because he is capable of suppressing his nature and thus freeing a place for divinity*. There is godlikeness in human nature itself, in the very human voice of that nature. Silencing the world and the passions liberates a man. God desires that not only God should exist, but man as well. (Berdyayev 2009e: 84)⁹

What would be, in Berdyayev’s view, the full truth of God-manhood? This is the question the renewed and transfigured Christianity needs to answer to reveal the Christological consciousness of man.

7 Emphasis mine.

8 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10, PG 91: 1144c.

9 Emphasis mine.

The Full Truth of God-manhood

Berdyayev writes that Christ was God-man from all eternity. There was never a “moment” in the life of the Divine Being when Christ was not both God and the human being. Berdyayev avers that “the creation took place in eternity as an interior act of the divine mystery” (Berdyayev 2009f: 198). Furthermore, “through the birth of the Son in eternity the whole spiritual race and the whole universe comprised in man, in fact, the whole cosmos, responds to the appeal of divine love” (Berdyayev 2009f: 198). Therefore, the creation of human personality must have taken place in meta-history or theandric time-eternity, which are synonyms for the traditional term eternity.¹⁰

One can penetrate the mystery of the creation only if one grasps the inner life of the Divine Being. Traditional affirmative theology has been closely confined within rational concepts and that is why it has been unable to grasp that *inner life of the Divine Being, solely in which* the creation of the world and man [that is to say, the attitude of God towards His other self] can be understood (Berdyayev 2009f: 190).¹¹

There is a strong parallel between the reasons why God is the Trinity – why the Father begets the Son and makes the procession of the Spirit – and the creation of the human. Although the human person is created, God needs her almost in the same way as the Father needs the other two Hypostases.¹² And since God needs his creature, the traditional concept of the creation has to be rejected.¹³ Berdyayev claims, “rationalistic and exoteric religious thought is obliged to maintain the cruel idea that God created the world capriciously, without necessity, and entirely unmoved from within” (Berdyayev 2009c: 190).

¹⁰ “But it is absolutely impossible to conceive either of the creation of the world within time or of the end of the world within time. In objectified time there is no beginning, nor is there any end, there is only an endless middle. The beginning and the end are in existential time” (Berdyayev 2009c: 207).

¹¹ Emphasis mine.

¹² Berdyayev is aware that due to the limitations of human language it is difficult to express the exact character of God’s ‘need’ for man. He writes, “in the depths of spiritual experience there is revealed not only man’s need of God but also God’s need of man. But the word ‘need’ here is an inexact expression, as indeed are all human terms when applied to God” (Berdyayev 2009c: 210).

¹³ If we again take Maximus the Confessor as an example of the Patristic teaching, we find that, despite his teaching on the human as microcosm and mediator, he does not understand the creation of the person as ‘necessary’ for God, or as a part of the interior life of the Divine. Maximus emphasizes that God is immovable and that movement pertains only to creatures. The goal of the creation is that creatures find rest in God’s immobility. Although this rest is conceived as “perpetual striving” (ἐπέκτασις), it is clear that only creatures strive towards God whereas God Himself is utterly immovable vis-à-vis His creation. See Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 60, CCSG 22:73–81; *Amb. 7*, PG 91:1069A–1077B.

If the creation was unnecessary for God, the world and the person, the entire creation, is without significance and is going to perish, contends Berdyaev.¹⁴ To secure a genuine basis for human liberty, we need to see the mystery of creation “as the interior life of the Divine”. We can grasp what human freedom is only if we understand that we are intrinsically connected with the life of the Trinity.

Just like a human person is a part of the inner life of the Trinity, time is not essentially different from eternity. In a mysterious sense, eternity *is* history. God is *in* time. On the other hand, if history is more than a mere external phenomenon, if it holds absolute significance with absolute life, if it is, moreover, based upon a true *ontological* principle, then it must have both its origin and its fulfilment in the inmost depths of the Absolute. (Berdyaev 2009d: 44). Time is *in* God.

In his often criticised prophetic style, Berdyaev maintains that God the Trinity and God-Man are inseparable to such an extent that God without the human would not be God the Trinity. “God without man, an ‘inhuman’ God, would be Satan, not God the Trinity” (Berdyaev 2009f: 189). This is the answer to the ultimate philosophical question, “why there is something rather than nothing”, or why the primordial Nothing yearned to become something?¹⁵ God became God only for the sake of creation. (Berdyaev 2009f: 194). Both God and the human being originate from the same source, from the primal void of the divine nature or Nothingness where, before the first movement, they existed in an undifferentiated union.

In the primal void of the divine Nothingness [of Godhead], God and creation, God and man disappear, and even the very antithesis between them vanishes. “Non-existent being is beyond God and differentiation”. The distinction between the Creator and creation is not the deepest that exists, for it is eliminated altogether in the divine Nothingness that is no longer God. (Berdyaev 2009f: 194)¹⁶

The human being, therefore, is a part of the inner movement of the divine life. Anthropogonic and the theogonic process started together and neither of them had ontological primacy over the other since the Son was never conceived otherwise but as God-Man. The idea of God-humanity requires a

14 It is clear that for Berdyaev we cannot ground human freedom solely on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, on the doctrine according to which the creation of the world was not an act of necessity. If God creates freely, His creation, according to Patristic teaching, also possesses freedom and is even “equal of honour” (ὁμότιμος) (Lampe 2004: 209–210).

15 Jacob Böhme poses a unity that in its absolute lack of distinctions, is Nothing, *ein Ewig Nichts*, the *Ungrund*. But this *Ungrund* possesses an inner *nisus*, striving for self-realization, which establishes itself as a dialectical force to the primal Nothing, and sets the otherwise static unity in motion. In this way, the Nothing is transformed into Something and the source of all existing things (Abrams 1973: 161).

16 Using Whitehead’s terminology, this would mean that in the divine Nothingness the antithesis between God’s conceptual nature and derivative nature disappears (see Whitehead 1985: 345).

literal interpretation of *perichoresis*: the two natures in Christ ought to be seen as ontologically reciprocal, equally enlarging each other, mutually dependent. This is why Berdyaev stresses, “God exists if man exists. When a man disappears, God will also disappear [...]”. And quoting Angelus Silesius he adds, “I know that without me God could not endure for a moment. Were I brought to nought He would yield up the Ghost for lack (of me)” (Berdyaev 2009f: 194).¹⁷

Dignity of a Metaphysical Factor

During his second sojourn to the US, C. G. Jung visited a village of Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. He had a conversation about religion with an elderly member of the tribe. The Indian told him: We are the sons of Father Sun and with our religion, we daily help our father to go across the sky. We do this not only for ourselves but for the whole world. If we were to cease practising our religion, in ten years the sun would no longer rise. Then it would be night forever. (Jung 1995: 281)

Jung straightaway realised on what the “dignity, the tranquil composure of the individual Indian, was founded. It springs”, the Suisse writes, “from his being a son of the sun; his life is cosmologically meaningful, for he helps the father and preserver of all life in his daily rise and descent” (Jung 1995: 281). After this discussion, Jung envied the elderly Indian, “I had envied him for the fullness of meaning in that belief, and had been looking about without hope for a myth of our own. (ibid.)

It seems that, eventually, Jung found out what the myth he was looking for was about: man is indispensable for the completion of creation. He is the second creator of the world, in the sense that he feels capable of formulating valid replies to the over-powering influence of God. (Jung: 1995: 282, 285) He can render back something essential even to God.

That he can render back *something essential even to God*, induces pride, for it raises the human individual to *the dignity of a metaphysical factor*. “God and us” [...] this equation no doubt underlies that enviable serenity of the Pueblo Indian. Such a man is in the fullest sense of the word in his proper place. (Jung 1995: 282)

Epilogue

In Berdyaev’s view, monophysite deviations of the Christian teaching were directly responsible for the raise of Humanism with its rejection of all-powerful God who, unlike the God of the Pueblo Indians, did not need human being. Humanism turned its back to God and declared that human being is the son

¹⁷ One of the meanings of the death of God is the multiplication of life. See Knežević: 2020a, 8. God’s death implies the descending of the Son of God into the original void of freedom (Berdyaev 2009f: 135). By descending into meonic freedom, the New Adam empowers and resurrects human nature without acting as nature’s determining cause.

of nature. But to be the son of nature means to be fundamentally determined by natural laws, having no impact on cosmic developments. How can today's humanity find its way to "the dignity of a metaphysical factor"?

The only way for Christianity to rectify the tragic results of its tendency towards monophysitism and to imbue human kind with a true dignity is to preach that "God without human being would be Satan, not God the Trinity" (Berdyaeu 2009f: 189). Perhaps now we can understand better Berdyaeu's dictum "God exists because human being exists"; "when a human being disappears, God will also disappear [...]".

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Romilo Aleksandar Knežević

Društvena sloboda i dostojanstvo ljudske ličnosti po Nikolaju Berđajevu

Apstrakt

Savremene evropske demokratije, a posebno učenje liberalizma, počivaju na načelima evropskog humanizma. Humanizam se javlja kao reakcija na srednjevekovno učenje o božanskoj svemoći koja je u suprotnosti sa dostojanstvom ljudskog bića kao ikone Božije. Posledica reakcije je da se sada ljudsko biće postavlja u središte Univerzuma. U potpunosti se odbacuje metafizička dimenzije ljudskog bića koje sada postaje sin prirode a time i nužnosti. Humanizam pokušava da stvori novi pojam ljudskog dostojanstva, ali dok uzdiže ljudsko biće istovremeno ga i unižava budući da je rob prirodnih nužnosti. Po ruskom religioznom filozofu Nikolaju Berđajevu, istinsko dostojanstvo dolazi od istinite slobode koje se ne sastoji samo u moći da se preobrazi društvo već i da se stvori novi svet.

Ključne reči: Sloboda, humanizam, liberalizam, Božija svemoć, imago Dei, ljudsko dostojanstvo, ličnost, individua.