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THE RUSSIAN MENTALITY

Thesis.

The rich and multi-themed philosophy of Nicolas Berdjaev, which I have worked many years with, is for me a typical example of the Russian mentality responsible for the course of the 20th century. Of a mentality expressing itself in the heroic and desperate, with regards to the price of the certainty of corporate redemption as the final solution for the tragic history of humanity. The achieved *Ultimum* is said to be connected with the total redemption of the evil of terrestrial existence.

Justification.

In avoiding simplified generalizations one should note that this type of soteriology was not singular to Russians entering into the intellectual and political arena of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. In its various parts, Marxism was after all, for a fairly significant number of adherents, a convincing justification for the joyous end of history in which the freedom of the human race, achieved at long last, would equal the sum paid for the stratified evil of history. Although Berdjaev quickly left Marxism for the direction of eschatological, pneumatic Christianity, creating a rare example for the twentieth century of religious gnosis, he belonged to the generation which brought about the revolution in Russia in the year 1917. He also constantly emphasized that the eschatological idea of the Kingdom of God as well as the corporate, not individual character of salvation are typical 'Russian ideas' (compare at least his: *Russkaja idieja Osnownyje problemy russkoj mysli XIX wieka i naczala XX wieka*, [Berdjaev, 1946] and *The Russian Idea* [Berdjaev, 1947]).

However mistaken the reduction of Berdjaev and Lenin to a common denominator may appear, given all the immense differences that divide them, one must not lose sight of the fact that both not only

knew but, first and foremost, *believed* that history has a *happy ending*. They perceived it, however, differently. Sharing then the commonly held belief, they called for — each in his own way — erasing of existing culture for the sake of another, perfect one. Not gradually, via the route of improvement, but radically, via negation. They were revolutionaries: one — of the spirit, the other — of social matters.

Most generally speaking — Leszek Kołakowski writes — that the revolutionary mentality is a way of thinking which distinguishes itself by an exceptionally intensified belief that the total salvation of man is possible and that the state of salvation is in absolute opposition to the present state of enslavement, that there is no continuity whatsoever between them and no intermediate stages at all; moreover the said salvation in its totality is the sole autonomous aim of humanity and that any other values must be subordinated as means. There is but one aim and one value that is the total negation of existing world. Whatever cannot serve as a means to achieve this value — already is of no worth and must be viewed as a part of the present rotten world. Suffering and toil are an inseparable part of the road to salvation though equally through this they are rational and pay back a hundred-fold with their future fruits. In a word, the revolutionaries do not believe in purgatory: they believe in the Way of the Cross, they believe in heaven and hell, the kingdom of total redemption and in the kingdom of total evil. They think along the principle of ‘all or nothing’ [Kołakowski 1983, 217–218].

It is a matter of the belief in the justification of the evil of history for the sake of the final victory of Good. In protest against the ossified world Berdjaev proposed in place of the spirit of revolution — the revolution of spirit [Berdjaev, 1939]. It seems, however, that whether spiritual or ‘material’ revolution, understood as total negation, is always evil. It is obvious that humanity would not have been able to survive if it were not for the continual corrections carried out on the material created by them. This is a trivial thought. They were not, however, trivial attempts at a whole negating of all imperfect achievement in the name of total fulfillment in the future. Berdjaev, despite being totally aware of the illusory nature of the idea of so-called historical progress, was a shrewd critic of varied earthly hopes and mistakes, the salvation from which he saw in the negative attitude of an individual towards world mechanisms, in the renewed spiritual experience of the Christian mystery this time crowned with success. He committed that self same

mistake which the Gnostics made in relation to Christianity, about whom Plotin writes: “The creators not cherishing for this work and our land any recognition at all, but no less they announce that a new land has arisen for them to which they will leave from here for certain” [Dorosz 1984, 235–236].

If one was to agree with Henri Bergson’s known saying that every philosopher with the whole of his creativity tries to present just one idea, then in the case of Berdjaev this will be the repeatedly articulated need for the realization of Eschaton; the belief in the necessary co-operation of man in the creation of the Kingdom of God. For it is not ‘on that side of time’. History and eternity already now penetrate into the truly creative acts of the human spirit, while the most lofty fruits of creativity enter into the eschatological Kingdom of Heaven. The end of time is always close and remains in the sphere of eschatological hope. The rebirth of humanity and the transformation of the world announced by Berdjaev is only ‘the beginning of the new world’ acquired through the spiritual regeneration of humanity and not through the millenarian terrestrialization of paradise proposed by communism. However, the Russian thinker noted the cleansing role of communism not only in the unmasking of capitalism’s criminalities, but firstly in the impelling of Christianity to recover the lost eschatological dimension and so to transform into a spiritual Christianity which would start the era of the Holy Ghost. In this very context Berdjaev saw Russia’s singled out role in the renewing of the visage of the whole world.

The above postulate was connected — in accordance with his belief — with the most important document of Christianity: with Godmanhood which in the eschatological perspective destroys the difference between the empirical human concrete subject constantly sinking into evil and that maturing to full divinity — God; when they only unite in spirit, when they only destroy the difference between empirical, earthly existence and transcendental duty, they will lead with combined forces on the path to transcendent from this world in the sphere of the Spirit, in the existential world of divine-human mystery.

We are not going to consider the theological sense of the concept of Godmanhood in the doctrinal corpus of Christianity — so characteristic for Russian religious thought of the twentieth century [Hryniewicz 1985, 713–715; Hryniewicz 1989]. Without complicating

ourselves in theological subtleties it will be easier, possibly, to become acquainted with the specifics of the Russian mentality.

That is, more or less unconsciously, the mentality has acquired that God-human relationship with which, however, both members of this relation can radically, in a Manichaeian way split, and then call in despair for their union. This phenomenon is known in general as obscurity, lack of clarity, ambivalence, the entanglement of contradictions characterizing the Russian soul, in as far as we agree (something Berdjaev did not doubt), contrary to the nominalist tradition, that something like “the soul” of a given nation can in fact exist. But the half fearful astonishment of Europeans that grips them when they are involved with Russians, demands belief in a certain specific spiritual décor of the latter, while the constant repetition, not always of the highest quality, deviations on the subject of the “Russian Sphinx” bear witness to the relevance of the subject.

“Ambivalence, I think, is the chief characteristic feature of our nation — writes Yosif Brodsky. — There is no Russian executioner who does not fear that one day he will become a victim, and there is equally not even the most wretched victim who would not admit (if only to himself) to psychological leanings towards being an executioner. Our most recent history went for both one and the other. There is in this a certain wisdom. One could even think that ambivalence *is* (Brodsky’s italics) wisdom, that life as such is neither good, nor bad, simply arbitrary. Maybe this is why our literature places such obvious emphasis on the correct matter, that it is disputed so successfully. If this said emphasis was simply duplicity of thought, everything would be in order; but it stimulates instincts. This type of ambivalence is, I feel, that said ‘blessed news’ which the East, not having anything else to offer, is shortly to force on the rest of the world” [Brodsky 1989, 11].

We are not going to recall the influence of the many-fold analyses of historical, political, cultural and geographic circumstances (here Berdjaev claimed that Russia is a victim of geography) on this or another shaping of the Russian mentality, the basic deformation of which was — via the circumstances brought about — the lack of freedom fraught in turn with the most varied derived consequences. From the philosophical point of view the most important appears to be what Czesław Miłosz described in *Native Europe*, and which can be called a specific Russian theodicy. As Jan Prokop has written, giving an

account of the above mentioned poet, Russians “grieve over the presence of evil in the world, but at the same time bet that the world will be given in its entirety to Satan. Longing for absolute goodness in the other world we live for that in devilry helpless in the face of its actual superiority in us and around us” [Prokop 1990, 104]. Hence the longing for the anticipated, absolute good ‘there’ — the greater, the more helpless the longings they endorse evil ‘here’. The more evil is in operation and is seen by a Russian around him the greater his desire for good, perfection; a phenomenon which Miłosz called a hiatus between intention and act. The more they desire good the more they see evil forced to act in the name of the final — it stands to reason — reconciliation in good. This desire for the redemption of evil and universal good could find an outlet in the eschatological design of the Russian people renewing Christianity as we saw in Berdjaev, but could be embodied in Russian Communism in which version the Russian Eschaton was realized in reality with the conspicuous help of purely earthly political and social circumstances. “I understood communism as a reminder of a still unpaid Christian debt” [Berdjaev 1983, 297] wrote Berdjaev. It seems that many Russians shared this view.

This antinomy of the Russian mentality did not go unnoticed for Russians themselves. The first two that come to mind. Brodsky: “In the broadest terms no single writer in the history of Russia has not avoided claiming Divine Providence for the darkest of events giving them automatically the human capacity for forgiveness. The whole problem with this otherwise prepossessing attitude is that it is fully shared by the secret police and at The Last Judgement its officials will be able to call on it as on convincing reasons for their actions” [Brodsky 1989, 122]. With a somewhat shocking openness Vyenyedikt Yerofyeyev wrote: “The secret of the Russian soul is to be found in the fact that there is in it a fissure. That is a crack. Meaning — a hole. In any case it does not positively indicate air-tightness. It does not recognize itself as a comprehensive, finished form [...]”.

A fissure — is a Russian great privilege. A Russian, even the most modest, *with Chekov included* (V. Yerofyeyev’s italics) has never doubted in the fact that he is the best of all entities created by God. He has never doubted also in the fact that he is ‘a sh.t’. For the whole of Russian philosophy the breath has been held from this unexpected-sudden polarity. The whole of Russian literature is enchanted by the

depth of its hero. Other nations were also astounded, comprehending nothing. For what were they to understand when everything they have is locked up, when you can't see a single chink" [Yerofyeyev 1990].

Hence the "chink" between the evil "here" and the good "there". Somewhat simplifyingly one may say that Russians, regardless of intellectual base, or its absence, were so acquainted with evil that the only possible solution was the quickest possible jump to good. Here, it seems, lies the "Russian idea" of Godmanhood with which Dostoyevsky so struggled.

Here we are not interested in its Christian origin, although Bogumił Jasinowski in his work *Eastern Christianity and Russia* showed this aspect of Eastern Christian spirituality which, seeing the world of irrevocable evil, sought flight from it in the good of the eschatological measure. The role of eschatology in Orthodoxy has also been emphasized by Paul Evdokimov. The heterodoxical currents in relation to Christianity will act more like gnosis. We have seen in the example of Berdjaev that the removal from God of the responsibilities for the existence of good and evil, but through the surpassing of freedom not created by Him, opens a totally unimpeded free choice between evil and good through man. Primarily even evil is in the divinely similar process of creation. It was necessary for Lev Shestov, in analyzing "Ivan Karamazov's dialectic", to prove that Berdjaev's freedom to commit evil is equal in reality to the necessities of evil, for the devil within us which can be accessed at will must be done so in order to profit from our rights of liberation. So the freedom of choices changes into the necessity of choice and all the monstrosities described by Dostoyevsky had to occur even though they were caused by a seemingly free man.

However one examines the Russian idea of godmanhood: theologically or in its communist version, its sense is roughly the same. Today we cause evil tomorrow it will transform itself into good, for we are virtually "like gods" everyone without exception: both executioner and victim. This idea found an exceptional medium in Marxism, recreating the biblical motif of paradise lost and found again when, after the Second Coming "we shall all be changed" [1 Cor. 15, 51]. Russian communism was initially, after all, (before it had changed into subservient conformism in relation to the totalitarian state) the belief in the approaching millennium which would subordinate the entire "temporary" temporal evil. If individuals of the mentality of Lenin,

Trotsky and — despite everything — Berdjaev believed that they had found the key to solving the mystery of man's earthly destitution within his history, then their Gnostic certainty was based fundamentally on the divinely similar creative nature of man. Only he could, according to them, freely shape the normative of good and evil. Following Marx and Nietzsche, any kind of non-human, absolute reference had become an illusion. Russians believed in this unconditionally. The place of the empty absolute was to be taken by man so that through the painful development of his nature, led by evil, it would lead to the end of the work of creation. From the Russian point of view it was immaterial if — as with Berdjaev — the said point aimed for what we call the God of the Eschatology or as “with Marx (to a lesser extent Engels) in the form of belief that the communist future will bring a perfect reconciliation of the empirical existence of people with the authentic essence of man and equally with great nature. This return of man to his very self — the complete new appropriation by him of all his strengths and abilities — is exactly that which the state of paradise was to be: a perfect fusion of human entities on a scale equally social as individual” [Kořakowski 1983, 154]. In both cases the evil of the terrestrial soil has fulfilled the most positive role. If it were not there, if there were no blows to which we had to be exposed on the way to the *Ultimum*, the *Ultimum* itself would lose sense, history would be futile and its manager — the devil — would never be redeemed for he simply would not exist. At the same time the devil, that is evil, fulfilled a key role in Russian *Oeconomiae Divinae*. For the greater the evil the greater the final effect on the opposite, divine side. Is this not that ambivalence, the said “God blessed news” which Russians attach to the world and which Brodsky recalled? Hence the extreme Russian immersion in evil with the simultaneously pinning for good.

There is not much in common with the known reckoning of Leibniz. From the Russian point of view there is no need for a given amount of evil to reveal the good of the whole creation. On the contrary. The maximum quantity of evil is required so that the redemption from it would be the more effective. The problem is, however, as Hannah Arendt has written, “for the whole of our philosophical tradition in point of fact it precludes the comprehension of ‘radical evil’, this touching equally, both Christian theology which even prescribes divine origin to the devil himself, and Kant — the only philosopher who for

certain at least suspected the existence of such evil, although he instantly rationalized it into the conception of the ‘warped evil will’ allowing itself to be explained by comprehensible motifs” [Arendt 1989, 348]. So the Russians, so sensitive when we consider the *conditio humana*, give the impression that they have been acquainted with “radical evil” for ages. Evil, according to them, is so evil that it cannot get any worse which means it can only get better. And better evil is the first step to good and this is not any good but to the Very Highest Goodness. It appears that it is on the basis of this that the famous antinomy of the Russian soul lies, so emphasized by Berdjaev as the delight in extremes, in the transfer to extreme situations which are characterized by the fact that there are always two poles and neither can exist without the other.

Maybe this explains in some way why Russians were able to blindly follow this cult during their lives and sincerely weep following the death of the greatest tyrant in their history who exterminated most of them. The secularized idea of godmanhood: the real evil “here” and the desired good “there” (although they originate from the same source) found itself a total realization.

It is obvious that the varied heterodoxical forms of religiosity, the millenarian expectations and Gnostic certainty of the initiated are not characteristics exclusive to Russians. What we mean is rather a given attitude which we can briefly call the Russian mentality. In discussing the *Vekhi (Landmarks)* collection, Andrzej Walicki emphasized in relation to K. Löwith’s, E. Voegelin’s, N. Cohn’s and J. L. Talmon’s works that “the millenarian-gnostic structures of thought, regardless of how we evaluate them, were always an important component of Western spirituality and that they on their own are not able to represent the key to understanding the tragic complications of Russian history” [Walicki 1988, 102]. It is true, that “the structures of thought (...) on their own” will not explain the history of any nation. At the same time we should, however, remember that the idea of godmanhood being considered here “understood in its widest sense, is a humanist idea. For humanism is the self-awareness of humanity divining its very self. The utopian illusions of the West grew also under the influence of humanism. But the West, thanks to its century old pluralism of convictions, had worked out an ability to the imperceptible neutralization of everything, even the most poisonous embryos of their

spiritual life. In Russia the result of the specifics of its historical development was not favourable to anti-utopian antibodies" [Yuriev 1990, 3821–3822]. Of course. The disease for which the "Russian soul" has hopelessly fallen and all the more violently at such a late age of its development in comparison to Europe carried the epithet of humanism. Dostoyevsky warned against it, pointing out what the "Russian boys" were capable of when they get hold of their humanistic and lofty ideas in general. Leaving behind them an even greater evil than that which they revolted against. This prophecy fulfilled itself to the letter.

Dostoyevsky sought the antidote to humanism in the return to the "Russian soil", which, in the example of concrete political postulates, sounded as equally repulsive as the actions of his literary heroes. Berdjaev — a thinker so negatively set to the ideas of "heaven on earth", so sensitive to the dangers which the idea of humanism, the self-sufficiency of man, brought with it — remained fundamentally true to it for the postulated return from it to the inexpressible rationally of the communion of *God and man* in the eschatological misterium and therefore in the name of the Christian myth was the postulate of man's self-perfection — and not only — in the face of the persistent silence of our divine nature. For I can search in myself for traces of divine breath and work zealously upon their kindling and sustenance, except for the saints and mystics, I lack the certainty that the angel is speaking to me and God's will is announced. Normally I remain unsure, alone with myself, having to rely on myself and thus not divine choices. More often therefore I remain in union with Satan, whether I want it or not.

"If there wasn't man there wouldn't be the devil, for natural order would not be negated by anybody" [Miłosz 1989, 160]. For the Russian mentality, the natural order, as with the assumption of evil, not only should be but had to be irrevocably negated in the name of another, already good order. The natural order which surrounded a Russian could not be praised with features that deserved respect — hence the yearning for a supernatural order. In order, however, to bring into instant effect absolute goodness (anything else being excluded) one needs the devil i.e. evil — a negated force because this is always available. And here we are not talking about some kind of partial goodness which people universally create conscious of its own imperfection. A Russian demands immediately the highest good regardless of his location. One of the best experts to discuss this

problem area was Miłosz, already mentioned above, who noted, highly appropriately, that “in Polish literature there are no characters such as Dostoyevsky’s Alosa or prince Myshkin representing the dilemma ‘either total goodness or nothing of goodness’, there is not to be found equally the desperate ravings of the ‘superfluous men’ thirsting for the Aim, God, that for almost a century was foretold in Russia as the revolution with its absolute aim” [Miłosz 1990, 151].

When at last that final revolution was brought about (although it was a political *coup d’Etat* taking advantage of the tangle of favourable circumstances) there occurred at least one strange thing from the point of view of communist practice. The philosopher and publisher of *Der Russische Gedanke* — Boris Yakovienko noticed it first, just at the beginning of the 1930s. He wondered why the young Soviet authorities had not killed, in accordance with their real nature, non-Marxist intellectuals and academics who were oppositional set against the regime, but allowed a significant number of them to emigrate at the start of the 1920s, or simply banished them. He reached the conclusion that besides other reasons an important factor was the acknowledgement of the magnitude of these people (needless to add in the later years of consolidation of communist power there was an argument for the slaughter of academics and artists) and also “the obvious awareness of the authorities that an important kinship links them with the condemned and cursed intellectual directions. Despite the differences which from the practical, superficial point of view could appear enormous and despite the clearly manifested hostility, the said kinship is rooted in the depths of soul and intellect” [Wetter 1975, 99]¹.

The analyses carried out by Gustav A. Wetter show the kinship “rooted in the depths of soul and intellect” between Marxism and Russian religious thought. They are based in our belief firstly on the conviction in the final and universal salvation from evil. This was, as Berdjaev emphasized, the “Russian idea” of the anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven, of the Kingdom of Eschaton or equally the New Middle Age into which humanity must enter for the doings of the Russian people following the profound experience of the crisis of European culture as a result of the great war at the start of the twentieth century. At last the criticisms of that culture were at that time

¹ Cf. [Dahm 1988, 52–157]

significantly greater: to mention only the “death of God”, the “twilight of the West”, the “crisis of European sciences”, the “collapse of the Western civilization” or the “revolt of the masses”, to confine oneself to a couple of examples. As opposed, however, to the Western criticism, the Russian mentality significantly focused the dilemma more: either good or evil. The Russians rejected the continuity between one and the other. The construction of the Kingdom took place also finally in means accessible only for Russia. Not through the recovery of the lost dispatch of Christian myth, as Berdjaev wanted, but through the deification of man which concretely meant the deification of a chosen class, *respective* of the party, *respective* of its leader. It was a deification which Russians had in abundance and zealously worked upon its multiplication — simply of evil when that man called Stalin turned out to be evil incarnated, though we are unable to say whether absolute evil. Paraphrasing the ending of Kołakowski’s “Main Currents...” one may say that the Russian idea of godmanhood turned out to be like the “farcical side of human adversity”. The desire for absolute goodness ended in the Stalinist era: a crime unheard of in human history.

Translated from the Polish by Guy Torr

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ABSTRACT

THE RUSSIAN MENTALITY

The present essay is the conclusion of my two books devoted to Nicolas Berdjaev's religious philosophy: *Amor futuri albo eschatologia zrealizowana Studia nad myślą Mikołaja Bierdiajewa (Amor Futuri or Eschatology Realised Studies on the Thought of Nicolas Berdjaev)*, [Styczyński 1992] and *Umiłowanie przyszłości albo filozofia spraw ostatecznych. Studia nad filozofią Mikołaja Bierdiajewa (Adulation for the Future or the Philosophy of the Ultimate Matters Studies on the Thought of Nicolas Berdjaev)*, [Styczyński 2001]. The differences between them are mentioned in the latter. They were both written in Polish and as a consequence had no chance of reaching a wider circle of readers. This is, therefore, the reason why I have decided to present this conclusion to an English language readership. I have tried to show the consequences of the unique Russian mentality, whose predominant feature is an ambivalence between a persistent search for good and constantly doing of evil. This "Russian theodicy" expressing itself in the creation of an alternative world, which is to justify the evil done, has its roots in the conviction of man's principally divine nature revealing itself through the exculpating effect of evil. In the case of the twentieth century of Russian history it yielded a result totally different from the expected one.