

Church Discord and Freedom of Conscience

Nikolai Berdyaev

When this seminal essay was published in 1926, it ignited discussion about freedom of conscience in Orthodox life. It remains a key point of reference for nearly all Orthodox thinkers wrestling with this issue. The essay was originally written in the context of a sharp disagreement in the émigré Russian Church that led on the one hand to a major ecclesial schism and on the other to the formation of Orthodox lay organizations and an academic community that gave birth to what is now known as Russian Religious Renaissance.¹

Berdyaev's essay, published in late 1926 in the émigré magazine *Путь* (*The Way*), addressed the decisive schism that followed the council of émigré Russian bishops earlier that year in the Serbian town of Sremski Karlovtsy, where the Synod of the Russian Church in Exile was headquartered. At the council, Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky) of France and Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky) of America announced that they were leaving the jurisdiction of the Karlovtsy Synod. A significant part of the conflict centered on the relationship between the bishops and various clergy-lay groups formed during the first years of the exile, many of which carried on the torch of the Moscow Council of 1917/18 and its unprecedented breadth of representation. As the present essay makes clear, Berdyaev's position was firmly on the side of more representative church governance and against the strong hierarchical approach instituted by Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) and supported by several other bishops of the Karlovtsy Synod as well as some priests and laity from the so-called Belgrad Group.

It also bears noting that Berdyaev, though a philosopher of an essentially Western formation, nevertheless frames his theological argument around a familiar opposition of Catholic versus Orthodox mindsets, a dualism that is as traditional to the Orthodox argument as it is limited and based largely on prejudice.

It is impossible to do justice here to the complexities of the intellectual schism that followed the ecclesiastical one, but it is important to note that Berdyaev expressed what became the position of not only the Russian Christian Student Movement (ACER) that his essay supported, but also the future Saint Sergius Institute in Paris and the postwar Orthodox Fraternity of Western Europe. As such, it deserves to be carefully studied by all scholars of the Orthodox Renaissance of the twentieth century.

Berdyaev's essay was originally published in *Путь* 5 (Oct.–Nov. 1926): 42–54. This version was adapted from an English translation by Alvian N. Smirensky.

¹ See Nicholas A. Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963).

– *The Editors*

Clericalism is alien to Orthodoxy. This negative phenomenon was developed, rather, on Catholic soil. But we are now witnessing the birth of Russian clericalist tendencies and a clerical ideology. Even the better segments of our Orthodox youth have been affected by this malady. Among them, this is a childhood disease of the Russian Religious Renaissance: a passionate reaction to a long period of separation from the Orthodox Church. Among the elders, the pre-Revolutionary generation, this is more of a geriatric sclerosis, completely incompatible with creativity and freedom.

The last Council of Bishops in Karlovtsy set out on a path of a schism in the Church. It devastated the Metropolitans. It practically condemned the Student Christian Movement. It fomented a poison of malicious suspicion, desiring to infect healthy souls with its senseless mistrustfulness. Its clericalist tendencies produced a frightful shock, raising profound questions about the Church's self-consciousness. This is actually a positive aspect of this miserable council. Sometimes good arises out of evil. Divine providence makes use of evil for good. The pus-filled boil has burst open, and this is a good thing. A horrible blow was delivered to the authority and prestige of the Russian bishops in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, who have governed all these years by spiritual fear. This ordeal must likewise be painfully experienced by all those who were susceptible to the illusions of clericalism.

A certain segment of Russian youth who were ardently and sincerely religious but had not completely thought through or even generally grasped the fundamentals of Orthodoxy developed a tendency to consider each bishop infallible, seeing him as something like the pope. This generation, which has reacted against the Revolution's destructive calamity and which feels the need to lean against

an unshakable pillar of authority, has developed a fear of freedom of spirit, freedom of choice. Such tendencies will lead to tragic conflicts of conscience.

It is only in Catholicism that the concept of external, infallible hierarchical authority has been fully developed and taken to its logical conclusion. In Orthodoxy such a concept can only be incomplete and contradictory. It might be possible to live satisfactorily with one Pope, but trying to live with twenty five popes constantly arguing and condemning each other could easily land one in an insane asylum. Of course, Orthodoxy differs from Catholicism not because it has twenty five popes instead of one, but because it has no pope at all. This must be thoroughly understood.

Orthodox consciousness does not recognize the concept of infallible authority in any bishop. Only the whole Church in its *sobornost* (catholicity) enjoys infallibility, and those who to whom this infallibility is attributed constitute the whole people of the Church, of all Christian generations beginning with the apostles. The 1848 Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs states: "Infallibility is found in the oneness of the Church's ecumenicity, united by mutual love and the unchanging dogmas, along with the purity of rites. It is not entrusted to the hierarchy alone but to the whole people of the Church, which constitute the Body of Christ."² The bearers and guardians of Christian truth are the whole people of the Church and not the hierarchy alone. And there are no formal and legal guarantees for expressing the internal authority of the Church. A single Orthodox individual can be more correct than the majority of bishops. There was a time when Saint Athanasius the Great, while still a deacon—that is, in an insignificant clerical office—was the defender of true Orthodoxy against almost the whole of the Eastern episcopal establishment, which

² Berdyaev actually quotes a paraphrase from the Encyclical found in Aleksey Khomyakov, "Несколько слов православного христианина о западных вероисповеданиях," in *Работы по богословию* (Moscow: Меддум, 1994). Cf. "Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs" (1848) in *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, ed. Paul Halsall, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1848orthodox-encyclical.asp>, §17.

Members of the
First Council of the
Russian Orthodox
Church in Exile,
Sremski Karlovtsy,
Yugoslavia, 1921.



was inclined towards Arianism. At that time, the clericalist position would have been against Athanasius the Great and on the side of the Arian bishops. It is entirely conceivable, to the Orthodox mind, that the lay author A. S. Khomyakov expressed the spirit of Orthodoxy much better than some Metropolitans influenced by scholastic theology, both Protestant and Catholic.

Orthodoxy has tolerated a wide freedom of religious thought. The great advantage of Orthodoxy is found in precisely its lack of external guarantees. It does not view the Church in terms of the kingdom of this world, analogous to the state, which demands formal juridical conditions. It believes in the direct activity of the Holy Spirit. A question which is presently obscure but which must be acutely posited is whether Orthodoxy does or does not recognize freedom of conscience as the preeminent basis of spiritual life. [Russian poet and thinker Feodor] Tyuchev once wrote, referring to Pope Pius IX: "They were overcome by the fatal word: 'freedom of conscience is nonsense.'"³ These words, so dear to our Slavophiles, make sense and are jus-

tified only if Orthodoxy itself steadfastly affirms that freedom of conscience is not nonsense but is the greatest treasure of Christianity. But we are living in a time of fear and timidity in the face of freedom of conscience, refusing to take upon ourselves the burden of freedom, the burden of responsibility.

Today's clericalist tendencies reflect a Catholic view of the Church and church authority. And this Catholic view is especially strong among those who consider themselves fanatically and exclusively Orthodox, who hate Catholicism and are incapable of understanding its positive qualities. Today there is a reaction not only against Russian anti-religious thinking, which is very good, but also against Russian religious thought of the nineteenth century, which amounts to ingratitude and an unnecessary break in continuity. Russian Orthodox religious thought was exceptionally freedom-loving; it nurtured the idea of the free spirit, freedom of conscience, and was preparing a creative spiritual reform, a spiritual renaissance, which was wrecked by the long-gathering forces of atheistic revolution and—inseparable from it—the dead-

³ Fyodor Tyuchev, "Encyclica" (1865), in *Полное собрание сочинений и писем в шести томах* (Moscow: Классика, 2003), vol. 2, 132.

ening, spirit-quenching forces of reaction. Now the creative and regenerative movements in the Church are curbed and paralyzed by the lies of the Living Church and the falseness of church reform in Soviet Russia.

For me the issue of freedom of conscience is fundamental in Christian consciousness and must be articulated with the greatest clarity and radicality. Freedom always enjoys primacy over authority. Even in Catholicism, the search for an unshakeable authority with perceptible attributes is, in the final analysis, fictitious and based on illusions. The Pope's infallible authority is contingent on its being accepted and confirmed by the free will of the believing Catholic. Papal authority is not an external objective reality, it is not a reality of a natural and material order, such as the reality of a stone thrown at us or a tree branch striking us from without. It is a reality of a spiritual order. But papal authority becomes a spiritual reality through an act of faith, which is an act of freedom, of acceptance, on the part of a religious person.

What is distinctive about the predominant Catholic view is that it aims quickly to put a stop to the exercise of the freedom of conscience; it does not recognize the permanence of its exercise. In principle, the Orthodox mind does not recognize this curb on the freedom of conscience, or believe that such exercise is the exclusive prerogative of the highest church organs. Freedom of conscience acts without ceasing. That freedom keeps the catholicity of the Church alive. The life of the Church is the unity of love in freedom. In essence, everything that is significant spiritually—in the Catholic world as well—presumes the freedom of conscience, the free creativity of the spirit, not the action of an external formal authority.

Freedom of conscience in Orthodoxy does not mean Protestant individualism. It is inherently, profoundly connected with *sobornost*. The Reformation was absolutely correct in its affirmation of the freedom of conscience but in the end it set out on the false path of individualism. Freedom is not isolation of the soul, opposing it to all other souls and to the whole world. In the realm of freedom, of Christian freedom, there is a mystical union of that which is uniquely individual with that which is universally common. But freedom can never be ended or interrupted and it cannot be delegated to another. It can only be enlightened.

I can never accept anything against my free conscience, not even God himself, since God cannot amount to violence against me. My humility before the highest authority can only be an enlightenment and a transfiguration of my free conscience from within, as my mystical communion with a higher reality.

Even an ecumenical council, Orthodoxy's highest organ, does not enjoy formal authority. An ecumenical council does not have formal, juridical features, consciously discernable; it does not have a legal status. A council should not be made into an idol or an absolute. A council could be a robber council, having all the trappings of legitimacy. Well-known is a sharp criticism by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who did not want to attend councils. An authentic ecumenical council is one at which the Holy Spirit is truly present. The authenticity and spirituality of an ecumenical council is discerned and affirmed by the free conscience of the people of the Church. The Holy Spirit acts within the Church's people, in the Church's *sobornost*, and makes a distinction between truth and falsehood, between authenticity and imitation.

The order of church life, as a spiritual existence, is distinguished by its lack of

external guarantees, of legal or materially discernable signs of authenticity. Everything is resolved through spiritual life, through spiritual experience. The Holy Spirit does not act like natural forces and social forces. There are no analogies. Introducing such an analogy is a temptation and an attempt to identify the Church with this world.

The historically inevitable hierarchical structure of the Church and the development of the canons are occurrences of a secondary rather than primary order. Only the spiritual life and what develops within it are primary. This is what maintains the Church in its holiness. Affirmation of the primacy of external hierarchical authority is always a self-deception and an illusion. Only those whose internal convictions are identical or similar to those of an external hierarchical authority submit themselves completely to that authority. No one has ever submitted to external authority if his conscience definitely opposed it, or at least his submission was only in accordance with external discipline.

This must likewise be said about Catholics. External authority of itself has never been able to convince anyone of anything. Conviction always arises from within and always presumes a collaboration of the freedom of conscience and God's Spirit. Clericalism is convincing only for convinced clericalists, for those who treasure the clerical structure of life more than anything else, those who desire and anxiously await the triumph of clericalism, who are its partisans. The defenders of authority and the enemies of freedom usually recognize complete and unlimited freedom for themselves, but they do not want others to have it. They are the least humble and the most self-willed people around.

This is obvious from the example of the right-wing clericalist trend among the

diaspora. The extreme and at times fanatical supporters of the Karlovtsy Synod's line against Metropolitan Evlogy represent the extreme right-wing monarchist group, which would select the highest church organ and the Metropolitan not on the basis of ecclesio-canonical principles but on the basis of their particular political sympathies and Black Hundredist reactionary aspirations. If the Synod of Bishops and the Council of Bishops adopted a more liberal and freedom-loving direction for the Church, if they broke with the right-wing monarchist course, their present supporters would desert them and would begin to reject their ecclesiastical authority. This is just like the Communists, who believe in complete freedom for themselves but do not let others breathe freely.

All these far-right monarchists in the diaspora recognize complete freedom of conscience and freedom of choice for themselves and admit the authority of the Church where they want and where they like, clothing with authority those metropolitans and bishops who cater to their whims and sympathize with them. In Berlin, I have heard Russians say on more than one occasion that they do not recognize the authority of the Metropolitan [Evlogy], to whose jurisdiction they are subject, because they do not like the direction he is taking. These people would never listen to the true voice of the Church, which would condemn their aspirations and political sympathies, nor accept it as the Church's voice. They never wanted to listen to Patriarch Tikhon, who is the highest organ of the Russian Orthodox Church. The bishops who did not like the direction the Patriarch was taking did not listen to him either. The very formation of the Synod of Bishops was a willful act, contrary to the wishes of the Patriarch.

These self-willed people of the right-wing camp have never recognized the

freedom of the Church and have always supported the dominance of the state over the Church—or rather, not so much of the state but of their own political leanings and interests. The first Karlovtsy Council, which was condemned by the Patriarch, was conducted under the banner of the right-wing monarchist organization, which exercised its dominance over the Church. Of what use is hierarchical authority here? They do not recognize it when they do not like it.

Today, in right-wing émigré circles, church authority is recognized where it endorses and encourages reactionary restorative political desires, where there is an aura of the spirit of obscurantism and spiteful paranoia about a “Jewish-Masonic” conspiracy. No one pays much attention to canons unless they are needed for a false and hypocritical cover. It is quite clear that, from the canonical point of view, legitimacy is on the side of Metropolitan Evlogy, but the right-wing clericalist sector recognizes the ecclesiastical authority of the Synod of Bishops inasmuch as the latter expresses their spirit and their aims. The right-wing clericalist segment in fact consists of people who want to dominate the Church with their politics, their monarchist view of government. It also recognizes the primacy of freedom over authority—but only of their own freedom. It projects its freedom, its will, upon the organ that it likes and that is convenient for it. This lie must be exposed, and it is being exposed by life itself.

The Karlovtsy episcopate is a specific party, a particular trend. It is not the voice of the Church as a whole. The claim of this trend of the émigré Orthodox Church to autocephaly, its pretension to be the head of the whole Russian Orthodox Church, is pathetic and laughable. A significant proportion of the émigré hierarchy (not all) consists of bishops who deserted their flocks, and for that reason it cannot have any signifi-



cant moral authority for the whole of the Russian Orthodox world. Not a single bishop or priest in the emigration has any moral right to pass judgement upon bishops and priests who are doomed to a martyr’s life in Russia. There are those who speak with disdain and judgement about Patriarch Tikhon [Bellavin] and about Metropolitan Benjamin [Kazan-sky]. This is a godless, repulsive display. No one can know how such a disdainful and judgmental individual would

Metropolitan Evlogy
(Georgievsky).

behave himself in Soviet Russia. Would he not join the Living Church, as did a number of former Black Hundreds supporters, since they are so experienced in servitude and denunciation? We already know that both Patriarch Tikhon and Metropolitan Benjamin, in their own ways, suffered martyrdom.

We have entered upon a lengthy epoch of church discord. For anyone who knows church history, there is nothing new in this. But we Russians have become accustomed to a lengthy period of peace and stability in the Church. The Orthodox people lived in a stable milieu, in a strong cohesion of Church and state. In the nineteenth century, the Russian world experienced stormy movements, which resulted in crisis and catastrophe, but the Church remained—in appearance—in a state of deathly calm and immobility. Perhaps the current catastrophe is the result of the Church's inertness. The monarchy protected the peace of the Church but along with this it stood in the way of any creative activity, even forbidding the calling of a council.

Many Orthodox people thought that this calm and inertia would be eternal. But to a more acute observer, it was evident that all was not right and peaceful in the Orthodox Church. Internal processes took place, internal contradictions arose, which were not exposed only because the Church was in slavery to the state. The prevailing style of the imperial Church was one of deathly inertia and immobility. There were no church discords or disputes because there was very little creative activity, or it was so insignificant that it was powerless to express itself. When disputes arose in the first-century Church, there was also a stormy creative life. Church unrest can be the flip side of a vital internal life, of religious tension and internal struggles of the spirit.

We are entering upon such an epoch, one very difficult and trying, full of responsibility but also joyful in seeing the beginning of a creative movement. The structure of the Orthodox soul must undergo a change. A new order is coming to Orthodoxy. One must prepare his soul for a violent era of discords. There is no turning back to the old calm and stability, nor should there be. One cannot divest oneself of the burden of the freedom of choice; one cannot lean against an external, unshakable pillar for support. We must find support within the depth of our own spirit.

We are living through that moment in the history of the Orthodox Church at the end—the liquidation—not only of the Petrine Synodal period but of the whole Constantinopolitan period in Christianity. We are now at the beginning of a new Christian era. The Church must redefine its relationship to the world and what is taking place in the world. The Church must be free and independent of the state, of Caesar's kingdom, of worldly elements. It must relate to the creative processes of the world in a more meaningful way, it must bless the world's move toward Christ and Christianity, which are as yet unrecognized, it must welcome the prodigal son's return to the Father in a different way than it has done up to this point.

In times of a historical crisis and change, during the destruction of the old world and the birth of the new, the Church's hierarchy does not immediately and fully recognize the magnitude of events taking place, nor does it assess the religious significance of what is taking place and its effect upon the Church. A part of the hierarchy remains completely in the past and longs for the restoration of the old, peaceful, immobile life. It is not sensitive to the historical reality. It is blind to what is taking place in the world. It looks upon the tragedy of

mankind without love or compassion. It remains full of pharisaical self-justification and has a closed mind. Another part of the hierarchy begins to sense that some changes are taking place but without being entirely conscious of them. A third part recognizes these changes more fully. This variation in disposition and consciousness engenders strife within the hierarchy itself and discord in the Church. As always, intellectual motivations are mixed with personal and class agendas, with class struggle and personal competition.

The Karlovtsy bishops, the Karlovtsy Synod, and the majority of the Sobor represent the trend within the hierarchy which finds itself entirely in the decaying past, the period in Orthodox history that is withering away. They neither see nor understand what is taking place. They are spiritually blind and embittered at the tragedy taking place in the world and in humanity. They are modern-day scribes and Pharisees, for whom the Sabbath is greater than man. The last Karlovtsy Council and its condemnation of every creative movement in Christianity is the final convulsion of the Church's dying era. It is Monophysite in spirit, in that it rejects man; it is Caesaropapist in the flesh, in that it deifies Caesar on earth. This kind of a trend must hurl anathemas at everything that is taking place in humanity and in the world. It is captive to malicious mistrustfulness and suspicion. It sees only the advent of evil, since it is only interested in the old life and hates any new life.

It is tied not to the eternal in the Church but only to that which is corruptible and transient. It stands in the way of the emergence of new life in Orthodoxy. Such a tendency lacks not only spiritual truth but also canonical truth. The right-wing synodal trends within the diaspora are formally compatible with the

leftist [Living Church] synodal trends in Soviet Russia. There is no freedom for the Church on either side.

Spiritual truth and canonical truth is entirely with that part of the hierarchy that guards the freedom of the Church, that places the Church above worldly elements and political passions, that discerns the magnitude of the historical revolution that has taken place and precludes forever any possibility of returning to the past. This portion of the hierarchy abroad is represented by Metropolitan Evlogy. The point here has nothing to do with Metropolitan Evlogy's personal views, but with the fact that he is the instrument of the highest will, of divine providence, during this difficult and torturous transitional period the Orthodox Church abroad is undergoing. Such was Patriarch Tikhon for all Russia. It is clear that here we have help from God.

Neither a patriarch nor a metropolitan can be a spokesman for any kind of extremism in the life of the Church, and they rarely are the initiators of anything other than a placid movement. Their mission is to maintain the Church's equanimity in the face of discord and disturbances. But in their mission they should not interfere with creative initiatives that emerge. They can give them their approval and incorporate them into the mainstream of church life.

The equilibrium of the Church's life, her unity, cannot be supported by way of compromise with the decaying segment of the hierarchy that condemns creative life and blocks the Church from entering a new epoch. This decaying trend is doomed to be sloughed off. The Church's development is found on the opposite side of that deadening policy, which chokes off the spirit. I believe that a split is inevitable sooner or later (the possibility of a temporary truce cannot be exclud-

ed, of course, but it would not last). The Orthodox Church will not cease to exist because of this and will not lose its unity. What is essential is unity in truth, not a compromise of truth with falsehood. The fear that the reactionary-restorationist faction might break away for good and then die off is not a religious-ecclesiastically grounded fear, but rather a political fear, since this would be a mortal blow to the entire right-wing monarchist movement. This blow must be administered since that movement stands in the way of the healing of Russia and the Russian people. It is blocking the begetting of a better life.

The extreme right-wing party in Orthodoxy clings to the idea of ecclesiastical nationalism. It wants to isolate Orthodoxy from the Christian world. It does not understand the ecumenical spirit. In all likelihood we will experience a new Old Believer (or Old Ritualist) schism, but in the worst possible sense of those terms. The old schism had a genuinely popular basis, but this will not be so in the new schism. This new schism is possible in Russia itself as well as in the diaspora. One should prepare for it spiritually. It will demand courage and decisiveness.

Our own epoch in the life of the Church presents us with a very difficult and complex spiritual problem. What does it mean when a bishop who is well-known for his ascetical life, an authentic monastic, who carries out the testaments of the holy fathers, who is known for his spirituality, turns out to be spiritually blind, unable to test the spirits, and sees in the world around himself and in mankind nothing but evil and darkness, and is doomed to spread nothing but condemnation and gloom? This is a very alarming problem, calling for thoughtful concern. Apparently, asceticism in and of itself does not bring about higher spiritual achievements and does

not result in spiritual insight. It might even dry up and harden the heart. The devil is also an ascetic. Another element is necessary in the spiritual path, without which asceticism is deprived of its transfiguring and enlightening purpose. Asceticism without love is fruitless and dead. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Cor. 13:1-7)

The hierarchs who gathered for the Council of Bishops in Karlovtsy failed to carry out the testaments of Apostle Paul. There is no love in their words and deeds, only a profound malevolence, a lack of love for man and for God's creation. They are neither "patient" nor "kind." They are "boastful" and "resentful," they "rejoice at wrong," they "bear" nothing, they "hope" for nothing, they "endure" nothing. The monk-ascetic can observe the commandment to love God, but if he does not observe the commandment to love his neighbor, does not love man or God's creation, if he sees nothing but evil in man, then his love for God is perverted and distorted. Then he is nothing but "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Monastic-ascetical malevolence, lack of love, suspicion of the world of man and of any activity in the world is a perversion of Christian faith. Christianity is the religion of love for God and love for

man. Love for God alone without love for man is a perversion of love for God. Love for man without love for God (humanism) is a perversion of love for man. The mystery of Christianity is the mystery of the God-man. The monk-ascetic whose heart has hardened and cooled, who loves God but treats man and the world without love, is a practical, living Monophysite. He does not confess the religion of the God-man. He is the culprit of the advent of Godless humanism in the world.

Orthodoxy has had experience with the Monophysite distortion and now we are seeing its evil fruits. We are witnessing the last vestiges of a Monophysite, misanthropic Orthodoxy, or—more correctly—of a pseudo-Orthodoxy. This spirit is bound for oblivion. It treats man in evil ways and condemns any movement of life. This problem is pointedly raised in the discord within the Church. Presently there is a struggle for Christianity as the religion of the God-man, uniting within itself the fullness of love for God and man. Asceticism without love is dead. It makes one blind, without vision. It makes of man a self-made eunuch.⁴ This truth must be realized through suffering in the time of our discord. He who is exclusively concerned with the salvation of his soul while being cold and cruel to his neighbor, that person kills his soul. The bishops who passed their resolutions at the Karlovtsy Council show no signs of Christian love. They are carrying out a deed without love, one that is inimical to man. They are Monophysites in the spiritual-ethical meaning of that word, no matter how loudly they profess the irreproachable ecclesiastical and dogmatic formulas. In this is the metaphysical meaning of current state of things.

Much is said in our time about the “churching” of life. This is the maxim of the Russian Student Christian Movement. The maxim is undoubtedly sincere but

it needs clarification and an explanation of its context since one can attribute completely different meanings to it.

The churching of life could be understood in the spirit of a false hierocracy or clericalism, in the spirit of the old Byzantine theocratic principles that have been done away with in history and cannot be restored. Some understand “churching” as a submission of all facets of life to hierarchical authority, subject to the direct rule of the hierarchy. This is more a Catholic than an Orthodox understanding of churching, a Catholic theocratic idea from which even many Catholics free themselves. It is hard to understand how such an idea has arisen among a certain segment of our youth, who look upon the hierarchy as possessing a kind of infallibility and a special charisma of knowledge and teaching authority. In fact, there is no such teaching in the Orthodox Church, even though some individual hierarchs have espoused it. It fundamentally contradicts the principle of *sobornost* that lies at the foundation of the Orthodox Church. The *sobornost* of the Church, which cannot be expressed in formal or juridical terms, is incompatible with a belief in the infallible authority of the episcopate and its exclusive charismatic primacy in doctrine and teaching authority.

The Spirit breathes where it wills. For the Orthodox, the Church is not an unequal organization. The priesthood has, before anything else, a liturgical meaning, and in this it is infallible and does not depend upon human qualities or talents. But Christian truth is revealed to and guarded by the whole people of the Church, among whom may be people with special, individual gifts of teaching.

To the priesthood belongs leadership on the spiritual path, for the salvation of souls, but not on the path of creativity, which is the prerogative of mankind. For

⁴ A reference to the heretical Skoptsy sect in nineteenth-century Russia, which practiced self-castration.

example, *starchestvo* [spiritual leadership of *startsi* or elders], which is so characteristic of Orthodoxy, proves that even spiritual gifts for the guidance of souls are not directly linked to the hierarchical order. The *starets* is an individual gifted with personal charisma discerned by the people, a spirit-bearing individual and not a member of some particular hierarchical order. The *startsi*, more often than not, were persecuted by bishops (very enlightening on this point is the life of Father Leonid, one of the first great *startsi* of the Optina monastery).

It is without question that disciplinary power, without which church administration would be impossible, belongs to the bishop within his diocese. But this does not constitute infallible authority or a special gift of teaching. The bishop is at the head of the hierarchal structure of the Church; he maintains the unity of the Church and preserves Orthodox tradition. But lordship over the entire creative life of the individual and of the collective does not belong to him. He does not exercise lordship over people's knowledge, over their social endeavors. Nor does

creative initiative in spiritual life belong to him. Even Catholics recognize that inwardly, priesthood belongs to all Christians, and in a certain sense all Christians are priests. It is only in the sphere of outward manifestation that the Catholics affirm the hierarchical principle in an extreme form. Orthodoxy recognizes the potential universal priesthood to an even greater degree. This accords with the doctrine of the apostles and many teachers of the Church. By contrast, hierocracy is a deviation and a distortion, a refusal to recognize that the Holy Spirit acts in all of Christian humanity, that Christ is present among his people. This is the temptation of the Grand Inquisitor [in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*], the rejection of the Spirit's freedom and the renunciation of the burden of freedom of choice, the delegation of responsibility to the few and its removal from the conscience of all Christians. It is unfair to blame the Catholics alone for this.

The churching of life can be understood in a diametrically opposite sense. It can be viewed as the placing of greater re-



Celebration of the 25th anniversary of Metropolitan Evlogy's consecration to the episcopate. Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky, Paris, 1928.

sponsibility upon all the people of the Church, upon all Christians, a more powerful action by the freedom of the Spirit. One can and must recognize as potentially “churchly” that which does not have an official, formal, juridical stamp of “churchliness.”

The churching of life is an invisible process; it does not hit us over the head. God’s kingdom comes invisibly, in the depths of people’s hearts. People are tired of the conventional lies of external churchliness, which symbolically sanctifies life but without any real transfiguration or improvement. The authentic churching of life is not limited to the processes that formally belong to the Church’s hierarchy and are subject to a symbolically established form of sanctification. It includes above all those processes that truly change and transfigure life in accordance with the spirit of Christ, and in which Christ’s truth becomes manifest. These processes on the surface can remain free and can appear autonomous, but within them Christ’s Spirit can act. [Aleksandr] Bukharev, one of the most remarkable of Orthodox theologians, says it well when he speaks of the “descent of Christ upon the earth,” about our assimilation to Christ in every act of our life.

The churching of life is a true, ontologically real Christianization of life, the introduction of Christ’s light, Christ’s Truth, Christ’s love and freedom into all spheres of life and creativity. Such a process demands spiritual freedom. It cannot be the result of an external authority or coercive act.

The churching of life is not merely a *sacramental* process, a process of the sanctification of life, but it is also a *prophetic* process, a creative process, one that transfigures life, changing it and not merely sanctifying it. For this reason, it cannot flow from the exclusive, author-

itative action of the hierarchy; Christian freedom must operate in it.

The assertion that divine grace acts only under authority and not in freedom is mistaken and arbitrary. Some have observed that freedom has been responsible for many mischiefs in this world, and have concluded that it is dark and without grace. Yet authority has also been responsible for no small amount of mischief and has multiplied darkness and malice in the world. There is no guarantee in either authority or freedom since behind authority there can be a manifestation of malicious freedom, self-volition, and arbitrary rule. But freedom can be enlightening and full of grace. The Spirit of God acts through freedom.

Where God’s Spirit is, there is freedom. Without freedom, God’s will can not be executed in this world. Man’s free conscience may have been darkened by original sin, but it has not been destroyed. Otherwise the image and likeness of God would have been erased in man and he would have been incapable of receiving any revelation; religious life would have been impossible for him. Man’s freedom was reborn and enlightened from within through Christ’s redemption, and a free conscience was affirmed in man as a direct result of Christ’s light within him.

Fearless affirmation of the freedom of spirit, of freedom of conscience, has a special significance in our critical epoch, in this epoch of ecclesiastical trouble and religious storms. Freedom is tough and requires strength of spirit. But this toughness and strength are much needed today. It is precisely in our era that it is impossible to lean exclusively on external authority, on a pillar that towers above us and is not within us. We must experience this absence of external guarantees and external firm support in order to realize this. Only then will

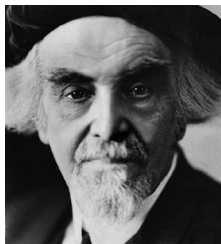
that immovable foundation be discovered within us.

This does not mean in the least that God has abandoned us. The work of the Holy Spirit might well be greater than ever. The faltering of all external authorities and the crushing of all illusions have providential significance. This has been sent to us as a test of our Christian freedom, of our internal fortitude. No Orthodox Christian is exempt from the freedom of choice, from acting on a free conscience. One cannot run away from this, seeking a safe shelter. The highest levels of hierarchy need the free conscience of Christians, the freedom of their choice, during this time of trouble and confrontation. God needs man's free conscience, man's free determination, man's unfettered love. The whole meaning of the creation lies in this. To reject the freedom of conscience as the supreme origin and primary principle of religious life is to reject the world's purpose; this rejection is a slavish opposition to God, a temptation, and a derangement. The spirit of a free conscience is not the spirit of a formal and indifferent liberalism. It is part and parcel of the very content of Christian faith.

Everything that I say here is not about the freedom that I demand from God, but about the freedom God demands

from me. The discords in the Church that are now taking place inside Russia and in the diaspora demand firmness, fortitude, and strength, they demand the power of freedom in us. Without the spirit of freedom, one cannot conquer the temptation of Communism and can offer nothing in its stead.

It has not been given to us to cast off the burden and the difficulty of freedom, the striving towards it. As paradoxical as it sounds, we have in a certain sense been forced toward freedom by the very tragic events taking place in the world. Our consciousness must rise to meet the events of history. The sorrowful events that took place at the Council of Bishops have their positive side: they liberate us from illusions and temptations; in a negative way they remind Christians of their birthright, their higher calling. The suspicious attitude toward the Russian Student Christian Movement, the most valuable thing in today's diaspora, teaches the youth that Christian rebirth is impossible without freedom of spirit. It is clearer now than ever before that the Orthodox Church holds fast not to external authority, not to external organizational unity, but to the internal spiritual freedom, Christ's freedom, the freedom and grace in man through the action of the Holy Spirit. *



Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874–1948) was an existential philosopher and Orthodox intellectual. His writing reflected an abiding concern with social and cultural issues, even as his early engagement with Marxism gave way to an interest in Christian spirituality. He spent the latter part of his life in Paris.