

# The Spirit of the Grand Inquisitor: On the *Ukaz* of Metropolitan Serguis Condemning the Theological Views of Father Sergius Bulgakov

Nikolai Berdyaev

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## Translator's Introduction

On September 7, 1935, the Moscow Patriarchate delivered an *ukaz* against the sophiology of Father Sergii Bulgakov. On October 30, a similar condemnation was published by the Russian Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), headquartered in Serbia, except this time Bulgakov's teaching was labeled not simply "foreign" to Orthodoxy but outright heretical. Metropolitan Sergius Stragorodsky, the acting locum tenens of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchal throne, soon followed up his first *ukaz* with another in December. This triple punch set off the roughly two-year controversy known by Anglophone scholars as the "Sophia Affair," in which religious thinkers, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, weighed in on the merits of Bulgakov's sophiology as well as on the merits of the condemnations.<sup>1</sup> Although Bulgakov's teaching was ultimately judged orthodox (though mistaken on some points) by his own ecclesiastical authority in 1937—he belonged to the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Evlogy Gorgievsky, under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and so was untouched canonically by the condemnations—the cloud of heresy followed Bulgakov among his fellow Orthodox for the rest

of the twentieth century. For many, it remains to this day.<sup>2</sup>

It was into this dispute that Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev intervened with his essay "The Spirit of the Grand Inquisitor."<sup>3</sup> The article was published in the December issue of the Russian émigré journal *The Way*.<sup>4</sup> Largely bypassing an evaluation of Bulgakov's sophiology itself, Berdyaev instead questioned the theological meaning of institutional, ecclesiastical condemnations as such. What Berdyaev's response to the *ukaz* reveals—and what is echoed by the arguments of Vladimir Lossky and Bulgakov himself concerning the legitimacy of Metropolitan Stragorodsky's actions—is that the Sophia Affair constituted a crisis for interpreting the ecclesiology of *sobornost'* shared by all participants in the debate, an ecclesiology shaped by the nineteenth-century theologian Aleksey Khomyakov.

Khomyakov's organicist understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology as fundamentally distinct from Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology, precisely because of its abjuring of external authority in the Church as the criterion for discerning theological truth, was

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the Sophia Affair, see Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1925–1940*, trans. Jerry Ryan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 384–402.

<sup>2</sup> I am currently preparing for publication a critical study of the Sophia affair, as well as a book of translations of the primary texts from the controversy.

<sup>3</sup> The Russian text on which this translation is based can be found in *Записки Русской академической группы в США*, vol. 39 (New York: 2016), 218–229.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, "Дух Великого Инквизитора. (По поводу указа митрополита Сергия, осуждающего богословские взгляды о. С. Булакова)," *Путь* 49 (1935), 72–82.



Nikolai Berdyaev and Sergii Bulgakov with P.E.T. Wridington and B. Duffus, May 26, 1937.

put to the test by the top-down *ukaz* issued against Bulgakov's speculative thought. The faculty of Saint Serge Theological Institute even spoke of the *ukaz* as an "assassination attempt" against theological investigation, premised as it is on freedom of thought. Both Bulgakov and Berdyaev's responses to the *ukaz* characterized Metropolitan Stragorodsky's actions as "Catholic" and "papist" while simultaneously championing *sobornost'* as the distinguishing mark of Orthodox thinking. Defenders of the *ukaz*, such as a young Vladimir Lossky (who cut his theological teeth in this controversy), suggested that critics of the *ukaz* were thoroughly Protestantizing in their understanding of Khomyakov's key insights.

As usual in theological polemics, the debate is as much about theological ideas as it is about theological method. In this instance, it concerned how much freedom of speculative thought bishops should allow an influential Orthodox cleric in his academic writings. Every ecclesiology also serves as an account of the development of doctrine (at least, that is, from the nineteenth century onward), and in the Sophia Affair the question of intellectual freedom in the discerning and development of doctrine by theologians and bishops cut to the heart of how the

Russian Orthodox understood their own ecclesiology.

To contextualize Berdyaev's salvo, the reader should be aware that the circumstances by which Metropolitan Stragorodsky acquired Bulgakov's recent sophiological writings were shrouded in mystery for Bulgakov and his associates. Bulgakov's 1933 book *The Lamb of God*, on which the majority of the *ukaz*'s criticisms was based, was unavailable in Russia because of Soviet censorship, and so Metropolitan Stragorodsky needed to rely on extracts from the text delivered to him through members of the Brotherhood of Saint Photius. Bulgakov was never given the chance to defend himself against his accusers. Due process was hardly observed; furthermore, profound doubts existed concerning the canonical legitimacy of Metropolitan Stragorodsky's *ukaz* itself, in light of the disorganized state of the Holy Synod in the Soviet Union at this time.<sup>5</sup> Add to this the jurisdictional disputes among the Moscow Patriarchate, ROCOR, and the Russian Exarchate under the Ecumenical Patriarch, motivated in large part by the distinct positions these churches took in relation to the Soviet Union and the persecution of Christians within its borders, and it becomes apparent that careful consideration of theological issues could prove difficult with such tensions.

Yet in this article—animated by the spirit of the modernist crisis that occupied the European Catholic world, and especially France, just a few years prior—Berdyaev's contribution takes a broader view. Beyond sophiology proper, and beyond questions of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, Berdyaev considers the *Christian* legitimacy of the very notions of orthodoxy and heresy. It was Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that provided Berdyaev with the main symbol from which to deliver his judgment not only on the

<sup>5</sup> See the helpful, albeit brief, discussion in Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: "Behold, I Make All Things New"* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 88–91

*ukaz* but also on the long history of Christendom. The Catholic inquisitor of Ivan Karamazov's "poem" sits in judgment on Christ himself, who has come to earth again and whose presence threatens to reintroduce spiritual freedom to the masses domesticated by the miracle, mystery, and authority of the institutional Church. That the Inquisitor is on the side of Satan, despite disposing the Church in Christ's name, is the great secret of the poem that motivates Berdyaev's comparison in this article. Like many of his contemporaries, Berdyaev read the Grand Inquisitor as an emblem of any ecclesiastical power that distorts the act of Christian faith—a deed of spiritual freedom becoming the godlike dignity of humanity—into servile submission in exchange for earthly goods (social order, confessional uniformity, and the like). From this perspective, the ecclesiastical condemnations of Bulgakov represent much more than a local church dispute. They touch on the very meaning of Christian revelation, of the Christian religion itself.

In light of today's debates on universal salvation and hell, it is striking that Berdyaev links as intractably entangled the post-Constantinian ecclesiastical settlement, the idea of heresy, and the doctrine of eternal torments. Certainly, Bulgakov did not share Berdyaev's ideas on the nature of doctrine, nor did he endorse his colleague's nearly anti-ecclesial and anti-clerical reduction of orthodoxy and heresy to mere matters of sociology. Nonetheless, Berdyaev's critique of ecclesiastical power in light of the crucified Christ's analogical redefinition of divine power, as well as his attempt to relate that power to the human spirit's innate drive to seek truth in freedom, grants "The Spirit of the Grand Inquisitor" a continuing relevance, not only in Orthodoxy, but in every Christian communion where orthodoxy and heresy continue to matter.

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*"The princes of the Gentiles lord it over them, and they that are great exercise power upon them. But it shall not be so among you."* —Matthew 20:25

*"We are not with you, but with him: that is our secret."* —Dostoevsky, "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor"

The *ukaz* of Metropolitan Sergius [Stragorodsky] that condemns the views of Father Sergii Bulgakov has a far broader significance than just the dispute over Sophia. It bears on the destiny of Russian religious thought, it raises the question of freedom of conscience and of the very possibility of thinking in Orthodoxy. Is Orthodoxy a religion of the freedom of spirit or an inquisitorial torture chamber? Since Metropolitan Sergius evidently confesses an infallibility for himself and for his synod that exceeds the infallibility of the pope, and since he wants to introduce the Catholic practice of the Index,<sup>6</sup> the issue here is the very nature of Orthodoxy. The force of the *ukaz* condemning Father S. Bulgakov is not only quite compromised but even completely annulled by the fact that Metropolitan Sergius has not read Father S. Bulgakov's books and that he prepared his condemnation on the basis of statements from a certain Mr. Stavrovsky<sup>7</sup> and on communications from the Brotherhood of Saint Photius—that is, on the basis of a secondhand denunciation. If in scholarly or philosophical writing someone makes a judgment on the views of any author while not having read his books, this is called acting in bad faith and is morally condemned. But in administrative-ministerial writing, be it ecclesiastical or governmental, all too often judgments are based on delations and spy testimony; here the ethics, clearly, are different. There is no charism enabling a person to judge books he has not read.

<sup>6</sup> The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list of books judged heretical or dangerous by the Vatican and forbidden for Catholics to read or to publish. In force from the 16th century onward, the Index was effectively done away with in 1966.—*Trans.*

<sup>7</sup> Alexis Stavrovsky, president of the Society of St. Photius and secretary to Met. Eleutherius of Lithuania, who was part of the Moscow Patriarchate.—*Trans.*

We are dealing here with a phenomenon characteristic of our era: ecclesiastical fascism. Fascism is the dictatorship of youth over thinking. If fascism with its violence and its disregard for the dignity of man is repulsive in political life, then even more so is it disgusting in ecclesial life. From the *ukaz* itself I got a whiff of that musty, damned seminarianism, and so I understand how difficult must be the conflict between Father S. Bulgakov, a man of high intellectual culture, and that old seminarianism that simultaneously rejects thinking and demands unthinking faith, a faith in authority that is steeped in the most vulgar rationalism. In the *ukaz* Father Bulgakov is called, with censure and condemnation, a “true member of the intelligentsia,” and to this, apparently, are ascribed his “heretical” deviations. Perhaps if Father S. Bulgakov were a shopkeeper or a consistory administrator, then, clearly, there would be revealed to him the secrets of Orthodoxy that are hidden from a member of the intelligentsia. Orthodoxy, apparently, is understood here as a religion of estate and class. Everyday Orthodoxy has always inclined towards merchants and the petit bourgeois.

Father S. Bulgakov hails from the estate of the clergy: he is the son of a priest and grew up in the seminary, but he has great intellectual experience and has trod a complex path of searching. His name is written in the history of the Russian intelligentsia, and this is something that will never be forgiven him by the old classist, petit bourgeois seminary Orthodoxy. But it is just this that makes Father S. Bulgakov a man of important destiny. It is unacceptable to relate to such a person in the way seen in the *ukaz*, without any Christian love or any grace. It is absolutely clear that Metropolitan Sergius rejects theological thinking, rejects not

only freedom of thought but thought itself. Theology must be reduced to the writing of seminary textbooks, and Father S. Bulgakov understands Christianity somewhat differently than do the seminary textbooks. But understanding Christianity in the spirit of these seminary textbooks was one of the essential causes of the falling away from Christianity by a significant portion of humanity. With such a slavish and unenlightened religion a more developed human consciousness and conscience could not reconcile itself.

The *ukaz* of Metropolitan Sergius wants to return Russian Orthodoxy to that unthinking state in which it found itself in the old Muscovite tsardom, wants to erase Russian religious thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the only thought that existed in Orthodoxy after the Greek patristics and the Byzantine currents of the fourteenth century. All Russian religious thought, from the point of view of this *ukaz*, must be considered unorthodox; it all contains one form or another of “heretical” deviation. The condemnation of Father S. Bulgakov is simultaneously a condemnation of [Alexei] Khomyakov, of [Alexander “Feodor”] Bukharev, of [Fyodor] Dostoevsky, of Vladimir Soloviev, of [Viktor] Nesselrode, of Nikolai Fedorov, despite the great differences among them. What remains is a desert. In making no distinctions between dogmas and theological teachings—which is the Catholic approach—Metropolitan Sergius is forced to reject any theological creativity. Creative thinking requires talent, granted by God, and talent provokes *ressentiment*. This is Orthodox nihilism, enmity towards culture. There exist not just the obligatory dogmas of the Orthodox Church, but there is also the obligatory, uniform theological doctrine of the

Orthodox Church, and the infallible guardian of this theological doctrine is Metropolitan Sergius and his synod. It is unclear where such an understanding of Orthodoxy comes from. In Orthodoxy there are not even obligatory “catechetical” books.

Father S. Bulgakov can take comfort in the fact that there has never been a teacher of the Church who has not been accused of some heresy: every creative manifestation of theological and religio-philosophical thought, every new problematic, has met with accusations of heresy. I took the *ukaz* as coming from the religion of the synagogue, the religion of scribes and Pharisees. Christianity in history has constantly been regenerating as, degenerating into, a religion of legalism. Orthodox metropolitans, despite setting themselves off against Catholicism, have nonetheless continually sought infallibility, a collective papism that is far worse than the papism of one individual. The sinful will to power, to domination and to tyranny, has constantly haunted Christian history; far too much can be explained by it. And so it is time, finally, to correct this injustice towards Catholicism. When the Orthodox have criticized Catholicism, they have normally accused it of authoritarianism, of rejecting freedom of conscience and of thought through inquisition. Tyutchev wrote of the pope: “These fateful words, his downfall: ‘freedom of conscience—what nonsense!’”<sup>8</sup> The Slavophiles, Dostoevsky, and even all the institutional theologians who wrote against Catholicism denounced Catholic clericalism for the hierarchical authority’s confessing itself infallible and committing violence against the conscience and thinking of the faithful. It was presupposed that in Orthodoxy there is a greater freedom of spirit, no clericalism. But that

was only while they were attacking Catholicism. When they turned to the internal life of the Orthodox Church, there proved to be no freedom at all—less than in Catholicism. Khomyakov, who taught that freedom was the foundation of the Orthodox Church, was not able to publish his theological works in Russia; he had to publish them in French. Bukharev underwent genuine persecution. Nesmelov had to rework the conclusion of his dissertation on Saint Gregory of Nyssa to a contrary position so that it would be accepted by the Theological Academy.<sup>9</sup> Vl. Soloviev was not able to publish much of his writing in Russia and was always under official suspicion.

The ecclesiastical censor made impossible the development of Russian theological thought in Russia. Let no one plead that the Church depended on the government.<sup>10</sup> The episcopate has always distinguished itself by its sycophancy towards governmental power. But if the bishops had had their way, the spiritual oppression would have been even greater. Freedom has been upheld not by official Orthodoxy, not by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but by Russian Orthodox “modernism,” which is more faithful to the roots of Christianity. It is exactly the same with *sobornost’*. In Khomyakov we find genius intuitions concerning freedom and *sobornost’*, but they did not correspond to the actual situation of the Orthodox Church. *Sobornost’* existed in theory but not in practice. We must state emphatically that among Catholics there is much more freedom of thought than among the Orthodox, and precisely not abstractly but in practice. For this reason, in Catholicism a rich and diverse theological literature is possible—and that is without even mentioning the Western Middle Ages, when freedom of thought in Catholicism was greater,

<sup>8</sup> Fyodor Tyutchev, “Encyclical” (1864). A reference to Pope Gregory XVI’s statements in the encyclical *Mirari Vos* (1832) on liberty of conscience (see §14).—*Trans.*

<sup>9</sup> In personal correspondence, Nesmelov related to me his sufferings at the hands of ecclesiastical censorship.

<sup>10</sup> That is, in the Synodal era (1721–1917).—*Trans.*

more extensive, than in the modern era. Thus in the Middle Ages there was possible a flowering of very diverse and mutually contending theological, philosophical, and mystical schools. There was nothing equivalent to this in the Orthodox East. And now Catholic thought finds the possibility of movement, of responding to the problems of our era without being completely suffocated. So it is, for example, that among the French Catholic Thomists, that is, people who prize orthodoxy, there has arisen an entire movement of neo-humanism, very radical on social and cultural questions, standing at the top of the contemporary problematic. Participating in this movement are priests, Dominican monks and others, and they are left in peace. It is impossible to imagine something similar in the Orthodox sphere, among Orthodox clergy and monks who above all stand in need of culture and enlightenment. The most obscurantist clericalism is increasing among the Orthodox; among us there are only a few solitary figures who find themselves in a tragic situation.

On this painful theme I consider most shocking the destiny of the "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor." It was warmly greeted by K. Pobedonostev,<sup>11</sup> whom all of thinking Russia considered the Grand Inquisitor. This misapprehension was possible only because he related the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor exclusively to Catholicism and did not permit the idea that it could refer also to Orthodoxy. Apparently even Dostoevsky himself did not sufficiently grasp what he had written in this genius Legend, and perhaps he would have feared the logical conclusions to be drawn from it. With the Legend, Dostoevsky in effect revolted against any religion of authority, wherever and whenever it might appear, as the temptation

of the Antichrist. This was an unprecedented hymn to the freedom of Spirit, the most extreme form of religious anarchism. The Legend has a Catholic guise, but it refers not only to Catholicism; it refers to Orthodoxy, too, just as it also refers to the authoritarian religion of atheistic communism. For Dostoevsky, authority in religion is the spirit of the Antichrist, the acceptance of the temptation rejected by Christ in the desert. To this temptation all the churches in history have been subject. And they would always justify themselves as the Grand Inquisitor does, with concern over "these little ones." The *ukaz* of Metropolitan Sergius is quite in the Spirit of the Grand Inquisitor, yet without the poetry and melancholy of the latter. We must stop accusing Catholicism; better to take a look at ourselves. If a renewal awaits Russian Christianity, then it must overcome its self-satisfaction, its stale provincialism, its unchristian nationalism: it must enter the greater world.

I am not a cleric, I am neither a dogmatician nor a theologian. I am a free philosopher, and therefore in my criticism of the *ukaz* of Metropolitan Sergius I will stand on different ground than that on which Father S. Bulgakov must stand. I do not condone disputes about heresy, and instead I attempt to give my own psychological and sociological analyses of the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy. As a philosopher, I was amazed that Metropolitan Sergius speaks of Plato and Plotinus, the greatest philosophers of antiquity. He considers it damnable that Father Bulgakov appeals to Plato and Plotinus, and he sees in this the incriminating sources of Father Bulgakov's theological "heresies." It seems clear to him that these sources constitute pagan philosophy. We must decisively express

<sup>11</sup> Konstantin Pobedonostev, Ober-Procurator of the Most Holy Synod from 1880 to 1905.—*Trans.*



our protest against this expression itself, which reeks of musty seminarianism. The philosophy of Plato and Plotinus is not pagan philosophy; it is just philosophy. It is unclear what philosophy Metropolitan Sergius would consider acceptable—not the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, and hardly the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. It is clear that he completely rejects philosophy and considers it an impious affair. But for the same reason he should reject theology too, since theology is impossible without philosophy, without the categories of thought worked out by philosophy. It is well known that Greek patristic theology was steeped in Greek philosophy, in Neoplatonism. Saint John Damascus, the greatest authority in Orthodoxy, was steeped in Aristotelianism, as was Western scholasticism. Or does Metropolitan Sergius think that Orthodoxy is

pure fideism or something like religious feeling? In that case he is much closer to certain Protestant currents (Schleiermacher, Ritschl) than to the Greek teachers of the Church.

It is indisputable that Father S. Bulgakov is a Platonist. I myself am not a Platonist, and in the eyes of Metropolitan Sergius I profess a far worse philosophy than Platonism. But I am curious to know: since when is being a Platonist a heresy and a crime? Of course the theology of Father S. Bulgakov is gnosis, religious knowledge, and not an administrative synodal *ukaz*. But this does not mean that he has anything in common with Valentinus or Basilides. I think they have nothing in common. The gnostics had a dualistic approach, the complete opposite of sophiology. And what is known about the gnostics apart from what their enemies wrote about them, distorting their ideas?

Francisco Goya,  
*The Inquisition Tribunal*, 1812–19.  
Real Academia de  
Bellas Artes de San  
Fernando, Madrid.

I fear that they knew as much about the gnostics as Metropolitan Sergius learned about the ideas of Father S. Bulgakov through the presentation of Mr. Stavrovsky. But in free and civilized governments, those zealous for orthodoxy are not given the right to destroy the works of those they accuse of heresy.

Notwithstanding the confusion of the theological ideas expressed in Metropolitan Sergius' *ukaz*, one thing is clear: it stands exclusively on soteriological ground, that is, it permits only thought concerned with salvation. This is quite typical and completely understandable. An exclusively soteriological, that is, utilitarian understanding of the incarnation, the reduction of the entire Christian worldview to soteriology, allows for the possibility of fortifying the organization of power. Concealed behind this you will find the instincts of domination and of power. Those who hold in their hands the keys of salvation lord it over human souls. This is quite advantageous for the Grand Inquisitor's theory. In the *ukaz*, Father S. Bulgakov is accused of denying even the eternal torments of hell, although there is nothing about this in his books. But this is the favorite motif of the soteriological approach. It is precisely the teaching of the eternal torments of hell that has always been the main support of power, domination, and religious tyranny. In Metropolitan Sergius's dispute with Father S. Bulgakov, what appears most important is not the question of Sophia but rather the question of the incarnation. Is the incarnation exclusively a matter of salvation or is it the continuation of the creation of the world? Is the enhumanization of the Son of God a contingency elicited by sin, merely the correction of a mistake? Or is it part of

the plan of the world's creation, and the incarnation a universal divine process? Metropolitan Sergius rejects the fundamental idea that Russian religious thought has delivered, the idea of Divine-Humanity. He rejects the correspondence between Divinity and humanity, the humanity of God and the humanity of Christianity, and thereby he returns to the pre-Christian consciousness that, in fact, has always played a major role in institutional Christianity.

I now proceed to the fundamental question of orthodoxy and heresy. For me it is absolutely clear that the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy are sociological in character. "Orthodoxy" is the religious consciousness of the collective, and concealed behind it is the rule of that collective over its members. This is the organized domination of the genus over the individual. The nature of orthodoxy and heresy is quite clear in Russian communism. Every Soviet Communist philosophy stands under the banner of the difference between orthodoxy and heresy and not the difference between truth and error. By means of orthodoxy the central organs of the Communist party lord it over human souls. This is also a unique, anti-Christian soteriology. Heretics are doomed to damnation. This imitates what was earlier claimed in the religious sphere. Behind the hunt for and condemnations of heresies were always concealed the instincts of power and instincts of sadism, which have played a massive role in religious history. The whole doctrine of hell is the product of the sadism of some and the masochism of others. The condemnation of heresies has always had ecclesiastical-political motives, and concealed behind it has always lain malice. It is completely mistaken to think that the pathos



of orthodoxy is the pathos of truth. Orthodoxy and truth are completely different concepts and behind them lie different motives. The pathos of orthodoxy is the pathos of ruling, of domination and of compulsory unity, but not the pathos of truth and understanding. Orthodox doctrine is not understanding and it rejects understanding. It always has a utilitarian character. Better that the conservative orthodox not appeal to the love of truth—it does not suit them. For they have not only reconciled themselves with the unconscionable distortion of historical truth perpetrated by church historians but have also excommunicated those who defended historical truth. German Protestant scholarship has tremendous religious merits precisely because it has sought truth. The falsification of history is the especial product of orthodoxy. Marxist orthodoxy on this point is no different from religious orthodoxy.

Truth is disclosed only through freedom and not through authority, which strangles thought. Rule in the Church is a social reality and completely similar to rule in government or in primeval hordes and tribes. Everything here is opposed to the Gospel, opposed to the Kingdom of the Spirit, everything is based on unbelief in the Spirit. Christian reform demands the definitive overcoming of the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy as having a manifestly social and utilitarian character; it demands their replacement by the concepts of truth and error, or truth and lies. Truth grants freedom, it liberates, but orthodoxy produces the inquisitorial torture chamber and grants freedom only to the sadistic instincts of those in power. Christ said of himself that he is the truth, but a system of concepts thirsting for power says of itself that it is orthodox. Christ also said that he is the way and the

life. Orthodoxy [Ортодоксия] rejects the way and the life. If in fact the word “heresy” should ever be used, then the only real heresy is heresy against Christian life, not heresy against doctrines or against this or that system of concepts. The *ukaz* of Metropolitan Sergius is just such a heresy against Christian life. Precisely due to his striving for truth and from love for truth may a person reject a system of concepts that proclaims itself orthodox but that is irreconcilable with an acute conscience, with intellectual integrity. Dogmas are merely symbols of religious experience and of the religious path, not a frozen system of concepts, not intellectual doctrines; the latter always belong to a particular time and fluctuate. Religious truth can be accepted only actively, by a person’s integral spirit, by his enlightened reason and conscience.

Only a slave could accept a doctrine imposed by authority, if conscience does not accept it, if freedom does not agree to it. Without my freedom, nothing is meaningful for me. Phenomenologically, freedom has primacy over authority. Authority exists as long as people believe in it. But this means that faith has primacy over authority. And in the Catholic world, when authority attempts to violate the conscience and the consciousness of Catholics, no one really accepts this violence. Either they keep quiet and hide their views or they break away. Religious life concerns the spiritual plane of being and therefore nothing in it has meaning without freedom. But authority tries to lord over it through the terror associated with the threats of damnation and eternal hell. In this lies its baseness, which deprives the spiritual life of any value. This is religion on the social but not on the spiritual plane. In the *ukaz* of Metropolitan

Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergii Bulgakov, and Metropolitan Evlogy with YMCA leaders, Chantilly, 1933.



Sergius I see the same unbelief in spirit, the same faith in external means, similar to the external means of government, taken from the world of the societal attitudes of domination present in all ecclesiastical-administrative and governmental acts. People of ecclesiastical authority are people of little faith, they deny the spirit, they believe only in the world of visible things and its methods. The Spirit of God acts only through Spirit. There can be no criterion for the Holy Spirit taken from the lower spheres of being; the Holy Spirit is Its own criterion.

The consciousness of conservative church people, especially of those in power in the Church, predates the critique of knowledge, finding itself in the stage of naive realism. That is why they do not understand the dual character of revelation. They do not understand the activity of man in the reception of revelation: the relationship between the Subject and the object of revelation they interpret through naive realism. Revelation

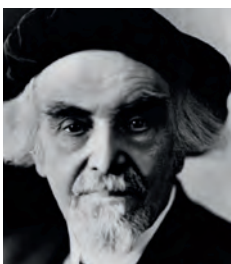
presupposes not only God but also man. There can be no revelation to a block of wood or to a stone. The Spirit reveals itself only to spirit, and the human spirit is always active in the reception of revelation. Revelation is refracted once it enters the human element and is conditioned by it, it is expressed in human language and in the categories of human thought. Hence the stages of revelation; hence development; hence the relative and conditional character of much of what was recognized as holy in the past but was bound up with human limitation. Hence too the necessity of continually purifying Christianity. The structure of human consciousness changes, the spiritual state of man varies. Man reacts creatively to what is revealed to him from above. To man, as to a free spirit, all new problems are posed, and these demand an answer. There exist problems that absolutely were not posed by the ecumenical councils. The ecumenical councils and the teachers of the Church absolutely did not face the problems of the cosmos and of man, the mystery of the created

world. There are no dogmas concerning man and the cosmos; there is only the dogma of the Holy Trinity and of Christ. For this reason, theological ferment and struggle are inevitable. For complicated philosophical reasons, I am not a proponent of the doctrine of Sophia, but I recognize the great significance of the problematic associated with this doctrine. My trouble with the doctrine of Sophia is the opposite of what troubles the conservative orthodox: I fear the possible conservative conclusions stemming from this teaching, I fear the sacralization in history of what cannot be sacred, for example, theocratic government, private property, the form of organic life, and the like. But I am in solidarity with Father S. Bulgakov in his new problematic and in his struggle for freedom of religious thought. At times it seems to me that if he had not used the Greek word Sophia but had only used the Russian word “Wisdom [Премудрость],” then he would have been left in peace. This is a sign of how insignificant and pathetic human accusations [of heresy] are.

The *ukaz* of Metropolitan Sergius seems to presuppose that every member of the Moscow Patriarchal

Church must share the theological views expressed in the *ukaz* and join in the condemnation of Father S. Bulgakov. The theme of the *ukaz*, in my opinion, has no connection to the infighting over ecclesiastical jurisdiction. But as a member of this Church,<sup>13</sup> I must decisively declare that I look on the condemnation of Father S. Bulgakov with the greatest indignation, as toward an obscurantist assault on thinking. Not only do I not share the theological ideas in this *ukaz* but I consider them to sit at the very lowest level of thought. Let the logical conclusions be drawn with respect to me. But I must say in advance that I submit to no coercion of human conscience and thinking. It is sad to think that the persecuted so easily become the persecutors. I remain in Christ’s Church, which is founded on love and freedom. For freedom and creativity in religious life, for the dignity of the human being, a heroic battle must be waged. Truth is no thing, no object, it is not a system of concepts falling from heaven; it creatively discloses itself and it is won on the way, in life. Truth is given, not to be kept in some corner, but to be realized in the fullness of life and to be developed. ✽

<sup>13</sup> Viz. the Moscow Patriarchate.—*Trans.*



*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.