

# Nicolas Berdyaev – The philosophical and political relevance of a spiritual autobiography

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Nicolas Berdyaev's spiritual autobiography was, unfortunately, the least well-known of his publications. Therefore, we will try to shed light on it, emphasising its philosophical and political value. We will describe the manner in which the author speaks in order to deepen our understanding of it. We will also consider the genesis of some of his works, noting the influence his spiritual experiences had on them. We will emphasise some of the main political aspects his spiritual autobiography contains, showing its usefulness in areas like political theology. Therefore, we will present the interdisciplinary value of this autobiography, together with its potential for building bridges between spirituality and different areas of science (theology, psychology, philosophy, politics, history, philology and possibly sociology) in an analysis dedicated to providing a holistic understanding of his work. We will observe how his spiritual experiences informed his way of thinking, allowing him to critique topics like modernity, a system based on freedom, love and human dignity and a profound understanding of eschatology as the accomplishment of the world and its mission.

**Contribution:** The research investigates Berdyaev's memorial work showing why it can be considered a spiritual autobiography and it emphasises also its relevance for the philosophical area.

**Keywords:** political theology; philosophy; theology; Russian culture; Communism.

## Introduction

An important voice of the Russian exile in France, Nicolas Berdyaev started as a Kantian-Marxist (ed. Audi 2015:97; Bompiani 2006:1187) and ended up a Christian-existentialist thinker. Having assented to a completely different way of thinking, he developed an interesting critique of his previously held beliefs (Pezzimenti 2013:97–99). Certain experiences, presented in his autobiographical notes altered his lifestyle and his way of thinking, bringing him closer to Christian spirituality. Authors who influenced his way of thinking include names like André Gide (Berdiaev 1992a:7; Gide 1946, 1948), Tolstoy (Berdiaev 1992a:50), Kant, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche (Berdiaev 1992a:180; Bompiani 2006:1187), but Dostoyevsky, to whom he dedicated an interesting essay (Berdiaev 1992b; Huisman 2001:414), remained his favourite. Therefore, some influence on his style and ideas can be traced to him.

The genesis of some of the Berdyaev's most important ideas can be found in his autobiography (Berdiaev 1992a, 1998). Published and republished in several editions, it contains information about topics like social justice, Pan-Slavism (Copilaş 2014:48–50) and political theology (Morariu 2019:1–4). Initially it was felt that his autobiography was more of an account of the elements that influenced his political orientation than an approach to his own interior beliefs. Little by little, edition after edition, the accent would be shifted towards one of spiritual seeking and the autobiography would change from a philosophical account to a more spiritual one. Moreover, he would often speak about the genesis of part of his books or about the way in which some of his ideas changed under the influence of certain religious or social experiences.

Conscious of this fact, we will try to see how the spiritual autobiography of the 'most translated Russian thinker of the 20th century' (ed. Craig 2005:93) recounts his interior metamorphosis, while also emphasising its philosophical and political dimensions. Both researchers who are interested in his work and its impact on society and those who want to place it in the larger context of contemporary philosophical works should benefit from such an approach. We will also try to answer questions like: How did Dostoyevsky and other writers influence his way of

thinking? Or what are the main aspects of his autobiography that can be considered relevant for contemporary discourse in political theology?

## Berdyaev's spiritual autobiography in the context of his work

If, according to commentators on his work, Berdyaev's criticism of modernity and modernism (Berdiaev 2001)<sup>1</sup> was one of his most important books which together with *The Sense of Creation* (ed. Cosma 2004:100) gained him an honorary PhD from Cambridge University (Michel 2001:207), while *Spirit and freedom* (Berdiaev 2009) is considered his most theological work (Huisman 2001:414), *Autobiography* is definitely his least known and least investigated work (Hughes 2015:66). There are some references and book reviews that tackle it (Casañas 1982:282–288) but there is still scope for many more studies of this work. Should one read a few of the authors who investigated all his publications or who provided a synthesis of some of his important books, one might think that *Autobiography* is only a peripheral essay where the author does not say anything new. For example, about the philosophical meaning of his book, a contemporary author said that:

Towards the end of his life, Berdyaev wrote an autobiographical essay that I have already mentioned, entitled: *Dream and Reality*.<sup>2</sup> There, he makes a presentation of his life, of his dreams and of the development of his ideas. It is a good introduction that helps the reader to feel the aroma of his ideas, his approach in understanding certain things. In the penultimate chapter, he gives an outline of his philosophical thinking. He begins with a small prayer of forgiveness, saying that in none of his books was he able to adequately express what he thought and quoted a verse from Tyutchev. (Louth 2015:64)

In fact, although the last chapter contains a synthesis of his philosophical approaches, references to this aspect of his thought can be found throughout the book. Classified among personalists with thinkers like Jacques Maritain (Laubier 2008; Maritain 1976), whom he deeply respected,<sup>3</sup> Berdyaev brought a different perspective to the subject. As one contemporary researcher underlined:

Berdyaev did not start his reflections with the individual human person and then move to God as an individual divine person, like in the Western personalist tradition. Instead, he began with the Trinity, [...] and viewed personality in terms of relatedness and intercommunion. (Hughes 2015:79)

This eschatological emphasis explains why he can be considered a philosopher of freedom, as well as some of his pantheistic tendencies. Whether in clear and explicit

1. 'Berdyaev gained worldwide fame with his book *Novoesrednevenkov'e* (*A new middle age* [1924] 2001), which was translated into 12 languages. He continued to develop several aspects of his philosophical works that were also quickly translated into different languages, until his death in 1948' (ed. Craig 1998:727).

2. In its first edition, this was the title of the spiritual autobiography of Berdyaev. Later, he would call it a philosophical autobiography and after that, a spiritual autobiography. Even nowadays, different editions and translations have different titles.

3. In the autobiography, he described Maritain as follows: 'Maritain is a mystic and our spiritual dialogues were very interesting. He is sensible and very sensible to the new modern tendencies. Yet, strangely enough, this does not affect his philosophy at all' (Berdiaev 1992a:331).

presentations or in notes recounting different aspects of his autobiography, the author often makes reference to eschatology and to its relationship with the personalist understanding of the world. Speaking about freedom as the basis of his system of thinking, Berdyaev characterised his way of thinking in a few lines of his autobiography as follows:

God wanted freedom and freedom was the one that brought the tragedy of the world. Freedom is in the beginning but also in the end. It is, as a whole, a philosophy of freedom that I built, improved and completed all my life. I am convinced that God is present only where there is freedom and that He can be found only within it. Freedom alone must be sacralised and false sacralisations, where history abounds, must be desacralized. (Berdiaev 1992a:65)

Beyond the clear philosophical accents that are important in understanding the landmarks of this rich work, there are also political accents. Although Russian society of the time (both before the October Revolution and after) did not overemphasise the economy and economic crises as it does presently (Makrides & Seraidari 2019:23), freedom was certainly under threat during different dictatorships and totalitarian movements – linked to the aforementioned economic sphere. This explains why the Russian thinker is not an idealist and why he sees the accomplishment of freedom only in an eschatological dimension.

It is also interesting to note how he understands the road to freedom in relation to the idea of suffering in his philosophical work. This element is linked with his conversion to Christianity but it is important to mention that it occurs especially with the help of Dostoyevsky's<sup>4</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoievski 1997) and with that of Tolstoy (Tolstoy 2005, 2013). About this, he confessed:

It is why I approached the heroes of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky (because here he found the idea of the hero in suffering), through which I reached Christianity.

Beyond the stage of inner metamorphosis I was about to experience, I felt penetrated by a great spiritual power. My whole life was transformed. I came to feel a great spiritual flight. I felt a curious resistance being born and growing in me, a kind of base of the uncontrolled spiritual being, not only because I discovered the truth, the meaning of life, but also because I had promised to dedicate my whole life to the search for and the service of truth, the search for the meaning of life. (Berdiaev 1992a:107)

## Political and spiritual relevance of Berdyaev's autobiography

Having presented the main aspects that define his autobiography in its context, we will now outline the main elements that make it valuable for areas like political theology. Without developing an extremely analytic approach, we will still try to have a critical view on his ideas where needed and

4. 'The problems related to the theodicy have always been at the centre of my religious research. Therefore, I am a son of Dostoyevsky' (Berdiaev 1992a:220; Damian 2010:206).

question some of his assumptions. This is in order not only to see their meaning and context but also to identify the influences exercised by other Russian or foreign thinkers on his writings and style.

### Truth and freedom: Pillars of Berdyaev's autobiography

Truth and freedom are, as should be stated from the beginning of our approach, the pillars of his thinking. Compared to other philosophers who often only theorised about different concepts, Berdyaev first experienced their lived reality. At times he rediscovered these concepts after having lost them at different moments of his life. After warmly welcoming the November revolution and after being tolerated to teach at Moscow University, he became the founder of the 'Free Academy of Spiritual Culture' in 1919 (Michel 2001:207). He was almost killed yet was eventually exiled. It was in exile that he experienced loneliness and solitude, first as a physical state and then as an inner way of feeling that would help him to get closer to God and understand the creation of values (Casañas 1982:284).<sup>5</sup> As he later testified, he would discover God as the fulfilment of the world and of human life:

Our world, which could very much exhaust reality, seemed derivative and far from God. God is at the centre. All that remains from Him is decentralized. Life would become flat and mean, if God and the higher world did not exist. (Berdiaev 1992a:212; Otto 2011)

Although different authors who investigated his life and activity distinguished between several levels of freedom in his thinking,<sup>6</sup> in his autobiographical notes, like in other works written by him (Berdiaev 2009), the accent falls not on the concept in itself but on its relationships with divinity. Having this as a base of his philosophy, the Russian writer also tackled topics like the giving up of freedom, seen as possible only before God. In this context, he spoke about the 'test of freedom', 'the world's slavery' (that brings him close to dualism) and the way in which Divinity is capable of giving freedom from slavery:

The renunciation to freedom is that which/it creates facilities [*sic*] and provides welfare to obedient children. Even sin I do not feel as disobedience, but as a loss of freedom. And freedom is divine for me. God is freedom and the One Who gives it, yet He is not the master, but the deliverer from the slavery of the world. (Berdiaev 1992a:229)

### Pantheism and political theology

In a context where authors like Fr. Serghei Bulgakov were condemned for speaking about the uncreated gift of '*Sophia*'

5.'The theme of creation, of the creative vocation of man, is the essential theme of my life. However, it is not the result of my philosophical thinking. It is an experience lived inside, an inner light [...]. Creation does not need justification, it is the one that justifies man, it is an anthropodicy. It is the subject of man's behaviour in relation to God, of his response to God' (Berdiaev 1992a:260).

6.'We distinguish in Berdyaev's thinking three kinds, levels or aspects of freedom. The first, called "meonic freedom", then the "post-meonic freedom." The second, called "post-meonic," is the freedom of God and that of man. In both God and man, this freedom, which is intended for them, implies the same tragedy, related to the conflict between good and evil on the one hand, and to good and good, or the two equal values of good, on the other hand. This natural freedom is a corrupt one, because it is bounded by necessity, and can only be restored in Jesus Christ, in Whom we have the third form of freedom' (Damian 2010:207).

(Bulgakov 2012), Berdyaev was also regarded with suspicion by Christians from different traditions. Some still criticise him and if they at least do not quite consider him a heretic, at least they come very close to it. He is often attacked for the notion of 'uncreated freedom' and for his apparently pantheistic ideas. In his notes, there is also information showing that he was aware of this aspect but always considered himself misunderstood:

The Orthodox, the Catholics, the Orthodox Protestants, have very strongly attacked my idea of uncreated freedom and have seen it as a non-Christian dualism, a Gnosticism, a limitation of the divine omnipotence. But I have always had the impression that I was not understood, which, doubtless, would not have happened had I been granted more attention. (Berdiaev 1992a:366)

As the dualist orientation of Berdyaev and its pantheist outcomes do not constitute the aim of our investigation, we will not insist on its content and on its theological import. Moreover, beyond his doctrinaire deviations, he succeeded in creating bridges between theology and philosophy. Therefore, as a contemporary researcher underlines:

He professes and builds a mystical philosophy because he believes that it is the only one that can overcome the opposition between the transcendent and the immanent and this fact is essential in finding answers to man's fundamental questions and problems. (Damian 2010:205–206)

In order to accomplish this task and develop the arguments of his discourses, he advanced topics like pure spirituality and humanity. Nonetheless, he was aware of the difficulty of his endeavour, since the superior of the two is very hard to reach by humankind.<sup>7</sup> With the purpose to distinguish his way of thinking from that of controversial systems like Bulgakov's, he formulated his ideas relating two topics, namely human intuition and the already mentioned creative freedom. The former was detailed in his spiritual autobiography:

Human intuition and creative freedom constituted my starting point [*in creation*], not *Sophia* or the sanctification of the flesh, as has happened with others. The evil of human life is what has troubled me most. It does not identify with the feeling of sinfulness, like in Calvin or Luther, for example, or like in Jansenists and in monastic-ascetic Orthodoxy. (Berdiaev 1992a:205)

It is difficult to say if the writing of a spiritual autobiography represents for Berdyaev an exercise of self-knowing, an attempt of healing himself of some bad experience or simply a way of life. Even for the author, this aspect seems to be rather unclear. As has been the case for other authors of spiritual autobiographies, writing about the self is a complex experience, difficult to define and can have multiple outcomes (Morariu 2019:2). The only clear thing is the honesty of the author at the beginning of the paper and the difficulty of investigating the self. For the Russian philosopher, the exercise of writing does not seem to be very difficult:

I have always written. For me, writing is a spiritual hygiene, a form of meditation and concentration, a way of life. I have

7.'Spirituality and pure humanity are hardly accessible to humans. Pure humanity seems to be alien, distant and inaccessible to man. Pure humanity is divine, desirable in the eyes of Christ. The essence of Christianity and its great novelty resided in the revelation of God's humanity, in the humanisation of God, in that it filled the abyss between God and man' (Berdiaev 1992a:387).

always been able to write, in all circumstances and in any state of mind. I could write with a 39 degree fever, with a severe headache, in the worst conditions, during the Moscow bombings of 1917, and the Paris ones of 1940 and 1944. The cover of my soul, very receptive and sensitive, could vibrate, I could feel a state of distress; but my spirit remained free of the ambience, turned towards the creative action. It is what has given me strength my whole life, despite my weaknesses; and in this I have felt a beneficent gift. (Berdiaev 1992a:278)

The fact that Berdyaev was capable of writing in almost any situation and did not suffer (as he confessed in the spiritual autobiography) from crises of inspiration like other writers, does not mean that he was not demanding on himself or that he had low standards. Not at all! He was very critical of himself and the release of a book never made him feel fully pleased. He often spoke about this topic in the aforementioned book (Berdiaev 1992a). There in a note dedicated to one of the books that contains *in nuce* his entire philosophical way of thinking based on freedom, which, unfortunately was not very warmly received at that time, he presented the reasons that made him rewrite some of his books and the style adopted in the work:

[I]t's been quite a long time, about thirty-five years, since I wrote the *Philosophy of Freedom*. From the philosophical point of view, this book does not satisfy me anymore and, from another point of view, I am not one of those writers who, pleased with their ideas, release them voluntarily. On the contrary, I do not like to re-read or read my previous works. I appreciate the creative exaltation that is lived, not the product of this projected exaltation. I wanted to re-write each of my works. Already in exile, I developed a new philosophy of freedom, under the title of: *The Spirit of Freedom* (Berdiaev 2009). This philosophy is better, but I think I have not yet been able to now write this book better. In fact, this problem of freedom haunts me in all my books. (Berdiaev 1992a:127)

However, among the topics approached by Berdyaev in his work, there are also some related to the political sphere and to the author's convictions about it. As a Russian thinker, he initially developed a philosophy that tried to establish peace between nationalism and the sense of universalism (Berdiaev 1992c:48–49; Ivlampie 2001:13). He started as a Marxist, being even tolerated among the leftist intelligentsia in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Yet, as he underlined in this note: 'I have never adhered to social trends. I have always been "an anarchist" and "an individualist" and I have always placed myself on a spiritual level' (Berdiaev 1992a:10).

Before being exiled by the ones in whom he trusted and before changing both his principles of life and his way of thinking, Berdyaev was also a man who fought for the revolutionary cause. He was even imprisoned and exiled for this reason. This was the moment when he discovered Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and other important authors of Russian culture which made him place it among the happy periods of his life.<sup>8</sup> It was

8.'Before my exile to Volgodia, I went through a period of flight and prosperity, one of the most fruitful periods of my life. It was shadowed, like all my youth, by a dramatic situation of disorientation, but I always think about this period with a feeling of happiness, despite the fact that I've also kept painful memories' (Berdiaev 1992a:156).

there that he met his wife<sup>9</sup> and started to see the exterior events only in relation to their interior spiritual relevance.<sup>10</sup> It was there also that he understood that the period before the exile was one of maximum popularity (Berdiaev 1992a:158).

Nevertheless, 1922 was the moment when, forced to leave Russia forever,<sup>11</sup> he embarked upon a difficult yet fruitful period, becoming a prolific author and having the possibility of developing interdisciplinary topics useful for areas like political theology (Morariu 2019:3). It was after this year that his conception about freedom in relation to eschatology and pantheism took shape and meaning, going through a process of metamorphosis, just like the author. In his spiritual autobiography, Berdyaev would speak about all these aspects and their influence that changed him, while underlining the way in which the spiritual experience made him choose some of his important ideas and plead for them.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that Berdyaev's spiritual autobiography has been insufficiently tackled by contemporary research, this is where the author starts to present and investigate himself, beginning with his childhood and using even genetic characteristics to emphasise certain patterns of his behaviour.<sup>12</sup> It is an important work with an interdisciplinary value, which can be used not only to understand the author and his ideas but also to see the genesis of some of his books. We can also notice in the autobiography how his ideas changed because of the experiences he underwent. Berdyaev's spiritual autobiography contains the basis of his ideas about topics like freedom, eschatology and love, useful both for philosophy and for political theology, together with his conceptions about theology. As I have tried to show, this transforms the work into a useful tool for those who want to understand the author, his work and the relationship between the two. At the same time, the work shows the author's interior freedom which defines his way of thinking. It makes him not only a Christian existentialist who sees God and his manifestation

9.'In the summer of 1904, I moved to St. Petersburg in order to publish a new magazine. My departure was preceded by important events that changed my life. The summer of 1904 was decisive. I met Lydia again, the friend of my life. She had a religious nature demonstrated by the revolutionary experience, which had a particular value. She had a strong and profound faith which, on several occasions, was of great help to me. She was a being of a rare spirituality. At the end of her life, she got close to holiness' (Berdiaev 1992a:175).

10.As one of his biographers underlined: 'For Berdyaev, the events of his outer life, or his social life, have value and significance only in relation to their spiritual content, always dominant in relation to the exterior world, only in relation to the source and meaning. And when the philosopher refers to a fact from his biography, the commentator often does not have much to add, because the details omitted by the author appear to be unimportant in front of the essential, existentialist vision of the phenomenon, a vision that starts from within the phenomenon' (Vadimov 1998:9–10).

11.'In September 1922, Nicolas Berdyaev was forced to leave his beloved Russia forever. To obtain his departure, he had to sign his own death sentence, accepting to be killed on the execution camp if he ever came back to the Soviet borders' (Marange 2009:14).

12.Therefore, he shows that: 'It is necessary to mention some defining characteristics of our family. I belong to a predominant race of people, with a predisposition for anger crises. My father, a very good man, had a very lively character and, because of it, had many clashes and conflicts during his life. My brother, a man with an extraordinary kindness, had real anger crises. I have also inherited this irritable and dominant character. It is a mark of Russian boyars. As a child, I felt the need to hit some people around me with the chair. A certain loneliness adds to all these; I have also seen it as a way in which the world has perceived me, but also through my own conscience' (Berdiaev 1992a:21).

towards freedom as the basis for human existence and its evolution, but also a Christian personalist, bringing him closer to the approaches of authors like Jacques Maritain (Laubier 2008; Maritain 1952, 1968, 1976), while at the same time distinguishing his contribution from theirs. What is more, it is valuable also for its psychological insights (because the author tries to know himself better by describing his evolution since childhood and, most probably, by overcoming moments that were painful in his life) and for the practical use of political ideas and approaches it presents. Berdyaev's autobiography can undoubtedly be considered a work of philosophical and political merit needing to be rediscovered not only by philosophers and theologians but also by researchers in the area of political science. Those who want to better grasp the Russian context and its role in the development of a certain orientation towards the political space too would benefit from his insights. At the same time, there are also aspects that ought to be criticised in it. His dualist approach, the fact that is not very clear where his philosophical approach ends and his theological one begins, the fact that there are passages of his work where he refuses to speak about his political orientation, his political beliefs and the reasons motivating him at different times of his life which inspired him to have one or other attitude regarding a problem, a regime or a historical situation leaves many unanswered questions for the inquisitive student.

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### Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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