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Towards an Orthodox Theology of Liberation: An Examination of the Works of Nicolas Berdyaev

Abstract

Orthodox Christians are no strangers to liberation struggles as they have experienced hardship in totalitarian and oppressive regimes. Therefore it seems odd that the theology of liberation does not appeal to them. This essay attempts to highlight some of the reasons why the Orthodox Church finds liberation theology unacceptable. However, that does not mean that the Orthodox Church is indifferent to the sufferings and cries of its people living under the weight of unjust social, economic and political structures. There were Russian Orthodox thinkers whose writings were critical of the socio-political and religious status quo and sought to reconcile communism with Christianity. Nicolas Berdyaev was one of them. Critical of both



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capitalism and socialism, Berdyaev's works provide insights into topics like Christian anthropology, social justice, Marxism, history and eschatology. At the same time, like most liberation theologians, he favoured some form of socialism. In fact, the writings of Berdyaev reveal to us themes that anticipate the theology of liberation.

Keywords

Nicolas Berdyaev, Gustavo Gutiérrez, theology of liberation, praxis, Marxism, history, eschatology

1 Introduction

Started in the 1950-1960s in Latin America, the theology of liberation was a response to the plight of the poor, marginalized and dehumanized sector of society caused by social injustice in the region. The term was used by Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Catholic priest, in his seminal work published in 1973, *A Theology of Liberation*. His theological approach was a sincere attempt to bring about a just society.

Liberation theology interprets the teaching of Christ with the aim of helping the poor to free them from unjust economic, political and social conditions. Its methodology is to do theology from the point of view of the economically poor and downtrodden members of the community by identifying with their struggles and hope. This means that the church must concentrate its effort on liberating people from poverty and oppression and must fight for their rights.

Gutiérrez puts it simply: "The theology of liberation tries – in ecclesial communion – to be a language about God. It is an

attempt to make present in this world of oppression, injustice and death, the Word of life.”¹

Liberation theology has its roots in the long biblical tradition in which God liberated his people not only from sin and eternal damnation, but also from social and political oppression. Orthodox Christians, also deeply rooted in biblical tradition, had been oppressed and marginalized in Russia. They had also been involved in political conflicts in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and elsewhere in Europe. It is therefore surprising to find Orthodox Christians, who are no strangers to liberation struggles, reluctant to adopt and develop the theology of liberation.

This essay seeks to examine the Orthodox Church’s reticence to embrace liberation theology in spite of the fact that its members have experienced much poverty, oppression, vulnerability and suffering as in Latin America and the Caribbean. Technically the term “liberation theology” cannot be used to describe the religious-revolution movements in Russia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Notwithstanding the Orthodox Church’s lack of enthusiasm to accept liberation theology, there were Russian thinkers who had displayed socio-critical strands in their writings reflecting the themes of liberation.

In view of this, we will discuss the writings of Nicolas Berdyaev, a Russian Orthodox existentialist philosopher, focusing on issues related to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s theology of liberation. As we shall see, in spite of their different backgrounds, there are striking similarities in their theological, social and political analysis in the light of biblical tradition. In many ways, the theological and socio-political commentaries of Berdyaev anticipate the theology of liberation. First, we will examine

¹ G. Gutiérrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” in: Ch. Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 37.

some of the reasons why Orthodox Christians find the teaching of liberation theology unacceptable.

2 Contextual versus Universal

Heavily influenced by the material condition and culture of society, liberation theology is based on praxis and context. Concerned with abolishing oppressive structures, liberation theology is directed neither by classical manuals nor tradition, but by present realities and future possibilities. Its commitment to social change is based on the gospel values seen through eyes of the poor and marginalized.²

Liberation theology takes a critical and clear attitude towards economic, social and cultural issues in society. It is critical not just of society, but of the church as well, in so far as they fail to establish a more equitable society based on gospel values. Liberation theology takes its inspiration not only from revelation and tradition, but also from historical process. Because it is open to historical process, “truths” which have been established once and for all are considered “static” and in the long run, “sterile.”³ Not denying orthodoxy, liberation theology seeks to balance and even to reject the exclusiveness and primacy of Christian doctrine. Furthermore, liberation theology regards the obsession with orthodoxy as nothing more than fidelity to an out-dated tradition.⁴

Unlike liberation theology with its focus on context and praxis, Orthodox theology strives to be universal and contemplative. It seeks to formulate a “universal theology” that can unite all Christians and regards its tradition as living, developing, and

² See S. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 2002), pp. 70 – 73.

³ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1973), p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

normative.⁵ Vladimir Lossky argues that “theology must be of universal expression. It is not by accident that God has placed the Fathers of the Church in a Greek setting; the demands for lucidity in philosophy and profundity in gnosis have forced them to purify and to sanctify the language of the philosophers and of the mystics, to give to the Christian message, which includes but goes beyond Israel, all its universal reach.”⁶

While liberation theology emphasises the immanence of God and the humanity of the suffering Christ, Orthodox theology, profoundly soteriological, emphasises the transcendence of God and the divinity of Christ.⁷

For the Orthodox, faith is “a personal adherence to the personal presence of God Who reveals Himself.” Theology “as word and as thought must necessarily conceal a gnostic dimension, in the sense of the theology of contemplation and silence.”⁸

Although it acknowledges the importance of theological teaching as part of historical work here on earth, with careful consideration to space and time, Orthodox theology stresses contemplation: “Nourished with contemplation, it does not become established in silence but seeks to speak the silence, humbly, by a new use of thought and word.”⁹

Faith is regarded as an “ontological relationship between man and God.”¹⁰ This Orthodox understanding of faith as contemplation is a far cry from the action-packed theology of

⁵ S. Hayes, “Orthodoxy and liberation theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 73 (December 1, 1990), p. 13.

⁶ V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 2001), pp. 30-31.

⁷ P. Bouteneff, “Liberation: challenges to modern orthodox theology from the contextual theologies,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 63, no. 3-4 (January 1, 2012), p. 27.

⁸ V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 2001), p. 13.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

liberation that seeks to overthrow unjust social and political structures with violence if necessary.

Another reason why the Eastern Church is reluctant to adopt the Latin American model of liberation theology is the understanding that Orthodox theology is “liberation theology” as it is. The incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ lead to our liberation from the bondage of sin and damnation. Christ rescues us from the clutches of sin and thus liberation is at the heart of the gospel.

3 Western Influence

In spite of the fact that liberation theologians are highly critical of European thoughts and deny that their theology is European, they have actually assimilated many of those Western ideas in one way or another. Here I like to mention the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann who exerted a profound influence on liberation theologians and others as well.

In his *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann criticises the static eschatological concept in Christianity. Moltman writes:

“To believe means to cross in hope and anticipation the bounds that have been penetrated by the raising of the crucified (...) the man who thus hopes will never be able to reconcile himself with the laws and constraints of this earth (...) Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation *in* suffering, but also the protest of the divine *against* suffering.”¹¹

Believing that Christian mission is not just to spread the faith and the hope that goes with it, Moltmann insists that evangelisation must be involved in the “historic transformation of life.”¹² Here it means that the gospel challenges us to bring

¹¹ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), pp. 20-21.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 330.

about a more equitable world, to close the gap between the sorry state of affair now and the promised future.

Echoing Karl Marx, Moltman writes, "The theologian is not concerned merely to supply a different *interpretation* of the world, of history and of human nature, but to *transform* them in expectation of a divine transformation."¹³

Influenced by Moltmann and at the same time critical of his work, Gutiérrez argues that "The hope which overcomes death must be rooted in the heart of historical praxis; if this hope does not take shape in the present to lead it forward, it will be only an evasion, a futuristic illusion."¹⁴ In other words, Christianity is moving towards the future and beyond, but those who are too concerned with the "beyond" run the risk of neglecting to work for a just society and to struggle for liberation from unjust economic and political structures.

Marxism, another European thought, exerts a powerful influence on the theology of liberation. Liberation theologians make use of Marxist categories in their social analysis with the hope of changing the unjust social and political structure in Latin American society. Like Marx, these theologians recognise that economics plays a crucial role in the historical process. They embrace the Marxist notion of class struggle and believe that the oppressed must shape their own history by taking up the liberating praxis of the gospel.

Gutiérrez acknowledges the influence of Marxist thought as a positive force with its focus on praxis and the transformation of the world. He considers the confrontation between contemporary theology with Marxism as "fruitful."¹⁵

Appreciating Marx's analysis, Gutiérrez writes: "Pointing the way towards an era in history when man can live humanly,

¹³ Ibidem, 84.

¹⁴ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1973), p. 218.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 9.

Marx created categories which allowed for the elaboration of a science of history.”¹⁶

Framed in Marxist categories, liberation theology is rejected by the Orthodox Church. Latin Americans, living under unjust social and political structures, may find communism influenced by Marx, enlightening and liberating. In fact, Latin American liberation theologians take pride in using Marxist analysis as it is scientific and respectable in the Western world.

Orthodox Christians living in the former Communist states of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries find Marxism extremely repulsive because it is associated with oppressive regimes and dictatorship. In Europe, communism has collapsed, and in the so-called communist countries, preserving Marxism is only an excuse for those in authority to remain in power. In China, we have “socialism with Chinese characteristics” which basically means relentless capitalism coupled with dictatorship of the Communist Party. The military in China is characteristically called, *The People’s Liberation Army*.

Orthodox critical perception of Marxism is echoed by Joseph Ratzinger who claims that “where the Marxist ideology of liberation had been consistently applied, a total lack of freedom had developed, whose horrors were now laid bare before the eyes of the entire world.”¹⁷

Commenting on the issue of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, a crucial theme in liberation theology, Ratzinger points out that orthopraxy means “right action” which is related to the code of rites and orthodoxy means right way of worshipping and glorifying God (*doxa*) as understood by the early Eastern Churches.¹⁸

In spite of the Orthodox’s distrust of Marxism, there were Christian thinkers in Russia, Sergius Bulgakov and Nicolas

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 116.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 124-125.

Berdyaeu, for example, who had attempted to assimilate Marxist thought in their theology. Marxism actually became an inspiration for some theologians who were anxious to create a more just and humane society in Russia.

4 Back in the USSR

The 1917 revolution in Russia culminated in the overthrow of the Tsarist imperial regime and the establishment of a new socialist state. Before this event, throughout those years of oppression, political groups like the *Mensheviks* (pure Marxists), the *Bolsheviks* (Neo-Marxists) and other socio-political groups emerged which influenced both secular and religious groups including some well-known theologians. According to Alexander Negrov, "The Russian religious philosophy of that period was devoted to the goals of a practical transformation of life and society and to a recognition of God as the substantial factor."¹⁹

Advocates of this philosophy accused the Orthodox Church of being too concerned with the afterlife and thereby neglecting to make the message of Christ relevant to the needs of people in this present life. They wanted the Orthodox Church to be more involved in the lives of the common folk, in the social, economic and political transformation of the country.

Nicolas Berdyaeu puts it succinctly when he writes: "the light, which comes upon the highest leaders of organized religion must shine toward the lower horizons of the society."²⁰ In other words, the Orthodox Church must make a shift from insisting on religious piety to implementing concrete pastoral programmes for the people. Its theology, then, must reflect and respond to the specific situations and issues in Russia. In the

¹⁹ A. I. Negrov, "An overview of liberation theology in orthodox Russia," *HTS* 61(1&2) 2005, p. 330.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 331.

light of this, Marxism became an inspiration and a challenge for Orthodox Christians like Berdyaev, whose philosophical and theological writings were critical of the ecclesiastical, social and political structures of Russian society.

A significant feature of Russian theology in the twentieth century is the focus on the Kingdom of God – regnocentrism. There was this intense seeking of the Kingdom of God which led some Orthodox theologians to call for the “Christianization of the world and for the activity of humans in the world.”

Negrov claims that “Russian theological thought at the end of the nineteenth century was very social in its focus (...). Hidden behind these social utopias was the search for the Kingdom of God. Russian thinkers attempted to find a path for Russia which might avoid the development of capitalism with its inevitable triumph in the spiritual, moral and socio-economic spheres.”²¹

Berdyaev, for example, called upon Christians to be creative in changing and improving the social order. He also reminded us that nothing is eternal, neither socialism nor capitalism. Our history points towards the realisation of the Kingdom of God and this implies that we do not have a perfect society on earth, but we can improve society for the betterment of humankind. A perfect society can come about only through the “transfiguration of the world” which is the coming of the Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem.²²

Some Russian Orthodox thinkers were convinced that socialism could help to create a more equitable society. They believed that socialism is not all-together incompatible with Christianity and that it could lead to the realisation of social justice where the exploitation of human beings will not be allowed. This means that Christians should promote the socialisation of society that would guarantee people’s right to work, to live life to the full and to promote justice. They also believed that only

²¹ Ibidem, p. 333.

²² N. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1945), pp. 231-232.

the church, because of its spiritual orientation, is able to create the New Man that Marxism promotes.

Nicolas Berdyaev was one of those thinkers who believed that it was possible for a Christian to be a socialist. In fact, Berdyaev insisted that a Christian “ought to be a socialist.”²³ We will now turn to his life and works.

5 Life and Thought of Nicolas Berdyaev

Born in 1874, of Russian gentry origin, Nicolas Alexandrovitch Berdyaev, came from a long line of military men, including his father, who was an officer in the Imperial Guards. Not surprisingly, he was sent to the Military Cadet Corps for his education. But he disliked all things military and rebelled against regimentation.

In 1894, Berdyaev enrolled as a law student at Kiev University and his concern with social justice led him to Marxism. In 1900, as a Marxist idealist, he began to write books and articles, a task which he continued until his death in 1948. Berdyaev’s participation in political revolts led to his expulsion from the university. Never gaining a degree, he read widely and independently. He was attracted to Marxism, but the writings of Ibsen and Dostoyevsky helped him to recognise Marxism’s philosophical weaknesses.²⁴

In 1901, after his return from exile, Berdyaev met a young professor, Sergius Bulgakov (1871 – 1944), who influenced him to embrace Orthodox Christianity. Bulgakov had been a Marxist and taught economics in Kiev. The two became life-long friends. In 1903, Berdyaev went to Germany to study for a semester at the University of Heidelberg. Upon his return to Russia, he met

²³ Ibidem, p. 334.

²⁴ F. Nucho, *Berdyaev’s Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 11-12.

and married Lydia Yudifovna and settled in St. Petersburg where he edited *The New Way*.²⁵

Moving to Moscow in 1908 to join the Religious Philosophy Society there, Berdyaev met a group of religious thinkers who had experienced the same religious struggles that he was undergoing. Their open discussion of religious philosophy aroused his interest in Russian Orthodoxy and his own philosophical ideas began to take shape. It was around 1905 that Berdyaev took Orthodox Christianity seriously and became friendly with some famous Orthodox theologians. Conscious of his faith as a Christian, he turned from Marxism to Christianity.²⁶

A faithful son of the Orthodox Church, Berdyaev valued the freedom that existed in this great family of Eastern Orthodox. Built on the principles of self-government, both the clergy and the laity share in building the church, the body of Christ. As a result, the Orthodox Church is closely related to the people and culture of the place.

The freedom and simplicity in Orthodox theology also attracted Berdyaev. He felt at home in the Orthodox Church because it was not authoritarian and absolute in its teachings and practices as he said: "I have not known authority (...) most particularly, in my religious life."²⁷

Well acquainted with many theological works, Berdyaev had attempted to study the nature and essence of Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. He came to the conclusion that Orthodoxy is "less susceptible of definition and rationalization than either Catholicism or Protestantism."

This feature of Orthodoxy gives the church more freedom, and thus, in his opinion, it is superior to the other branches of Christianity. Though not a typical Orthodox believer, he insisted that he has never severed his link with the Orthodox Church.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 12.

²⁶ N. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1950), p. 180.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 48.

However, he was not totally satisfied with it and did not consider his church as the only true one.²⁸ Upon his arrival in Paris in 1923, Berdyaev took part in ecumenical gatherings between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants.²⁹ Thus it was no surprise that when Berdyaev died on March 23, 1948, his Orthodox funeral service was attended by Catholics and Protestants, a sign of true ecumenical observance.³⁰

As a Russian philosopher, Berdyaev's outlook is not well known in Western circles. The influence of the Orthodox Church has a peculiar influence on the Russian mind. There are also differences between Western and Eastern Christianity and the societies they formed.³¹ But, as we shall see, when it comes to dealing with the pain and anguish of humanity, the plight of the poor and oppressed, there are striking similarities in the way theologians of both traditions interpret their situations in the light of scripture.

In this short biographical sketch above, we have noticed that Nicolas Berdyaev prized freedom more than other things on earth. He was called the "philosopher of freedom. In fact he himself has written, "I do indeed love freedom above all else (...) From my early childhood I was wedded to freedom"³² and "the problem which preoccupied me above every other was that of freedom."³³

He continues: "Freedom, unconditional and uncompromising freedom, has been the fountain-head and prime mover of all my thinking."³⁴ In view of his struggle for freedom throughout his life, Berdyaev was critical of the shortcomings of both

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 177.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 258.

³⁰ D. A. Lowrie, (editor and translator), *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), p. 23.

³¹ D. B. Richardson, *Berdyaev's Philosophy of History* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p. xvii.

³² N. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1950), p. 46.

³³ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 158.

capitalism and socialism. Nonetheless, his tendency was towards supporting socialism as the basis of government because of his concern for social justice.

6 Capitalism and Socialism

Critical of both capitalism and socialism, Berdyaev argues that in the struggles for workers' rights, both systems regard the person merely as a function of society. Nineteenth century capitalism in Marx's analysis means the desire to maximise profit rather than the desire to meet real human needs. The workers are alienated in capitalist society because they are regarded not as individuals with positive human traits, but as a source of manpower to be exploited in the pursuit of wealth. Berdyaev equates socialism with Marxism.

Although Christian Ethics is opposed to the ideologies of capitalism and socialism, Berdyaev believes that there is partial truth in socialism and that the "morally objectionable aspects of socialism have been inherited by it from capitalism."³⁵ As such, he is more concerned with the struggle against capitalism than socialism in the liberation of workers.

For Berdyaev, the struggle against the injustice of capitalism is the "struggle for the economic rights of the individual, for the concrete rights of the producer and not for the abstract rights of the citizen." Liberation of the worker is the liberation of the person from the oppressive clutches of capitalism.³⁶

Social problems are related to that of private property, and thus, according to Berdyaev, socialism is right to question the institution of private property. Obviously, an unlimited and absolute right of property results in some people being impoverished. In other words, uncontrolled private property

³⁵ N. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1945), pp. 213–214.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

breeds “evils and iniquities of feudalism and capitalism”. It also leads to “unendurable social inequality, proletarianization of the masses and the loss by the workers of the means of production.”

Such a situation can only increase “envy, malice and vindictiveness that the oppressed lose all human semblance,” becoming a “non-person” as it were. At the same time, Berdyaev has acknowledged that there is a right to private property because it is connected to the principle of personality. The person must be given some power over the material things in this world and the state has no right to deprive him of such things, including the freedom of thought, conscience, speech and the right to move freely. This means the right to private property is related to freedom. If the state is the sole owner of all the material goods in society, the people will be enslaved: “Economic dependence deprives man of freedom, whether it be dependence upon capitalists or upon the community and the state.”³⁷

Berdyaev argues that the problem of absolute private property cannot be solved by transferring this right from a few owners to the state. This would only lead from one tyranny to another – from a few rich individuals like bankers and owners of factories to the community or the state. This would result in more restriction of freedom. For Berdyaev, true liberation consists in denying unlimited power to anyone. It is “godless or anti-Christian” to believe that some people can have absolute ownership of the material world. Absolute right of property belongs to God only.

Therefore the right of owning property must be shared between the individual and the society, and they must be limited and functional as well. Berdyaev argues that property helps the human being to realize his freedom, but it can also be a means of exploitation and tyranny. This evil can be avoided

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

when God becomes the absolute owner and man acts as his steward. Believing that the desire for limitless wealth lies at the basis of the capitalist society with its deceptions and contradictions, Berdyaev calls for self-control and self-limitation in acquiring properties.³⁸

Though Berdyaev is critical of both capitalism and socialism, he favours socialism as the basis of government. He believes it is capitalism that destroys the reality of property. In struggling against capitalism, Berdyaev speaks of the need to “re-establish the spiritually personal attitude to the world of things and material goods, the ultimate bond between personality and the world in which it is called upon to act.”

While he believed in unlimited freedom in the spiritual realm, Berdyaev calls for restricted freedom in the economic realm. Economic freedom must be reduced to the minimum or it will lead to great abuses as when people are deprived of their daily bread. In this respect, Berdyaev upholds socialism. He insists that it is the responsibility of the state to protect one social class, usually the poor and marginalised, from the oppression of another, namely the rich and powerful. The ideal situation would be to develop the professional middle class.³⁹

Some of the issues raised by Berdyaev above are reflected in the theology of liberation as they affect the lives of the poor and marginalised. We shall now examine some specific topics in the works of Gutiérrez and Berdyaev. In spite of their different cultural, historical and even religious backgrounds, there are striking similarities in their discourses. These topics concern Christian anthropology, praxis, Marxism, history and eschatology.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

7 Christian Anthropology

Gustavo Gutiérrez⁴⁰ argues that the point of departure for contemporary theology since the Age of the Enlightenment has been the challenge raised by the modern secular spirit. The West has been affected by aggressive secularism that denies the existence of God or relegates religion to the private sphere. However, in the Latin America continent and the Caribbean, the challenge comes not from the non-believers, but from the “non-persons,” who have been deprived of their status as human beings. Gutiérrez claims that “the ‘non-person’ questions not so much our religious universe but above all our economic, social, political and cultural order, calling for a transformation of the very foundations of a dehumanizing society.”⁴¹

The notion of personhood, “personality,” features significantly in Berdyaev’s writings. Berdyaev is very much aware of how society can deprive a person of his dignity as a human being, making him into a “non-person” in Gutiérrez’s sense. He condemns the champions of capitalism who wanted to justify and preserve the form of economic slavery known as free labour. The capitalist and socialist societies do not recognise “personality” as an ultimate value. The value of personality is over taken by the value of material wealth. In other words, what you have is more important than what you are. Instead of “personality” in Berdyaev’s sense, which values the dignity of the human person, the bourgeois capitalist society encourages “individualism,” which destroys and dehumanises people.

Stressing the importance of the human person, Berdyaev writes: “Personality is the image and likeness of God in man and this is why it rises above the natural life (...) The value of personality is the highest hierarchical value in the world, a

⁴⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavo_Guti%C3%A9rrez.

⁴¹ G. Gutiérrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” in: Ch. Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 28.

value of the spiritual order (...) the idea of personality lies at the basis of ethics.”⁴² In other words, the theology of liberation demands that we give “non-person” back their “personalities.” Further, he argues that “the so-called individualism, characteristic of the bourgeois capitalist society and connected with economic freedom and unlimited right of private property, has nothing to do with personality and is hostile to it.”⁴³ Believing that the individualism of the capitalist society destroys the dignity of the human person, Berdyaev seeks to uphold the sacredness of “personality” which is related to the inherent value of the human person who is made in the image of God.

Influenced by Kant and Christianity, Berdyaev teaches that human personality is “the highest hierarchical value in the world.” This means that all exploitation by an economic system, a state or society, is a denial of this fundamental Christian truth. In exploitation and oppression, the human being is treated like an object, a means or a thing.

But in reality, according to Berdyaev, the human person is “a greater value than society, nation, government, although he is often crushed by society, nation, and government which make themselves idols of the objectified, fallen world.”⁴⁴ Personality is “resistance, an unbroken creative act.”⁴⁵ Therefore it is important for the personality not to submit to unjust and oppressive structures, but to resist.

⁴² N. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1945), p. 55.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

⁴⁴ Quoted in: M. Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949), p. 139.

⁴⁵ N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1944), p. 49.

8 Reflection on Praxis

In doing theology of liberation, according to Gutiérrez, the first step is to contemplate God, to discover and put into practice his will for us. This means the veneration of God and doing his will come together. The consequence of prayer is the commitment towards the poor in which we find the Lord (cf. Mathew 25: 31-46). Gutiérrez writes: "Contemplation and commitment in human history are fundamental dimensions of Christian existence; in consequence, they cannot be avoided in the understanding of faith."

The first act is solidarity with the poor in which the mystery is revealed. The second act is reasoning.⁴⁶ In other words, theology, as a critical reflection in the light of the Word, helps us to understand the relationship between our life of faith and the need to build a more equitable and humane society.

Hence, an act of faith is the starting point of all theological reflection. Gutiérrez insists that it is not just an intellectual assent to the message, but "a vital embracing of the gift of the Word as heard in the ecclesial community, as an encounter with God, and as love of one's brother and sister. It is about existence in its totality." To receive the Word, is to make it happen: it is a "concrete gesture." At the same time, authentic theology is always spiritual as taught by the Fathers of the Church.⁴⁷ Here we have theology as a critical reflection of praxis.

Gutiérrez teaches that performing acts of charity lies at the heart of the Christian life. In fact, this conforms more to the biblical view of the faith as St Paul tells us: "love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith." The gift of one's self to God implies the gift of oneself to others – this is the foundation

⁴⁶ G. Gutiérrez, "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," in: Ch. Rowland, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 28-29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

of the *praxis* of Christian's active presence in history.⁴⁸ This means that faith is not just a mere affirmation or assent; it is also a commitment. Gustavo Gutiérrez cautions us that this is not just a horizontal approach to faith, but a "rediscovery of the indissoluble unity of man and God."⁴⁹

As we have seen earlier, Gutiérrez acknowledges that the confrontation between theology and Marxism has been enriching as theologians began to search for its own sources, to understand the transformation of this world and the historical stage in which the drama of human existence takes place. This confrontation with Marxism enables theology to understand the meaning of faith in its historical context and what it means to transform the world in the light of the gospel.⁵⁰

Another important feature of liberation theology is the rediscovery of the eschatological dimension which has led its practitioners to consider the central role of historical praxis. For Gutiérrez, "human history is above all else an opening to the future." This means that man must orient and open himself "to the gifts which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the Lord and with other men." Here the importance of action is stressed in Christian life: "To do the truth." Christians are called to transform the world, to establish brotherhood and communion in the world.⁵¹ In other words, Christian life is about concrete service to others and not just an acceptance of doctrines or an assent to an intellectual faith.

To do theology, according to Gutiérrez, means to have a critical attitude towards economic and socio-cultural issues. It necessarily includes a criticism of society and the church in the

⁴⁸ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1973), pp. 6-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

light of the gospel. "Theology is reflection, a critical attitude."⁵² This means that pastoral service must come first, followed by theological reflection. Gutiérrez writes: "Critical reflection thus always plays the inverse role of an ideology which rationalizes and justifies a given social and ecclesial order."⁵³

Critical analysis of the social, economic and political systems has also been an important feature of Berdyaev's philosophical writings. Praxis or faith in action includes the struggle for social justice, a topic that Berdyaev had written in the light of his Orthodox faith and the situation in his homeland.

9 Social Justice

In view of man's tendency to exploit another in the capitalist society, Nicolas Berdyaev insists that it is not enough to engage only in spiritual struggle against sin. We must not accept every social system as inevitable. In other words, we must fight for social justice. Traditionally Christians were prepared to defend and justify unjust social structures believing that original sin made human beings bad and thus, it was impossible to eradicate social injustice. Berdyaev argues that such attitude is simply "hypocritical and sociologically false."

Besides original sin, Christianity also teaches about seeking the Kingdom of God and striving for perfection just as the heavenly Father is perfect. Although the bourgeois capitalist system is the result of original sin, Berdyaev argues, it does not mean that we cannot change it. Social reforms and improvements are possible in spite of sinful humanity. It is also important to note that the will to create the greatest possible social justice does not mean that we are capable of creating an earthly paradise.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

But as a Christian I must do my best “to realize Christian truth in the social as well as in the personal life.”⁵⁴

Berdyayev warns us that if Christianity refuses to take social justice seriously on the ground that original sin makes us incapable of any good, then this task will be taken by others and the idea of justice will be distorted. We find this in revolutionary movements, in socialism and communism.⁵⁵ In other words, Berdyayev urges Christians to take up the cause of social justice and not leave this task to unbelievers, because without God as the foundation, justice will be distorted or perverted.

Christianity is realistic about human nature and therefore it will not allow a false utopia to develop. However, Christianity demands that we seek in concrete ways the realisation of social justice in our society. Distinguishing between the Christian idea of social justice from materialistic socialism, Berdyayev teaches that Christian ethics does not accept the materialistic view of the world and also does not recognise “the metaphysics of equality which denies personality with its spiritual life and devastates reality.”⁵⁶

As mentioned earlier, by personality, Berdyayev means the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the human person. A personality has absolute value because he is made in the image and likeness of God and the human soul is more valuable than all the kingdoms of the world. A man may sacrifice his life but not his personality, which is a “spiritual – religious category.”⁵⁷ As such, Berdyayev insists that the social problem can only be solved if there is a “spiritual regeneration.” The social question is essentially “a question of the spiritual enlightenment of the masses, without which no justice can be achieved.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ N. Berdyayev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1945), p. 221.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 222-223.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 223.

⁵⁷ N. Berdyayev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1955), p. 178.

⁵⁸ N. Berdyayev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1945), p. 224

Berdyaeu claims that the Christian understanding of wealth and poverty cannot be translated into social categories because the truth of Christianity points to the Kingdom of God. The question of creating a more equitable society is a secular issue and not a spiritual issue. However, it would be wrong for Christians to be indifferent to social life and to accept social injustice and exploitation. In other words, Christians must not bow down before social structures created by others.⁵⁹

Based on economic freedom, capitalism actually promotes a new kind of slavery, which is even more inhuman than the slavery of old, according to Berdyaeu. Although socialism does not recognise the value of freedom and personality, he still believes it is a more humane system compared to capitalism. This brings us to two topics related to socialism – communism and Christianity – on which Berdyaeu offers some important insights that were developed by later scholars.

10 Marxism and Christianity

Nicolas Berdyaeu highlights the messianic root in Marxism. He recognises that beyond the doctrine of historical and economic materialism, Marxism is “a doctrine of deliverance, of the messianic vocation of the proletariat.” This points to the future perfect society where men will no longer depend on economics. For Berdyaeu, this is the soul of Marxism – a utopia. He thinks that man’s complete dependence on economics is due to the sin of the past, but in the future all this can be changed. This attempt to create a perfect world, which is an attempt to establish the Kingdom of God on earth is “a secularization of the ancient Hebrew messianic consciousness.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 231.

⁶⁰ N. Berdyaeu, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1955), p. 98.

Alasdair MacIntyre characterises Marxism as a Christian heresy. Deeply influenced by French socialists who appealed to Christian principles, Marxist philosophy and the idea of alienation has roots in Judaism and Christianity. Marxism also has a strong “apocalyptic force” which is similar to Christian eschatology. Marx was inspired by Jewish and Christian messianic hopes to establish a secularized version of utopia of a classless society utilising the Hegelian idea of dialectical materialism. Hegel’s theory of evolution implies that through contradictions and their resolutions, we move to a higher phase of development.⁶¹

In this regard, Berdyaev views the theory of progress as a false religion seeking to replace Christianity. Evolutionary theory no matter how valid it is cannot be identified with the Christian eschatological concept. Secular theory of progress can have no meaning because it has no goal – they lack true teleology.⁶² Furthermore, there exist the dynamic principles of history that determine the destinies of humankind which eventually produced that world history which coincides with the Christian history.⁶³ Here, Berdyaev is of the opinion that true progress must be seen in the Christian perspective with the coming of the Kingdom of God. Any other religious theory of progress is necessarily an imitation of the Christian ideal. As we shall see, Gutiérrez also believes that “history is one” – world history and Christian history coincide. Christ is the Lord of history.

Berdyaev writes that in Russia, communism seeks to replace Christianity and the functions of the Church are transferred to the State. Communism embraces the whole of one’s life, it seeks to answer religious question and to give meaning to life.

⁶¹ O. Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 68–69.

⁶² M. Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949), p. 179.

⁶³ N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), p. 111.

Communism acts like a religion. It is concerned with the salvation of the souls of its citizens and preaches one saving truth: "the truth of dialectic materialism."⁶⁴

The Communist government views the church as the cause of slavery and exploitation. In view of this, Berdyaev thinks the communists are very ignorant and unenlightened about religious matters. At the same time, he is also critical of Christians who condemn the communists for their persecutions because they are not altogether innocent of atrocities. In fact, Christians have done little for the realisation of social justice and the promotion of the brotherhood of man. How can they accuse the communists for failing to do so? Berdyaev writes:

"The sins of Christians, the sins of the historical churches, have been very great, and these sins bring with them their just punishment. Betrayal of the covenant of Christ, the use of the Christian Church for the support of the ruling classes, human weakness being what it is, cannot but bring about the lapse from Christianity of those who are compelled to suffer from that betrayal and from such a distortion of Christianity."⁶⁵

Christians are not innocent, as far as Berdyaev is concerned. In fact, the Christian faith has been manipulated to serve the establishment of the Kingdom of Caesar, to defend the ruling class, the rich and powerful. The poor and marginalised were told to accept their sufferings and hardships as part of their lot in life and to submit meekly to every social evil.

Christian humility was falsely interpreted to deny human worth. In view of this, Berdyaev sees communism as a challenge to the Christian world: "In it is to be seen the Highest Tribunal and a reminder of duty unfulfilled."⁶⁶ Berdyaev laments that since the time of Constantine, the church has not so much as

⁶⁴ Idem, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1955), p. 169.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 171.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 172.

overcame the Kingdom of Caesar as has been subjected to it.⁶⁷ Christians have failed in their duty and commitment. Communism thus challenges Christians to be faithful to the gospel values that they profess.

11 Great Mentor of Christianity

As a supporter of the classless society, Berdyaev comes close to being a communist. At the same time, he is also a supporter of “the aristocratic principle as a qualitative principle in human society.” This noble principle depends, not on one’s class or property, but on one’s character or personal quality. Berdyaev supports a “Christian personalism,”⁶⁸ but not an individualism that is opposed to the principle of personality and communion. Influenced by Orthodox Christian anthropology, he speaks of the idea of “God-humanity.” As in Jesus Christ, the God-man, the incarnation of God in man, there is also in humanity a collective incarnation of God.

“God-humanity is the continuation of the incarnation of God.”⁶⁹ Communism claims to have created not just a new society, but a new man. But Berdyaev thinks that communism deprives man of his depth and turns him into “a flat two-dimensional being.”⁷⁰ For him, a new man can only come about when he is regarded as of supreme value in life, not just a commodity in the structure of society. This implies the Christian idea of rebirth into the new Adam.

In spite of his severe criticism of communist philosophy, Berdyaev believes the social system of communism can be reconciled with Christianity. In fact, he is more critical of the capitalist system which he believes “crushes personality and

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 174.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 179.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 180.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 182.

dehumanizes life,” turns human beings into commodities, “an article of merchandise,” and subjects humans to the power of economics and money. Communism at least attempts to solve the problem of food distribution. Here is a famous saying of Berdyaev regarding the question of bread for the hungry:

“The question of bread for myself is a material question, but the question of bread for my neighbours, for everybody, is a spiritual and a religious question. Man does not live by bread alone, but he does live by bread and there should be bread for all. Society should be so organized that there is bread for all, and then it is that the spiritual question will present itself before men in all its depth.”⁷¹

This means that the struggle for spiritual interests, for spiritual revival is not enough because the large part of humanity is without food. Christians must first be concerned to respond to the basic necessities of the vast majority of people. In other words, we must preach with our actions.

Communism is “a great mentor for Christians,” Berdyaev claims, because communism reminds Christians of the prophetic message of Christ in the gospel.⁷² While the capitalist system urges people to follow their personal interests in order to promote economic development for the community, Berdyaev argues that the economic system of communism urges people to serve the common good which is closer to the Christian ideal.⁷³ He also believes that communism can challenge and “stimulate the awakening of the Christian conscience.”

Christian truth lies in promoting justice and emancipation from social slavery.⁷⁴ This implies the idea of “conscientization” or developing the power of the poor and oppressed to transform

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

society, developed by Paulo Freire in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968).

12 History and Eschatology

Following biblical tradition, Gutiérrez presents eschatology as the “driving force of salvific history radically oriented toward the future.” Eschatology becomes the key to understanding the Christian faith. Like the prophets in the Old Testament, our life in Christ must be directed towards the future although our concern is with the present.⁷⁵ This means that the full meaning of God’s action in history is understood only in its eschatological perspective. It is the revelation of the final meaning of history that gives value to the present.⁷⁶

In the same way, for Berdyaev, history has meaning because it is moving towards a fulfillment; it comes to an end. Otherwise life or history is meaningless if there is no closure. He concludes that the “true philosophy of history is eschatological in nature.”⁷⁷ Thus the historical process must be understood in the light of its final end. Berdyaev adopts a Christian-Judaic understanding of history.

Originated from the Jewish idea of historical fulfillment, Berdyaev’s concept of history is different from the Greek understanding which is cyclical in nature. The Jewish consciousness looks towards the future, in expectation of some great event about to happen in the destinies of Israel and other nations as well. “For the Jews the idea of history turns upon the expectation of some future event which will bring with it a

⁷⁵ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1973), p. 162.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

⁷⁷ N. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1950), p. 294.

solution of history.”⁷⁸ This Jewish understanding of history is closely linked to eschatology.

Eschatology concerns the final destiny of humankind – death and judgment. It is also the goal of history and its fulfillment. The Greeks had no such concept, but for the Jewish people, Berdyaev writes, “It is absolutely essential for conception and elaboration of the idea of history, as a significant progression or movement capable of fulfillment. No conception of history is feasible without the idea of fulfillment because history is essentially eschatological.”⁷⁹

Another important feature of Berdyaev’s understanding of history is messianism which is also of Jewish origin. Growing out of Judaism, Christianity is essentially messianic. In the synoptic gospels, the focus is on the preaching of Jesus Christ on the coming of the Kingdom of God. Berdyaev stresses that the “true messianic belief is the messianism which looks for a new era of the Spirit, for the transformation of the world and for the Kingdom of God”.

As such he rejected all attempt to establish an earthly utopia or theocracy because “To a notable degree history is the history of crime, and all the dreams of idealists about a better state of society have ended in criminal deeds.”⁸⁰

Even though we have not realised the Kingdom of God, Berdyaev believes all is not lost because “the great testing trials of man and the experience of the seductive lures through which he lives have a meaning.”⁸¹ This means that the freedom of man must be tested and proven. It will be an “empty freedom” when

⁷⁸ N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), p. 28.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

⁸⁰ Quoted in: C. S. Calian, *Berdyaev’s Philosophy of Hope: A Contribution to Marxist-Christian Dialogue* (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), p. 108.

⁸¹ N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1944), p. 263.

it is not “unaware of resistance, when it is too easy.” It is in conflict that freedom is tempered and fortified.

Berdyayev characterises bourgeois freedom as empty and egoistic. Without resistance and sacrifice, “freedom disintegrates.” So it is the conflicts and failures of history that compels human beings to push forward towards the Kingdom of God, according to Berdyayev. For the realisation of the Kingdom of God, what we need is “not change *in* this world, but a change of this world.”⁸²

Critical of the passive understanding of the apocalypse, Berdyayev believes that the end of the world depends on the activity of man: “The revolutionary apocalyptic consciousness actively and creatively turns to the realization of human personality and to the society which is linked with the principle of personality.”⁸³

Spiritual and social revolutions cannot be wrought by human beings alone, but with the “outpouring of the Spirit, which changes the world.” Berdyayev writes: “Active eschatology is the justification of the creative power of man. Man is liberated from the sway of the objectivization which had enslaved him.”⁸⁴ This suggests that man must rebel against the slavery of history in order to take history into his own hands.

The mentioned reflection of Berdyayev suggests, in the words of Gutiérrez, that “history is one” and there is only “one human destiny” assumed by Christ, the Lord of history. Our human history is the history of our salvation. We have moved from an abstract, essentialist approach to “an existential, historical, and

⁸² C. S. Calian, *Berdyayev's Philosophy of Hope: A Contribution to Marxist-Christian Dialogue* (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), pp. 108-109.

⁸³ N. Berdyayev, *Slavery and Freedom* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1944), pp. 264-265.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

concrete view which holds that only man we know has been efficaciously called to a gratuitous communion with God.”⁸⁵

The liberation of the Jewish people from the bondage in Egypt recorded in the Old Testament is both a historical fact and a biblical story. In view of the liberation of the Jews, Gutiérrez argues that it is by transforming the world, breaking out of servitude, establishing a just society, assuming his destiny in history, that man becomes truly himself. This can also mean the flourishing of the personality in Berdyaev’s sense.

13 Conclusion

In spite of the Orthodox Church’s lack of interest in the theology of liberation as practiced in Latin America for the reasons that we have discussed, there were voices in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were critical not only of the social and political structures, but also of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In the tradition of St. John Chrysostom, they recognised the poor and downtrodden as the ones favoured by God and spoke against their wealthy oppressors. Nicolas Berdyaev was one of such modern prophets whose writings have influenced many people, not least, the liberation theologian, Juan Luis Segundo. In this essay, I have attempted to relate the works of Berdyaev to the themes of liberation theology taught by its founding father, Gustavo Gutiérrez. The similarities in their writings on Christian personalism, social justice, Marxism, history and eschatology suggest that there is potential for ecumenical dialogue between Catholic and Orthodox Christians on these issues.

Berdyaev would agree that our mission now is not so much to work for the unity of the churches as for the unity of

⁸⁵ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1973), p. 153.

humankind journeying towards the Kingdom of God. As an existentialist philosopher, critical of both capitalism and communism, and upholding the Orthodox Christian faith, he has taught us the need to struggle for freedom and justice. Like most liberation theologians, he was in favour of some form of socialism. Berdyaev was in many ways a liberationist and his works foreshadowed the theology of liberation.