

Between Russia and the West

An interview with Professor Teresa Obolevitch, Chair of Russian and Byzantine Philosophy at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow.

Sister Teresa, you have studied Russian religious philosophy for many years. What, in your opinion, is the importance of Berdyaev for society today? What makes him relevant?

A: Nikolai Berdyaev is one of the most significant figures not only for Russian, but also for Western European, philosophy. If you ask any educated humanities student in the West to name a Russian thinker the first one they will mention, along with Dostoevsky,



Nikolai Berdyaev. 1909.

is Berdyaev. Of course, not many of them will be able to engage in a discussion on the essence of his philosophical position, but the fact that his name is literally on the lips of many educated people and crops up in the most diverse contexts is evidence of the role played by Berdyaev in the development of philosophical thinking in the West. And the concept that should probably be seen as central to this role is that of the individual as a free person, not free of something, but intrinsically free, and, like God, belonging to the kingdom of freedom. Of course, in Berdyaev's metaphysics of freedom there are also aspects that are a long way from Christianity, but the main thing here is that freedom is set in contrast not only to necessity and dependence on external circumstances, but also to egoism and anarchy. According to Berdyaev, freedom is by no means simply being able to indulge one's desires, one's ego; above all it is the freedom to develop, which opens up vast scope for creation. Man must strive for something, he must create. This is an inherently human characteristic, and it is in being a creator that man demonstrates what it is to be human. That is why I think that Berdyaev's ideas are so important for society today.

As his relations with the Russian émigré community were not easy, Berdyaev valued his fame in the West, something which he stressed in his autobiography. He was a remarkable figure, and wherever he went there was always something going on. When he was still in Moscow, in the difficult years after the Revolution, he founded the Free Academy of Spiritual Culture, of which he was President until he was exiled, and when he was in Berlin he founded the Academy of

Religious Philosophy which several years later moved with him to Paris. Mention should also be made of *Put'*, Berdyaev's famous journal, which in the fifteen years before the war published works by Russian and Western European philosophers and theologians. All this, of course, contributed to the development of Russian philosophy and its fame in the West.

Q: And Berdyaev regarded himself not simply as a philosopher, but a Christian and Orthodox philosopher...

A: This was without doubt extremely important for him. Of course, opinions on his article on Orthodoxy differ, but for many people who were unfamiliar with Eastern Christianity, especially French people, this was like an introduction to Orthodoxy. And it was not oversimplified or reduced to the lowest common denominator; on the contrary, the article was aimed at educated people and intended primarily for professional people, philosophers such as Jacques Maritain and many other famous thinkers of the first half of the 20th century.

One of Berdyaev's greatest achievements were the religious colloquia that were held in his Paris apartment and to which he and his wife, Lydia, a former Catholic, invited the famous intellectuals of the day, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. They were attended by Fr Georges Florovsky and Fr Sergius Bulgakov, and the spiritual leaders of French Catholicism (Jacques Maritain, Gabriel Marcel) and Protestantism (Marc Boegner, Wilfred Monod, Auguste Lecrnf). It was here that the initiatives, or, in today's language, the projects, were born that still continue to this day and whose significance should not be underestimated.

Hugely important in its own right is Berdyaev's research into the history of Russian thought, from the Christianisation of Russia to the Revolution of 1917. His book *The Russian Idea*, written specifically for the Western reader, was one of the first introduc-



The first issue of the journal *Put'*, 1925.

tions to Russian philosophy. In it Berdyaev explains the most important concepts of Russian philosophy and theology, such as *sobornost'* (conciliarism) and *vseedinstvo* (all-in-oneness), many of which are difficult not only to grasp but also to translate. Berdyaev forged a path which led to original, profound works intended not so much for the untrained reader as for those great contemporary philosophers whom Berdyaev knew and with whom he became friends. In this respect it is thanks to Berdyaev that Russian thought was accepted into Western philosophy and Western culture. ■

Professor Teresa Obolovitch was in conversation with Hieromonk Tikhon (Vasilyev). June 2018.