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SERBIA: BETWEEN OR ABOVE EAST AND WEST?¹

That which in human suffering
rises against God and on man's behalf,
is rising of the
true God himself.

- Nikolai Berdyaev

Abstract: *The paper tackles the issue of Serbia's spiritual identity as it was defined by Archimandrite Justin Popović and Bishop Nikolai Velimirović, probably the two most influential figures in Serbia's recent religious history. Serbia stands on the crossroad between two irreconcilable worlds, between West and East. For Popović, The West represents atheism and materialism, while the Eastern road is the symbol of Orthodoxy and Saint Sava, Serbian enlightener from the 12th Century. Bishop Nikolai's view is somewhat more nuanced, as he argues that Serbia's choice is not between West and East; Serbia should be above both principles. Both spiritual teachers agree that patristic concept of God-Man Christ, which is the "ideal balance" between God and human being, is what elevates Serbia above West and East. The paper argues, however, that Popović and Velimirović fail to detect what Nikolai Berdyaev, the renowned Russian philosopher, saw as the proclivity of the Fathers towards monophysitism. Due to this misinterpretation, Popović and Velimirović could not understand properly the rebellion of the Western humanism. According to Bishop Velimirović's immensely ambitious plan, Serbia should rise "above" East and West. Whoever wishes to be "above" East and West, nevertheless, would need to engender an ideal balance between God and human being. And this balance would have to postulate, unequivocally, that God and man are more than God alone.*

Key words: *East, West, ontological freedom, Godhuman, God-man, freedom of will, Chalcedon*

"We live on the geographical and spiritual watershed between two worlds, between two cultures, between East and West [...] On the one hand, our soul is attracted by the tumultuous West and its magnetic lure; on the other hand, we are tempted by the placid East with its mysterious beauty."²

This is how priest-monk and university professor Justin Popović, one of the 20th century's most influential Serbian theologians, describes the paradoxical situation of his nation. Two forces are waging a war for the soul of Serbia and there could be no reconciliation among

¹ (This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, #GRANT No 1554, *Assessing Neoplatonism in the 14th and 15th century Balkans* - ANEB).

² Поповић 1999, 436. Trans. by the author.

them. Popović argues that it is a matter of either/or: either Serbia will follow the road of the Western, European man, or it will follow the “Eastern” road of Saint Sava, the founder of the Serbian autocephalous church in the 12th century, and this is the road of Christ God-man. For Popović, who was also an Oxford student, the choice was obvious: Serbia was destined to abandon the West and follow Christ.

Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1880 – 1956), Popović’ theology professor and an equally influential figure, formulated this view somewhat differently. For him, Serbia is not only “between” East and West. Serbia has to be “above” East and West.

“The Orthodox peoples [...] must be *above* both Eastern and Western damnations. They must strive neither for the Eastern spiritual world nor for the Western material world (...) The Balkans cannot be between the East and West, it should be *above* both and should enlighten both.”³

What exactly do these conflicting notions of East and West symbolise for Popović and Velimirović? What is the specific trait of the Serbian Orthodoxy to which it owes the privileged role of the enlightener? Popović and Velimirović agree that Christ God-man is the most important idea that Serbia has to offer to the world. More precisely, it is in the person of God-man that all contradictions between the theocentric East, which denies body, matter, world, and culture, and the anthropocentric West, which idolises world, matter, and culture, are transcended. Orthodoxy represents an authentic Christian metaphysics, that of *godhuman* realism. Our authors are confident that West and its apostle Nietzsche would have never drifted from God had they understood the mystery of God-man. This statement implies that Western man rejected God simply because of his titanic wish to become god himself.⁴

Popović stresses that in the person of God-man one finds “ideal balance” between God and human being. So, in this essay I shall argue that this ‘balance’ implies human *ontological freedom*. Freedom, as defined here, is not about freedom of will or freedom of choice. Freedom, to borrow John Zizioulas’ expression, is a question of ontology; freedom is about “absolute ontological otherness”.⁵ The person is free only as radically unique. Furthermore, since the person exists by self-manifesting herself, it follows that the person’s inimitability appears to everyone else, including her Creator, as a total *novum* – a *new world*.

Given the significance of the concept of God-man, I shall try to shed light on the Chalcedonian dogma of Christ’s two natures. I shall also clarify right away that Chalcedonian dogma in my view is satisfying from the doctrinal point of view, but we are still waiting for its adequate theological explication.⁶ As an example, I will take the work of the sixth century Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor, who owes his epithet to his excellent apology of the integrity of human nature. In continuation, I will offer a reading of Maximus’s theology through the eyes of Nikolai Berdyaev, a noted Russian religious philosopher, who claimed that in the works of Church Fathers there is no genuine anthropology. For Berdyaev, an accurate anthropological teaching needs to abandon the traditional doctrine of creation according to which God created human being without having any need for him. If God “needs” human person, this means

³ Велимировић 1996, 308. Cited in Milutinović 2011, 161.

⁴ Milutinović 2011, 161.

⁵ “Freedom is not simply ‘freedom of will’; it is the freedom to be other in an absolute ontological sense. Zizioulas 2006, 11.

⁶ Writing about the Chalcedon, Sergius Bulgakov stresses that “here we have only dogmatic, not a theological, synthesis; until the present day, a theological synthesis is still being sought by theological thought.” Bulgakov 2008, 443.

that this person is, in a sense, “uncreated”,⁷ i.e., non-determined by God. In the final section I shall demonstrate how Zizioulas arrives exactly at this deduction, but because it is in conflict with divine perfection, he is forced to renounce it.

But before I advance with my scrutiny of the concept of God-man, I shall give a brief exposition of Bishop Nikolai theological views, as a background in which Popović’ *Weltanschauung* was formed.

Emulating the great teacher

In his book *“Getting Over Europe”*,⁸ Zoran Milutinović writes with some generalisation,⁹ that Velimirović is one of those authors whose entire opus is based on a single idea. The purest expression of this idea is to be found in a lecture Velimirović delivered at London’s Kings College in 1920:

“My thesis is simple and clear. I assert: 1) that Europe has put aside her *centre* of civilisation – which has been the *Christian religion* for over twelve hundred years – counting that *this centre has ceased to be the centre in the eighteen century* – and that she is now tottering on the edge, eagerly grasping, now this, now that, *a partial agency of human life as her central light and principle guide*; and 2) *that Europe’s day* – if all the laws of history do not deceive us – *soon will be over unless she returns to the centre*, from which all her chief achievements in civilisation hitherto have emanated as radiations.”¹⁰

Velimirović’ vision of Europe, reminds us Milutinović, is hardly original and it must have been familiar to the British audience, since it was propagated by several renowned figures, from Hilaire Belloc in the 1920s to Douglas Jerrold and T. S. Elliot in the 1930s. Velimirović must have thought that his predictions were accurate when some twenty years after his King’s College lecture started Second World War with hitherto unknown atrocities. Velimirović himself was imprisoned and spent two months in the Dachau concentration camp, as well as a few more months under Gestapo supervision in Austria and Slovenia. Before he was released by American soldiers, Velimirović summarized his verdict about Europe:

“All of Europe smells of death. European universities preach death. European writers describe death. European scientists immortalise death. European politicians work for death. European educators sow death in youth’s souls. European imperialists disseminate death the world over. European revolutionaries carry the banner of death. Modern Europe is a synonym for death.”¹¹

Velimirović believed that the process, which ended with the Second World War as its logical outcome, had started in the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment of the French

⁷ “The person, consequently, cannot be realized as an intramundal or fully human reality (...) Only theology can treat of the genuine, the authentic person, because the authentic person, as absolute ontological freedom, must be ‘uncreated’, that is, unbounded by any ‘necessity’ ... Zizioulas 1985, 43.

⁸ Milutinović 2011.

⁹ Europe takes a prominent place in Velimirović’ works only after the Great War (WWI), and he does not address it during his time in Ohrid, Žiča, or in the American period.

¹⁰ Velimirović 1920, Cited in Milutinović, 2011, 147.

¹¹ Velimirović 1976-1986, vol. 13: 331-332.

philosophers. The Enlightenment, Velimirović maintained, was responsible for every kind of cultural evil and in particular for the de-Christianisation of Europe. However, his political view is not clericalism. He is advocating the reintroduction of Christian values as the foundation for everyday life, similar to that of T. S. Eliot's interwar period.¹²

Apart from the Enlightenment, Velimirović criticises directly three European 'spectres': Darwin, Nietzsche, and Marx.¹³ These three figures embody the fatal science, the fatal ethics, and the fatal social theory. In his 1912. essay '*Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky*', Velimirović rejects the former's ethics and especially his proclamation of the death of God. For him, Nietzsche is the "apostle of the West" and the very quintessence of Western Europe.¹⁴

Velimirović replaces the pair of conflicting notions of East and West with his idea of "Above East and West". Indeed, Serbia is geographically located between East and West, but as for the ideas on which it stands, it rises *above* both.

"The Orthodox peoples in the West must be above both Eastern and Western damnations. They must strive neither for the Eastern spiritual world nor for the Western material world (...) The Balkans cannot be between the East and West, it should be above both and should enlighten both."¹⁵

From the time of the article "*Above East and West*", Velimirović regards the West only as an enemy of the Serbian people. For everything ungodly in Serbian people, he accuses the Westernizers among them. And, who was standing against this tide of Westernisation? Only the Orthodox Church and the peasants, who throughout the nineteenth-century kept on shouting together: "Rotten West! Rotten West! Let's defend ourselves from the rotten West!"¹⁶

In his "*Speeches to the Serbian People through a Prison Window*", written in Dachau in late 1944 and early 1945, Velimirović attacks, without naming him, Matthew Arnold and his "*Culture and Anarchy*", in which Arnold is suggesting that culture will become a new centre, replacing religion:

"[Europe] renounced God ... and made idols of wood and stone, of paper and soil, and innumerable other mute and dead earthly things. Europe called all these things with one name, that mute and dead pantheon she named with one word: Culture. What the golden calf was for Israel in the desert, Culture is for the new Israel, i.e., for Christened Europe [...] Culture above everything else."¹⁷

Velimirović stresses that all this magnificent culture could not prevent Europe from starting the Second World War. It is only Christ that Europe can be proud of and without Christ, Europe is insane and sick.

We need not forget that the man who shouted the "Rotten West" slogan was one of the rare Serbs who had a relatively wide audience for his works in the West. He was a German and Swiss student, he held an honorary doctorate from Glasgow University and later on from Columbia University; he was a welcomed lecturer at several British and American universities,

¹² Milutinović 2011, 147, 158.

¹³ Milutinović 2011, 159.

¹⁴ Milutinović 2011, 160.

¹⁵ Velimirović 1996, vol.2, p. 308. Trans. by the author. See also Milutinović 2011, 161.

¹⁶ Velimirović 1976-1986, p. 799.

¹⁷ Velimirović 1977, p. 314.

he wrote and published his books in English, and was the first non-Anglican preacher in St. Pauls cathedral. He was a man of great erudition familiar with Europe's high culture as well as with its everyday life. "He had a room on Savile Row and used to eat at the Dickens Chop House on Warwick Street."¹⁸ And yet, the West remained "rotten" for him. He could see plainly that the Western boat was heading towards a catastrophe and that the same destiny would befall Serbia should it not return to Christ. His pupil Popović remained faithful to this idea.

God-man and the ideal balance

It has already been argued (see Bodan Lubardić, "*Revolt against the Modern World*")¹⁹ that Popović is rejecting *en block* the entire West and Western culture, failing to see its multifaceted reality. Western culture and Western Christianity are viewed through critical lenses only. I argue, however, that not only Popović, but also the experts in his work tend to make the same mistake by uncritically approaching patristic texts. A respectful but cool-headed distance might open our eyes to some of the weaknesses of patristic anthropology, helping us to understand better reasons for humanistic rebellion.

We have seen that for the Western plight Velimirović and Popović suggest a method similar to the "Return to the Fathers". Ever since the First Orthodox Theological Conference held in Athens in 1936, when George Florovsky, a distinguished Orthodox theologian, proclaimed Orthodox theology's need to "return to the Fathers", his proposal met very few dissenting voices. One of them was Berdyaev's. Berdyaev not only opposed Florovsky's prescription but explicitly warned *against* the "Return", arguing that in the theology of the Fathers, there is no true anthropology.

"In this lies a grave danger for our epoch, the danger of the restoration of the Christianity of the Fathers, which *has no true anthropology*. Such a restoration might play into the hand of the spirit of the Antichrist. When religious consciousness leaves an empty place, it is filled by the spirit of the Antichrist. Religious demeaning and oppression of man lead to a false over-estimation of himself that finally destroys him."²⁰

Berdyaev maintains that in the works of the Fathers, there is a "fatal tendency towards monophysitism."²¹ Popović, as we remember, stated that in God-man Christ one finds an "ideal equilibrium" between God and man. Indeed, Chalcedonian formula postulates that the difference of the natures is in no way removed because of their union; rather, the properties of each nature are preserved, so much so that in the *perichorisis* they indwell and enrich each other.

But Sergius Bulgakov, a renowned Russian émigré theologian, argued, that in the Chalcedonian dogma of the duality of the two natures in Christ "we have only *dogmatic*, not a *theological*, synthesis; until the present day, a theological synthesis is still being sought by theological thought [...] and the desired theological synthesis in the doctrine of Christ remains something for the future—and in particular of our epoch—to achieve."²² Bulgakov stresses that in the Chalcedonian dogma, the fundamental question of the union of the two natures in the one hypostasis of Logos was described only from the negative side (with the four negatives:

¹⁸ Milutinović 2011, 167.

¹⁹ Lubardić, 2017.

²⁰ Berdyaev 2009, 93.

²¹ Berdyaev 2009, 80.

²² Bulgakov 2008, 443.

inconfusably, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably), but not from the positive side. “We know what Chalcedonian ‘no’ is, but what is its ‘yes’?”²³

Bulgakov does not say what is the “yes”, but we can assume that the positive aspect of the hypostatic union would require a thorough theological explication as to what is the unique and specific property of human nature – a quality that belongs *only* to human nature – that penetrates divine nature. If God is the source of everything created, how can human nature have an exclusive property?

Theological expositions often fail to draw inevitable logical conclusions from the doctrinal formulae, as this would require a radical paradigm shift in our understanding of the concept of God and human beings. For example, on the level of doctrine, classical teachings about God’s omnipotence and of *imago Dei* are not contradictory. But when we try to examine them theologically, we see that they are incompatible. The Fathers maintain that the notion of divine icon presupposes the power of absolute self-determination (*autoexousion*). This means that a human person is possible only if it is determined neither by the existing world nor by God. In other words, the notion of *imago Dei* remains only a nice metaphor unless the human person is capable of creating *a new world*, bringing forth qualities that have never existed before. This is what “absolute self-determination” means. This is what Nietzsche has in mind when in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he writes “if gods exist, then there is nothing left for us to create”.²⁴

Nonetheless, this definition of *imago Dei* cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of God’s simplicity, according to which God is fully actualised. If God is an *actus purus*, He has already created everything He could create. Since God is “completed”, that is – immutable – this means that the world is also forever completed. There are only two possible solutions to this *aporia*: first, we can give up altogether the idea of *imago Dei*. Secondly, we can, quite contrarily, take the idea of *imago Dei* very seriously, trying to find a definition of God’s omnipotence that would allow for human *ontological* freedom. If we fail to see the incompatibility between patristic ideas of omnipotence and self-determination, we won’t find it necessary to adjust our vision of God. Neither Popović nor Velimirović suspect an anthropological problem in Chalcedonian dogma, and this is why they do not do justice to European culture and humanism. An impartial reading of the Chalcedon, in my opinion, is bound to reveal patristic theology’s inclination towards monophysitism.

As Berdyaev argued, the Fathers developed the sublime doctrine of *theosis*, but in this *theosis*, there is no man at all.²⁵ The only thing that deified human nature is capable of doing, in Berdyaev’s view, is to withdraw and leave space for divine nature. It is this demeaning of human being that prompted the Russian thinker to argue that in the theology of the Fathers, there is no true anthropology. If our analysis verifies Berdyaev’s diagnosis, this would mean that Popović’ criticism aims at the wrong addressee. For ill-fated humanism Popović prescribes a method similar to George Florovsky’s “Return to the Fathers”. While the “return” might be useful, it should not serve the purpose of enthroning the Fathers as an eternal criterion of truth. “Return” could be meaningful, but it needs to imply an objective elucidation of patristic anthropology.

Scholars who sympathise with Florovsky’s “Neo-patristic synthesis” would find Berdyaev’s words about the monophysite tendency of patristic texts bizarre. For them, just like for Popović, it is self-evident that the apostasy of Western humanism finds its prototype in Adam’s rejection of God. Berdyaev, however, understands expulsion from Paradise as a positive stage in Adam’s process of maturing, as an overcoming of the unreflected, “prenatal” union with God. So, humanism does not have to be necessarily a manifestation of atheism, and Adam’s

²³ Bulgakov 2008, 444.

²⁴ Nietzsche 2006, 67.

²⁵ Berdyaev 2009, 84.

desire to become god does not have to be a sign of human Promethean pride, but a God-inspired urge for individuation. If we acknowledge this scenario, it will become clear why John Zizioulas claimed that theism not only gives birth to atheism, but that “atheism sprang from the very heart of the Church.”²⁶

Maximus the Confessor and the Chalcedon

Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor (579 – 662) was one of the vital figures in defending the integrity of human nature. Maximus “defense” is probably the most detailed apology of this kind, but the question remains – could it endure austere theological scrutiny? Let us briefly analyze Maximus’ argument in favour of the singleness of human nature.²⁷

Maximus clarifies that when he mentions *perichorisis*, he speaks of a double action, both divine and human. As is well known, the Fathers used the term *perichorisis* having in mind the analogy offered by the Stoic concept of “mixture” (*krasis*). The term *krasis* comes from Stoic physics and implies a capacity of bodies to penetrate each other without being damaged. However, the active character of *perichoresis* is probably mostly noticeable when compared to the other term – “adhesion” – that depicts a more static relation of the two natures. As in the case of the *perichorisis*, Maximus borrows the term “adhesion” from Gregory Nazianzen who writes about the two natures penetrating each other “in virtue of their mutual adhesion” (*to logo tis simfyias*).²⁸ The term “adhesion” is a prerequisite for a synergetic *perichorisis* as we can see from Maximus’ sentence from *Opuscula* 7:

“Then, as he showed that the natural energies of Christ the God, who is composed of both, are perfectly preserved, that of his Godhead through the almighty command, and that of his humanity through the touch, he proves them to be thoroughly united by their mutual coming together and interpenetration.”²⁹

Perichorisis often comes—at least in Maximus’s work—in a phrase *eis allila perichorisis* (penetration into each other), and sometimes in another similar phrase but without the prefix *di allilon horisis* (penetration through each other).³⁰ So, the term “adhesion” points to the relationship of the two natures induced by the Incarnation, whereas the second concept depicts their mutual interpenetration.³¹

To explain the character of the unity of the two natures in Christ, Maximus uses the well-known metaphor of fire and iron. Iron blazes in fire, and becomes almost as fire, but it does not change its nature, remaining iron. Hence, in one hypostasis we have both iron and fire; iron acts according to its nature, as well as according to the nature of fire, but in a way that is characteristic of iron alone.³² Here we are dealing with an adoption of human nature into the realm of the divine, “But human nature”, as Lars Thunberg stresses, “itself tends towards this adoption, and, therefore, (as in the case of iron and fire) develops within this union always what

²⁶ Zizioulas 2006, 237.

²⁷ For a more detailed account, see my *Homo Theurgos: Freedom According to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev*.

²⁸ *Ep.* 101, PG 37, 181C.

²⁹ *Opuscula* 7, 88A. Louth 1996, 189.

³⁰ *Amb* 17; PG 91, 1228 C.

³¹ *ThPol* 7.

³² *ThPol* 16; PG 91, 1053 B.

is inherent in itself and *proper* to itself. So the characteristic of iron alone is that the glowing sword burns and cuts at the same time.”³³

Although the simile of iron and fire is quite compelling, it is only a figure of speech, and one ought to ask, how exactly we are supposed to understand it? What does it mean that “the glowing sword burns and cuts at the same time” if we apply this figure in the context of human nature? What is the “cutting” of human nature, that is, what is the property of human nature that is retained? Moreover, based on which of its properties does human nature manage to stay distinct? Maximus sees the *activity* of human nature as decisive for the preservation of its otherness. But, is this activity sufficiently 'active' to maintain the otherness of human nature?

In *Ambigua* 10 Maximus writes that God and man stand in a relationship of a certain polarity the best example of which is the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Maximus expounds:

“[...] And that God makes himself man for the sake of love for man, so far as man, enabled by God, has deified himself, [and also] ‘that man is rapt up by God in mind to the unknowable, so far as man has manifested through virtues the God who is by nature invisible.’”³⁴

Maximus does not raise the question of the origin of human nature. This question, nevertheless, is crucial for our scrutiny, because to be distinct our nature would need to have a different source from divine nature. But, as we know, there is only one source of being and that is divine nature. If human nature originated from its divine counterpart it could not be human. So, it must come from somewhere else. The only possible source of human nature the Fathers could think of was the absolute non-being (*ouk on*). Introduction of the *ouk on*, however, proved not to be the right solution. The Fathers were aware that from the absolute *nihil*, which is not an ontological but logical category, nothing comes out. Thus, they had to consent to the Greek postulate *Ex nihilo nihil fit*. Gregory of Nyssa explains that the fact that God creates “out of *ouk on*” means that God creates *ex Theo* - out of himself.³⁵ But if he creates out of himself, i.e., out of his nature, how can he create human nature as something distinct - as his other?

Nikolai Berdyaev on the Absolute

The term “nature” belongs to the set of impersonal notions such as *ousia* or *energeia*. These concepts know only mechanical, emanational ways of creating in which the properties of the creator “spill over” and create the world. The further the world distances itself from the Absolute, the less being it possesses. This, of course, is the age-old problem of the One and the Many. How can One, conceived as perfect, immobile, and immutable Absolute create an ontological “other”? Berdyaev maintained that this problem still torments contemporary philosophy as much as it tormented Greek thought.

“The problem of the one and the many tormented Greek thought. How is the transition from the one to the many to be made? How is the one accessible to the many? Is there an *other* which exists for the one?”³⁶

Berdyaev wrestles here with the problem of monism or “ontological totalitarianism”, claiming that “slavery to being is, indeed, the primary slavery of man.”³⁷ But why the Absolute, as a product of metaphysics that gives priority to being over person – to *essence* over *existence* -

³³ Thunberg 1995, 30.

³⁴ *Ambigua* 10; PG 91, 1113 BC.

³⁵ Maximus the Confessor, for example, equated with much nuance *ex nihilo* and *ex Deo*, as this was the case also with Irenaeus (*a semetipso*), Gregory of Nyssa (*De hominis opiicio* 24 (PG 44:212D–213C), and Dionysius the Areopagite. See Blowers 2003, 175.

³⁶ Berdyaev 2009b, 49-50.

³⁷ Berdyaev 2009b, 78.

does not permit the existence of the other? Firstly, the Absolute is perfect in the sense of finished completeness. It is fully actualised and therefore lacks potency that waits to be actualised. In the jargon of traditional metaphysics, the Absolute is *actus purus* - pure actuality. It is a completely fulfilled *esse* without a *posse*. Subsequently, the Absolute's ontological structure is monolithic. In the Absolute, there is no dialectical tension between potency and actualisation. Not only the Absolute does not need to move; but being completed, it *cannot* move. Berdyaev clarifies that the Absolute is not a being, is not a personality, which always *presupposes a going out from itself and a meeting with the other*.³⁸ Since in the Absolute there are no signs of movement, neither are there signs of life. The God of the Bible, reminds us Berdyaev, is characterised by a dramatic life and movement, while from the Absolute, according to the precepts of Aristotelian philosophy, all inward motion and every tragic principle are excluded.

Berdyaev introduces another important paradigm shift, but this time it pertains to his theory of personality. Personality, for Berdyaev, is a union of the one and the many.³⁹ It is only the person that permits *simultaneous communion and otherness*. But what exactly is the person's property that makes possible a harmonious relationship between the One and the Many?

To create an other, the Absolute would need to have a *binary* structure, i.e., a potency standing in a dialectical relation to it. This potency cannot be created by the Absolute since this would exclude its potential for otherness. At the same time, the *posse* must not create bifurcation in being. It cannot be a second God.

A potency *in* God, a "space" of freedom left by God to his creature, was imagined long before Berdyaev, in the work of the German mystic Jacob Böhme. Berdyaev, nevertheless, thought that if freedom were *in* God this would mean that it is created by God. And if it was created, it could not be a source of alterity. This is why Berdyaev makes a bold paradigm shift arguing that freedom is *outside* of God. He calls it – *uncreated* freedom. Berdyaev's new ontology apprehends being as a binary dialectic union of potency and actualisation. What creates the maximum tension between *posse* and *esse*, securing the ever-new life of God and the world, is the uncreated and external character of freedom. Despite its uncreated character, external freedom does not cause a split in being. This is because uncreated freedom is nothing but God's *nature*. So, the person's character is antinomical: the person is *created*, but created from *uncreated* freedom, and this is why it remains a mystery – an absolute ontological other – even for the Creator.

For Berdyaev, therefore, the person's radical ontological otherness is preconditioned by uncreated freedom. God can create a unique person, a person that remains a mystery for him, only if he creates from a space of freedom which is not created nor controlled by him.

Zizioulas - paradox of benevolent necessity

As Berdyaev demonstrated, given that nature exists only in a hypostatic form, the issue about the two natures of Christ has to be transferred to the level of the person. What in *perichorisis* enriches God is not human nature *per se*, but human nature enhypostatised in a unique personality. To be truly God's ontological other, the person needs to be uncreated, that is, created from uncreated freedom. Therefore, an "ideal balance" between God and man needs to postulate that *God and man are greater than God alone*.⁴⁰ Put simply, by creating man God *added something ontologically new to his being*. Such an assumption – being in contradiction with divine perfection and immutability - would require major changes in our concept of God, changes that most Orthodox theologians, including Popović, would not be prepared to endorse.

³⁸ Berdyaev 2009c, 84.

³⁹ Berdyaev 2009c, 49-50.

⁴⁰ Berdyaev 2009, 130. For a more detailed argument, see my *Homo Theurgos*, especially pp. 201-202.

The theology of John Zizioulas is a good example of what I am trying to say here.

Pondering deeply about the question of the person, Zizioulas inevitably concludes, as seen, that “in its terrifying ontological ultimacy the person needs to be ‘uncreated’”⁴¹ The person cannot be determined by God. Zizioulas was one of the rare Orthodox theologians who did not hesitate to say that atheism is a direct product of theism or ontological totalitarianism.⁴² Human freedom, stressed Zizioulas, is not related to the freedom of will or the freedom of choice. Freedom is a matter of ontology - freedom is about “absolute ontological otherness”. I am free only if by creating my person God expanded the being, only if in the final calculation God and man are more than God alone.

Zizioulas admits that the Church ignored the issue of ontological freedom and tried to reconcile God and man using the pretext of “obedience”. To wit, I am free because I voluntarily accept not to be free. And I accept not to be free because I want to be obedient to God who is the very cause of my slavery.

Naturally, the “obedience” argument could not respond to the problem of ontological totalitarianism, which, together with the question of the origin of evil, is regarded (especially in the works of Paul Ricoeur, Immanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida) as the most important cause of atheism. So ‘man has felt like a slave and rejected the yoke of God’, writes Zizioulas. He continues:

“Atheism sprang out of the very heart of the Church and the notion of freedom became prominent again. There is more than “obedience”, or rather something quite different from it that is needed...”⁴³

What exactly is this “more than obedience” in Zizioulas’ view? Does he envisage a possibility that in affirming our freedom we can transcend the givenness of the world and God, without falling into negative or destructive liberty? Zizioulas eventually reaches a verdict that the positive transcendence of the compelling reality is impossible. But if this is the case, what is it that he meant by “more than obedience”? This question remains unresolved. Zizioulas admits that human freedom as ultimate self-determination is unfeasible. “Human freedom can prove itself ultimately only through the annihilation of what exists.”⁴⁴ This is Zizioulas’ final word. We can choose either destructive self-determination or ‘obedience’ to theistic God who is the ultimate form of necessity. Thus, for Zizioulas there are only two kinds of freedom: first, destructive liberty; second, freely accepted slavery. Although both of them are tragic, Zizioulas prefers not to question the patristic notion of God. Struggling to escape ‘evil freedom’ he falls captive to ‘benevolent necessity’. Certainly, Zizioulas could have chosen a third road. He could have tried to be *creatively* faithful to the Fathers and to reinterpret their teaching on divine perfection. This would require a bold paradigm shift as he would need to hypothesise that God created human beings because he *needs* their ontological originality. But instead of risking the inauguration of a new God image – instead of questioning the theistic idea of God – Zizioulas decided to sacrifice the idea of *imago Dei*, i.e., to sacrifice human freedom. When he was only one step away from a major theological breakthrough, Zizioulas decided to pull over and go back to the Fathers. He thus returned to the idea of “obedience”, which, as he admitted, was the very cause of atheism.

With certain generalisation, one might say that the Serbian theological scene is divided between “traditionalists” and “modernists”. However, neither the former (faithful to Popović and

⁴¹ Zizioulas 1985, 43.

⁴² Zizioulas 2006, 237.

⁴³ Zizioulas 2006, 237.

⁴⁴ Zizioulas 2006, 235.

Velimirović) nor the latter (influenced by Zizioulas) suspect the lack of true anthropology in patristic texts. This “religious demeaning of man” passes unnoticed, together with the warning that it might provoke, once again, a “false over-estimation of himself that finally destroys him.”⁴⁵

Ignoring the anthropological question, of course, is far from being an exclusive trait of the contemporary Serbian theology. In other Orthodox countries theologians seem to be equally unaware of this problem. But the issue does not concern only Orthodox countries - its dimensions are global.

Given the immense role that the problem of freedom played in the history of theology, it is surprising, lamented Paul Tillich, how little ontological investigation into the meaning of freedom is carried out by modern theologians.⁴⁶ We assume that Tillich primarily complains about the theological situation in the West. Serbian theological consciousness regarding this specific question, therefore, is not located *between* East and West, because to be “between” it would have to be distinct from them.

According to Bishop Velimirović’s immensely ambitious plan, Serbia should rise “above” East and West. Whoever wishes to be “above” East and West, nevertheless, would need to engender an ideal balance between God and human being. And this balance would have to postulate, unequivocally, that God and man are more than God alone.

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⁴⁵ Berdyayev 2009, 93.

⁴⁶ Tillich, 1968, 202.

СРБИЈА – ИЗМЕЂУ ИЛИ ИЗНАД ИСТОКА И ЗАПАДА?

Есеј се бави питањем духовног идентитета Србије и српског народа који се налази на раскрсници између Истока и Запада. За архимандрита Јустина Поповића, као и за епископа Николаја Велимировића, Запад је заједничко име за одбацивање Богочовека Христа, као идеалне равнотеже између Бога и човека, и прихватање ничеанског човекобога. Како је, међутим, писао Николај Берђајев, у светоотачкој теологији се може открити склоност према монофизитизму, склоност коју Поповић и Велимировић нису примећивали. Велимировић је писао да Србија не треба да буде само између Истока и Запада, онда треба да буде *изнад* и да их обоје просветљује. За овакав задатак, међутим, била би потребна нова антропологија према којој су, по речима Берђајева, Бог и човек више него сам Бог.