

## Amsterdam Lectures 2012-13:

### The Ways of Modern Orthodox Theology: Part I

#### Lecture V: Nikolai Berdyaev—creativity, freedom and the person

At one time, Nikolai Berdyaev was the best-known figure of what Nicolas Zernov called the ‘Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century’ (the title of a book published in London, 1963). Now he is much less highly regarded.

##### *Biography*

Born 1874 into the Russian military aristocracy; his mother half-French (and a quarter-Polish). Educated in Kiev: Military Academy and then the Corps of Pages. Left this potentially military career for Kiev University; became a Marxist, involved in revolutionary activity, exiled to Vologda and expelled from the university. After brief exile we find him in St Petersburg, editing with Sergei Bulgakov, *Voprosi Zhizni* (*Questions of Life*), an important, though short-lived journal. Also studied philosophy in Germany, and then from 1907 lived in Paris as freelance journalist and philosopher. 1917: returned to Russia and supported the Marxists. 1920: appointed professor of philosophy at Moscow University. All this time (from the beginning of the century) moving closer to Orthodoxy. 1922: exiled from Russia, ending up in Paris. Became a focus of intellectual life in Paris among the émigrés, editing the journal *Put'* (*The Way*), and convening a group of Catholic and Orthodox intellectuals from 1928 with Jacques Maritain. Controversial figure among the Orthodox in Paris. Died 1948.

He was immensely prolific, publishing 20 or so books and many articles. Many of his books were translated into French and English; he became the best known, outside Russian circles, of the Russian intelligentsia in exile.

##### *Ideas and Thought*

Difficult to expound, as his thought is mostly aphoristic. I shall concentrate on a few books (see bibliography) and try to bring out the flavour of his thought, rather than trying to expound it systematically.

Last chapter of *Dream and Reality*: summary of his thought. Against ‘objectification’, his philosophy a kind of ‘idealism of freedom’. Central themes:

- Freedom
- Person as opposed to individual, and also to nature
- *Sobornost'*: free society, as opposed to hierarchical society or society based on ideology

*Personalism*: some parallels with Martin Buber and his ideas in *Ich und Du*.

*Creativity*: opposed to the direction of much Orthodox thought at the time that was recovering the unique value of the icon in its traditional form

*Ethics*: a form of creativity, not of submission to moral rules or codes

*Beauty*: the goal of human activity, the goal therefore of ethics—ethics of the Resurrection

*Berdyayev's book on Dostoevsky*

Themes:

- Understanding of what it is to be human
- Freedom, evil, tragedy
- 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor'

*Bibliography*

I have found nothing very useful in the secondary literature on Berdyayev. I have based my own exposition on the following books:

*Dream and Reality* (London, 1950)

*The Meaning of the Creative Act* (London, 1954)

*The Destiny of Man* (London, 1945)

*Solitude and Society* (London, 1938)

*Dostoevsky* (London, 1934)