

# The Truth of Orthodoxy

Nikolai Berdyaev

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The Christian world does not know Orthodoxy well. It knows only the external and, for the most part, negative features of the Orthodox Church, while her inner spiritual treasures remain unknown. For a long time Orthodoxy was locked inside itself; it did not have a spirit of evangelism and did not reveal itself to the world. Orthodoxy did not have the worldwide significance of Catholicism and Protestantism. For hundreds of years it remained apart from passionate religious battles, it lived under the protection of large empires—Byzantium and Russia—and preserved its eternal truth from the destructive processes of world history. It is characteristic of Orthodoxy's religious nature that it was not substantially actualized [that is, it was not instrumentalized as the basis for social order] nor exposed externally, it was not militant, and precisely because of this the heavenly truth of Christian revelation was not distorted as much. Orthodoxy is the form of Christianity that has suffered the least distortion in its substance as a result of human history. The Orthodox Church had its moments of historical sin, for the most part in connection with its external dependence on the state, but the Church's teaching, her inner spiritual path, was not subject to distortion.

The Orthodox Church is primarily the church of tradition, in contrast

to the Catholic Church, which is the church of authority, and to the Protestant churches, which are essentially churches of individual faith. The Orthodox Church has never been subject to a single authority, but has been held together unshakably by the internal strength of tradition. Of all forms of Christianity, it is the Orthodox Church which has remained the most closely tied to early Christianity. The strength of internal tradition in the Church is the strength of spiritual experience and the continuity of the spiritual path, the power of superpersonal spiritual life, in which every generation shakes off feelings of self-satisfaction and exclusivity and is united with the spiritual life of preceding generations extending back to the Apostles. In that tradition, I have the same experience and the same sagacity as the Apostle Paul, the martyrs, the saints, and the whole Christian world. In tradition, my knowledge is not only personal but also superpersonal, and I live not in isolation but in the body of Christ, in a single spiritual organism with all my brothers in Christ.

Orthodoxy is, first of all, an orthodoxy of life and not an orthodoxy of indoctrination. From this point of view, heretics are not so much those who confess a false doctrine but those who lead a disordered spiritual life and follow a false spiritual path. Orthodoxy is, before all else, not a doctrine, not an

*Note:* When it was originally published in *Вестник ПХД* in 1952 (no. 11), this text by Berdyaev (1874–1948) included the following editor's note to clarify some of the philosopher's more difficult formulations: "When Berdyaev, insisting on the pneumatological character of Orthodox theology, speaks of 'the expectation of the new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the world,' he does not mean a 'Third Covenant' or some new era of the Holy Spirit to replace the Christian revelation. It is clear from context that these words refer to the eschatological fulfillment, the 'Heavenly Jerusalem.' Similarly, Berdyaev's mention of *apokatastasis* (as an alternative to the Western doctrine of predestination) should not necessarily be understood as heresy on his part: indeed, the idea of a divinely determined universal salvation would not have been acceptable to a philosopher whose thought was founded on the pathos of freedom."

external organization, not an external norm of behavior, but a spiritual life, a spiritual experience, and a spiritual path. It holds the substance of Christianity to consist in internal spiritual activity. Orthodoxy is less the normative form of Christianity (in the sense of a normative-rational logic and moral legalism) but is rather its more spiritual form. And this spirituality and "innermostness" of Orthodoxy have not infrequently been the sources of its external weakness. The Church's external weakness and insufficient development, her insufficiency of external activity and realization, are evident to everyone, but her spiritual life and treasures have often remained hidden and invisible. This is characteristic of the spiritual nature of the East, in contrast to the spirituality of the West, which is always active and outward, but often exhausts itself spiritually because of this activity. Likewise, in the non-Christian East, India's spiritual life is especially hidden from outside eyes and is not actualized in history. This analogy could be extended, although the spiritual nature of the Christian East is far different from the spiritual nature of India. Holiness in the Orthodox world, in contrast to holiness in the Catholic world, did not leave written monuments after itself; it remained concealed. But this is not yet the reason why it is difficult to judge Orthodox spiritual life from the outside.

Orthodoxy did not have its Scholastic age; it experienced only the age of Patristics. And the Orthodox Church to this day relies on the Eastern teachers of the Church. The West sees this fact as a sign of Orthodoxy's backwardness, of a dying out of creative life. But it can be given another interpretation: in Orthodoxy, Christianity was never rationalized as it was in the West, in Catholicism, thanks to the influence of Aristotle. In Orthodoxy doctrine

has never attained such a sacred significance and dogmas have not been so attached to mandatory intellectual theological teachings; they have always been understood primarily as mystical truths. We were less confined by theological and philosophical interpretations of dogmas. Nineteenth-century Russia witnessed a genesis of creative Orthodox ideas, which expressed more freedom and spiritual talent than did Catholic or even Protestant thought.

To the spiritual nature of Orthodoxy belongs the primordial and inviolable ontologism which first presented itself as the manifestation of Orthodox life and only then of Orthodox thought. The Christian West followed avenues of critical thought in which subject was opposed to object, and the organic whole of thinking, the organic connection with life, was thereby violated. The West has shown itself more capable of a complex unfolding of its thinking, its reflection and criticism, its refined intellectualism. But here is a violation of the connection between the one who knows and thinks and the primordial and original existence. Cognition was expelled from life and thinking, from existence. Cognition and thinking did not pass through the spiritual wholeness of the person in the organic unity of all his strengths. The West accomplished great feats on this foundation, but this resulted in the falling apart of the primordial ontologism of thinking: thought did not enter into the depth of substance. This resulted in Scholastic intellectualism, rationalism, empiricism, and the extreme idealism of Western thought. In the Orthodox sphere, thinking remained ontological, joined to existence. This is evident throughout the whole of Russian religio-philosophic and theological thought in the 19th and 20th centuries. Rationalism, legal-

ism, and all normativism are alien to Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church is not defined in rational concepts; only those who live within her and who share in her spiritual experience can understand her. The mystical types of Christianity are not subject to any kind of intellectual definition, they do not have any juridical or rational signs. Genuine Orthodox theologizing proceeds on the basis of spiritual experience. Orthodoxy is almost completely lacking in Scholastic manuals. Orthodoxy understands itself as the religion of the Holy Trinity: not an abstract monotheism but a concrete Trinitarianism. The life of the Holy Trinity is reflected in its spiritual life, its spiritual experience, and its spiritual path. The Orthodox Liturgy begins with the words: "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Everything comes from above, from the divine Triad, from the heights of him who Is, and not from man and his soul. In Orthodox understanding it is the divine Triad which descends and not a man who ascends. There is much less of this Trinitarian expression in Western Christianity, which is more Christocentric and anthropocentric. This difference was already apparent in Eastern and Western Patristics: the latter begins its theology from the divine Trinity and the former from the human soul. Thus the East first of all proclaims the mysteries of Trinitarian and Christological dogmas. The West primarily teaches about grace and free will and about ecclesiastical organization. The West came to have greater wealth and also greater internal variation in its ideas.

Orthodoxy is the branch of Christianity with a greater revelation of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Orthodox Church did not adopt the *Filioque*, which was viewed as a subordinationist teaching about the Holy Spirit.



Nikolai Berdyaev in 1947.

The nature of the Holy Spirit is revealed not so much by dogmas and doctrines but by its action. The Holy Spirit is closer to us; it is more immanent in the world. The Holy Spirit acts directly upon the created world and transfigures creation. This teaching is revealed in the greatest of Russian saints, Seraphim of Sarov. Orthodoxy is not only Trinitarian in essence, but sees as the task of its earthly life the transfiguration of the world in the image of the Trinity, that the world should become pneumatic [that is, spiritual] in essence.

I am speaking about the depths of mysteries in Orthodoxy and not of superficial trends. Pneumatological theology, the anticipation of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the world, arises more easily on Orthodox soil. This is the remarkable particularity of Orthodoxy: on the one hand it is more conservative and traditional than Catholicism and Protestantism, but on the other hand, within the depth of Orthodoxy there has always been a greater expectation of a new religious manifestation in the world, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the coming of the New Jerusalem. Orthodoxy did not develop in history for nearly the whole second millennium; evolution was a stranger

Nikolai Berdyaev  
with Mother Maria  
Skobtsova.



to it, but concealed within it was the possibility of religious creativity, held in reserve for a new, not-yet-arrived historical epoch. This became evident in Russian religious trends of the 19th and 20th centuries. Orthodoxy makes a more radical division between the divine and natural worlds, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar, and does not accept the kinds of analogy between the two that are frequently employed by Catholic theology. The divine energies act covertly in man and in the world. One cannot say about the created world that it is a god or is divine, nor can one say that it is outside the divine. God and divine life do not resemble the natural world or the natural life; one cannot make analogies here. God is eternal, while natural life is limited and finite. But divine energy is poured out upon the natural world, acts upon it, and enlightens it. This is the Orthodox understanding of the Holy Spirit. Thomas Aquinas's teaching about the natural world, positing it in opposition to the supernatural world is, for the Orthodox, a form of

secularization of the world. Orthodoxy is in principle pneumatic, and in this is its uniqueness. Pneumatism is consistent Trinitarianism brought to perfection. Grace is not the mediation between the supernatural and the natural; grace is the action of divine energy on the created world, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. It is precisely the pneumatic nature of Orthodoxy that makes it the most open form of Christianity, showing its roots to lie predominantly in the New Testament rather than the Old. At its apex, Orthodoxy understands the purpose of life as the acquisition or attainment of the grace of the Holy Spirit, as the spiritual transfiguration of creation. This understanding is essentially opposed to a legalistic understanding in which the divine, supernatural world would be regarded as the law or norm for the created natural world.

Orthodoxy is primarily liturgical. It instructs and enlightens not so much by sermons or the teaching of norms and laws, but by liturgical services which give a foreshadowing of transfigured life. It teaches likewise through the examples of saints and instills a cult of holiness. But the images of saints are not normative; they demonstrate the graceful enlightenment and transfiguration of creation by the action of the Holy Spirit. Orthodoxy's refusal of normativity orients it more at odds with the ways of human life, with history; it makes Orthodoxy less useful for any kind of organization or for cultural creativity. The hidden mystery of the Holy Spirit's activity upon creation has not been transferred onto the ways of historical life.

Characteristic for Orthodoxy is *freedom*. This internal freedom may not be noticed from the outside but it is everywhere present. The idea of freedom as the foundation of Orthodoxy was

developed in Russian religious thinking of the 19th and 20th centuries. The admission of freedom of conscience radically distinguishes the Orthodox Church from the Catholic Church. But the understanding of freedom in Orthodoxy is different from the understanding of freedom in Protestantism. In Protestantism, as in all Western thought, freedom is understood individualistically, as the right of a person who preserves himself from encroachment on the part of any other person, and who defines himself in isolation from others. Individualism is foreign to Orthodoxy; to it belongs a particular kind of collectivism. A religious person and a religious collective are not in opposition to each other. The religious person is found within the religious collective and the religious collective is found within the religious person. Thus the religious collective does not become an external authority for the religious person, burdening the person externally with teaching and the law of life. The Church does not exist outside of religious persons. The Church is within them and they are within her. Thus the Church is not an external authority. The Church is a grace-filled unity of love and freedom. "Authoritativeness" is foreign to Orthodoxy because this form engenders a fracture between the religious collective and the religious person, between the Church and her members.

There is no spiritual life without freedom of conscience, without freedom of the spirit. Without this freedom, there is not even a concept of the Church, since the Church does not tolerate slaves within her. Only the free are needed by God. But authentic freedom of religious conscience, freedom of the spirit, is made evident not in an isolated autonomous personality, self-asserted in individualism, but in a personality conscious of being

in a superpersonal spiritual unity, in a unity within a spiritual organism, within the body of Christ, that is, the Church. My personal conscience is not placed outside, in opposition to the superpersonal conscience of the Church, but is revealed only within the Church's conscience. But without an active spiritual deepening of my personal conscience, of my personal spiritual freedom, the life of the Church is not realized, since this life cannot be external to nor be imposed upon the person. Being within the Church demands spiritual freedom, not only from the first entry into the Church, which Catholicism also recognizes, but throughout one's whole life. The Church's freedom with respect to the state was always precarious, but Orthodoxy always enjoyed freedom within the Church.

In Orthodoxy freedom is organically linked with *sobornost'*, that is, with the activity of the Holy Spirit upon the religious collective, the activity that has been with the Church at all times, not just during the times of the Ecumenical Councils. Orthodox *sobornost'*, the life of the Church's people, has never been distinguished by external juridical signs but only internal, spiritual characteristics. Not even the Ecumenical Councils enjoyed indisputable external authority. Only the whole Church collectively, throughout her whole history, has enjoyed the infallibility of authority. The bearers and custodians of this authority are the whole people of the Church. The Ecumenical Councils enjoyed their authority not because they conformed to external juridical legal requirements but because the people of the Church, the whole Church, recognized them as Ecumenical and genuine. Only that Ecumenical Council is genuine in which there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit; the outpouring of the

Holy Spirit has no external juridical criteria but is discerned by the people of the Church in accordance with internal spiritual evidence. All this indicates the Orthodox Church's non-normative and non-judicial character. By the same token, the Orthodox consciousness understands the Church more ontologically: it does not view the Church primarily as an organization, as a society of faithful, but as a spiritual, religious organism, the mystical body of Christ.

Orthodoxy is more cosmic than Western Christianity. Neither Catholicism nor Protestantism sufficiently expresses the cosmic nature of the Church as the Body of Christ. Western Christianity is primarily anthropological. But the Church is also the cosmos rededicated to Christ; within her, the whole created world is subject to the effect of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Christ's appearance has a cosmic, cosmogonic significance. It signifies a new creation, a new day of the world's creation. The legalistic understanding of redemption as a judicial process between God and man is entirely foreign to Orthodoxy. It holds rather to an ontological and a cosmic understanding of the appearance of a new creation and a renewed mankind. The Eastern Fathers maintained as central the idea of theosis, of the deification of man and of the whole created world. Salvation consists in this deification. The whole created world, the whole cosmos is subject to deification. Salvation is the enlightenment and transfiguration of creation, not a legal acquittal.

Orthodoxy treats the mystery of the *resurrection* as the summit and the ultimate goal of Christianity. Therefore, the central feast in the life of the Orthodox Church is the feast of Pascha, Christ's glorious resurrection. The shining rays of the resurrection per-

meate the Orthodox world. The feast of the resurrection has immeasurably greater significance in the Orthodox liturgy than in Catholicism, which reaches its apex in the feast of the nativity of Christ. In Catholicism we meet the crucified Christ and in Orthodoxy the resurrected Christ. The way of the Cross is man's path, but it leads man, along with the rest of the world, towards the resurrection. The mystery of the crucifixion may obscure the mystery of the resurrection. But the mystery of the resurrection is the utmost mystery of Orthodoxy. The resurrection mystery is not only for man; it is cosmic. The East has always been more cosmic than the West. The West is more humanistic; in this are its strength and meaning but also its limitation. The spiritual basis of Orthodoxy engenders a desire for universal salvation. Salvation is understood not only as individual but collective, embracing the whole world. Thomas Aquinas's idea that the righteous person in paradise will delight himself with the suffering of sinners in hell could not have emanated from Orthodoxy's bosom. Nor could Orthodoxy proclaim the teaching of predestination, neither in its extreme Calvinist form nor in that imagined by the Blessed Augustine. The greater part of Eastern teachers of the Church, from Clement of Alexandria to Maximus the Confessor, were believers in *apokatastasis*, the doctrine of universal salvation and resurrection. This is characteristic of [contemporary] Russian religious thought. Orthodox thought has never been constrained by the principle of divine justice and has never forgotten the principle of divine love. It has chiefly defined man not from the point of view of divine justice but from the idea of the transfiguration and deification of man and cosmos.

Finally, the definitive and most important feature of Orthodoxy is its escha-



tological consciousness. Early Christian eschatology, the anticipation of Christ's second appearance and the coming of the resurrection, was preserved to a greater extent in Orthodoxy. Orthodox eschatology entails a lesser attachment to the world and earthly life and a greater propensity towards heaven and eternity, to the kingdom of God. In Western Christianity, actualization of Christianity in the paths of history and a propensity toward earthly order and earthly organization have tended to obscure the eschatological mystery of Christ's second coming. In Orthodoxy, primarily as a result of its lesser historical activity, a greater sense of eschatological anticipation has been preserved. The apocalyptic dimension of Christianity has been less expressed in the West. In the East, in Orthodoxy, and especially in Russian Orthodoxy, there have arisen particular apocalyptic tendencies, an anticipation of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Orthodoxy has preserved the ancient truths in its more traditional or conservative form of Christianity, but has also allowed for the possibility of greater religious innovation—not innovations of human thought, so prominent in the West, but the innovation of the religious transfiguration of life.

The primacy of the fullness of life over the differentiation of culture has always been especially characteristic of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy has never given rise to the kind of monumental culture that arose on the grounds

of Catholicism and Protestantism. Perhaps this is because Orthodoxy is turned toward the kingdom of God, which will come not as a consequence of historical evolution but as a result of the mystical transfiguration of the world. It is not evolution but transfiguration which is characteristic for Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy cannot be known through surviving theological tracts and is expressed least of all in concepts; it can be known only through the life of the Church and the Church's people. Yet Orthodoxy must come out from its condition of being shut up and isolated, it must actualize its hidden spiritual treasures. Only then will it attain worldwide significance. The recognition of Orthodoxy's exclusive spiritual significance as the most pure form of Christianity must not engender internal self-satisfaction, leading to a rejection of the meaning of Western Christianity. On the contrary, we must acquaint ourselves with Western Christianity and learn many things from it. We must strive toward Christian unity. Orthodoxy is a good basis for Christian unity. Orthodox Christianity has experienced very little of secularization, and can therefore contribute an immeasurable amount toward the Christianization of the world. The Christianization of the world must not mean a secularization of Christianity. Christianity cannot be isolated from the world. It continues to move within it, without separation, and while remaining in the world, it must be the conqueror of the world—not be conquered by it. ✽

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*Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev* (1874–1948) was an existential philosopher and Orthodox intellectual. His writing reflected an abiding concern with social and cultural issues, even as his early engagement with Marxism gave way to an interest in Christian spirituality. He spent the latter part of his life in Paris.