

Russian Orthodox Prophet Nicolai Berdyaev

Royal Davis
September 1973

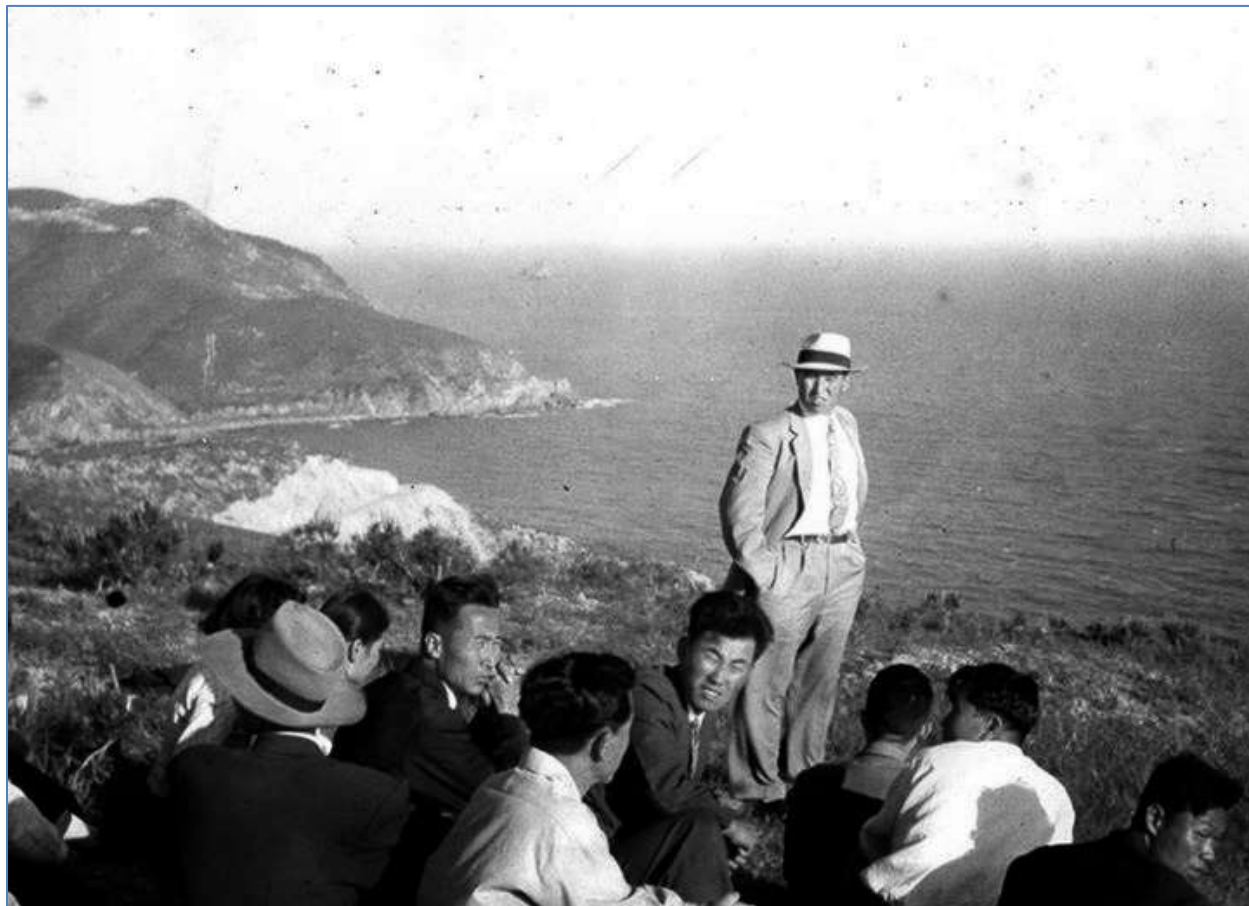


Photo date and location unknown

Abridged from a report given at a Washington, D.C. meeting of the Theological Committee which is under the direction of Miss Young Oon Kim. Rev. Royal Davis, an ordained Congregational minister, is a contributing editor of the journal Religion and Society and now lives at Washington's Upshur / Varnum Unification Center.

As the World Council of Churches celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, the objective observer can at least praise the way it has introduced Eastern Orthodox Christianity to Western churchmen, both Catholic and Protestant.

Within Eastern Orthodoxy the Russian church is of special importance, and within it no one has had quite so much contemporary influence as the lay philosopher of religion Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948). Berdyaev in our time was for modern Orthodoxy what Jacques Maritain was for Catholicism and Paul Tillich for Protestantism. The very fact that all his major books have come out in paperback editions shows the depth of his impact.

Berdyaev came from Kiev, the ancient seat of Christian Russia. His family belonged to the aristocratic and military class swept aside by the Revolution of 1917. Though Berdyaev himself had opposed Czarist reaction as a student, been imprisoned for his youthful indiscretions, and spent three years in exile, he soon recognized the satanic underside of Revolutionary Marxism.

Once Lenin secured his grip on Russian society he quite naturally strangled the intellectuals who might provide an opposition party. Many were killed or driven into Siberian exile. Berdyaev was one of the lucky university professors expelled from the Soviet Union but warned that he would be shot if he came back.

Berdyaev joined the more than one million Russian refugees in Germany. He repeatedly described himself as an exile rather than an emigre. The emigre was anti-Communist for reasons of economic advantage, social status, and political loyalties. The exile was cast out because the Communist society would not tolerate an independent spirit.

Sheer economic necessity drove Berdyaev from Berlin to Paris. As many Americans recognized, Paris in the 1920's was a cultural refuge from middle class materialism, the 5 and 10¢ store capitalism of the West, and the Red dictatorial terror of the East. Paris was Picasso, Gide, Cocteau, Bergson, Loisy, Valery,

Maritain -- a truly Renaissance city of the human spirit. Almost alone it stood for life, light and love in Europe between two world wars, an oasis of classic humanism. For the Russian, the French capital provided both physical safety and intellectual stimulation.

Berdyaev once noted the basic difference between the Christian West and the Christian East. The Western church since Augustine conceived of man as a wretched sinner. The Eastern Church thought of him as a noble creature upon whom was indelibly placed the divine image. Man the sinner was totally depraved, hopelessly corrupted, inordinately proud, completely rebellious. By contrast man made in the likeness of God came from Him and is destined to reunite with Him.

Berdyaev was thoroughly Platonic, decidedly Byzantine, wholly Orthodox in orientation. His doctrine of God-manhood provides us with a positive self-image, reinforces the cultural activities of the human spirit, and respects the intellectual side of human nature.

Berdyaev called his approach the philosophy of the Creative Act. God and man share a common image. The divine and human are alike, human creativity mirroring God's creativity. By His very essence God reveals Himself by creating an orderly and beautiful cosmos out of nothing. Likewise by his freedom man most fully expresses himself in creative activity of every kind.

In his Paris years Berdyaev gathered about him every sort of creative person. His home became the meeting place of philosophers, theologians, poets, painters, Catholics, Protestants, traditionalists, modernists, almost anyone with artistic sensibilities or speculative vision. He really believed that by means of the Platonic dialogue one could truly come to understand creation and Creator.

Such catholicity of temperament led the Russian to reinterpret the whole Christian tradition in a novel fashion. His was a philosophy of freedom, the metaphysics of Genesis One, so to speak. As God creates stars, rivers, creeping things, and fowl of the air, so man, His image creates poems, paintings, novels, cathedrals, philosophic systems, constructive theologies, and saintly lives. Dante's hell has to be abandoned precisely because it denies the lasting value of large parts of God's handiwork and because it obscures the permanent significance of the divine image dignifying every individual.

According to the Russian Slavophiles, Catholicism errs by treating man in an absolutist fashion, considering us as mere servants to be ordered around by a divine monarch. Protestantism went to the opposite extreme with its excessive and destructive individualism. Orthodoxy corrects the political Christianity of Saint Peter and the antinomian Christianity of Saint Paul with a Christianity derived from Saint John, the Gospel of light and love, running water and ecstatic fire.

The Old Testament religion of law and the New Testament religion of faith must be replaced by Johannine religion of spirit, creative and free. Now that we have passed through the age of the Father and the age of the Son we herald a new age of the Holy Spirit. Berdyaev thus took the old Russian idea of *sobornost* (community) and applied it to the whole range of human activities.

Berdyaev would applaud a church which believes that Eastern wisdom and Western thought should be reconciled, a church aware of the demonic character of Communism, a church desiring the unity of religion and science, a church young in spirit and open to new revelation.