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Revelation in Nicolas Berdyaev's Religious Philosophy

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Abstract: Nicolas Berdyaev's understanding of the self-revelation of God to humankind is a point of connection between the central ideas of his religious philosophy. Berdyaev says that God's self-revelation occurs within the inner person, through divine-human spiritual cooperation, bringing about a revolutionary transformation of the human consciousness. Yet, the degree to which revelation can occur depends on human spiritual development. The eschatological culmination of this development will be the revelation of God in humankind and humankind in God—fulfilling the Godmanhood of Christ. The content of revelation is the Truth that is Godself, expressed in relational knowledge of God. Revelation occurs as an activity of divine-human cooperation. It is affected by human limitations and must be open to critique, particularly to purge from it human categories of dominance, power and enslavement. Truth is its own criterion, but in *sobornost* there is a sense of communal discernment. Only in freedom may revelation and truth may be found.

Keywords: Nicolas Berdyaev, revelation, religious philosophy

1 Revelation, the Spirit and the human

Revelation is not *the* integrating concept of Nicolas Berdyaev's religious thought—freedom and humanity fill that role. Yet the self-revelation of God is a point of connection between central ideas of Berdyaev's religious philosophy. To approach Berdyaev's concept of revelation, one must look at his ideas on truth, freedom, spirit, knowledge, objectification, the human subject and the very nature of God.

This article seeks to explore Berdyaev's idea of revelation in the context of his philosophy. This is interesting particularly because of Berdyaev's association of revelation with the spiritual, including the Holy Spirit. There is little published work (in Western languages at least) on Berdyaev's concept of revelation.[1] I do not attempt a thorough analytical discussion of the merits or otherwise of Berdyaev's view in contrast to other views of revelation—that would require a much larger study than can be attempted here.

1 The secondary sources relate to the context within Berdyaev's philosophy of his concept of revelation, rather than his ideas on revelation itself. Fuad Nucho does give a concise summary of aspects of Berdyaev's concept of revelation in *Berdyaev's Philosophy*, 127–133 and touches briefly on a number of the points made in this essay. In my view, however, Nucho sometimes misstates Berdyaev's position.

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1.1 Revelation within, through divine-human spiritual cooperation

For Nicolas Berdyaev, self-revelation is a defining characteristic of God[2] and the presence of revelation is a defining characteristic of religion.[3] God actively "goes out to meet man."[4] Berdyaev does not attempt a concise, complete definition of revelation, except to say that, "where the divine is manifested, there is revelation."[5] The revelation of God to the world and to man takes many forms, Berdyaev says.[6] Nevertheless, he makes clear his ideas on revelation's essential character.[7]

In Berdyaev's concept, revelation is always a spiritual occurrence. It occurs by the Holy Spirit, neither in the objective realm, nor within the subjectivity of the soul, but in the human spirit.[8] Revelation is the very fact of the Spirit within the human subject; it is spiritual experience and spiritual life.[9] God's self-revelation is neither a transcendent objective event, nor an illumination from without. Rather, it transpires within us.[10] Nevertheless, the inner spiritual event of revelation can be symbolised in an external, objective, event or institution.[11]

For Berdyaev, it is essential to understand that revelation is divine-human, not solely divine; it requires conscious human involvement and cooperation; the very notion and existence of revelation depends on humanity.[12] Only when the human spirit meets the Holy Spirit in existential encounter is there an intuitive apprehension of God. For Berdyaev, this is the only "proof" of God.[13] Thus Berdyaev's understanding of revelation depends on his philosophy of spirit. "Spirit" is not simply the Holy Spirit, rather it is the sphere in which the divine and the human are united.[14] The divine element in humanity is the spiritual element. Though spirit is not the Holy Spirit, the difference is but one of degree.[15] Consequently, a distinction between the two at times seems blurred in Berdyaev's writing. "Spirit emanates from God but it is not a Divine creation like nature; it is a divine infusion, an inspiration. That is the biblical image."[16]

John Robinson found the way in which Berdyaev speaks about "spirit"—especially in *Spirit and Reality* and *Freedom and the Spirit* —to be a contribution to modern theology. Robinson said, "As long as we go on speaking of the Spirit as a separate metaphysical entity or 'Person' I doubt whether we shall ever begin to communicate."[17] However, Berdyaev does not go so far as to set aside the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Personality is an important category in Berdyaev's thought that also relates to spirit—divine and human. Personality is free spirit and the link between man and God, beyond "the false submergence of man in his own closed circle."[18]

David Richardson says that for Berdyaev, "Spirit is the link of man with God because it transcends objectivized knowing through the primacy of the will; and because it transcends a pure subjectivity through the divinity of the human spirit."[19] Berdyaev distinguishes sharply between the human soul and the human

2 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 46.
3 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.
4 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 46.
5 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 88. Consequently, in an incomplete form, revelation can occur in non-Christian religion, and the content of revelation is the divine.
6 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 46.
7 Particularly in chapter 1 of *Truth and Revelation* and in section 1 of chapter 3 of *Freedom and the Spirit*.
8 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.
9 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 14.
10 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.
11 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 46–47; Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 91.
12 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 46.
13 "The one and only reason for belief in God is the existence of the divine element in man." Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 234.
14 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 47.
15 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 141.
16 Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality,* 33.
17 Robinson, "Church and theology", 156–157.
18 Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 246.
19 Richardson, *Berdyaev's Philosophy of History*, 108.

spirit.[20] The former pertains to our humanity and the latter to our divinity. The soul knows only objectively, but in and through spirit there is an apprehension of subjective reality, including the self-revelation of God.

Berdyaev criticises the traditional understanding of revelation as communication from an externally objective God to a receiving, knowing, subject. God is subject and is revealed *to* us *within* us; revelation occurs inwardly and spiritually through the action of God.[21] Outward events, as in history and nature, are but symbols of a spiritual reality. We can understand and receive revelation only within the depths of the human spirit and, to become revelation, an historical event must be realised within us spiritually.[22] Because revelation is the self-disclosure of God, Berdyaev asserts, its content is God's very self, rather than knowledge about God.

A distinction between revealed and natural religion is neither profound nor useful, in Berdyaev's view.[23] God is revealed in nature but, of itself, this affords an incomplete knowledge of God. Nature completely devoid of the divine does not exist, but it is only a stage toward the revelation of God. The revelation of divinity in nature merely reflects that which takes place in the spiritual world.[24] Revelation may be received *via* natural phenomena and historical events, especially the Christ event. However, it is to do with meaning and therefore occurs not as outward events themselves, but through their spiritual interpretation.[25]

Revelation cannot be used as an external authority. To oppose freedom of thought because of a supposed objective necessity of revelation stands against what Berdyaev regards as an essential principle: that God is revealed only within the inner consciousness. "Faith always has a spiritual precedence over authority. It is simply a form of materialism to regard revelation as authority."[26] Revelation requires both divine grace and human freedom; revelation and faith are impossible without each other.[27] Thus, revelation is not something done *for* us, but requires faith by which we cooperate with the divine.[28] Revelation takes our freedom for granted, our faith in something which remains invisible,[29] faith is "always directed towards the mysterious and hidden world … involving an extension of experience to an unprecedented degree."[30]

Revelation is understood only in the light of the indwelling spirit, the presence of which affirms the divine image in man, the *imago Dei*.[31] Berdyaev criticises those who say that humans as spiritual beings resemble God only by grace rather than by virtue of their nature. To regard revelation as purely transcendent, denying the immanence of spirit and the inward revelation of God by the Spirit is, he says, a denial of the relationship between God and humankind. Revelation has an affective consequence for *both* God and human. As God and humanity are disclosed in each other, revelation makes known the yearning of God for us as much as it illuminates us in our yearning for God. Thus, Berdyaev stands against the traditional theological viewpoint that God is impassive and complete in Godself.[32]

Though revelation is a spiritual event, Berdyaev emphasises that only through humanity has it reached humanity—through lawgivers, prophets, apostles, teachers and saints, and especially through Jesus. Even when one hears God's voice in the inner self, one hears it through one's own humanity. Thus, revelation reflects the human condition and is affected by human limitations. The presence of this natural, limited, element requires of revelation that it be "purified and emancipated" from anything that is not of the truth

20 Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5.3; Hebrews 4.12.
21 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 47.
22 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 93.
23 Ibid., 88.
24 Ibid., 89.
25 Ibid., 94.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 93.
29 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 48. Cf. Hebrews 11.1.
30 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 104.
31 Ibid., 95.
32 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, 48. Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the kingdom of God*, 42–47.

or the Spirit.[33] Here Berdyaev tends to use the word "revelation" in two ways. He uses it in the usual sense of the disclosure of God as well as to designate that which humankind in whatever way understands to be God's self-disclosure. It is in the latter sense that revelation may be criticised.[34]

1.2 Revelation and the transformation of the consciousness

Berdyaev argues that there are differing degrees of God's revelation. God cannot be revealed fully because of our fallen nature and the limitations of the natural realm. At present, we could not withstand God's full glory.[35] Inasmuch as it contains the Truth, the self-revelation of God, Christian revelation is in principle absolute. Yet, in receiving the revelation of God, made known in the world, humankind is aware of limitations on its apprehension of God.[36]

Revelation is transforming—a "catastrophic transformation of consciousness."[37] It is revolution rather than evolution—a spiritual awakening and reorientation of the self toward the spiritual realm in which God is revealed. The revelation of God empowers a transformation of human consciousness, releasing and making known the depths of the human spirit.[38] Berdyaev argues that the extent to which we can receive revelation depends on the nature and capacity of the human consciousness and our receptiveness to the spiritual realm. He draws a distinction between a "static consciousness" and a "dynamic consciousness". Berdyaev asserts that religious experience, which includes revelation, can be understood only through dynamic consciousness.[39] This is despite the static conception of consciousness he believes to have then been held by most schools of philosophy and theology. "Revelation always means a spiritual awakening and it is accompanied by a fresh orientation of consciousness towards another world."[40] Many concepts of philosophy,[41] Berdyaev argues, do not admit that the human consciousness can be enlarged, and thereby deny that the human can connect with the divine life and new kinds of spiritual experience. This limited perspective leads to "a transcendent and external interpretation of revelation which is the product of a naïve and naturalist realism."[42]

A static, unchanging, state of consciousness cannot grasp the reality that is known only by the spirit. A dynamic human consciousness can deepen and change from within the inner being. This change is empowered by the life of the spirit, within which revelation is given.[43] Because the spiritual reality is limitless, active and dynamic, it can be revealed only to a consciousness with the same dynamism. The spiritual awakening of the consciousness occurs through movement of the divine towards the human and

33 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 8.

34 Berdyaev was not alone in describing revelation as a personal, immanent encounter in which the divine is made known. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher described revelation as being generated in the individual and recognised as original and new, without which one has no religion Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 89–90. Early twentieth century modernists such as Auguste Sabatier also saw revelation as an encounter with the redeeming presence of God. (Sabatier, *Outlines*, 35–36) Sabatier and Berdyaev would also agree in denying that revelation is a source of unchangeable dogma. Similar beliefs were held by the Catholic Modernists early in the twentieth century. The Roman Catholic Church was sufficiently perturbed by this to require clergy to ascent to an *Oath against Modernism* (Pius X, Motu proprio *Sacrorum Antistites*, 1910) rejecting inner experience as a foundation of faith and requiring reliance on the external signs of revelation, including miracles and prophecy. If doctrine is not revealed, how could the church offer the godly wisdom and instruction that religion is supposed to provide? To this, Berdyaev's "short answer" would be that, in revelation, it is not doctrine that is revealed, but God's very self, which surely is more profitable.

35 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 92.

36 Ibid., 93.

37 Ibid., 96.

38 Ibid., 95.

39 Ibid., 97.

40 Ibid.

41 Berdyaev instances "rationalism, transcendental idealism, empiricism, evolutionism, and theological positivism". Ibid., 100.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 101–2.

the human towards the divine. "Revelation ... reshapes our consciousness, and removes its limitations."[44] Because revelation is a divine-human process involving the inner human consciousness, without this process it does not occur, does not exist. There are degrees of revelation itself, according to the development of the consciousness. Revelation is not a fixed external phenomenon received in varying measure. "The pouring forth of the divine illumination corresponds to the changes to which consciousness is subject and to the various tendencies and manifestations of the spirit."[45] Thus, referring to Old Testament history, Berdyaev finds a relationship between revelation, development in the world and a dynamic development of consciousness.[46] Even Christianity itself has degrees of revelation, and its history has had its special times of change. At times, Christian truth has been less known, because of diverse "structures of consciousness and the differing degrees of spirituality."[47] Thus, Berdyaev extends changes in consciousness and degrees of revelation not only to personal development in the lives of individuals, but also to the history of Christianity.

1.3 The eschatological revelation of humanity

Christian revelation has become too rigid, Berdyaev declares, as if the Spirit had departed. Revelation must be understood more mystically. As this happens, a new period in Christian history will begin. God's self-revelation, Berdyaev insists, is not an unchangeable "given', but an ongoing, developing, spiritual encounter between God and humanity—in individuals and in humankind at large.[48] One can object to the possibility of new and ongoing revelation only if one takes a static view of humanity, which would allow humankind to receive revelation only passively.[49] "The greatest error of which historical Christianity is guilty is due to the circumscribing and deadening notion that revelation is finished and that there is nothing more to be expected."[50]

One of his earliest books, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, first published in 1916, continued to be regarded by Berdyaev as one of his most important.[51] In it, he expressed the idea of a continuing unfolding of God's revelation in dispensational terms, as three epochs of divine revelation: the revelation of the law (the Father), the revelation of redemption (the Son) and the revelation of creativity (the Spirit). These "epochs" are co-existent and all relate to humankind.[52] The third epoch—the epoch of the Spirit—will see the reversal of the effects of the Fall and a revelation of the intended divinity of humankind. "The third creative revelation in the Spirit," Berdyaev said, "will have no holy scripture; it will be no voice from on high; it will be accomplished in man and in humanity—it is an anthropological revelation, an unveiling of the Christology of man."[53] Thus, the primary question in contemporary religious discussion is "the possibility of a new revelation and a new spiritual era."[54] This would not be a new religion, but the fulfilment and universalisation of the Christian revelation.

It is insufficient simply to wait for the revelation of the Spirit, Berdyaev argues. The new epoch also depends upon human creativity. The revelation, the openness, of God and humanity to each other by the Spirit will remove the contradiction between the divine and the human. This new epoch of the Spirit presupposes a radical reorientation in human consciousness, a maturity of the human spirit. The basis of

44 Ibid., 101–2.
45 Ibid., 111.
46 Ibid., 112.
47 Ibid., 113.
48 Ibid., 114–16.
49 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 19.
50 Ibid., 183.
51 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 100–1. Berdyaev later regretted that he had never been able to "work out the principal thesis of this work". Ibid., 211.
52 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 320.
53 Ibid., 107. In a later work, *The Destiny of Man* (84–153), Berdyaev deals in depth with the three 'epochs' in the context of ethics—The 'Ethics of law', the 'Ethics of Redemption' and the 'Ethics of Creativeness'. There, however, he does not elaborate the relationship of revelation to creativity beyond what he exemplifies in Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*.
54 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 183.

the new epoch will not be judgment and retribution but creative development and assimilation to God.[55] The culmination of revelation as a divine-human process will see the full disclosure of God and humankind in each other. Thus far, Berdyaev says, the world has seen only Old Testament law and New Testament redemption. We are yet to see a religious epoch of creativeness—the epoch of the Spirit. God has thus far concealed what humankind may create in true freedom.[56] The exercise of creative freedom is an act of courage.[57] It will continue creation and become an instrument of revelation, showing the resemblance of the creature to the Creator.[58] Berdyaev argues that Christianity has sought to reveal God but having taught mostly of human weakness and sinfulness is yet to reveal the true nature of humankind, its divine nature.[59] For Berdyaev, humankind is more than a mere component of creation: "Man is not a transitory fragment of the cosmos, a mere step in its evolution; he is superior to the cosmos, independent of its infinity, in principle embraces it completely"[60] and will do so fully in Christ, in whom all of creation is embraced.

Particularly from Vladimir Solovyev,[61] Berdyaev draws on the doctrine of Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*). It is the union of two natures, the Divine and the human, while the distinction between them and their independence is preserved, presupposing a certain commensurability between God and man.[62] As Christ is God-man, the revelation of Christ is the revelation of both God and human. "The Christological revelation is also an anthropological revelation."[63] The idea of Godmanhood has early origins in Eastern Orthodoxy[64] but also appears in Western thinking, particularly when labelled, as by Valliere, "the humanity of God".[65] "The humanity of God" at first seems a contradiction in terms, for humanity is created in God's image, not *vice versa*. In a sense, however, it implies whatever it is in God that humanity and God have in common, as a consequence of God's creation of humankind in the image of God.[66]

Berdyaev speaks of an interpenetrating union of God and humankind in Christ; he looks for a time when human creative potential would increase so that humankind would work with God in the re-creation of the world and be divinized in the process. For Berdyaev, divine-human cooperation in revelation and its outworking in human creativeness are vital preparation for this work. His vision is of humanity overcoming separation from God, by creative acts in and through the Spirit. Berdyaev was motivated by this expectation. Meanwhile, we do not know when this will be and Berdyaev hesitates between pessimism and optimism.[67]

Berdyaev's ideas on the eschatological revelation of humanity may seem speculative to the Western reader. But they are less out of the ordinary in the context of an Orthodox theology of redemption and the deification/divinisation of humankind. Berdyaev is in the mainstream when speaking of humankind being brought to perfection in the likeness of the God-man, Jesus Christ. However, he is distinctive in the way in which in which he speaks of an epoch of the Spirit, creativity, and an eschatological revelation of God and human in each other.

55 Ibid., 185.
56 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 100. Cf. I Cor. 2.9.
57 Ibid., 107.
58 Ibid., 120–21. Cf. I John. 3.2.
59 Ibid., 80–1.
60 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 276.
61 Berdyaev, "The idea of God-manhood".
62 Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 36.
63 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 81.
64 "[T]he idea of the divinization of man is the fundamental concept of Orthodox mysticism, the object of which is the transfiguration of everything created." Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 254–5.
65 Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 11–15.
66 Cf. Barth, *The Humanity of God*.
67 "I am not at all an optimist. Rather I am inclined to think that we are entering an epoch of darkness and of vast destruction". Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 134. "I am not an optimist, but it would be wrong to characterize me as a pessimist ... I do not think that man's fate is quite hopeless." *Put'*, (Jan.-Mar. 1945), 46. Translated and quoted in Lowrie, *Christian Existentialism*, 1965, 324.

2 Knowledge, truth and critique

2.1 Knowledge

As revelation is the self-disclosure of God, Berdyaev reasons, its content is God. Therefore, the content of revelation must also be Truth.[68] This is spiritual knowledge *of* God, rather than knowledge *about* God and not something that exists outside of oneself.[69] Rather, knowledge approximates the truth that is gained through inner experience. Knowledge of the things of the spirit (as distinct from scientific, objective, knowledge) has a mystical element, bringing intellect, emotion, will and intuition together. In speaking of mysticism, Berdyaev refers more to spiritual knowledge and processes rather than orthodox mysticism, which he asserts to have frequently been identified with asceticism and thus not truly mystical.[70]

When he writes about knowledge, Berdyaev assigns decisive importance, "to the affective element, however difficult it may be of articulation in intellectual propositions…". Extreme rationalism, Berdyaev asserts, springs from oppression and in the last analysis usually originates in intuition and emotional commitment rather than intellectual argument.[71] "I cannot help thinking," he says, "that those who hope to attain knowledge would be better employed in trying to communicate with the mystery of being than in analyzing and defending the truth of logical propositions."[72]

For Berdyaev, revelation contains no cognitive element and is not of itself knowledge.[73] Revelation can be important to knowledge, however, as it may bring a distinct experience which, "philosophy can transform into an immanent datum."[74] Such knowledge comes about as a creative understanding, a dynamic process involving, "a movement of the spirit, a direction of will, a sensitivity, a search for meaning, a being shaken, elated, disillusioned and imbued with hope".[75] True philosophy, a love of wisdom, is pre-eminently spiritual and emotional. Knowledge does not eliminate mystery—indeed it has mystical elements—but it destroys false mystery and mysticism that originate in ignorance. "Mystery abides even on the summits of knowledge: indeed, it is made more real and significant in knowledge." God is the ultimate mystery and the highest knowledge participates in the mystery of God.[76]

Berdyaev upholds the value of scientific method in matters of objective study, including history.[77] He vigorously denies, however, any claim that science may be a means of all knowledge or a solution to all human problems. Berdyaev desires of philosophy that it, "should not be *about* something or somebody but should be that very something or somebody, in other words that it should be the revelation of the original nature and characteristic of the subject itself."[78] Berdyaev acknowledges indebtedness to Kant, particularly in Kant's dualism of the realm of phenomena and the noumenal realm of "things in themselves". However, he disagrees with Kant's view that the real but noumenal world ("things in themselves") is unknowable and that the phenomenal world is the only subject matter of knowledge. On the contrary, for Berdyaev it is an apprehension of things in themselves that is more real.[79]

68 Others, however, would see revelation as a God-directed means to the disclosure of God—in the Scriptures, for example.
69 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 83.
70 Ibid. There are echoes of Gregory of Palamas here. Gregory affirmed the theology of experience and meditation, defending the mystical stance of Hesychasm. By encountering God's "energies', especially God's light, Gregory taught that one could have a relationship with God, even though God is in essence unknowable.
71 Ibid., 87.
72 Ibid., 88.
73 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, 5. Cf. Richardson, Berdyaev*'s Philosophy of History*, 165*ff*.
74 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, 5.
75 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality,* 89.
76 Ibid., 90.
77 Ibid., 286–87
78 Ibid., 93. Emphasis original.
79 Ibid., 7.

2.2 Truth

Berdyaev speaks of Truth as being distinct from truths.[80] Capital-letter Truth is reality itself, and is supernatural. God is Truth. Small-letter truths are knowledge about reality, based in the objective. The notion of truth is presently under the spell of objectivisation, Berdyaev declares. Only what can be objectively verified is generally considered true, genuine, and trustworthy. The dominance of objective thinking, played out as science and technology, alienates and suffocates the life of the spirit and of the individual.

How then is a criterion of Truth to be found? Berdyaev asks. Too often, this is sought in something inferior to Truth, in the objectified world. Yet, in the objective realm, proof ultimately rests on assumptions. Truth cannot be guaranteed. "The freedom of the spirit knows nothing of guarantees."[81] Truth is disclosed, not proven. "Creative philosophy must free itself from the tempting power of proof, must fulfil the act of renouncing this safe adaptation to necessity."[82] Berdyaev discards pragmatism and utilitarianism as criteria of truth. Nor does he allow reason to be absolute in assessing truth.[83] "Truth, integral Truth, not partial, is a revelation of the higher world, that is of a world which is not objectified."[84] "The one and only standard of truth is Truth itself ... all other criteria exist for the objective world of the commonplace."[85]

For Berdyaev, pure truth has a prophetic edge. No religion is above truth and revelation must reveal truth.[86] "The pure and undistorted truth of Christianity which is not adapted to the interests of anything whatever might well be highly dangerous to the existence of the world, to mundane societies and civilisations. It might be a consuming fire which descends from heaven."[87]

Pragmatic adjustment of God's revelation in the service of human institutions makes purported "revelation" subject to critique. The criterion of this critique, again, is truth, but this is not the same as formal proof. There can be no criterion of true knowledge of God outside of Godself. Nor can any person's inner spiritual experience be proven true.[88] "When a logical proof is demanded in matters of religious faith, then faith is dragged down to the lowest level of spiritual unity."[89] To demand proof of the vision of God, Berdyaev says, is to place under authority something given in freedom. "Faith ... knows nothing of necessity in the logical or juridical sense."[90]

To seek an external standard of truth in revelation is not only futile but harmful. "The quest of standards of truth leads us into a vicious circle from which there is no way out." To assume any objective authority for religious truth will ultimately require a subjective belief in the authority, though this may be disguised by its social or traditional character.[91] To the question, "Where then is a fixed and abiding standard of truth?" Berdyaev declines to answer, as "the acceptation of truth always involves an element of risk. There is no guarantee and ought not to be any." Such risk lies in every act of faith.[92]

Observing that, for Protestants, Truth is found in the Word of God, Berdyaev similarly suggests that, "it remains unexplained by what criterion it is to be decided what is the Word of God and what is the human contribution." In Barth, for example, a near-contemporary of Berdyaev, "it is left obscure to what extent the Word of God is a historic fact." Berdyaev says that this is because Barth seeks to be free of philosophy—

80 Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 42–49.
81 Ibid., 46.
82 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 48.
83 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 37.
84 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 28.
85 Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 46–7.
86 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 31.
87 Ibid., 28.
88 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 110.
89 Ibid., 108.
90 Ibid., 111.
91 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 39.
92 Ibid., 40.

an impossibility in Berdyaev's view.[93] Berdyaev affirms that God is revealed in scripture,[94] but not in scripture alone. The revelation of God to the world and humanity takes many forms. The crucial criterion for attainment of the knowledge of God is that God is at work, seeking to meet with women and men.[95]

2.3 Truth and community

Truth, Berdyaev says, is communal, but he sharply distinguishes the "communal" from the "collective". Collectivism is compulsory social organisation, in which "truth" is dictated from outside as if it were the common will and view. It is people being together in a coerced, merely outward, way. Community life, on the other hand is a brotherly communion in truth of people whose freedom is accepted, bringing into reality the free life of each.[96] Berdyaev and others in the Russian Orthodox tradition describe such a communal life as *sobornost*.[97] "Communality, *Sobornost'*, is a society that is spiritual, which is hidden away from an externalised and objectivised society."[98] Berdyaev writes that, through the experience of *sobornost*, "... I am not alone, for I am one with all my brethren in the spirit, in whatever place or time they may have lived."[99] Here Berdyaev gives a hint of a path to discerning Truth: it can be revealed in community life.[100] He argues that the process of finding truth and meaning is a process of the whole person—will and intellect as well as spirit—and that the process of thinking and discernment cannot take place in isolation.[101] Knowledge is personal, but also is a form of communication and each person comes to know things through community.[102] The degree of spiritual community is crucial and the person who thinks cannot be separated from the common of brothers and sisters in spirit.[103]

The *sobornost* relationship is one of unity in spirit, not of organisational authority. Just as Truth is made known spiritually in the life of one human being, it would seem that Berdyaev suggests that revelation might be experienced spiritually by a community united in the Spirit. *Sobornost* represents a kind of collective individual that can enter more effectively into communion with God than through individual efforts.[104] Unity in the revelation and knowledge of God and humankind is part of the eschatological hope but its outworking in practice is not easy in the daily life of a community of faith. Nonetheless, a number of Christian gatherings would testify to having experienced a collective sense of the mind of God.

Of course, communal discernment of truth is what the councils of the church have often claimed for themselves—most notably the great councils of the Roman Catholic Church, last instanced in Vatican II. Berdyaev would not allow that such processes necessarily lead to *the* Truth. He insists that a single believer may be more correct than a host of bishops.[105] "A council is infallible only when it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and gives utterance to truth. But there is, again, no criterion for judging when the council is so inspired.

93 Ibid., 49.

94 Here one might comment that Berdyaev is not completely consistent, for elsewhere he regards external, objective phenomena such as the written word as not being revelation. A clearer statement of his view might be that the Scriptures *symbolise* the inner spiritual reality that is God's self-revelation.

95 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 46.

96 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, 25. Cf. Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit*, 123.

97 "... the Russian noun *sobornost* might be translated as qualitative togetherness. In this particular instance it can also be understood as *koinonia*—a fellowship of sharing and participation created by the power of the Holy Spirit. That the church is *soborny* means, according to Berdyaev, it is neither a lofty ideal nor a mere aggregation of individuals but rather a living community gathered around the Messiah." Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom*, 212. Berdyaev's understanding of *sobornost* draws on the ecclesiology of Aleksei Stepanovitch Khomyakov (1804–1860).

98 Berdyaev, "The Problem of Man."

99 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 329.

100 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 25.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid., 39–40.

103 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 40; *The Beginning and the End*, 37. This is a central theme in *Solitude and Society*.

104 Idinopulos, "Intersections of Spirit", 294.

105 Berdyaev, "Discord in the Church and Freedom of Conscience."

Nor is there any criterion of the Holy Spirit. And in any case the Holy Spirit is not a criterion."[106] The point is that there can be no deterministic causal chain in the establishment of spiritual truth, including the truth of revelation. Berdyaev repeatedly insists that *sobornost* occurs in and through freedom—the freedom of spirit in which Truth is made known.[107] "Church *sobornost* does not mean authority ... rather it is the communion in love of the church people with the Holy Spirit."[108] The Holy Spirit dwells in the people of God as a whole, though there can be no proof. "The Spirit—the Holy Spirit—is incarnated in human life, but it assumes the form of a *whole humanity* rather than of authority."[109] The whole people of God are the keepers of truth and the Holy Spirit works in the community of believers (*sobornost*) to divide truth from untruth. Consciousness may be at once personal and communal.[110] Truth exists for the good of all, but is revealed only under certain spiritual, intellectual and cultural conditions. A community united in spirit may be like a single person and able to discern truth and speak prophetically.

2.4 Revelation and history

Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that God's reality can be established only (1) by metaphysical reflection on human experience in history or (2) by independent religious experience of which God is shown to be the basis.[111] For knowledge of God based on religious experience to be more than subjective, God's self-revelation needs to be linked to external and public manifestation of God in specific historical events. Richard Rothe formulated thinking on this "outer" revelation in the mid-nineteenth century. He argued from scripture that God's revelation is not inspiration but a related series of miraculous historical facts and institutions, redeeming us by purifying our knowledge of God. Revelation must be outward, as we are sensory beings. It must lead the human consciousness, by ordinary processes of thought, based on evidence, unambiguously to a true idea of God.[112]

The contrast between such an approach and that of Berdyaev is clear. Berdyaev would not find the subjectivity of a religious experience to be a weakness. He would not accept the idea of revelation as an "outer" phenomenon and he would not allow sensory perceptions or argument based on those perceptions as a ground on which to know God. Only in the inner person, in the human spirit, by the work of the Holy Spirit, can God be known. Nor would Berdyaev accept that that the veracity of religious experience can be proved by argument and objective evidence.

Berdyaev says that its relationship to history is the most important aspect of revelation that is open to critique, for Christianity is the revelation of God in history. "Truth is not only capable of passing judgement upon historical revelation, it is indeed bound to do so. Revelation in history has value only in so far as it is a revelation of truth, an encounter with truth, in other words if it is a revelation of the Spirit."[113] As objects, the events and institutions recorded in the Bible are symbolic of revealed spiritual realities. They are revelation only in a symbolic sense, not as realities. "History," Berdyaev says, "is an objectivization and a socialization of revelation; it is not the primary life of the Spirit."[114] For Berdyaev, it is important to the faith that the coming of Jesus happened as a historical fact. Nevertheless, Christianity arose in an age when mythical events were accepted as factual. The biblical authors did not distinguish as sharply as we might today between history, meta-history and the "supra-historical": in Scripture they are intermingled.

106 Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 186.
107 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 54.
108 Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit*, 122.
109 Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 187, emphasis original. On the same page, Berdyaev declares this to be the "pivotal idea" of *Spirit and Reality*.
110 Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit*, 123.
111 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 222–224.
112 Ibid., 1: 224–225
113 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 38.
114 Ibid., 48.

"Scientific" history and biblical criticism may quite properly dispute things that Scripture relates as fact[115] for a truly spiritual religion cannot set itself above truth.

Berdyaev concludes that the idea of "historical" revelation is contradictory and the acceptance of revelation as history is a product of naïve materialism. Historical revelation can only be a "symbolization in the phenomenal world of events which take place in the noumenal historical world." There is an element of mystery in the manifestation of a real, noumenal, spiritual event in a way that is adapted to the limits of time and place. "The infinite God speaks with a finite human tongue."[116] To establish certain "facts", it is insufficient that they have long been accepted as historical. "The Christian conception of the divine Incarnation ought not to mean the deification of historical facts."[117] Christian "truth" must not rely on unattested history. Nor does acceptance of something by the many signify truth. (Here Pannenberg would agree, but would add that attestation of the historical fact most essential to the faith, the Resurrection, is indeed feasible.) Berdyaev accepts the great importance of tradition in religious life. However, of itself, tradition is not an indicator of truth and it is not an external authority. "To trust in it requires a continuation of the creative process."[118] Acceptance of tradition, whether based in revelation or not, invokes the communal discernment found in the *sobornost* principle.

Historical criticism must be free and can be enlightening but, of itself, Berdyaev believes, it cannot decide spiritual questions. The historicity of events concerning Jesus ultimately cannot be determined by history. The truth of the Christ event, "is a mystery which is not visible from without in history, but has been disclosed in the religious experience of the Christian community."[119]

2.5 The critique of revelation

Because revelation occurs through human mediation, it is affected by human limitations and is received and recorded humanly. Therefore, Berdyaev says, it is subject to critique. In *The Divine and the Human*, he claims that to that date (1945) no critique of revelation had been written that might be analogous to Kant's *Critique of Pure and Practical Reason*. Such a critique of revelation would show the human content of revelation, for all revelation is a divine-human partnership. It is a partnership between the self-revealing God and the women and men to whom God is revealed.[120]

The critique of revelation is a spiritual task assisted by critical scholarship, including biblical criticism. Revelation has always been subject to the judgment of human reasoning and conscience, albeit enlightened from within by the same process of revelation. There has long been a desire to understand and explain revelation, but an uncritical acceptance of "revelation" is dangerous.[121] In what has been accepted as historical revelation we find much that is all too human and certainly not divine.[122]

We tend to create God in human image. Berdyaev contends, however, that the important task in response to anthropomorphism is to seek to make the images of God that we create for ourselves as near as we are able to the divine likeness. The revelation and proclamation of the image and likeness of God is, as in all revelation, a divine-human dialectic.[123] The critique of revelation includes the purging of anthropomorphism and sociomorphism—the transference to God's relationship with humanity of "conceptions derived from the slavish social relations which contain, among human beings, the relation of master and slave."[124] The

115 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 16.
116 Ibid., 17.
117 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 47.
118 Ibid., 41.
119 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 18.
120 Ibid., 2–3.
121 Note again that Berdyaev is using the word "revelation" in two ways—in its usual sense as the disclosure of God but also to signify that which humankind, rightly or wrongly, understands to be God's self-disclosure.
122 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 49–50.
123 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 3.
124 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 8.

difficulty with anthropomorphism is not that it ascribes to God those human characteristics that are good, or that it sees in God a desire for responsive love, but rather that it ascribes to God traits of inhumanity, cruelty and love of power.[125]

Thus, "revelation" may be criticised when it transfers to God human social categories of dominance, power, and enslavement. The critique of revelation is, for Berdyaev, a basis from which to attack dogma that is inconsistent with the nature of God—for it is God who is the subject of revelation. Thus, for example, revelation of God must be an instrument of freedom and dogma cannot purport to be based on revelation if it is inimical to freedom. Berdyaev argues that "social categories of dominance and power have been transferred to God", and that this is "evil sociomorphism".[126] Here, Berdyaev argues not from evidence of the character of God as such, but from the premise that God does not act against freedom. The God revealed in Christ, Berdyaev says, is not the despotic monarch of the Old Testament but the God of love and freedom, revealed in spirit and truth.[127]

Berdyaev criticises a juridical interpretation of the redemptive relationship between God and humankind. This, he says, is based on ancient pagan religion in which humanity sought to propitiate the gods with material sacrifice.[128] Berdyaev is severely critical of the "element of cruelty in the interpretation of Christianity" from which one might suppose that the coming of Christ had worsened human situation.[129] He asserts that the traditional doctrine of God as an all-powerful ruler has led to atheism, for it has rendered theodicy impossible. It is impossible, he says, to find the presence of God in the cruelties and inhumanities of the present world. To make God responsible for such evils depends on a false doctrine of divine providence, for God does not govern the world in the commonly-understood sense, but is present in freedom and love.[130]

These examples illustrate the way in which Berdyaev is persuaded that an incorrect use of revelation, or misapprehension of its content, leads to false dogma that is destructive of faith and freedom. He claims that, in most theology, revelation has been objectified and wrongly interpreted with naïve realism. But God is not an object and "One cannot enter into communion with the mystery of the Spirit in any sort of objectivization."[131] The critique of revelation, Berdyaev says, must begin by addressing this realism. Revelation is spiritual, not a disclosure of material and social reality. Only as *symbolism* is any form of objectivisation of the Spirit possible. Berdyaev seeks a critique leading to, "the liberation of spirit from naturalistic and materialist distortions."[132] Such a "critique by the spirit"[133] would liberate revelation from objectification and the consequences of the subject-object relationship, overcoming the division between humankind and "things in themselves." Christ himself, the God-man, is the resource for this critique and its conclusion.[134]

Although rationalistic abstract reasoning deadens the interior life of the Spirit and deprives God of dynamic interior life, intelligent thought should nevertheless be applied to critique. "Revelation as Truth presupposes the activity of the whole man and to assimilate it demands our thinking also. ... Revelation cannot be something which is finished, static, and which requires a merely passive attitude for its reception."[135] Reliance on the Spirit and critical assessment as a source of truth, is linked to Berdyaev's central concept of freedom, for divine power is freedom and does not rely on naïvely accepted and coercive authority.[136]

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125 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 3.
126 Ibid., 4.
127 Ibid., 6.
128 Ibid., 5.
129 Ibid., 5–6.
130 Ibid., 7–10.
131 Ibid., 13–14. The problem of objectivisation is discussed more fully below.
132 Ibid., 14.
133 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 67.
134 Cf. Osborn, "Subject and Object", 162–3.
135 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 48–9.
136 Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 185.

3 Freedom and objectification

3.1 Revelation requires freedom

Berdyaev's philosophy begins with freedom, which for him is the basis of all else.[137] For Berdyaev, God is present and revealed only in freedom. "I have come to Christ through liberty and through an intimate experience of the paths of freedom."[138] Any relationship between God and human must be based in freedom. Freedom is the context of our existence. It cannot be determined by anything else, for otherwise it would not be freedom. "Freedom is the ultimate: it cannot be derived from anything: it cannot be made the equivalent of anything. Freedom is the baseless foundation of being: it is deeper than all being."[139]

We are not forced to recognise God, as God's purpose is freedom and God is revealed only through the freedom found in spiritual life. The action of divine grace presupposes human freedom and without freedom, faith is impossible. By faith, by voluntary exercise of choice, we open ourselves to the spiritual realm in which God is freely revealed.[140] Berdyaev notes that some argue that freedom and truth are opposed, for truth commands human recognition and allegiance. But such power-wielding "truth", Berdyaev argues, is by its very objectified nature a denial of freedom and no longer truth. One cannot be liberated by coercion.

The close association between freedom and truth brings Berdyaev's idea of freedom into the study of his concept of revelation. Revelation is a divine-human cooperation in knowledge and truth, and truth cannot be received except in freedom.[141] "All things in human life should be born of freedom and pass through freedom and be rejected whenever they betray freedom".[142] This applies to revelation, which is an aspect of human life as well as the divine life.

Berdyaev believes that human freedom is rooted in the "nothing" out of which God created the world. That is not the same as creation *ex nihilo*, however, but an undifferentiated, mystical, primary principle, prior to God and the world. Berdyaev draws on the seventeenth century German mystic Jacob Boehme's idea of the *Ungrund* (the groundless, the abyss) that is the basis of everything, though sometimes Boehme identifies it with God. Berdyaev seeks to refine Boehme's concept, employing metaphors of the *Ungrund*, including "meonic freedom" which he infers from *me on*, a Greek expression for nonbeing (in the non-indicative mood).

Discussing Boehme's concept, Berdyaev says, "I am inclined to interpret the *Ungrund*, as a primordial meonic freedom, indeterminate even by God."[143] Berdyaev says that "Victory over meonic freedom is impossible for God, since that freedom is not created by Him and is rooted in non-being…".[144] Berdyaev separates the *Ungrund* from God and identifies it with an irrational, incomprehensible, and impulsive freedom, which cannot be defined, save only as nothing. He says that even God the creator is born out of this divine nothing. Freedom is not created by God, but rooted in the *Ungrund* from eternity.[145] "We should probably be right in thinking of *Ungrund* as the primary existential freedom. For freedom precedes being. Freedom is not *created*. That is the definition I personally should propose."[146] *Ungrund* is a nothingness, preceding God, who is, of course, not nothingness. In the *Ungrund*, the distinction of freedom from God the Creator is transcended. Humanity is the child of God and of freedom.

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137 In his intellectual autobiography, *Dream and Reality*, Berdyaev declares *Freedom and the Spirit* to be the best expression of his views on freedom. *Dream and Reality,* 100. There is an overview of the centrality of freedom in Berdyaev's life in *Dream and Reality*, 46–54.

138 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, x.

139 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 145.

140 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 105–7.

141 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality,* 47.

142 Ibid., 48.

143 Berdyaev, "Studies concerning Jacob Boeme".

144 Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 281.

145 Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 144–6. Cf. McLachlan, "Mythology and Freedom", 474–485.

146 Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 145. Emphasis original.

Nikolai Lossky, a fellow exile and friend of Berdyaev's, describes the concept of the *Ungrund* as one of a number of ideas philosophers had taken on from Solovyev (and Boehme before him) that, "disagree with the data of religious experience and intellectual intuition, and should therefore be rejected in the course of further development of the Christian world conception."[147] Lossky argues that "neither mystical experience nor intellectual intuition" find any evidence of a "nothing" existing independently of God and utilized by God in creation. (That God created the world out of nothing cannot be taken to mean that God used a "thing" called "Nothing" as material from which to create.) Rather, God created without use of anything from within Godself or without. Freedom, Lossky declares, is a created attribute of the human will, entirely compatible with divine omniscience. Lossky argues that Berdyaev's idea of the *Ungrund*, and of freedom not being created by God, is not acceptably Christian.[148] Lossky is quick to add that his criticism by no means implies rejection of the rest of Berdyaev's system. However, Berdyaev would not accept as truly free a human freewill potentially subject to God—let alone a "freewill" constrained by the possibility of eternal hell and damnation. For Berdyaev, freedom is "primordial, undetermined and underived".[149] Without a freedom of this kind, Berdyaev's concepts of truth and revelation would seem to fall to the ground.

Evgueny Lampert calls Berdyaev's uncreated freedom, "the most disastrous conclusion in his whole philosophy, and one which seems in fact no way warranted by his own fundamental presuppositions."[150] Lampert finds "uncreated freedom" to be a disastrous idea because it implies an ontological dualism. His criticism is not exact, however, because the priority of freedom is itself one of Berdyaev's "fundamental presuppositions." Berdyaev, aware of criticisms such as this, asserts that "groundless freedom" does not imply ontological dualism.[151] His philosophy is existential, "and existential philosophy cannot be ontological".[152]

Oliver O'Donovan takes up the idea of freedom in an interesting way that has echoes of Berdyaev's idea while also differing from it.[153] He speaks of freedom not as a primordial pre-existent, but as a work of the Holy Spirit. O'Donovan's concern is the essential importance of freedom to a man or woman's autonomy as a moral agent. The Spirit makes Christ's work of redemption present to us. In doing so, the Spirit restores to us our position as subjects rather than objects. "The Spirit evokes our *free* response as moral agents to the reality of redemption. … This assertion makes it clear in what sense "subject" and "subjective" … are the appropriate terms to use of the Holy Spirit's work."[154] "The effect of the Holy Spirit's presence to man-as-subject, individual or communal," O'Donovan writes, "is *freedom*."[155] To say someone is free, O'Donovan adds, is to speak of the person, not his or her circumstances. This discussion addresses Lossky's concern that, in a Christian framework, freedom must be a created work of God while also identifying the connection, important to Berdyaev, between freedom and the human person as subject. (What it does not do is deal with the problem of theodicy that, in Berdyaev's view, does not allow freedom to be the creation of God.[156])

Berdyaev's concern for freedom leads him to reject ontology, for he asserts of the primacy of freedom over being. "[W]ith regard to Being, man is not free at all; and this signifies, at the same time, the primacy of spirit, for it is with regard to spirit that man is free."[157] Primacy of being, over which humanity has no control, would lead to determinism. Freedom cannot be determined except by itself. The category of being, which is the concern of ontology, is itself "a product of intellectual objectification" and a "transcendental

147 Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 248.
148 Ibid., 249.
149 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 47.
150 Lampert, "Nicolas Berdyaev", 346, n. 4.
151 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 179.
152 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 68.
153 O'Donovan, "Freedom and Reality".
154 Ibid., 137. Emphasis original.
155 O'Donovan. "Freedom and Reality", 138. Emphasis original.
156 Berdyaev proposes a theodicy that denies that God is omniscient. God has no power over freedom, for it is not God's creation. Even God requires freedom to be God. Thus, God cannot be responsible for evil that arises from freedom. Berdyaev maintains that God does not create our freewill, but helps that will to become good. Freedom cannot be created. If it were, theodicy would be impossible. Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 112–4.
157 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 99.

illusion."[158] Reality in its original state is not undifferentiated Being, but creative act and freedom, to be found in the person, the subject, and in spirit.

3.2 Revelation and objectification

Throughout his work, Berdyaev asserts the priority of the subject over the object. It is this, he says, that makes him an existentialist.[159] He describes the critique of objectification as one of his fundamental philosophical intuitions[160] and disbelieves in a stability of the natural and historical, "objective" realm. For Berdyaev the objectified world is not the true and real world, but a condition that has come about particularly because of the Fall. "Man's mind may never be free from compulsion exercised by "objective realities", but this only goes to show his fallen condition, which can be properly understood and evaluated only from the point of view of a philosophy of freedom, of creativity and of communion in love."[161] Thus, objectification is a consequence of estrangement, in which we are alienated from the subject of our knowledge. "Objectivity signifies the enslavement of the spirit to external things: it is a product of disruption, disunion, estrangement and enmity."[162] Only the subject is real and able to know reality. "The world truly exists in the unobjectified subject. ... Knowledge, which is an activity of the subject, depends on the victory over disunion and estrangement, on the extent and intensity of spiritual communion."[163]

To affirm the transcendent alone, Berdyaev asserts, is a form of naturalist objectification that restricts the inner spiritual life. A tendency towards the transcendent, "separates God and man, isolating man in himself and dividing the spirit from the soul." Rather, Berdyaev looks for a "kind of immanentism, in which consciousness is regarded as immanent in being. The knowing subject is merged in the infinite life of the spirit."[164] In the ultimate, however, God's self-revelation is neither transcendent nor immanent and the distinction between the two will become unnecessary.[165]

Berdyaev asserts that enslavement to the objective is present in Christian theology no less than in secular disciplines.[166] Yet God is *not* object, not an external reality, but immanent in us.[167] This understanding of God, and thus of theology, has profound implications for revelation. Revelation brings knowledge of God but does not thereby do away with mystery. It discloses the depths of mystery, in all of the ineffability of God. The element of mystery always remains and revelation does not imply the apprehension of God by reason.[168]

Berdyaev's strictures notwithstanding, there are contemporary theologians concerned with the human self as subject. Thus, for example, writing on "Revisionists and Liberals", James Buckley finds that theologians of as diverse backgrounds and views as Edward Farley, Gordon Kaufmann, Schubert Ogden and David Tracy, "are concerned with human beings as free *subjects* embedded in a physical and social and historical world, radically threatened by ambiguity and suffering and evil and seeking ways to overcome this situation."[169]

158 Ibid., 286.
159 Ibid., 93.
160 Ibid., 286.
161 Ibid., 287.
162 Ibid., 286.
163 Ibid.
164 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 96.
165 Ibid., 91.
166 "The new path that philosophy is following takes for granted a revision of the traditional philosophy upon which Christian theology and the interpretation of Christianity have rested ... which I call objectified. The idea of God, of Providence, of Authority, the naïvely realistic conception of the creation of the world and of the Fall, the notion that a rational ontology is a possibility, all these have been due to the same process of objectification." Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 13–14.
167 Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 300.
168 Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 90.
169 Buckley, "Revisionists and Liberals", 327–342. Emphasis original. For David Tracy, for example, Christian freedom is, "the real but limited freedom of the prophetic-mystical subject-as-agent-in-process." Tracy, *Dialogue with the other*, 102.

The resolution of humanity's enslavement to the objective is ultimately eschatological. The unity of subject and object, as Robert Osborn expresses it, "is a heavenly reality before it is an earthly possibility, and this heavenly reality which has become an earthly possibility is the God-man Jesus Christ."[170] As objectification's difficulties arise because of human estrangement from God,[171] so will they be resolved when all things are ultimately brought together in perfect freedom in Christ.[172] The experience of Christ in freedom is the inner consistency and unifying mark of Berdyaev's religious work. He begins not with God, nor with humanity, but with Jesus Christ, the God-man. All else comes out of this. Berdyaev seeks not to prove the reality of God but to bear witness to the freedom he knows in Christ.

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170 Osborn, "Subject and Object", 163. Osborn finds in Barth and Berdyaev similar understandings of relationship between subject and object and its resolution in Christ.

171 "Sin is life without Christ, and life without Christ is life in which the original unity is split into subject and object." Osborn, "Subject and Object", 165.

172 Cf. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, chapter 9.

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