urn:nbn:de:0276-2012-4079

Gaelan Gilbert

A New Middle Ages? A Reappraisal of Nicholas Berdyaev's Prophetic Imagination[1]

Abstract

With the intention of recuperating the work of a prolific thinker as a resource for Orthodox social practice and public policy, this essay considers the significance of Nicholas Berdyaev's 1933 book *The End of our Time,* alternatively titled *The New Middle Ages,* as an Orthodox critique of the cultural, political and economic systems of modern society. My study indicates not only Berdyaev's seeming prescience in offering important evaluations of distinct social forms and their negative consequences, but also in proposing creative suggestions for the adaptation of those forms by

Gaelan Gilbert is doctoral candidate in medieval literature and Vanderkerkhove Research Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, BC. He has studied in Greece and taught in California, France, and Canada.

[1] This paper was presented in a condensed form at the George Florovsky Society's 2011 *Pilgrims and Pioneers* conference at Princeton Theological Seminary.

modern Orthodox Christians to facilitate new Orthodox modes of public social existence.

Keywords

Berdyaev, society, capitalism, asceticism, medieval, modern, nationalism, Orthodox, imagination

In this essay, I shall consider the significance of Nicholas Berdyaev's 1933 book *The End of our Time,* alternatively titled, *The New Middle Ages*[2] as an Orthodox response to the cultural, political and economic systems of modern society. My study will indicate his seeming prescience in offering both important critiques of distinct social forms and creative suggestions for the responsible adaptation of those forms by modern Orthodox Christians.

I.

As the title of this paper suggests, Berdyaev turns to premodern models as a lens through which to analyze modern social existence. Such an interpretation is not reducible to escapism, nor should it be seen as irrelevant or outdated, particularly for Orthodoxy, which, in a way still inconceivable to 'the West,' consistently draws from premodern (patristic) sources for ethical and social wisdom. Intriguingly, much recent scholarship from a range of disciplines has also turned to the Middle Ages for analogues in characterizing emergent political and economic institutions, whether domestic or international.[3]

---

2 Nicholas Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time,* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933).

3 John Rapley, "The New Middle Ages," *Foreign Affairs*, 85.3 (May-Jun. 2006), 95-103.

A school of International Relations (IR) theory known as neomedievalism, for instance, sees in the versatile structures and tactics of Middle Eastern sub-national polities some persuasive evidence for what the Strategic Studies Institute calls "the decline of the state," which is a distinctively modern governmental form.[4]

Echoing Berdyaev's concerns, Oxford political theorist Jorg Friedrichs (following Hedley Bull) has argued for the importance of premodern civic space as "a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty" for understanding public governance in the twenty-first century.[5] Even Ramsey-prize winning Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has recently argued that American forms of religious organization like the so-called 'mega-church' are indicators of the "immense institutional transformations that may lie ahead for American Christianity." Hart suggests that mega-churches are a type of sub-national polity that could conceivably mediate between individuals and the State, and thus "might be taken as [...] a kind of new mediaevalism, an attempt to gather small cities into the precincts of the church and to retreat into them from a world increasingly inimical to spiritual longing."[6]

---

4 See Phil Williams, *From the New Middle Ages to a New Dark Age: The Decline of the State and U.S. Strategy.* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), ix. For more on IR theory's neomedievalism, see also; Philip G. Cerny, "Neomedievalism, Civil War and the New Security Dilemma: Globalisation As Durable Disorder," *Civil Wars,* 1.1 (1998): 36-64; and Stephen J. Kobrin, "Back to the Future: Neomedievalism and the Postmodern Digital Economy," *Journal of International Affairs,* 51.2 (Spring 1998): 361-86; and of course Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 3rd edition.

5 Jorg Friedrichs, *European Approaches to International Relations Theory,* (London: Routledge, 2007), 133. See especially ch. 7, "The meaning of new medievalism: An exercise in theoretical reconstruction," 127-45.

6 David Bentley Hart, *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 53. From an

As the above examples suggest, the premodern European past can provide versatile models for assessing emergent forms of twenty-first century social organization. Yet at this point perhaps we should ask whether we are among those who, as Berdyaev puts it, "cannot bear any suggestion of a return to the ideas of the middle ages and zealously oppose any tendencies which they consider mediaeval."[7] Surely we are! As cultural historian Nicholas Watson astutely notes,

> Considered as an ideology, modernity is a dogma at whose core is a set of beliefs about time (that time is uni-directional, progressive, and so on) in which the postmodern moment has also been quietly invested and which tend strongly to validate the as-yet-nonexistent future at the expense of the past. Hence The New York Times's assumption that any irruption of irrationality into the present is "medieval," for, speaking dogmatically, the medieval is the discarded past: the decayed, gothic edifice on whose ruins were built the state, economic progress, secularism, and civil society. All this is, perhaps, obvious. But how did this dogma arise? What are its implications for Western culture's relationship with its history?[8]

Berdyaev's *New Middle Ages* seeks to respond to these questions, arguing in a similar vein that "it is time that people stopped talking of the 'darkness of the middle ages' in contrast with the 'light' of modern history; such talk represents views

---

Orthodox point of view monasteries would perhaps better embody this aim, although types of what Berdyaev would call "co-operative association" organized by laity may be closer. While mega-churches as they now exist in America function mainly as combinations of spectacular entertainment and pious consumerism, a locally-oriented, diocese-based, homegrown Orthodox rendition is not inconceivable.

7 N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 101.

8 See Nicholas Watson, "The Phantasmal Past: Time, History, and the Recombinative Imagination," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 3.

which are too thin [...] to be worthy of the level of contemporary historical scholarship."[9] Rather, the medieval era has much to offer: "[f]or long it was believed that this complex and rich period had been a great void in the intellectual history of mankind and of its philosophical thought, when as a matter of fact these centuries had so many excellent thinkers and such diversity in the realm of their thought that nothing like it can be found at any other epoch."[10] Yet what Berdyaev is proposing when he speaks about a new middle ages is not a return to an outdated past, for "[w]hen we speak of passing from modern history to the middle ages it is a figure of speech; such passage can take place only to a new middle age, not to the old one."[11] Yet neither for Berdyaev does the more recent past offer a viable option:

> The old worn-out world to which we can never go back is precisely the world of modern history: a world of rationalist prophets, of individualism and Humanism, Liberalism and democratic theories, of imposing national monarchies and imperialist politics, of a monstrous economic system compounded of Industrialism and Capitalism, of vast technical apparatus, of exterior conquests and practical achievements; a world of unbridled and endless covetousness in its public life, of atheism and supreme disdain for the soul.[12]

And so, if we are not to go back, either to an old middle ages or to a worn out modernity, we must go forward: "without fear or discouragement, we must leave this day of modern history and enter a mediaeval night. May God dispel all false and deceptive light."[13] As apophatic as he is realistic, Berdyaev combines

---

9 N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 101-02.
10 Ibid, 103.
11 Ibid, 101.
12 Ibid, 78.
13 Ibid, 63.

fearlessness with hope: "[n]ight is not less wonderful than day, it is equally the work of God; it is lit by the splendour of the stars and it reveals to us things that the day does not know."[14]
My contribution in this essay is to explore how one innovative and outspoken Orthodox thinker succeeds in rendering intelligible certain problematic aspects of modern social existence. Putting forward his writings as an imaginative and exemplary Christian response to contemporary socio-economic issues, I shall inquire how Berdyaev's critical perspectives can inform Orthodox social existence today. The answer, I suspect, derives from his acute analysis of modern society and subsequent description of a robust counter-praxis grounded in the active public role of the laity of the Church. Recuperating Berdyaev's vision today is more imperative than ever because, in the face of unprecedented economic corruption, moral decay, and political violence, a uniquely Orthodox stance on the Church's visible role within modern society is sorely needed. In all its greed, fear, lust and anger, the world unknowingly longs for redemption and union with its maker and Lord, Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by the Church. Given the exigencies of its transhistorical mission, in seeking to share the Gospel message publicly the Orthodox Church can benefit from an awareness of the 'neomedieval' forms of social organization that are emerging on a global scale. The reappraisal offered here of Nicholas Berdyaev's prophetic imagination (in Brueggeman's sense), as a "voice crying in the wilderness" of twentieth-century society, is intended in some small measure to facilitate such an awareness.

II.

[14] Ibid, 70-71.

When Berdyaev suggests that "in the name of the Christian idea of man we must burn away the idolatry and superstitions of a lying and destructive Humanism," our first response is likely to be a hesitant one.[15] How could anything named humanism be destructive, let alone superstitious? Needless to say, Berdyaev here strategically inverts the long held opposition between superstition, conceived as a naïve medieval attitude, and humanism, conceived as that awakening from the authoritative oppression of the Middle Ages.[16] Like his contemporary Owen Barfield, Berdyaev sees in the legacy of such humanism, however, nothing less than the individualistic sacrifice of true personhood:

> Human identity, like every authentic reality, is only conferred in that spiritual concretion which puts the seal of divine unity on the whole of human multiplicity. In abstraction and isolation it is lost. The process of modern Humanism is the passage from man in this spiritualized concretion, where everything is organically bound together, to a sundering abstraction, wherein man is changed into an isolated unit.[17]

Berdyaev's argument here has various parallels in contemporary historiography that links the modernization and secularization of the West to late-medieval intellectual and institutional changes. The writings of historians and economists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Fernand Braudel, Hans Blumenberg, Eamon Duffy, Charles Taylor, Avner Greif, and Anthony Giddens, like Berdyaev, all locate the influential origins of modernity in those shifts of political and economic structure that are characteristic of the later European middle ages. As Giddens notes, almost echoing Berdyaev, "the more tradition

---

15 Ibid, 65.

16 See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

17 N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 37.

loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardizing influences too – most notably, in the form of commodification, since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions."[18]

Like the work of Duffy and Taylor, Berdyaev's ecumenical affinity with Catholic thought likely played a part in sensitizing his perspective to premodern modes of thought and social organization, even while this affinity is ultimately undergirded by a Weberian critique of Protestantism. Accordingly, Berdyaev sees individualist humanism as closely linked with capitalism:

> Individualism, the 'atomization' of society, the inordinate acquisitiveness of the world, indefinite over-population and the endlessness of people's needs, the lack of faith, the weakening of spiritual life, these and other are the causes which have contributed to build up that industrial capitalist system which has changed the face of human life and broken its rhythm with nature.[19]

For Berdyaev, capitalism can "hold sway only in a society that has deliberately renounced the Christian asceticism and turned away from Heaven to give itself over exclusively to earthly gratifications."[20] He diagnoses capitalism's privileging of individual interests as inimical to genuine spiritual existence:

> The whole economic system of Capitalism is an offshoot of a devouring and overwhelming lust, of a kind that can hold sway only in a society that has deliberately renounced the Christian asceticism and turned away from Heaven to give itself over exclusively to earthly gratifications. It is quite

---

18 See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 5.

19 Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 91.

20 Ibid, 92.

> obvious that Capitalism is unthinkable as a 'sacred' economy. It is the result of a secularization of economic life, and by it the hierarchical subordination of the material to the spiritual is inverted. The autonomy of economics has ended in their dominating the whole life of human societies: the worship of Mammon has become the determining force of the age. And the worst of it is that this undisguised 'mammonism' is regarded as a very good thing, an attainment to the knowledge of truth and a release from illusions. Economic materialism formulates this to perfection when it brands the whole spiritual life of man as a deception and a dream.[21]

Under capitalism, "man has become an economic category."[22] Berdyaev's opposition to the prioritization of economic criteria over spiritual, moral, and even political concerns resonates powerfully with the writings of his friend Orthodox philosopher Sergei Bulgakov, whose *Philosophy of Economy* so vividly argues for the sacredness of all human affairs, with a similarly "mystical" emphasis.[23] But Berdyaev's critique of capitalism also finds analogues in recent responses from certain prominent Christians like Cornel West and Chris Hedges to the widespread corruption underlying the global economic crisis. What is more, Berdyaev's claims anticipate in their acute diagnosis of socio-political developments the aforementioned

---

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid, 51.

23 As Evgueny Lampert writes, Berdyaev "approaches the social problem from the point of view of 'mysticism', rather than 'politics' – which, however, does not at all mean that he denies the value of politics or economics, of the state or the nation, etc. His 'mysticism' denotes a particular evaluation of man and his place in society and he judges the process of social life above all from the point of view of the Christian value of human personality." See Evgueny Lampert, *Nicholas Berdyaev and the New Middle Ages* (London: James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1945), 77.

school of International Relations theory known as neomedievalism, treating the currently existing global order as the result of modern history's economic impetus and boldly claiming that "the end of Capitalism is the end of modern history and the beginning of the new middle ages."[24]

Berdyaev extends this critique by targeting mechanization and its negative effects on work as evidence of the damage caused by accelerating the flow of capital beyond healthy limits. Contrary to both capitalism and socialism, in Berdyaev's political economy labor is considered to be an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic good, and most definitely not a mere prerequisite for leisure:

> The question of the discipline of work is vital for contemporary societies; the old underlying reasons for work have gone and new ones have not been found: but again it is a question of the hallowing and the justifying of work, and is therefore ignored by both Capitalism and Socialism, neither of which is interested in work as such.[25]
>
> The principle of work, spiritual and material, will be found at the root of future societies: not, as in Socialism, of work of which the goodness or badness does not matter, but of work considered qualitatively. That was always the Christian idea. The excessive leisure and laziness of the privileged classes of modern history will vanish […] The problem will present itself as a religious one, the sanctification of work, a problem which has no interest for modern history because it has tried frenziedly to free all men from the 'burden' of work: both Capitalism and Socialism have 'solved' it by mechanization.[26]

For Berdyaev, the division and mechanization of labor divorces man from his surroundings, and the history of industrialization

---

[24] Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 95.
[25] Ibid, 94.
[26] Ibid, 115-16.

is one of increasing alienation of the worker from the work. Socialism and capitalism alike mistake work for a "burden," when really it is the activity which enables humankind to fulfill their creative vocations. What we do, after all, shapes who we are. Given his expanded understanding of labor as involving more than capital or leisure, it comes as no surprise that Berdyaev rejects the modern myth of 'Progress,' the notion of history that motivates and justifies colonial expansion. Instead, he contends provocatively that the notion of Progress "camouflag[es] the true ends of life,"[27] and that Christians should do everything in their power to "decrease the speed of that ever-moving current which is bearing us on to nothingness, and acquire a taste for eternity."[28] Berdyaev calls here for a reorientation of human desire toward that which exceeds the cycle of production and consumption, suggesting that human beings were not meant to live as fast or accumulate as much as a capitalist economy demands. We will see below that he means in this regard to call into question the neoliberal notion of freedom upon which modern political and economic frameworks depend, proposing the right direction of human desire toward God as true freedom. In contemporary terms, however, Berdyaev was nonetheless also proposing in the early twentieth century his own model of what is only now being called a "post-growth economy."[29] In his words, "we shall have to have a much more simple and elementary material culture and a spiritual culture that is far more complex."[30]

Alongside economic issues, Berdyaev offers a critique of modern political forms. Central to his political critique is the

---

27 Ibid, 116.

28 Ibid, 116-17.

29 See Richard Heinberg, "Life after the end of economic growth," *The Guardian* (November 30, 2011), accessed January 11, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/30/end-of-growth?source=patrick.net; and, postgrowth.org.

30 N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 95.

idea that "[m]odern nationalism springs from individualism," and he speaks of "self-sufficient national monads (in the same way that human individualities have become self-sufficient monads)."[31] Berdyaev proceeds to expose the contradictory notion of a political democracy without equal opportunity by first recognizing the necessarily hierarchical nature of political representation and, secondly, foregrounding the fact that economic equality is impossible within a capitalist system. Likewise - and this is nothing new to Orthodox ears – nationalism fragments ecclesial communion: "[r]eligion itself has taken the form of a national enclosure; there is no unity or response to the cosmic unity in Christianity […] and men have made for themselves a false god, the nation."[32] Berdyaev's analysis finds parallels in the work of Catholic scholar William Cavanaugh on the importance of a Christian "theopolitical imagination." Cavanaugh argues that "[t]he history of the state is the creation of an increasingly direct relationship between state and individual by the state's absorption of powers from the groups that comprise what has come to be called 'civil society.'"[33] This process of absorption is intrinsic to the notion of a State, which from its modern origins has defined itself in terms of *sovereignty*: "[t]he conceptual leap which accompanies the advent of the state in the sixteenth century is the invention of sovereignty. The doctrine of sovereignty asserts the incontestable right of the central power to make and enforce laws for those people who fall within recognized territorial borders."[34] For some, national sovereignty may be viewed as a necessary recourse for maintaining a state of law. As an

---

31 N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time*, 96.

32 Ibid, 96-97.

33 See William Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20.2 (April 2004), 256.

34 Ibid, 250-51.

Orthodox Russian in exile from Stalin's atheistic totalitarianism, however, Berdyaev felt the crushing force of political sovereignty exercised violently beyond its proper limits.

The question of those limits is being asked with renewed fervor in the political contexts in which Orthodoxy now finds itself, from the post-9/11 US and Putin's Russia to Turkey and Syria. One negative effect of the nationalist ethos that can result from political sovereignty is ethnophyletism, the privileging of national or at least linguistic-cultural boundaries over catholic, ecclesial unity. The problem of ethnophyletism is nothing new, of course, but it is also not showing signs of disappearing any time soon. Critiques of nationalism like Berdyaev's can assist in articulating what is at stake for contemporary Orthodox Christians in matters of institutional allegiance and, ultimately, ecclesial life. And yet while Berdyaev's ecumenical call for a return to "the cosmic unity in Christianity" resonates strongly with Orthodox-Catholic and Orthodox-Anglican dialogues, the twentieth century has also seen what Berdyaev calls "a kind of internationalism," which in his eyes represents a "caricature of universalism" by offering a transnational unity that functions as an abiding rival to both ecumenical unity and regional fiscal autonomy.[35] Berdyaev correctly locates the source of this internationalism in the expansive tendencies and colonialist history of capitalism, noting that "a kind of internationalism is native to Capitalism."[36]Berdyaev notes the dependency of each

---

[35] N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 100. The notion of globalization as a false catholicity has recently been taken up and critiqued in terms similar to Berdyaev's by other prominent theologians. For an Orthodox discussion, see Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation: Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements* (Boston, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2000). For a Catholic treatment, see William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (London: Continuum Press, 2002); *Migrations of the Holy,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011).

[36] N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 99.

local economy on larger market forces,: "[t]he supremacy of Capitalism has brought about an economic world-system and made the economic life of each country dependent on the economic situation in general."[37] As we are only now coming to learn in light of the global economic crisis, we are all in it together!

III.

So what do Berdyaev's new Middle Ages look like? Certain aspects of its social dimensions can be glimpsed primarily in Berdyaev's attempts to conjure an evocative vision of the future that leaves behind what is decaying in the present.[38] What I want to call Berdyaev's "prophetic imagination" can be discerned in the elevated style and future-oriented perspective from which the latter half of *End of Our Time* proceeds. Berdyaev sketches an image of modern society renewed by a return to the wisdom of the past. Such looking back for the sake of moving forward is the essential trajectory of the Christian tradition, for the Word who was revealed can and does speak to anyone in the present, as a means for renewal and growth. Charges against Berdyaev of idealism or utopianism are beside the point, for rather than foretelling dates of future events, Berdyaev is drawing analogies and imaginative constructions of what possible collective futures *could* look like, with the hope of rekindling the embers of social action and public witness that, especially among Orthodox, seemed – for Berdyaev at least – to have grown cold. Yet Berdyaev's friendship with individuals

---

37 Ibid.

38 As Berdyaev writes, "The approach to the new middle age, like the approach to the old one, is marked by a visible rotting of old societies and an invisible formation of new ones" (83). And again: "Decay precedes a middle age, and it is needful to mark the course of those elements that are dying and those that are coming to birth" (91).

like Maria Skobstova indicates that at least some of the influences of his new Middle Ages may have been grounded in contemporary examples of Orthodox social justice and radical sacrifice whose potential, if put into practice on a wider scale, he hoped to emphasize.

Anticipating Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart's discussion of American religious culture as a "new antiquity" (not to mention his and others' critiques of American neo-imperialism), Berdyaev begins by likening modern society with the cultural syncretism that predominated in the latter days of the Roman Empire:

> Our age resembles that of the fall of the Roman empire, the failure and drying-up of Graeco-Roman culture, forever the head-water of all European culture. Modernist art recalls the loss of the old forms of perfection under the barbarian invasions; our social and political activities resemble those under the emperor Diocletian, when man was no longer his own master; religious and philosophico-mystical researches to-day are not unlike the curious examining of the mysteries at the end of Greek philosophy – betraying a hunger for the Incarnation, for the coming of a God-Man. Spiritually, our time is like the Hellenistic age with its universalism and syncretism.[39]

When Berdyaev launches into a description of the "new Middle Ages," shifting from analytical derision to hopeful speculation, the picture is a comprehensive one:

> The stock-exchange and the press will no longer be masters of the world. Social life will be simplified; making an honest living will require a lower standard and less artificiality. It is likely that men will form themselves into unified groups, not under political emblems, which are always secondary and generally counterfeit, but under

---

[39] N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time,* 58.

> economic tokens of immediate importance, according to professional categories of trade, art, and other work, spiritual and material; these will take the place of the present castes and classes. There is a great future before professional unions, co-operative gilds, corporations in general, and they are a clear indication of the middle ages on a new basis. Instead of political 'talking-shops' we shall have assemblies of professionals representing real bodies, not intriguing for political power but bent upon dealing with vital matters – for themselves and not in the interests of parties. Future society will be of the syndicalist type, but understood in a very different sense than that of revolutionary syndicalism. The only polity that has any worth is that wherein a very decided radicalism observes the hierarchical principles of power.[40]

Syndicalism *and* hierarchy? Berdyaev enunciates a peculiar position here, and yet it is one that bears affinities with the Catholic school of political economy known as Distributism, especially in its advocacy for unions and craft guilds as the primary social units, rather than individuals.[41] Felix Guattari's echoes Berdyaev here in his notion of the "group-subject," which for Guattari stresses the importance of granting political agency to collectives, especially those other than multinational corporations!

Berdyaev's call for a radical new political economy imports fundamental Orthodox practices as well. Quite closely echoing former Metropolitan Jonah's 2011 address at the Acton

---

[40] Ibid, 112-13.

[41] A notable distributist, H. J. Massingham, cites Berdyaev in his 1943 text, *The Tree of Life*, which likewise draws upon premodern economic theory, particularly for negative evaluations of usury. See H. J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life,* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1943), 26, 40, 129.

Institute entitled, "Asceticism and the Consumer Society,"[42] Berdyaev argues that the Christian task of resisting the idols of consumerist capitalism requires an embrace of austerity, what he calls a "new asceticism." If undertaken as a form of repentance for the harm that human social and economic practices have inflicted (as suggested by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in his encyclical on this topic issued for the new church year in September 2012), this new asceticism would effectively be "the negation of industrial-capitalist principles"[43] such as self-gratification and waste. For Berdyaev, Bartholomew, and Jonah alike, repentance is the stance that Orthodox Christians should take in light of the current financial and environmental crises. Yet Berdyaev also considers the new asceticism to be a creative, quasi-monastic *lay* endeavor, what he calls "a particular sort of monastic life in the world, a kind of new religious order."[44] This "monastic life in the world" is a properly Orthodox response *to* and also a mode *for* outflanking the unethical and creation-harming consumerism upon which the current capitalist system depends. For instance, a public response based in Christian doctrine to the harmful side-effects of that system can open the way for a wholesale reevaluation of work:

> Work must be understood as a participation in creation, and great occupational activity combined with a cutting-down of 'wants' will characterize the whole of society in

---

42 See former Metropolitan Jonah's "Asceticism and Consumer Society," delivered at the Acton Institute on June 20, 2011, accessed on January 11, 2012, http://www.acton.org/global/article/asceticism-consumer-society. A follow-up interview with former Metropolitan Jonah on the subject of his speech can be found here in Acton Institute's journal, *Religion and Liberty,* 21.3 (Summer 2011), http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-21-number-3/asceticism-consumer-society-interview-metropolitan.

43 N. Berdyaev, *End of Our Time*, 94.

44 Ibid, 116.

> this new period of history. It is only thus that impoverished mankind can continue to exist. The centre of gravity will have to be moved from the means of living, in which men to-day are absorbed exclusively, to the last ends of life.[45]

Treating work as participation in creation allows space for human creativity in the ergonomic and economic realms, effectively sanctifying it as a freely chosen vocation or task into which we can pour our God-given gifts and educated skills. As Berdyaev famously asserts elsewhere, "God awaits from us a creative act." Moreover, taking this maxim seriously can facilitate longer-term reorganizations of economic structures and practices, first on local, interparochial and eventually regional (diocesan and archdiocesan) levels, especially as new generations gain additional skills for implementing alternative means of production, and becomes accustomed to more conscientious habits of consumption. There are even possibilities for inter-parochial micro-financing so that zero-interest loans can be made for purposes of churchplanting, with an already well-established parish providing the capital for a budding mission, with the interest paid going to the creation of another loan. This financial network has proven to work well for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in developing countries, including missionaries – why not domestically also? This is no communist vision. Even in idealistically suggesting that "competition [will] be replaced by co-operation," Berdyaev emphasizes that "[t]he principle of private property will be kept as an eternal foundation," however "limited and spiritualized in application."[46]

This mention of property and limitation leads Berdyaev to the question of authority. Authority is always a question of power, but "[m]odern times look on power as a right and are much

---

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, 95.

concerned with fixing the bounds of that right."[47] In contrast, the "new middle ages will look on power as a duty, and political life founded on a scramble for the right to power will be stigmatized as unreal and parasitical, without ontological significance."[48] What allows the power of political authority to be conceived as a duty, rather than a right? Berdyaev's answer constitutes nothing less than an ordering principle of his neomedievalism, what he calls "organic hierarchy."[49] As he says, the new middle age, like the old, is hierarchical in structure, whereas modern history everywhere repudiates such an organization. Man is not a unit in the universe, forming part of an unrational machine, but a living member of an organic hierarchy, belonging to a real and living whole.[50]

The key to organic hierarchy is ontological interdependence, according to which each level depends upon the others to fulfill their duties if social peace and civic order is to be achieved. The premodern notion of the "body politic" clearly informs Berdyaev's perspective here, and it is important to remember that the medieval lineage of the body politic ultimately derives from the Pauline notion of the Body of Christ. In modern society, however, "each rung claims to be independent of the ladder."[51]

What Berdyaev means by independence is not so much freedom as *irresponsibility,* the wrongful abdication of one's social contribution to the common good for the sake of individualistic preferences, interests and goals. By relying on secular humanism's atomization of social life, capitalism and political liberalism promote the independence of competing individuals at the expense of denying interdependence.

---

47 Ibid, 111.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid, 42.
50 Ibid, 109.
51 Ibid, 96.

Berdyaev considers the exploitation of the poor in nominally democratic states to be the natural 'equalitarian' result of a shallow model of political freedom rendered inconsequential by the economic inequality it aims to conceal. For Berdyaev, the modern notion of freedom lacks any substantive ontological foundation for sustaining a robust account of human equality. Without reference to being created in the image of God, the modern notions of civic liberty and even human rights are weak and philosophically untenable, only meagerly supported by an understanding of human freedom as defined by "choice." Since no vision of the good as the end and purpose of freedom is held publicly in common, for Berdyaev the neoliberal understanding of freedom is a category without content, emptied of its potency in being reified as an end unto itself. Hence modern appeals to democratic equality as the highest of all goods in the face of economic inequality are an ambivalent factor which Orthodoxy, with its commitment to organic hierarchy and its deep tradition of ontological interdependence ("on behalf of all, and for all"), not to mention the imperative to neighbor love, must publicly engage.

Berdyaev's perspective on this point can help facilitate an Orthodox rethinking of what we - as *first of all* citizens of the Kingdom - mean by democracy with regard to rights *and* responsibilities, freedom *and* interdependence, and their indissoluble connection. For Berdyaev, as for the Church Fathers, the value of freedom comes in its being used to seek the good, since it can also be the very vehicle for our turning away from communion with others in God. And the new middle ages provide the opportunity for learning to use our freedom again, in a way that evokes the dawn of modernity itself: "the new middle age will give a place to that experiment in liberty made by the modern world, with all the real benefits that we owe to it in the order of consciousness and the increased

refining of spirit that it has brought about."[52] Berdyaev's description of a new middle ages thus aims to inspire the human imagination for constructing a collectively realized and equitable public sphere in which true freedom means seeking the good as that which in different ways guides both public policy and spiritual practice.

And as that which shows Christian ethics to ultimately derive from God's own loving nature, the Church for Berdyaev is central to the new middle ages, even if – or perhaps precisely because - its boundaries are not always clearly discernible:

> The spiritual centre in the near future will be, as in the old middle ages, the Church alone. Her life is developing unseen, outside official lines, for her boundaries are not clearly marked and cannot be pointed out as if they were a material object. The life of the Church is a mystery and her ways cannot be understood by reason alone: the Spirit breatheth where he will, and creative movements appear which, from the external, official, simply rationalist point of view, seem strange and foreign to the Church.[53]

Berdyaev's understanding of the Church as a living and developing entity treads on controversial ground by suggesting the fact that further manifestations of the truths proclaimed by Christianity – and indeed, Christ the Truth Himself – are still at work in shaping the fruits of human endeavor and thought. Yet is this not, perhaps, a versatile definition of tradition itself? Berdyaev's vision is here, as elsewhere, expansive:

> The Christianity of the oecumenical councils and the great doctors has not yet sufficiently expounded the truths about man and the universe. The Church is cosmic by her nature and contains within herself the fullness of Being; she is the universe baptized.[54]

---

52 Ibid, 79.
53 Ibid, 108.
54 Ibid.

IV.

We would do well to remember in all this that Berdyaev is writing as a self-proclaimed "rebellious prophet" whose descrying of the future (our present) must be considered *not* as some utopian blueprint for erecting the perfect State, but rather a positive vision which in the very appeal of its imaginative vividness exposes what is lacking and off-kilter in current states of affairs. As Berdyaev himself admits, ""I want only to try to point out the characteristics and tendencies which the renewed aspect of society and culture is likely to have."[55] How startling that a "new middle ages" could seem more appealing, more equitable, more Christian than modern society! It is with an eye to historical developments since Berdyaev's day that the contemporary value of his prophetic imagination emerges, an expression of public human flourishing in harmony with Orthodox anthropology and ecclesiology grounded in the freedom of the human person as made in the image of God.

Already two generations ago, Berdyaev was articulating the social, ethical and environmental ramifications of the material realities underlying our political and economic systems, ramifications that are only now becoming disastrously clear in ways impossible to ignore. In response, Berdyaev takes up Orthodox tradition in innovative ways. He proposes syndicalist organic hierarchy as the ordering principle behind the creative participation of the laity in ecclesial life. He challenges the false catholicity of nationalism and ethnophyletism in the name of the "cosmic unity" of Christianity, recalling that the Church is also an invisible, eternal reality. He reimagines work as a form of participation in creation that is obscured by mechanization and greed. He invokes the possibility of a "new asceticism" which would integrate anti-consumerism and material

---

55 Ibid, 70.

simplicity into the very fabric of Orthodox spiritual discipline and social life.

Can Berdyaev's suggestions help inaugurate alternative public modes of Christian praxis in response to the widespread exigencies of global, crisis-driven capital? As Emmanuel Clapsis maintains, "[t]he credibility of the Church's message in the political arena depends less on what it proclaims itself to be, and more on what it actually does. Its praxis authenticates its message, not vice versa."[56] How can we begin to adopt a new lay asceticism? What creative act does God demand of each of us, at home, in the workplace, as acts of worship? Dare we go further, and say that to be true to Christ's commandment to love our neighbor *and our enemies* demands a new concerted public response of Orthodox Christians to the deeply embedded injustices in the current functioning of our political and economic systems? As the source for productive and provocative questions like these, Berdyaev's prophetic imagination is a challenging stimulus for Orthodox public theology and witness in twenty-first century social contexts.

Works Cited

N. Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933).

H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 3rd edition.

W. Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20.2 (April 2004): 243-74.

---. *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (London: Continuum Press, 2002).

---

[56] E. Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation,* 224.

---. *Migrations of the Holy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011).
E. Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation: Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements* (Boston, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2000).
P. G. Cerny, "Neomedievalism, Civil War and the New Security Dilemma: Globalisation As Durable Disorder," *Civil Wars,* 1.1 (1998): 36-64.
J. Friedrichs, *European Approaches to International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007).
A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991).
S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
D. B. Hart, *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).
R. Heinberg, "Life after the end of economic growth," *The Guardian* (November 30, 2011). Accessed January 11, 2012 at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/30/end-of-growth?source=patrick.net; and, postgrowth.org.
S. J. Kobrin, "Back to the Future: Neomedievalism and the Postmodern Digital Economy," *Journal of International Affairs,* 51.2 (Spring 1998): 361-86.
E. Lampert, *Nicholas Berdyaev and the New Middle Ages* (London: James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1945).
H. J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1943).
Metropolitan Jonah Paffhausen, "Asceticism and Consumer Society," *Religion and Liberty,* 21.3 (Summer 2011), http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-21-number-3/asceticism-consumer-society-interview-metropolitan.
J. Rapley, "The New Middle Ages," *Foreign Affairs*, 85.3 (May-Jun. 2006): 95-103.
N. Watson, "The Phantasmal Past: Time, History, and the Recombinative Imagination," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 1-37.

P. Williams, *From the New Middle Ages to a New Dark Age: The Decline of the State and U.S. Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), ix.