

Georgy Fedotov: a Person in the World of Culture*

Sergei Nizhnikov

Department of History of Philosophy
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: nizhnikovs@mail.ru

Igor Grebeshev

Department of History of Philosophy
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: igor.grebeshev@yandex.ru

Abstract—Having travelled the difficult path of internal intellectual development and gone through fascination with social democratic ideas, like many other Russian thinkers of the early 20th century, after overcoming the nihilism of revolutionary ideology, Georgy Fedotov gained a balanced position of a historian and a philosopher of culture. To the thinker, a person is always man in the world of culture, which does not necessarily imply only the culture of his epoch. The cultural dimension of the person is more profound and complex than any direct influences and historical circumstances within whose borders the person exists. The Russian thinker believes that the person is revealed and comprehended only in the history of culture in the most intimate moments of fate (such as Abelard's tragic love) and in the generally significant results of creative activity.

Keywords—*philosophy of culture; cultural dimension of the person; personalism; medieval thought; freedom in culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

The three stages can be distinguished in the creative works by Georgy Petrovich Fedotov (1886-1951): the "Russian" one, the "French" one (from 1925), and the "American" one (from 1941). The first, "Russian" stage is not even and unequivocal: a certain evolution associated with social upheavals that shook the country in the early 20th century can be traced in it. In the years of the first Russian revolution, Fedotov was a member of the RSDLP (Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party) and even joined the labor squad. According to his own confessions, in 1905-1906, he "was quite a sectarian and a conspirator", took part in outreach activities among workers, and acted as an intermediary between the Bolshevik organizations in Saratov and St. Petersburg. However, reaping a harvest of his former revolutionary activities, in his letter dated March 3, 1918, he admitted, "I have stopped pondering about socialism and the republic." After the events of October 1917, Fedotov appealed to the faith of his fathers. However, he remained a socialist even in Christianity, which brought him closer to Berdyaev, another person who had not fully overcome revolutionism and anarchist freedom. At the same time, the revolutionary tempest led Fedotov to discover love for Russia [1].

Fedotov's views did not coincide with the ideologies that existed in the Russian emigration; sometimes the vagueness

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his articles seemed alarming. At the same time, the thinker's publicist activities gained him the glory of the "new Herzen". Fedotov was the creator of one of the variants of the "post-revolutionary" ideology.

From 1931 to 1939, together with Ilya Fondaminsky and Fyodor Stepun, he published *Novy Grad* magazine, discussing the theme of Christian socialism and seeking to overcome intellectualism along the path of religious culture. He sought to unite the seemingly incompatible things: the Middle Ages and humanism, Christianity and socialism, culture and eschatology. It combines the Christian faith with liberalism and universal hope; faith in Russia and love for it coexist with faith in the West. He opposed both fascism and communism and hoped for the triumph of freedom. At the same time, he sought to combine freedom with socialism, calling for its new birth, which was supposed to lead at least to justice, if not to the Kingdom of God on Earth. The craving for "social and moral Christianity" can already be found in the works by VI. Solovyov [2]. Since those times, this idea became one of the fundamental issues in Russian philosophy, and its traditions were continued by G. Fedotov in his own way.

II. G. FEDOTOV AS A MEDIEVALIST

According to Georgy Fedotov, a person is always man in the world of culture, not necessarily only in the culture of his time. The cultural dimension of a person is more profound and complex than any direct influences and historical circumstances within which the person exists. In this sense, the Russian thinker believes that the person is revealed and comprehended only in the history of culture in the most intimate moments of fate (such as Abelard's tragic love) and in the generally significant results of creative activity.

Initially, the young G. Fedotov was interested in such a personality as Augustine [3]. In fact, Fedotov's study is dedicated to the analysis of Augustine's spiritual evolution. The scientist argues, in particular, that he, already during the stage of life after his "conversion", remains a philosopher and solves exactly the problems of philosophical cognition. "He accepts all the dogmas of the church and treats them respectfully. Yet he touches upon these dogmas in passing; he ponders over the possibility of rational cognition and the meaning of life rather than meditates over them..." [4]. Later, however, a transition to consistently dogmatic positions gradually takes place [5].

The young medievalist is about to go through his own “conversion” and gain the experience of religious philosophical creativity. But it should be noted that the path of “collision” of religion and culture always remains unacceptable for him. It is as unacceptable as is the subordination of the person and history to the religious, “providential determinism” (Augustine’s teaching on predestination). We should also note the fact that G. Fedotov demonstrates profound historical and philosophical knowledge and skills of independent philosophical thinking even in his early works.

Abelard (1924), a brilliant book by G. Fedotov, followed. It is symbolically divided into three parts: *The Destiny, The Man, and The Thinker*. The entire book, however, is dedicated to Abelard as a personality. With deep understanding and, undoubtedly, with sympathy, Fedotov reproduces the vicissitudes of the tragic fate of the protagonist, providing a subtle historical and philosophical analysis of his intellectual perceptions. Yet, ultimately, Abelard’s life journey and his philosophical work are regarded by the researcher as an expression of the personality of this legendary intellectual of the 12th century (though far from complete). “Abelard as a personality is interesting to us not in his empirical eventuality, but in his cultural and historical position: on his way to the Renaissance... We aim to picture Abelard’s self-identity rather than his character. Only self-identity is a phenomenon of culture, not of nature” [6].

Touching upon historical and philosophical issues, G. Fedotov also provides a characteristic of the medieval philosophical culture in the perspective of the subsequent development of philosophical knowledge. “In the lifeless kingdom of the medieval dialectic in the second half of the 11th century, we observe frenetic excitement. Schools are being founded; passionate struggle is raging; new systems keep growing out of comments. We witness the birth of the new thought (our thought), though its first movements remain hidden from us” [7]. Fedotov both understands the essence of the alternative fundamental to the philosophy of the 20th century (an epistemological and an ontological choice) and also definitely relates his own philosophical position to the ontologism typical of all Russian metaphysics.

In the worldview of the medieval thinkers, Fedotov undoubtedly finds the principles close to his own outlook. He himself seeks to avoid the extremes of rationalism and irrationalism, a radical and unequivocal opposition of faith and reason. He discovers all of these approaches in Abelard’s religious and philosophical search. “By sacralizing knowledge, Abelard rationalizes faith... First, one has to believe, then, one has to understand... Yet he does not doubt the limitations of reason and the need for faith (at least an imperfect one). In *Christian Theology and Introduction to Theology*, he argues on two fronts: against the proud ‘dialecticians’ who ‘regard anything they cannot embrace and grasp with their reasoning as nothing’, and against the enemies of dialectics and knowledge in general, which is always a blessing, fearful lest it could be abused” [8].

Irrationalism in general has never been a defining feature of Russian philosophical thought. The famous medieval thesis “I believe in order to understand” often plays a key role in Russian religious metaphysics – from the Slavophile definition of faith as the “sharp-sightedness of the mind” to Vladimir Solovyov’s idea of the “new synthesis” of religion, science, and philosophy. Almost every prominent Russian metaphysician of the 20th century had to argue “on two fronts”: against the positivist denial of any metaphysical and religious experience, on the one hand, and, simultaneously, against religious obscurantism and “occult fantasies”, on the other hand. In this regard, G. Fedotov has always been extremely consistent and, we might say, he sees eye to eye with Abelard. To a certain extent, this also applies to the protection of the humanistic heritage in European and Russian culture as expressed by the Russian thinker. In no small measure, he connects the importance of Abelard’s creative works with the humanistic intentions in these works. “Beyond the verge of the Middle Ages, discussing Abelard’s influence is no longer possible. But we can speak about those aspects of his personality that did not fit in the culture of his age yet connected him with the future, as if anticipating it. We have already emphasized his humanistic features. His passionate, religious love for the Greco-Roman antiquity, and, even to a greater extent, extremely developed self-awareness, intense interest in his own personality... relate Abelard to the first humanists” [9]. Once again, Fedotov emphasizes the personal nature of Abelard’s theological and philosophical search. The thinker’s personality turns out to be a link between historically and culturally distant ages.

These topics mentioned above can also be found in G. Fedotov’s work on Dante. However, this is where the thinker juxtaposes the ideas of the past and the present in a much more radical way. Already in the very beginning, he formulates a thesis regarding “painful apolitism” and “social nihilism” of his time and contrasts it with the cultural situation of the “organic epochs of history”. Only in such times, Fedotov insists, Dante’s political ideal (the treatise titled *On Monarchy*) could be shaped, which is by no means a random and alien phenomenon in the great poet’s works. “Nothing allows us so obviously to consider the distance separating our bourgeois epoch, which is ashamed of its present day, from the wholesome and organic culture, which does not need to descend into romantic antiquity in search of... heroes. For Dante, his contemporaries communicate freely with the Catos and the Caesars, saints and angels – while standing at the threshold of eternity... Modernity (as viewed by him) retains its metaphysical dignity. Politics becomes a chapter of theology.” [10] Dante not only never shied away from politics; he was involved in public and political activities in the most direct way (“a delegate, a member of the State Council, a prior and, finally, a political emigrant”).

In the treatise titled *On Monarchy*, according to G. Fedotov, Dante supports, above all, the ideal of a “universal civilization” rather than the idea of a monarchic statehood or a specific monarchist power. To Dante (and, it should be immediately noted, to Fedotov himself), politics is an essential element of culture, and it makes sense only in this

capacity. “Therefore, politics, the practice of uniting people, remains subordinate to culture, that is, according to Dante, the religious vocation of mankind” [11]. The Russian thinker pays particular attention to the fact that, in his utopia of the “world monarchy”, the poet and politician admits and asserts the exceptional value of the principles of the “freedom of man” and “civil service” of power, including the monarch himself (“everyone’s servant”). “Unity, peace, and justice are the three basic political ideas of the Middle Ages, formulated by Augustine and developed by the ideologists of the Carolingian Renaissance. Dante associates freedom with them, and relates his epic pathos to this idea...” [12].

It is not surprising that G. Fedotov completes his analysis of Dante’s utopia by referring to metaphysical arguments which require addressing the sphere of ontology instead of political and cultural preconditions of the “autonomy” of the individual and social existence. Ultimately, as the previous analysis has demonstrated, he sees culture as ontological to a significant extent. “The originality of existence”, which, according to Fedotov, does not allow any unification or unity of command (“a single will”) is also the most profound uniqueness of man’s cultural cosmos.

III. N. BERDYAEV AND G. FEDOTOV

The pathos of renouncing the worldly life characteristic of N. Berdyaev’s philosophical work is completely absent in the early historical works by G. Fedotov. Later, in his historiosophical writings, the issue of the apology of culture becomes crucial. There is no need for a person to strive to escape from the world of culture. According to Berdyaev, there is no real freedom in culture, and it cannot be found there. Yet Fedotov does not see the lack of absolute freedom as something completely catastrophic. From his point of view, the principle of “autonomy” of personal and social existence which is really implemented in history and culture and prevents various mechanical forms of “despotic unification” is of tremendous value. It is at the personal level that a person achieves metaphysical “autonomy”, which, ultimately, allows this person to be not merely a natural being and an object of socio-cultural influences, but also a true subject of culture, its creator.

G. Fedotov is well aware of the fact that the central point of Berdyaev’s metaphysics is the idea of “uncreated freedom”. He also understands that it is precisely this idea that is most alien to the tradition of Christian ontology, “Such a concept of freedom could hardly be reconciled with the Christian understanding of God as an Absolute Being. This is where we encounter the most vulnerable point in Berdyaev’s philosophy” [13]. However, it is quite obvious that Fedotov is unhappy with such unorthodox “vulnerability” of his friend’s views, yet much less than with his radical criticism of any forms of sociocultural activity as inevitably leading man to slavery in the world of objectification, “While combating sociality, Berdyaev remained a socialist throughout his entire life...In Berdyaev’s socialism, there is relatively little compassion or the motive of care... Berdyaev sees the goal of the socialist movement as the liberation of a person. Here, the person is at the fore again, and Berdyaev prefers to refer to his socialism as a

personalistic one. Another pretext, the most personal and powerful one in Berdyaev’s socialist complex, is his hatred of the bourgeoisie.” [14]

Fedotov does not directly relate Berdyaev’s “socialist personalism” to the “irresisted Marxist past.” In Berdyaev’s mature works, it is impossible to detect any socialist project. He is convinced that “spiritual bourgeoisness” is a historically universal phenomenon that arises long before the establishment of the bourgeois system and substantially maintains its influence even after any “socialist” revolutions, including, in the opinion of the thinker, the one that took place in Soviet Russia. Fedotov sees the “socialist” issue in Berdyaev’s works as, actually, the only social alternative the philosopher, nevertheless, tends towards, in spite of his uncompromising criticism of bourgeois society, regarding the latter as the embodiment of “philistine attitudes and vulgarity”, “looking up to an average person as a measure of all values”, ideological “relativism”, and “political atomism” [15]. From Fedotov’s point of view, the fatal mistake Berdyaev makes as a philosopher consists in his acceptance of the need for an unconditional choice between absolute freedom of a person and the real forms of its relative, “autonomous” freedom which are only possible in culture and history.

Fedotov himself regards “bourgeois vulgarity” as an equally destructive phenomenon of social life. However, he sees something fundamentally alien to his own position in Berdyaev’s anti-bourgeoisness. “All these legitimate motives of repulsion do not at one for the sophism which gradually becomes more obvious in Berdyaev’s further argument. This is the motive of formal democracy. According to him, formality means fictitiousness. It follows that the freedoms of speech, press, etc., which are so vital for a philosopher, suddenly become imaginary when the matter concerns the masses... While speaking for spiritual freedom — for the few ones who live by creating spiritual values — he makes up an island of freedom for thinkers and poets in the ocean of universal slavery without noticing it” [16].

G. Fedotov constantly speaks against the interpretation of all the relative and incompletely perfect things as fictitious and false. He sees any step foreshadowed by the free creative effort of the individual as valuable in itself. In this sense, democracy, in spite of its imperfection, is always opposed to despotism: a system that admits the freedom and dignity of a person (at least formally) is opposed to a system that fundamentally neglects human rights and freedoms. Besides, the two Russian thinkers differ in their understanding of the formal aspects of historical existence. Analyzing Berdyaev’s position, Fedotov reasonably emphasizes that he, unconditionally accepting the priority of a creative act over its result, is rather indifferent to the literary form, even in his own writings. Berdyaev also finds it extremely difficult to identify his own position with the tradition of “historical Christianity” and, undoubtedly, with the church tradition.

The positions of the two thinkers, however, become closer to each other when it comes to the way they see the personal element in religion, “Religion is unimaginable beyond man’s attitude towards God. Modern theology tends

to interpret it as God's attitude towards man." [17] Criticizing K. Barth's "theocentric theology" in that context, Fedotov definitely assumes the position common to all the Russian religious metaphysics: it is the problem of human creative activity that is viewed as the most important issue in metaphysics of divine and human relations. Touching upon this matter, Berdyaev, as we have already mentioned, insists that God "needs" human creativity, desires creative efforts of man, and expects them.

It can be said in a certain sense that Berdyaev is much more irrationalistic than Fedotov. This basically refers to Böhme's and Berdyaev's idea of irrational ground-free freedom. Fedotov, in his turn, never postulates any irrational inceptions. Moreover, he defends the tradition of classical rationalism from irrationalistic criticism in religion and philosophy in a rather peculiar way. He makes an absolutely remarkable statement, "Whereas rationalism can be heretical, irrationalism has always been a heresy". At the same time, it is interesting that both thinkers quite definitely distance themselves from the irrationalism of Lev Shestov (though both of them personally demonstrate their respect and a good attitude toward him). Berdyaev's critical opinions of various forms of occultism contemporary to him are well-known.

IV. CONCLUSION

G. Fedotov finds individualistic and "spiritually anarchic" (in his own terminology) motifs in Berdyaev's personalism rather foreign to him. A person, the thinker believes, achieves self-fulfillment in cultural creativity. The world of culture is neither alien nor "extrinsic" to a person. Man is not alone in this world; moreover, he creates it himself. Fedotov does not deny the problem of "objectification" (N. Berdyaev) and acknowledges the incompleteness and imperfection of man's historical creativity. Yet to him, the world of culture is not only its "objective" side. Culture also includes man's spiritual, creative pursuit which does not die within it; it is not "objectified", either. Religious, moral, and aesthetic experience of the human personality finds its expression and continues to live within the cultural tradition. Therefore, the fate of culture is the most important question for man in any historical epoch [18]. The fate of a person and that of culture are inseparable; they cannot be opposed to each other under any circumstances. It is symbolic that *The Saints of Old Russia* (1931), probably the most famous book by Fedotov, ends with the words about the need for a "cultural feat". Concluding that "alienation" of the Church from public and cultural life (since the times of Peter the Great) is one of the central dramas in Russian history, the author expresses confidence that such a state of affairs is far from fatal, "The time will come, and the Russian Church will be faced with the task of the Christianization of Russia which was deprived of God" [19].

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