

REALNEWS

Reflections at Day's End

No. 12 May/June 2010



**Hell's Gates
West Coast, Tasmania**

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On the Need for Discernment

One of the signatory characteristics of the present time is a near-universal preoccupation with information. We are everywhere assailed by words and images. Both written and electronic media are engaged in a feverish presentation of the changes that occur from day to day and from hour to hour in a global theatre that is everywhere connected by the instantaneous transfer of information.

We are collectively urged to participate in this endless torrent by continually updating to the new technologies through which the swirling mosaics of change are transmitted. Our television screens are now larger, thinner and brighter; our computers are smaller and faster; our mobile telephones have become wonderlands of engagement whereby we can instantly communicate with entire tribes of friends and strangers. We are carried through this informational maelstrom with such rapidity that there is often no time to absorb or even to consider the meaning of what we are presented with.

Economies collapse and are reconstituted while the millions who are adversely affected, losing their homes or a major part of their retirement and superannuation savings, are left to individually salvage their lives.

Wars are recklessly started and relentlessly executed with neither consideration of the hidden influence of those immense establishments that produce the costly hardware whereby "modern" wars are conducted nor thought

of the consequences for those unfortunates caught in the crossfire.

Hundreds of thousands of the inhabitants of impoverished island nations are smitten as tectonic plates shudder and shift while half a year later, despite promised assurances of assistance from wealthy nations, those who survived continue to live their days and nights under canvas even while the rubble of their former houses remains untouched.

Entire populations in the Middle East are held captive in ruined cities and are systematically starved and deprived of the basic necessities of life by powerful governments who wilfully unleash their military might on small flotillas carrying desperately needed supplies and desperately committed passengers.



Oil companies recklessly pursue their lucrative quarry ignoring safeguards and dismissing dangers in their impatience to void the earth of its remaining supplies of gas and oil while yet they can, all the while disregarding the consequences of their activities on the state of the atmosphere and the health of fragile ecosystems.

Each day brings news of deepening social and environmental pathologies and deadly personal contentions between those with a lust to govern and rule over others. And it all washes over us and

through us in its benumbing profusion. We know everything, yet we know nothing.

So how are we to navigate through this universe of endless possibilities? How are we to remain present to the realities in which we live without yielding to the blurring of all boundaries and the numbing of all sensitivities? How are we to retain a coherent and consistent view of that which endures beyond the transience of the words and images that crowd our days?

The entire style of the Western media is dominated by a passion for the brief and the dramatic. Apart from specialist programs, the clichéd “ten second grab” defines the presentation of most issues in the electronic media. This style has also come to characterise political pronouncements. Many of us still carry a clear memory of a triumphant George W. Bush standing in full flight gear on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln on May 1st 2003 under a huge banner proclaiming “Mission Accomplished.”

Such brevities serve to mask the great labyrinths of complexity that underlie the situations “managed” by our political minders.

To take things at face value is to be satisfied with the stories and the ethos projected by those who would determine how we will think and what we will know. To be satisfied with what is presented through the dominant media is to be entranced by the ripples on the surface of a vast ocean without awareness of the mighty currents that heave below the surface.

The art of discernment begins with a determination to understand the nature of the hidden forces that act upon us, a willingness to make moral judgements in issues of justice and fairness, and a

capacity to make choices based on longer-term rather than transient considerations.

Discernment requires that one’s sources of knowledge encompass the various dimensions that condition a given event or phenomenon. It also requires a capacity to carefully reflect upon those dimensions, to interpret their meaning and thence to come to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon or issue with which one is confronted.

We cannot come to a discerning perspective if we draw most of our knowledge from the transient wash of words and images that fill the daily papers and electronic media. It is not so easy to develop a clear understanding of the forces that underlie personal, social, political and environmental realities. We need to look further, pause longer and weigh more carefully the many elements that are acting within this time of increasing troubles.

THE WOUNDED EARTH

STALIN’S GIFT TO THE EARTH Lake Karachai. A New Hell-World

We are all by now aware that the development and testing of nuclear weapons have released enormous amounts of radioactivity into the atmosphere, into the oceans and onto the soils of virtually every land mass on the planet. The explosion at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union dramatically demonstrated that the development of nuclear energy has brought forth its own monstrous harvest of radioactive elements. Yet despite such obvious sources of radioactive pollution, the immense cauldrons of unearthly poisons produced by both the United States and the former Soviet Union remain largely hidden from view.

The atomic slayings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki may have brought World War II to an earlier ending, but they also ignited a cold fever that was to consume the energies of a war-broken Soviet Union for the next four decades and generated a struggle for nuclear supremacy that would eventually spew forth over 50,000 nuclear warheads stored in the silos, submarines, aircraft carriers and bombers of the US and Soviet military machines.



Joseph Stalin moved heaven and earth and virtually the entire Soviet industrial capacity in his furious drive to match the destructive capacity of

the US. All safeguards were abandoned in those early days of ceaseless activity.

One of the unexpected consequences was the creation of a hell-pit in the southern Urals that presently holds many times more radioactivity than that released in the massive Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Lake Karachai, a small lake near the Mayak chemical and industrial complex built to produce weapons-grade plutonium and tritium for the Soviet nuclear program has become the most radioactive site on the earth.

Even before World War II had started, Soviet physicists were aware of the enormous energy contained within the nuclei of fissile atoms. Physicist Yuli Kariton had worked under Ernest Rutherford at Cambridge during the late 1920s and had published a number of papers relating to nuclear fission in the late 1930s. During the 1940s, Soviet

physicists and engineers were kept informed of virtually all developments in the Manhattan Project by a steady stream of intelligence emanating from such sources as the German physicist Klaus Fuchs. A full two months before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviets were already in possession of detailed instructions on the construction and the implosion mechanism of the *Fat Man* bomb that was to be used on Nagasaki.

Within weeks of the declared ending of World War II, tens of thousands of prisoners from the numerous Gulags or penal camps within Russia were transported to a number of secret destinations in order to construct new industrial facilities for the production of enriched uranium and plutonium for use in the emerging Soviet nuclear weapons program. The most important of these were the Siberian Chemical Combine at Tomsk-7 on the Tom River, the Mining and Chemical Combine at Krasnoyarsk-26, on the Yenisey River, and the Mayak facility at Chelyabinsk-65, on the Techa River near Lake Karachai. These “closed” or secret cities never appeared on official maps and their existence was never acknowledged until after the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

During the four decades of their operations, these facilities released silent storms of incandescent elements into the local environments. The Mayak facility in particular released many times more radioactive pollution throughout the Chelyabinsk region and beyond than was ever released from the Chernobyl meltdown.

The Mayak complex is situated in the southern part of the Ural Mountains about 1,500 kilometres east of Moscow. It sits on approximately 160 square kilometres of what is now a totally ruined landscape. Numerous industrial and military

factories pepper the surrounding countryside. At present, some 90,000 people continue to live in the complex itself, while 12,000 are still directly involved in the nuclear industry.

Within three months of the end of World War II, 70,000 inmates from the Gulags had been transported to Chelyabinsk to build the high-rise apartment buildings, metallurgical factories and a complex of five uranium-graphite reactors, each of which served only to produce weapons-grade plutonium. The first reactor was fired up in June 1948.



By February 1949, the first batch of plutonium concentrate had been separated from the infernal

cocktail produced by the neutron bombardment of Uranium-238. Six months later, enough plutonium had been produced to create the 5kg lug of plutonium metal that formed the core of what came to be called *Joe-1*, an exact replica of *Fat Man*, the bomb dropped on Nagasaki by the US. *Joe-1* was successfully detonated at Semipalatinsk in Eastern Kazakhstan on 29th August 1949.

The race was on.

In their haste to catch up to the Americans, little thought was given by Soviet engineers or physicists to the handling of the huge quantities of radioactive wastes produced by the chemical separation of plutonium from irradiated reactor fuel rods. They were simply dumped into the Techa River, which joined the Tobol River further downstream and eventually emptied into the Arctic Ocean.

After three years of disposing of nuclear wastes in this manner, radiation levels in the Techa River were monitored for the first time. Alan Bellows reports:

“In the village of Metlino, just over four miles downriver from the plutonium plant, investigators and Geiger counters clicked nervously along the river bank. Rather than the typical “background” radiation of about 0.21 Roentgens per year, the edge of the Techa River was emanating 5 Roentgens *per hour*.” [Alan Bellows, damninteresting.com, 17/10/2008]

By 1952, radioactive wastes from Chelyabinsk had been detected in the Arctic Ocean, thousands of kilometres away. The engineers began to panic. Clumsy attempts were made to contain the release of radioactive pollution. Using heavy machinery, large channels were created whereby the liquid wastes from the Mayak complex could be diverted away from the local river systems and directed into local lakes and marshlands.

Much of that material is now concentrated in Lake Karachai, a marshland near Chelyabinsk which occupies some 50 square kilometres. During the first ten years of operations at Mayak, over 120 million curies of radioactivity derived mainly from the long-lived radionuclides Cesium-137 and Strontium-90 were dumped directly into Lake Karachai. In real terms, Lake Karachai has absorbed nearly one hundred times more radioactive Cesium and Strontium than that released in the Chernobyl meltdown.



The radioactivity from Chernobyl was spread over vast areas of Europe and the former Soviet Union. Lake Karachai, however, is a very

small body of water that is now laden

with radioactive contaminants to an unimaginable degree. Of even greater concern is the fact that seepage from Lake Karachai has created a huge plume of highly radioactive groundwater which is presently moving away from the lake itself. This huge underground plume has already spread over three kilometres from the shoreline and is continuing to drift at the rate of 80 metres a year towards several river systems, including the Irtysh River that flows nearby. All these rivers eventually empty into the Arctic Ocean.

In October 1991, a number of suitably clad officials from the U.S. Department of Energy visited Lake Karachai. They recorded radioactive levels of 300-600 millirems per hour near its shores. This level of radiation is three to six times the level of exposure permitted *per year* according to U.S. regulations. At the dosage rates reported, anyone standing on the shore of the lake would receive a fatal dose of radiation in the time that it takes to read a newspaper.

In addition to the direct discharge of radioactive materials into local rivers and marshlands, there have also occurred two catastrophic events that have come to light only since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.



As soon as it was realised that radioactivity from the Mayak operations

had reached as far as the Arctic, steps were put in place to contain the immense amounts of liquid radioactive waste produced at Mayak. A series of concrete-lined steel tanks were constructed eight metres below ground level. Liquid radioactive wastes were stored in these tanks for 12 months during which time they were cooled by a constant stream of

water to carry off the heat generated by their highly radioactive contents. The seals in a number of these tanks proved to be faulty and liquid waste began to leak into the coolant water. In addition, the heat exchange systems on several of the tanks progressively broke down.

Though they were aware of these problems, the engineers at Mayak did nothing because of the difficulty in doing any repairs in the intensely radioactive environment near the tanks. They were of the view that the increased temperatures around the storage tanks were not hazardous. They were grievously mistaken.



On the afternoon of 29th September 1957, the temperature in one of the defective tanks reached nearly 700 degrees Fahrenheit, triggering a huge explosion that tore through the storage system. The force of the explosion hurled the massive 2.5 metre thick concrete lid that covered the cooling trench a distance of 30 metres, blew in the windows of buildings nearby and completely destroyed the metal gates surrounding the storage site.

An immense column of red and orange smoke that sparkled like the Northern Lights rose a kilometre into the air above the Mayak complex darkening the daylight. Large radioactive particles showered the entire area for several hours, and smaller cotton-like shreds continued to float out of the sky well into the following day.

This debris rained down on hundreds of soldiers and a group of 3,000 prisoners who worked in the chemical and metallurgical factories nearby. Within 48 hours, many had developed symptoms of radiation poisoning: diarrhoea, skin burns, hair loss and changes in blood chemistry. Many of the soldiers involved in clean-up operations within the compound died soon after.

The explosion spread 20 million curies of radioactivity over an area of nearly 33,000 square kilometres across Chelyabinsk, Sverdlovsk and Tyumen Oblasts, and into the lives of over a quarter of a million people who lived in those regions. Most severely affected was an area of over 800 square kilometres immediately downwind from the explosion. Michel Goulet of the American University reports:

“For the next two years hospitals in the region were filled to capacity. Due to inadequate medical records, the number of people who died from the explosion cannot be determined. Only 10,000 people of the quarter million population were evacuated and the evacuations were delayed in some cases for up to 18 months.” (Michel Goulet, *Ural Mountains Radiation Pollution*, December 1996)

Soviet commentators have estimated that over 124,000 people received lethal doses of radiation as a result of the explosion and died over an extended period ranging from days to years. (I. Ionina and M. Kubeev, *Soldiers of the Chelyabinsk Chernobyl*, Moscow, 1999)



Over 100,000 hectares of agricultural lands were eventually declared unfit for use and 23 villages were completely evacuated. Within two years, all of the pine trees within a

twenty-kilometre radius of the Mayak complex were dead.

Ten years later, the southern Urals experienced a series of droughts that resulted in the drying up of a number of rivers and lakes in the region. Among them was Lake Karachai, which lost nearly half of its total water content. Large areas of highly radioactive sediments that had been accumulating in its basin over the previous fifteen years were exposed to the air. Independent journalist Mark Hertsgaard describes what happened next:

“In 1967, a cyclone swept across the drought-exposed shores of Lake Karachai and whirled its deadly silt high into the air and across the surrounding landscape. Five million curies of radioactivity were dispersed over fifteen thousand square miles; nearly half a million people were affected.” (*To the Nuclear Lighthouse*, 1998)

Many of those who had been affected by the radioactivity released in the 1957 explosion at Mayak were once again rained upon by a deadly fire that poisoned their soils and damaged their cells.

The area surrounding the Mayak nuclear complex is now the most polluted region on the earth. Apart from the radioactive contamination of river systems, marshlands, groundwater reservoirs and agricultural lands, the health of the local inhabitants has been grievously affected. In addition to the numerous deaths already caused by the release of radioactivity from the Mayak facility over the past sixty years, future generations will face grave uncertainties. The Chelyabinsk region has the highest cancer rate in the Urals with the incidence of cancer among women being 30% higher than anywhere else in Russia. Infant mortality is almost twice that in the rest of the country. (Yuri Zarakhovich, *Poisoned Waters*, Time, 11/5/2003)

Even though plutonium production ended in 1987, the Chelyabinsk region remains an immense repository of solid and liquid radioactive materials. According to the Moscow-based branch of Greenpeace, some 20,000 cubic metres of liquid radioactive waste has been dumped into Lake Karachai every year for most of the past decade. In addition, much of the high level radioactive material recovered from dismantled nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union, as well as over 30 tons of reactor-grade plutonium with a half life of over 24,000 years, are presently stored at Mayak.

There are no guarantees that nature will accommodate our neglects or comply with our expectations. The windstorm of 1967 whipped vast clouds of radioactive particles from the dried banks of Lake Karachai and spread them as fine aerosols through the lives of the inhabitants of the Chelyabinsk region. More recently, a series of droughts in Russia have caused a noticeable drop in the water levels of the Techa River and the poisoned lakes throughout the region. The area remains notoriously prone to dust storms.

The pandemic of wildfires that has swept through Russia in recent months created new concerns as they licked the edges of lands and forests contaminated by both the Chernobyl meltdown and the Mayak disasters thereby threatening further major releases of radioactivity.

The immense plume of radioactivity beneath Lake Karachai continues its inexorable spread through ground waters and towards a number of river systems that empty into the Arctic Ocean. Lake Karachai itself is situated over a geologically unstable part of the southern Urals. Mark Hertsgaard reports:

“Running beneath the Mayak complex are a number of geological fault lines which could flush irradiated water across hundreds of miles via underground channels during an

earthquake.” (*To the Nuclear Lighthouse*, 1998)

Technological civilisation has altered not



only the conditions of our lives, but also the conditions of our planet. Every freedom we may have gained has come at a certain cost. Much of the present concern over our longer-term future centres on the effects of increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the earth’s atmosphere. Yet this is but one of a constellation of serious disturbances that industrial civilisation has wrought on the earth. It is not that we lack knowledge of our present circumstances. But we seem to have blithely accepted that this is just the way things are and that there is very little we can do about it. The fierce contentions and ultimate indecision at Copenhagen last December has made that very clear.

As in an individual human life, we seem collectively reluctant to change our ways until we are confronted with life-changing limitations or life-threatening pathologies. Changes made under such circumstances may slow down or attenuate the tendency to dissolution, but will only rarely result in a full restoration of health and freedom.

Although we may pride ourselves on the great freedoms that have been bestowed by technological civilisation, we would do well to consider just what sort of earth may eventually be inherited by the meek.

Further Sources

1. Michel Goulet of the American University in Washington DC offers a detailed coverage of the consequences of the nuclear activities at Mayak:

<http://www1.american.edu/ted/URAL.HTM>

2. Mark Hertsgaard was one of the first independent Western journalists to visit the Chelyabinsk region during the early days of the breakup of the Soviet Union. His report on the consequences of the Soviet nuclear weapons program at Mayak makes for fascinating reading:

<http://www.markhertsgaard.com/articles/110>

LETTER FROM ALEXANDRA

HEARING THE SOUND OF WATER Finding my Religion

The sea of faith was once, too, at the full, round earth's shore... but now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.
(Matthew Arnold 'Dover Beach')

We are all bound to withdraw from earth's round shores and have but a tenuous amount of time in which to work out what really matters. In this deep mystery of life we all find ourselves contending with what we want and what we don't want. In between for all of us there can be a lot of losing and finding, a lot of apprehending and misapprehending life's possibilities.

All this current collective commotion of ours is generating an indiscriminate and immeasurable amount of collateral damage. Casualties abound throughout the biosphere, faith being not the least. Too frequently, life becomes 'sound and fury signifying nothing', white noise devoid of music, wood entirely without trees, a book unread and opened. Too

frequently with loss of faith comes loss of intuition, a loss of investigative hope willing to trust there is more to reality than what meets the eye.

Reality, as some of us know, can be brutal, nasty and unforgiving. Life in all its beauty and its terror is frequently 'red in tooth and claw.' And reality, as the brilliant poet T. S. Eliot well knew, is too much for most of us to bear. The full truth of things is no doubt too much for nearly all of us and paying "absolute attention" to reality as some unflinching teachers insist is perhaps better left to the mad or the sanctified.

Faith we may need, even as it now drains down the sheer edges of the world, for we cannot have even a ration of freedom and adventure without acknowledging what we cannot understand and cannot control. Yet faith we lose easily enough, along with its close cousin trust, as we continue to cross thresholds. It is not only faith and its corollary religion that may be draining away but much else that is precious and irreplaceable. Out in vast arenas of the world, a litany of lamentation rises up bespeaking lost tribes, languages, habitats, cultures, innocence, opportunity, loves and lovers. This is not simply to say that all things must pass including empires, churches and our own time in the scheme of things, but something else can be more keenly missed: a sense of direction and worth, a sense of conscience and belonging, a sense of accountability and wonder. Lose that and you will in truth find it hard to get by.

Loss as we know can gang tackle us from every side, leaving us bereft and stunned in a hard blink of an eye. Some losses we never recover from, some we welcome and others are just so fashionable, like losing one's religion for instance - providing it is Christianity and not one of the more exotic and seemingly more potent faiths within the parliament of the

world's religions. But losing and finding something like religion can be hazardous and harrowing as I discovered recently.



I had gone south to Tasmania in a casual attempt to escape - if not lose - my regular working reality in what was nine parts holiday and one part pilgrimage. I came to that far

south isle, so beautiful and rugged and yet so mantled in its dark and peculiar history. The tourist alibi suited me, putting me below the radar and away from the roles and functions of my even more peculiar working life as priest of the Roman church or Roman Catholicism Inc. as less forgiving souls may call it.

So I was sweetly adrift one day in my little kayak on a little river on the wild west coast of the island. I was paddling at strolling speed, sweeping from a dark tannin stained stream into a wide estuary. It was a clean wind day, blowing strong at that roaring forties latitude. I landed my craft on a long spit of sand and stepped out to explore. Before me was a huge expanse of weather-flattened sand like a mini Sahara. Behind me and to the north, gnarled and wind bitten scrublands stopped abruptly, giving way to the corrugated sand. To the south, great ramparts of dunes rose and rose spilling inland. To the west, beneath the lash and fury of a wanton wind was the distant grey green ocean, beckoning and broiling.

I started west towards the light and came to the place where the sea surrendered its claim. A wave of hail and rain hammered into my face and onto the beach. Untouched clouds hung low in the

southern sky brooding with rain. And then fitfully and fleetingly, the sun appeared. I stopped as the sea had stopped, thus far and no farther. In front of me yards and yards of humming drumming white water reverberated with fluid import, telling stories of impossible distance, vast emptiness and unimaginable storm. The spray tossed into the air and the pounding waves drummed and confirmed the message: my existence was as porous as my place on the edge of nothingness. All was dense and immense and intimidating. Unfazed by my precocious sea-savvy confidence, the sea lapped at my feet with a promise to outdo me.



I was all alone in the wind-woven sand. There were no witnesses, no available rescues, and

no interruptions to the sea's apparent silence. It seemed that I really did not matter, only my eyes and my ears to record the unfazed, unfeeling, uncaring sea. The wind grew keener, etching even more intricate patterns in the sand behind me informing me that I was utterly alone in every cell and fibre of my being. The ceaseless sea was cold and terrible, leaving me landlocked and defenceless. I fell to my knees.

It was nothing as lofty as worship or homage that brought me to my knees that day, just instinct and a desire to surrender in the face of so much aloneness, so much emptiness. All that space made me tremble and I flinched at the interrogation within the silence. The questions arising were the usual suspects. The sea was well informed. I did not yet know who I was, I wondered who was mine and who wasn't. Which tribe? Which course, which set of connections and beliefs would help me navigate the abyss? Who cared and who

did not and did I know my own true name? I looked behind me to the east and already my footprints were disappearing in the wind. Now to the west the sun had retreated behind a curtain of rain clouds. "Where am I and does anyone care?" I heard myself thinking.

Again I looked south and this time a restless tribe of voices and memories came sweeping up on the wind. I suddenly remembered that less than a days march south was a place that banished convicts used to call Hell's Gates. A callous and calculating empire had sent them not long ago to a place of harrowing and unbearable exile, adding regular atrocity and programmed cruelty to a life of penal penury. And on the wind there were other voices, other eddies of complaint, whispering of even darker cruelties and deeds inflicted against a disappeared people. Their voice was less than a whisper but the resonance of it touched every dell and dale of the island. "Who cared then and who cares now?" the memories on the wind lamented.



Behind me the sea pounded on imperviously, with no answers then or now for the exiled and abandoned. For a moment I was disorientated in the keening wind, unsure of whether I had just momentarily looked Forever in the eye or had received a flat refusal of all my prayers. The memories on the wind suggested to me that the world had grown smaller, up-scaled in production but lacking space. Raw violence however was inflicted and endured from age to

age, still begging the blowing wind for answers. I had rarely felt so alone.

I shivered and then remembered I was not so solitary a wayfarer as I thought. I did have a tribe with me, not excluding the unquiet memories on the wind. I had my story of ancestors. I had my slender degree of connection, weaving me into a greater web. I was not alone.

Heartened, I returned up river from the estuary, back through the corridor of dark water. Unthinkingly I was gliding from Yang to Yin, from rough to calm and still. In time the river narrowed and the forest became more rain saturated. Soon I was rippling through a dense and thickening shroud of green. It kept me quiet.

When hunger and the roll call of time called me back to my holiday, I thought to think no more of unanswered prayers. But an unanswered sea had a way of investigating and questioning me. What then about all the plagues and plights of the universe? And what if God was no more personal than the sea?

I shivered again, to think of all talk of care for a falling sparrow as wishful thinking, all prayer and entreaty nothing more than a closed-circuit conversation within the muck and mulch of a private psyche, not even the comfort of an imaginary friend returning sacred pleasantries, just talking to nothingness and in the end finding there is nothing to rely on. After that, it wasn't hard to be lost at sea along with my religion.

Ah yes! I knew how religion, like me, had grown accustomed to forgetting its own name, forgetting to forge and celebrate the living link with what is most vital, most true, most essential. I knew the word religion meant to re-link or to bind together, but was now viewed by fashionably clever people as bondage to

superfluous superstition and reactionary delusion. I daily encountered the suspicion that instead of representing the One who had freed me from all tyrannies, I was a sponsor for all manner of chauvinistic conceit.

Truthfully I had some professional experience of religion. I had observed its propensity to decorate and dance with the top end of town. I had personally suffered a sample of some of its scrupulosities and superstitions. I had witnessed its infantilising ways of believing the infinite could be managed and monopolised within one exclusive set of nostrums and canons. I knew how non-negotiable religion could be about word and symbol and practice.

It was easy enough to lose my religion once memory and the sea caught up with me. The mood on the beach that day stayed with me, unzipping old certainties and taking to task past parsimonies. I had felt the tang and allure of that salty wind back on the beach of no religion, no teacher, no method, no guru. It was so enticing to dispense with the prevarications and pontifications of meddling clerics, to let both baby and bathwater out to sea. No more straining after dubious perfections, no more babbling to shadows and taking oneself far too seriously, no more letter of the law spoiling the spirited party.

Ah! But such unfettered anarchy, like reality, proves hard to bear. The sea was all too ready to allow me to step out into its wild rip and take my chances with chaos and mortality. But all my rush of nay saying felt a lot more like drowning-not-waving. That west wind had left me too cold to be cool. Too much unbinding, too much losing my religion and I would lose touch with the round earth shore before my time. My no would outweigh my yes to life. I would be unlinked rather than linked to the summon of love

expressed in covenant, duty and immediate care of my neighbour. I would be unconnected with any story bigger than my own, unable to navigate the vastness of existence without the binding impetus of a solemn imperative, lost on the night tide without star or anchorage to help when the waters are troubled.

Saying no to the bigger story was too much to lose, a sense of chivalry and direction being not the least. It takes a lot of nerve and muscle to not allow despair and indifference to run riot. It takes an extraordinary potency to seed a hope and daring big enough to love the world as it is. I could willingly renounce catechism and canons, breathing more manageable air, but not that potency to link and bind things. What is it that can hold together freedom and responsibility, love and wilfulness, inspiration and perspiration? It is so easy to scatter in the face of death and entropy, and so sure, so easy to not care less about being bound to the woes and joys of another and end up in a world devoid of art or science, potency or pathos, feeling or conscience.



Gathering, on the other hand, binding and linking so that we hold the universe together one slender degree of separation at time, one act of kindness at a time takes enormous heart and a determined wide embrace. It takes a willingness to interfere with the ways of evil, to resist, to bleed, to ache in the cause of care of neighbour and care for the world. Such

courage, such rigour sustains a hope that all the ruptures, all the discords, all the rending and breakings of life can be received with healing purpose. It is a determined yes despite the fey tenuousness of much of life, an unhesitating yes to pulling justice and mercy to work together, a welcoming yes to something as seemingly impersonal as the universe still being guided by providence rather than brute chance.

Such a yes, no matter how tempered by negation and detachment, required more than some decorative non-obligatory spirituality. It was much more of a summons than just a polite invitation. Hearing that summons, responding to it, demanded accountability and a willingness to accept fully the humble ration of tribe and life given to me. All could belong in that yes, friends and strangers, enemies and accidents, blessings and a sea that refused to recede. I had either to find a sturdy answer to that implacable sea or else stay lost.

As Jalaluddin Rumi once observed:

*God says to you "I am the sound of water
In the ears of the thirsty;
I am rain falling from heaven.
Spring up lover and show some
excitement!
How can you hear the sound of water and
then fall back to sleep!"*

Vincent Jewell
Alexandra, Victoria

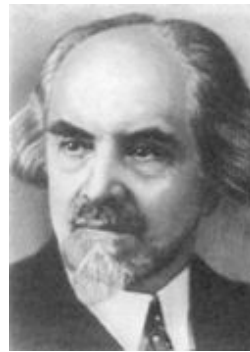
BOOK REVIEW

***Spirit and Reality*, Nicolas Berdyaev
(trans. George Reavey), Geoffrey Bles,
The Centenary Press, London, 1939**

In this extraordinary work, Nicolas (or more correctly, Nikolai) Berdyaev directs his highly original thinking to an exploration of the nature of Spirit, which

he understands to be a hidden yet powerful motive influence within the phenomenal world. *Spirit and Reality* is among the most coherent and penetrative explorations of the nature of spirit that are available to us.

Berdyaev is deeply familiar with the Western intellectual traditions. He has fully assimilated the works of Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel and Schopenhauer, yet remains unapologetically Christocentric in his philosophical position.



Berdyaev was born into an aristocratic Russian family in 1874 and died at his desk in France at the age of 74 years. As a young man, he was drawn into the turbulence of the Russian

Revolution. In 1898, he was expelled from his university for participating in revolutionary activities. In 1913, he was charged with blasphemy by the Russian Orthodox Church and barely escaped life-long exile in Siberia. Seven years later, his continuing and vocal opposition to the Revolution resulted in his being expelled from Russia as an enemy of the State. The strength of his character was clearly present from an early age.

According to Berdyaev, the historical materialism embraced by the architects of the Revolution was a distortion of the nature of the redemptive forces that were at that time trying to find expression in Russia. Peter Maurin comments: "Although the bourgeois spirit had always existed in culture, it had reached its apex in the nineteenth century. Berdyaev saw then that its concupiscence was no longer restricted by supernatural beliefs as it was

in the past, no longer kept in bounds by the sacred symbolism of a nobler traditional culture. The centre of life, the spiritual, had been exiled to the periphery. The triumph of the bourgeois spirit led Berdyaev to declare that history was a story of failure. Berdyaev lamented that the will to power and affluence had triumphed over the will to holiness and genius." (Peter Maurin: *Prophet in the Twentieth Century*, Paulist Press, 1981)

Berdyaev's immense intellectual power was charged with penetrative spiritual insight. His writings reflect a deep knowledge of the works of many of the carriers of the mystical traditions of both the East and the West. A close reading of *Spirit and Reality* suggests that Berdyaev himself walked in the light and participated intimately in the realities that he sought to describe. He experienced the activity of spirit within the world and realised personally the freedom from conventional authority and rationality that deep spiritual awareness can bring.

Berdyaev is very interested in the nature of asceticism and offers a perspective that acknowledges the seemingly contradictory impulses to serve as an instrument of the spirit through the vehicle of highly ascetic disciplines and a near-Manichaeic negation of physicality and the phenomenal world, and the cultivation of a capacity for active love of others and of the world as manifestations of divine providence. Yet Berdyaev is surprisingly brash in his criticism of such ascetic works as "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas a Kempis, and in his dismissal of such phenomena as stigmatisation as "unacceptable" to the resurrectionist perspective with which he so strongly identifies.

In such matters, Berdyaev has perhaps failed to understand that not all incline so easily towards his fiercely intellectual

style or his illuminism. He seems to have little patience with those who may be given more to devotional approaches rather than the sharply analytical approach that he clearly favours. He comments: "Eastern mysticism is predominantly that of resurrection whereas Western mysticism is mainly that of crucifixion." (p. 142)

Berdyaev examines the divide between the self-directed asceticisms that aim to escape from the reality of suffering, and the Divinely-mediated mysticism that enables one to live in freedom even while in the midst of the suffering and tragedy that are an inevitable part of human life. He concludes that "Buddhism knows only compassion but not love." (p. 100) He is unambiguous in his view of the place of happiness as a realisable goal of human experience: "There are no very happy men but only moments of happiness." (p. 107)

Berdyaev is uncompromisingly critical of the role of those ecclesiastical and secular institutions that claim to represent Divine Will or Mandate in human affairs. He is forthright in expressing his strong distaste for the authoritarianism exercised by Roman Catholicism.

Berdyaev's primary task is to offer an understanding of the relationship between spirit and freedom. Above all else, he identifies love as the essential quality that is necessarily kindled in deep and authentic spirituality. Not surprisingly, Nicolas Berdyaev has had a significant influence on such Christian thinkers as Thomas Merton and Matthew Fox.

Selected excerpts from Nicolas Berdyaev's "Spirit and Reality" can be found on the [Lit. Reviews page](#) of the THP website in the "Christianity" section of "The Wisdom Traditions"

POETICA

Terra Calda

We have been away for far too long
From the pull of the world and the day to day
From time of work and time of play

The debt of the day too deep to repay
Has gone too far has been too long
Tell me now which way to turn
Which tune to give to the sacred song

As newer nails of fire and metal
Pierce the armour and spoil the earth
They burn the children before their birth
For want of love for want of worth

In times now past upon the lake
The swans would slow and silent flow
Yet in this time and in that place
The deadly metal seeps and soaks
To riverbeds and ocean deeps
And mother weeps

Now time to call this to a halt
Time to call this to an end
There is no more that we can spend

And time to make our way in peace
Find a hearth and till the earth
Toil to turn the damage round
Regain again the sacred ground
Restore anew this broken place
Through love and song through sweat and grace