

"The Kingdom of Spirits"
Semyon Frank and Russian Religious Personalism

by Randall A. Poole

Abstract

Personalism holds that persons are rational, moral, creative, and spiritual beings who bear an intrinsic worth or dignity and who are the very center of reality: its ontological center (persons are the highest form of reality), its axiological center (persons are the supreme value in reality), and its epistemological center (through persons reality is intelligible). This essay deals with Russian and Russo-French personalism, spanning the one hundred years from Ivan Kireevsky to Semyon Frank, whom V. V. Zenkovsky famously regarded as Russia's greatest philosopher and in whose works Russian religious personalism arguably achieved its highest degree of development. The essay gives attention to Vladimir Soloviev's importance in Russian personalism, to interwar Russo-French personalism in the figures of Nikolai Berdiaev and Jacques Maritain, to the personalist rebirth of human rights in the twentieth century, and to the similarities between John Zizioulas's neo-patristic personalism and Frank's personalist ontology of absolute realism.



Keywords: Nikolai Berdiaev, Semyon Frank, Jacques Maritain, Vladimir Soloviev, John Zizioulas, personalism, personhood, human dignity, human rights, Christian humanism



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Introduction: Russo-French Personalism and Human Rights

The term "personalism" (*"der Personalismus"*) seems to have entered modern philosophical discourse in 1799, when Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) introduced it in his book *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*).¹ The immediate predecessor of personalism as an international philosophical movement was Rudolph Hermann Lotze (1817–1881), especially through his three-volume work on philosophical anthropology, *Mikrokosmos* (1856–1864).² In France, the philosopher Charles Renouvier (1815–1903) published a book under the title *Le Personnalisme* in 1903. By then a robust American school of idealist personalism was emerging in the figures of Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910), George H. Howison (1834–

1. Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 online edition); <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/personalism/> Williams is also the author of the valuable study, *Who Is My Neighbor? Personalism and the Foundation of Human Rights* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2005).

2. See Johan De Tavernier, "The Historical Roots of Personalism," *Ethical Perspectives*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2009): 363. See also David Sullivan, "Hermann Lotze," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024 online edition); <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2024/entries/hermann-lotze/>. The Sullivan article has a section on personalism as one of Lotze's three legacies. Lotze was a strong influence on the Russian philosopher Lev M. Lopatin (1855–1920), who was a main representative of neo-Leibnizianism in Russian thought (together with Aleksei A. Kozlov, Sergei A. Askol'dov, and Nikolai O. Lossky). In their classic histories of Russian philosophy, V. V. Zenkovsky and N. O. Lossky classify Lopatin and the others as personalists (in the Leibnizian sense). See V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, trans. George L. Kline, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), vol. 2: 630–676; and Nicholas O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International Universities Press, 1951), 158–162. For revisions of these traditional classifications, see James P. Scanlan, "Russian Panpsychism: Kozlov, Lopatin, Losskii," in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, ed. G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 150–168. See also the end of the section below, "Russian Personalism before Berdiaev."

1916), Ralph T. Flewelling (1871–1960), Albert C. Knudson (1873–1953), and others.³ Soon thereafter personalism became a philosophical force in interwar France, where the exiled Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948) was one of its spokesmen, together with Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950) and Jacques Maritain (1882–1973). So far as I know, the first book in which Berdiaev used the term "personalism" is *The Destiny of Man*, published in Russian in 1931 and in French in 1935.⁴ In any event it is one of the first uses of the term in the interwar Russo-French religious-philosophical milieu.⁵ Some months earlier, on December 8, 1930, Mounier's review *Esprit* and the personalist movement associated with it were conceived at a meeting at Berdiaev's home in Clamart. The actual founding meeting took place the following day at another location.⁶ In his memoirs Berdiaev wrote that the movement's combination of socialism and personalism was expressed in the newly coined term *personalisme communautaire*.⁷ Maritain claims that he himself coined the term, which then became associated especially with Mounier.⁸ Berdiaev adopted a similar term, "personalist socialism," to designate his own mature social philosophy, which he expounded in *Slavery and Freedom* (1936).⁹

Today personalism is recognized as a whole philosophical worldview with a long and rich history.¹⁰ It has become popular to be a personalist. On June 15, 2018, David Brooks published an op-ed in the *New York Times* titled, "Personalism: The Philosophy We Need." Personalism holds that persons are rational, moral, creative, and spiritual beings who bear an intrinsic worth or dignity and who are the very center of reality: its ontological center (persons are the highest form of reality), its axiological center (persons are the supreme value

3. See in particular Albert C. Knudson, *The Philosophy of Personalism: A Study in the Metaphysics of Religion* (New York and Cincinnati: The Abingdon Press, 1927).

4. Nikolai Berdiaev, *O naznachanii cheloveka: Opyt paradoksal'noi etiki* (Paris: "Sovremennye zapiski," YMCA Press, 1931). "Personalism" is used in the heading of the second section of chapter 3 (pp. 60–67). In the English edition, see Nicolas Berdiaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 54–61.

5. Another Russian living in Paris, Alexandre Marc, also used the term in 1931. Marc (whose real name was Alexandre Markovich Lipiansky) was a Russian Jew of socialist-revolutionary tendencies who had converted to Catholicism. He founded and edited the rightist review *Ordre Nouveau*. See De Tavernier, "The Historical Roots of Personalism," 367; and Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1925–1940*, trans. Jerry Ryan, ed. John A. Jillions and Michael Plekon (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 329.

6. Arjakovsky, *The Way*, 192. *Esprit* began publication in October 1932 and continues to this day. Berdiaev wrote, "I was present at the meeting at which *Esprit* was founded. This took place at the home of I., a left-wing Roman Catholic, subsequently a Deputy and a member of the Socialist Party." Nicolas Berdiaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography*, trans. Katharine Lampert (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 274.

7. Berdiaev, *Dream and Reality*, 274.

8. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), 51, as cited in Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism*, trans. R. T. Allen (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2018), 53.

9. Nikolai Berdiaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (Philmont, NY: Sematron Press, 2009).

10. See Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism*; and Rufus Burrow, *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999).

in reality), and its epistemological center (through persons reality is intelligible). Most forms of personalism are broadly theistic, with personalism itself plausibly tracing its origins to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity: three persons in one God. One of the most influential personalists of the twentieth century was Pope John Paul II.¹¹ Another was Dr. Martin Luther King, who built the American Civil Rights Movement on personalist foundations.¹²

Personalism is attracting renewed scholarly attention because of its connection with the twentieth-century history of human rights.¹³ The main figure in this intellectual history is Jacques Maritain, whose 1942 book *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* set him on the path to become, in Moyn's estimation, "the premier postwar philosopher of human rights."¹⁴ He was closely involved in UNESCO's 1947–1948 research on the philosophical foundations of human rights and was, more generally, one of the intellectual architects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁵ His 1936 treatise *Integral Humanism* is a profound explication of personalism, yet offers no explicit endorsement of human rights.¹⁶ That changed with *Scholasticism and Politics*, based on nine lectures that Maritain delivered at the University of Chicago in the autumn of 1938. What he calls the personalist conception of democracy "is first of all determined by the idea of man as God's image, and by the idea of the common good, of human rights and of concrete liberty; and it is based on Christian humanism."¹⁷ He refers repeatedly to the "primordial rights of the person," which are the very basis of governmental authority. It is clear that the direct cause of Maritain's shift between 1936 and 1938 was Pope Pius XI. In March 1937 the pope issued two encyclicals, *Mit brennender Sorge* and *Divini Redemptoris*, both of which forcefully deployed the idea of human rights against their respective targets (Nazism and Communism).¹⁸ This

11. He is the center of attention in Williams, *Who Is My Neighbor? Personalism and the Foundation of Human Rights*.

12. See Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). There is a section on Berdiaev in King's essay, "Contemporary Continental Theology," which he likely wrote in 1951–1952 as a doctoral student at Boston University's School of Theology. The essay is available at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/about-papers-project>.

13. See Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

14. See Samuel Moyn, "Personalism, Community, and the Origin of Human Rights," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. S.-L. Hoffman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 87, 90.

15. Soon after its founding, the UN's Commission on Human Rights, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, asked UNESCO to help with its work on an international bill of rights. UNESCO invited 150 leading intellectuals from around the world to submit papers on philosophical issues raised by human rights, especially the problem of how to ground them. Its Committee on the Philosophical Principles of the Rights of Man convened in Paris from June 26 to July 2, 1947, to discuss the papers, which are available on UNESCO's website and which were also published: UNESCO ed., *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations*, intro. Jacques Maritain (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949). Maritain also contributed a chapter, "On the Philosophy of Human Rights."

16. Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and a Letter on Independence*, ed. Otto Bird, trans. Otto Bird, Joseph Evans, and Richard O'Sullivan, K.C. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

17. Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 87.

18. Maritain quotes from *Divini Redemptoris* in *Scholasticism and Politics* (110).

indicated that the Church was moving further along the path laid by Leo XIII, which progress authorized Maritain's new position on human rights.

Berdiaev's personalism, by contrast, had all along been an explicit defense of human rights. In *The Destiny of Man* he wrote categorically: "The only political principle which is connected with absolute truth is the principle of the subjective rights of the human personality, of the freedom of spirit, of conscience, of thought and speech."¹⁹ For him, everything in politics is relative except human rights. Even more remarkable, pre-revolutionary Russian religious idealism, long before Berdiaev brought it to the West and christened it "personalism," forcefully defended the idea of human dignity and the rights which issue from it. The two greatest metaphysical idealists of nineteenth-century Russia, Boris Chicherin (1828–1904) and Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), were resolute champions of human rights.²⁰ Their legacy inspired the 1902 collection *Problems of Idealism*. In his contribution to the volume, Berdiaev wrote: "The person in his 'natural' rights is sovereign. ... Ethically, nothing can justify violation of the natural rights of man, for there is no end in the world, in the name of which the sacred strivings of the human spirit could be infringed upon or in the name of which the principle of the human person as an end in itself could be betrayed."²¹ Thus, as paradoxical as it may seem in the face of centuries of Russian autocracy, the "old Russian tradition of religious personalism," as Moyn refers to it,²² was a robust theory of human rights decades before the Catholic Church and Maritain made their own very similar personalist discoveries and transformed international understanding of human rights.

Russian Personalism before Berdiaev

Though the term "personalism" was not commonly used by Russian philosophers before Berdiaev, it has been appropriated by historians of Russian thought to describe a deep feature of the Russian religious-philosophical tradition. The most recent and impressive example is Sergei Polovinkin's book *Russkii personalizm*, which appeared in 2020, two years after the author's death.²³ It runs to more than 1100 pages. The defense of human dignity and of

19. Berdiaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 198.

20. Boris Chicherin's *Filosofia prava (Philosophy of Right)* (1900) is a profound idealist defense of human rights and the rule of law. Human dignity and human rights, including the "new" right to a dignified or worthy human existence, are central to Soloviev's *Justification of the Good* (1897), often regarded as the most important Russian work of moral theory. See Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. Natalie A. Duddington, edited and annotated Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), especially Part 3, ch. 4 ("The Moral Norm of Social Life"). For a classic account of these philosophers (and their followers), emphasizing the priority they gave to human rights, see Andrzej Walicki, *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

21. N. A. Berdiaev, "The Ethical Problem in the Light of Philosophical Idealism," in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, ed., trans., and intro. Randall A. Poole (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 179.

22. Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*, 68–69; Moyn, "Personalism, Community, and the Origin of Human Rights," 86–87.

23. S. M. Polovinkin, *Russkii personalizm* (Moscow: Sinaksis, 2020).

personhood (*lichnost'*) was arguably the most important preoccupation of nineteenth and twentieth-century Russian thought.²⁴ The *lichnost'* theme was a very broad one. The term can mean person, personhood, personality, individual, individuality, and even self. It did not necessarily carry metaphysical or theistic connotations. In the nineteenth century, a whole range of Russian thinkers including the Westernizers, Alexander Herzen, the "subjective sociologists" Peter Lavrov and Nikolai Mikhailovsky, and liberals of all stripes used *lichnost'* to stress that the individual was an autonomous, active moral agent capable of introducing his or her own values into history and of striving for progress. It was the subject of Ivanov-Razumnik's classic work, *Istoriia russkoi obshchestvennoi mysli (History of Russian Social Thought)* (1907). Ivanov-Razumnik was a neo-populist thinker, a Socialist Revolutionary, who extolled the "primacy of the person" and asserted that "the good of the real human person should serve as the criterion of our acts and our worldview."²⁵ He celebrated "ethical individualism," contrasting it to "philistine egoism."

By the time Ivanov-Razumnik's book appeared, a different group of Russian thinkers had achieved prominence. They were the metaphysical idealists and religious philosophers of the early twentieth-century Russian religious renaissance, which drew its inspiration from Vladimir Soloviev. They gave *lichnost'* the philosophically exalted meaning of *personhood*, which emphasized the person's absolute worth, dignity, and rights. *Problems of Idealism* was an important milestone in this development. As Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924) wrote in his foreword to the book, Russian idealism attached "primary importance to the principle of the absolute significance of personhood."²⁶ Though he and the other contributors did not use the term "personalism," certainly they advanced the concept.

The Russian tradition of religious-philosophical personalism began with the Slavophiles, specifically with Ivan Kireevsky's concepts of "integral personhood" (*tsel'naia lichnost'*) and "believing reason" and with Aleksei Khomiakov's concept of *sobornost*, which refers to the qualities of an ideal community (for him the Church) through which people can most fully realize their personhood.²⁷ In one place Kireevsky (1806–1856) wrote that "only a reasoning and free personality is what is essential in the world. It alone has a distinctive significance.

24. See *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, ed. Hamburg and Poole. See also Nikolaj Plotnikov, "'The Person is a Monad with Windows': Sketch of a Conceptual History of 'Person' in Russia," *Studies in East European Thought*, vol. 64 (2012): 269–299; and *Personal'nost': Iazyk filosofii v russko-nemetskom dialoge*, ed. N. S. Plotnikov and A. Haardt (Moscow: Modest Kolerov, 2007).

25. Quoted by Richard S. Wortman, *The Power of Language and Rhetoric in Russian Political History: Charismatic Words from the 18th to the 21st Centuries* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 75. *Lichnost'* is one of the "charismatic words" which form the subject of Professor Wortman's book.

26. P. I. Novgorodtsev, "Foreword to the Russian Edition," *Problems of Idealism*, 83.

27. Further on these concepts, see my essay, "Slavophilism and the Origins of Russian Religious Philosophy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 133–151.

Everything else has only a relative significance."²⁸ The Russian personalist tradition continued with Boris Chicherin, though he referred to it as "individualism."²⁹ Chicherin always thought of himself as a Hegelian, yet by 1880 he had adopted a liberal, Kantian interpretation of Hegel that stressed the intrinsic, absolute worth of human personhood. He embraced Kant's idealist conception of human nature, which was based on the dual power of reason to posit or recognize ideals and to determine the will according to them. Chicherin directly drew metaphysical conclusions (theism) from this quintessential human capacity for ideal self-determination.³⁰ Rational autonomy or self-determination was also the distinctively human principle in Vladimir Soloviev's tripartite conception of human nature, between the absolute or divine principle and the material principle. Together the human and divine principles form *Bogochelovechestvo* (Godmanhood or divine humanity), Soloviev's central concept. It is the free human realization of the divine principle in ourselves and in the world—the process of *theosis* or deification.³¹ Other currents in Russian religious-philosophical personalism include Lev Lopatin's "concrete spiritualism" and Sergei Trubetskoi's "concrete idealism"—"concrete" designating the personalist focus;³² Nikolai Berdiaev's philosophy of freedom and creativity,³³ Sergei Bulgakov's Trinitarian theology of personhood and personalistic

28. Ivan Kireevsky, "Fragments," in *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, trans. and ed. Robert Bird and Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), 284.

29. B. N. Chicherin, *Filosofia prava* (Moscow: I. N. Kushnerev, 1900), 228. Following Chicherin, Pavel Novgorodtsev also used the term "individualism" in *Problems of Idealism* and in his 1909 book, *Krizis sovremennogo pravosoznaniia* (*The Crisis of Modern Legal Consciousness*). In his chapter in *Problems of Idealism* he referred to the "subtle and penetrating thinker" Charles Renouvier, who within a year published his book, *Le Personalisme*. Novgorodtsev associates him with the "revival of individualism," by which he means the ethical and metaphysical defense of personhood. See P. I. Novgorodtsev, "Ethical Idealism in the Philosophy of Law (On the Question of the Revival of Natural Law)," *Problems of Idealism*, 307. In his book *The New Middle Ages* (1924)—translated into English under the title *The End of Our Time*—Berdiaev made the fundamental personalist distinction between the individual, a biological and sociological concept, and the person, a spiritual and religious concept. See Nicolas Berdiaev, *The End of Our Time*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933), 35, 85–86. Maritain made this very distinction in his book, *Three Reformers*, published in 1925. In it he wrote, famously, "As individuals, we are subject to the stars. As persons, we rule them." See Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 21.

30. For a fuller account see my essay, "The Liberalism of Russian Religious Idealism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, 255–276, esp. 259–263.

31. See Poole, "Vladimir Solov'ev's Philosophical Anthropology: Autonomy, Dignity, and Perfectibility," in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930*, ed. Hamburg and Poole, 131–149.

32. On Lopatin, see my essay, "William James in the Moscow Psychological Society: Pragmatism, Pluralism, Personalism," in *William James in Russian Culture*, ed. Joan Delaney Grossman and Ruth Rischin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 131–158, esp. 138–143. On Trubetskoi, see Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Sergei N. Trubetskoi: An Intellectual Among the Intelligentsia in Prerevolutionary Russia* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976); O. T. Ermishin, *Kniaz' S. N. Trubetskoi: Zhizn' i filosofii* (Moscow: Sinaxis, 2011); and P. P. Gaidenko, *Vladimir Solov'ev i filosofii Serebrianiogo veka* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2001), 121–161.

33. See Ana Siljak, "The Personalism of Nikolai Berdiaev," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, 309–326; and Regula M. Zwahlen, "Different Concepts of Personality: Nikolaj Berdjaev and Sergej Bulgakov," *Studies in East European Thought*, vol. 64 (2012): 183–204.

metaphysics of all-unity;³⁴ Nikolai Lossky's panpsychic "hierarchical personalism";³⁵ Lev Karsavin's "symphonic" idea of the person within his metaphysics of all-unity;³⁶ and Semyon Frank's personalist ontology of "absolute realism"—which will occupy us below.

Neo-Patristic Personalism (John Zizioulas)

Eastern Orthodox theology was an important source of the development of Russian personalism. In the Christian patristic era the concept of the person received powerful new development.³⁷ It figured centrally in the thought of the Greek Church Fathers, in the great Trinitarian and Christological debates. On these historical and dogmatic foundations, twentieth-century Orthodox theology centralized the concept of the person. Orthodox personalism was a main feature of the neo-patristic revival, associated first of all with Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky.³⁸ Before returning to Russian religious-philosophical personalism proper, let me take one prominent example of Orthodox or neo-patristic personalism: John Zizioulas (1931–2023), who was Metropolitan of Pergamon in the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and one of the most influential Orthodox Christian theologians of the past century. His book, *Being as Communion* (1985), helps us to understand the patristic foundations of personalism, including of course Russian personalism.³⁹

34. Some of the seminal texts are from the 1920s, such as *The Tragedy of Philosophy* (1927), written in Crimea before Bulgakov's expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1922, and *Glavy o Troichnosti (Chapters on Trinitarity)* (1928–1930). See Sergii Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (New York: Angelico Press, 2020). On these works, see Joshua Heath, "On Sergii Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*," *Modern Theology* 37/3 (July 2021), 805–823; Heath, "Sergii Bulgakov's Linguistic Trinity," *Modern Theology* 37/4 (October 2021): 888–912; and K. M. Antonov, "Problema lichnosti v myshlenii o. S. Bulgakova i problematika bogoslovskogo personalizma v XX veke," *Rozhdenie personalizma iz dukha Novogo vremeni: Sbornik statei po genealogii bogoslovskogo personalizma v Rossii*, ed. V. N. Boldareva (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2018), 176–185.

35. See James P. Scanlan, "Russian Panpsychism: Kozlov, Lopatin, Losskii," in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930*, ed. Hamburg and Poole, 150–168; and Gaidenko, *Vladimir Solov'ev i filozofia Serebrianogo veka*, 211–241.

36. See Martin Beisswenger, "Eurasianism: Affirming the Person in an 'Era of Faith,'" in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930*, ed. Hamburg and Poole, 363–380.

37. John M. Rist, *What is a Person? Realities, Constructs, Illusions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 22–55.

38. See *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, ed. Andrew Blane (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993). See also Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and my review of this volume in *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook: A Publication of Mediterranean, Slavic, and Eastern Orthodox Studies* (University of Minnesota), vols. 30/31 (2014/2015): 514–517. For a recent edition of some of his works, see *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (London: T&T Clark, 2019). For Lossky's theology of the person, see Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erikson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

39. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985). Subsequent references to this book cited parenthetically in the text. See also Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), a study of Zizioulas and Lossky.

According to Zizioulas, "The person both as concept and as a living reality is purely the product of patristic thought" (27). He had in mind the Greek Fathers in particular: "With a rare creativity worthy of the Greek spirit they gave history the concept of the person with an absoluteness which still moves modern man even though he has fundamentally abandoned their spirit" (35). Before the Church Fathers, the Greek term for person, *prosōpon*, and the Latin term *persona*, meant something very different ("mask" or "role," respectively). In these earlier meanings, "person" designated something superficial that was distinguished from man's essential being, which essential being belonged to a greater whole, for the Greeks the cosmos and for the Romans the state. Zizioulas stresses that in its pre-patristic meanings "person" lacked specific ontological content or depth. Being was above the human individual and bound him in various ways. The individual was a product of this higher ontological necessity. What the Church Fathers accomplished, according to Zizioulas, was to invest the concept of the person with essential being, to "ontologize" it, by identifying it with the term "hypostasis," which already was closely linked with the term "substance" (*ousia*). As a result of this identification, "from an adjunct to a being (a kind of mask) the person becomes the being itself and is simultaneously—a most significant point—the *constitutive element* (the 'principle' or 'cause') of beings" (39).

This transformation in the meaning of "person" was achieved in the course of the theological elaboration of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the final formula of which is "one substance (*ousia*), three persons (*hypostaseis*)."¹ In the West, the formula was understood to mean that the ontological principle of God is the divine substance rather than the person. Zizioulas regards this as a misinterpretation: It is the person of the Father, not the common substance, that is the principle or cause of God's being (40). The "monarchy of the Father," of his personhood, means that God's being is not an ontological necessity issuing from the divine substance but is rather the result of God's free will to exist. God's existence is personal, and therefore it is also free (persons possess free will) and trinitarian (persons exist in community). The divine substance is personal by its very nature: it "never exists in a 'naked' state, that is, without hypostasis, without 'a mode of existence.' ... Outside the Trinity there is no God, that is, no divine substance" (41). Trinitarian theology reveals that the ontological principle of God is not a pre-existing substance but a person, the Father, whose existence is an act of free will and whose love begets the Son and brings forth the Holy Spirit, forming the Trinity or community of persons in which God subsists.

Zizioulas's personalism extends to human persons, of course. Human persons are limited because they are not the free cause of their own existence (as God is); rather they are created. Authentic personhood is uncreated and enjoys "absolute ontological freedom." It is the condition of personhood itself: "If God does not exist, the person does not exist" (43). For Zizioulas, divine personhood is both the ground and goal of human personhood. The goal is "that man might become a person in the sense that God is one, that is, an authentic person" (44). Zizioulas specifies that this is the very content of salvation as theosis. It is the

full realization of our personhood in God, the fulfillment of the hope "that the personal life which is realized in God should also be realized" in us (50).

Just how is the personal life realized in God and how are we to strive to realize it in ourselves? Here too Zizioulas is reasonably clear. He quotes 1 John 4:16, "God is love," and explains that love constitutes God's very being or substance. It is not a qualifying property of being but "*the supreme ontological predicate*" and the basis of God's ontological freedom (it abolishes the ontological necessity of substance). In a striking formulation Zizioulas writes, "Love as God's mode of existence 'hypostasizes' God" (46). It makes his "mode of existence" a personal one, a Trinitarian one. From the love that is God and is his ontological freedom, the Father begets the Son and brings forth the Holy Spirit. In this connection Zizioulas refers to God's ecstatic character, to "the fact that His being is identical with an act of communion" (44). As he otherwise puts it, "*To be and to be in relation* becomes identical" (88). At the human level, it is clear that while love cannot yet (at our level of being) become the freely-willed cause of our very existence (as it is for God), we should strive, through love, to "hypostasize" ourselves ever more deeply and to immortalize ourselves in the process, because "life for the person means the survival of the uniqueness of its hypostasis, which is affirmed and maintained by love" (49).

Russian Religious Personalism: From Soloviev to Frank

In Russia, the patristic heritage described by Zizioulas was recovered by the country's four theological academies, which undertook a massive, multigenerational effort (from approximately 1821 to 1918) to publish the works of Church Fathers in Russian translation, accompanied by extensive scholarly analysis.⁴⁰ Among those featured were the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) and Maximus the Confessor, whose "similitude anthropology" was a profound theology of personhood that emphasized human agency and self-determination in the salvific process.⁴¹ Ivan Kireevsky contributed significantly to this Russian *ressourcement*. He, his wife Natal'ia, the Optina spiritual elder (*starets*) Makarii (Ivanov) (1788–1860), and the Archpriest F. A. Golubinskii (1797–1854), professor of philosophy at the Moscow Theological Academy, all collaborated in translating and publishing the works of Simeon the New Theologian, Maximus the Confessor,

40. Cyprien Kern, *Les traductions russes des textes patristiques: Guide bibliographique* (Paris: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1957). See also Jeremy Pilch, '*Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs*': *Deification in the Work of Vladimir Solov'ev* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 19–21. Further: Patrick Lally Michelson, "*The First and Most Sacred Right*": *Religious Freedom and the Liberation of the Russian Nation, 1825–1905* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2007). See especially the first chapter, "In the Image and Likeness of God: The Patristic Tradition of Human Dignity and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Russia." See also Michelson, "Russian Orthodox Thought in the Church's Clerical Academies," *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, 102–105.

41. See Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996). According to Louth, "For Maximus, what is distinctive to being human is self-determination (*autexousios kinesis*: movement that is within one's own power). ... This self-determination is not, however, absolute: human beings are created in God's image, and it is in their self-determination that they reflect God's image" (60).

Isaac the Syrian, and other Eastern Church Fathers.⁴² Their publication program resulted in sixteen volumes by 1860.

One remarkable result of the Russian recovery of the writings of the Church Fathers was Vladimir Soloviev's concept of *Bogochelovechestvo*, which combined the patristic sources with modern philosophical ones such as Kant and Schelling. His main theological sources were the patristic doctrine of theosis and Chalcedonian Christology, which confirms that the two natures of Christ, divine and human, are united in his person in perfect harmony, without "division or confusion"—Christ being the integral "Godman." Soloviev was "profoundly knowledgeable" of patristics, as has most recently been demonstrated by Jeremy Pilch.⁴³ This knowledge informed his seminal work, *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (completed in 1881),⁴⁴ which deserves to be seen as a powerful theory of personalism.

Recall that according to Soloviev's tripartite conception of human nature, human beings combine in themselves three principles: the absolute or divine principle, the material principle, and (between them) the distinctively human principle (self-determination).⁴⁵ Together the divine and human principles form "divine humanity"; together they are also the source of human personhood, dignity, and rights. (It is highly significant that Soloviev begins *Lectures on Divine Humanity* with an astute critique of the modern effort to ground human dignity and rights in secular humanism.) As the next step in his personalist theory, he posits that every person is absolutely unique with an individual character that reflects "the idea that determines the essential significance of this being in everything" (52). Such ideas are not abstract products of thought but rather metaphysical entities or "foundations of being" (60). The bearer of an idea is a person. Person and idea are correlative as subject and object, and their inner unity is necessary to achieve real, full being (64). Furthermore, "all ideas are inwardly interconnected, equally partaking of the one all-embracing idea of absolute love," which contains everything else within itself as *all-unity* (63). The person bearing the all-one idea of absolute love is God (64). As a result of the Fall, all-unity becomes a project, which is to be realized through divine humanity and "the deification (*theosis*) of all that exists" (137).

Soloviev stipulated that divine humanity was to come about through the "kingdom of ends"—Kant's ideal of a moral community of persons who respect each other as ends-in-themselves, whose highest end is nothing other than the kingdom of God, and who are self-governed by freely and inwardly accepted laws of virtue. Soloviev's social ideal of "free theocracy" is clearly modeled after the kingdom of ends, which is personalistic through-and-

42. Patrick Lally Michelson, *Beyond the Monastery Walls: The Ascetic Revolution in Russian Orthodox Thought, 1814–1914* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 54. See also Jeremy Pilch, 'Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs', 59–61.

43. Pilch, 'Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs', 56.

44. Pilch, 'Breathing the Spirit with Both Lungs', 57–111.

45. Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, trans. Peter Zouboff, revised and edited by Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995), 158. Subsequent page references cited parenthetically in the text.

through.⁴⁶ Whether his metaphysics of all-unity preserved the personalism of its preceding stages is a matter of dispute.⁴⁷ The resolute personalistic development of all-unity belongs to his successors such as Sergei Bulgakov and Semyon Frank. In what follows I shall focus on Frank (1877–1950).

In Zenkovsky's estimation, Frank was the greatest Russian philosopher.⁴⁸ Frank himself gave that distinction to Soloviev, in an influential English collection of Soloviev's writings that he edited at the end of his life.⁴⁹ The metaphysics of all-unity forms the overall framework of *The Unknowable* (1938), widely regarded as his most important work.⁵⁰ In it Frank wrote, "the total-unity of being is a kingdom of spirits" (136). The "kingdom of spirits" is a metaphysical concept. In contrast to the kingdom of ends (free theocracy) in Soloviev's system, it describes all-unity itself. With that deft move, Frank "personalized" his whole system. He himself characterized *The Unknowable* as a work of "personalist ontology."⁵¹ His last major work, *Reality and Man: An Essay in the Metaphysics of Human Nature* (1956), is a more accessible statement, with some revisions and new material.⁵² In these works, Russian religious personalism arguably achieved its highest degree of development.⁵³

Frank is perhaps not the most obvious Russian philosopher to consider with regard to the theme of the influence of Eastern Orthodox theology on the development of Russian personalism. Greek patristic references in his works certainly are no more common than other religious sources, including from traditions other than Christianity. The religious-philosophical tradition with which he most explicitly identified was Neoplatonism; he once called Nicholas of Cusa his only teacher in philosophy (U xi). But in the last two decades of his life he did make fairly frequent references to the patristic doctrine of deification, identifying it with *Bogochelovechestvo*, which concept he embraced as his own. He may well have learned

46. See Randall A. Poole, "Kant and the Kingdom of Ends in Russian Religious Thought (Vladimir Solov'ev)," in *Thinking Orthodox in Modern Russia: Culture, History, Context*, ed. Patrick Lally Michelson and Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 215–234.

47. See Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2: 512.

48. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2: 853, 872.

49. *A Solovyov Anthology*, ed. S. L. Frank, trans. Natalie Duddington (London: SCM Press, 1950). In his introduction to this volume Frank wrote that "Solovyov is unquestionably the greatest of Russian philosophers and systematic religious thinkers" (9).

50. S. L. Frank, *The Unknowable: An Ontological Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Boris Jakim (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1983). Page references cited parenthetically in the text ("U").

51. Philip Boobbyer, *S. L. Frank: The Life and Work of a Russian Philosopher, 1877–1950* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1995), 166.

52. S. L. Frank, *Reality and Man: An Essay in the Metaphysics of Human Nature*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1966). Page references cited parenthetically in the text ("RM").

53. See Evgenii Zinkovskii, *Poniatie lichnosti v antropologii Semena Franka v perspective klassicheskogo opredeleniia "persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia"* (Karaganda: Rimsko-Katolicheskaia Tserkov, "Credo," 2018). See also Peter Ehlen, *Zur Ontologie und Anthropologie Simon L. Franks*, in Simon L. Frank, *Die Realität und der Mensch: Ein Metaphysik des menschlichen Sein* (Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2004). There is a Russian translation: Peter Elen, *Ontologiya i antropologiya S. L. Franka*, trans. A. S. Tsygankova (Moscow: Institut filosofii RAN, 2017).

about it from his personal friend Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882–1957), who wrote a classic account of it, *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs* (1970), originally published in 1932–1933 as a series of articles.⁵⁴ But in the 1940s Frank left no doubt of his Christian universalism. Orthodoxy was one source among many of his religious philosophy.⁵⁵

There is a striking similarity between Frank's personalism and Zizioulas's. Brandon Gallaher points to it in his "Postscriptum" to Fr. Robert Slesinski's book, *The Philosophy of Semyon Frank*.⁵⁶ On the basis of the similarity, Gallaher writes that "Frank is a profoundly Orthodox thinker where Being as Communion, the idea of Godmanhood expressed concretely in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and deification are at the heart of his philosophy of Being."⁵⁷ Of course Zizioulas could not have influenced Frank. On the other hand Zizioulas might very well have read Frank since he worked with Georges Florovsky and studied Russian religious thought (including Berdiaev) apart from émigré theologians such as Vladimir Lossky.⁵⁸

Personhood and Being: Frank's Personalist Ontology

Perhaps the most obvious thing that could be said about Frank's philosophy is that it is based on his conviction that there is far more to reality than the external, natural world that confronts the senses. For him, the empirical, objective world, the world of facts, does not exhaust reality, and "conventional empiricism," as he calls it, is only one way of knowing reality (or rather part of it). He believed that there are other ways of knowing reality and that they disclose more

54. Philip J. Swoboda, "'Spiritual Life' versus Life in Christ: S. L. Frank and the Patristic Doctrine of Deification," *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 242. On her studies of the patristic doctrine of deification and her close relations with Frank, see Teresa Obolevitch, *Myrrha Lot-Borodine: The Woman Face of Orthodox Theology* (St. Paul, MN: IOTA Publications, 2024), 167–187, 219–232.

55. Booboyer, *S. L. Frank*, 193–194.

56. Brandon Gallaher, "Postscriptum," in Robert F. Slesinski, *The Philosophy of Semyon Frank: Human Meaning in the Godhead* (Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2020), 220.

57. Gallaher, "Postscriptum," 225.

58. Specifically with regard to Berdiaev's personalism, he wrote: "Neither does the personalism of a Berdiaev, with his mysticism of a cosmic spiritualism and his gnosiocentric anthropology, bear any relationship to the concept of person I have put forward." See John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*, edited by Fr. Gregory Edwards (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2010), 20–21. However, in his article, "Elder Sophrony's Teaching on the Person in Relationship to Contemporary Theological Currents," he reflects on Berdiaev in a more positive light. Here Zizioulas says: "An attempt to remove the meaning of the person from the narrowness of individualism is made by N. Berdiaev. He distinguishes the individual from the person, emphasizing that the individual is a *quantitative* concept, subject to addition, composition, and use for higher purposes, while the person is a *qualitative* notion, which cannot be the means to any end. This is an important step towards an Orthodox personalism. [...] It is the first step of personalism in the direction of love. However, even this thinker, profoundly influenced by German idealism, does not fully liberate the person from the dominion of cogitation." Zizioulas's article appeared in the following conference volume: ΓΕΡΟΝΤΑΣ ΣΩΦΡΟΝΙΟΣ, Ο ΘΕΟΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΚΤΙΣΤΟΥ ΦΩΤΟΣ ΠΡΑΚΤΙΚΑ ΔΙΟΡΘΟΔΟΕΥΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΟΝΙΚΟΥ ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟΥ (Athens, 19–21 October 2007). I am grateful to Dr. Raul-Ovidiu Bodea for the information and references in this note and for his translation of the above passage (from a Romanian edition of the Greek volume). In 2024 Bodea completed his doctoral studies in theology at KU Leuven, Belgium, defending his thesis, *Existentialism as a Methodological Paradigm for Orthodox Theology: Nikolai Berdyaev and John Zizioulas*.

of it, not just its surface layer but reality as whole, reality as such, in its (spiritual) depths. These ways come from inner experience. Frank's essential claim is that reality reveals itself in our inner experience *as persons*, which is (or can be) reliable and truthful in its testimony. In *Reality and Man*, he writes, "A philosophy adequate to the task of obtaining true knowledge of reality is therefore always based upon living inner experience, in some sense akin to the experience that is called 'mystical'" (17). His approach can be traced to St. Augustine, to whom Frank ascribes fundamental importance and whose words he commends, "Go not outward but inward; the truth is within man" (U 198). Reality is revealed in various types of inner experience, including the basic intuition of being ("immediate self-being" or "I am"), the experience of communion (the "I-thou" relation), aesthetic experience, moral experience, metaphysical experience, and religious experience.

In a more fundamental way, our inner experience is truthful to reality because human beings as persons share a basic ontological affinity with the spiritual core of reality. Persons are spiritual beings: according to Frank, human beings are persons because they are capable of "spiritual life," through which they seek to ground themselves in spiritual being (RM 173–74). Because persons co-belong to spiritual being and are permeated by it, their inner experience can express its truth. Personhood or personal being, Frank writes, "belongs to the inmost core of reality and must be recognized as its centre and primary source" (RM 104). This is what is meant by "personalist ontology": being consists in personhood and in communion among persons, and it reveals itself to persons.

Frank calls the reality that reveals itself in our inner experience "the unknowable." The term is not unproblematic, since his view is that inner experience does convey knowledge of reality. For example, the second chapter of *Reality and Man* bears the title, "Reality and Knowledge of It." Only its external aspects can be known rationally, scientifically, theoretically, logically. In the external, phenomenal realm, being is objectified and therefore subject to objective knowledge. The deeper layers of reality are noumenal. (Frank does not explicitly use this Kantian distinction, but it expresses his thought perfectly well. He does use Rudolf Otto's term "numinous.") These layers evade rational thought but can be experienced from within. In this realm, Frank says, we are dealing with experiential consciousness, not cognitive or theoretical consciousness (U xx). He refers to the "metalogical" and "transrational" nature of being. Being is "concrete" and cannot be captured by the abstract concepts of rational thought. A similar contrast was made before him by many Russian religious philosophers, beginning with Kireevsky and Khomiakov. They criticized post-Kantian German idealism for reducing being to consciousness, and contrasted it to their own "concrete idealism," which they extolled for its distinctive "ontologism." Frank dislikes the term "idealism" because of its phenomenalist and rationalistic associations, but his philosophy, in its reliance on inner experience and tracing its origins to Plotinus, St. Augustine, and Nicholas of Cusa, is a type of ontological idealism. He called it "absolute realism" to emphasize the primacy of being over thought or consciousness (U 66).

There are other reasons why Frank thinks that reality is "unknowable," all relating to its nature as all-unity. What follows is one of his lucid descriptions of the concept: All-unity as a true unity is

the unity of unity *and* diversity: a unity which not only embraces all its own parts and points but also inwardly permeates them in such a way that it is also contained as a *whole* in each part and point. Thus, each point of being, though it has all else outside of itself, nonetheless in its place and in its way is the whole itself, total unity itself. Being something singular *together* with all else, all existents are constituted by their *separateness*. But having all in themselves and also being connected to all else, all existents have *all* immanently in this double sense: in themselves and for themselves. All existents are permeated by all and permeate all (U 114).

The *unity of separateness and of mutual penetration* is an essential concept for Frank; it fundamentally informs his personalist ontology, as we will have several occasions to see. Defying rational or logical explanation, it is one good reason why Frank describes reality as "unknowable." Another is that reality is an absolutely indivisible whole, which means we cannot conceptually grasp it; its parts are analytically separable only at the expense of the whole. Reality is a "metalogical unity"; it is "something *greater and other* than all we can know about it" (U 33).

Together with the wholeness of all-unity, Frank stresses that everything in it is singular and unique (individuality). What is singular and individual "forms the genuine essence of being in its concreteness," but is ungraspable in general concepts and "is thus a clear index of the unknowable in the essence of reality" (U 35, 36). Another such index is that reality is not finished. Frank describes being as potentiality, existent potency." Being as a whole is not frozen and static; *it is not what it already is*. On the contrary, it is *plastic*: it not only is, it is becoming; it is in the process of self-creation. It is growing, changing, being formed" (U 47). From the last sentence in particular it will come as no surprise that Frank refers to true reality as "life," in this respect (but not in others) following Tolstoy (RM 76 ff.). Finally, reality is unknowable because it, in the supreme form of absolute mind, the *ens realissimum*, or the "primordial ground," is the very condition of truth: "*We* cannot speak of ultimate truth and express it in our concepts, but this is only because ultimate truth *itself* speaks, wordlessly, for itself and of itself, expresses and reveals itself. And we have neither the right nor the possibility to fully express through our thinking this self-revelation of ultimate truth. We must be silent before the magnificence of truth itself" (U 96).

The highest expression of individuality in all-unity is the person. Persons are the culmination of the mysterious and unknowable unity of separateness and of mutual penetration that characterizes all-unity as a whole. They "are a kind of *miracle* that surpasses our understanding" because, through their free will, they are able to combine in themselves

the transcendent and immanent that forms their spiritual center and being (U 177). Frank writes:

The mystery of the human person as an individuality ... consists precisely in the fact that what is *universally valid* is expressed in the deepest *singularity* that defines the essence of the person. This universal validity is the all-embracing infinitude of transcendent spiritual being ... so that precisely this uniqueness, this singularity, is the form that is permeated by the transcendent that is common to all people (U178).

Indeed only persons, with their uniqueness and absolute singularity, can express the infinite and universal with maximal adequacy. "The essence of total unity as spirit, as the reality of intrinsically valuable and intrinsically valid being, acquires ultimate *definiteness* only in concrete individuality, in contrast to the definiteness of objective being [the external world], which is always abstract and general" (U 178).

Frank embraced the mystery of personhood and of being with his approach of "wise, knowing ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*). This approach, which is similar to apophatic or negative theology, reveals the unity of separation and of undivided wholeness (or mutual penetration). Such unity is an "antinomian monodualism" in which two opposites (logically separate according to the law of mutual negation) are inwardly united and mutually permeating, the result being: "the one is *not* the other but it also *is* the other; and only with, in, and through the other is it what it genuinely is in its ultimate depth and fullness" (U 97). This antinomian monodualism, Frank writes, can be understood as a triadism or trinity (with the third element being the unity or synthesis of the two opposites). He adds: "This contains the most profound and general reason why human thought constantly arrives—in its most diverse religious and philosophical expressions—at the idea of trinity as the expression of the ultimate mystery of being" (U 98). He may well have had in mind the patristic concept of *perichoresis*, used to describe the communion or interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity and, on occasion, the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ.

The Kingdom of Spirits

For all Frank's strictures against the (rational) knowableness of reality, *The Unknowable and Reality and Man* remain works of fundamental ontology and philosophical anthropology, offering a positive, powerful vision of being and personhood—of the "kingdom of spirits." We know Frank believed that reality reveals itself in the inner experience of persons. His point of entry is self-consciousness, in which we first encounter reality as such, rather than in its external, closed form as objective being. We encounter inner being, self-revealing reality, which Frank calls "immediate self-being": being revealing itself to itself (and to us, who are co-participants) as being (U, ch. 5). We experience it in the recognition, "I am," through which

we are also aware of being itself, in our simultaneous recognition, "it is" (or the world is). According to Frank, "*Immediate self-being is the am-form (Bin-form) of being*" (U 108). It is the first condition of all-unity, since only self-transparent being can bring external material being (opaque to itself) into unity with itself (at least ideally).

Immediate self-being is not simply another term for our self-consciousness or even for the "transcendental unity of apperception" (though it is closer to that); it is rather the source of them. Frank defines it as one of various modal forms of being, "different means or degrees of the self-revelation and self-realization of being" (U 110). It is a mode of absolute reality (or simply the absolute), which is clearest in one of its aspects, immediate self-identical being. But it has another, opposing aspect, selfhood, in which it is not self-identical with the absolute. "Here we have our first concrete example of antinomian monodualism," Frank notes (U 110). Immediate self-being is a dual-unity of being as pure immediacy (self-identical with the absolute) and selfhood (at some remove from it). Interestingly, Frank says this dual-unity is most clearly expressed in the Upanishads, "in which Brahman, the absolute, is identified with Atman, the deepest ground of the soul" (U 111). Indeed this is a powerful (and ecumenical) image of his conception of personhood striving to ground itself in spiritual being. Until such grounding is achieved selfhood is prone to subjectivity (spurious self-grounding instead of self-transcending), as Frank also indicates.

In the course of his analysis of immediate self-being in its dual-unity as pure immediacy and selfhood, Frank introduces for the first time his concept of the kingdom of spirits. The kingdom is all-unity (pure immediacy of being), realized in a multitude of separate particular selves (U 114–115). Frank's designation of them as spirits indicates their trajectory from selfhood to fully realized personhood as they increasingly transcend themselves, ground themselves in spiritual being, and ultimately achieve deification or union with God. He devotes much of *The Unknowable* and *Reality and Man* to this process. Immediate self-being, especially in its aspect of selfhood, is the pivotal point in the process because its nature is to transcend itself. It is "being in the form of becoming, potency, striving, and realization" (U 115). The self's capacity for transcendence is rooted in freedom. In *The Unknowable* Frank writes of the "higher freedom which emanates from our selfhood" and which can direct it beyond itself, toward others and toward spiritual being (116). In *Reality and Man* he calls this higher freedom "self-determination" (167). In both books, he shows that self-transcendence can be directed outward or inward. Outward transcending is oriented toward other selves in the form of the "I-thou" relation. Inward transcending is oriented toward spiritual being and beyond that to the "primordial ground" (holiness or divinity) (U 112–123). He deals most explicitly with the nature of personhood when he discusses inward transcending, but of course it is also relevant to the "I-thou" relation.

Frank writes eloquently about the mysterious process by which another being reveals himself to me as "thou," by which I recognize him as "thou," and by which I myself, in this encounter, first fully recognize myself as "I." For Frank this process of mutual recognition is

miraculous. According to him, "the 'I-thou' relation is a 'communion,'" in the sense of *the mutual penetration of the separate* (U 142). It is genuine inner unity, a dual-unity, represented by the concept of "we," which Frank calls "a wholly special, miraculous mode or form of being" (U 149). It reveals the inner structure of reality as such, "the real, inner, existent-for-itself mutual interwovenness and mutual permeatedness of the 'one' and the 'other.'" Indeed, "we can say that *in the 'I-thou' relation genuine concrete total unity in its transrational, unknowable essence is revealed for the first time precisely as living being.*" This leads Frank to a striking conclusion: "*Being is the kingdom of spirits, and the kingdom of spirits consists precisely in the fact that the one always exists for the other, that, transcending itself, the one affirms itself only by abandoning itself for the other*" (U 144). In *Reality and Man*, Frank has a chapter section titled, "Reality in the Experience of Communion." There he writes: "In communion or actual apprehension of another person not through the cognitive gaze but through vital contact, we come into touch with the mysterious depths of living reality, no longer merely in our inner life, but outside us" (62). In these mysterious depths, we find the "inner mutual interpenetrability of the kingdom of spirits," in which every "I" and "thou" are in perfect communion in the all-unity of "we" (66–67). This vision of perfect communion was inspired by the concept of sobornost' and, most fundamentally, by the Christian Trinity.

Members of the kingdom of spirits also pursue self-transcendence inwardly, grounding themselves in spiritual being. The concept of the ground is important for Frank; according to him, subjectivity and potentiality are defining qualities of selfhood, which therefore requires a ground in the objectivity and actuality of spiritual being, and beyond that in the "primordial ground" (holiness, divinity, ultimately the absolute). We become increasingly aware of the ground in moral, metaphysical, and religious experience, which together form what Frank calls "spiritual life." Through free will (self-determination) we are capable of inward transcendence toward the ground. Like many Russian (ontological) idealists of his time, Frank thought that the ideals of spiritual life (truth, the good, beauty)—by which the will is self-determining—entailed a transcendent ground, in which intrinsic value and being are one. In particular he linked the ideal of truth, the very concept of truth, with the primordial ground of reality.

The capacity for self-transcendence is the basis of Frank's conception of personhood. This capacity enables man "to separate himself from himself" and to arrive at a "higher, spiritual I." Here is Frank's definition: "*It is this higher, spiritual selfhood which constitutes what we call the person. The person is selfhood as it stands before higher, spiritual, objectively valid forces and is permeated by and represents these forces*" (U 174). From his overall account in *The Unknowable* and *Reality and Man*, it is clear that he defines personhood more generally as the process of inward self-transcendence, of self-determination by the ideals of spiritual life, and of grounding in spiritual being. In a succinct statement of it: "The 'person' is the mode of man's being in its necessary transcending inward, into the depths, into the deep layer of reality that surpasses man's being" (U 239). It is worth noting that in *Reality and Man*, he

simply uses Kant's formulation: Autonomy or self-determination constitutes man as a person (157). (True, he makes clear that autonomy is actually theonomy.) *The Unknowable* includes a chapter section, "The Mystery of the Person." In it Frank writes that "man as a person is always and essentially something *greater and other* than all we can perceive in him as a finished determination constituting his being. That is to say, he is a kind of infinitude, so that he has an inner bond to the infinitude of the *spiritual kingdom*" (176).

"The Argument from Personhood." Godmanhood and Christian Humanism

The last three chapters of *The Unknowable* and three of the last four chapters of *Reality and Man* are devoted to the reality of God and to his relation with man and the world, as revealed in our metaphysical and religious experience. Having established the reality of personhood, Frank now turns more directly to the grounds for the reality of God. In his last book he wrote, "The only completely adequate 'proof of the existence of God' is the existence of the human person taken in all its depth and significance as an entity that transcends itself" (RM 104). This type of "argument from personhood," which he also made in *The Unknowable* (200), was utterly convincing to Frank: "If the human being is aware of himself as a person, i.e., as a being generically distinct from all external objective existence and transcending it in depth, primacy and significance, if he feels like an exile having no true home in this world—that means that he *has* a home in another sphere of being," the sphere, that is, of ultimate reality. "The apprehension of the reality of God is, thus, immanently given in the apprehension of my own being as a person" (RM 104, 106).⁵⁹

On the basis of his argument from personhood, Frank embraced Soloviev's idea of Godmanhood, giving it much more attention in *Reality and Man* than in *The Unknowable*. It is not just that in ourselves as persons we recognize the reality of God, but that the divine is immanently present in us in some form (Soloviev speaks of a divine principle). Naturally Frank thinks that the inner unity of God and man (Godmanhood) can only be apprehended as the mutual penetration of separate elements, through antinomian monodualism (U 245, 257). The Chalcedonian dogma of the divine and human natures ("without division or confusion") properly applies, Frank acknowledges, to Christ, but, he asks, "does this imply that there can be *no other form* of combining these two principles in the human person?" And his view is that "something 'divinely-human' is inherent in man's being as such" (RM 140). This is the theological foundation of Christian humanism, which, Frank notes, found its highest philosophical expression in Nicholas of Cusa (RM 124). *Reality and Man* includes an account

59. Soloviev pioneered this type of "argument from personhood." In *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, it took the specific form of a Kantian "argument from human perfectibility." He wrote that the human capacity for "infinite development" presupposes an ultimate end toward which it is directed, which he called the positive absolute of all-unity or perfect "fullness of being." Infinite human striving toward the absolute ideal convinced Soloviev of the ontological reality of the absolute. He formulated this in striking terms: "Thus, belief in oneself, belief in the human person, is at the same time belief in God." See Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 17, 23.

of Christian humanism and its historical fate, something new compared to *The Unknowable*. We have seen that Frank admired St. Augustine in certain respects, but he recognized that his emphasis on human depravity was at odds with Christian humanism. Ever seeking the coincidence of opposites, he suggests that the true approach to understanding divine grace and human freedom, and more generally the relation between God and man, can be found in a synthesis of Augustinianism and Pelagianism. He says that St. Thomas Aquinas expressed such a synthesis in simple words: "We must pray as though everything depended upon God; we must act as though everything depended upon ourselves."⁶⁰

Frank and Human Rights

In the introduction I noted that personalism, a new form of Christian humanism, has been rediscovered because of its role in the intellectual history of human rights in the twentieth century.⁶¹ How does Frank fit into this history? He was committed to human rights from his early years as a Russian liberal. This commitment owed much to his close collaboration and friendship with Peter Struve, whom he joined in leading the Russian Liberation Movement that would culminate in the Revolution of 1905. In January 1906 Frank prepared a draft "Constituent Law on the Eternal and Inalienable Rights of Russian Citizens," a type of declaration of rights for the then hoped-for constitutional monarchy.⁶² The experience of the Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Civil War confirmed his skepticism of any theory of human rights based on a materialistic rather than spiritual conception of human nature. He was convinced that a secular humanistic grounding of human rights was untenable; the foundation had to be "religious humanism," as he put it as early as 1909, in his famous essay in *Vekhi*.⁶³

Frank's first major work of social philosophy, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, was published in 1930, just before the interwar elaboration of personalism and its theory of human rights by Berdiaev and Maritain. In this work his approach to human rights is reserved, because he associates them with the modern democratic idea of "the sovereignty of individual and collective human will."⁶⁴ But true human life, he counters, consists not in the self-assertion of the will, but rather in a principle he calls *service*: service to truth and to the realization of God's will (126–127). As a spiritual being, man "realizes his freedom, his self-

60. These words have also been attributed to St. Ignatius Loyola.

61. See also Ana Siljak, "A New Christian Humanism: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain," in Bernard Hubert, *An Exceptional Dialogue, 1925–1948: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain*, edited in English and with an introduction by Ana Siljak, trans. C. Jon Delogu (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025), 3–36.

62. Gennadii Aliaiev, "The Concept of Democracy in Simon Frank's Philosophy of Liberal Conservatism," *Studia z Historii Filozofii*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2023): 97–119, here 103.

63. S. L. Frank, "The Ethic of Nihilism: A Characterization of the Russian Intelligentsia's Moral Outlook," *Vekhi/Landmarks: A Collection of Articles about the Russian Intelligentsia*, ed. and trans. Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 155.

64. S. L. Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society: An Introduction to Social Philosophy*, trans. Boris Jakim (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987), 127. Subsequent pages references cited parenthetically in the text.

determination, only insofar as he serves the higher, Divine *truth*" (128). Human rights must be grounded not in "the will of people" but in the one "innate" right to serve the divine truth and God's will (129). "The supreme principle of *service* determines the entire structure of rights and obligations that make up the social order," Frank writes (129). He was highly critical of the spiritually ungrounded "liberal" conception of human rights (130). For him, human rights are not absolute in themselves; their value comes from service to the Absolute. At the same time, he did recognize freedom of conscience and religious belief as "a kind of genuinely primordial right," since it is the condition of the recognition of absolute values and of authentic service to them (138).

Ten years later, in 1940, as Maritain was realizing that personalism provided a powerful theory of human rights, Frank began working on a new book, published later in 1949 as *The Light Shineth in Darkness*.⁶⁵ In it he offers a more positive assessment of human rights than in its 1930 predecessor. First he diagnoses the "crisis of humanism" in a way that is very similar to Berdiaev's classic account in *The New Middle Ages*: modern humanism is anti-religious and thus also anti-human, since without a spiritual element there is no distinctive concept of the human; what is left is "bestialism," as Nietzsche makes clear (21–28, 26).⁶⁶ The "good news" is that Christianity revealed Godmanhood (Frank's Solovievian framework is obvious), the divine-human ground of human existence, and we moderns can recover that ground (64). Christianity was, for Frank, the greatest spiritual revolution in history because with it human beings discovered their personhood and their dignity, or at least acquired a "wholly new consciousness" of them that surpassed earlier presentiments (65). Though he does not use the term here, he contends that "personalism" came with Christianity and consists in the recognition that human beings are persons, invested with absolute dignity, because they are rooted in divine-human being. Next he makes the same connection among Godmanhood, theosis, and human rights that Soloviev made before him: "All the 'eternal rights of man' that were proclaimed later originate from the 'powers' granted by Christ to people, from the 'power to become sons of God' (John 1:12)" (65–66). This power, the power of human self-determination according to the image and likeness of God, is the true essence of humanism and it is more than a claim or "right" of man. "It is the holy obligation of man to defend his dignity, to remain true to his high origin" (66).

In *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, Frank's position on human rights has evolved to such an extent that they (together with natural law) now constitute his criteria for a rational and just social order. He defines justice according to the principle of *suum cuique* (to each his own), which entails that society should guarantee everyone's "natural rights," i.e., "those needs and claims of the individual which emanate from his nature as the creatural bearer of God's

65. S. L. Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness: An Essay in Christian Ethics and Social Philosophy*, trans. Boris Jakim (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1989). Pages references cited parenthetically in the text.

66. Berdiaev defines the theme of modern history in the following words: "It is an unfolding of ideas and events wherein we see Humanism destroying itself by its own dialectic, for the putting up of man without God and against God, the denial of the divine image and likeness in himself, lead to his own negation and destruction," See Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, 29 (italics removed).

image" (172). Such rights are both individual and social: they protect individual freedom but at the same time must be compatible with the existence of society, since the latter is the very condition of human progress or the development of the higher intellectual and spiritual potential of persons. The task is to establish "maximal equilibrium and harmony" between the individual and society, between freedom and solidarity. If Frank gave more weight to social solidarity than does "liberal individualism," it was because he recognized (again explicitly following Soloviev) that society is necessary for whatever degree of human progress is possible given human sinfulness.⁶⁷ He used the term "Christian realism" to describe his mature social philosophy and made clear that it was firmly oriented toward his personalist ontology of the "kingdom of spirits" (173).⁶⁸

Personalism is one of the great philosophical movements of the past two centuries. If persons are not reducible to or explicable by naturalistic processes, if their distinctive capabilities refute naturalism, then personhood must be woven into the deepest layers of reality. The theistic metaphysical implications of personhood were central, as we have seen, to Russian and to Russo-French personalism. While Frank is not as closely identified with Russo-French personalism as Berdiaev and Maritain, his philosophy of "absolute realism" is quite similar to Maritain's Thomistic realist personalism. I do not know if the two philosophers ever met,⁶⁹ but there is a beautiful passage in Maritain's *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* that captures their shared spiritual wisdom: "The worth of the person, his liberty, his rights arise from the order of naturally sacred things which bear upon them the imprint of the Father of Being and which have in him the goal of their movement. A person possesses absolute dignity because he is in direct relationship with the Absolute, in which alone he can find his complete fulfillment." In short, "the person is a spiritual whole made for the Absolute."⁷⁰

67. At the end of this chapter section (for its title see the next footnote) of his book, Frank writes: "Vladimir Solovyov says that the task of the state can never be to establish heaven on earth; it has another task, not less essential: *to prevent the appearance of hell on earth*" (180). Frank does not provide a citation, but he is clearly paraphrasing *The Justification of the Good*: "The purpose of legal justice is not to transform the world which lies in evil into the Kingdom of God, but only to prevent it from changing *too soon* into hell" (324).

68. The title of section 5 (pp. 171–181) of the book's fifth chapter is: "The General Character and Fundamental Content of 'Natural Law.' The Meaning of Christian Realism." See also Philip Boobbyer, "A Russian Version of Christian Realism: Spiritual Wisdom and Politics in the Thought of S. L. Frank (1877–1950)," *The International History Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2016): 45–65.

69. In a March 1938 letter to Maritain, Berdiaev makes clear that they had spoken of Frank but in a way that suggests Frank and Maritain had not met. The letter indicates that Frank was hoping Maritain might write a letter of recommendation to support his application for a French research stipend; Berdiaev was conveying the request to Maritain. See Hubert, *An Exceptional Dialogue, 1925–1948: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain*, 209–210. In January 1940 Maritain left France for North America, which means that if he and Frank met, presumably it was in the period between March 1938 and January 1940. In *Reality and Man* (193), Frank refers to Maritain's *Réflexions sur l'intelligence et sur sa vocation propre* (1924).

70. Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, in Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy. The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. D. C. Anson, intro. D. A. Gallagher (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2011), 67, 112.

RANDALL A. POOLE



Randall A. Poole is Professor of Intellectual History at the College of St. Scholastica, a senior fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University School of Law, and co-director of the Northwestern University Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought. He is the translator and editor of *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy* (2003) and co-editor of five other volumes: *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (2010, 2013), *Religious Freedom in Modern Russia* (2018), *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (2020), *Evgenii Trubetskoi: Icon and Philosophy* (2021), and *Law and the Christian Tradition in Modern Russia* (2022). He is also the author of many articles and book chapters on Russian intellectual history, philosophy, and religion.