NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

STUDIES IN RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE, AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Volume 2 (2025)

ISSN 3065-0755

Northwestern
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Volume 2 (2025): 5–6
10.71521/xhzn-n102

About the Current Volume of the Journal

In early November 2024 the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida and the Northwestern University Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought convened a conference, *Religion, Human Dignity, and Human Rights: New Paradigms for Russia and the West*. The conference featured thirty-four papers, ten of which (in revised form) are published here, in the second volume of *Northwestern University Studies in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought*.

Few topics in the humanities and social sciences attract as much attention, and generate as much debate, as the history and theory of human rights. The two basic, different approaches to this topic might be broadly characterized as secular humanism and religious humanism. The first sees human rights as the product of the Western Enlightenment and French Revolution. It holds that dominant strains of Christianity (in particular Augustinianism) debase and degrade the human relative to the divine, that religious institutions are prone to the abuse of power, and that human rights arose in early modern Europe against the absolutist alliance of church and state and against the religious wars of the era. By contrast, the religious genealogy of human rights recognizes that there is a deep humanistic strain in Christianity that emphasizes human dignity rather than depravity and affirms the possibility of human progress (through reason and conscience) toward salvation or union with the divine (*theosis*). The religious genealogy locates the origins of human rights in this "participatory" type of theological anthropology (human beings participate in and work toward salvation, theosis being a divine-human project), as well as in the multiple Christian contributions to the idea, practice, and institutions of the rule of law (cannon law, conciliarism, natural law, later medieval and early modern natural-rights theory) and in the struggle for religious freedom and freedom of conscience in early modern Europe and colonial North America.

As paradoxical as it might seem, Russia has a powerful intellectual tradition (or counter-tradition) defending human personhood and its dignity and rights. Part of this rich tradition belongs to secular humanism, but arguably the more impressive part belongs to religious humanism. Beginning with the two greatest philosophers of nineteenth-century Russia, Boris Chicherin (1828–1904) and Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), Russian religious humanists elaborated an idealist conception of human nature, according to which human beings are persons by virtue of reason's remarkable dual power: first, to recognize or posit absolute ideals (e.g., truth, the good, and beauty), and, second, to determine the will according to such ideals. These thinkers identified this capacity for *ideal self-determination* as the core of personhood and as the source of human dignity and human rights. They also believed that it defeated naturalism—the absolute

ideals of reason invalidated positivism, while free will refuted physical determinism—and thus entailed a theistic metaphysics. Precisely this belief is what made them *religious idealists*.

In 1922 Lenin deported most of Russia's prominent religious idealists, together with scores of other non-Marxist intellectuals. Among those exiled were Nicolas Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Semyon Frank, and Ivan Ilyin. These four Russian religious philosophers—and theorists of human personhood, dignity, and rights—are featured in the pages that follow, in the articles by Ana Siljak (who also considers Lev Shestov), Matthew Lee Miller, Daniel Adam Lightsey, Annette G. Aubert, Nathaniel Wood, and Paul Robinson. (Lightsey and Robinson highlight the importance of the capacity for ideal self-determination in their subjects' understanding of human nature.) Religious humanism attracted not only prominent Russian Orthodox philosophers, but also—as J. Eugene Clay shows in his article—Russian Christian minority thinkers such as a Aleksandr Prokhanov, a Spiritual Christian Molokan and fervent defender of freedom of conscience in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Alexander J. McConnell takes us to the late Soviet period, in his consideration of the different types of humanistic discourse in use at the time. Interestingly, he demonstrates that, compared to secular dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov, Christian dissidents engaged more directly with the concept of humanism, were more attentive to its different meanings, and were more likely to identify positively with it—though some, like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, firmly rejected it. Megan Brand adds a needed internationalist dimension to our collection with her article on the Dutch Christian humanist and jurist, Hugo Grotius, hailed as the father of international law. She makes a strong case for the continuing relevance of his theories of natural law and international order. John Witte, Jr., concludes the volume with his reflections about what the "ontological differences" between Orthodox Christianity and Western churches (and societies) might teach us—each other—about universal human rights and ecumenism.

Randall A. Poole
College of St. Scholastica
Co-Director and Editor

We welcome letters to the editors about any of the articles published in this volume. Please address them to Susan McReynolds (s-mcreynolds@northwestern.edu) and Randall Poole (rpoole@css.edu).