The Quest for Novel Philosophy of Freedom in the Thought of Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky

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This study attempts to examine novel approaches to the subject of divine and human freedom by certain eminent Russian thinkers of the diaspora. In the first place, a brief survey of the evolution of the notion of freedom in modernity tries to show that its very conceptualization, as well as its relation to nature, changed in relation to the Patristic era. The Russians of the diaspora experienced extreme consequences of the 'programme of modernity', such as the Bolshevik revolution that led to their exile, but also the crises of the societies in which they found refuge. They were thus put into conditions that demanded novel historical reflection in a quest to find their own particular voice that would offer an alternative to the different versions of the programme of modernity. An Orthodox notion of freedom that would be different from both socialist collectivism and liberal capitalism, without however glorifying the medieval past, was urgent. In this paper we shall observe the experimentation of Nikolai Berdyaev with the notion of the *Ungrund* and of Georges Florovsky with that of the *podvig*, as well as the very original use of the Patristic term *hyperousion* by Vladimir Lossky. We shall also examine the notion of freedom in relation to creative artistic genius, to mystical transcendence, and to historical contingency.

Introduction: The modern evolution in the notion of freedom

What is important in the thought of the Russians of the diaspora is that they tried to respond to novel questions which did not exist as such in the Byzantine and Patristic era. From the fall of Constantinople until the end of the nineteenth century, many philosophical, but also scientific, technological, economical and civilizational changes occurred. The leading Russian theologians of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century did not just try to recover a medieval tradition. Their endeavour was to encounter the actual problems of modernity and then indulge in tradition as a possible way out of modern impasses.

Among the particular philosophical and other changes that occurred especially in the West from the end of Byzantium until the nineteenth century, one can briefly mention the following in relation to the evolution of the notion of freedom:[1]

[1] For this brief sketch, I am inspired mainly by the following works: Panagiotis Kondylis, *Η Κριτική της Μεταφυσικής στη Νεότερη Σκέψη: Από τον όψιμο Μεσαίωνα ως το τέλος του Διαφωτισμού* (Αθήνα:

i) The rise of nominalism, voluntarism, and mechanistic determinism, which correspondingly replace realism, intellectualism, and teleology. Nominalism was already a current inside Western scholastic philosophy. Especially after Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, there was a reversal of priorities. The individual is regarded as the primary ontological datum instead of the general substance. What is more, this evolution is gradually linked with casting doubt on the traditional Aristotelian teleology, which tends to regard nature in its universality as a bearer of inherent goals. Concomitantly, the emphasis is put not on the power of intellection to detect and contemplate these goals, thus leading to their subsequent realization, but on the power of the individual's will independently of any preconceived goals. In the sciences, there is from the sixteenth century onwards a new epistemology in which physics are linked to mathematics in a convincing way, thus neglecting the study of the teleological qualities of nature which help the latter achieve particular goals. Gradually, induction is considered more important than deduction, whereas in the English-speaking world, empiricism replaces the contemplation of general ideas. From the seventeenth century onwards, nature is conceived as a machine rather than as a receptacle of divine ideas that inform it in order to progress in the realization of finalities contemplated by the human intellect. These three movements, namely nominalism, voluntarism, and mechanistic determinism go hand in hand in the replacement of realism, intellectualism, and teleology. Nominalism concerns the ontological question, voluntarism the ethical one, and mechanistic determinism the view of nature. All three are deeply connected with epistemology. The combined result is a new modern worldview in which it is considered more significant to study particular individuals and their often-arbitrary wills, rather than universal essences and their inherent finalities. What is important for our subject is that in this modern worldview, nature is no longer regarded as a bearer of goals but as a field of blind necessity. It is interesting that two of the most important founders of philosophical modernity, namely René Descartes (1596–1650) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), acknowledged this deterministic view of nature as necessity, but they tried to find space for the experience of God and ethical values elsewhere, for example in a transcendental sphere or horizon that is totally different from the understanding of nature through science.

In the Byzantine Patristic era, there was no one-sided prevalence of realism, intellectualism and teleology. On the contrary, different views were articulated and a quest for the right balance between the different elements of human will and intellection were sought. At the same time, it is true that Byzantium did not know the radical prevalence of nominalism, voluntarism, and mechanistic determinism that

Γνώση, 1983); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Marios Begzos, *Νεοελληνική Φιλοσοφία της Θρησκείας* (Αθήνα: Ελληνικά Γράμματα,1998); Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Η κλειστή πνευματικότητα και το νόημα του εαυτού: Ο μυστικισμός της ισχύος και η αλήθεια φύσεως και προσώπου* (Αθήνα: Ελληνικά Γράμματα,1999)

one finds in early modernity. For the Byzantine Fathers, nature was not a machine governed by the laws of mathematized physics, but a work of the divine *energeia*, accompanied by *logoi* that express the divine will about its future. Virtue was seen as an unfolding of potentialities inherent in nature that help the latter reach the realization of goals. In this view, even the post-lapsarian state of the fallen nature did not prevent the wise man from observing the finalities of the *logoi* of nature. Sinful passions were not seen as natural instincts, but as tendencies toward non-being that only subsist due to their parasitic indwelling in the forces of nature that are in themselves good. Therefore, on the one hand, modernity was a revolution against the absolutization of realism, intellectualism, and teleology that happened particularly in the West and not in the East, which sought for a right balance. On the other hand, the modern absolutization of nominalism, voluntarism, and mechanistic determinism led to a worldview that was radically different than that of the Eastern Fathers. In what concerns our topic, this change meant that in modernity nature was rather conceived as necessity, since it is known through mathematized physics, whereas freedom, if it existed at all, was usually viewed as liberation from this deterministic nature, which was accessible only to some transcendental element in man. It is to be noted that nominalistic individualism was in tune with the new Protestant emphasis on the individual. The Enlightenment only radicalized this emphasis on the independence of the individual.

ii) Romanticism and German idealism. In the nineteenth century, following the Kantian synthesis, the philosophical current of German idealism tried to achieve a more global integration of different elements, such as freedom and necessity, spirit and nature, intellect and will. This effort to overcome one-sidedness through a higher integration culminates in the dialectical thought of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). The demand of German Idealism and of the general cultural movement of Romanticism is one of right balance and integration of different elements. As such it could be seen as a recovering of the spirit of the Middle Ages before the modern restriction of humanity to individualism and scientism. Nevertheless, in German idealism differences are integrated *precisely as conflictual*. Hence, nature continued to be viewed as necessity, though one that can be sublated in the sphere of freedom.

iii) At the financial and technological level, capitalism and the industrial revolution brought a totally new way of production. Capitalism was linked with a nominalist emphasis on the struggle of different independent individuals. What concerns the history of ideas is that this worldview was transported to nature itself by the thought of Charles Darwin (1809–1882). Darwinism meant the final blow to teleology in its privileged domain, namely biology. After the end of the nineteenth century, even biological nature, which was generally considered a special space of the emergence of finalities, was reduced to a struggle between individuals that are moved by instincts and arbitrary contingency. Furthermore, Freudian psychoanalysis combined nineteenth century's scientism with a novel deconstruction of consciousness. Man is

again seen as moved by instincts and his behaviour is better explained by the suppression of some of his desires. On the other hand, socialist Marxism was equally based on nineteenth century scientism, though combined with a dynamical dialectical thought inherited by German idealism.

iv) Toward the end of the nineteenth century, new philosophical paths were tried out as an alternative to both idealism and materialism. The interconnected philosophical movements of phenomenology, personalism, existentialism, and hermeneutics emerged, following the thought of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). These currents have the characteristic that they radicalize some elements of the modern programme, but to a such extent that they in fact also deconstruct it in some way. For example, the subjectivity put forward by some versions of phenomenology and existentialism can be seen as both a radicalization of the Cartesian *cogito* and as its deconstruction, or rather as a drawing of its most radical conclusions, which leads to its undermining from within. At the same time, the epistemological revolution that took place thanks to quantum mechanics, the theory of relativity, and other scientific evolutions, such as the uncertainty principle, shattered some of the presumptions of modernity.

It was in this context that the most important Russians of the diaspora thought. Their country was violently westernized by Peter the Great (1672–1725), had become one of the Great Powers of nineteenth century Europe, and had been the pioneer in one of the most extreme projects of modernity, namely communism. At the same time, Russian thinkers experienced a nostalgia for their living tradition, which they regarded as different from Western influences. The thinkers that we will examine here were exiled in the West due to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. They experienced a material and spiritual orphanage and they had to rearticulate their thought as an alternative from both the socialist version of modernity that had led to their exile and the capitalist one in which they were not totally assimilated. At the same time, their answer was not a refuge to an idealized past. They felt the need to articulate their tradition anew in order to find their particular voice in a changing environment. In what concerns our topic, this meant a need to define freedom in a new way that would be inspired by the Patristic tradition, but would also respond to the modern conceptualizations of nature. When we approach their philosophy of freedom, we have thus to take into account the fact that the notions of freedom and nature have changed drastically since the Patristic era in the ways we have briefly observed and that their Orthodox thought is therefore a novel response, inspired by tradition.

Freedom as liberation from reason in the thought of Lev Shestov (1866–1938)

Before observing the thought of Berdyaev, Lossky, and Florovsky on the subject of freedom, reference must be made to two important immediate predecessors,

namely Lev Shestov (1866–1938) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944). Lev Shestov is known for claiming a sort of radical irrationalism and fideism. He belongs to both the Jewish and the Christian Orthodox tradition, as he was a member of a family of assimilated Jews in the Russian Empire and his thought was influenced by both. Shestov is a modern descendant of a great line of anti-philosophers, who claimed that philosophy and its logic are most inadequate when searching for God or the truth. This line arguably includes, among others, Saint Paul, Tertullian, in some sense Augustine of Hippo and Duns Scotus, Martin Luther, Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Shestov's work could be seen as an effort to articulate especially the thought of the two last thinkers, namely Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Shestov thought that reason and morality are the two great enemies of freedom and truth, since reason oppresses human freedom and morality conceals truth. In this sense Shestov, followed the *Notes from the Underground* (1864) of Fyodor Dostoevsky, but also a philosophy that is 'beyond good and evil' as expounded by Friedrich Nietzsche. The answer to this oppression is radical faith after the example of Abraham as interpreted by Søren Kierkegaard. Shestov would say after Tertullian 'I believe, because it is absurd' (*credo quia absurdum*), and he would think that the greatness of the absurdity contributes to the greatness of faith. He would even be more radical than Kierkegaard in the sense that he demanded not only a suspension of ethics, but a total rejection of it.

In Shestov's thought, Athens represents the symbol of reason, which means adaptation to this world of necessity, whereas Jerusalem stands for the faith in freedom as a continuous miracle that defies the laws of the world.[2] This freedom is absolutely not a freedom of choice between good and evil, but a transcendence of this world that is based on such choices. In other words, in a paradoxical way, evil can be abolished only if a moral choice between good and evil is transcended. Evil is abolished only through faith in the biblical God who is above being and reason, which is tantamount to a sort of rupture. For the latter, the one who is in despair about his failure is in a 'privileged' condition in relation to the one who is confident about his moral achievements. What is crucial is that Shestov shaped a radical sense of freedom that is totally different from freedom of choice and which is contrary to reason and conventional morality. Some of these elements will also be found in Nikolai Berdyaev, though in a different form. The reference to Shestov is necessary, because by drawing the conclusions of the spirit of Dostoevsky, he points to a notion of freedom that is the opposite of reason and rational knowledge of nature.

Freedom as liberation from givenness in the thought of Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944)

The influence of German idealism is evident in the work of Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944). This influence is possibly related to some important themes that we

[2] See: Léon Chestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem: Un essai de philosophie religieuse* (Paris: Vrin, 1938).

find in Bulgakov's work and afterwards in the thought of other thinkers of the Russian Diaspora, as well as in the 'theology of personhood' in Greece. In these two currents, those themes will often be linked to personalist and existentialist philosophies. But one has to remember that such themes go back to Romanticism and German idealism. What I mean is the link between freedom and personhood and between necessity and *ousia*. Sergei Bulgakov boldly states: 'In the creaturely spirit, nature is givenness or unfreedom. It is necessity that is realized in the freedom of the person'.[3] Bulgakov openly admits that such intuitions are to be found in modern German philosophers: 'Fichte showed convincingly, the creaturely I is, in its freedom, connected with necessity, with not-I, which reflects and limits it'.[4] The reason that he did not face a problem admitting these influences was that he considered Patristic theology as an incomplete project that can be complemented by modernity. And he regarded German Idealism as a fundamentally Christian philosophy which follows medieval Christian thought, actualizing it in the context of modern challenges.[5] One of the achievements of German idealism is its dialectical mode of thinking, which was turned by Bulgakov into an engagement for an antinomical way of thought, in which the freedom of personhood and the necessity of nature are seen as an antinomy that is vital for the divine-human drama. The notions of *kenosis* of the Son and of the Spirit are equally of Idealist influence. Such notions are found later in Lossky, but in a way that is much more in tune with Patristic theology and with an apophatic understanding of antinomy. What was for Bulgakov a rather positive way of indulging into the antinomical mysteries of Sophia became for Lossky a cause for respect to the unfathomable supra-essential character of God whose antinomies are irreducible and hence ungraspable by the human mind. Before we reach Lossky, it is however to be noted that another feature of Bulgakov's thought is his insistence on the creativity of the divine Sophia that influenced Nikolai Berdyaev, to whom we shall now turn.

The quest for a philosophy of 'abysmal' freedom and creativity in the thought of Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948)

Nikolai Berdyaev starts from the remark that there is no true anthropology in the thought of the Fathers,[6] especially in what concerns a positive affirmation of a particularly human creative freedom. The quest for this genuine human freedom is linked nevertheless with a higher idea of God, since the human revolution

[3] Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 128.

[4] Ibid., 127.

[5] Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'From Sophia to Personhood: The development of 20th century Orthodox Trinitarian Theology', *Phronema* 33.2 (2018): 8–9.

[6] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The meaning of the creative act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 93.

against the oppressive God of metaphysics would be an uprising of God himself.[7] And, inversely, the degradation of man would also mean the degradation of God. Berdyaev's thought follows some basic insights of German idealism. His main distinction is that between the 'spirit', which is close to the Kantian 'noumena' and 'nature' which is tantamount to the Kantian 'phenomena'. 'Nature' is the domain of objective scientific knowledge (*Verstand* in Kantian terms), whereas 'spirit' is that of 'subjects', persons, or hypostases (Berdyaev uses modern and patristic terms alike), that are free from objective determination (*Vernunft* according to Kant). Berdyaev is in favour of German idealism because he thinks that it has grasped both divine and created 'being' in their living dynamism. The Copernican turn is that whereas for Aristotle, imagination is an essentially passive capacity that receives imprints, after Kant, it is the human subject that forms experience actively even in its scientific comprehension, whereas productive imagination consists in an effort to bridge the phenomenal world of objects with the noumenal world of values. Besides, medieval metaphysics considered immobility and simplicity as the supreme attributes of divine perfection. For Berdyaev, on the contrary, the higher divine characteristics are spirit, life, freedom, action, and movement.[8] But these imply a God who is a multitude of persons to the detriment of the metaphysical demand for simplicity. Being a Trinity implies for Berdyaev a sort of *kenosis*, already at the higher theological level, which is also evident in the dynamic character of God's action in creation and history. The unity of divinity can of course coexist with the multiplicity of the three hypostases, but only if we are ready to sacrifice our idolatrous rationalistic way of thinking which favours ontological monism. The truth of the Trinity is thus approached by antinomical thought, whereas non antinomical rationalist thought leads to heresy.[9] In other words, the heretics of the first centuries were not those who thought about God in an absurd way, but, on the contrary, those who tried to subsume God in the idolatry of reason, of a Hellenic or Jewish bend. In order to approach God, one needs a non-rationalistic thought in which rest could coexist with motion and perfection with dynamism.

Nikolai Berdyaev uses the notion of *Ungrund* by the German mystic Jacob Böhme (1571–1624) in order to formulate such a novel comprehension of freedom and dynamism. *Ungrund* could be translated as 'bottomlessness' or 'groundlessness'. The *Ungrund* is considered a 'Godhead' that is ontologically prior to God as a striving and thirst for freedom. This notion by Böhme initiated voluntarism in modern German thought, as it meant that will precedes being. Analogous notions are formulated by F.W.J. Schelling, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich

[7] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The divine and the human* (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2008), 2.

[8] Romilo Knežević, *Homo Theurgos: Freedom according to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev* (in print in English with L'Édition du Cerf, Patrimoines, 2018), 185.

[9] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 192–93.

Nietzsche, Nikolai Hartmann and others. The logic of this thought is that for man to be free, there first has to be a similar freedom in God. But the notion of God has to be liberated by the traditional link between the divinity and the absolute perfection (or pure actuality) of being that we encounter in classical metaphysics, such as in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Two interconnected problems with the theory of *Ungrund* are that: i) It considers progress in God, leading to the so-called 'Process' theologies. Human freedom is based on divine freedom only to the degree that anthropogony is dependent on a Theogony, in a modern Christian version of Hesiod. ii) It ultimately implies some form of evil as intrinsically implicated in the development of the Good, being thus in tune with the dialectics of German idealism. It must be noted that putting an undetermined will beyond being is not completely novel. In Neoplatonism, for example, such as in Plotinus and Proclus, the One is beyond being and intellection and it could be considered as tantamount to a very primordial will and energy. In Christian thought, also, sometimes the Father is regarded as possessing an initial good will (*προκαταρκτική εὐδοκία*) that is 'then' carried out by the Logos, who expresses the Father, thus leading to Being and to creation in the Spirit. The Father is thus linked to simplicity of will, the Logos to expression and form, and the Spirit to perfection. (Of course, this peculiar Triadology coexists with the more preponderant one of the common essence and energy of the three Persons).

A highly distinctive trait of the modern German formulation of the initial undetermined will is that it could be seen as somehow comprising evil, which is a necessary part of the dialectic—a view that had been adamantly rejected both by Neoplatonic and Christian thinkers in late antique and medieval times. Nikolai Berdyaev develops the thought of Böhme by considering the *Ungrund* as a *μὴ ὄν* that exists outside God. The notion of *μὴ ὄν* is contrasted to that of the *οὐκ ὄν*. The latter means the absolute nothingness 'out of which' God created the world according the Judeo-Christian tradition, whereas the *μὴ ὄν* is a sort of potentiality that could become a being, but is not yet being, closer to the Hesiodean chaos or the Anaximandrean ἄπειρον. Berdyaev has probably placed the *Ungrund* outside God in order to free him from evil. There is however no dualism, since the Unground is not 'yet' being. It is the chaotic origin of both uncreated freedom and God, which are united.[10] According to Knežević, the reason for posing the *Ungrund* outside of God is to reconcile divine omnipotence and human created freedom. For Berdyaev, God's power is not that of the pure actuality of Aristotelian metaphysics; it is a power that coexists with a powerlessness over the undetermined and uncreated character of the *Ungrund*. According to McLachlan, true freedom evades the determinateness of Being;[11] it thus has to be uncreated but put besides the determinate God of Being. In this way, God would be conceived in a way in which his supremacy would

[10] Knežević, *Homo Theurgos*, 170.

[11] James M. McLachlan, *The desire to be God: Freedom and the Other in Sartre and Berdyaev* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 122.

be combined with free indeterminate potency. And there would be a divine ontological grounding equally for human freedom, the latter not being threatened by the omnipotent prescient God of metaphysics. Putting the *Ungrund* outside God is tantamount to a divine *kenosis*, that happens 'first' at the theological level, but is then evident in the Incarnation of Christ. It means that God is not static but is an ever-developing supra-being[12] that can at any time bring radical novelty in tune with his own indeterminate character. Apophaticism becomes thus fundamental in theology in harmony with an anthropology in which original creativity is possible. The *Ungrund* is thus more like a symbol that helps us glimpse into the *kenosis* that happens in the interior of theology.

It is this *kenosis* of God before the possibility of freedom that accounts for divine freedom as a combination of power and powerlessness, which is to be found 'first' in the kenotic intra-Trinitarian dialogue of the persons and which then becomes evident in the *kenosis* of God during the creation of the world and the Incarnation. Christ thus brings the intra-Trinitarian *kenosis* of God into creation, making human innovation possible. Such a sign of innovation is the constant upsurge of new values in human history.[13] The distinction between God and the *Ungrund* can also take the form of the distinction between God and the *Godhead* (*Gott* and *Gottheit* in German), which exist in indivisible unity, the latter referring to the abysmal freedom that grounds God as a Trinity of Persons. The kenotic character of God 'starts' in the fact that he somehow 'accepts' this abysmal freedom that presupposes the dynamic character of his being and 'then' develops intra-Trinitarian relations of love and dialogue between the Persons. God's kenotic character means that he is above movement and rest, as conceived by rationalistic thought. There is an intra-Trinitarian 'movement' tantamount to the generation of the hypostases and the love between them. This kenotic character of God is manifest in the creation of the world, in which God leaves space for the creation of natural otherness, and it is concluded in the Godmanhood of Christ who leaves space for the manifestation of his created human nature alongside his divine one. For Berdyaev, the creation of the world is continuous, which means that man participates in it, thus being able to bring radical newness to the world[14] and even to the divine life itself, as even God awaits his enrichment by man.[15]

The anthropological *enjeu* is a positive human freedom that would be freedom *for* and not only freedom *from*. Following a favourite theme of German idealism, Berdyaev speaks about the new age of the Spirit that begins after Godmanhood. This is a period of perpetual creativity in which the figure of the artistic genius has an indispensable place alongside that of the saint, leading a 'monastic life in the

[12] Knežević, *Homo Theurgos*, 177.
[13] Ibid., 200–201.
[14] Ibid., 219.
[15] Jean-Louis Segundo, *Berdiaeff: Une Réflexion chrétienne sur la personne* (Paris: Aubier, 1963), 128.

world'.[16] This combination of geniality and asceticism consists in a freedom from givenness. In the age of the Spirit, the 'freedom from' of the ascetic (freedom from passions and from sin) can be complemented by the 'freedom for' of the artistic genius (freedom for novelty and originality). The redemption of the age of the Son is thus completed in the creativity of the age of the Spirit. For Berdyaev, genius is contrasted to talent. Talent implies obedience and adaptation to the given, whereas genius is revolutionary and means a break with givenness.[17] The artists and thinkers that influenced Berdyaev in his quest are Aleksandr Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Andrei Byelii, Léon Bloy, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Verlaine, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernest Hello, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Maurice Maeterlinck.[18] This freedom from givenness seems to mean a participation in Godmanhood through the Spirit, since both God and man as his image draw from the creative primordial freedom of the *Ungrund*. This participation could even be viewed as becoming 'uncreated' by grace, according to the very bold claim of Saint Gregory Palamas (*Triads* 3.1.31). According to Berdyaev's theology of creativity, the artistic genius could be considered as participating in this uncreated divine freedom sharing in its absolute character. True art is inherently Christian, since it is genuine Christianity that seeks transcendence, whereas other kinds of art, such as pagan art, are quite happy with adapting themselves to the given of the world. True art is a non-submission to the world, a theurgy in the etymological sense of the world as a work of God through man.

From the 'Ungrund' to the 'hyperousion': Freedom as irreducibility to nature in the thought of Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958)

In Vladimir Lossky, one finds a critique of rationalism similar to that of Nikolai Berdyaev. What Lossky proposes as an alternative theological epistemology is apophatic participation (i.e., a total psycho-corporeal communion with God). Apophatic participation means encountering God in his true ungraspable character that might seem *antinomic* for the human recipient. Even though Lossky does not indulge in the dialectical character of God as Berdyaev does, he does think that God's supra-essential being may present antinomies that it would be futile to reconcile through a monistic rationalistic approach. The role of theology is rather to put the emphasis on full communion with God (i.e., to a meeting with him in all his richness that surpasses a static understanding). One difference between Lossky's and Berdyaev's points of view is that the latter is interested in human and cosmic creative evolution and thus stresses the importance of the dialectical emergence of newness

[16] Berdyaev, *The meaning of the creative act*, 178.
[17] Ibid., 175.
[18] Ibid., 240–41.

both in God and in His creatures, whereas Lossky is more interested in an ontology of full participation in the existing God.

Vladimir Lossky is more faithful to the Eastern Fathers in that he does not favour—as Berdyaev does—a German philosophical term such as the *Ungrund*, but prefers the Patristic term ὑπερούσιος, meaning that God is beyond being and essence. The latter can be attributed to God only in a metaphorical way and if we speak of God as a supreme Being, then we fail to participate in his dynamic character. The importance of apophaticism lies in the fact that it constitutes a reverent approach to God that does not try to exhaust him in finite human reason. Apophaticism can equally entail a critique of metaphysics (i.e., God viewed as an explanation of physical beings that is in continuity with them), ontotheology (God viewed as one being among many, even if he is the first and supreme being) and ontologism (the effort to reduce everything to a notion of being). A fundamental divine antinomy is that between the essence and the energies of God. 'The "unions" are […] the superessential nature of God. […] The distinctions […] are the processions (*proodoi*) beyond Himself, His manifestations (*ekphanseis*), which Dionysius also calls virtues or forces (*dynameis*), in which everything that exists partakes, thus making God known in His creatures'.[19] Lossky unites different patristic terms such as the *πρόοδοι*, *ἐκφάνσεις* and *δυνάμεις* of ps.-Dionysius with the *ἐνέργεια*, as understood by Saint Gregory Palamas. It is important to have in mind that for Lossky divine essence is not static; it is, in reality, a hyper-essence that transcends the determination of being and knowledge. At the same time, this ecstatic hyper-essence is manifested both eternally and in the world through the energies that also *are* God.

The distinction is thus less one between essence and energy and more between, on the one hand, the indeterminate and ecstatic hyper-essence, and, on the other, its manifestation through the energy that can be participated in. This antinomy is experienced by the faithful who feels that she cannot exhaust God when she participates in Him. In the participation of the divine one has an irreducible simultaneous experience of both transcendence and immanence. This antinomy cannot therefore be reconciled. Like Berdyaev, Lossky is quite bold in ascertaining that simplicity and the principle of non-contradiction might be supreme values for philosophy but can only lead us to the God of the philosophers. The latter is too pure in comparison to the true God participated in by the faithful in all His richness that might be subjectively received as antinomic. But this antinomy is present above all in the Incarnation of God which constitutes a challenge for logical consistency.[20] Christ's Incarnation is paradoxical in nature, but this paradox is the basis for participation in the divinity in a way that is real and comprises the integrity of the human psy-

[19] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 72.

[20] Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, apophaticism and divine-human communion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 28.

cho-corporeal compound. Theological discourse should thus not reconcile the antinomies for the favour of metaphysical simplicity but should rather be antinomic in order to do justice to the tension between cataphatic and apophatic theologies.[21]

Participation in Christ offers us an experience not only of the antinomy between hyper-essence and energies, but also of the one between the hyper-essence and the three persons. Lossky follows here a method of 'deconceptualization' by which philosophical notions such as that of the hypostasis are deprived of their rationalistic content in order to arrive at their theological meaning.[22] If for the philosopher the hypostasis is the substance or the individual, the theologian will follow an apophatic '*kenosis*' of this content in order to understand the hypostasis as irreducible to nature/essence. Each hypostasis of the Trinity does not have content graspable by the human mind through definitions. In fact, the 'impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases' means that 'they are alike in the fact that they are dissimilar'.[23] The apophatic (non-)definition of the hypostasis is that each hypostasis presents absolute irreducible uniqueness and impossibility of reduction to common essence or nature. The hypostasis is not an individual substance like the Aristotelian *πρώτη οὐσία* that can be subsumed to the common essence.[24] For Lossky, the hypostasis is a person but not an individual. The difference between the two lies exactly in the fact that a person is a deconceptualized individual: 'The individual is part of a species, or rather he is only a part of it: he divides the nature to which he belongs, he is the result of atomization, so to say […] Individuals are at once opposite and repetitive: each possesses its fraction of nature; but indefinitely divided, it is always the same nature, without authentic diversity'.[25] The two interconnected problems of the individual are that the individual is a fragment of nature that separates it and that, as such, it is ultimately reducible to nature in a hierarchy of species and genera. The person, on the contrary, neither divides nature nor is subsumed by it. God is not a Trinity of individuals, because God does not know of a subordination of species and genera in his hyper-essence. But he is a Trinity of persons, because the persons for Lossky mean a simultaneous '*ekstasis*' and '*hypostasis*'. The persons exceed nature, but at the same time they make it subsist. The persons cannot of course exist without nature, but they do signify for Lossky an 'enhypostasization' of nature, its subsistence in concrete modes.

Lossky gradually moved from an apophatic comprehension of the person as irreducibility to nature to a more positive one based on the patristic notion of *τίς* that is interpreted as absolute uniqueness. This notion of personhood is particularly

[21] Ibid., 44.

[22] Ibid., 54–56.

[23] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, edited by John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 113.

[24] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 50.

[25] Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, translated by Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 41–42.

patristic and should not be confounded with the philosophical or sociological one.[26] '"Person" signifies the irreducibility of man to this nature – "irreducubility" and not "something irreducible" or "something which makes man irreducible to his nature" precisely because it cannot be a question here of "something" distinct from "another nature" but of someone who is distinct from his own nature while still containing it, who makes it exist as human nature by this overstepping and yet does not exist in himself beyond the nature which he "enhypostasizes" and which he constantly exceeds.'[27] Exceeding nature means that the person is free in relation to nature.[28] The uniqueness of the someone cannot be reduced to individual attributes; it is apophatically undefinable.

The personal attributes that distinguish the divine persons are not natural or individual attributes but denote relations of origin that cannot be further conceptualized. For example, we cannot have a conceptual analysis of the difference between the generation of the Son and the *ekporeusis* of the Spirit. The *Monarchia* of the Father is important in order to safeguard that the persons will not be subsumed by the unique nature. In order to exist as persons, the person must have a personal and not a natural cause. But for Lossky there is no subordination of the nature to the person either. The monarchy of the Father entails an irreducible antinomy in which 'the one nature and the three hypostases are presented simultaneously in our understanding'.[29] The monarchy of the Father does not have connotations of power. On the contrary: If the cause was natural, there would be either a subordination of the hypostases as in Neoplatonism or a polytheistic fragmentation of the divine substance. Since the cause is personal, it entails an equality of nature, power, dignity and honour. The monarchy of the Father is then productive of equality instead of inequality.[30] And, even though we apophatically abstain from attributing conceptual content to the personal attributes of the Trinity, this simultaneous existence of personal uniqueness and natural equality could be viewed as a combination of freedom and love in the Christian God. The monarchy of the Father means freedom from nature, but also equality in nature, or, even more, a loving communion of nature and activity. The fundamental antinomy in Trinitarian being is thus the one between freedom and love that coexist in the Trinitarian God. However, this line of thinking should not be stressed too far, as divine freedom and love are referred both to the personhood and to the (hyper-)essense of God (i.e., to the totality of God).

For Lossky, divine freedom is not explained only by the personal character of God and the monarchy of the Father, but also by the supra-substantial character of his essence, which prevents a static and determinate character of his Being. Both

[26] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 106.
[27] Ibid., 120
[28] Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 42.
[29] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 81.
[30] Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 47.

divine personhood and hyper-essence entail freedom in God and both do not have a particular conceptual content that could be grasped by our intellects. Divine freedom is thus also linked with apophasis, for example, with the fact that both divine personhood and hyper-essence exceed determinate characteristics that could be conquered gnosiologically. Besides, Lossky is well aware of the nature/will distinction proclaimed by Saint Athanasius. The will is common to the three Persons of the Trinity. The generation of the Son and the *ekporeusis* of the Spirit are not products of the divine will; only the contingent created world is such a product.[31] On the other hand, one cannot say that they are unfree either. Thus, the distinction between 'nature' and 'will' is considered as one between two different modes of existence—in the essence and outside of the essence.[32] The generation of the Son and the *ekporeusis* of the Spirit are interior to the (hyper-)essence of God, whereas the energy is a manifestation also outside of the essence. Of course, divine energy is uncreated, eternal and simple. But the contingent world is also a product of this common divine energy and, in the latter, simple energy can be perceived as multiple. One could deduce that freedom and love concern the totality of God and not only personhood.

Besides, God's freedom seems not to be considered identical with His will. God's will is distinguished from his nature, following Saint Athanasius's distinction. The divine will is common and it can result in contingent products as the created world. But divine freedom seems to be an ampler notion, since it also refers to the personal freedom guaranteed by the *monarchy* of the Father. Perhaps it should be noted here that this personal freedom of God is not a freedom from *essence*, but a freedom from *essentialism*. What Lossky wants to say is that the personal *monarchia* of the Father entails that God as a Trinity of Persons is not subsumed by an essence that could be considered necessary and/or determinate and/or approached by our intellect. The personal *monarchia* of the Father means thus an abolition of essentialism (i.e., of a non-apophatic epistemological and ontological approach), through which one would try to define God in his essence and thus consider certain necessities in his Being. Thus, expressions such as 'freedom from the limitations of nature' do not actually apply to God's essence but tend to evade a wrong essentialist epistemological attitude towards God.

What actually happens with God's nature or essence is that it is rather a 'hyper-essence' (i.e., non-determinate and exceeding Being). Thus, freedom is to be found also in the supra-essential character of God's 'essence', which is termed 'essence' only metaphorically, and not only in God's personhood. The 'enemy' is not essence but essentialism as an ontological and epistemological human stance, the opposite of which is apophaticism. The latter pertains both to God's personhood and to God's hyper-essence, which are considered an antinomical distinction in a free hyper-Be-

[31] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 85.
[32] Ibid., 86.

ing. There is no equation between person-essence and freedom-necessity in Lossky. Divine freedom is articulated both through the *monarchia* of the Father (and the relevant personal relations of origin) and the supra-substantial character of God's hyper-essence. Both are revered apophatically, whereas necessity rather pertains to an essentialist kind of human thinking that is totally rejected in relation to God and considered the opposite of apophasis: 'The negative approach, which places us face to face with the primordial antinomy of absolute identity and no less absolute diversity in God, does not seek to conceal this antinomy but to express it fittingly, so that the Mystery of the Trinity might make us transcend the philosophical mode of thinking and that the Truth might make us free from our human limitations, by altering our means of understanding'.[33] The question is thus not one of God being liberated from his essence, but one of humans being liberated from essentialism, in order to have full communion in the freedom that is God both in the Trinity of Persons and in his hyper-essence manifested through the energies.

In a very profound remark, Papanikolaou notices that there might be a tension in Lossky between, on the one hand, proclaiming the apophatic character of personhood and, on the other, relating some characteristics, such as freedom and love to personhood.[34] However, one could notice that the character of God as personal freedom and love is considered as a fact of revelation, not as a logical necessity approached rationally. And this fact of revelation does not create a positive concept as to what 'Fatherhood', 'Filiality' or 'Spirituality' really are. The revelation that God is freedom and love rather helps us avoid essentialism and approach God as an antinomy between unity of hyper-essential 'essence' and Trinity of Persons, both exceeding *our own* human notions of necessity. Of course, revelation might be considered as offering us some sort of positive knowledge, for example that God is a Trinity or that the Father is the cause of the other two Persons. But this is non-conceptual knowledge; it is rather knowledge that is implicit in our holistic real communion with God, which includes both his revelation in Christ and our ecclesial participation in him.

The reason of Lossky's ardent opposition to the Western dogma of Filioque is precisely one against a certain epistemological stance. The problem of the Filioque is for Lossky primarily one of ontological and epistemological essentialism. In Thomism, the Persons are considered as relations of opposition that are interior to the divine substance. In this way: i) the Persons are subsumed to the essence; ii) the Persons are exhausted to relations; iii) the relations are also relations of opposition and not only of origin; iv) they can be comprehended by dialectical reasoning that can grasp a dialectical 'evolution' of one divine substance through different processions and oppositions. For Lossky, on the contrary, retaining the fundamental and irreconcilable antinomy between person and hyper-essence also means that the Persons

[33] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 80.
[34] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 65–66.

constitute an absolute otherness that is not exhausted in relations. 'The relations only serve to express the hypostatic diversity of the Three; they are not the basis of it. It is the absolute diversity of the three hypostases which determines their differing relations to one another, not vice versa'.[35] And, even though Lossky's thought is *antinomical*, *it is not dialectical* as in Thomas Aquinas or in modern Hegelian interpretations of Western Trinitarianism. The antinomy of unity and diversity in God is experienced in the event of full communion in him and is not reconcilable through reasoning. The personal character of God means exactly a resistance to a subsumption in a higher synthesis.

Lossky's novel view of personhood is also evident in the fact that he links some traditional features of Christian theology particularly to personhood. Similar to Berdyaev, Lossky admits that he was not able to find a full-blown anthropology of personhood in the Eastern Fathers.[36] A complete anthropology of personhood is thus a task for our age. In this task, however, two things should be kept in mind: i) Lossky seems to think that the image of God in man is particularly linked to personhood. ii) He also seems to think that there has been an anthropology of personhood during the medieval ages in the West, but that it failed. In the West, Boethius (c.477–524) famously defined the person as an 'individual substance of rational nature' (*substantia individua rationalis naturae*). One could thus argue that what was lacking in the East, namely an anthropology of personhood, did take place in the West, even though this question is a complex one.[37] But Lossky thinks that the line of thinking followed by Boethius actually means a separation between anthropology and Christology or, in other words, an anthropology of personhood that is independent from the Christology of personhood. The reason is that Christ does indeed assume a human substance that is individualized in the sense that it has particular properties (*φύσις ἐν ἀτόμῳ θεωρουμένη*), but at the same time he assumes neither a human individual nor a human person, since the opposite would signify Nestorianism. From this event of revelation, one should reach a precious apophatic conclusion that an individualized human substance does not exhaust the mystery of personhood.[38] The fact that Christ does assume an individualized substance without however being a human person means that personhood is *something more* than the individualized substance, even if the two might seem to coincide in the case of human individuals. One could add that following this line of reasoning the notion of the individual is also not exhausted in the individualized substance. But, if we follow Lossky's definitions, one would say that the individual results from the division of

[35] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 79.

[36] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 112

[37] Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos calls into doubt the significance of this supposed difference between East and West on the subject of personhood and individuality. For fr Loudovikos's most updated view on this debate, see: Nikolaos Loudovikos, 'Dialogical nature, enousion person, and non-ecstatic will in St Maximus the Confessor: The conclusion of a long debate', *Analogia* 2.1 (2017): 79–110.

[38] See the brilliant remarks of Aristotle Papanikolaou in: Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 116.

nature that is broken in a hierarchy of genera and species until the individual that constitutes the most specific species. God is not a Trinity of individuals, because God's nature does not comprise such a hierarchy of genera and species and is not thusly divided, even if certain Fathers, such as John of Damascus did consider a Trinity of individuals in God, as Lossky himself admits.

For such reasons, it seems that, for Lossky, it is personhood that constitutes the apophatic mystery par excellence of irreducibility to nature, a mystery that we find both in Triadology and in Christology, and that could arguably be the basis also for anthropology. The individual might not be exhausted to the individualized substance, as we learn from Christology, but, for Lossky, it results from the division of nature and should not be the basis for a genuine anthropology of personhood. In this case, an Orthodox anthropology of personhood should follow a different way than that of Boethius. At the same time, it should be noted that Lossky's apophatic (non-) definition of person as 'irreducibility to nature' *is not used as a polemical notion against nature as such*. It might be regarded as a polemical notion against essentialism or individualism as anthropological and epistemological stances. But at the same time, Lossky does not seem to conceive of a primacy of Person over nature. He only remarks the difference between person and individual, the former 'being' an apophatic mystery of irreducibility to nature, while the latter resulting from a division interior to nature. At the same time, if we ground our anthropology of personhood in Christology instead of an independent anthropology, what follows is that the hypostatic/personal mode of Christ in relation to his Father in the Spirit also becomes the model for human personhood. What follows is that the image of God in man, the κατ' εἰκόνα, is 'situated' especially in personhood and is fulfilled by Christ, even if we encounter here the paradox of a divine Person realizing the mystery of human personhood.

For Lossky, the image of God is 'to be a personal being, that is to say, a free responsible being'.[39] This call is realized in Christ who is fully obedient to the Father, as we observe in the prayer in Gethsemane. Human personhood could thus follow this christological model of freedom from the limitations of nature. Thus, even though Lossky seemed to mourn the lack of an anthropology of personhood in the Eastern Fathers, he himself also seems to reject an independent anthropology of personhood, as the one followed by Boethius, considering it an unfortunate Western line of reasoning. What he proposes is a divine model of personhood for human personhood that happens in Christ. This does not necessarily entail a polemical notion of personhood against nature, since the person is only apophatically considered 'irreducibility to nature'. At the same time, we do find in Lossky a certain consideration that the obedience of Christ to the Father is a model of freedom in relation to one's nature, or a dignity consisting in being able to liberate oneself from nature.[40] This

[39] Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 71.
[40] Ibid., 72.

means that even though in Trinitarian theology there is no primacy of personhood over nature, since the two are seen as a primordial antinomy, in Christology there is a certain sense that the divine person of Christ is offering his human nature to the Father in a personal mode of obedience.[41] He thus constitutes a model for the human κατ' εἰκόνα after which human persons can also be free from their nature, offering it to God, without however abandoning it, since the goal is rather the transfiguration of nature in a new mode. Then, even if there are no polemics between person and nature in Lossky, we do find a sort of locating the fulfilment of the image of God in man (κατ' εἰκόνα) in the personal mode of Christological obedience to the Father rather than in attributes of human nature. This personal understanding of obedience is also related to a personal understanding of *kenosis*, to which we can now turn.

For Lossky, *kenosis* does not concern the whole divine nature. It is peculiar to the Son. However it is regarded not only as pertaining to the human nature of Christ, but as 'the mode of existence of the Divine Person who was sent into the world, the Person in whom was accomplished the common will of the Trinity whose source is the Father'.[42] The *kenosis* is thus rather viewed as a hypostatical mode of the Son also in relation to the Father, even if it basically concerns the economy. 'There is a profound continuity between the personal being of the Son as renunciation and His earthly *kenosis*'.[43] At some points he might also speak about the 'mystery of the self-emptying, of the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit's coming into the world',[44] leaving 'His own Person concealed beneath His Godhead'.[45] A distinction might be spotted in the fact that while the Son conceals the glory of his divinity in the *kenosis*, the Spirit hides his Person. However, both Persons fulfil the good will of the Father and one could say that the theme of the two *kenoseis* of the Son and the Spirit is structurally analogous to the theme of the two economies, which has been a much criticized theological development in the early thought of Vladimir Lossky. What concerns us here is that there seems to be an intrinsic relation between *kenosis* and personhood.[46] The *kenosis* is possible thanks to the irreducible and free character of the Person that can conceal the glory of his nature, in the case of the Son or even his own personhood, in the case of the Spirit. Human *kenosis* is then but a realization of the divine image in man, consisting in personhood.

Thus, one could say that, on the one hand, Lossky wishes to situate the image of God in the total personhood rather than in a psychological attribute, such as the intellect, the reason, or the freedom of will. This insistence is related to his avoiding intellectualism and rationalism, which he considers as the vices of Western thought. By following the Palamite anthropology, Lossky would be against a detached anthro-

[41] Ibid., 72
[42] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 145.
[43] Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 101.
[44] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 168.
[45] Ibid., 168.
[46] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 109–13.

pology, where only one part of man would bear the 'image of God', and he finds in person a way to articulate a human catholicity that would be in the image of God in a universal way and in a christological perspective. On the other hand, this insistence in personhood, which is arguably a modern development, does not develop in Lossky in a full-blown person versus nature dialectic, since Lossky understands theosis also in a naturalistic way. The hypostatic union is the basis for deification, but the latter also means the participation in the natural divine energies of God, which also permeate human nature. Besides, the divine energy is the foundation of the cosmos and is present in it from the very beginning of creation. One critique that could be made to Lossky's view is that the person is used as a means or as a carrier for the transference of energies from God to creation. The hypostatic union would thus be not the most eminent goal in itself but a sheer means to 'transport' the energies. Once the hypostatic union has taken place, the rest of the salvation takes place through a more or less ahistorical participation in the energies. Such a line of criticism might have some ground in the sense that the hypostatic union could indeed be viewed as ensuring the participation of humanity in the divine energies. At the same time, this critique would be, in my opinion, unjust, since what Lossky tries to do is rather to view person and nature as complementary for salvation. Human personhood, differing from sheer individualism, has a particular 'mission' in the history of salvation as God's image, but its fulfilment by the hypostatic union of Christ means a deification also of nature by divine energy. What is more, the mutual complementarity between person and nature can be observed if we are to follow the logic of the initial much criticized view of Lossky about the two economies: One could say that the Christological event is based on a personal mode of union of the two natures, but it then results in a sort of quasi objective salvation of human nature. On the other hand, the economy of the Spirit means an offering of the common natural energies of God, but paradoxically leads to a personification and individualization of the faithful in relation to the analogy of their personal participation in these energies.

Even if there has been a sharp and just critique to these arguably novel soteriological views, what I want to argue here is that Lossky rather experimented with different ways of showing a complementarity of person and nature in salvation. In any case, he does not seem to have endorsed a one-sided naturalism to the detriment of history. Participation in energies, such as the divine light, is sometimes seen by Lossky as having an eschatological character, since it is tantamount to an experience of the eschatological 'eighth day'.[47] If someone argues that Lossky's view of divinization as participation in the natural energies points towards naturalism, it could also be pointed out that Lossky was one of the main modern theologians who situated the divine image in personhood instead of some natural attribute, as was the case with

[47] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 60.

most of the Fathers in both East and West. Lossky's stance could best be described as a sort of 'personalist Neo-Palamism', in which personalism serves as a means to actualize Patristic thought in reaction to modern individualism and rationalism, but in dialogue with contemporary Western currents of thought, whereas nature retains soteriological significance due to the influence of the Palamite and Dionysian theological archetype. In the anthropology of this Neopalamite personalism, after baptism, a human person can integrate in himself both the human and the divine energies (by grace),[48] following the model of Christ, who integrates in his hypostasis the divine and the human energies, with the important qualification that unlike a human person, the divine Person of Christ also bears the divine (hyper-) essence.

Freedom as historical contingency in the thought of Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) and the notion of podvig

In his theology of creation, Georges Florovsky formed a strong notion of the contingency of the world in relation to God, drawing some bolder conclusions which were only inherent in the Patristic tradition. His point of departure seems to be the influence of Karl Barth (1886–1968) who distinguishes radically between approaching God through nature and through revelation. In what concerns the former, there seems to be no natural capacity to approach the God of the revelation whatsoever. Revelation is, inversely, an approach of God to men, which is totally different not only from natural theology, but also from natural religion in general.[49] Revelation, however, does not consist in an one-sided divine monologue, but provokes a dialogical syn-ergy between God and man, which is established inside history firstly as a testament and then as a Church based on God's Incarnation. In a later phase of his work (late 1940s-early 1950s), Florovsky seems to have been influenced by the works Christus und die Zeit (Zürich: 1945) by Oscar Cullmann and Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire (Paris: Seuil, 1953) by Jean Daniélou. His interest thus now lies in the history of salvation as a very concrete salvific interaction between God and man. But the latter can also be expressed in dogmatics, which nevertheless are not abstract, but form an indispensable part of this same history of salvation.[50] Christian theology is thus not an abstract meaning—philosophical, metaphysical, or other—but a systematic interpretation of the history of salvation.[51]

[48] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 124.

[49] Georges Florovsky, 'The work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation', *The Christian East* 13.2 (1932): 49–64.

[50] See: Nikolaos Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού και το Μυστήριο της Εκκλησίας: Γεώργιος Φλωρόφσκυ και Ιωάννης Ζηζιούλας σε διάλογο γύρω από τη θεολογική μεθοδολογία* (Ph.D. thesis, Πάτρα: Ελληνικό Ανοιχτό Πανεπιστήμιο, 2016), 77; available at the link http://thesis.ekt.gr/thesisBookReader/id/37547#page/24/mode/2up , last visit 6/3/2019.

[51] Georges Florovsky, 'The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement', *Theology Today* 7.1 (1950): 68–79.

Florovsky seems to initially espouse the radical disjunction between natural theology and revelation proposed by Barth or the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem proposed by Shestov. At the same time, he thinks that the Greek Fathers have managed to achieve a synthesis between the supra-rational given of the revelation and its philosophical expression in the Hellenic linguistic paradigm of their time. But this achievement is itself part of the history of salvation. It is not an eternal philosophical truth; it is the product of a concrete incarnation that took place in a specific historical context. Such a notion of incarnationism helps Florovsky avoid two opposite dangers: namely, on the one hand, abstract unhistorical rationalism, and, on the other, contextual relativism. For Florovsky, the dogmatics of the Greek Fathers is a concrete historical inculturation that cannot be turned into an eternal truth in an abstract universalist sense. But on the other hand, it is arguably part of God's salvific dialogue with humanity. The Incarnation of the Logos in Greek words is considered almost as important as his Incarnation by assuming a nature with particular properties, including his belonging to a Jewish genealogy. A de-hellenization of Christianity would thus be less the loss of an eternal contemplated truth and more the loss of a concrete historical incarnation that has meaning not as a perennial philosophical system but as a specific historical dialogue between God and humanity.

In Florovsky's thought, elements of personalism as well as of critique of rationalism are linked with his novel evaluation of history as a category that is distinct from nature and its rational contemplation. History is conceived as the place of dialogue between the personal God and the personal human being that constitutes his image. In this historical dialogue, God is revealed in a totally different and novel way in comparison to his fragmentary revelation through nature and its rational contemplation by man. This revelation is initiated by the Testament but is concluded with the Incarnation and the Church that this Incarnation initiates in the Spirit. Then nature is thus regarded as somehow being itself integrated if not subordinated to history. The assumption of the created and human nature by Christ is regarded as part of a historical dialogue, rather than the other way around (e.g., history being considered a part of natural evolution or of a divine plan that takes place primarily through the intelligent planning of nature). It seems that in Florovsky, history is the meaning and the final cause of nature, rather than the other way around. But this means that nature is integrated in a free and in some sense contingent dialogue between personal beings, whereas the inverse, namely an integration of history in nature would be tantamount to a deterministic evolution of preconceived natural forms in time.

In this sense, Florovsky is a modern thinker who developed Patristic thought, for example the notion of the *logoi* of nature, in an original way. What is common with the notion of the *logoi* is that for Florovsky we also find in history a sense of fulfilment of God's intention. His general scheme is one of a historical distance between

a typological symbol and its fulfilment at the appropriate time in the future, while humanity lives in a state of anticipation during the interval. Nikolaos Asproulis justly criticizes this as a sort of latent historicism in Florovsky's thought, since a one-sided emphasis on achievement and fulfilment inside history could be tantamount to accepting a schema of linear historical progress, thus calling into doubt God's ability to provoke genuine surprise or to frustrate created notions of historical progress. It seems that, after all, Florovsky does owe his general line of thinking to German idealism more than he would like to admit. At the same time, he is rather a theologian of dialogue and not a philosopher of dialectics. Fulfilments inside history are achievements of a divine-human dialogue in which both God and humanity consent. At one instance, Florovsky uses the term 'epigenesis' in order to describe historical developments, in contrast to 'evolution'.[52] Whereas 'evolution' means a development of totally inherent capacities, 'epigenesis' means a development that is contingent and dependent on the environment, in contrast to theories of 'pre-formationism'.

It seems that there is a certain tension in Florovsky's thought. On the one hand, he indulges in considerations of historical entelechies that lead history to progress until its eschatological goal. On the other hand, he would not espouse absolute historicism or idealist historical dialectics. What is important in history is that it is contingent and therefore open to surprises. The two parts of the tension could be reconciled if we consider that it is God who brings history to fruition through his interventions and the fulfilments of his promises. On the other hand, man is free to accept, to reject, or even to modify God's determinations. The result of the historical dialogue[53] is thus not necessarily linear or progressive in a dialectical way; it is open to adventures or even to regressions. But the latter do not annul God's ultimate determinateness to lead history towards achievement of soteriological goals but rather sometimes even meet man in his despair or use the results of his failure in a novel salvific way. Florovsky's tension between, on the one hand, the fact that history does comprise a sort of progressive tendency and, on the other, its open and non-predetermined character is also one that we find in Fathers such as Saint Maximus the Confessor.[54] The tension is due to the fact that there is an end in history, namely the eschatological goal of the full manifestation of the hypostatical union between God and man in Christ. And God intervenes constantly to offer us glimpses of this end.

[52] Georges Florovsky, 'Η δύσκολη θέση του χριστιανού ιστορικού', in *Χριστιανισμός και Πολιτισμός, Έργα* 2, trans. Nikos Pournaras (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πουρναράς, 2000), 63–64.

[53] In contemporary Orthodox theology, the theme of the historical dialogue between God and man is developed in its ontological profoundness mainly by fr Nikolaos Loudovikos. See for example: Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010).

[54] See: Dionysios Skliris, '"Eschatological teleology", "free dialectic", "Metaphysics of the Resurrection": The three antinomies that make Maximus an alternative European philosopher', in *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher*, eds, Sotiris Mitralexis, Georgios Steiris, Marcin Podbielski, and Sebastian Lalla (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2017), 3–23.

But the itinerary is open, and man may or may not realize particular historical goals. Besides, Florovsky is a scholar with an acute historical consciousness, famous for writing a historical account of the evolution of Patristic thought in relation to the history of the Byzantine Empire. And, even though he considers the Greek language as a historical flesh for the Incarnation of the Logos, at the same time he does not hesitate to point out that Byzantine Christianity has been a historical failure in both its antinomical versions as empire and desert.[55] The ideal of the empire has led to an accommodation of the Church to secular power, whereas the ideal of the desert has often led to sectarian splendid isolation.[56] Thusly, Orthodox progress in the future would arguably be *neo-patristic*, yet *post-byzantine*.

The supposedly linear character of history espoused by Florovsky aims to deny the ancient Greek cyclical notion of time. Florovsky is equally against an existential interiorization of eschatology as that found for example in Rudolf Bultmann. In Florovsky, the end of the eschaton is always there, but there is room for genuine tragedy inside history. Florovsky's view could best be described as an 'inaugurated eschatology', since the eschaton did enter history, but there is still tension between the 'already' of the Incarnation and the 'not yet' of the full manifestation of the results of the Resurrection.[57] However, there is the danger in this schematization, as Nikolaos Asproulis brilliantly remarks, that we see history and eschatology as two distinct poles in a dialectical relation, in which the eschaton is solely at the end of the historical itinerary as its continuation. In this sense, history is at the service of eschatology, but in a way that prevents the eschaton from constantly entering history and shaping it from within. In his effort to criticize extreme eschatological visions to the detriment of historicity, Florovsky is led to making history the field par excellence of the emergence of meaning.[58] Florovsky's inaugurated eschatology sometimes gives the impression of promoting the Incarnation at the detriment of the Resurrection and a pneumatology in which the Spirit is moving history at the detriment of a pneumatology in which the Spirit would come from the outside in order to transform history.[59]

The notion of personhood is approached by Florovsky inside the context of this divine-human dialogue. Personhood is the image of God in man which consists in being able to respond to God within a mutual dialogue.[60] Personhood is intrinsically

[55] See the profound analysis in: Thanasis Papathanasiou, 'Αυτοκρατορία και έρημος: Η Ιστορία και οι αντινομίες της στη σκέψη του π. Γ. Φλωρόφσκι', *Synaxi* 64 (1997): 27–52.

[56] Georges Florovsky, *Το Σώμα του Ζώντος Χριστού: Μια Ορθόδοξη ερμηνεία της Εκκλησίας*, trans. Ioannis Papadopoulos (Αθήνα: Αρμός, 1999), 124–25.

[57] See Marios Begzos, *Φαινομενολογία της Θρησκείας* (Αθήνα: Ελληνικά Γράμματα, 1995), 91; Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού*, 222–26, 242–43.

[58] Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού*, 244–45.

[59] Ibid., 252.

[60] Georges Florovsky, 'Αποκάλυψη και Ερμηνεία', in A*γία Γραφή, Εκκλησία, Παράδοσις, Έργα* 1, trans. Dimitrios Tsamis (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πουρναράς, 1976), 14–15; 'Αποκάλυψη, Φιλοσοφία, Θεολογία' in *Δημιουργία και Απολύτρωση, Έργα* 3, trans. Panagiotis Pallis (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πουρναράς, 1983), 23–24.

linked to the notion of history, since God only addresses persons, not impersonal natures, and it is this divine call that establishes history as a field of continuous dialogue. When describing the person, Florovsky would start from praising the Aristotelian contribution, since the notion of the first substance (*πρώτη οὐσία*) offers stability and permanence. Some notions that are however linked to the Christian understanding of personhood beyond Aristotelianism are freedom, creativity, dynamism, and universality.[61] Freedom is linked to the notion of *podvig*, meaning the 'ascetical achievement' that is emblematic of Florovsky's thought. *Podvig* is a Russian word that is difficult to translate. It means a courageous act of self-denial and self-transcendence in contrary conditions. *Podvig* could be the deed of a military hero, of an ascetic saint or even of a scientist who struggles for scientific progress in adverse circumstances. Personhood thus involves man's dynamic character in an act that transcends the initial limitations of nature without, however, being contrary to its inner dynamic potentialities. Florovsky envisages a man in the becoming, the personal character of whom entails the dynamic realization of capacities through acting. As Asproulis remarks, 'Florovsky […] understands the notion of person as an individuation of the essence (human or divine) or as a particular expression of it and as an identity that is revealed in its manifestation *ad extra* through acting rather than as the result of a contemplative approach ad intra or as a description of its being'.[62] In Lossky, Meyendorff, and Yannaras we find such a comprehension of the person as being realized in its manifestation through the energy. Especially Yannaras's notion of self-transcendence (αὐθυπέρβασις) has some common traits to that of the *podvig*.[63]

In Florovsky one finds a similar moderately apophatic notion of personhood, but the emphasis is put rather in the *ethical act*, in the *podvig*, than in the natural energy. The *podvig* synthetizes between moral responsibility, reaction to historical challenges and, also, the ecstatic character of personhood, which in a transcendent way performs possibilities that were not entirely absent in the natural given but awaited for their performative realization. The *podvig* is a personal transcendence not only of natural limitations, but also of the physical and the empirical ego or individual.[64] But this personal achievement of the *podvig* is not performed by a transcendental personal self. It is an act of syn-ergy with God which eventually manifests the best potentialities of nature, psychology, and selfhood, albeit in an eminent form attracted by divine grace. Personhood is thus regarded as a possibility to initiate an ecstatic movement that transcends the initial adverse conditions (what could be biblically termed as the '*παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος*', see *Epistle to the Colossians* 3:9), without any escapism from nature. Florovsky sees in this ecstatic character of personhood

[61] Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού*, 135–137.
[62] Ibid., 138.
[63] See for example: Christos Yannaras, *Το Πρόσωπο και ο Έρως* (Αθήνα: Δόμος, 1987), 119–121.
[64] Georges Florovsky, 'Δημιουργία και Δημιουργηματικότητα', in *Δημιουργία και Απολύτρωση*, 83–84.

the possibility to introject the multitude of other persons inside us after the model of unity of the Trinity[65] that is based in the homoousion and the perichoresis of persons. Florovsky detects psychological and moral traits in personhood, such as subjectivity and moral responsibility—especially in assuming the *podvig*. But, at the same time, he regards personhood as a third way between Western Post-Cartesian individualism and Eastern collectivity. This third 'golden' rule is the catholicity of human personhood in the image of the Trinity. The person can arrive at a universal bearing of its nature even introjecting other persons, as in the Trinity each Person hypostasizes the totality of nature in perichoresis with the other divine Persons. Of course, in humanity this is not a given, but a dynamic achievement in the act of *podvig*.

The emphasis given to history is linked to very strong understanding of the contingency of the world. Florovsky might be well based in the thought of Saint Athanasius about the world being produced by the will of God, but he radicalizes this thought. The world is seen as a 'contingent surplus of existence',[66] as an excess[67] which is in no way ontologically necessary; the world could have not existed at all.[68] This radicalization takes place in contrast to Bulgakov, who seemed to consider creation as an inherent element of God's character as Creator. But it was also in tune with Neo-Thomist personalist emphasis on the contingent character of world's existence. What is more, it meant that if the world is fortuitous then its contemplation cannot teach us anything about God in himself, but only about contingent results of his will. In a very bold articulation, Florovsky states: 'We have to distinguish "two modes of eternity": the "essential eternity" in which only the Trinity lives, and the "contingent eternity" of the free acts of the divine grace'.[69] God's will for the creation of the universe and the various creatures inside it is not ontologically necessary. God could have created another world with different creatures, or he could have abstained from creating any world whatsoever.

It has, however, to be noted that the characterization of the acts of grace of God as contingent is a novel and radical move, which was not performed by the Byzantine Fathers. In the latter, we can find in Saint Maximus the Confessor notions such as the *logoi* of beings that are considered as wills of God, but the latter are not characterized as 'contingent'. The whole notion of 'contingency' is of course rather a Western, particularly Thomist preoccupation, which has gained new actuality in both Neo-Thomist and atheist versions of existentialism. Florovsky thus radicalizes Patristic thought in order to respond to a modern problematic. His response is that we should rather embrace and celebrate the contingent and excessive character of

[65] Georges Florovsky, 'Η καθολικότητα της Εκκλησίας', in *Αγία Γραφή, Εκκλησία, Παράδοσις*, 59.

[66] Georges Florovsky, 'The idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy', *Eastern Churches Quarterly* 8.3 Supplementary issue: Nature and Grace (1949): 55–56.

[67] Florovsky, 'Δημιουργία και Δημιουργηματικότητα', 65.

[68] Ibid., 58.

[69] Florovsky, 'The idea of Creation', 67.

the world, as this means that the latter is a gift, a *charisma* of God's love. Most theologians would agree in that, but it seems that proceeding to characterize even the divine acts in regard to this world as also contingent is something that would gain less consensus.

Florovsky wishes to conceive of a God who is totally free from creation and could arguably create a variety of different worlds or none at all, without himself losing his ultimate ontological value. His effort is thus to exalt divine freedom. At the same time, it could be regarded as problematic to somehow introduce contingency to God, even at the level of his acts, since this would mean a sort of different potentialities, out of which God 'chooses'. But the Byzantine Fathers usually abstained from attributing freedom of choice, since that would include a game between presence and absence (i.e., presence of actualities and absence of possibilities). In the Fathers, God's supra-essential 'being' is rather conceived as a complete presence that is not co-existent with any absence, as an actuality that does not exclude non-existent capacities. God is therefore free in an eminent way without choosing. If we are to put this in an image, God does not choose a way; instead, He creates a way that 'retroactively' is the only possible. For example, modern interpreters of Saint Maximus prefer to interpret the '*logoi* of beings' as uncreated without entering into the sloppy question of whether they are contingent or not. Of course, after man's fall, God adapts his plans to counter the results of the Fall, but, again, this is not viewed as a divine 'choice' but only as divine 'providence'. In any case, the point of my remarks is that Florovsky does move beyond a traditional notion of God by pointing to eternal yet contingent divine acts catering for the contingent world. His wish is rather to exalt the freedom of God, who is not dependent on an internal necessity in what concerns creation. At the same time, this way of understanding the sublimity of divine freedom is a novel one, a modern way which did not exist in the Patristic era. At other points of his work, however, Florovsky tries to follow a Maximian intuition that the divine idea about creation is transcendent and different from creation itself.[70] It seems, thus, that Florovsky does espouse the traditional notion of the divine *logoi* of beings as uncreated and divine. But he poses a further question, which is quite a modern one, namely whether these uncreated *logoi* are in a sense contingent, since God could have willed a different world. Byzantine thinkers did not indulge in such hypotheses, but modernity has brought a new acuteness in this awareness of the non-necessity of the universe, and Florovsky seems to respond to this existential concern. What is more, from the epistemological point of view, the emphasis on the total contingency of the world or even of divine acts pertaining to it means that if we want to know God in himself, we should rather turn away from nature and towards history as the privileged locus of his manifestation. For it is in history that a revelation of God's non contingent being occurs.

[70] Ibid., 69.

Conclusion

In this study I have tried to show the experimental character of the thought of some eminent Russian thinkers of the diaspora concerning the subject of freedom. What we find as a common preoccupation is the need to respond to the modern notion of freedom, which was formulated in the West from the time of medieval nominalism until the more recent currents of personalism and existentialism. In this response, the Russians of the diaspora search in the Patristic tradition for inspiration, even though they frequently remark, like Berdyaev and Lossky, that there is no anthropology of personhood in the Fathers, the latter being a task for our own age.[71] In any case it could be remarked that trying to answer modern questions could not but shape in a way the answers themselves. In other words, even though the aim of the thinkers that we have examined was the final synthesis between freedom and nature, following the relevant Orthodox tradition, the way they have posed the problem tended in many cases to equate nature to necessity and freedom to liberation from it. This stance is widely criticized today, in an era where we are longer conscious of the medieval nominalist roots of existentialism.[72] In this study I have tried to highlight two aspects of the relevant contribution of the Russians of the diaspora: On the one hand, their *ethos* as thinkers, namely the fact that they did not believe that the tradition is closed in its perfection, but insisted that there are new challenges that await a future solution. On the other hand, I have endeavoured to show some specific fruits of their experimentation. Some of the notions put forward, such as that of the *Ungrund* by Nikolai Berdyaev, are less traditional and create acute difficulties, such as an effort to exalt human creativity to the detriment of God's omnipotence, as if God has to be restricted in order to leave space for the human creative genius. Other solutions, such as Lossky's insistence on the *hyperousion* of God or Florovsky's novel synthesis between the Greek notion of person and the particularly Russian notion of the *podvig,* were probably proven to be more successful. The most precious element in the legacy of the Russians of the diaspora is perhaps their very example of creative experimentation, intellectual honesty and experience of historicity in both its impasses and liberating surprises.

[71] Modern Greek theologians did respond to this task set by Russian thinkers such as Berdyaev and Lossky. See for example: Christos Yannaras, *Το Πρόσωπο και ο Έρως*; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

[72] For an acute and profound critique of ecclesiological consequences of the thought of eminent Russians of the Diaspora, see: Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Church in the Making: An Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality* (Yonkers, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016).