

Montreal Institute of Orthodox Theology / Université Laval

The Human Person in the Orthodox Tradition

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*The Person in Modern Orthodox Theology*

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1. Olivier Clément (referring to Nicolas Berdyaev, Sergius Bulgakov and Vladimir Lossky):

These men conflicted with each other on other subjects. But they concur entirely concerning the person. I would not dare say: *consensus patrum* – but perhaps one should, because the Spirit is not exhausted, especially in times of distress and of lucidity.<sup>3</sup>

2. Simeon Franck:

The true meaning of the Christian faith... lies in the direct relation between the idea of God and that of the reality and absolute value of the human personality. Christianity is a personalistic and anthropological religion. In it man for the first time *finds himself*, finds rest and security for that which forms his inmost unutterable essence, inevitably homeless in the world where it finds no understanding, sympathy or mercy at the tribunal of reason and objective rationalistic morality.<sup>4</sup>

3. Nicolas Berdyaev:

The entire world is nothing in comparison with human personality, with his unique fate. [...]

If man were not a person... then he would be like other things in this world and there would be nothing unusual about him... Personality is like nothing else in the world, there is nothing with which it can be compared, nothing which can be placed on a level with it.<sup>5</sup>

4. Nicolas Berdyaev:

The face of man is the summit of the cosmic process, the greatest of its offspring, but it cannot be the offspring of cosmic forces only; it presupposes the action of a spiritual force, which raises it above the sphere of the forces of nature. The face of man is the most amazing thing in the life of the world; another world shines through it. It is the entrance of personality into the world process, with its uniqueness, its singleness, its unrepeatability.<sup>6</sup>

5. Pavel Florensky:

The personal character of a person, this living unity of self-building activity, the creative transcending of his self-enclosedness, constitutes his nonsubsumability in any concept, his “incomprehensibility,” and therefore his unacceptability for rationalism. It is a victory over the law of identity that raises a person above a lifeless thing and makes him a living centre of activity.<sup>7</sup>

6. Sergius Bulgakov:

Humankind is transcendent to the world and in this sense is free of the world, is nonworld. It is not exhausted by any *what*, is not defined by any definition, but is, like God, an absolute *not-what*. It places out-

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<sup>3</sup> Olivier Clément, “Aperçus sur la théologie de la personne dans la ‘diaspora’ russe,” *Mille Ans de christianisme russe 988-1988* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1989), 304.

<sup>4</sup> Simeon Franck, *God with Us: Three Meditations* (1942) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), 140-141.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (London: Geoffrey Bies, 1943), 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59-60.

side itself and opposes to itself any worldly givenness as a certain what, while remaining free of it and transcendent to it. Moreover, *humankind is transcendent to its own self* in all of its empirical or psychological givenness, in every self-definition, which leaves the peace of its absoluteness unbroken and its depths not muddied.<sup>8</sup>

7. Sergius Bulgakov:

What is a person? What is the I? No answer can be given to this question other than with a gesture that points inward. *A person is indefinable*, for it is always being defined with everything, remaining however *above* all of its conditions or determinations. Person is the unknowable mystery inherent to each, an unfathomable abyss, an immeasurable depth.<sup>9</sup>

8. Nicolas Berdyaev:

Man, the only man known to biology and sociology, man as a natural being and a social being, is the offspring of the world and of the processes which take place in the world. But personality, man as a person, is not a child of the world, he is of another origin... Personality is not nature, it does not belong to the objective hierarchy of nature, as a subordinate part of it... Man is a personality not by nature but by spirit. By nature he is only an individual.<sup>10</sup>

9. Nicolas Berdyaev:

Individuality is a naturalistic and biological category, while personality is a religious and spiritual one. [...] An individual is part of the species, it springs from the species, although it can isolate itself and come into conflict with it. The individual is produced by the biological generic process; it is born and it dies. But personality is not generated; it is created by God. It is God's idea, God's conception, which springs up in eternity. [...] Personality is the image and likeness of God and this is why it rises above the natural life. [...] The value of personality is the highest hierarchical value in the world, a value of a spiritual order.<sup>11</sup>

10. Vladimir Lossky:

...it will be impossible for us to form a concept of the human person and we will have to content ourselves with saying: "person" signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature – "irreducibility" and not "something irreducible" or "something which makes man reducible 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, of someone who goes beyond his nature while still containing it, who makes it exist as human nature by this overstepping.<sup>12</sup>

11. John Zizioulas:

I have excluded every possibility of regarding the person as an expression or emanation of the substance or nature of man (or even of God himself as "nature").<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> **Sergius Bulgakov**, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations* (1917) (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 287.

<sup>9</sup> **Bulgakov**, *Unfading Light*, 290.

<sup>10</sup> **Berdyaev**, *Slavery and Freedom*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (1931) (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), 55.

<sup>12</sup> **Vladimir Lossky**, "The Theological Notion of the Human Person," *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 120. Lossky says much the same thing in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*: "The idea of the person implies freedom vis-à-vis the nature. The person is free from its nature, is not determined by it" (*The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1944) (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 122).

<sup>13</sup> John Zizioulas, "Personhood and Being," in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Yonkers NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 59.

The perfect man is consequently only he who is authentically a person, that is, he who subsists, who possess a ‘mode of existence’ which is constituted as being, *in precisely the manner in which God also subsists as being.*”<sup>14</sup>

12. Nicolas Berdyaev:

From the point of view of the individual, personality is a task to be achieved.<sup>15</sup>

13. Christos Yannaras:

The actualization of personal relation is made complete only in the fact of interpersonal communion, only with reference to supreme (that is essential) otherness... The person represents the unique power of approaching the mode of existence of beings, beyond any objective i.e. conventional, determination.<sup>16</sup>

14. John Zizioulas:

Both in the case of God and in that of human beings the identity of a person is recognized and posited clearly and unequivocally, but this is so only in and through a relationship, and not through an objective ontology in which this identity would be isolated, pointed at and described in itself. Personal identity is totally lost if isolated, for its ontological condition is relationship.<sup>17</sup>

15. Nicolas Zernov:

They [the converted Marxists] remained fearless fighters against hypocrisy, religious bigotry and intolerance. They firmly defended the dignity and significance of the individual and the importance of social justice.<sup>18</sup>

16. References – Critics of Orthodox Personalism:

Jean-Claude Larchet, “Personne et nature. Une critique orthodoxe des théories personnalistes de Christos Yannaras et de Jean Zizioulas,” in *Personne et nature, La Trinité – Le Christ – L’homme. Contributions aux dialogues interorthodoxe et interchrétien contemporains* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2011).

Nicholas Loudovikos, ‘Person instead of Grace and Dictated Otherness: John Zizioulas’ Final Theological Position’, *The Heythrop Journal*, 52 (2011).

Lucian Turcescu, “‘Person’ versus ‘Individual’ and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa,” *Modern Theology*, 18, 4 (2002).

Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (London: SPCK, 2015), 225.

17. References – Defenders of Orthodox Personalism:

Alan Brown, “On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology,” in Douglas Knight, ed., *The Theology of John Zizioulas* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Is John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise? Response to Lucian Turcescu,” *Modern Theology*, 20, 4 (2004); also his *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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<sup>14</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>17</sup> **John Zizioulas**, “**On Being a Person: Towards and Ontology of Personhood**,” in *Communion and Otherness* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 112.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 294.

## 18. Counter-critiques of Larchet and Loudovikos:

Alexis Torrance, "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate," *Heythrop Journal*, 52 (2011).

Reviews of Larchet's book *Personne et nature* by Peter Bouteneff (*Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 56, 1 (2012)), and by Andrew Louth (*Journal of Theological Studies*, 65, 1 (2014)).

## 19. Vladimir Lossky :

I must admit that until now I have not found what one might call an elaborated doctrine of the human person in patristic theology, alongside its very precise teaching on divine persons or hypostases."<sup>19</sup>

## 20. Nikolaos Loudovikos:

Nature was created to be deiform and not at all inexorable and monstrously inimical to the person, who is supposedly free by definition (and the fall happened not because of the existence of nature, but precisely on account of Man's self-serving *personal* choices....

Despite the fall, then, nature remains as a gift of God, naturally, without the 'censurable' sinful fall of the free will, which, according to Maximus, also provoked the 'non-censurable' fall of nature – it is the person, as I have said, that rendered nature the way Yannaras regards it, not the other way round....

There is no existential 'apo-stasis' or 'ek-stasis' or 'freedom' from nature, but its affirmation and its opening up to a mode that is beyond nature, not simply the mode the 'person', but the mode of uncreated enhy-postatic nature.<sup>20</sup>

## 21. Jean-Claude Larchet:

The negative conception that Yannaras and Zizioulas have of essence takes the form of deep loathing at every turn of their thought, such that Professor S. Agourdis has characterised our two authors as *ousiama-chi* (literally, those who struggle against essence). This attitude leads our two authors (Zizioulas even more than Yannaras) to minimise the place and the role of essence or nature in the fields of Triadology, Christology and anthropology, where we seem to be dealing with persons without essence or without nature and everything that takes place occurs without them, at the level of the person considered as the sole true reality, the sole object of "ontology" that our two authors advance as a model of contemporary Orthodox theology.<sup>21</sup>

## 22. Jean-Claude Larchet:

The being of a person is simultaneously his hypostasis and his essence or nature as it exists in this hypostasis, and ontology is attached to both, which form a whole, and not to the person alone.<sup>22</sup>

## 23. Norman Russell:

... 'personhood' becomes with Zizioulas a way of re-expressing what the Fathers meant by 'participation'. For in virtue of its relational nature, personhood implies difference from God without division, as well as communion with him without confusion.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Lossky, "The Theological Notion of the Human Person," in *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 112. Lossky nonetheless states that Christian anthropology, both Eastern and Western, "are clearly personalist."

<sup>20</sup> Nikolaos Loudovikos, "Hell and Heaven, Nature and Person. Chr. Yannaras, D. Stăniloae and Maximus the Confessor," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 5, 1 (2014), 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> Larchet, *Personne et nature*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Larchet, *Personne et nature*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 318. Also Torrance, "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology," 701.

#### 24. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos:

It should be noted that the term “person” is assigned by the Fathers to the Triune God, while for humans the biblical term “human being” (anthropos) is used, with the specification that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.

Modern Western philosophy used the term “person” for human beings too. But this is viewed according to the principle of personalism (in the philosophical, psychological and existential sense) and humankind’s fall from the theological concept of being in the image and likeness of God. Unfortunately this Western personalism has been brought into Orthodox theology by some.<sup>24</sup>

#### 25. Stelios Ramfos:

The person cannot be identified wholly with the ego or be submerged in the group aspect of the social relationship. The person is the active existence of the human being on the level of meaning and, as such, includes in a transformative manner both the relation and the individual.<sup>25</sup>

If something is peculiar to the Christian person, it is its individual character.<sup>26</sup>

The Orthodox peoples “must develop a human being whose free atomic individuality is combined harmoniously with a loving sense of community.”<sup>27</sup>

#### 26. Stelios Ramfos:

Personhood is the catholicity of a particular individual. [...] Universality refers to the fullness everywhere of oneness, not to a kind of general presence of it. It signifies the whole in the part. [...] An atomic individual can pursue catholicity in the “becoming” of time and thus achieve its own personhood.<sup>28</sup>

#### 27. Kallistos Ware:

The key question in Orthodoxy today is not only ‘What is the Church?’, but also and more fundamentally ‘What is the human person?’ What does it imply to be a person-in-relation according to the image of God the Holy Trinity? What does it mean to attain ‘deification’ (theosis) through incorporation into Christ?<sup>29</sup>

#### 28. Aristotle Papanikolaou:

Humans are truly persons when they image the loving, perichoretic communion of the persons of the Trinity.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos, “Texts of ‘The Holy and Great Council’ Distinguished by ‘Creative Ambiguity’ and Other Flaws September 30, 2016” <<https://orthodoxethos.com/post/the-decisions-of-the-hierarchy-of-the-church-of-greece-on-the-holy-and-great-council-and-the-final-outcome>> (09.04.2017).

<sup>25</sup> Stelios Ramfos, *Yearning for the One: Chapters in the Inner Life of the Greeks* (2000) (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 281.

<sup>26</sup> Ramfos, *Yearning for the One*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ramfos, *Yearning for the One*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ramfos, *Yearning for the One*, 282.

<sup>29</sup> Kallistos Ware, “Orthodox Theology Today: Trends and Tasks”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12, 2 (2012), 116.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology,” in Mary Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge UP, 2008), 233.