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Afterword

Caryl Emerson

It is seemly to end the journal's inaugural issue with an essay devoted to Russian personalism, peaking on the philosopher Semyon Frank (1877–1950). He did not have the Romantic dazzle and visionary flair of Nikolai Berdyaev, nor Sergii Bulgakov's theological precision laced with lyricism and pathos. Multi-ethnic, inclusive, ecumenical, averse to millenarianism and utopia, Frank was a transnational thinker. As long as faith was the ground, he preferred intermediate or middle spaces filled with "both-and" rather than exclusive dogmatic binaries.¹ The bigger and more unknowable these mediating spaces, the more mysterious will be the energy that connects us and the more imperative the presence of an Absolute. And also, he concluded, the more crucially individualized all "I-Thou" interactions on this site will become.

Frank's mature personalism was attentive above all to the concrete encounter. Early in his career he had praised Nietzsche for distinguishing between "love for one's neighbor" (the reflex of kinship) and a more abstract or altruistic "love of the distant," which bypassed persons in favor of a love of "things and phantoms."² This latter love had every right and reason to exist; it prods us toward the ideal. But Frank came to acknowledge, by the time of his intricate dissection of the I-Thou relationship in his 1938 masterwork *The Unknowable*, the dangerously simplifying temptation of such distant vision.³ Because compassion happens only in the present, not in the past or future, a fully-realized I-Thou or "love for one's neighbor" is differentiated, time-consuming, and difficult. Frank's insight here recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's early comments on the ethically binding force of our singularity or uniqueness [*edinstvennost'*]; the 'I', Bakhtin insists, has no "alibi in Being," no exit out of answering for

1. See Philip Boobbyer, "Semyon Frank," Chapter 29 of *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 496–509, here 498.

2. See S. L. Frank, "Friedrich Nietzsche and the Ethics of 'Love of the Distant'" [1902] in *Problems of Idealism. Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, trans., ed. and introduced by Randall A. Poole (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 198–241; and Semyon Frank, "The Ethic of Nihilism" [1909], in *Vekhi / Landmarks*, trans. and ed. by Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994): 131–155.

3. See S. L. Frank, *The Unknowable. An Ontological Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* [1938], trans. Boris Jakim (New York: Angelico Press, 1982/2020), chapter 6, "Outward Transcending: the 'I-Thou' Relation," 124–155.

who, at any moment, I am. Over a decade ago, Mikhail Epstein, one of the distinguished contributors to this issue, developed both these Bakhtinian ideas into what he calls the "diamond rule."⁴ Unlike the Golden Rule or the categorical imperative, which presume similarity (do unto others as you would have them do unto you—and this deed is both reciprocal and repeatable), the multi-faceted Diamond Rule is predicated on an ethics of radical particularity. Cleanse yourself of the fantasy that others are merely a mirror of you; as light falls on the subject, each facet creates its own depths. Even though the other is unknowable in the large, however, we can discipline ourselves to access needy parts of others (and expose needy parts of our own erring and incomplete selves) in ways that are more apophatic than duplicative. As Christian humanists, Bakhtin (and Semyon Frank too) would probably have signed on to the Diamond Rule, which Epstein summarizes as: "do unto others what the other needs done and what only you can do right now, from your own time and place."

Diamond-rule optics is a stunningly attractive exemplar of personalism, but not one that lends itself easily to a politics. Political thinking in the modern state tends to depersonalize. It aggregates, organizes parts externally, enters into combat, strives toward social justice and a legal definition of rights. It can be reconciled with determinism and positivism. The radical personalist would insist that a concrete encounter, to be worthy of the eye-to-eye relation, must begin elsewhere, with one's own concrete act of inner spiritual healing. Any reality worth the name begins there for the human subject. Or as Berdyaev put the matter in 1934: "There can be no worse aberration than to identify the *object* with reality. To know and to objectify or to abstract are currently regarded as synonyms. But the very opposite is true: effective knowledge involves familiarity."⁵

The options seemed to be: the objectified distancing of politics versus the familiarity of persons. Russian émigré circles in the 1930s and '40s mercilessly debated these models and the tactics that each required.⁶ What made the debates so excruciating is that these exiled Russian idealists, aristocrats and egalitarians alike, were against *all* reigning ideological systems—communism, fascism, free-market capitalism with its bourgeois complacency and devotion to material profit—and yet they found nihilism, as a politics, abhorrent. As Ana Siljak argues in her editor's Introduction to the English translation of the Berdyaev-Maritain correspondence, for these philosophers an economically unmonitored, spiritually unmoored individualism

4. "Differential ethics: from the golden rule to the diamond rule," Ch. 15 in Mikhail Epstein, *The Transformative Humanities, A Manifesto*, trans. and ed. by Igor Klyukanov (New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2012): 217–224.

5. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, trans. by George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1936), 51, emphasis added. An accurate (and more informative) literal translation of the title of Berdyaev's 1934 Russian original is: *The 'I' in the World of Objects. An Essay on the Philosophy of Aloneness [одиночество] and Communion / Communication [общение]*.

6. For an even-handed survey of these debates (with Struve and Ilyin championing the "political" option and Berdyaev, Frank and Bulgakov arguing for the innerly redemptive), see Stuart Finkel, "Nikolai Berdyaev and the Philosophical Tasks of the Emigration," Ch. 17 in G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole, *A History of Russian Philosophy, 183–930. Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 346–362, especially 356–361.

would invariably drive people to "succumb to a tyranny of one sort or another."⁷ The dignity of human beings lies not with their individuality but with their personality [*lichnost'*], which is relational and must be grounded in an Absolute. In the interwar period, however, no serious poet or philosopher had the luxury to ignore politics.⁸

This maiden issue of the journal is abundantly graced with Christian humanisms from the Parisian Orthodox diaspora. Rowan Williams considers Sergii Bulgakov's quest for a "soul" in socialism and how the Church should respond. Bradley Underwood takes on Berdyaev and Bulgakov as analysts of the metaphysical Underground, that generative site of evil and playground of Nothings. Daniel Adam Lightsey links Vladimir Nabokov, supreme aesthete, with Bulgakov's sophiological hymn to the creative artist. But theologians do not define the agenda. Four contributors discuss Dostoevsky's novels, and the other three interrogate -isms constructed outside the religious realm (Darwinism, Empiricism, Marxism). The Dostoevsky essays, diverse as they are, each challenge us to rethink a received wisdom. Working with the cast of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Gary Saul Morson asks us to reconsider what it means to have—or to adopt—a belief. The novel's narrator assures us that realists are not unnerved by genuine miracles. But why is Alyosha's faith tested by the awfulness of a "reverse miracle," by his Elder's unnaturally rapid bodily decay? (Morson's answer: faith must be freely given, a choice; certainty is the province of the Grand Inquisitor.) Amy Singleton Adams, countering Dostoevsky's reputation for extremity and urban scandal, celebrates his moments of smallness, tenderness, the theophany of contemplative landscapes and icons. Likewise within an Orthodox perspective but with darker implication, the Dostoevsky of Denis Zhernokleyev insists on the impossibility of an autonomous ethics that is graspable by human experience, whether in the bosom of nature or in the nineteenth-century novel. And Peter Winsky cautions us not to dismiss as mere caricature or satire the figure of Father Ferapont, earnest hesychast fanatic and sworn foe of the Elder Zosima—for among Dostoevsky's goals is to make "*finding the good* more difficult for his hero and readers."

The more secular entries and -isms continue this mission of making the good harder to find. Since—depending on the hermeneutics of the thinker—"the good" can mean both the objectively true and the morally defensible, each essay has a fascinating seam where Russian apologists for raw, mechanistic matter come up against the transcendent. Jillian Pignataro is concerned to set right the organicist Strakhov's critique of Darwin: the enemy wasn't Darwin (whom Strakhov respected) as much as Social Darwinism, and in Strakhov's view an "internal teleology" was compatible with natural selection. Julia Berest takes on another vigorous import into Russia of the 1860s, the empiricism and utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, showing how Mill's recondite *System of Logic*, while alienating Orthodox conservatives, galvanized

7. Ana Siljak, "A New Christian Humanism: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain," introductory essay to Bernard Hubert, *Nikolai Berdiaev and Jacques Maritain: An Exceptional Dialogue (1925–1948)*, edited by Ana Siljak, trans. Christopher Jon Delogu (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2024), here 22.

8. For an eloquent discussion of key intellectual and literary players in French-Anglophone circles that complement the Russian diaspora, see Alan Jacobs, *The Year of our Lord 1943. Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Russian academic philosophy (in this process, Strakhov's organic holism and Chicherin's synthesisism play a predominant role). Finally, Daniela Steila gives us a rich, loosened-up and humanized picture of "critical" and "alternative" Marxisms at the century's turn. Is the human subject energized or imprisoned by a consciousness of necessity? Can the Marxist critique, which continued to inspire those who rejected its political expression in Bolshevik policy, be scientific without being fatalistic and blind to persons in the present? If Mikhail Epstein ends his essay on Russian-Jewish identities with the cautious hope that each of those overlapped peoples could now return to a more modest existence, then Steila ends hers on a larger anxiety, the modernist conceit that the "human subject is the mighty conqueror of nature and the ultimate ruler of the universe." The hubris of such a position is as inherent in Marxism as it is in the Book of Genesis or in Berdyaev's numerous attempts at an anthropodicy. Ultimately, what brings the secular and non-secular essays in this issue together, perhaps unexpectedly, is the contested legacy of the European Enlightenment. Reassessing this legacy became an obsession among twentieth-century Russian religious philosophers, and their case has been handsomely continued by American literary humanists with a profound interest in theology, such as Duke University's Thomas Pfau.⁹

In closing, a few words about the origins of Northwestern's Research Initiative RPLRT—"ripple art," as one of our research scholars, Michael Ossorgin, dubbed it. With its well-curated forum (of essays, interviews, posts), international conferences, and now annual journal, this acronym is gaining some traction in the battered world of Russian Studies. The Initiative is appropriately situated in a university whose Press hosts the strongest Slavic book series in the country (SLRT: Studies in Russian Literature and Theory) and whose Slavic Department houses the professor who for decades has taught the biggest in-person classes on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the northern hemisphere (Gary Saul Morson). The embryonic stage of this research community was a zoomed reading group spearheaded in July 2021 by Susan McReynolds, Chair of Northwestern's Slavic Department. Several of the contributors to this first issue of the journal—graduate students, junior scholars and senior academic mentors—were pulled in at that time. Susan, Bradley Underwood (an ordained Baptist minister now in the Slavic PhD program at Northwestern), and Paul Contino (of Pepperdine University) resolved on a topic: the human person. According to the collective memory of this original inner circle, Rowan Williams—already targeted as a highly desirable participant for the coalescing group—had mentioned two names as indispensable for understanding contemporary personalism: Robert Spaemann and the Eastern Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaros. We began with Spaemann's 1996 book, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something.'*

Am I treating you as someone, or as a thing? As a neighbor or as a phantom? The topic proved apt for the first hard-lockdown year of the pandemic, which saw each of us

9. See, for example, Thomas Pfau, "The Failure of Charity and the Loss of Personhood: Beyond the Enlightenment Impasse," *Tradition and Discovery: The Journal of the Polanyi Society*, vol. 43.2 (July 2017): 4–20, and at more length in his *Minding the Modern* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

reified, isolated, but also infinitely more intimately available. As talking squares on a screen, more of us could interact visibly as persons than would ever have been possible to manage geographically or corporeally. From Spaemann (a German Catholic) the group moved on, or better moved outward and back in search of historical ground, to the Eastern Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras and then to classic thinkers in the Russian religious tradition (Bulgakov, Solovyov, Dostoevsky, Pavel Florensky, with detours into Levinas), all the while gathering members from around the globe. When the world made its "transition to in-person"—a shocking phrase that no one would have dreamed of before 2020—McReynolds gave the group a more stable institutional identity by founding the NU Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy and Religious Thought (Literature was tucked in later). She invited Randall Poole, an intellectual historian at the College of St. Scholastica, to be its co-director, and together they welcomed Brad (an indefatigable facilitator) as associate director. The abomination of Putin's war against Ukraine and the co-option of the Moscow-based Russian Orthodox hierarchy into this re-imperializing mission made the task of the Initiative both trickier, and more necessary. But consider the comment by Rowan Williams in his essay for this issue. Socialism—and every group ideology—has both an anthropology and a soul. Sergii Bulgakov (along with his fellow Russians Berdyaev and Frank, who also began their careers in Marxist economic thought and who also transcended it) insisted on beginning any authentic human economy with the movements of the soul. Define that as you like, but where you'll end up is never with mere things, phantoms, or dead matter. You'll end up with a person in need of an Other. This is probably as close to a compact mission statement as the Initiative will ever come.



Caryl Emerson is A. Watson Armour III University Professor Emerita of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University. Her scholarship has focused on the Russian classics (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky), Mikhail Bakhtin, and Russian music, opera and theater. Recent projects include the French Neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain and the interwar Russian diaspora (philosophers and creative artists), the Russian modernist prose writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (1887–1950), the allegorical-historical novelist Vladimir Sharov (1952–2018), and the co-editing, with George Pattison and Randall A. Poole, of *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (2020).

Reviews



Becoming Like God

The Russian Ideal of Deification at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

Octavian Gabor

Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 232 pp.

One approach in describing the history of humanity is to trace the various and intricate ways in which humans have approached the theme of deification. Questions about the special connection between humanity and divinity are raised even prior to Christian thought. At the beginning, the approach had an epistemic flavor, focusing on the *source*, in the sense of cause (the Greek *aitia*) of knowledge. In Parmenides, for example, the youth searching for knowledge is led by the goddess Dike, who says in fragment B2, "Come now, and I will tell you, and you, hearing, preserve the story,/ the only routes of inquiry there are for thinking."¹ Parmenides seems to suggest that the ultimate source for knowledge is the goddess. Humans can also have this knowledge if they pursue divinity and accept the logos that the goddess imparts. If indeed this theme has always been in the background of the problem of understanding who we are, there is no surprise that Russian religious thinkers focused on it during a time of turmoil: the time between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. This is the period under scrutiny in Ruth Coates' *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*.

Coates believes that the main purpose of the Russian writers during this period of time was to respond to the question about overcoming death: "how to transform death into everlasting life."² In some sense, the interest of intellectuals in religious problems, or their appeal to religion in solving intellectual problems, led to the Russian religious renaissance, beginning around 1900 and continuing to 1922.

1. Patricia Curd's translation, quoted in Patricia Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides: Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004), 24.

2. Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

Coates recalls Karkkainen's claim that Eastern theology doesn't focus so much on guilt as on mortality as the main problem of humanity.³ I would add that even this mortality needs qualification: in the East, mortality is the manifestation of people's separation from God, and it is expressed in sickness. The cosmos, as we experience it, is for the Eastern Orthodox ethos corrupted, as a sick body that needs recovery. The only recovery that is genuinely available for this is deification. Anything else, regardless of what that may be, is still an experience of a diseased reality. The four Russian writers Coates studies (Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky) are embedded in the cultural and theological atmosphere created by this model. It is a perspective that avoids the juridical approach in Western Christianity, where Christ's sacrifice is a payment for sins. The doctrine of deification recalibrates this payment in different terms: Christ takes on human nature so that humans can also, as much as this is possible, take on divine nature.

Coates points out that the first formal definition of deification was given by Dionysius the Areopagite, in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: "the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible."⁴ Certainly, the understanding of human salvation as deification did not begin with the Areopagite. Two centuries before him, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote the famous dictum, "the Logos became man so that man can become God."⁵

Coates points out that the idea of deification pre-dates Christianity. Of course, this does not mean that deification, as understood by Christian thought, is what the Greeks and the Romans thought of when they approached the notion of a deified emperor. In fact, one may say that what the Romans described as an emperor-god was the antithesis of the god-man who participates in divine nature through the grace of God, and never due to his own power. Still, Coates is correct in suggesting that the notion did not appear out of nothing. One may even consider the Aristotelian account of divine life in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he says that humans are called, *as far as this is possible* to live the life of the divine. This expression, "as far as this is possible," is parallel to Dionysius' definition of deification mentioned above, even if the Greek words are different.

Coates proposes that there is an implicit claim about human nature within the context of deification. She writes that the doctrine presupposes a "dynamic anthropology."⁶ The claim seems right at first sight, but it still depends on how we may define this notion. In her account, "dynamic anthropology entails an understanding of human nature as fluid and undetermined, and of the human will as essentially free, either to reject the approach of God or to accept it and cooperate with God in realizing His purpose for the person who is approached, and through that person, for the world."⁷ This dynamicity may be better understood, I believe,

3. Ibid., 27.

4. Cf. *ibid.*, 24.

5. See c. 54 of St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 167.

6. Coates, *Deification*, 31.

7. *Ibid.*, 31.

if we apply the Aristotelian model of potentiality/actuality. Human nature is complete; but its completeness presupposes the possibility of further becoming like God, not through its own power, but of being acted upon by a different nature, the divine one. Otherwise, if we mean by dynamic a nature that needs something else to be completed as human, we open the door to differences in quality between human beings. Instead, Orthodox Christian thought emphasizes the intrinsic value of each human being because of their belonging to this human nature, which has the ability of receiving and partaking of divinity.

Coates organizes her volume in six chapters. She begins with a study of deification in Patristic thought. Starting from Dionysius the Areopagite's definition mentioned above, "Deification is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible," the author develops the notion of deification working primarily from Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.⁸

The second chapter engages the nineteenth century, which created the basis from which the idea of deification flourished in the Russian renaissance. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first describes the monastic culture of nineteenth-century Russia, with a focus on spiritual eldership and hesychasm. The second delves into what may be the author whose work is most centered on the question of what a human being par excellence is, Fyodor Dostoevsky. I will refer more to Dostoevsky while engaging the other chapters.

In the third chapter, Coates analyzes *Tsar and Revolution*, a volume published by the Merezhkovskys, as she calls them, the group formed by Dmitry Merezhkovsky, his wife Zinaida Gippius, and their friend Dmitry Filosofov. The volume approaches the theme of deification from a political standpoint. Taken together, Coates says, "the essays represent a powerful and informed treatment of the political dimension of the deification theme, the age-old apotheosis of the emperor, and its significance for Russian cultural, political, and social story."⁹ *Tsar and Revolution's* thesis has two parts, according to Coates. The first is that the alliance of state and church is an experiment in theocracy. The second claims that this experiment is false, primarily because it replaces the man-God Christ with the tsar-god, and the kingdom of heaven with a kingdom of the earth. The solution of the Merezhkovskys was to have a revolution that leads to the absence of any temporal power. The autarchy in Russia stemmed from the combination of two powers in the hands of one man, the Tsar, which took place with Peter the Great. When he became the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, being at the same time a temporal and a spiritual leader, he replicated, according to the Merezhkovskys, the dual nature of Christ, human-divine. Of course, this is one of the ways in which the notion of deification can be corrupted in human thought. One of the best portrayals of this corruption appears in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where Raskolnikov's attempt to become a super-human, or a Napoleon, as the text has it, is parallel

8. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9. Coates, *Deification*, 84.

to the Tsar's approach to leading both the church and the state. Such status places him above humanity, for it gives him the power to make or lose life.

Coates points out that there are "two distinct conceptions of royal power" co-existing in Russia: "a religious conception of the tsar as the image of Christ as ruler and high priest, as Christ's deputy on earth; and a secular conception of the emperor as 'containing within himself all power and the source of all power,' a conception that evokes the pagan perception of Caesar as deified man, or earthly god." Of course, Merezhkovskys reveal both of them as "blasphemous distortion of Christian truth."¹⁰

The writings in *Tsar and Revolution* show a dichotomy between the true Christ, the two natures living in one person, and the imitation of Christ, which results in false god-men. Anyone who proclaims himself as the anointed one, the Christ, the god-man par excellence, is a false Christ. It is in this context that Michael Cherniavsky's proposal arrives: "the myth of the sacred ruler was counterposed by an equally significant and culture-shaping myth of land and people: the myth of 'Holy Russia.'"¹¹

Chapter 4 moves away from the connection between politics and deification to a more spiritualized account. Coates discusses one of Berdiaev's works, *Meaning of Creativity*. She believes that Berdiaev's view is influenced by the seventeenth-century German theologian Jakob Boehme. Thus, the first part of the chapter is dedicated to Boehme's work, to show that Berdiaev's discussion of deification is done in Boehme's terms. While it is true that Boehme and Berdiaev "insist on a divine element in humans that for both is connected to their special status as children of God who share with him the quality of eternity,"¹² Berdiaev's work is more connected with patristic intellectual tradition.

In my mind, this chapter reveals the difficulties that the notion of deification brings forward. For example, one may ask this question: is there something internal to a human being that makes him able to be divine? In Berdiaev, according to Coates, the indwelling of Christ is the agent of deification, but it remains to be seen whether Christ is an agent in the sense that he accomplishes deification or in the sense that he "empowers us to express our natural divinity."¹³ Perhaps the very precise cutting between these two options is problematic, for it begins in separation. The fact that Christ and the human being cooperate is clear. It is also clear that the source for deification is divinity. The problem remains in whether this divinity was manifested or not prior to Christ's Incarnation. If it was prior, then the Athanasius' formula is no longer correct. If it was posterior to the incarnation, then we return to the classical understanding, that deification became possible only due to Christ's becoming human.

Coates notices that Berdiaev is mistaken when he suggests that there is a lack of anthropology in the writings of the church. He is not wrong, however, that Marxism

10. Ibid., 96.

11. Ibid., 107.

12. Ibid., 120.

13. Ibid., 124.

replaced Christian anthropology with a corrupted anthropology, in which the new god is the proletariat. One may even say that the notion of deification is so embedded into human thinking that we must always refer to a false god whenever we no longer have connection with the real one.

In Chapter 5, Coates introduces Sergei Bulgakov in his own words, as a Christian materialist with the ambition "to translate [the teaching of the Fathers] into the language of contemporary philosophical thought."¹⁴ While *Philosophy of Economy* may be the work in which Bulgakov introduces himself as such, it is still surprising that Coates focuses on it to explain deification. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Bulgakov opposed Marxism, and the development of the early twentieth-century Russian philosophy out of and against Marxism is a focus of Coates' volume.

Bulgakov, Coates notices, begins his volume with death. Coates associates this with the idea that "Orthodox spirituality is suffused with the pathos of death."¹⁵ Deification itself is an answer to death, Coates proposes. But economic activity is as well, since humans work primarily to struggle against death, to avoid it by providing resources for life.

Of course, there may be an equivocation in the use of the notion of death, and it can be debated whether this equivocation results from Coates's or Bulgakov's writings. For Orthodoxy does struggle against death, but the writings of the fathers, primarily those concerned with deification, bring forward a death of the soul. Economic struggle, on the other hand, is against physical death.

Coates shows that *Philosophy of Economy* is not primarily a book about deification, but one that uses the deification metaphor to explain other aspects of political and social life. I wonder, however, how much the metaphor helps in explaining processes that belong to this plan of existence. In deification, incarnation is essential: the movement from this plan of existence toward the spiritual one cannot be accomplished in the absence of incarnation. Any account of deification that does not include the first movement, that of the immortal taking on mortality, as in Athanasius' formulation, corrupts deification, even to the point of changing humans into different kind of beings. After all, Dostoevsky's approach to this in, for example, *Crime and Punishment* demonstrates what happens when man wants to become a super-human based on his own capacities.

This is also connected to how the notion of death is interpreted. Thus, even if all economic activity is directed toward the overcoming of death, no outcome of economic activity will ensure deification, not even immortality, since immortality is not by nature a property of humans. Instead, part of the idea of deification is precisely the fact that the one who is created and mortal by nature takes on attributes of the uncreated and immortal by nature. If humans can achieve the overcoming of death through economic activities, this can only mean that the incarnation itself is no longer needed.

14. Ibid., 143.

15. Ibid., 152.

Coates analyzes Bulgakov's claim that human activity is the means by which God brings the material cosmos into the divine life. She believes that his approach derives from his reliance on Schelling's philosophy, and this is actually the reason why the notion of deification at work is a corrupted one. Coates rightly points out that Bulgakov's focus on economics downplays the significance of incarnation, because if indeed humans are the one who, through their work, reconcile the created order with God, then there is no need for an incarnate savior. If Bulgakov's philosophy is understood in the description Coates provides, then she is perfectly right that the Orthodoxy at work in his writings is flawed. I wonder, though, whether this is due to evaluating a work of economics from the perspective of theology. If Bulgakov's purpose in his *Philosophy of Economy* is to explain the human drives in participating in work, then he is no longer called to show that the source of deification is grace: he needs to focus on economic principles only. Similarly, one may find different accounts of Aristotle metaphysical principles depending on whether these principles are spelled out in Aristotle's metaphysics or, let's say, in his works of moral philosophy. Different fields require different explanations and different focuses.

In fact, in *Unfading Light*, published in 1917, Bulgakov writes unequivocally about humans' lack of power in bringing about their own immortality. He writes,

Therefore with their own powers, no matter how great they might be, human beings cannot pull themselves out of the gulf of sin and render their nature healthy, but are doomed all the more to be stuck in the swamp of sin, drowning in the clutches of greedy nothing. It is a shortsighted error to think that simply in virtue of "evolution"—of time and "progress"—the good will be strengthened in humanity at the expense of evil, and thus humanity becomes all the more perfect by force of things, as if automatically. In reality only evil is accumulated in that way, while good is realized in the world only by free spiritual struggle. Therefore the divinization of humanity can by no means be achieved through the path of evolution.¹⁶

In the same book, Bulgakov emphasizes that economic approaches refer only to this plan of existence: "Everything economic in its coarse or fine sense is utilitarian; it pursues a practical goal that is limited by the interests of terrestrial being. All economic tasks, no matter how broad they might be, belong to the surface of *this* world, the current eon."¹⁷

With chapter six, we return to deification proper: the theology of Pavel Florensky, especially as it appears in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. If Bulgakov's view seemed to suggest that it is possible for humans to defy immortality through their own work, Florensky's book, in Coates' perspective, comes very close "to judging his contemporaries' religious

16. Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 350–351.

17. *Ibid.*, 365.

aspirations as a demonic exercise in 'self-deification.' "¹⁸ Indeed, Ruth Coates' main thesis is that Florensky understands deification in the context of the tradition of Christian mysticism, based on the Holy Fathers of the Church, and I take this to be a true assessment. But this raises the question: is any other concept of deification appropriate? Can we, for example, list among the concepts of deification that which stems from Bulgakov's philosophy of economy? In my mind, the answer is negative. This is not in the sense that we cannot use the term "deification" to describe the idea that humans may have access to something that does not belong to them by nature through their own work. Of course, a horse from a painting is a horse, but only in name, as Aristotle would say. Similarly, an eye that is not connected to a living body is an eye only in name, but it is not properly an eye because it does not do what an eye does. Corrupted notions of deification—primarily based in Marxist definitions—are also deification only in name, but they are not genuinely so because they do not do what deification does. Their action does not lead to humans' taking on another nature by grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, the action of making oneself immortal through your own means is the opposite of deification, even if, on the surface, remains the same. This is because in deification, as it is understood in Orthodox theology, the agent of deification is essential.

This may suggest that writers who use deification differently than the Holy Fathers have a wrong understanding of it. While this may certainly be the case, this conclusion does not follow necessarily. It may be, as I think in Bulgakov's case, that these writers use metaphors based on deification to explain aspects of human existence that are in agreement with it. Human cooperation with God toward immortality is indeed understood within the context of deification, but this does not mean that their actions alone are deification. Thus, if we were to refer to economic activity as a means to obtain immortality, emphasizing that such work has the same purpose as deification, this is not intrinsically unorthodox unless it excludes the divine work that is a precondition of deification.

I think Fyodor Dostoevsky's work emphasizes precisely this aspect. His departure from Marxism—just like the departure of the majority of the writers about whom Coates writes—can be described, after all, as an acknowledgement of the brokenness of the deification account and a return to deification proper. This does not mean, though, that remnants of Marxist ideology are not to appear in their approaches, and thus Bulgakov's writings may be such a case.

Returning to Florensky, in his writings we recover the traditional orthodox approaches in which truth is a person. Thus, knowledge of truth becomes a question of partaking of the divine person in us, and so deification starts in the work of accepting the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, and a knowledge of that Person by partaking of his person in love. Thus, the epigraph of *Pillar and Ground*, as Coates notes, is the phrase of Gregory of Nyssa: "knowledge becomes love."

18. Coates, *Deification*, 205.

Coates' conclusion subsumes these approaches under what can be called, "human, all too human." She writes, "The millenarian hopes of the Merezhkovskys, Berdiaev, and Florensky were not realized. The new order swept in by the Revolution proved to be of the human, all-too human kind. Christ did not come to reign on earth; the age of the Holy Spirit did not dawn."¹⁹



Octavian Gabor is Professor of Philosophy at Methodist College. He works on Greek philosophy, Dostoevsky, and the notion of personhood. Recent journal articles and book chapters include: "Dostoevsky in Romanian Culture: At the Crossroads between East and West" (2024), "Responses to Divine Communication: Oedipus and Socrates" (2020), "Taming the Beast: Constantin Noica and Doing Philosophy in Critical Political Contexts" (2019), "Justice between Mercy and Revenge in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Plato's *Crito*" (2019), and "Constantin Noica's Becoming Within Being and Meno's Paradox" (2017). He has translated from French to Romanian and Romanian to English. His most recent translations are Andre Scrima's *Apophatic Anthropology* (2016) and Constantin Noica's *The Romanian Sentiment of Being* (2022, with Elena Gabor) and *Pray for Brother Alexander* (2018).

19. Ibid., 208.



Russian Liberalism in Theory and Practice

Randall A. Poole

Vanessa Rampton, *Liberal Ideas in Tsarist Russia: From Catherine the Great to the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ix, 229 pp.

Paul Robinson, *Russian Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2023), x, 289 pp.

The history of liberalism is always a critically important topic. But this is true especially now, when liberal values and institutions are in retreat in countries (such as the United States) where they once seemed relatively secure, and when prospects for liberal development in countries such as Russia and China seem as remote as ever. These two books focus on Russia, but both take a comparative approach that emphasizes the normative or universal claims of liberalism as political theory. What are these claims? What makes liberalism normative, and not just one ideology among others?

The essential value that constitutes liberalism and distinguishes it from its competitors is the human person and his or her liberty. The supreme liberal value is human dignity, the intrinsic worth of every person. If we accept this proposition, then there are no higher values (such as class, nation, society, or humanity) to which individual persons could be rightly sacrificed (though of course they can choose to put the good of others over themselves). The good of society consists in the good of every person in it. In Kant's famous formulation, the person is an end-in-itself, never merely a means for other ends.

Human dignity is the source of human equality. If the person has intrinsic and infinite worth, then all persons are equal in value, though obviously human beings are not equal in their individual strengths and weaknesses, in their life circumstances, in their conduct, and in a myriad of other ways. (The sources of human dignity are a matter of philosophical controversy, but one viable general source is the human potential to do good.) Human dignity is also widely regarded as the source of natural or human rights, guaranteed and enforced by the rule of law. The state and higher international institutions, as the instruments of the rule of law, ought to

embody it and their officials ought to subordinate themselves to it. In the end the rule of law rests upon civil society: citizens who have a keen consciousness (ultimately a moral one) of human dignity and rights and who engage in various forms of community and civic activity to defend them, from voting and governmental participation to (in cases of state violation of legal norms) civil disobedience and collective coercive conduct.

In sum, liberalism can be defined as a normative political philosophy of human dignity, equality, and rights, upheld through the rule of law and civil society (at local, national, and global levels). "Liberal individualism" is something of a shibboleth that distorts authentic liberalism, since the latter recognizes that persons can develop and realize their potential—that human well-being, progress, and flourishing are possible—only in community and society. But if there is broad consensus about the fundamental liberal values, there is much less agreement about how societies and economies should be organized to best serve human dignity and equality and about how best to promote human flourishing. Still, at the most general level, it can be said that liberalism is about essential human values and the best ways to build societies worthy of them. Thus understood, the importance of liberalism as a political and social philosophy is obvious.

So, too, is the specific topic of Russian liberalism, for at least three reasons. First, liberalism is an important part of Russian history, especially its intellectual history. Since Ivan the Terrible, autocracy (the conceptual opposite of the rule of law) has been the dominant feature and structure of Russia's political history. The country's oppressive political reality meant that Russian liberals had to defend their ideals and values, their hopes and dreams, with even more emphatically persuasive force and clarity. They succeeded brilliantly: The intellectual history of Russian liberalism is very rich. Thwarted in practice, Russian liberalism developed theoretically (the only way it could) and reached high levels of philosophical sophistication. Some of the best liberal theorists globally (e.g., Boris Chicherin and Pavel Novgorodtsev) are Russian. We can learn a lot from them.

Second, the political failure of Russian liberalism is a human tragedy. For centuries Russians have deepened our common humanity with their thought and culture, and for centuries they have suffered mightily at the hands of their illiberal governments (tsarist, Soviet, post-Soviet). And not only Russians have suffered, as the current war in Ukraine makes clear. This leads to the third reason why Russian liberalism matters. Russia is a nuclear power. An illiberal Russia will always pose a grave danger to international security. (Paul Robinson is a military historian and a security expert.) None of this is to deny that societies that have prided themselves on being liberal have also often miserably failed to live up to their own standards, at home and abroad, with great human costs.

By the very nature of the topic, both of these books are largely intellectual histories of Russian liberalism. This is explicitly so in the case of Vanessa Rampton's study. Russian liberalism had two types of philosophical defenders: positivists and idealists (or neo-idealists). Her book is a study of their ideas, the historical contexts in which they worked, and their attempt to put liberal ideas into practice at the time of the 1905 revolution and the ensuing "Duma Monarchy." Russia's most famous liberal, the historian Pavel Miliukov (1859–1943), was a positivist, and he is one of the book's subjects. Another is the sociologist Maksim Kovalevskii (1851–1916). Miliukov has been extensively studied but Kovalevskii has not, and this book sheds welcome new light on him. But the neo-idealists are at the center of Rampton's attention. She regards them as the most consistently liberal, not only in their defense of liberalism's core values, but also in their recognition that while human dignity must always remain an inviolable principle, liberalism involves compromise, accommodation to complex historical realities that often resist ideals, and appreciation of the inevitable tension among competing values, especially between "negative" and "positive" liberty. This type of open-ended, "empirical," pluralistic liberalism was famously championed by Isaiah Berlin, whose perspective Rampton adopts. Yet Berlin always took a skeptical approach to Russia's neo-idealists, let alone to its religious philosophers, while she believes they were truer to his pluralistic liberalism than were the positivists. That's interesting.

Her book is a compact, inviting, and accessible study. It is synthetic and interpretive, based both on existing scholarship and primary sources, with the balance tipping more toward synthesis than original research. There is large and complex literature on Russian liberalism (not to mention liberalism more generally), the philosophical aspects of which are challenging, so interpretive synthesis is appropriate and valuable. (In the interests of fair disclosure I should note that Rampton values my own work, draws upon it, and presents it well.)

The introduction establishes the book's comparative perspective by presenting the main concepts and figures in western liberalism, with astute indications of their relevance to Russia. The discussion focuses on selfhood, freedom, liberal practices, and the tension between freedom and justice. Referring to John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Benjamin Constant, Rampton writes: "These theorists are of particular interest to us here because they eschewed abstract notions of liberalism, and articulated views of the relationship between the individual and society that justified an approach to freedom as a permanent recalibration between different values and goods, dependent on the particularities of time and place" (24). She notes that these liberals were widely read in Russia.

Chapter 1 is an expert, succinct survey of Russian intellectual history from the Enlightenment to 1900, focusing on how Russian thinkers (properly liberal or not) understood the key liberal ideas of human dignity, equality, freedom, rights, law, and human progress. Rampton identifies Aleksandr Radishchev's early importance in the intellectual history of Russian liberalism, noting that he (1749–1802) "openly questioned the legitimacy of

autocracy in the name of inalienable individual rights and humanitarian values" (43). The chapter features nineteenth-century Russia's two greatest philosophers, Boris Chicherin (1828–1904) and Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), both metaphysical idealists. Rampton appreciates that Russian socialism (Alexander Herzen, Peter Lavrov, Nikolai Mikhailovskii), in its defense of individual moral autonomy against supposed necessary laws of historical development, contributed to the distinctive ethical thrust of Russian liberalism.

Three of the book's six chapters emphasize neo-idealist liberalism: chapters 2, 4, and 5. Chapter 2 is the most general and deals with the "revolt against positivism" in various spheres of culture and thought in fin-de-siècle Europe and Russia. Neo-idealism was an important element in this critique. According to Rampton, "The fundamental premise of idealism is that the mind and its ideals are not merely epiphenomena of the brain. Ideals have their own causal power, which for philosophical idealism indicates that there is more to reality than the physical world" (68). The chapter then turns in detail to the Russian neo-idealist defense of liberalism, with particular attention to its institutional center, the Moscow Psychological Society, and to the large collective volume *Problems of Idealism* (1902).

Chapter 4 takes up another famous volume, *Vekhi (Landmarks)* (1909). Although the liberalism of its contributors was inconsistent, Rampton argues that as a whole they understood (and tried to convince their readers) that liberalism depended on the complex interplay of several factors: a free and dynamic spiritual life (and through it the inner recognition of human dignity), culture and education, civic and legal consciousness, civil society, and civic, legal, and political institutions. Chapter 5 is devoted to two major neo-idealist liberals: Bogdan Kistiakovskii (1868–1920) and Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924). Kistiakovskii was a Russian neo-Kantian (one type of neo-idealist) who believed that "lawful socialism" (i.e., socialism that respects the liberal principle of the rule of law) was the best way to realize ideals of positive liberty such as self-realization and the right to a dignified existence. Novgorodtsev was arguably the most important Russian liberal theorist after Chicherin. He championed the revival of natural law. While Kistiakovskii resisted drawing metaphysical or theistic conclusions from idealism, Novgorodtsev embraced them.

Other parts of the book deal with positivist liberalism: specifically the last section of chapter 2 and chapter 6 (Miliukov and Kovalevskii). Rampton's analysis presents the neo-idealists as both better philosophers and better liberals. The positivists tended to pin their hopes for a liberal Russia on their (non-empirical) belief in progress as a necessary historical law and on their environmentalist approach to human nature, which conceived "the transformation of the individual personality as the by-product of institutional and social change" (81). Chapter 3 is the most historical in the book. It concerns Russia's main liberal party, the Kadets ("Kadet" was short for "Constitutional Democrat"), in the run-up to and aftermath of the 1905 Revolution. The chapter is informed by the author's sympathetic understanding of the dilemmas faced by a liberal party in a thoroughly illiberal polity.

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Rampton is most interested in how Russian liberals understood their values (which, in the absence of any reigning examples from their native land, they took to be universal human ones) in particular historical circumstances. She attends to their attempts to apply these values to improve their own society (especially in the period 1900–1914), and to how their efforts altered their (and our) understanding of liberalism. She deems the neo-idealists to have been the better liberals both in theory and practice, not only because they understood the permanent tension between liberal ideals and historical realities, but because they were more likely to embrace this tension as dynamic, creative, and indeed truly progressive. The positivists, by contrast, were more likely to resist it, preferring to collapse it under one or another scheme of historical inevitability or necessity. The neo-idealists were not utopians. They conceived progress as a moral task to be accomplished by human beings driven by ideals and working to realize them *as much as possible* in specific historical circumstances. The positivists, by contrast, generally conceived progress as a historical law somehow unfolding of its own accord and leading inevitably to a perfect human society.

In the conclusion to her book, Vanessa Rampton returns to the comparative, even global perspective with which she began: How can liberalism, with its universal claims to cherishing human dignity, defending human rights, and promoting human flourishing, at the same time be specific and relevant to local human communities and cultures? Her book leaves little doubt that Russian liberals, especially the neo-idealists among them, thought deeply about that question and can offer even our own bewildered age some valuable approaches to it.

The main question raised in Paul Robinson's book is the inevitable one, "Why has liberalism failed to take root in Russia?" He does not take a deterministic view of the failure of Russian liberalism: there were periods (Catherine II and Alexander I, the Great Reforms, the "Duma Monarchy," perestroika) when Russian liberalism might have become, if not the dominant principle, at least an important political factor in the country's development. Explaining why that never happened is the author's task, and he carries it out well. The short answer is that despite the long and rich history of liberal ideas among Russian intellectuals, Russian autocracy has always stifled the development of a strong civil society—the ultimate social condition of liberalism. The short answer is made long by the 260 years from the beginning of Catherine II's reign to today.

While there are many studies of Russian liberalism, Robinson's is the only one which examines Russian liberalism as a whole from its origins in the late eighteenth century through the Soviet era to post-soviet Russia, including also the inter-war Russian emigration. That alone commends the book. Most of the existing literature on Russian liberalism focuses on the tsarist period and on the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Chapters 2–6 of the book cover this long period. These chapters are based mainly on existing scholarship and offer a good introduction. Chapters 7–11 cover Russian liberalism in emigration, in the Soviet period, during perestroika, under Yeltsin, and under Putin. These five chapters are the best

in the book and the most valuable, since much less work has been done on Russian liberalism in the period from 1922 to 2022. Here Robinson draws extensively and effectively on sources published in Russian since about 1990. His account of Russian liberalism over the past century is an important contribution to the literature.

Chapter 1 takes up some of the main general problems of Russian liberalism, including its origins, periodization, and national peculiarities—what was specifically Russian about it? Robinson begins the history of Russian liberalism with the reign of Catherine II (1762–1796), though many historians have dated its origins much later, from the mid-nineteenth century or even further in the future. Robinson's approach is defensible, based mainly on the intellectual origins of Russian liberalism during the late Enlightenment. He introduces a theme that runs throughout the book: whether liberalism in Russia is mainly a Western import or artifice or whether there is an authentically Russian liberalism, a Russian national tradition of liberalism. This is an important issue that transcends Russia: Can universal values (liberal values such as human rights) take national forms and be strengthened in the process? Opponents of liberalism (in Russia and elsewhere) attack it as "western" or "foreign." This has become a basic and crude tactic of Putinism ("liberalism is gay").

The book's subsequent chapters follow the same structure. They begin with a basic historical overview of the period in question and then consider the development of Russian liberalism across three categories: cultural liberalism, political liberalism, and socio-economic liberalism. This tripartite structure has its organizational virtues, but it doesn't work equally well in each of the chapters and the distinctions among the three types can at times seem artificial. Logically, cultural liberalism deals with liberal intellectuals (cultural elites) and their ideas; political liberalism with the realization or implementation of these ideas, with its pragmatics and with liberal political movements and parties; and socio-economic liberalism with the social-economic conditions and results of liberalism. But there is some overlap among the three categories, and at times they all operate at the level of ideas: cultural ideas, political ideas, and socio-economic ideas.

Across the chapters, "cultural liberalism" presents the leading Russian liberal thinkers and their ideas, from Alexander Radishchev to Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989) and Sergei Kovalyov (1930–2021), together with variations of the two main philosophical theories of Russian liberalism (positivism and idealism). Robinson mentions (even if briefly) virtually every significant Russian liberal thinker and gives attention to some of their major writings. Under the category of political liberalism, the book spans Catherine II's *Instruction* to the Imperial Legislative Commission, Alexander I's constitutional plans, the Great Reforms, the history of the liberation movement that led to the Revolution of 1905, the Duma Monarchy, the history of the Kadet party from 1905 to the emigration, the human rights movement in the Soviet period, perestroika, "shock therapy" under Yeltsin, and the extinguishing of liberalism under Putin. The chapter sections on socio-economic liberalism consider such topics as the Russian peasant commune and the Stolypin agrarian reforms, capitalism and

industrialization, the "right to a dignified human existence" championed by Vladimir Soloviev, and Soviet socialism and post-Soviet privatization, emphasizing throughout the overall weak socio-economic foundations of liberalism in Russia.

As mentioned above, the best part of the book is on Russian liberalism over the past century. In 1922 Lenin deported scores of Russian philosophers; many other Russian liberals also fled the country. In Chapter 7 Robinson demonstrates that the history of émigré liberalism is an essential part of the history of Russian liberalism as a whole. He explores both the fate of the Kadet party in exile and the intellectual legacy of émigré philosophers and economists. That legacy includes a Christian conception of human dignity and personhood that philosophers such as Nikolai Berdiaev advanced against Western liberalism, which was taken to be agnostic or atheistic and therefore destructive of spiritual freedom. This type of religious critique of Western liberalism (and of human rights) has gained traction today, not only in the Russian Orthodox Church but also among some Western Christian thinkers (e.g., John Millbank, William Cavanaugh, and Vigen Guroian). It is distorted, neglects the religious origins of human rights, and is in general fraught with risks.

The Soviet project was inimical to liberalism. "Miraculously, though, pockets of liberalism survived," Robinson writes (117). In Chapter 8 he presents a very good account of Soviet liberalism, generally following Mikhail Epstein's view that, "Liberalism was the major intellectual force of the entire dissident movement" (120). Dissident discourse focused on human rights and the rule of law, as Robinson shows in detail. In many respects the liberal ideas of the dissident movement triumphed with perestroika (Chapter 9). In 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev resolved that the Soviet Union should be a state under the rule of law (*pravovoe gosudarstvo*). This liberal ideal has remained elusive in the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Indeed, Putinism has all but destroyed it. For good reason does Robinson both begin and end his study with the grim observation that today Russian liberalism is in an extremely "parlous state" (2, 203).



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