

PERSONALISM - A NEW/OLD TREND IN POST-MARXIST RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

Philipp FLURI*

Russian philosopher and historian of philosophy Assen Ignatow has noticed an interesting new trend in Russian philosophy. Though Marxism-Leninism is still dominant in academic life, a few new schools of thought have emerged on the philosophical scene. Who would have thought, though, that Western political philosophies (like Popperism or Habermas'/Luhmann's critique of the postmodern state or other schools advocating the secular welfare state) would become the main new school in post-Marxist Russia sees him- or herself proved wrong. The major new philosophy is, according to Ignatow, the Russian philosophy of the 1920ies and 30ies -*Russian personalism*, the thought of thinkers like Solovyov, Berdyaev, Bulgakov, Frank, Losskij. Since 1985 about 40 works by these highly original Russian thinkers have been re-published and interest in their work is growing. Very interestingly, some formerly Marxist thinkers have found it necessary to comment on Christian personalism.

Western philosophy of the enlightenment kind, especially Western individualism and the spirit of capitalism, have always been alien to Russian thought. Western influence started with Hegel und some of Schelling's ideas, which paved the way to Marxism and from there to Leninism. Russian personalism was once one of the main reactions against atheist collectivism. Russian personalism was immensely practical, trying to do justice to the situation of man in an imperfect world without trying to hide from him or her the less agreeable truths of life: the problems of our individual responsibility for what we do and what we do not do.

The original Russian personalist thinkers therefore were at odds with the Socio-Communists in a variety of issues: against collectivism they stressed individual responsibility, against the heroization of the society they praised the value of the person, against a communist society of rights and duties they developed a personalized and rather informal view of a community of believing responsible persons sharing faith, charity and hope.

In what follows we will give a short introduction into what Russian personalism was -and is. We will also undertake to point out what makes it different from contemporary Western thought -and why it should be better adapted to contemporary Russian spiritual needs and demands than anything that could ever come from the West.

The re-discovered Russian thinkers -though highly critical of the excesses of Communist rule- are not in favor of a *bourgeois* world order. They have little understanding for capitalist ways. Their philosophical viewpoints do take into

account Western European history, but they are also trying to do justice to a mentality which never went through the *Stahlbad* of the age of the enlightenment, which never knew a Renaissance period, but bears the imprint of Tatar domination, Ivan the Terrible's Conquista, Peter the Great's Great Leap Forward, a forced industrialization among the last tzars. Berdyaev, one of the rediscovered personalists, claims *e.g.* that communism was successful because the political order it succeeded was degenerate. Communism became possible, because the *bourgeois* Christianity it succeeded was not authentic. Nor is Berdyaev in favor of Western-style democracy. Western-style democracy, he says, helps the power-hungry to satisfy their a-social needs. Western-style democracy is a quantitative approach to find out about what is best for the people. But the people are easy to be talked into things that are not really good for them. According to this highly original Russian thinker freedom is not a social but an *ontological* category. Socially speaking freedom means that the powerful can have their way. Ontologically speaking freedom means that everyone can realize him- or herself as a person. And this ontological freedom, Berdyaev says, should be valued much higher than all ideals of equality.

World-famous writer A. Solzhenitsyn, a modern exponent of the personalist tradition, also claims that Western democracy's merits are purely negative: it helps to avoid tyranny of the few, though not of the many. And it reduces the human person to a subject of needs and demands. What is immensely more important to him is *respect for the human person*. Solzhenitsyn advocates therefore a "village-type" democracy, a democracy of the small place so to speak, a democracy which does justice to the human person without reducing him or her to the status of a 'citizen'.

Neither capitalism nor communism nor an emerging new bourgeoisism are, then, desirable positions. What is sought for by the personalists is a new form of living together which does justice to one's own spiritual needs and demands - a position which must not be confused with *New Age*-pseudoquietism.

1. Personalist Views: Berdyaev and Solovyov

According to Berdyaev, only a community which allows *egos* to become persons is a community deserving of the name. Both socialism and liberal democracy have a fatal tendency to "objectify the self". Berdyaev's ideal community is somehow the direct opposite of what the modern state seeks to be. Personalistic communitarianism -the Berdyaevian ideal of living together- is based on the existence of the creative and free individual who realizes his or her nature. Modern Western democracy is not favoring this ideal of living together; its way of socializing the ego leads to an objectified "theatrical ego" unaware of its real needs, its individualism again leads to a progressive isolation of the already estranged ego.

The aim and goal of personalist communitarianism is "communitarian community", a society based on "love" which alone supplies the framework within which *egos* can become *persons*.

Soloviov's main idea was that the good is identical with truth, and that each human being has access to the true-and-good by his or her very nature (his

argument may remind Chinese readers of Meng-tzu's argument in favor of the good and human openness to the knowledge of it).

It is crucial, then, to get to know the good-and-true in its entirety because incomplete knowledge of it may lead to inadequate philosophies of life, such as:

- pessimism in the Schopenhauerian bourgeois sense
- blind activism
- moral "amorphism" or agnosticism
- aestheticism (Nietzsche).

All these erroneous attitudes stem from the lack of capability or will (!) to perceive and live the true-and-good. Man has to decide in favor of or against the good. *Tertium non datur*. Man cannot choose to be an animal only. The agnostics claiming that they cannot come to a decision are deceiving themselves.

That the good exists and that human beings have access to it (whether they want to or not) can be evidenced in a contemplation of man's emotional life. In some way, human history can even be understood as a history of man's dealings with the true-and-good:

- *Each and every human being has a feeling of shame.*

It is this sentiment by which man is separated from the animal order, as no animal has it, but humans have had it ever since there was anything like human history. This sentiment, however, is not only a principle of separation between humans and animals. It also has an objectifying function within the acting person. An insight into the moral status of our actions or at least an uneasiness as to whether we are doing the right show us that we are not only physical beings but do also belong to a higher order. The sentiment of shame separates us from what we are ashamed of -our physical nature. And this fact evidences another fact, namely that we are not only the physical being we are ashamed of. I share this sentiment of shame with others- *therefore I am* (a human being).

- *Each and every human being knows the feeling of compassion.*

Soloviov quotes from Isaac of Syria: "Compassion is the burning of man's heart for whatever there is, humans, birds, demons, and everything that has been created. Whenever man is mindful of them and looks at them, Tears will flow from his eyes. The strong and overwhelming pity which fill his or her heart and the great suffering contract his heart and he will not be able to accept that any harm or sorrow will happen to any of those creatures". Soloviov himself was sad to have come home without his coat on many a winter evening because he had met a beggar on the street.

- *Each and every human being is familiar with the feeling of awe.*

Compassion means for the individual, that he or she has an individual obligation to feed the hungry etc. If the number of the needy outnumbers my individual capacity to help, then this fact cannot mean that my obligation becomes nil. There is a solidaric obligation to help.

Human history is then a history of how human beings in every generation developed a notion of the true-and-good, or failed to develop that notion, and of how

their actions were influenced by their knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the true-and-good.

Solovyov also tried to develop a vision of an economy that is based on the notion of the true-and-good. He came to the conclusion that "to see in the human being only a producer, a proprietor and user of material goods is both immoral and incorrect. These activities have *per se* no importance or relevance for human existence, and they can therefore not be the expression or even an image of human essence or the value of human existence... In a living society that is open to the future the economic elements are guided and channeled by moral objectives" (cf. Muckermann, 69).

2.The Renaissance of Russian Personalism. A Challenge for Western Individualism.

Should Russian Personalism become a paradigm for Russian philosophy in the near future, there is no reason for the West to rejoice. Nor is the *End of History* near, then. Russian Personalism will in any case challenge and critique Western modern individualism and bourgeois capitalism -the ingredients of what E. Mounier called "le désordre établi" (established dis-order).

Russian Personalism can be expected to challenge Western individualism on at least four levels:

- (1) because it tries to give history a direction, a goal, an aim. Western modern individualism does not give history a goal, a direction, an aim. The social welfare-state does not need faith, hope, charity. Modern Western society is a system of checks and balances, enabling *egos* (not *personae*) to co-exist.
- (2) because it tries to give dignity to the human *person*. There is no theory of the human person at present in the West. There are theories of the psyche, of the citizen, of the subject of economic conditions, sociological theories of the religious believer. But there is no theory of the person *qua* person that has any influence on decision-making.
- (3) because it wants *solidarity*. The Russian personalist thinker does not want to discuss individual rights. Nor does he want to discuss about which form of government is best. There will always be injustices in any form of government. If humans, however, become aware of their person-hood, and the person-hood of whoever lives with them, then they will be able to live complete lives anywhere. Solidarity has two aspects, then: on one hand it is a necessary condition for human survival. On the other hand it is a great chance for humankind -the condition for the possibility of becoming one-self.
- (4) because it is *Christian* in a radical sense. Solovyov put it very strictly:

"Mankind believed that one could believe in Christ and yet afford not to take his words seriously. Thus certain passages of the gospels were interpreted in certain ways to make certain agreeable conclusions possible, while other passages were deliberately being overlooked." Give unto Ceasar what

RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

is Caesar's', 'my kingdom is not of this world'... those were the words well received. But never: 'mine is all power in heaven and on earth'. Christ the priest, Christ the sacrificial lamb -those were the images we liked so well, but never Christ the king. Christian peoples have repeated and repeated for centuries: 'we have no king but Caesar'. And we have thus even today a society which calls itself Christian, but which is intrinsically heathen, not only as far as the ways of life are concerned, but which is intrinsically heathen even in its fundamental attitudes toward life" (cf. Muckermann, 107ff).

From what has been said it seems to be obvious that Russian Personalism -should it become a major philosophical trend- will be incommensurate with Western individualism. It will pose major challenges to it. But then, shouldn't it be challenged?

* Institut International des Sciences Politiques et Sociales
Pensier-Fribourg, Switzerland

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RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

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** The reader will not find all of these works quoted in the text. This bibliography is rather meant to be something like a "Reading List" for further relevant lecture as literature on non-Marxist Russian philosophy is rather scarce and translations hard to come by.