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REVIEW OF NATALIYA PETRESHAK'S DOCTORAL THESIS ENTITLED  
*A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF A PERSON IN THE  
THOUGHT OF NIKOLAI BERDYAEV AND RENÉ GUÉNON*

The study written by Nataliya Petreshak is not a large (162 pages, including bibliography) comparative analysis of the philosophies of person elaborated by Nikolai Berdyaev and René Guénon. The first belongs to the classics of the 20th century philosophy, while the second was a religious thinker and an esoteric writer who can at best be treated as a figure from the margins of philosophy. The author of the thesis, however, treats him as a full-fledged philosopher too – a disputable, but, perhaps, not entirely unacceptable approach. Berdyaev and Guénon were both very prolific writers, which certainly makes any analysis or confrontation of their ideas more complicated and difficult.

The dissertation consists of three chapters (divided into many subchapters), which deal with the life, intellectual biography and personality of both protagonists (Chapter I), the origins and evolution of the idea of the person (Chapter II) and, finally, Guénon's and Berdyaev's philosophy of person (Chapter III). The last part of the work is a short conclusion in which the author tries to summarise the results of her reflections and analyses.

Berdyaev and Guénon happened to live for a period of time in the same city, Paris, yet they probably never met, although they had at least one

common friend - Jacques Maritain. Ms. Petreshak notices this lack of personal contact – a rather strange thing given Berdyaev's readiness to socialise with anyone whom he considered intellectually interesting, be them famous thinkers or illiterate religious sectarians – but she does not interpret or comment on it. She is aware of the differences between the styles of thinking characteristic of Berdyaev and Guénon, but ultimately emphasises the general similarities rather than the divergences between the two thinkers (pp.51-52). According to her, their intellectual proposals should be seen in terms of a reaction to the crises, revolutions and catastrophs of their epoch: the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. In this sense they were both deeply and similarly influenced by the course of history. At the same time the author of the dissertation maintains that they were optimists who believed in the final overcoming of the crisis of civilisation and proposed their own varieties of a cyclical historiosphy.

In reconstructing the history of the concept of the person, the author describes its origins and the main stages of its development, paying particular attention to the contribution of the Church Fathers and their influence on Guénon – who claimed that the heritage of the Church Fathers was lost by the later Christianity – and even more so on Berdyaev, who, in her opinion, was always deeply inspired by the Patristic tradition. The author concentrates in her synopsis, which exhibits considerable erudition, on the early phases of the development of the concept of the person (from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages), ignoring the vicissitudes of this concept in modern and contemporary philosophy, even though she alludes here and there to the presence of the "personalist school" in 20th century thought.

The interpretation of Berdyaev's thought proposed by Petreshak is far from the understanding of this thinker accepted by the majority of historians. She argues that Berdyaev's thought is rooted in the patristic tradition and the mysticism of the Orthodox Christianity (p. 92) and exhibits a very strong communitarian tendency. In her opinion Berdyaev is one of those Russian thinkers who more than others exposed the idea of *sobornost'* (p. 139). According to her, he strictly links the evolution of a person with the fate of community and claims that thinking is a collective activity (p. 144). She writes much about his references to the Kabbalah, although she notes that they should not be overestimated, yet she minimises his interest in Silesian mysticism. According to her reading, in Berdyaev's philosophy the person does not exist actually but is a task, a final form of existence to be achieved by an individual, which is possible only in the womb of a collective. She notes the role played in Berdyaev's personalism by the idea of creativity; this creativity in her view has a purely contemplative character (p. 124).

In discussing Guénon's thought, the author of the study reveals the central role played in it by the idea of initiation. Guénon discovers its structure in various religious traditions and obviously subordinates his concept of the person to it. The idea of the person - says the French esotericist - has been forgotten by modern humanity, which has wrongly confused it with the individual. The only "real person", a person worthy of the name, is the Universal Man (identified with the Kabbalistic Adam Kadmon and the Cosmic Man of the Hermetic tradition). The author of the study does not say much about the ontological status of this mysterious being, and perhaps Guénon did not explain it satisfactorily either. The individuals are merely manifestations and singularisations of the Universal Man (p.107) or, in other

words, they are beings who participate in the Universal Man, but are never completely united with Him. Through initiation they can perfect themselves, transform and approach the ideal (p. 107). In the course of initiation, an individual loses his specific characteristics and becomes more and more the image of the ideal (Universal Man). The highest form of initiation means withdrawal from the world; accordingly to it, contemplation, i.e. paradoxical "passive activity", constitutes the highest form of activity.

The final part of the study, entitled *General Conclusion*, begins with a rather surprising declaration of its non-conclusiveness. "The analysis of this research - Petreshak writes - has revealed various unresolved issues that warrant further exploration and investigation" (p.148). Fortunately, in the next passages the author makes several statements that contradict these words. In some places she suggests (149-150), in others she clearly states (p. 151), that both thinkers are representatives of personalism, enumerating the common features of their positions and pointing out the differences between them. They were both convinced that man is a being whose vocation is to transform himself into a person, and conceived of transformation as a spiritual process leading to the transfiguration of the created world and approaching transcendence. In terms of differences, Berdyaev was an eschatological thinker who expected the future transformation of the world and believed in the possibility of the complete metamorphosis of an individuality into a person, while Guénon was a traditionalist, who denied the possibility of the complete "personalisation" of an individual.

The author of the study announces more than once, and without any trace of modesty, that her work is an innovative contribution to the history of 20th century thought (pp. 8, 54). There is no doubt that she raises a problem that

deserves real attention from researchers, and indeed she does so for the first time, if one does not take into account several passages in Robin Waterfield's book *René Guénon and the Future of the West* (first edition 1987). So far, at least, I have not found any monograph devoted entirely to a comparative analysis of the thought of Berdyaev and Guénon or of selected aspects of it. I admit that a fascinating book could be written on such a subject. But the dissertation under review is by no means a fascinating one, even if it does, with a slight surplus, meet the minimum requirements for a doctoral thesis. On the other hand, we should not forget that, for the reasons mentioned in the first paragraph of the review, the subject is so difficult that it would be a real challenge for any author, not only for a young researcher taking the first steps in her academic career.

What are then - in my opinion - the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis? Let us start with the strengths. The best criterion for the real value of a thesis in the humanities is whether it makes the reader think. If it does, we have proof that the work is not absolutely devoid of significant content. Nataliya Petreshak's study raises, even though it does so rather indirectly, a very important question about the compatibility of personalistic thinking with non-Christian religious traditions, especially with the Islamic one. In other words, she asks whether personalism can emerge and flourish in a non-Christian cultural context, on non-Christian soil. The answer that emerges from the study seems to be negative, because even if the author calls Guénon "a personalist", the extent to which his "personalism" differs from Berdyaev's is obvious at first sight. In the conclusion the author states that Guénon's concept of initiation is compatible with Christianity (p. 152). One could add: Guénon's concept of initiation is more compatible with

Christianity than western personalism - always being a *philosophy of difference* - is compatible with Guénon's concept of initiation. The latter abolishes difference, dissolves all persons in the Universal Person and could be compared to an oriental night in which all pilgrims are black.

This contrast is striking despite the author's efforts to make Berdyaev more similar to Guénon than he really was. While I disagree with her interpretation of Berdyaev, I admit that this thinker, like all great philosophers, can be read in different ways, and I find Petreshak's reading acceptable, even valuable, when she reveals the patristic heritage in Berdyaev's thought. Her interpretation is undoubtedly too holistic and too communitarian, but who knows, perhaps mine is too individualistic. In any case, this distortion of Berdyaev's image makes the idea that the Oriental concept of initiation is an example of impersonalism – which, incidentally, is how Berdyaev would see it – all the more convincing. The contrast between Berdyaev's personalism and the “personalism” of Guénon remains obvious even after Berdyaev has been reinterpreted in such an unusual manner.

The biographical chapter is an interesting one as it provides a wealth of valuable information on the lives of both thinkers and offers an outline of their personalities. Perhaps the portraits of both could be more synthetic and vivid, but that would require a literary gift that we cannot demand of a scholar writing in a foreign language.

At this I feel obliged to make a sober remark about the practice of writing in English about Russian philosophy by scholars in Poland, who presumably know Russian: it does not make much sense. Writing about writers (poets, novelists, thinkers, etc.) in their own language has been a normal practice in the academic world for centuries, and I see no reason to abandon it. This is

especially true in the case of Russian religious thought, with its idiomatic language, key terms of which cannot be translated into English (but are often translatable, although not without difficulties, into other Slavic languages). The Russian adjective *sobornaya* as an adjunct to the noun *community* does not mean *universal*, as the author translates (p. 144), but *typical of sobornost'*, i.e. monoplural, informal, free, and abolishing the tension between the individual and the collective. If the dissertation had been written in a language other than English (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian), it would have been better both for the subject matter and the author, not because her English is bad - I am not competent to evaluate it - but because it is not the best tool for analysing and describing Russian thought.

Unfortunately, the dissertation also has its flaws, which must be relentlessly enumerated in order to help the author avoid them in the future.

The first two, in fact introductory, chapters of the study are too long in comparison with Chapter III, which is the most important and constitutes the core of the dissertation. Next, there are also too many auto-references and repetitions in the text: the author too often tells us what she is going to say or what she has already said. It is true that this is a mistake commonly made by academic authors, still such redundancy is a waste of space, so precious in a concise study, which could be used to communicate more important things. It is not surprising, then, that the author overlooks a number of topics the discussion of which would make her study both deeper and more interesting. To mention just a few: the definition of personalism, the idea of microcosm in Berdyaev's philosophy (she notes its role in Guénon's thought but completely ignores its presence in Berdyaev's anthropology), references to or

remarks on Guénon in Berdyaev's writings (there are only few of them but they are worthy of attention and comment).

Unfortunately, some of Petreshak's comments on Berdyaev's historiosophy (p. 18, 52) exemplify a complete misinterpretation. Berdyaev was neither an optimist nor a proponent of the cyclical theory, but a catastrophist who was convinced that the crisis could, but did not have to, be overcome. As an ardent defender of human freedom he also rejected all cyclical theories. The title *The New Middle Ages* may seem to suggest something else - but it does so only to those who have not looked into the book.

The language of the dissertation is fluent, yet often not precise enough, especially with regard to philosophical, sociological and historical terminology. The author many times uses the term *metaphysics* and its derivatives in a strange, unclear and incorrect way (pp. 39, 44-46). What does the term *metaphysician* mean in the following sentence: "[...] Ananda Coomaraswamy, a renowned Indian philosopher and metaphysician"? (p. 39) Or what does the term *ideology* mean to the author when she writes as follows: "During this particular period, a variety of ideologies emerged, with some of the most influential being fascism, communism, socialism, and capitalism" (p. 14)? Socialism is an example of an ideology in a very different sense than communism or fascism are. Furthermore, I have never heard of such an ideology as *capitalism*, even if it is true that capitalism as a social order has its own ideology, as some researchers and thinkers point out, which happens to include elements of socialism as an ideology. Another issue concerns the periodisation and naming of intellectual and artistic currents. "This phase in the development of Russian philosophy - we read in the dissertation - went under various names, including the Silver Age, the *fin de*



*siècle*, and the Russian religious Renaissance" (p. 20). Absolutely not! These terms are not synonymous, only one of them – Russian religious Renaissance – is the name of a philosophical current, Silver Age and *fin de siècle* are the names of epochs, one of them used only in the Russian context.

There are also a number of minor factual errors in the text of the dissertation. No monograph is completely free of such errors, but in this case there are some that could have easily been avoided if the author had been a little more careful. For instance, she states at one point (p. 23) that "Berdyayev became acquainted with the works of Jacob Boehme" in 1920s, after leaving Soviet Russia, during his stay in Berlin, but in another place (p. 31) she inform us that he knew Boehme's philosophy before 1917. Obviously, only one of these statements can be true. Another example - the beautiful book by Berdyayev *О рабстве и свободе человека* (*The Slavery and Freedom* in the English translation) is included by the author of thesis among the works of the philosopher written during the Second World War. The book was published in 1939. Berdyayev used to write rather quickly, but it is hardly possible that he managed to write and publish the book within four months, between Spetember the 1st and the end of the year 1939.

To conclude, despite all critical remarks, I consider *A Critical Assessment of the Concept of a Person in the Thought of Nikolai Berdyayev and René Guénon* by Nataliya Petreshak to fulfill the formal requirements for a PhD thesis and recommend proceeding to the subsequent stages of the doctoral procedure.

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