

Peter Ehlen's Christian Reading of Frank's Russian Religious Philosophy

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ABSTRACT This paper analyzes the problem of Western perceptions of one of the most original branches of the Russian Philosophical Renaissance that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century: namely, the so called Russian Religious Philosophy. This problem still possesses contemporary relevance, owing to the fact that Russian philosophy continues to be engaged in a search for self-identification in respect of Western philosophical contexts. The paper shows that “Russian Religious Philosophy” is perceived by Western thinkers not only as “an exotic cultural phenomenon,” but also as an equal partner in a dialogue: it is considered a significant philosophical achievement, meeting all generally accepted criteria of philosophical creativity. The German Catholic philosopher Peter Ehlen’s monograph on the subject of the religious philosophy of Semyon Lyudvigovich Frank will furnish us, here, with an example of just such an approach. The author of the monograph approaches his subject as something which he himself stands in an essential connection to—something which he, as a researcher, is in a peculiar spiritual communion with. A common spiritual experience of the religious perception of reality determines both Ehlen’s interest in Frank and the specific character of the research undertaken by him. The position of researcher, expected to maintain a certain distance from his or her subject matter, is replaced by that of a co-thinker, engaged in co-experiencing and understanding in depth the ideas of the particular philosopher under examination. The result of this approach is a new synthesis created by Ehlen on the basis of Frank’s philosophy.

KEYWORDS Ehlen, Peter; experience; Frank, Semyon; methodology of history of philosophy; religious philosophy; Russian Philosophical Renaissance

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1. THE PROBLEM OF THE RECEPTION OF RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY IN THE WEST

Russian philosophy is a multidimensional phenomenon. It includes various trends, which allows us to speak about the “polyphony”¹ of Russian thought. “Russian Religious Philosophy” is seen as a special trend in the history of Russian thought of the late 19th and 20th centuries, whose representatives defended the religious character of philosophy in general, stating that “religious intuition lies at the bottom of any philosophical knowledge” and considering philosophy to be “a necessary tie . . . between comprehension of the Deity and rational knowledge of reality.”² An attempt at synthesizing religion with philosophy, knowledge with faith, in order to provide a basis for creating a new picture of the world, for a new methodology of cognition, and for grasping the true essence of being, made up the deeper sense of the investigations carried out by the thinkers belonging to this current.³

Peter Ehlen, in his book *Russische Religionsphilosophie im 20. Jahrhundert: Simon L. Frank*,⁴ —which, in my opinion, provides an interesting example of how so called Russian Religious Philosophy is perceived nowadays in the West—establishes the fact of there having been, particularly in Germany, only a very limited degree of familiarity with the philosophical work of the Russians. According to him, this was confined to knowledge of writer-philosophers (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Nikolay Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, and others) and unsystematic philosophers (Nikolay Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, Mikhail Bakhtin).⁵

On the other hand, the bibliography which I myself recently compiled on Semyon Frank,⁶ one of the main representatives of Russian religious

1. Mikhail Gromov, “Russkaya filosofiya” [Russian Philosophy], in *Novaya filosofskaya ensiklopediya*, ed. Vyacheslav Semenovich Stepin (Moscow: Mysl, 2010), <http://iph.ras.ru/elib/2618.html>.

2. Semyon Frank, “Filosofiya i religiya” [Philosophy and Religion], in *Na perelome: Filosofskiiye diskussii 20–ch godov*, ed. P. V. Alekseev (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), 322–23. For the reader’s convenience, I shall refer to Frank’s works in the main text using the standardly accepted English translations of their titles, even where they have not actually been published in English.

3. Andrey D. Sukhov, *Russkaya filosofiya: Osobennosti, traditsii, istoricheskiye sud’by* [Russian Philosophy: Specifics, Traditions, Historical Fates] (Moscow: Rossiyskaya akademiya nauk, Institut filosofii, 1995).

4. Peter Ehlen, *Russische Religionsphilosophie im 20. Jahrhundert: Simon L. Frank; das Gottmenschliche des Menschen* (Freiburg; Munchen: Verlag Karl Alberg, 2009).

5. Peter Ehlen, *Semyon L. Frank: Filosof khristianskogo gumanizma* [Semyon L. Frank: A Philosopher of Christian Humanism] (Moscow: Ideya-Press, 2012).

6. Oksana Nazarova, “Bibliografiya proizvedeniy Semyena Lyudvigovicha Franka” [Bib-

philosophy, testifies to a fairly wide interest in his work, confirmed by translations of his texts into English, German, Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Italian, Dutch, Hungarian, and French, as well as by the existence of a variety of research works devoted to different aspects of his activity. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are other modes of acceptance of Russian philosophy in the West. These may take the form of direct dialogue (through personal contacts, lectures, public presentations), and the publication of texts by international publishing houses, not linked in any manner to Russian emigration.

The traditional interest of Western Slavonic scholars in Russian religious philosophy confirms, at first sight, the thesis that its peculiarity exhibits to an exceptional degree a "national" character, so that to try to understand it is, accordingly, tantamount to attempting to unravel the "enigmatic Russian soul." However, the publication, in German, of a collection of works by Semyën Frank, initiated by the professors of religious (Catholic) universities, and the appearance of books about Frank written by the Jesuit philosopher Peter Ehlen, testify to the possibility of Russian religious philosophy also being comprehended by Western philosophers.⁷ Frank himself mentioned this fact in his German lecture "The Russian Worldview," addressed to the Berlin section of the Kant Philosophical Society in 1925, in which he set out to offer a characterization of the specific character of the Russian mode of thinking.

2. THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE AS DEFINED BY FRANK

In his lecture Frank tells us that "the only way that leads one to genuine understanding and enables one to give an objective evaluation of Russian philosophy" is "intuitive fathoming and empathy."⁸ In the pages of his lecture, we may also encounter a different notion of "experience," synony-

liography of Works of Semyon Lyudvigovich Frank], in *Filosofiya pervoy poloviny XX veka: Semyën Lyudvigovich Frank*, ed. Vladimir N. Porus (Moscow: Rossiyskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya, 2012).

7. Something similar can be said in relation to a number of studies (Master's and PhD theses) devoted to Frank's activity by young German scholars at the Munich High School of Philosophy (Germany). While their interest may have been inspired by the educational activities of Professor Ehlen, I think we can be sure that none of the postgraduate or doctoral candidates involved would have written about Frank if his philosophy had not held a genuine interest for them.

8. Semyon Frank, "Russkoye mirovozzreniye" [Russian World-view], transl. G. Franko, in *Russkoye mirovozzreniye* (Sankt Petersburg: Nauka, 1996), 162. Originally published in German as *Die russische Weltanschauung*, Charlottenburg: Pan-Verlag Heise, 1926.

mous with the ambiguous notions of “intuition” and “empathy.” This kind of experience consists in “spiritual advancement towards understanding the spiritual essence” of a subject.⁹

Frank was engaged in dealing with the concept of “experience” throughout his entire creative life. It can be found in his early articles about Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹⁰ and William James,¹¹ as well as in his work *God with Us*, in the first chapter of which he gave a detailed analysis of this concept. What does Frank understand by “experience”? My intention here is to subject the main constituents of this concept to further examination.

For Frank, experience means the “non-external cognition of the subject”; it is not “the experience of perceptual evidence” but, rather, consists in approaching “something through internal apprehensions and empathy,” and in a “vital-intuitive grasp of being in empathy and emotion, in a vital-intuitive manner.”¹² Obviously, Frank is speaking here about spiritual experience.

In Frank’s article about Goethe, we come across another very important element of his definition of “experience.” There he discusses the “objectivity of cognition”: there is present within experience, construed as a domestication by the human spirit of the reality of the object itself in its vital integrity, “a self-evident sense of objectivity, a clear feeling that a statement reproduces objects as they are—[a feeling] which can be based on the nature of objects and not on subjective motives.”¹³ Later, in his “The Russian Worldview,” Frank referred to this as an “inner testimony of being,” or the “primary and completely direct evidence” of being itself.¹⁴ At the same time, in his work *God with Us*, he expressed the same idea in a more laconic way: the “real presence of the object itself, in contrast to a judgment, which is a reflection on transcendent reality, is called experience. A reflection, a judgment, require verification, and so may be true or illusory. Whereas experience confirms itself; it is enough for experience simply to exist in order to be truth.”¹⁵

In the same work, Frank phrases his considerations concerning the

9. Ibid.

10. Semyon Frank, “Iz etyudov o Gyëte: Gnoseologiya Gyëte” [From Etudes about Goethe: Goethe’s Gnoseology], *Russkaya mysl’* 31, no. [book] 8 (1910). Reprinted in *Zhivoye znaniye* (Berlin: Obelisk, 1923), 25–70.

11. Semyon Frank, “Filosofiya religii V. Dzhemsa” [Philosophy of Religion of W. James], *Russkaya mysl’* 31, no. [book] 2 (1910): 155–64.

12. Ibid., 166.

13. Frank, “Iz etyudov o Gyëte,” 39 in reprint edition.

14. Frank, “Russkoye mirovozzreniye,” 1 68.

"general nature of experience" in more concrete terms, and focuses in detail on its specific sub-species: on "religious experience." I would like to point out two characteristics of this experience, which will be important for my subsequent discussions.

Firstly, "experience," according to Frank, "cannot be restricted to what is manifestly given, but also comprises that which occurs as hidden, which is present without being given." In philosophical language, we might say that this experience amounts to the "immanent experience of transcendent reality." Religious experience confirms that "God's transcendence contradicts neither his immanence, nor his direct presence . . . in the depths of our spirit, as a component of our inner experience."¹⁶

Secondly, while comparing religious experience with other extra-sensuous types of experience, such as forms of aesthetic and moral experience, Frank comes to the conclusion that a profound analogy is exhibited with the experience of communication between people. "Religious experience is a special type of experience, whose essence can be most strictly defined as the experience of communication," he writes.¹⁷

3. THE WORLDVIEW-CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS NATURE OF RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

The West can, surely, understand things Russian, but only if it is willing to take the very essence of their Russianness into account. According to Frank, the "Russian spirit possesses an exceptional inclination and ability to apply the religious point of view to life," and "a Russian thinker in his typical national form is, in the first place, a religious thinker, a religiously conditioned spirit."¹⁸ Apart from that, Russian philosophy is, basically, a "theory having the character of a world-view," because "its essence and central purpose never lie in the field of purely theoretical, unbiased cognition of the world, but instead always consist in a religious-and-emotional interpretation of life."¹⁹

15. Semyon Frank, *S nami Bog* [God with Us] (1964), Ch. 1.2 "Vera kak religiozny opyt" [Belief as Religious Experience], accessed 31 August 2013, http://azbyka.ru/vera_i_neverie/o_vere/frank_s_nami_bog_01-all.shtml.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Semyon Frank, "Russkaya filosofiya, eyë kharakternaya osobennost' i zadacha" [Russian Philosophy, Its Peculiarity and Mission], in *Russkoye mirovozzreniye*, 208.

19. Frank, "Russkoye mirovozzreniye," 164.

For Frank, Russian philosophy, in possessing these characteristics, corresponds to the essence of philosophy as such. This is because philosophy can be considered a science only “in a derivative sense,” and is primarily “an intuitive teaching of a worldview, which stands above science, and which is closely related . . . to religious mysticism.”²⁰ If we take into consideration this refined understanding of philosophy, then, as Frank thinks, Russian philosophy “has enough significance to generate in Western European readers not only literary and historical, but also a profound inner interest.”²¹ This philosophy can be understood specifically “through fathoming the religiosity and worldview-character of its roots.”²²

The philosopher holds that the Western European philosophical mode of thinking (in particular, the German philosophical mode of thinking) is capable of accepting Russian philosophy, because they are identical in respect of their substance: “both Western European and Russian cultures originate from the welding of Christianity and the spirit of antiquity, being two branches coming from a common stem.”²³ Frank was profoundly convinced that it is on a religious and mystical basis that the sense of a deep kindred relationship obtaining between the German and Russian spirits has arisen. “The Religious essence of the Russian spirit directly feels, so to say, its partial kinship with the philosophical essence of the German spirit.”²⁴

4. FRANK’S REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE, AS REFLECTED ON BY SOME RELIGIOUSLY INCLINED WESTERN HISTORIANS OF PHILOSOPHY

The notion of experience, employed as a basis for analyzing the work of a historian of philosophy, can be understood in two ways, resulting in two different analytical approaches:

- a) external experience serves as a foundation for an inquiry which will reconstruct the views of a given philosopher as these relate to an overall subject area, starting from claims made by him about a particular subject within this area;

20. Semyon Frank, “Sushchnost’ i vedushchiye motivy russkoy filosofii” [Nature of and the Leading Motives in Russian Philosophy], in *Russkoye mirovozzreniye*, 151. Originally published in German.

21. Ibid.

22. Frank, “Russkoye mirovozzreniye,” 164.

23. Ibid., 195.

24. Ibid.

- b) the facts of inner likeness and common spiritual experience give birth to a different type of philosophical inquiry, in which the internal experience of the researcher encounters the inner experience of the philosopher being studied.

As a result of the second approach, the text produced by the scholar can be viewed as a synthesis of the experiences of both personalities. Frequently, differentiation between the philosopher's own opinion and its interpretation as given by the scholar will be impossible. Strictly speaking, such an interpretation cannot be called a study, since the point of view of a scholar implies a distance, a view from without. But in such cases "an encounter with reality" takes place—with the *spiritual* reality of the other, of the *transcendent* person, of the thinker—as the object is present in the experience just as it actually is, without raising any questions about its genuineness. I prefer to use the term "profound" when referring to historico-philosophical studies based in just this sort of way on a particular kind of experience—a profound experience of communication. While communicating, we perceive our interlocutor as the other related to us. In the process of historico-philosophical study, taking the form of communication, the philosopher under scrutiny is also recognized by the scholar investigating him as someone to whom he is, in some essential way, connected by a relation.

The book by Peter Ehlen, mentioned above, may serve as an example of such a study.²⁵ Many of the chapters of this book in fact represent a new synthesis created on the basis of Frank's philosophy. It is possible to comprehend this synthesis only through close acquaintance. It is impossible to resolve this synthesis into components, to show how one branch of one's experience becomes interwoven with one's other experiences. Therefore, it is advisable to read the relevant chapters of Ehlen's book (Chapters 8–13), where, from my point of view, the presence of such a synthesis is most readily apparent.

5. FRANK'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

It has already become a commonplace in Frank scholarship to claim that his work *The Unknowable* (1939),²⁶ defined by Frank himself as "an intro-

25. When Frank himself plays the role of a historian of philosophy, he adopts a very similar approach. As an example, we may adduce his article about Bergson: Semyon Frank, "O filosofskoy intuitsii" [On Philosophical Intuition], *Russkaya mysl'* 33, no. [book] 3 (1912).

duction to the philosophy of religion,” represents the peak of his activity. Thus, one may be astonished by the fact that Peter Ehlen’s study, focused on his philosophy of religion, offers an innovative approach to Frank in this respect.²⁷ Even though Frank himself acknowledged that the philosophy of religion was the crucial topic in his philosophical world-view, no author before Ehlen had undertaken such a profound and detailed study of Frank’s philosophy through the prism of the philosophy of religion. I suppose that this is no accident. In order to reveal the importance of the philosophy of religion in Frank, one must not only possess similar experience, but such experience must be as profound as Frank’s own was. The issues discussed by Frank in *The Unknowable* actually require scholars of Frank to have a deep interest in them themselves. Ehlen, being a religious philosopher, possesses a particular type of philosophical mindset and similar experiences, and so is able to undertake a revealing study of Frank’s religious-and-philosophical world-view.

I would like to point out that Frank’s understanding of “philosophy of religion” is remote from its currently widespread definition as a “philosophical branch of learning whose task is to analyze religion, its essence and its various manifestations.” In this meaning, “philosophy of religion” is almost synonymous with “religious studies.” Bearing in mind Frank’s understanding of experience generally and religious experience as a variety of this, one should not attribute such an understanding of the philosophy of religion to him. It is necessary to turn one’s attention instead to a point he made, in *God with Us*, that his discussions of God are “nothing else but careful, fully conscious account of the contents of our experience.”²⁸ Consequently, in his understanding, the philosophy of religion is nothing else but a phenomenology of religious experience, i.e., an account of what is revealed in this experience. Religion is not for Frank a subject to be studied; religion is what inner experience contains. Accordingly, a historical-and-philosophical study of Frank’s philosophy of religion should be an exposition of the contents of Frank’s religious experience. However, I would prefer to leave open here the question of whether Ehlen’s book has a subject-structure that is in conformity with the structure of religious experience that Ehlen finds in Frank or with the subjects Ehlen himself discusses (i.e., proofs of God’s existence, the credibility of faith, the relation between the

26. Semyon Frank, *Nepostizhimoye: Ontologicheskoe vvedenie v filosofiyu religii* [The Unknowable: An Ontological Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion], Russkaya nauchnaya biblioteka 1 (Paris: Dom Knigi i Sovremennye Zapiski, 1939).

27. Ehlen, *Russische Religionsphilosophie*.

28. Frank, *S nami Bog*, Ch. 1.2 “Vera kak religiozny opyt” [Belief as Religious Experience].

Creator and his creation, the participation of a human in the Divine creation, the problem of theodicy and the problem of sin, etc.), which reflect the standard set of issues dealt with in Western philosophy of religion. It would be a challenging task, indeed, to answer that question in a short article such as this one.

6. IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

I believe that the phenomenon of Western philosophers' interest in Russian philosophy may be explained through the hypothesis that there are various types of philosophical mindset. Each of those types is created on the basis of some "initial philosophical intuitions,"²⁹ becomes incarnated within certain patterns and principles of thinking, and is instantiated in the writings of people whom we might call its "carriers," no matter what the chronological period and national boundaries pertaining to the context of their creation happen to be. Thus, it is a similarity of spiritual or vital experience that seems not only to have drawn Ehlen to the study of Frank, but also to have shaped his own specific approach, in which he abandons traditional scholarly distance for, instead, something we might describe as a co-reflecting on, co-experiencing of, and co-feeling about the ideas uttered by the author he is studying.

Frank himself experienced a spiritual kinship of "initial intuitions" with some representatives of Catholic Christian philosophy. According to him, the speech given by the Neo-Scholastic philosopher Erich Przywara during the 8th World Congress of Philosophy in Prague (1934) turned out to be the very climax of the congress. In his review of *The World Congress of Philosophy*, he wrote that "Przywara, with a high degree of persuasiveness, has managed to demonstrate that philosophical intuition is always nothing more than a special projection of religious intuition corresponding to the intermediary position of philosophy in as much as the latter is situated in between religion and mundane consciousness. The synthesis referred to by Przywara tended towards a synthesis of philosophy and religion in the fullness of both."³⁰

This parallel with Catholic philosophy shows that one should not think one can discern a distinctively Russian approach in the "religious understanding of philosophy" *per se*. One should rather employ the term "Christian philosophy" in a wide sense, not determined by any particular con-

29. Frank, "O filosofskoy intuitsii," 32.

30. Semyon Frank, "Filosofiya i zhizn" [*Philosophy and Life*], *Put'* 45 (1934): 72–73.

fession. Representatives of such a “Christian philosophy” were opposed to the idea of “pure philosophy,” stood for the unity of faith and reason, tied their philosophical ideas to the canonical dogmas of Christianity, and developed the doctrine of being to the point of being able to produce a body of philosophical doctrine concerning God. In several textbooks on the history of philosophy (both Western and Russian), the topic of Russian religious philosophy is traditionally placed in the sections on “Christian Philosophy,” alongside Neo-Scholasticism and Protestant Philosophy.³¹

This kind of deficiency in the reception of Russian religious philosophy in the West has been noted by Ehlen.³² To be sure, the very descriptor “Russian” seems to imply, via an opposition between Slavophiles and Westernizers, a traditional approach to explicating this kind of philosophy. Nevertheless, my own opinion is that the problems affecting the reception of Russian religious philosophy in fact stem from the unpopularity of religious approaches to philosophizing generally these days—something that is, itself, a distinctive feature of modern philosophical thinking.³³

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31. See, for example, V. I. Dobrynina, *Philosophy of the Twentieth Century: Tutorial* (Moscow: Znanie, 1997).

32. See note 4.

33. Many authors who practice this kind of philosophy realize that their approach to philosophy is not popular. Statements to this effect may be found in Vasily V. Zenkovsky, *Osnovy khristianskoy filosofii* [Fundamentals of Christian Philosophy], 2 vols. (Frankfurt: 1961–64); Frank, *S nami Bog*; and Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysik: Eine methodisch-systematische Grundlegung* (Innsbruck; Wien; München: Tyrolia, 1961).

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