

## Freedom and *Kenosis* A Reading of Nicolas Berdyaev's *Philosophy of Freedom*

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**ABSTRACT** This article proposes to look at the concept of freedom formulated by Nicholas Berdyaev in his early work, *Philosophy of Freedom*, through the prism of kenotic Christology. The kenotic nature of the Incarnation of the Son of God, as it was described in the St. Paul's *Letter to the Philippians* and developed later by the Christian tradition, was connected with His renunciation of his own infinitude—adopting the “form of a servant” and embracing the limits of the human body. It was an absolutely free act of the divine Person, who revealed to man his own divine model and opened up for him the possibility of its implementation, i.e., the way to becoming a person. For Berdyaev, this possibility is conditioned by the ability to engage in a free act of kenosis, involving the renunciation of the compulsions of reason that have entangled us in natural forms of necessity and that reduce us to mere cogs in the machinery of nature. According to Berdyaev, this way of human kenosis is faith. The act of faith, understood as a rejection of the tendency to seek security through compelling evidence, constitutes a person in his / her uniqueness, and performatively realizes the similarity to God potentially present in every human.

**KEYWORDS** enslavement; freedom; Incarnation; kenosis; kenotic Christology; Nicholas Berdyaev; person; rationalism

Russian thought is full of ideas that can sound surprising, even strange, to the ears of someone who has grown up in Western culture, and who is therefore accustomed to drawing fairly strict distinctions and lines of demarcation between different areas—such as religion and philosophy. The title of this text may also strike the reader this way, associating as it does the notion of freedom with the theological term *kenosis*. This, however, reflects its object, which is an idea that demands to be placed at the level of

philosophy, even while being consciously derived from religious sources—above all from the spiritual inspiration of Orthodox Christianity.

The very idea of interpreting the concept of freedom—as it is present in the deliberations of Russian thinkers—in terms of *kenosis* was expressed explicitly in Tomáš Špidlík's book, *L'idée russe. Une autre vision de l'homme*.<sup>1</sup> But I think that this fascinating issue was not sufficiently explored there, perhaps because of the very nature of that work, which is rather a compilation than an analysis or an interpretation. Špidlík did touch on certain topics: primarily, the agapic-kenotic nature of the person,<sup>2</sup> the relationship between *kenosis* and free creativity,<sup>3</sup> and finally the importance of the idea of a self-limiting and suffering God for some thinkers (mainly S. Bulgakov) and for Orthodox piety.<sup>4</sup> However, it seems that the problem is much more complex and reaches deep into Russian religious and philosophical thought, on a level where it approaches, critically, the achievements of Western philosophy—especially in the field of epistemology or, to use a term of Berdyaev, gnoseology. Therefore we must formulate the matter appropriately and examine the issues relating to God's self-limitation, and to its transposition, through religion and philosophy, into the reality of human actions. This should allow for a much better understanding of what Russian thought has to say about freedom and how this concept of freedom is influenced by Russian Orthodox Christianity.

For the purposes of this article I have decided to choose only one author and one text: Nicholas Berdyaev and his *Philosophy of Freedom*.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this choice lies mainly in the fact that for Berdyaev the very problem of freedom was the central question, which he considered at different levels.<sup>6</sup>

1. Tomáš Špidlík, *L'idée russe. Une autre vision de l'homme* (Troyes: Éditions Fates, 1994). I am using a Polish translation here: Tomáš Špidlík, *Myśl rosyjska. Inna wizja człowieka*, trans. Janina Dembska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Księży Marianów, 2000).

2. Špidlík, *Myśl rosyjska*, 26–27.

3. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

4. *Ibid.*, 60–64.

5. Nikolay Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody* (Moskva: ACT, 2005; first published Moscow, 1911).

6. This central aspect of Berdyaev's thought has attracted the attention of many authors. Cf., e.g., Paul Evdokimov, *Poznanie Boga w Kościele Wschodnim*, trans. Alina Li-duchowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 1996), 93; Ewa Matuszczyk, "O wolności według M. A. Bierdiajewa," in Nikolay Berdayev, *Filozofia wolności*, trans. Ewa Matuszczyk (Białystok: Orthdruk, 1995), v–xvii; Fuad Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity; A Critical Study* (London: V. Gollancz, 1967); Matthew Spinka, *Nicholas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959); Michel Alexander Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom: Life and Teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev* (New York:

He is therefore the most representative person and thinker for the issue I am interested in. And *Philosophy of Freedom*, although an early work of Berdyaev, is also representative of his whole thinking about freedom. As Alexander Mien has put it: “this book contains within itself all that, in the future, will be the themes of Berdyaev.”<sup>7</sup>

I must note here that the definition of freedom in terms of *kenosis* does not appear explicitly in *Philosophy of Freedom* or, perhaps, in any other work by Berdyaev. However, it is possible to deduce such a concept of freedom from his book, especially since it is a “theological philosophy,” consciously rooted in the spirituality of the Orthodox tradition. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly a philosophical work that puts itself in opposition to certain dominant trends in Western philosophy, especially the critical idealism of Immanuel Kant. Hence the discourse on freedom in *Philosophy of Freedom* is carried on primarily on an epistemological plane. As we will see, for Berdyaev both of these issues are closely related.

The kenotic interpretation of Berdyaev’s concept of freedom requires us to take a glance at the very problem of *kenosis* itself—what it is, how to understand it, what may its relationship be with the issue of freedom, and what perspective it opens up for creating an understanding of freedom. The notion of *kenosis* has a linguistic dimension, which is significant, and which should be adopted as our point of departure. What is essential, however, is its theological significance, which, in the Christian tradition, is associated primarily with issues connected with the Incarnation, but also, in some interpretations, with relationships within the Trinity and with how God relates to the world. Only after having outlined, in this manner, the backdrop to the idea of *kenosis*, shall we be able to pass on to the question of the relationship between *kenosis* and freedom, discussing it through the lens of Berdyaev’s work.

## KENOSIS

As was said, the meaning of the term *kenosis* can be considered on two levels. The first is determined by just the Greek root itself, i.e., the verb “κενόω.” The second is based on the idea of self-limitation of the Son of

Philosophical Library Inc., 1960); Mary-Barbara Zeldin, “Nicholas Berdyaev: Creative Freedom,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1969): 207–15. As far as I know the interpretation of Berdyaev’s concept of freedom in terms of *kenosis* has not previously been attempted.

7. Alexander Men’, “Nikolay Aleksandrovich Berdyaev,” in *Mirovaya dukhovnaya kul’tura. Khristianstvo. Tserkov’: lektsii i beced’i* (Moskva: Fond imeni Aleksandra Menya, 1995), accessed 7 December 2013, [http://www.alexandrmnen.ru/books/mdc/mdc4\\_07.html](http://www.alexandrmnen.ru/books/mdc/mdc4_07.html).

God as expressed in St. Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*, and developed by the subsequent Christian tradition.

The primary semantic range of “κενόω” is connected with activities of removing the content of something, emptying, draining (as opposite to “πληρώω”)<sup>8</sup> or, in a passive sense, being emptied, drained etc. It was also used to denote deserting a place, making it empty.<sup>9</sup> In relation to our topic here, its metaphorical senses are of much greater interest and importance — those ultimately derived from its “material” and “spatial” meanings. Figuratively, “κενόω” means “to divest,” “to make of no account or effect,” “to take away the effectiveness or significance of something,” “to deprive someone of the prerogatives of his / her status,” “to take an unimportant position,”<sup>10</sup> “to deprive of force and render something / someone vain or useless,” “to make void (to cause a thing to be seen to be empty or false).”<sup>11</sup> As we can see, the semantics of “emptying,” transferred to the metaphorical plane, gives a number of meanings that serve to denote a denial or deprivation of meaning and / or power. *Kenosis* can therefore be considered a state of someone's losing (or being deprived of) his / her substance, content, rationality and / or status, efficiency, effectiveness and control.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, there are surprising similarities and parallels between the semantic range designated by the term “κενόω” and the kenotic understanding of freedom by N. Berdyaev.

The theological idea of *kenosis* has its roots in the enigmatic statement written by Paul in *Philippians* (2:6–7): “but [Christ] emptied himself [“ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν”], taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”<sup>13</sup> This use of the verb “κενόω” has tied the theological understanding of *kenosis* permanently to the theme of Incarnation as motivated by God's endless

8. Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), s.v. “κενόω”; Henry G. Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. “With a supplement” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), s.v. “κενόω.”

9. Cf. Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “κενόω.”

10. Cf. Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “κενόω.”

11. Cf. Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), s.v. “κενόω.”

12. I think it is worth noting here that both of these levels can be associated with the question of knowledge and the problem of the mind in search of knowledge. To put it aphoristically, the reason which knows is the reason which has power and exercises control—just rules.

13. Hereafter I shall be using the text of the New Testament in the edition *Novum testamentum Graece*, ed. Barbara Aland, Eberhard Nestle, and Erwin Nestle, 27<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), and the translation of New Revised Standard Version.

philanthropy.<sup>14</sup> This connection becomes even clearer if we look at the context in which this phrase occurs. First, as a motivation for the Son of God's *kenosis*, Paul suggests His concern about "the interests of others" ("τὰ ἑτέρων," cf. Phil 2:4–5). Consequently, He who "though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Phil 2:6), and took the form of a slave (Phil 2:7, "μορφὴν δούλου λαβών"). The latter is the form of man; the very act of *kenosis* is identical with Incarnation, God's "being born in human likeness" (Phil 2:7, "ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος"). The self-limitation of God is therefore not mere "renunciation of something." It is, rather, a taking on of limitedness by the Unlimited, a becoming definite on the part of the Indefinite, a becoming definable on the part of the Undefined, and a taking up of place by the Omnipresent. This was presented in a very vivid way by Theodore the Studite, one of the leading theologians of Byzantine monasticism, in his profound argument for theological justification for the worship of images.<sup>15</sup>

God comes (in)to man, giving up, so to speak, His natural state, although from the dogmatic point of view (in the sense of Chalcedon) this cannot be understood as synonymous with the rejection of His own nature: Christ is both perfect God and perfect man, so He still has a divine nature. It is rather the paradox of self-limitation of the Unlimited one and, therefore, the resignation of being-without-borders through an absolutely free act of the divine person. According to *Philippians* (2:8), this act of *kenosis* leads to the death on the cross, in which the said paradox found its fullest expression. Finally, it is precisely this humility and obedience, being human to the end, that became the source of His exaltation, and thus the exaltation of human nature.

What we are dealing with here is, actually, the relationship between freedom and being a person, a relationship of utmost importance for our inquiry. It points to the fundamental importance of the idea of a person for the concept of kenotic freedom. The first thing we should consider is *keno-*

14. See, e.g., C. Stephen Evans, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). This view has been recently extended to the idea of creation, see John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

15. Theodore the Studite, *Antirrhetici tres adversus iconomachos*, Antirrheticus III, Migne, PG 99.396b, as cited in John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 158: "The Inconceivable is conceived in the womb of a Virgin; the Unmeasurable becomes three cubits high; the Unqualifiable acquires a quality; the Undefinable stands up, sits down, and lies down; He who is everywhere is put into the crib; He who is above time gradually reaches the age of twelve; He who is formless appears with the shape of man, and the Incorporeal enters into a body."

sis as God's way of life and the mode of His relationship with the world. According to Špidlík, this idea was developed by some Russian thinkers, especially by Sergey Bulgakov. Špidlík summarizes it as follows: the Persons in the Trinity are interrelated by love, which involves a paradoxical self-denial, through constant humility and *kenosis*, still deprived of any "pain" or "suffering." This divine *kenosis* has its origins in the inner life of the Trinity, but is also intrinsic to creation, because that is the moment when God begins His descent to "the reality that is not His, and at the same time cannot remain entirely 'other.'"<sup>16</sup>

Self-emptying is therefore a constitutive feature of the relations in the Trinity and of the relationship between God and the world—*kenosis* turns out to be relational. An indispensable condition for such a kenotic relation is an absolutely free act of the divine Person. This should be strongly emphasized: self-limiting applies to the person (the πρόσωπον or hypostasis, ὑπόστασις, not the nature or essence—φύσις, οὐσία). On the other hand, the divine Logos, as a person, emerged from His divine state of undefinability to become definable in the context of the unity of the person of the God-Man. By this means, in a certain sense, He renounced His ubiquity, the most distinctive feature of the absolute spiritual nature of God.<sup>17</sup> The absolutely formless God circumscribed Himself within the boundaries of the body, or of human conditions, which also include, among other sensible properties, that of shape. He "took the form of a servant." He became a man without ceasing to be God, but denying His "form" or, strictly speaking, a total lack of any form. He remained a divine Person but, in the mystery of Incarnation, brought Himself into the form perceivable to humans. According to Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the basic saving dimensions of the Incarnation (understood as "appearing in the form of man") was the revelation of man's likeness to God,<sup>18</sup> or, more precisely, of the human body's

16. Špidlík, *Myśl rosyjska*, 61–62. We can find a similar conception of creation as *kenosis* in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 118, as cited in Paul A. Scaringi, "Freedom and a 'Creative Act' in the Writings of Nikolai Berdiaev: An Evaluation in Light of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Freedom" (Ph.D. thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2007), 140, <http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/10023/443/1/THESIS.pdf>.

17. "In a certain sense" because, as, for example, Origen put it: "although the Word which was in the beginning with God, which is also God himself, should come to us, He does not give His place or vacate His own seat, so that one place should be empty of Him, and another which did not formerly contain Him be filled." Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. F. Crombie, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, vol. 4, *Fathers of the Third Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 4.5 [499 in translation].

18. Cf. Irenaeus Lugdunensis, *The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 22.

likeness to God.<sup>19</sup> Still, the most important aspect for me here is that of “isolation”: the taking on of form, the self-defining of the Indefinite. This establishes the unique character of the emerging person. Before the Incarnation the “personality” of God had not been known to man in the same way as it was afterwards.

Moreover, one may venture to say that before the Incarnation, man had not been conscious of his own real ability to become a person. The realization of human personhood, the conscious striving to realize the potency of being a person, became possible only after the revelation—in the mystery of the Logos that *σὰρξ ἐγένετο*—of God’s personal nature. Human personhood is therefore dependent on the person that is both Godly and human: the former cannot be realized without reference to the latter. The icon requires the proper model.

The relationship between the Godly-and-human person and the human one brings to light a fundamental difference between them. According to Špidlík, the former is solely agapic (selfless, giving), and the latter is agapic-erotic (wishing to receive).<sup>20</sup> But the measure of perfection of a human’s person,<sup>21</sup> its becoming similar to its Prototype, is *agape*, and therefore the ability to give kenotically of itself. Renunciation must be self-renunciation—there is no place for any compulsion. Only the person is capable of such a free act, under which it constitutes itself. The problem of human freedom is, therefore, the problem of man’s *kenosis* on his way to becoming a person, to realizing the potency that is in everyone.<sup>22</sup> But man can become a person only through the *kenosis* of the Son of God, who has adopted and deified human nature, renewing the likeness of God. Hence the necessity for *kenosis* in the life of a man who wants to be a person, and to be free as a person.

The question, therefore, which we should answer here is this: What is human *kenosis*? What should man give up in order to reach full freedom? Answers to these questions may be found, I believe, in Berdyaev’s *Philosophy of Freedom*.

19. Ibid., 11.

20. See Špidlík, *Myśl rosyjska*, 27. He attributes this idea to Berdyaev, but does not provide a link to any of his works.

21. Ibid. Cf. also Tomáš Špidlík, *La spiritualité de l’Orient chrétien. Manuel systématique* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978), 286–87.

22. This corresponds to Berdyaev’s conception, according to which God gave man His own image and likeness, i.e., the potency of becoming a person, as a task to achieve. (This has yet to be developed). See Nikolay Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. N. Duddington (London: G. Bles / The Centenary Press 1937), 71. Cf. Scaringi, “Freedom and a ‘Creative Act,’” 54–56.

## FAITH AS AN ACT OF KENOTIC FREEDOM

We should start by saying that for Berdyaev freedom is the very foundation of being,<sup>23</sup> prior to any nature. In fact, as he states, “all nature is born of freedom.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, we can say that it is impossible for a man not to be free; there is no possibility of taking away his substantial freedom. Any real lack of freedom is ruled out. But paradoxically, at the same time, we are enslaved by a kind of overwhelming illusion. For Berdyaev the problem lies in the fact that in the wake of sin (which he understands in a specific manner), this illusion has determined the whole course of the created world’s history. This mirage can be overcome by religious consciousness—especially, but not exclusively, of a Christian sort: the latter achieves this in the fullest and salutary way. However, rational consciousness, triumphant in modern times,<sup>25</sup> has brought the effects of sin to an extreme level, introducing a more and more radical separation between man and the rest of creation, between the knower and what is being known. This is a subtle form of slavery, associated with the experience of natural necessity. The illusory nature of this captivity, in the most general sense, is based on the fact that, according to our author, it is the result of free choice based on absolute freedom, which, on an ontological level, man has never lost:

*Necessity is the product of freedom, it comes from the misuse of freedom. The orientation of the living beings’ will creates a natural necessity and gives birth to binding constraints. Material dependence is a fruit of our free will. Necessity is only a certain, ill-directed correlation between living and free substances of different degrees. The separation of all beings in the world, the disintegration of the divine unity, leads to a state of being bound, fettered, by necessity. All that is detached from me, distant, alien, I perceive as a suffocating material necessity. Anything that is close, kindred, connected with me, I perceive as freedom.*<sup>26</sup>

In order to justify the thesis of the “free choice of enslavement,” Berdyaev constructs a theory of sorts about sin in pre-existence.<sup>27</sup> According to

23. Cf. Nikolay Berdyaev, *Smysl tvorchestva: Opyt opravdaniya cheloveka* (Moscow: G. A. Leman i S. I. Sakharov, 1916), 145.

24. Nikolay Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobodnogo dukha*, vol. 1 (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1927), 183.

25. Berdyaev wrote the *Philosophy of Freedom* in 1911.

26. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody*, 35 (author’s emphasis). There is no English translation of *Philosophy of Freedom*. Hereafter I use my translation.

27. As Matthew Spinka has observed, for Berdyaev the concept of the pre-existence of souls was a kind of axiom: “Berdyaev’s belief in the pre-existence of souls exhibits some



him, sometime, before we started to exist in our present form, motivated by love for the material world, we had made a choice that bound us to it forever. Prior to this unfortunate event, we had also had an insight into the spiritual world, the world of the living, concrete being that is inseparable from the Deity.<sup>28</sup> Our own free choice tore us from this being and cast us into the binding constraints of matter and its laws. We gazed into the material world and found it to be the only existing one, thereby rejecting our own spiritual home. That's why the laws that govern matter (time, space, logic) have become, for us, the only laws governing our existence as well.<sup>29</sup> Ever since that "time before time," the original unity of being and our natural participation in it have been broken. According to Berdyaev, this was a cosmic disaster which is still the source of our inner slavery:

Our faith in this world is so strong that our relationship to the world takes the form of coercive, obliging, binding, i.e., a form of knowledge. We no longer say that we believe in visible things—we know them, everything that relates to them has the force of proof.<sup>30</sup>

And further:

The unfortunate choice of the wrong object of love has tied us up. It has fettered our arms and legs and has made our life a prisoner's life. The walls of our prison, all these suffocating epistemological categories: spatiality, temporality, necessity, the principle of identity, are erected by our sin, our guilt.<sup>31</sup>

The problem of freedom is strictly connected with the problem of knowledge. The context of our current relationship with the world, as defined by Berdyaev, consistently leads him to the following observation: through an act of our intelligible will, human knowledge has been limited to this ma-

really astonishing features, for although he is perhaps alone among religious thinkers of our day to hold the tenet, he makes no particular effort to establish it. He merely assumes it." Matthew Spinka, "Berdyaev and Origen: A Comparison," *Church History* 16 (1947): 10.

28. This thought of Berdyaev resembles some early Christian concepts, particularly Origen's idea of the fall of rational beings, breaking their original unity with the Divine Logos. The result was the emergence of diversity and the creation of the material world. Cf. Origen, *De principiis* 1.8, 2.1.3. According to Scaringi, the notion of the preexistence of souls testifies to the influence of Origen upon Berdyaev. Cf. Scaringi, "Freedom and a 'Creative Act,'" 68, n. 29.

29. Cf. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody*, 27.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 33.

terial world. This world, drawn away by us from the whole of living being, is a place of vitiation and corruption, and this is clearly reflected in death and mortality—an idea which seems to echo the Orthodox understanding of original sin.<sup>32</sup> At the same time it remains still the object of our cognition, and on this basis we erect “the building of knowledge” and, what is more important still, the very theory of knowledge. The defective nature of the object has consequences in the form of false knowledge—as Grzegorz Przebinda puts it: “The sins of cognition can be explained only by the sins of being itself.”<sup>33</sup>

This tragedy unfolds at the intersection of our relationship to the world and of what we take away with us from this relationship. We recognize this world as the only existing one, or, at least, as the only part of being to which we have direct access through readily achievable knowledge. That is why the laws and the categories built upon the foundations of this knowledge have become, for us, a source of compulsion—of necessity and of evidence. The obviousness of sensuous intuition (Kantian *sinnliche Anschauung*) is, according to Berdyaev, something that has deprived us, wrongly, and still deprives us of our absolute freedom of cognition. Similarly, logic, which is just “the adjustment of thinking to being,”<sup>34</sup> if treated as universal law, pushes us into the limitations of the epistemological. Through all of this we find ourselves made completely subject to the determinism of the laws of physical nature: they now count as universal, but only because the whole world has been subjected to corruption. In such a relationship with the world, there is no place for individuality, for the uniqueness of a person. All of us are under the control of the same inescapable rules of nature. This “all” casts each and every one of us in the role of an “individual”—a negligible cog in the great machinery of nature, where his or her personal uniqueness has no chance of realization.<sup>35</sup> In other words, if there is no world in which the iron laws of nature can be absolutely relativized, there is also no possibility for us to escape from the natural anti-personal unification and to actualize the potential of personality, the *imago et similitudo Dei*, in ourselves.<sup>36</sup>

32. Cf. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 144–45.

33. Grzegorz Przebinda, *Od Czaadajewa do Bierdiajewa. Spór o Boga i człowieka w myśli rosyjskiej (1832–1922)* (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1998), 395 (my translation).

34. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody*, 33.

35. For the distinction between “individual” and “person,” see Donald G. M. MacCay, “The Relation of God and Man in the Writings of Nicolas Berdyaev,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 3, no. 1 (1950): 381.

36. Cf. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 72.

Is there anything that we can give up in order to achieve the fullness of freedom? How does Berdyaev answer this question? The Russian thinker seems to be saying the following: that our “pre-existential” love for the visible world, which has resulted in our being such as to be subject to and dependent on the laws of nature, in that they furnish us with some sort of sense of security with regard to our own purposefulness, issues a call for us to renounce the certainty and compelling self-evidence of rational judgments. This renunciation—a real *kenosis*—takes the form of an act of faith in a world whose existence is scientifically and empirically unprovable.<sup>37</sup> Faith is the self-emptying of reason, a denial of its tendency to seek generally and universally applicable rules, before which—as Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor says—everyone would feel compelled to bow.<sup>38</sup> This invariably involves a risk of sorts that the person involved must choose to take on board; the way of faith is difficult, deprived of all convenience, but also completely free:

In the act of faith there is a heroic act of renunciation, which is not there in acts of knowledge; the act of faith is an act of free love, which does not know of proofs, guarantees, or compulsions. I do not believe in my God because his existence has been proved to me, or because I have been forced to accept Him, or because I am in receipt of a pledge from heaven,<sup>39</sup> but because I love Him. I put everything on one card, take a risk, renounce all reasonable calculation. . . . Meanwhile, replacing faith by knowledge amidst

37. Cf. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody*, 27.

38. It is “the universal and everlasting anguish of man as an individual being, and of the whole of mankind together, namely: ‘before whom shall I bow down?’ There is no more ceaseless or tormenting care for man, as long as he remains free, that to find someone to bow down to as soon as possible. But man seeks to bow down before that which is indisputable, so indisputable that all men at once would agree to the universal worship of it. For the care of these pitiful creatures is not just to find something before which I or some other man can bow down, but to find something that everyone else will also believe in and bow down to, for it must needs be *all together*.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue*, ed. and trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage Books, 2004), 254 (author’s emphasis). On the significance of the figure of the Grand Inquisitor, as opposed to a kenotic Christ, see Nikolay Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. Robert Matthew French (London: G. Bles, 1943), 16. Cf. Georg Nicolaus, *C. G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person: A Critical Comparison* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 25.

39. Berdyaev is here making an allusion to a stanza of Schiller, invoked by Dostoyevsky in chapter 2.5.5 of *Brothers Karamazov*, “The Grand Inquisitor.” I am therefore employing an expression taken from the most acclaimed English version of the book. Cf. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 247, and note 6 to 2.5.5, on page 786.

the actual conditions of the world is a rejection of free choice, is fearfulness of danger and of what is problematic, is a preferring of what is guaranteed and safe: i.e., it is life lived under the duress of natural reality.<sup>40</sup>

This risk associated with real kenotic freedom has a “Christological” dimension, involving the ultimate expression of divine kenosis: Christ’s death on the cross. Kenotic freedom is the pinnacle of all freedom:

The mystery of Christian freedom is the mystery of Golgotha, the mystery of the crucifixion. The crucified truth forces nobody, does not compel anyone. It can only be freely exposed and accepted. . . . The Crucified did not come down from the cross as unbelievers demanded and demand of him for our times, because he “thirsted for a love that is free, and not for the servile raptures of a slave before a power that has left him permanently terrified.”<sup>41</sup>

Berdyaev also seeks to relativize the importance that philosophy and science attach to rational knowledge by demonstrating that both knowledge and faith have a common substrate and, specifically, that knowledge does not exist without some assumptions made on the basis of faith. The difference between them is psychological: “knowledge is compulsory, faith is free.”<sup>42</sup> Generally speaking, only an “unfortunate accident” in the form of the “disposition of free beings’ will” has decided that knowledge and its rules have come to be recognized as the only legitimate ways of knowing. In fact, knowledge relies on a faith in the absence of a need to prove its own basic axioms. It is, however, a lower faith, i.e., a belief, an inferior category of faith, because it is slavishly tied to this world and its materiality. For Berdyaev this material existence, with its rules and compelling actuality, is, paradoxically, unobvious, or rather, unreal. What really exists is the real living being inseparable from the Deity, which is available not to a distanced and rational subject trying to grasp it with his categories, but to a person capable of a free act of faith.

40. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody*, 28.

41. Nikolay Berdyaev, *Mirosozertsaniye Dostoyevskogo* (Prague: YMCA-Press, 1923; repr., Paris: YMCA-Press, 1968; Moscow: Zaharov, 2001), 205. Berdyaev’s quote comes from Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, chapter 2.5.5 “The Grand Inquisitor.” The text of this quote follows the translation of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. See Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 256. Cf. Jarosław Grzech, “Ideal wolności chrześcijańskiej w ujęciu Fiodora Dostojewskiego,” *Nomos* 17 (1997): 45–66.

42. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobody*, 24.

Thus, the kenotic dimension of human freedom is associated here with the problem of human cognition. In his current “carnal” situation, man is subjected to the laws of nature (as they have been adopted by reason). In our times, the situation is even more difficult, because modern philosophy has raised these laws to the rank of general and insurmountable rules of existence, thereby strengthening the compelling structure of consciousness. But man, as a potential person, may go beyond this defined epistemological framework, as he / she is capable of an act of freedom, a hypostatic inclination towards Reality, which is impossible to grasp rationally and by means of sensory perception. This is the principle of personalization—the emergence of a free person through the negation of the universal and absolutely unifying domination of the laws of nature. However, according to Berdyaev, the process of personalization, based on an act of faith, does not constitute a Kierkegaardian absolute and transcendent self, which, in its singularity, specificity, and loneliness, stands before God,<sup>43</sup> but leads to the reconstruction of the original unity-of-all, so important to many Russian thinkers, uncontaminated by the separation between subject and object. “Anything that is close, related, joined with me, I see as freedom”, says Berdyaev, “All that is detached from me, distant, alien, I see as a suffocating material necessity”—hence no separation, but union.

The problematic that concerns Western philosophical thought from Descartes through to Kant, Hegel, and finally Husserl, is the perception of reality through the prism of an insuperable separation between subject and object. Berdyaev tries to break down this barrier and show how to overcome this separation by renouncing the compelling rule of reason through an act of faith. At this level, faith acquires the status of knowledge, not so much in the sense of *episteme*, but in the sense of *gnosis*—knowledge understood as participation in being, vivid and unobjectified in rational categories.

One can say, therefore, that according to Berdyaev the freedom of an act of faith consists in the humiliation of reason, its *kenosis*. The scope of this humility we can extract from the semantic field of “*κενόω*.” Fallen reason, recognizing the material world as the only reality, claims to be the sole instrument of cognition. Faith as the *kenosis* of reason takes away its effectiveness and significance, deprives it of the prerogatives associated with its status, and renders it vain and useless. This radical relativization breaks the shackles of rationalism and makes man—a being “normally” subjected to natural uniformity—a totally unique person.

43. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 111.

The liberation of the *kenosis* of reason also has, for the whole cosmos, a soteriological dimension. The primordial act of freely choosing natural enslavement has brought damage, division and disintegration not only to man, but also to the object of his choice—the material world. The freedom of faith allows man to renew the original unity of the whole of being. Therefore freedom is, in some kind of way, our cosmic duty: “Because it is our fault,” writes Nicholas Berdyaev, “that nature has become dead. The cosmic vocation of man—his microcosm—is to revive the macrocosm of nature, to restore the life of the whole hierarchy of beings, including stones.”<sup>44</sup>

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44. Berdyaev, *Filosophiya svobody*, 35.

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