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Becoming God or Becoming Yourself: Vladimir Lossky on Deification and Personal Identity

Anthony Feneuil

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THEOSIS / DEIFICATION
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES OF DIVINIZATION
EAST AND WEST

EDITED BY

JOHN ARBLASTER – ROB FAESEN

PEETERS
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BECOMING GOD OR BECOMING YOURSELF

VLADIMIR LOSSKY ON DEIFICATION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

If every theological question has its philosophical counterpart, this counterpart is not always obvious. Some theological doctrines seem hopelessly useless to philosophy, as if they had no validity at all for universal thought, and could only make sense within the boundaries of Christian traditions. Perhaps this lack of universal meaning is partly why the Christian doctrine of divinization often sounded suspect to modern theologians in the West. But sometimes, such a seemingly specific doctrine, in no less specific circumstances, suddenly overlaps with the philosophical concerns of a particular place and time, and thus appears philosophically insightful, and universally thought-provoking. This is what happened to the Christian doctrine of divinization in 1930s Paris, thanks to Vladimir Lossky who irreversibly connected this doctrine to the philosophical question of personal identity. He transformed the quiet and relatively well established (although, less significantly in the Western Church) doctrine of divinization into a burning question: how could you be deified without ceasing to be yourself, and either dissolving into an impersonal divine substance, or negating your own identity in trying to imitate this other individual, Jesus, who happens to be God and thanks to whom you might become a divine being as well. In this article, I will show how he made this connection, and why his doctrine can still be helpful today to address the question of personal identity.

I. FROM 4TH CENTURY CAPPADOCIA TO 20TH CENTURY PARIS

In order to do so, we must first explain how Lossky's treatment of the Christian doctrine of divinization can be appropriated philosophically. This is not possible without acquiring insight into the context of his intellectual undertaking. Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) was the son of the Russian Christian idealist philosopher Nicolai Lossky. The Losskys were expelled from Soviet Russia aboard the "philosophy steamship"¹

1. About this "humanitarian" expulsion of the Russian idealist philosophers by Lenin and Trotsky, see A. RAZIN – T. SIDORINA, *The Philosophers' Ship*, in *Philosophy Now* 31 (March/April 2001) 34-38.

in 1922, but only Vladimir moved to Paris in 1924 to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. Over the 1930s and the 1940s, he became one of the prominent figures of the Russian orthodox community in Paris. However, he did not remain a purely Russian thinker (if such a thing exists). He soon embraced the French language in his writings², became a French citizen and tried to enroll in the French army during the German invasion in June 1940. In a posthumously published diary he described his seven-day journey across collapsing France, looking for a way to join the vanishing French army. This diary is an unambiguous testimony to his deep and passionate knowledge of French culture and history³. He developed intellectual contacts and befriended a number of key figures in the philosophical and theological circles in Paris: Étienne Gilson, Yves Congar, later Jean Wahl, among others. This is not to say that Vladimir Lossky turned his back on Russian history or culture. In his mind, there was no contradiction between being a genuine Frenchman and a true Russian. Raised in Saint Petersburg, the son of a philosopher deeply influenced by German idealism, and the Grandson of a Polish Roman Catholic woman, he declared in a 1956 letter to his father that he always considered himself an “Occidentalist” (in the never-ending opposition between Occidentalists and Slavophiles within the Russian *intelligentsia*). He believed that being “more European than every other European” was part of Russian identity⁴, so that Russians, in some way, can know European countries better than they know themselves. This view does not detract from his critical attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church, which mistook Christian universalism for an abstract universalism, and thus stifled the cultural diversity of Western Europe. Therefore, when Lossky, in France, defended (Russian)⁵ Orthodox

2. His first published essay (1929) was written in Russian, but his second one (1931), also on Dionysius the Areopagite, was written in French. Most of Lossky’s published works were written in French, except for those specifically addressed to the Russian Church or to the Russian philosophical community, such as his first book on Sergei Bulgakov (*Spor o sofii*, Paris, Confrérie de Saint Photius, 1936) and a few other essays. He also wrote a book in German with L. OUSPENSKY (*Der Sinn der Ikonen*, Bern – Olten, Urs Graf-Verlag, 1952). For an extensive bibliography, see O. CLÉMENT, *Orient-Occident. Deux passeurs: Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdokimov*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1985, pp. 99-103.

3. See V. LOSSKY, *Sept jours sur les routes de France. Juin 1940*, Paris, Cerf, 1997.

4. Letter from Vladimir Lossky to his father Nicolai Lossky, September 1956, quoted *ibid.*, p. 81.

5. Surely, one could simply say “Orthodox”, but my whole point in this paragraph is precisely to insist on the fact that Orthodox theology, contrary to Latin theology, allows for a certain amount of indiscernibility between the theological and the cultural contents of a doctrine.

ecclesiology, he did not seek to impose on France an Eastern conception, but rather to allow France to become herself religiously. In this regard, those passages from the 1940 diary where Lossky advocates Gallicanism, i.e. the irreducibility of the French Church to the Latin Church, are particularly interesting:

It is true that France followed the religious destiny of the “Latin world”, but she still keeps, deeply rooted in her being, the underlying tradition of Gallicanism. [...] Gallicanism is a universalism, but a concrete universalism: it is based on the diversity and the fullness of Christian territories that keep their own traditions, on the multiplicity of the local Churches, different from one another but still One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. For the mystery of catholicity lies in the unity that diversifies and in a united diversity⁶.

Obviously, Lossky uses an Eastern ecclesiological model to capture France’s situation and to disclose its inner truth. And this is the main reason why I quoted this passage at length. Not only because the question of the united diversity of the Church is crucial to the matter we are investigating, but because this passage is very typical of Lossky’s way of connecting the two main Christian traditions. Although he has often been characterized as a severe critic of Latin theology, mostly because of his repeated attacks on the *filioque*, which he saw as the origin of almost every disease of the Western Church and civilization⁷, this characterization is quite unfair. Actually, Lossky never intended to lecture the West from an Eastern vantage point. He was not attempting to replace one theological tradition with another. On the contrary, he relentlessly sought to understand how the Eastern Christian tradition might be useful to Western theology *as such*. His main work, the *Essay on the Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*⁸ (1944), far from being a mere exposition of Orthodox doctrine for a French catholic audience, is rather a reframing of the Eastern teachings against the background of the philosophical and theological debates of 1930s and 40s Paris. It is as much an attempt to understand the mystical theology of the Eastern Church from a Western point of view as it is an attempt to challenge Latin doctrines from an Eastern point of view. Consequently, there is no contradiction whatsoever between these kinds of works, including the collection of papers *In the Image and Likeness of God*⁹ or a series of lectures on the

6. LOSSKY, *Sept jours* (n. 3), p. 53 (my translation).

7. See CLÉMENT, *Orient-Occident* (n. 2), pp. 76ff.

8. V. LOSSKY, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l’Église d’Orient*, Paris, Aubier, 1944.

9. ID., *À l’image et à la ressemblance de Dieu*, Paris, Aubier, 1967; *In the Image and Likeness of God*, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974.

Eastern doctrine of divine energies¹⁰, and the scholarly work he pursued all his life on Meister Eckhart¹¹. Lossky's investigations into the Orthodox tradition cannot be separated from his work on Latin theology, which is itself closely connected to the philosophical context of the time, as shown by the fact that Lossky's doctoral research on Eckhart was supervised by Étienne Gilson¹².

Hence, two things overlap in Lossky's works: his ambition to give a synthetic account of the Orthodox tradition, and his engagement with contemporary philosophical problems. This becomes particularly obvious when he deals with the patristic (and then Chalcedonian) distinction between *nature* (οὐσία) and *person* (ὑπόστασις).

Since this distinction plays a crucial part in Lossky's doctrine of deification, it is worth elucidating at length. It was commonly used by Greek theologians of the 4th century to denote the being of the triune God: one οὐσία and three ὑπόστασεις. Lossky insists that this distinction is *not* to be understood as a distinction between the species (i.e. godhead or humanity) and its individual instantiations. On the contrary, the οὐσία must itself be understood as an individual substance, the substance of this singular being, God, even though the term "individual" does not adequately apply to God, since an individual is necessarily one among others of her kind, and of course God is only one of his kind¹³. In other words, the οὐσία must be understood in an Aristotelian way:

10. Id., *Vision de Dieu*, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1962.

11. Vladimir Lossky died before he could defend his dissertation. The manuscript was published posthumously: *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, Paris, Vrin, 1960. According to Vladimir Lossky's son Nicolas, who is quoted by Saulius Rumsas in the preface of the new French edition (2006) of *À l'image* (n. 9), Vladimir Lossky often complained that the accounts of the Orthodox faith he was constantly asked to give, with the discussions and polemics it entailed, distracted him from his main work on Meister Eckhart. But there is no doubt that these polemics and reflections on the general meaning of Orthodox theology and its relations to the Latin Church are essential to Lossky's work on Eckhart, just as his work on Eckhart allowed him to acquire a precise insight into Latin theology and its internal tensions.

12. One should also think of Meister Eckhart's significance to Martin Heidegger, whom Lossky quoted in some of his most important articles, and in his lectures in the 1950s, sometimes in relation to Gilson and the question of being in medieval theology. See CLÉMENT, *Orient-Occident* (n. 2), p. 86. For a precise account on the meaning of Heidegger's reference to Eckhart, see Y. MEESSEN, *La percée de l'Ego: Maître Eckhart en phénoménologie*, Paris, Hermann, 2016.

13. It is much more relevant in the case of the Chalcedonian formula concerning the being of Jesus-Christ: two οὐσῖαι and one ὑπόστασις, at least when applied to the human "nature" of Jesus-Christ.

A substance [οὐσία] – that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all – is that which is never said of a subject nor in a subject, e. g. the individual man or the individual horse¹⁴.

Originally, an οὐσία, in the Aristotelian sense of the term, is an individual being. And it is only in a derived sense that it can also refer to a species. But what about the properly Christian meaning of the term? And how are we to consider the relationship between the two distinctions: the Aristotelian distinction (primary/secondary οὐσία) and the Christological one (οὐσία/ὑπόστασις)? According to Theodoret of Cyrus, one should praise the Cappadocian fathers for their ability to distinguish two almost synonymous words (οὐσία and ὑπόστασις) on the basis of Aristotle's distinction. The ὑπόστασις would then refer to the primary οὐσία (the individual) and the οὐσία would refer only to the secondary οὐσία (the species).

But Lossky does not see things this way. He suggests that what makes the Cappadocians truly original is precisely the opposite of what Theodoret thought. When rephrasing the Aristotelian distinction with quasi-synonymous words, they did not identify the Christian distinction with the Aristotelian one without blurring it. The synonymy allows one to weaken the conceptual difference in order “to maintain in what is common the sense of the concrete *ousia* and to eliminate from the particular all limitations proper to the individual”¹⁵. In other words, it allows one to keep something of the primary οὐσία within the secondary οὐσία, and something of the secondary οὐσία within the primary οὐσία.

Lossky's argument is conceptual rather than historical: *if* οὐσία, nature, is to be understood as species, i.e. as a generic essence, then the corollary term, ὑπόστασις, which the Latin authors translated as “person”, must actually mean “individual”. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit would be three individuals sharing one common genus. But this, according to Lossky, would imply what the Cappadocian Fathers refused to admit: “a severance or division” in God, a gap “such that the Son should be thought of apart from the Father or the Spirit be disjoined from the Son”¹⁶. And this is why Lossky insists on distinguishing the οὐσία from a species, and the ὑπόστασις from an individual. Despite

14. Aristotle, *Categories*, trans. J.L. ACKRILL, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, chapter 5, 2a11, quoted by LOSSKY, *Essai sur la théologie mystique* (n. 8), p. 49.

15. LOSSKY, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (n. 9), pp. 111-123: “The Theological Notion of the Human Being”, here p. 116.

16. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*. Introduction, Translation and Commentary by A.M. SILVAS, Leiden, Brill, 2007, Letter 35, 4m, p. 255.

its conceptual rather than historical ground, the argument is not without historical significance.

It is true that Gregory of Nyssa¹⁷, just like the other Cappadocian Fathers, and most likely the Church Fathers in general, noted that understanding the relation between the οὐσία and the ὑπόστασεις as a relation between a species and its individual instantiations can be tricky, but he nevertheless endorsed such an understanding, while insisting on the imperfection of this model, and on the weakness of human thought when it comes to such difficult matters.

This therefore is the hypostasis: not the indefinite notion of the substance [οὐσία], which finds no instantiation because of the commonality of what is signified, but that conception which through the manifest individualities [ιδιωμάτων] give stability and circumscription in a certain object to the common and uncircumscribed¹⁸.

One should acknowledge that even though Gregory of Nyssa did believe that the three persons of the Trinity were not to be conceived apart from each other, and that their limits could not be drawn precisely, at least no more precisely than the borders between the different colors in a rainbow, he nevertheless understood the persons of the Trinity as three individual instantiations of a common essence.

My point here is not, however, to defend the historical plausibility of Lossky's thesis, according to which the Christian οὐσία must be distinguished from a common essence, and the ὑπόστασις, the person, from an individual being. Even if this thesis cannot be derived directly from Patristic literature¹⁹, it is still a good way to point out the mystery behind the "new and strange kind of conjoined separation and separated conjunction"²⁰, i.e. to point out an actual problem raised by the Greek Fathers, without dissolving this mystery. My point is to underline that this is precisely the *locus* where Lossky's exposition of the Orthodox faith, and his interest in contemporary philosophy meet: the distinction between *person* and *individual* is not so easy to discern in the Greek Fathers' works, but it is definitely common in the French philosophical

17. Gregory's Letter 35, "To Peter his own brother on the divine ousia and hypostasis", was attributed to Basil until 1944, which explains why Lossky rarely mentions Gregory (but rather Basil of Caesarea or Gregory Nazianzen) when talking about this distinction. See *The Letters* (n. 16), p. 248.

18. *Ibid.*, 3a, p. 251.

19. And the best evidence for that is probably that Lossky himself never gives any direct reference to a Patristic text in order to defend this precise distinction, even when he quotes John Damascene, who is probably the Patristic author most closely aligned to his position.

20. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters* (n. 16), Letter 35, 4n, p. 255.

context during the 1930s. It is the major distinction on which the loosely unified “personalist” movement is grounded. According to Emmanuel Mounier, for instance²¹, the purpose of personalism is to offer a third way between “bourgeois individualism” and communist or fascist totalitarianism. And this is exactly the part that Vladimir Lossky wanted his distinction between the οὐσία as individual essence and the person (ὑπόστασις) to play. A precise history of the relations between Lossky and this philosophical community during the 1930s and 1940s has yet to be written²². But there is no doubt that when using the distinction between individual and person at a time when it had become almost a platitude, Lossky knew what he was doing. He was not translating an old theological tradition into fashionable words, but rather using this tradition to join the current philosophical debate²³, and to shed new light on the common but nevertheless challenging distinction between an individual and a person²⁴.

II. CHRIST AND CHRISTS: LOSSKY ON DEIFICATION

And here we encounter the Christian doctrine of divinization. This is the theological locus where Lossky’s distinction between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις plays its biggest part. As a matter of fact, this distinction allows him to point out the major difference between the Eastern and the Western conceptions of deification and, to be fair, the major weakness of the Western conception. This is Lossky’s typical way of proceeding: appropriating a distinction from the French contemporary debate, rephrasing it through the Eastern tradition, and using it to criticize the Western tradition and to show the fruitfulness of the Eastern tradition.

21. E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste au service du personnalisme*, Paris, Montaigne, 1936. But one can also think about J. PLAQUEVENT, *Individu et personne: Esquisse historique des notions*, in *Esprit* (January 1938) 578-608.

22. Such a history would have to assess more broadly the role of the Russian Orthodox diaspora for the personalist movement. Mounier, for instance, mentions Nicolai Berdiaev, who contributed an article to the first issue of *Esprit*, as one of the main influences on his own thought.

23. To be sure, Lossky is not the first who tried to use the theological tradition in this context. One could probably argue that the whole personalist movement is in constant discussion with theology, and some attempts have been made to link the modern notion of person to the antique Christological debates. See for instance PLAQUEVENT, *Individu et personne* (n. 21), p. 595, who did not see any problem in identifying οὐσία with species.

24. So challenging, in fact, that Emmanuel Mounier himself does not want to press it too hard, unlike, he says, other personalist thinkers. See E. MOUNIER, *Le Personnalisme* (1949), Paris, PUF, 2005, p. 33.

What is the difference between the two traditions on the question of divinization? The Western Church conceives deification in a mostly Christological way. Being deified means participating in the Body of Christ. To be sure, the work of the Holy Spirit is not altogether negated, but – and this is, in Lossky’s mind, a consequence of the *filioque* – this work is reduced to a purely “functional” role²⁵, the role of an “agent de liaison” (literally a “liaison officer”) between the head and the members of the body. Therefore, and here we encounter once more the personalist theme, the Western redeemed Church can be but a “Christian totalitarianism”²⁶, where “personal freedom” is at risk, because “sin determinism” is replaced by “sacramental determinism”²⁷. Deification – and this might indeed be one of the great temptations of the mystical tradition in the West – implies the dissolution of personal identity, either through the imitation of Christ, or by fusing into the deity itself:

This would mean the annihilation of the human persons into the unique Christ, an impersonal deification, a beatitude without anyone beatified²⁸.

Against this “Christian totalitarianism”, Lossky gives an original account of the specific work of the Spirit. This is also a controversial account, even among Orthodox theologians, because of what might appear to be a contradiction or at least too great a gap between two aspects of the divine economy. As a matter of fact, Lossky does speak of *two* divine economies, the economy of the Son and the economy of the Holy Spirit, although he repeatedly insists on their inseparability. But though deeply linked, these two economies are not to be reduced to a single one:

The personal coming of the Holy Spirit will not be as a work subordinated or functional in relation to the work of the Son. The Pentecost is not the “continuation” of the Incarnation, it is what happens next, and it is its consequence²⁹.

Without the work of the Son, there would be no work of the Holy Spirit, because just as the work of the Son is to bear witness to the Father, the work of the Spirit is to bear witness to the Son. But just as there is no straight line between the being of the Father and the being of the Son, and just as the Son can but bear witness to the Father *as a Son*

25. LOSSKY, *Essai sur la théologie mystique* (n. 8), p. 156.

26. “Rédemption et divinisation”, in *À l’image* (n. 9), p. 103, my translation.

27. *Ibid.*

28. LOSSKY, *Essai sur la théologie mystique* (n. 8), p. 162, my translation.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 156, my translation.

(and not as a second Father), there is no straight route from the Son to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit can but bear witness to the Son *as another person*, not as a mere repetition of the relation between the Father and the Son. Through the deification process, the relation between the Son and the Spirit is, so to speak, dialectical.

The proper work of the Son is to deify our human nature. Through the Incarnation and its perpetuation within the Church and the sacramental life, that is to say, through the work of the person of the Son, human beings are aggregated into one deified body, the body of Christ, made itself of two natures: a deified human nature and a deifying divine nature (or energy)³⁰. If this is it, i.e. if there is no other divine work than the work of the Son, this body can be but a totalitarian Church: in participating in the double nature of Christ, human persons are themselves united to this person and do not exist as such. They are absorbed by this person, they become this person of the Son of God and, therefore, they are not themselves anymore. But this is not the end of the story. There is another divine economy, another work of God, and this is the work of the Holy Spirit:

The work of Christ unifies, the work of the Holy Spirit diversifies³¹.

Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit appears to contradict the work of Christ, dividing what Christ has united. But insofar as the nature and the person are distinguished within human beings as well as within the being of God, there is no contradiction, although there is a subtle dialectic.

From the οὐσία's point of view, i.e. from the point of view of one's nature, human beings are united into one and single individual nature: one body, the body of Christ or the redeemed Church. And this is the specific work of the Son. But the Holy Spirit ensures that this natural aggregation does not imply a personal dissolution. He ensures that our participation in this unique nature does not force each of us to renounce her own personality or, in other words, that within this gigantic body, no one becomes a simple means to an end that would be foreign to her. So the work of Christ concerns our nature, but the work of the Holy Spirit concerns our person. And insofar as the nature and the person are not identical, the unity of nature in the person of Christ does not contradict the multiplicity of persons in the deified Church.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 163, my translation.

This has quite an unexpected consequence: each one of us, in the redeemed Church, each deified person, becomes a Christ. She does not become *the* Christ, i.e. the second person of the Trinity, through the imitation of Jesus. This would mean losing one's own personality. Not the Christ but *a* christ, in the etymological sense of someone who received God's anointment, who is herself God's anointment, since she is herself and by the grace of God the Son *and* the Holy Spirit, another personal recapitulation of the whole united humanity, which does not contradict the singular personal recapitulation of humanity through *Jesus* Christ.

This is why George Florovsky was reluctant to accept Lossky's suggestion concerning deification:

It is very doubtful whether it is correct to make so sharp a distinction between the "nature" of the Church and the "multiplicity" of the constituent "persons" or "hypostases". Mr Lossky's conception does not leave enough room for the *personal relationship* of individuals with Christ. Of course, this personal communion is emphatically the gift of the Holy Spirit, but it is misleading to suggest that "in the Church, through the sacraments, *our nature* enters into union *with the divine nature* in the hypostasis of the Son, the Head of the Mystical Body", and then *to add* as something different that "each person of the (human) nature must become like unto Christ" and this is accomplished "in the grace of the Holy Spirit"³².

The objection is worth considering, since even theologians who apparently endorsed Lossky's distinction between person and individual subscribed to it³³. And Lossky himself, at the end of his life, might have presented his view in a more balanced way, insisting more on the deep unity between the work of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit, than on the difference between them. Nevertheless, I do not believe that one has to give up the twofold dimension of the divine economy, with the dialectic it entails, in order to preserve a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And on my reading, once you have given up this dialectic, as shown by the two cases of Olivier Clément and John Zizioulas, it becomes increasingly difficult to actually maintain the distinction between the individual and the person. Lossky did talk of the distinction between the individual and the person as a "distinction-identity"

32. G. FLOROVSKY, *Christ and His Church: Suggestions and Comments*, in O. ROUSSEAU (ed.), *L'Église et les Églises, 1054-1954*. Vol. 2: *Neuf siècles de douloureuse séparation entre l'Orient et l'Occident. Études et travaux sur l'unité chrétienne, offerts à Dom Lambert Beauduin*, Chevetogne, Éditions de Chevetogne, 1955, 179-190, pp. 168-169.

33. See CLÉMENT, *Orient-Occident* (n. 2), p. 65.

(“distinction-identité”)³⁴ in order to point out its ineffability. But his followers have stressed the identity much more than the distinction, without being able to give any precise account of what makes a person different from an individual, or let’s say from a Christian individual, even though Lossky wrote explicitly that the two terms, individual and person, could be understood as “opposite terms”³⁵. And the reason for this is that the dialectic of the two aspects of the divine economy in the process of deification is probably the best (and maybe only) way to give a positive meaning to the distinction between individual and person. Give up the dialectic, and you have to give up the distinction, or you keep it in a purely formal way.

Conversely, if philosophical lessons are to be learned from Lossky’s distinction between individual and person, this can only be the case through a deeper explanation of his understanding of deification, an explanation that at once overcomes Florovsky’s objection theologically, and proves insightful philosophically, giving some content to this common but outwardly strange distinction. There is a definite reason for this: human personhood is not something that is currently given, upon which one could reflect, as is the case for individuality. Human personhood, according to Lossky, is what makes us the image of God. Hence our current personalities can be but wounded ones. We are individuals, and we feel we are persons, but we do not know exactly what this means. Deification is precisely the process through which we will become persons, insofar as we lose our individualities.

Does this account of the deification process imply, as Florovsky believed it did, that any personal relationship *with Christ* is negated, since his work is limited to the deification of human *nature*, but has to be achieved by the work of the Holy Spirit, on a personal level? Not at all. As a matter of fact, according to Lossky’s original account, the dialectic between the two economies is rather the condition of any personal relationship to Christ. Florovsky is wrong when he supposes that according to Lossky, our relation to Christ is only a natural one through the sacraments. The objection might stand if the work of the Holy Spirit were purely to make us super-individuals, deified individuals who participate to the Mystical Body of Christ. But this is not the Holy Spirit’s role. He makes us personal beings, not super-individuals: and the person is not the completion of the individual, but her negation. Whereas the individual

34. LOSSKY, *Essai sur la théologie mystique* (n. 8), p. 135.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

exists only for herself, and separated from the others, the person is but a witness to someone *else*:

A person who self-affirms as an individual and encloses herself in the limits of her particular nature cannot fulfil herself totally – she impoverishes. It is when she gives up her own content, when she gives it freely, when she stops existing to herself that the person express herself fully through the nature of everyone³⁶.

It is the Holy Spirit, not Jesus Christ, who allows us to be personal beings (while the Son allows us to be personal beings with a deified *nature*). Here, Florovsky is right. But he did not see that according to Lossky, being a person means precisely *having a personal relationship with Christ*. In other words, what the Holy Spirit *adds* is nothing but the personal relationship with Christ. For such a relationship to take place, there is no need for the person to be distinguished from humanity as a whole and from Jesus-Christ in particular. Otherwise, there would be no person in God, since there is of course no separation in God. And Christ would not be one person recapitulating the whole of humanity (i.e. every individual) in his body (nature). But there are different persons in God, and deification means that even though we are all going to have one and the same nature, the deified human nature, the Body of Christ, we are all going to stay who we are, and even really become the persons we really are, since we will truly enter in a particular relationship with Christ. So being a person does not mean being *a part of* humanity. It means being the whole of humanity, but in a certain way³⁷. Defining this *way* is the real challenge in Lossky's theory of personal deification.

III. TRANSWORLD IDENTITY AND THEOLOGICAL LOGIC

This allows us to understand why Lossky's conception of deification gives fruitful indications to frame the philosophical problem of personal identity, not only from a historical point of view, but also within the current philosophical debate. What can it mean, for a person, that her nature is identical to humanity? Surely, in Lossky's mind, this cannot mean that the deified person is like a gigantic body or even like a perfectly (organically) integrated society. All physicalist metaphors for the sacramental communion are but metaphors. Ecclesial communion is not

36. *Ibid.*, p. 119. My translation.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

the magical blending of all the Christian individuals into a new super-individual. Or personhood would not overcome individuality, but simply improve it.

So the best way to understand in what sense the deified person shares her nature with the whole of humanity is to say that she *could have been* any other human being. The commonality of nature, i.e. the overcoming of individuality in Christ through the Holy Spirit, is the fact that you could have been anyone else, you could have shared his or her individual condition, without ceasing to be the person you are. This is probably why the best name for God is Love, not Love as a psychological concept, but Love as an ontological one, Love as the ability for someone to live another life than her own: “Love your neighbor *as yourself*” must be understood in the most literal sense, since the structure of deified humanity implies that your neighbor is actually yourself, or to put it in a more exact way: that your neighbor is actually what you are.

Hence, Lossky’s distinction between being an individual and being a person overlaps with what philosophers call the transworld identity problem. This problem is usually stated in the following way: is there an identity that is not only relative to this world but that crosses the different possible worlds? Is someone only what she is in *this* world, or also what she could have been? But with such a formulation, as brilliantly shown by David Lewis³⁸, it is particularly difficult to defend transworld identity: people (or things, since in such a statement of the problem there are no differences between them) can only be identical to themselves within a given world, and all the individuals that you could have been in other possible worlds are simply not you: they are counterparts of yourself, i.e. other individuals who do look like you, but who are different individuals. Any other thesis would entail contradiction. Lewis’ account is coherent, but it is weak intuitively, as Saul Kripke famously wrote:

If we say “Humphrey might have won the election (if only he had done such-and-such), we are not talking about something that might have happened to *Humphrey* but to someone else, a ‘counterpart’”. Probably, however, Humphrey could not care less whether someone *else*, no matter how much resembling him, would have been victorious in another possible world. Thus, Lewis’s view seems to me even more bizarre than the usual notions of transworld identification that it replaces³⁹.

38. D. LEWIS, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 1986, “Counterparts or Double Lives”, pp. 192-263.

39. S. KRIPKE, *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981, p. 45.

Lossky's conception of divinization can give an indication of how to address this weakness, insofar as it urges us to distinguish between two kinds of identities: individual identity and personal identity. The individual would be just who she is in the actual world, but the person would be precisely the one who is not reducible to any of those possible individuals, even though she is each one of them.

However, jumping to the conclusion that a person is a set of possible individuals would be misleading. Such a formal definition implies another confusion between personality and individuality, insofar as it is an attempt to ascribe properties to the person. Only an individual can be described by what she has, by her properties, as a subject to whom substantial predicates are attributed, as a (logical) owner. The person, first of all the person in the sense of Trinitarian theology, is not defined by what he has. He is defined by what another gives to him, in such a way that each person exists only insofar as he bears witness to another, and is only known insofar someone else bears witness to him. "Being a Son" is not a property of the Second Person of the Trinity, but only indicates that the properties of the Son must actually be attributed to someone else. The Son is the Son only insofar as he bears witness to the Father, as he reveals the Father through his own properties (which, consequently, are not his own) and the Holy Spirit only insofar as he bears witness to the Son. In other words, no person, as such, has anything belonging to her, like a predicate to a subject, since all that she is, belongs to someone else. This is why Lossky says that we will only know the person of the Holy Spirit once we, as a deified person, will actually bear witness to him⁴⁰ (or her, since the Holy Spirit's face will be made of the faces of every deified human person, and it is not so clear whether gender is part of human nature or personhood). No one (as a person) can be known except through someone else. Or in other words, personhood means that beyond all you can possibly *be*, there is something other than being that identifies you as yourself, and this "something" is your relation to others.

This has an immediate consequence for our problem: no property can be ascribed to a person as such, and "being a person" cannot itself be a property, but the indication that the logic of property ascribing, ultimately, is not enough to talk about who we are:

When we want to define and to "characterize" a person, we gather individual properties, "character traits". But these traits can always be encountered elsewhere, in other individuals, and they are never fully "personal". This is because they belong to the nature⁴¹.

40. LOSSKY, *Essai sur la théologie mystique* (n. 8), p. 157.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Ultimately, we face here a limit of common language (and it was precisely the point of Lossky's distinction to indicate such a limit). The person does not own anything, nor can we say that she *is* anything, at least directly (this would be dealing with the οὐσία, the nature, once more). How could we talk about personality, then, or about any person as such? At least not without giving up the logic of being (and the modal logic that is inherent to it) to deal with identity, and adopting a more pragmatic logic that would aim at acknowledging the fact that there is no direct identity ascription, and assuming its own dimension of personality building, so to speak. In other words, acknowledging that there is unfortunately no way to say what being a person means, without anticipating our own deification and becoming ourselves a person, and talking not about ourselves, but about who the Holy Spirit is to us. This might be the root of any properly theological logic.

Anthony FENEUIL