

Tatsiana ZAVERZHENETS

The Personalism of Emmanuel Mounier

The theme of personalism was discussed at the ecumenical conference "The Crisis of the Church – The Crisis of the World" in Münster in March 2001. In this essay I would like to outline and reflect on some basic points of the discussion.

DEFINING PERSONALISM

Personalism (coming from Latin *persona*, meaning a person or a personality) is a trend in religious philosophy, which acknowledges the person as the prime creative reality and highest spiritual value. It views the whole world as the manifestation of the creative activity of the Supreme Person – the Lord. An important personalist discussion forum was launched in France with the publication of the journal *Esprit* in 1952.

Personalism differentiates between the concepts of the 'individual' and the 'person'. A human being is an individual as a member of society, as a part defined in correlation with the whole. As a person one can affirm oneself in free will and in an eternal source – in God. The decision of a person presupposes an intention, a choice, a moral evaluation and an affirmation of personal freedom. The main principles of Personalism find their origins in traditional Christian view of the human being.

EMMANUEL MOUNIER

One of the most important figures of European Personalism, who largely contributed to its philosophical development, was Emmanuel MOUNIER who, shortly before his death, summed up the ideas of Personalism in a short book of the same name. Emmanuel MOUNIER maintains that one can become a lawmaker in relation to everything, particularly in relation to the circumstances that shape one's life. One's internal qualities ("calling" or "intimacy" in the terminology of Personalism) have to protect both person and society from totalitarianism and from individualism.

Emmanuel MOUNIER made the concept of a person a point of fundamental ontological categorisation, a point of a basic manifestation of being, where acts of volition go together with the continuity of existence. The origins of a person are not only in the person itself but in the endless united origin, in God; and they become the basis of any activity.

Becoming a person coincides with the movement of human history towards a civilised way of living, towards culture and spirituality. Emmanuel MOUNIER writes from a position of responsibility and he calls for serious work. He also underlines in this connection that God (or the Absolute) is immeasurable, God cannot be compared with the world and God will guide us and history.

IDEOLOGICAL OPPOSITION

The direct impulse for the creation of this philosophy of Personalism was a worldwide socio-political and economic crisis from 1929 till 1935, the offence of fascism and totalitarianism in Europe. For personalists, this crisis was not only a crisis of economic structures but it was a crisis of humanity as well.

The ideology and practice of fascism was criticised on the pages of *Esprit* and the editor of the journal was arrested when the Germans occupied Paris. The exit Emmanuel MOUNIER saw is the integral and spiritual revolution of humanity. He renewed the Socratic upheaval of ancient philosophy in the light of Christianity.

A PERSONAL UNIVERSE

The central position of Personalism as a philosophical movement is the existence of free and creative personalities. This presupposes a presence in their structures of the principle of unpredictable behaviour, which guards against strong systematisation. The rich experience of the person constantly works at the creation of situations, rules and determinations.

This makes enlivening activity, communication and unity with other people possible. Nothing can enforce this experience. The person cannot be described as an object in anybody. It is the only reality which we simultaneously recognise and build from within.

CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM

Society was created by God and we can meet people who can help us to understand that we are on the right path, that our life is the most valuable gift and that circumstances were given to us to enable us to understand better our personal context.

The works of Emmanuel MOUNIER are very optimistic in spite of the tragic historical period he lived in. They can prove vital to us Christians in periods of troubles, which are so frequent in our history. They call for work and for faith, for the ability of full, hard and interesting life. They call us to believe in God and God's truth and they promise God's help and care for God's children in need.



Suggested Reading

MOUNIER Emmanuel, *The Hope of Hopeless. Essays* (tr. Vdovina I.). Moscow, 1995.
Emmanuel Mounier. In KONSTANTINOV E. (ed.), *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*. Moscow, 1967.
Personalism (tr. Vdovina I.). Moscow, 1992.

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