

**Religion, Human Dignity, and Human Rights: New Paradigms for Russia and the West.  
A Conference in Honor of Nikolai Berdyaev at 150**

**Hamilton Center, University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida  
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The history of religious anti-humanism in the West and in Russia has led to the view that human rights both originate in and are best supported by secular humanism. Human rights, in this reading, arose in early modern Europe against the absolutist alliance of church and state and against the religious wars of the era. But there is a competing genealogy of human rights, one locating their origins in religious ideas, traditions, and institutions, whether in late medieval and early modern Europe, in Protestant North America, or in Christian and Jewish Russia.

Religious genealogies of human rights are typically grounded theoretically in human dignity and in the “sacredness of the human person.” Does respect for human dignity require a metaphysical or religious commitment? Perhaps not, but the historical traditions and theologies of religious humanism offer rich resources for the defense of human rights. This is worth remembering, at a time when human rights are under renewed attack, especially by Putin’s Russia. The long history of Russian autocracy (tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet) obscures the robust defense of human dignity and human rights in Russian religious-philosophical thought and has helped to make the respective humanist traditions in Russia and the West opaque to each other.

The Hamilton Center at the University of Florida and the Northwestern University Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought are jointly sponsoring a conference in honor of the 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of Nikolai Berdyaev, a Russian émigré who brought to Europe a Russian religious philosophy of personalism extolling human freedom, dignity, and rights. His ideas were developed in engagement with European philosophers, notably the Catholic personalist Jacques Maritain. In 1937, just before Maritain’s turn to human rights (which was directly prompted by Pope Pius XI), Berdyaev’s book *The Destiny of Man* appeared in English translation. In it he wrote, “The only political principle which is connected with absolute truth is the principle of the subjective rights of the human person.”

The Hamilton Center supports the research and teaching of the principles of a free society, engaging with the great works of the Western tradition and beyond. The Northwestern University Research Initiative fosters scholarship about the global relevance of Russian thought and literature. We invite papers exploring any aspect of religion, dignity, and rights in Russia and/or the West, from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Conference participants should consider the option to produce papers suitable (in their final form) for publication in an eventual edited volume.

Please send paper proposals or inquiries to Ana Siljak (ana.siljak@ufl.edu), Randall Poole (rpoole@css.edu), or Bradley Underwood (bradleyunderwood2025@u.northwestern.edu). Proposals should be submitted by June 1, 2024.