

*An Idea of Justice in the Platonic Tradition of Russian Religious Philosophy*

Lilia Castle, Chaminade University of Honolulu, USA

The Asian Conference on Ethnic, Religion and Philosophy 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The Platonic tradition is very strong in the ontology and cosmology of Russian religious philosophy. The notion of the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies, of Sophia as the foundation and the final goal of mankind established in classical Greece were remarkably developed in the views of such Russian philosophers as Vladimir Solovyov, Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, and Fr. Paul Florensky.

The Greek theories of matter were developed in Russian Religious thought within the parameters of transfiguration. Anthropocentrism, rather than theocentrism or cosmocentrism, was seen as central in Russian religious tradition, and an idea of Justice manifested in man's choice was perceived as essential to the process of man's transfiguration.

The dialectic between man's reason and contemplation produces the form for the revelations of mystical perception. Just choice is seen as a focal point in the spiritual transition and the destiny of man. Man's spiritual self could be preserved and developed only with the divine foundation of life. The denial of God leads a person to disarray, to the loss of his spiritual center, to the destruction of his inner order, and finally, the death of his sacred self. Both Greek and Russian philosophers emphasize justice being essential in the foundation of an ideal benevolent state; though the last ones assert the necessity of the consistency of temporal law with the divine. The meaning of life cannot be justified otherwise than in connection with the presence of the divine both in man and in state.

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

Geographically Russia lies half within Asia and half within Europe with the Ural Mountains running down her spine. Philosophically we might say that she contains two distinct essences, and taking the Platonic position that essences are immutable, we can more readily understand the contradictory nature of the Russian soul and mentality. The themes discussed here may shed some sunlight on this soul, to bring it to the Heraclitian dryness through philosophy.

The European world, and now today the Asian world, opens itself to new depths in the never-ending riches of Greek philosophical ideas. Greek wisdom permanently astounds us, so that we have the same feeling as our barbarian ancestors, the Goths and Huns when they arrived from their steppes, and the Celts from their forests, must have had to the Greco-Roman world of white carved columns. It was this Grecian world that conquered them forever through its luminosity, its knowledge, and the laws of its language.

In a sense we continue to be those 'barbarians' who learn from the ancient Hellenes, but now we do this along with our own development and new approaches. Like remote islanders we keep deciphering the sense of beautiful things left for us by the ships of an unknown great civilization. The further we go in our progress, the closer and clearer we see in the mirror of our consciousness the reflection of Sophia, She who is the wisdom of mankind.

Greek culture is very appealing to the Russian soul, since the very beginning of Russia is the result of two streams which crossed each other in the land of the ancient Slavs. The masculine stream of the Normans from the Baltic north met that of his magnificent Byzantine bride from the south. From Greek Byzantium, the carrier of Greek culture, Russia received its Christianity, and along with this the passionate love for the Greek world and Greek philosophy.

The common features embodied in Greek and Russian philosophies are reflected in the analogical perception and the expression of the reality. The intuitive feminine receives the divine world and immerses herself therein, and this listening for the Real, brought about by the mystical intuition, blends with the carefulness and high precision of the masculine idealistic representation of it.

The search for synthetic wholeness on all sides of being and in the human spirit itself is the inspiration for Greek and Russian religious philosophy. The intuitive penetration of reality, as well as the prophetic, have great importance for philosophy, though not replacing it. So theology in this context is seen as the feeding field for philosophy. This provides theology with the logical rational forms by which intuition and prophecy are refreshed.

Such world outlook influenced the attitude toward the theory of knowledge in Russian religious philosophy. The importance of gnoseology is not denied, but it is saturated in the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions. Epistemology is not exalted to the position, which it had in the West after Kant when it has been stated that there is no philosophy without epistemology. In Russian Religious Philosophy, however, that

which we may call the antinomian bastions of metaphysics stand with their walls intact while the mysteries of creation and physical manifestation remain.

Ontology of Neo-Platonism could be traced in the cosmology of S. Bulgakov who also applies it to the philosophy of consciousness. According to Bulgakov the Absolute is the abyss, the bottomless imperceptible background of the world with no bridge between the Absolute and the world. The presence or absence of the Absolute cannot be stated, nor can it be approached even by negative dialectic (that which is inherent to apophatic theology), since even rejection is a confirmation of nothingness. The Absolute creates the Divine in its transcendent and immanent nature. God steps out of the transcendence becoming God for man. Here is the beginning of the divine knowledge and the revelation of divine being to man. And it is in this descent, and further to the lower levels of the rational, that the apophatic and then the kataphatic appears. Then the need of myth appears as the intuition starts to penetrate the positive or effable poles of the dialectic.

The Greek mythological tradition and its religious ideology exist undivided in Neo-Platonism. Of course myth and dogma are formally separated in Russian religious philosophy, which nonetheless continues to soak itself in mythological steams. In the pre-theological world in which there are no hierarchical religious dogmas set out as absolute, philosophy replaces myth in its religious function. But religious contemplation, leading to intuitive vision, which may be considered to be a sort of exploration of the mythical, continues to play a very significant role in Russian Religious Philosophy.

The most complicated theological and philosophical problems in both philosophical traditions to be solved first in mystical visions, before receiving their logical form in philosophy. The tree of emblematic thought in contemporary myth is rooted in folk religions. Behind the beauty of exquisite forms, expressed in multicolored language is the breathing of the soul of a people with its mysteries and fairy tales. And the manifestation of the archetypal Sophia in her undivided beauty shines through all philosophical creations.

There is much to be admired in the beauties of the structure of Russian logic which does not have the precise nature of Western rationalism in its confirmation of the ultimate truths. Unlike the Western, Russian logic always retains the cloud of the imperceptible, the shine of the inexpressible behind its constructions. There IS the certainty in it, there is the confirmation, but only of the totality of the presence of soul in every part of the universe, and there is no privation of soul even in matter.

This unity of the rational and imperceptible is perhaps better expressed in literature and the arts rather than in philosophical structures. Thus there is a tendency in Russian theology to take on literary forms. Vladimir Solovyov and V. Ivanov are philosophers but they are also poets-symbolist of the Silver Age of Russian literature. But then too, Plato writes using dialogue in what we might call a theatrical style. Plotinus in Porphyry expresses himself with many a literary flourish. Myth appears as one of the forms in Plato, and Dionysian myth is the favorite of Ivanov, who was able to hear the winds of ancient Greece and to feel the terror antique in his veins.

Ancient polytheism and occultism (as part of the natural ability of man to penetrate behind the surface of phenomena) served as one of the sources of the immanent to the ancient Greeks. Their reflection in the epic, in myth, and fairy tale is closer to the spirit of Russian Religious Philosophy in this aspect than are modern mechanical rationalism and materialism. Ancient occultism and folk polytheism formed the real foundation of Plato's idealism, and this element came under beautiful speculative development in Russia.<sup>i</sup>

In Russian tradition, rational knowledge does not have the first and decisive role in the functioning of man in the universe. Rational knowledge is seen as only one function of our being, it is merely a thread in the process of life, and its sense, its goals, and its possibilities are defined within the larger picture of the relationship of man in the world as a whole. Russian ontologism would appear at times to be contradictory to Plato since it gives priority to that which is extant rather than to that, which exists as a potential in the realm of ideas. But this contradiction is illusionary since the absolute nature of the golden chain which binds all levels of being is ever apparent. Russian religious philosophy embraces all levels of the celestial and terrestrial hierarchy including knowledge about the world and our active being in the world.<sup>ii</sup>

Consciousness, especially in its approach to the divine is always antinomical. Antinomy is inherent to the very essence of *aletheia*, the truth revealed in the unconscious. The first antinomy is that what is transcendent (in whatever form of being it may exist) cannot by definition be immanent. But rational impossibility and contradiction does not annihilate holistic being. Plato stated that the nature of reason is such that it cannot make being completely immanent to itself, which is to say that there is an order of immanence which is not accessible to reason.

These limits to reason are reflected in the notion of antinomy. From one side God, the object of religious consciousness is transcendent to man and the world, and from another side, at the same moment, the Supreme Being enters the religious consciousness, becoming on entry the immanent potential of the lesser spheres. Both moments, the transcendent and the immanent, exist as poles and are given at once.

The dialogues of Plato are an example of the antinomical nature of our consciousness as well as the normality of it. It is apparent in the dialogues of Socrates as he struggles to indicate the being of the divine—which is not possible in logical terms. Apophatic theology, which gives place to the ineffable beyond theology itself, in a sense originated in this dilemma latent in Plato's Socrates. The very format of dialogue in itself gives us the notion that two different (sometimes opposite) visions of the same phenomenon reflect reality more truthfully than the one. Antinomy is born when reason understands that it is inadequate to the subject it tries to percept.

Antinomy is not a mistake in thinking, but it imposes a limit to the causes which bring essences into play.<sup>iii</sup> The area of the religious is the region where antinomy insists on existence. The wave can't achieve sky no matter how hard the wind blows. Thus, words, definitions, and thoughts taken from the world of man are unable to contain the definitions of a divine mystery which we cannot approach. That which in the general terminology of philosophy is called the idea, and which has for the positivist only an abstract dialectical function, in mystical vision and the penetration of an

accompanying pathos, takes on the quality of a concrete being which has not only generic but also individual qualities.

Russian philosophy as expressed by its most capable and erudite representatives is deeply religious. At the same time we cannot say that theocentrism or cosmocentrism are significant features. The neo-Platonic tradition which discusses generation in terms of potential and which was developed by physics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as probability theory, has long held a fascination for the Russian mind.<sup>iv</sup>

However, all aspects of being in their complexity and unity are investigated from the point of view of the place of man in the universe, and the importance of the intellect as a center of this wholeness. As Proclus mentions in respect to the Timaeus, "For the progression of things is nowhere without a medium, but exists according to a well ordered generation."<sup>v</sup> Human destiny, the sense of being, potentiality, and the sense of human history are themes which are of primary interest to the Russians.

Both Russian and Greek philosophy are rooted in the womb of religious consciousness. It is philosophy of the human spirit where the religious quest provides the foundation for intellectual life. This is why the place of man in the universe, the soul of man as the battlefield of demonic and angelic forces, is a central theme.

The closeness of philosophy to life is another distinctive feature of both Russian and Greek philosophy. The unifying theme here is the historical destiny and the tendency of the philosopher to "try" the ideas on himself, to embrace them and to apply them to his own life. The most abstract ideas are not detached from events of life but embodied in collisions and encounters of people at every level. Thus the ideal benevolent state, though it lost its transcendent aspect during the Marxian materialist plunge, remained as an important base for the Russian people.

In this perception the factual, psychological, and ontological levels coexist and are connected vertically. Intuitive and psychological approaches coexist with the rational. There is no arrogant confidence in absolute knowledge of what is right, even though it seems so in some philosophical arguments. In the Russian tradition power and might exist alongside helplessness, tragedy is ever inherent in the noble ideal, romanticism and rationalism are bedfellows, and there is an indifference towards everyday needs along with a readiness to sacrifice life for abstract ideals. The sumptuous feast during plague and siege, and laughter slipping out through the misery of tears, are all features of the mystery of the Russian soul.

## **Conclusion**

We might conclude by mentioning the fact that the Neo-Platonists were not well known outside of Latin translations in the Latin West until the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, while the Russian church maintained continual contact with the Greek. It was only during the brief and brilliant flare of the renaissance that the Greek spirit came to be known in Northern Europe, and this full color falling off from the Latinate dark ages was very soon eclipsed by the Puritan reformations.

As we move ever closer to a world state and to a universal megapolitic, our nationalistic quirks, religious exclusiveness and philosophical chauvinism begin to

fade away. The great foundations which have made the world what it is today must come under ever rigorous inspection. Some of the foundations must be demolished, but there are others that we cherish as we cherish life itself and which persist through the rise and fall of all empires, even as they rise and fall today.

---

<sup>i</sup> Bulgakov in his work *Unfading Light*, sees as the great achievement of occultism its closeness to a poetic perception of nature. As he puts it, “The world is the great hierarchy of ideal entities, ideal organisms. The perception of universal soul (of the Divine Sophia) in every part of the ‘dead world’ is the great achievement of occultism.”

<sup>ii</sup> The image of the golden chain is symbolic of the divine presence which binds the entire universe together. It is not a chain which hangs from the heavens to earth like a Jacob’s ladder, it is circular, in the nature of a necklace.

<sup>iii</sup> The various causes such as the formal or efficient cause and the final cause, as well as the material cause, the connective and the perfective, are seen by Proclus to be competitive. Raymundo Lull goes even further and gives causes an appetitive mode which rather leads to meditations of an evolutionary nature in which the only fittest survive. The fittest, it might be added, are not necessarily the best.

<sup>iv</sup> We might mention in this respect particularly the exegesis of the *Timaeus* by Proclus in which much thought is given to the nature of the potential vis a vis the consideration of the nature of causes.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, Vol. 1, p. 423.

---

## References

1. Bulgakov, S. (1914). Heroism and Service: Thoughts on the Religious Character of the Russian Intelligentsia. *Russian Review*. London. Vol. III.
2. Bulgakov, S. (1912). The Russian Public and Religion. *Russian Review*. London. Vol. I
3. Florensky, P. (1997). *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
4. Fedotov, A. (1948) *Treasury of Russian Spirituality*. N.Y.: Sheed and Ward.
5. Rozanov, V. (1929) *Fallen Leaves*, London: The Mandrake Press.
6. Solovyov, V. (1948). *Lectures on Godmanhood*. London: Dennis Dobson.
7. Zenkovsky, V. (1953). *A History of Russian Philosophy*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press.