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Aspects of Russian Thought
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“Examine the importance of Solovyov’s cult of Sophia
Divine Wisdom and its implication(s) for Russian Symbolism”

Sophia, for Solovyov, takes on more forms than this (femininely engendered) wisdom usually does. It also occupies a position which, with its companion, the human race, displaces the concept of ‘Sophia’ as a static, (rational) site that lacks vitality and dynamic progression of the world. As mediators between two larger forces, those of nature and God or ‘The Absolute’ – a Sophic human race should then, according to a constant theme in Solovyov’s work, play out its cosmic role and actually be elevated as humans to a higher form of being - merging into the ‘The All-Unity’.

This myth of return, though problematic, is the true meaning of Christianity and this – in Solovyov’s own political dimension, is something that could/would unite all people and bridge all differing beliefs and difficulties in the world. In borrowing the theme - of atoning for wrongs and returning to a blessed state of ‘All-Unity’ from a state of separation ¹– from Hinduism, strikes an odd chord, because Solovyov seems then to be arguing that the ‘World Spirit’ wasn’t really free and that by returning back, has made a (moral) mistake.

Solovyov has stated that the ‘World Soul’ (another representation of Sophia) has its own will – which could apparently make its actions amoral in relation to The Absolute and therefore not be reproachable. Solovyov, however, seems to assign an awkwardly moralizing rationale of re-building towards a universal (Christian) harmony to Sophia, which resembles the differentiation between ‘God as absolute being’ and ‘Man as The Absolute in process of becoming’ (towards ‘Godmanhood’)². Thus, an (un?)intentional blurring of categories and relationships is apparent while defending Solovyov’s Christian-mystical system.

There is another problem with the theme of return. It is odd that in the writings of Solovyov, the resolution of dissonance or disharmony in the universe is neutralized by the re-instatement of Sophia in a truly Christian way. This would come to mean irrevocable eternal consequences. Using the

¹ i.e. Between ‘Sophia’ and humans, between the ‘World Spirit’ and God, breaking up the elements in Solovyov’s tripartite cosmic harmony : ‘The Absolute’ , nature and ‘The human race-Sophia’.

² Pg.2 in “Readings in Russian Philosophical Thought” ed. Louis J. Shein (Mouton, 1968)

Hindu notion of the playing/sleeping Brahma, this would call for a cyclical mode of time and the universe, and a re-collapse of the attained harmonic order only to be re-organized anew.

Again, as with the child Brahma, who plays and ends his games –the lives in the universe- as his mother calls him to supper –as with Sophia- no moral guilt (a Christian notion) is placed on the child/cosmic spirit. The same strictly Christian win-win situation would happen in “The tale of the Antichrist”, if one were not able to read Solovyov’s texts and contexts as inter-related and inter-influencing body of work – even if it is a contradictory one. Again, this is in spite of the possibilities and flexibility of his system and set within a negative eschatological version of this teleology.³

Solovyov’s ideas do create a dynamic life philosophy. One can easily see how such a vital brand of thinking could affect –even rationalistically – multiple areas of society, the arts and academia. It is unfortunate, though, that in his increasingly more dogmatic system of ‘All-unity’ , severe generalizations of the materials used (i.e. Outer-cultural to Russia) finally in his worldview came to be formulated in such a rigidly ‘pan-Christian’ ways.

In the two way action of, first, borrowing foreign and ancient materials – allegedly ‘untainted’ by Western influences such as pure rationalism and empiricism - and secondly wanting to messianically export his ‘Universal’ system - Solovyov would chose to cloak his intuitions-thoughts in “open armed” Christian garb.

There are two problems around this straitjacketed, dynamic system, which is to be exported. First, it is an imbalanced, patronizing and patriarchal act to assume the cultural applicability of a system which, because of its proportions of Christianity to interpreted foreign materials, could “work” or inspire in the Western world, but cause a renewed colonialization and perversion domestic religious though in the sites of origin of some of the source materials.

So, the importance measured from Solovyov’s ‘liberating and uniting’ system would seem relative to the recipient time and cultures. The areas, more likely than not urban, to appreciate these experiences, the relations of these to their place in the world and Solovyov’s system, again, would necessarily be those that were within all or most of the frames of reference of such a system.

Which leads to the second point; upon reception, how is the candidate to read Solovyov’s system as a whole? Referring back to the idea of his thoughts making a ‘dynamic’ system, one which is increasingly being guided or narrowed down by a dogma (although Solovyov wants to avoid such);

³ pg. 391 in A.Walicki “A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism” (Oxford, 1979)

how is such a system not going to be in dialogue with ITSELF and as well as with its recipient and thus allowing for it to be modified by the particulars of the individual consciousness.

In other words; though Solovyov would like us to believe that we'll all come to the same universal conclusions (as he) when provoked and no less so, regardless of whether we come to these by thinking or by mystical experience⁴ or from a different (religious) culture. If he can cast his system into different molds (i.e. Change his mind and let his system allow for this), why can't we also – in way that is not by a frame work of Christian patronage?

In Solovyov's aspirations to 'All-unity' he has stressed certain aspects and themes such as practicality, all-comprehensiveness, universality.⁵ But, in seeking these goals, he often has vague or inconclusive how these are to be taken. The 'Practicality' of his thought, for example, one could argue, is something of an exclusive element. This 'neutral' term would, however, come to indicate the system's target audience as, again, Christians – of a particular background (and possibly –male-gender) and with a missionary zeal to be achieved.

"Practical for whom?". So, the system developed by Solovyov could be seen to be 'restricted' intentionally because of religio-political (and imperial, in a sense) aims, and could later be modified to 'outer' conditions as in the common syncretic use of e.g. Types of Christianity in African colonies.

Furthermore, in all his 'universality', like in the realm of love and sexuality, I see it as important not to ignore the biography/authorship of the man himself as a signifier in his work – an eclectic male writer with a curious(ly distant) relationship to women – and as affecting the partial understanding of the treatment of anything gendered female in the work (and anything deemed semi-androgynous for that matter).⁶

In the cult of 'Sophia Divine Wisdom', it seems that on account of 1) the continual emphasis on female fertility, 2) engendering this abstract concept as female, as well as 3) negating sexuality into something which, in control of (this) man's intellectual constructions, will be an act "towards realizing the ideal of the 'genuine human being'", Solovyov is corrupting a very interesting theory on sexuality with troubles of a psychological nature (his history with women) as well as falling into the trap of traditional 'divination' of women (meaning a fetishized and negated living object yet only ½

⁴ Though Solovyov's ideal of 'Godmanhood' presupposes a unification of corporal, intellectual and spiritual realms to come to this ultimate conclusion of unity.

⁵ Pg. 67 in John Sutton "The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov" (Macmillan, 1988)

⁶ pg. 385 in Walicki; about Baader

human⁷)

It seems to me as odd therefore that yet again, possibly for social and traditional reasons, Solovyov (unlike Rozanov – with his inconsistencies) is limiting the capacity of his thoughts' scope by not realizing his voice at work which he - in the age of Freud - should have at least noticed – if not his sexism as well.

It is this way that we see the Sophia cult becoming very dependent on notions of 'Sophia' as female 'Muse' (very literally) in a very patriarchal pseudo-liberated society. This is because, like for several Marxist regimes (well, for the capitalist environment as well) the female image and certain particular era-based fe/male images, are iconic of a mind-set that tells us about the sexual politics of these locations, times and construction of male identities.

“It's no coincidence that Plato felt the need to write great political theses (like the Republic) at a time of unrest,” someone once said. Likewise the C19th was time of great changes and utopic hopes to come. In Solovyov's use of the female / sexual as a link to the yet unattainable power he (and in different ways, many other political writers) envisaged is as clear road sign as his more direct commentaries of his work's travel from merely theosophical to strongly theocratic and ambivalently czarist and liberal; in his fluctuations, his foundation was still partially chauvinistic-traditional.

So, it becomes interesting to look at themes of inclusion into a seemingly depersonalized, highly structured, system of 'Godliness' (and seeping down to 'Godmanhood'), based strongly on pseudo-liberating male strategies using a female icon, where 'Sophia' is sexualized in relation to power/knowledge – and where getting to 'a new level' of Sophia - spirituality – is to get more sexually intimate and therefore gradually deifying your (male) self. So, consuming or using the female icon (since Sophia and The World Soul are feminine and passive) in a sense re-asserts ones now deified male identity.

Although the implications of Solovyov's philosophical and critical writings have had a vast influence on various movements including those of a theosophical persuasion and though he as an academician and theorist-systemiser is a landmark personality in (Russian) philosophy - it is hard not to look at his system as partially cutting its nose to spite its face and as not provoking as much interest in

⁷ with “interesting” I am pointing at the potentiality of Solovyov's treatment of sexuality –had it not been non gender-biased – serving as a foundation for a subtle treatment of gender/sexual identity as in Alice Jardine or Helene Cixous's work.. With “negated, 1/2 human” I point to Kristeva's discussion of the essence of 'woman' traditionally being treated as a negation of 'man' as a part of Solovyov's use of 'Sophia', leading to the symbolic “consuming” of her.

discussing or tearing to shreds his work as with e.g. Rozanov, whose fragmentation and outrageous views still offer a source of dialogue. In other words – perhaps paradoxically – less (specific) might have been more in terms of re-assessing his work today.