4-2001

Orthodoxy and Democracy: Sophiological Themes in the Philosophy of Nikolai Losskii

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ORTHODOXY AND DEMOCRACY: SOPHIOLOGICAL THEMES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF NIKOLAI LOSSKII[1]

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1. Introductory Remarks

This paper discusses the sophiological views of Nikolai Losskii (1870-1965). The concept of Sophia, introduced into modern Russian thought in the 19th century by Vladimir Solov'ev (1853-1900) was applied in the next century to many religious philosophical systems developed by Solov'ev's heirs. One of Solov'ev's followers, Nikolai Losskii usually is not regarded as a sophiological thinker. However, he not only explicitly speaks of Sophia in some of his central ontological and axiological works, but also assigns to Sophia an important role in his religious philosophy.

Losskii's sophiology is unique in 20th century Russian thought at least in two ways. First, unlike many other Russian thinkers, he does not view Sophia as a semi-divine intermediary between God and His creatures. Instead, Losskii argues that Sophia is a created entity, although in his system she occupies a special position within the hierarchy of creation. Second, and more important, is that by referring to his ontology of a hierarchical, or sophiological personalism, Losskii is able to defend his political convictions which unlike the mainstream emigre Russian thought are consistently democratic. Losskii's sophiology renders here an exclusive service by being tied up with democratic political philosophy. The purpose of the following paper will be to explore in more details these two basic points.

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[1] A short version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Boston, November 1999. I would like to thank Thomas Epstein for reading and commenting on my paper.

2. Sophia: Divine or Created?

Beginning with Solov'ev, the religious-philosophical concept of Sophia became closely associated with a specific ontological doctrine commonly called the "metaphysics of total-unity." Those Solov'evian followers who developed this ontology argued for the substantial unity of the Absolute and the world. They understood Sophia, the wisdom of God, as the link between the two combining the properties of both entities.

The sophiology developed by Fr. Sergii Bulgakov (1871-1944) serves, perhaps, as an ideal illustration of the theological implications of this kind of metaphysics.[2] **There existed other religious-philosophical doctrines designed along the same lines. A historian of Russian thought, Vassilii Zenkovskii mentions, for instance, the philosophical system developed by Semion Frank (1877-1950). Frank's understanding of total-unity as applied to the idea of creation represents, as Zenkovskii suggests, "a typical Sophiological construction ... combining the themes of nature philosophy and anthropology with the 'divine' aspect of the world."[3] Zenkovskii also refers to the thought of another Russian philosopher, Lev Karsavin (1882-1952), for whom the "conception of total-unity...led...unswervingly to the same theoretical constructions to which it had led Solovyov."[4]**

Karsavin unfolds his sophiological views in the book *Noctes Petropolitanae*. One reads here that the Absolute "contains everything in itself," as the "one and only existing absolute Being, the fullness of self-sufficient Goodness and the Loving Total-Unity itself."[5] Because the

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[2]See, for example, Mikhail Sergeev, "Bulgakov vs. Florovskii: A Sophiological Controversy in 20th Century Orthodox Theology," a paper presented at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston, August 1998.

[3]Vasilii Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, (authorized translation by George L. Kline), New York: Columbia University Press, 1953, vol. II, pp. 855-856.

[4]Ibid., p. 846.

[5]Lev Karsavin. *Noctes Petropolitanae. Malye sochineniia*. St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 1994, pp. 157, 160. All translations from the Russian, unless otherwise noted, are made by the author of this

"Divinity [of the Absolute] surpasses the distinction between Deity and Creation," the "[t]otal-unity of the world [is but] God's Total-unity, Divine Mind and Reason, Word and Son."[6] One also finds out that as a link between God and creation, Sophia is partly divine and partly created: "Sophia *Akhamot* [which] descended from the Divine *Pleroma*" and the "created Wisdom... the creaturely hypostasis and the Church as the total-unity of human beings and of the world in them."[7]

The sophiology of a close friend of Vladimir Solov'ev, Prince Eugene Trubetskoi (1863-1920), takes a similar direction. In his major work, *Smysl zhizni*, Trubetskoi writes, for instance, that the "eternal Wisdom which creates the world *is the principle of its other*... it creates everything... *out of nothing*.[8] "[T]he reality of the world," in its turn, Trubetskoi continues, "is a certain revelation of Sophia, a revelation that is *preliminary* and therefore inevitably partial and incomplete."[9] Finally, he says that the "world strives for total-unity; and the effective and realized total-unity is Sophia."[10]

Trubetskoi's sophiology, like those of Frank and Karsavin, seems to culminate as well in associating the concepts of total-unity and Sophia with that of the Absolute. In this respect, the sophiological views developed by Nikolai Losskii substantially differ from the former line of thought. Losskii proposes a distinct ontology which breaks with the divinization of wisdom and applies the concept of Sophia only to the domain of creation.

3. Hierarchical Pluralism in Ontology

In his ontological system Losskii distinguishes three levels of reality: the real, the abstract and the concretely-ideal. The third, he argues, "transcends both

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article.
[6]Ibid., pp. 171, 177.
[7]Ibid., pp. 181.
[8]Evgenii N. Trubetskoi. *Smysl zhizni* [*The Meaning of Life,* 1918]. Moscow: Respublika, 1994, p. 102.
[9]Ibid., p. 109.
[10]Ibid., p. 110.

real and abstract ideal [levels and is the reason why] the multiplicity of the real world exists in the form of an organic unity."[11] **This third sphere consists of the living agents which Losskii calls concrete ideal entities, substances or, with more precision, substantival agents.**

As compared to the abstract ideal reality which includes, for instance, abstract relations, substantival agents represent active entities originating their own manifestations in time.

The human self is such a substantival agent, and as a supra-temporal and supra-spatial unit, is responsible for creating psychic processes in time as well as material events which occur in a spatio-temporal framework. Thus, as Losskii points out, the "world as a whole, including material nature, is the work of spirit or of beings that are akin to spirit."[12]

According to the organic conception of the world, any object constitutes a system by virtue of a principle that lies beyond that system. Considering the whole world in its systemic unity, one naturally concludes that there must exist a principle which "is the source of the world's plurality and of its original unification" and which "does not contain any plurality in itself, and... therefore... stands above all systems."[13] This principle is properly named the "Absolute" and as such is subject of no positive definition.

The creaturely world differs completely from the Absolute and is a result of creation out of nothing or "absolute creation--creation in the highest and exact sense of the term."[14] By having created the substantival agents

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[11]Nikolai O. Lossky. *The World As an Organic Whole*. (Translated from the Russian by Natalie A. Duddington). London: Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 373.

[12]Ibid., p. 48.

[13]Ibid., p. 63.

[14]Lossky, *The World As an Organic Whole*, p. 69.

which themselves possess creative powers, God, however, in Losskii's view, did not determine their empirical character. In fact, the Absolute, could not have created the actual, but only the potential, human agents who must independently and freely use their powers in order to become actual persons. Otherwise, as Losskii points out, the concept of creation loses its proper meaning for,

> if God had created not only the *basis* of the person, but also the very *life* of a person, i.e. its manifestations in time, then this would have meant that the life of the world is the life of God Himself and, strictly speaking, that which we call the *world* is in fact one of the aspect of God's existence.[15]

The relation of God to the creatures, therefore, necessarily presupposes, mutual freedom "thanks to which... God is free from the creatures and from participation in their evil deeds."[16] Such a hierarchical, but pluralistic ontology leads Losskii to a reconsideration of sophiological themes in his philosophy.

4. Sophiology Revisited

Losskii develops his sophiology on the basis of an organic worldview which affirms that the whole "exists primarily and the elements can exist and come into being within the system of the whole."[17] He applies the idea of organism to all kinds of reality with the only exception of the Absolute. But is there a guarantee that the multitude of free and struggling organisms or substances created by the Absolute will not transform the universe into irreversible and total chaos?

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[15]Nicolas Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy,* New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1951, p. 330.

[16]Ibid., p. 574.

[17]Lossky, *The World As an Organic Whole*, pp. 1-2.

To answer this question Losskii points out that the substantival agents are co-substantial to each other and are integrated within a unifying framework by the founding principle of the creaturely world, the Supreme Substance. On the one hand, this entity, which Losskii, following the tradition, calls Sophia, is not identified with the Absolute and, like all other creatures, belongs to the creaturely realm. On the other hand, as compared to the imperfect substantival agents, the Supreme Substance, though created, is perfect and, therefore, is able to unite the multiplicity of creation in one cosmic whole. As Losskii writes in his book, *God and Cosmic Evil*:

> The correlation of all beings and all events which forms a single world is explained by the fact that the Cosmic Spirit stands at the head of the world, a substantival agent, who co-ordinates all activities of all beings, who is isolated from none, and therefore, belongs to the structure of God's Kingdom.[18]
> It might seem as if this Universal Substance, the "living wisdom,

Sophia," is what ancient philosophers like Plato and modern thinkers like Schelling called the World Soul. In this case Sophia, or the World Soul, would possess the whole of the world as its body--a position shared by the young Solov'ev as well. According to Losskii, however, Sophia cannot have any material body because "a material body can only exist in contraposition to some other material body... but outside the world-whole there is nobody which it could oppose."[19]

Therefore, Sophia as the Supreme Substance is not the World Soul but the Spirit which is free from any exclusiveness and related to the world as to its not-material body. As Losskii puts it: "The Spirit stands above the world which may be said to be the body *spiritualized*, and not merely *animated* by it."[20]

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[18]Nikolai O. Losskii, *Bog i mirovoe zlo* [God and Cosmic Evil], Moscow: Respublika, 1994, p. 301.

[19]Ibid., p. 121.

[20]Ibid., p. 122.

Losskii describes the life of the Kingdom of Spirit as totally different from that of the world, or of the kingdom of enmity. The existence of the spiritual kingdom makes it possible for fallen beings to restore their true divine identities and to partake of the heavenly life. Apart from helping such beings, God's Kingdom, led by Sophia, has a positive activity of its own. Spiritual life is not an eternal rest, but an extremely intensive activity. In the Kingdom of God everyone is in harmony with all, and everyone is all. The life of the kingdom headed by Sophia represents, therefore, a constant growth by every member in all possible directions which ideally complement and enrich one another. As Losskii writes in another book, *Value and Being*:

> **Any creative act in the kingdom of God brings into its structure a new and infinitely complex, individual content; that is, it represents something which is uniquely distinctive and irreplaceably valuable within the bounds of the cosmic being.[21]**

5. Implications for Political Philosophy

The originality of Losskii's sophiology apart from his ontological teaching was vividly manifested in his political philosophy. Compared to other Russian thinkers, such as, for example, his contemporary Ivan Il'in (1883-1954), Losskii published only a few articles devoted to the special problems of politics. However, again unlike many of his Russian colleagues, Losskii consistently stands for democratic values, and--what seems even more important--defends them theoretically on the basis of his sophiological or, as he calls it, *hierarchical* personalism.

One should note that the idea of democracy was never popular among Russian intellectuals brought up in the strong tradition of authoritarian rule. The distaste for democratic political institutions was especially evident in Russian

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[21]Nikolai O. Losskii, *Tsennost' i bytie [Value and Being], Bog i mirovoe zlo,* p. 278.

religious thought. Neither Piotr Chaadaev (1794-1856), nor the early--not to speak of the late--Slavophiles, nor even Solov'ev in his post-theocratic years, came to appreciate this form of government. Many 20th century Russian philosophers strongly criticized existing European democracies as well.

Their criticism was generally twofold. First, democracy as the rule of majority was rejected in its basic idea--as having a formal character and being, therefore, indifferent to truth and goodness. The counting of votes, its opponents argued, is mechanistic and does not guarantee the finding of the right solution; the holders of truth often are in the minority. Second, they added, most contemporary democracies represent secular communities, while all societies established on sacred principles have been undemocratic.[22]

Based on this general criticism, democracy was usually rejected in favor of a traditional monarchy. In contrast to democratic rule, the monarchical system was considered in perfect harmony with the organic foundations of life. Monarchy was also seen as the bearer of truth entrusted to it by religious authorities. In his defense of democracy Losskii challenges both of these assumptions. First of all, he argues that organic or holistic philosophy is not specifically tied to a certain political system, and then he makes a strong case for democracy, arguing that it is not relativistic *per se.*

Being himself a promoter of an organic conception of the world, Losskii recognizes, of course, that it presupposes the monarchical order of the world. However, as he notes, this ontological monarchism has nothing to do with monarchy as a political system. According to hierarchical personalism, the world as a system united by the Supreme Substance, Sophia, is composed of an infinite multitude of smaller sub-systems governed by the appropriate substantival agents. For example, a nation is united and

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[22]These arguments were stated, for example, in Nikolai Berdiaev's essay, "Democracy, Socialism and Theocracy," *The End of Our Time,* translated from the Russian by Donald Atwater, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933.

moved by the nation's soul. However, the soul of the nation which realizes its unity does not coincide with any of its members, just as the human soul does not equal any molecule of the human body.

It does not follow, therefore, that an authoritarian monarch expresses the soul of the nation better than a democratically elected president. On the contrary, in the course of the growing complexity of social life, the unity of the state, as Losskii notes, is achieved more securely by the dispersion of power and by a constitutional limitation on the absolute power of the monarch. Hence, the democratic form of the state organization is not only compatible with the organic worldview, but fits it even better than absolute monarchy.

In both cases, one deals with the rules of government which organize, in a different way, the systemic unity of the nation. Neither of them, as Losskii points out, is unconditionally perfect. In some circumstances monarchy is preferable; under other conditions people should embrace democracy. The choice depends upon what system of government can best balance the united will of the nation with the rights and development of its members.[23]

Together with his defense of democracy as compatible with the organic foundations of society, Losskii rejects the charge that democracy is indifferent to truth and leads to epistemological and ethical relativism. As a Christian thinker he believes in the absolute truth. However, he exclaims, "to whom would it occur to affirm that in earthly conditions we possess all the fullness of the absolute truth!"

"Even the Christian religion...in its dogmas gives only fragments of the absolute truth," Losskii says, "while leaving completely unresolved

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[23]Losskii elaborates on these issues in his article "V zaschitu demokratii" [In Defense of Democracy] published in *Sovremennye zapiski*, XXYII, Paris, 1926, pp. 369-381.

questions about the economic system, political forms, etc."[24] To realize the limitations of human knowledge while attempting to increase our understanding in a reasonable fashion does not mean to adopt relativism. The more people participate in the discussion and decision-making process for the improvement of social life and organization, the better are the chances of achieving an improvement. Social progress entails a synthesis of all positive ideas into a harmonious whole. "As far as democracy opens a field for a free struggle for truth," Losskii concludes, "it facilitates the working out of such a harmonious synthesis."[25]

6. Conclusion

Two general conclusions can be made as a result of our examination of Nikolai Losskii's sophiological views. First, Losskii's philosophy demonstrates a certain persistence of sophiological themes in modern Russian thought. In most religious-philosophical systems developed by Russian thinkers in the 20th century, sophiology seemed inseparable from the metaphysics of total-unity. Losskii's ontological doctrines proved to be different from this widely popular metaphysics. Nevertheless, he still found place in his ontology for the concept of Sophia.

Second, my analysis shows that sophiological themes in modern Russian thought enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy. Traditionally, it has been recognized that sophiology reflects an authoritarian stream of Russian culture. However, while being tied up with a specific religious (Christian) worldview, sophiology can incorporate in itself not only various ontological but also different political philosophies.

Nikolai Losskii, for instance, who disagreed with the mainstream of

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[24]Losskii, "Organicheskoe stroenie obschestva i demokratiia" [Organic Structure of Society and Democracy], *Sovremennye zapiski,* XXY, Paris, 1925, p. 352.

[25]Ibid., p. 353.

Russian sophiologists and rejected a doctrine of the divine nature of Sophia, defended his democratic political convictions on the basis of sophiological theories as well.