

XII. Russian Advaitic and Vishistadvaitic Philosophy

By G. Stavig, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*
50 (Nov. 1999), pp. 503-09

The Russian system of thought that most closely corresponds to the Indian Advaitic and Vishistadvaitic philosophy, is the metaphysics of Total-unity expounded by Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Father Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), Semyon (Simon) Frank (1877-1950), Father Pavel (Paul) Florenski (1882-1943/1950's) and Leo Karsavin (1882-1952). Vladimir Solovyov who wrote briefly on Indian and Buddhist religious thought, was Russia's most eminent philosopher of the nineteenth century. He initiated an original philosophical movement that greatly influenced subsequent Russian thought. Father Florenski was a skilled scientist who refused to renounce his holy orders and consequently was sent to a Siberian labor camp in 1933 where he eventually died. The other three metaphysicians were expelled from Russia during the Communist purge of 1922. Father Bulgakov was Dean of a Theological Institute in Paris from 1925 until his death in 1944. Semyon Frank was a Jewish convert to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1912, who made occasional references to Indian philosophy. He lectured in Germany (1930-37) where he was forced to leave, moving to France (1937-45) and London (1945-50). Leo Karsavin became a professor at Kovno University and later at Vilna in Lithuania. Unfortunately the Russian Communist took over Lithuania in 1939 and Karsavin was sent to a labor camp where he died in 1952.¹

The Russian Total-unity school of philosophy will be discussed under thirteen fundamental topics that relate to Indian religious philosophy.

1. The Absolute (Brahman)- Solovyov advanced the idea that the Absolute "is nothing and everything, nothing since it is not something, and everything since it cannot be deprived of anything." It is the first principle of unity, transcending real content and rational

form, standing above all determination and phenomenal existence. The Absolute is everywhere present to us as the ultimate ground of our being. If the creation were separate from the Absolute it would limit the unlimited which is impossible. "The Absolute can be known to the subject and the subject can be inwardly connected with all that exists in the Absolute and actually know this All. It is only in connection with that which truly is, as with the unconditionally real and unconditionally universal" that we can attain to reality and universality. Humans "cannot and will not be satisfied with any relative, limited content" They are convinced they "can attain positive absoluteness" and "possess the complete fullness of being."²

Frank accepts an Absolute, as an all-embracing primordial total-unity which is being in-itself (aseitas). It is a nonobjective, unconditional, undifferentiated, and indivisible continuity not divided into an external or internal realm, transpersonal and simple, transcending good and evil. Behind finite existence is a background of infinity, the substratum of reality which is not an object among other objects. "The primordial unity not being itself a determination, has nothing outside of it, i.e. it is an absolute unity or total-unity." God is "the essential potentiality or power of all that exists or does not exist and therefore it is self-contradictory to think of Him as nonexistent." Deity "cannot be separated from the rest of reality, for its essence consists in being the ground and the source of it." It appears as a Personal God to the devout soul, assuming a loving "thou" relationship with the devotee. "Since Divinity cannot be subsumed under any category, cannot be referred to any 'genus,' it follows that Divinity cannot be subsumed under the concept of 'the person,' cannot be conceived as one of many possible persons." The infinite is the primary and affirmative "fullness of all" while the finite is a negation of that fullness.³

2. The ineffability (acintya) of Brahman- According to Frank's conception of negative (apophatic) theology, "The primordial ground in its essence is something absolutely paradoxical, improbable,

rationally unknowable: namely antinomian.” The ultimate all-embracing metalogical realm of transrational knowledge is hidden and unfathomable. It is not a part of the determinate empirical world and transcends abstract conceptual thought, since it cannot be objectified. “This reality is not an object of perception, examination, or reflection.” Language can be utilized to express or suggest the experience of the Absolute, though it transcends logical analysis and conceptual thought. “The relation of Divinity to all else cannot be adequately expressed in any of the usual categorical forms, for they themselves originate from the primordial ground and their very meaning presupposes the reality of the primordial ground.” It can only be comprehended by transcendental thinking as a living unity where the experiencer and experience are one.⁴

For Karsavin the Absolute is in necessary opposition to the relative plane of existence. It is the unfathomable Divine Nothing that transcends human understanding and is not expressed by ideas. Bulgakov agreed the Absolute is the Divine Nothing that transcends the phenomenal plane of existence. Ineffability is attributable to “the inadequacy of the powers of human reason,” but is superseded by religious revelation.⁵

3. The Divinity of humanity (Atman)- Solovyov insisted that humans “have the same inner essence of life-or total unity-as God.” “Man as the spiritual centre of the universe, embraced the whole of nature in his soul” since “every man is rooted in his deepest essence in the eternal Divine world,” as “an eternal and particular being, a necessary and irreplaceable link in the absolute whole.” “This ideal person ... is merely an individualization of the total-unity which is indivisibly present in each one of its individual expressions.” All people preexist before their human birth as an eternal apperceptive essence. The empirical self is not the true substantial subject as Rene Descartes maintained. “What we call the ‘self’ or personality, is not a complete sphere of life closed in upon itself, with its own content, essence, or significance of being, but only a bearer or support of something other and higher.” “Surrendering to this other,

forgetting his own 'self', man ... in fact asserts himself in his true significance.”⁶

Frank later wrote that Godmanhood, is the Divine-human essence, the oneness of the human soul in God. We co-belong to the transcendental principle as a unity of a single substance. Humans are immersed in an Absolute Being that proceeds consciousness and is experienced in a state of supertemporal unity. Self-observation and inward perception presuppose something more immediate and primary. In the immediate self-being there is an inseparable unity between the subject and the object. All-embracing being is present in the inexpressible unity of “I am” and we experience its self-revelation within us. “This reality is what was revealed to Indian thought as Brahman ... and which also coincides with the bottomless depths of our own inner being-with Atman.” “I in the ultimate, deepest ground of my being maintain an eternal and indestructible bond with God . . . even my being without God is God’s being with me.” One all embracing selfhood generates a large number of interrelated individual selfhood's that limit each other. It is Deity manifesting in oneself and concurrently within itself, as selfhood at one with the Absolute. “This reality is not ‘given’ to us; it is given only to itself, and to us only insofar as we ourselves are this reality.”⁷

Karsavin observed that the spiritual Self is a unity, self-determined and free, while the corporeal self is plural, determined, and necessary. Our higher Self is an indefinable essence (ousia), spatially and temporally infinite. In addition to our lower being, we exist as a higher being, the perfect total-unity of a God-man. For Bulgakov all creatures are created in the image of God and are therefore living icons of the Deity. God and the empirical world are consubstantial, yet there is a distinction between them. Humans are created by God in the image of the Divine archetype. “The spiritual being which God breathes out of Himself into man’s body is rooted in the Divine eternity; the created spirit is, like it, eternal and uncreated and bears in itself ... its Divine nature.” Because of the

original Godmanhood, the deification of human existence is a possibility.⁸

4. Total-unity as an organic whole (angi)- Frank pointed out that “Nothing exists or is conceivable in the world that could exist in itself, wholly unconnected with anything else. Being is a total-unity, in which everything particular exists and is conceivable only in its relation to something else.” Cognition and abstract reasoning are possible because of the unity of being. Absolute existence as “total-unity permeates all authentic being; it is present as such in the tiniest segment of reality.” “The relation between the primordial unity and its determinations is not a special case of the relation between a whole and its parts” since each lies “in a totally different logical dimension.” “The primordial ground is the absolute unity and coincidence of all opposites.”⁹

Karsavin held that the first principle of philosophy is that, “The unity of the world is prior to multiplicity, and this multiplicity is resolved in unity.” The Absolute “contains all things in itself. It is a total-Unity. Beside It I am nothing; only in and through It am I anything; otherwise It would not be perfection or Total-Unity.” He also believed that our separate existence and self-consciousness are unreal, an illusion and dreamlike. Florenski and Bulgakov both taught that nature is an animate and living whole. The cosmos is a unity of wholeness, a one-many relationship that is revealed in a living experience. A metaphysical unity of all creation in God pervades the visible diversity of created existence.¹⁰

5. The creation (srsti, sarga) of the universe- Frank stated that there is nothing “wholly other” or apart from the Absolute, since it is the first principle of being from which all else arises. Phenomenal existence is neither identical with nor wholly different from it. “The world is infinitely extended in time,” yet it is not self-caused (causa sui) but is grounded in the supercosmic reality. Everything that comes into existence flows from the transfinite essence, which is begotten in the dark womb of potentiality. Creation of the world is a theophany, God’s self-revelation and self-

expression that bestow value and meaning on it. God the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, is inconceivable except in relation to the world.¹¹

Karsavin pointed out that apart from God we are nonexistent and exist insofar as we participate in God. The logical not temporal sequence of the creative process follows a Divine circle. It began with God alone, followed by the dying God and the emergence of creatures, creatures only without God, then the dying of creatures and an ascending to the level of God, and finally a return to God alone. Both Florenski and Bulgakov stressed the importance of the “word” as actively involved in the creative act. “The name of a thing is its substance. . . . The thing is created by its name; it interacts with its name and imitates it.... A name is a metaphysical principle of being and cognition.” An internal and not external linkage relates a word with its corresponding object. Consequently, the soul of a word, its inner meaning, the inner word, is the object itself.¹²

Concerning the evolutionary process, Solovyov noted that “The higher, more positive and fuller types and conditions of being exist (metaphysically) before the inferior ones, though they manifest and reveal themselves after them.” To assert that the process of evolution creates higher forms “out of nothing-means to found fact on a logical absurdity.” The evolutionary process creates “the necessary milieu for the manifestation or revelation of the superior.” “The superior type’s own positive contents does not arise out of non-being, but exists from all times. It only enters (at a certain point of the process) into another sphere of phenomena.”¹³

6. The comic play (Lila-vibhuti)- Both Solovyov and Bulgakov maintained that God needs empirical existence to manifest His love. Creation of the cosmos is an act of spiritual love that is expressed in all positive aspects of the world's existence.¹⁴

7. Pantheistic transformation (parinamavada)- Solovyov advanced the idea that the essence of God and man is the same, since the world is consubstantial with God. The world is posited by God out of Himself as His “other” since “no being can have the

ground of its existence outside of God, or have substantial being apart from the Divine world.” Phenomenal existence is “only a different and improper interrelation of the very same elements which constitute the being of the Divine world.”¹⁵

Karsavin asserted that creatures receive all of their content and substance from the Divine total-unity. Creatures are ontologically one, consubstantial with God or at least a part of Divine Being. “The connection of Deity with the created human being’ is not outside Deity, but in Deity Itself.... Man’s whole being is religious. Everything in us exists in a certain opposition to God and a certain unity with Him.” Bulgakov held that God creates the cosmos out of Himself, repeating in temporal succession the eternal content of the Divine nature. In creating the world the Divine Being shifts or externalizes the material already present within Himself.¹⁶

8. The world-soul (Mahat)- Solovyov conceived the world-soul as occupying “a mediating position between the plurality of living entities and the unconditional unity of Deity.” The world-soul is the realm of ideas and a living spiritual being, Sophia the eternal Feminine, which connects all living entities or souls. Bulgakov posited that “The world-soul, which contains all things in-itself, is the centre which unites the world.” “Phenomenally the world-soul has many aspects, but substantially it is one.” “The world-soul contains the ‘seminal logoi’ of being in a potential, amorphous state. The real plurality of manifold created being which inheres in the universe is bound into a unity by the world-soul.”¹⁷

9. Divine Incarnation (Avatar)- Solovyov, Karsavin, and Bulgakov taught that the Divine Incarnation descends into the stream of earthly events, temporarily renouncing his powers and assuming human limitations while becoming a historical individual. Self-limitation of the deity as a God-man, is an act of compassionate love and grace. The Divine Incarnation, redeems the self-limited creatures bringing about reconciliation with God. Bulgakov noted that “The timeless-eternal God makes Himself a becoming God in the God-man, denudes Himself of His eternal Godhood in order to come

down to human life” for the purpose of regenerating fallen humanity, redeeming it from sin and reconciling it with God.¹⁸

10. Universal liberation (sarvamukti)- Solovyov realized that all people strive for unity and slowly attain the final goal of oneness with God. Through grace man is deified and becomes a member of the Kingdom of God. The goal of world history is the universal manifestation of the Kingdom of God embracing all of humanity. Bulgakov emphasized that there is no eternal damnation, since finite sin cannot produce infinite punishment.¹⁹

11. Spiritual experience (samadhi, anubhava, nirvana)- Solovyov concluded that “In true religious experience the reality of that which is experienced is immediately given.... The reality of Deity is not a deduction from religious experience, but the content of it- that which is experienced.” Mystical awareness and the immediate experience of Absolute reality are necessary to develop a comprehensive philosophy. The purpose of this awareness is to shift “the centre of man’s being from his nature ... to the absolute, transcendent world, i.e. his inner union with what truly is.” Mystical experience awakens “from within, from the side of our absolute being which is inwardly connected with the being of the object known.”²⁰

Frank regarded primary knowledge as the mystical intuition of an object in its metaphysical wholeness and continuity. Living knowledge reveals a deeper sphere which is transrational being-for-itself, that is inexpressible in concepts and not given by discursive thought. Within the realm of the inner life is a level of reality with a higher epistemological and ontological value. Religious intuition is the direct revelation of God to the human heart. The act of striving toward the good is autonomous and not determined, because it coincides with the true inner basis of our being.²¹

Bulgakov observed that authentic religion requires the revelation of a Deity, who voluntarily enters into the terrestrial world as an act of grace. God “is known only through meeting Him, through His living revelation of Himself” in a religious awakening. God

is encountered in a mystic self-absorption accompanying a sublime revelation. Karsavin mentioned that redemption is realized by assimilating the Divine nature and attaining deification. The higher ideal is reached by the self who most fully manifests the individuality of the Absolute in the phenomenal world.²²

12. Evolutionary history- Solovyov optimistically believed that the world is gradually being transformed from the kingdom of man to the Kingdom of God. The “gradual spiritualization of man through an inner assimilation and development of the Divine principle constitutes the strictly historical process of mankind.” “The whole of nature has striven and gravitated toward man; the whole history of mankind has been directed toward the God-man.” The goal of history is the metaphysical unity of the cosmos, an eventual triumph of the good and the realization of the ideal humanity. Likewise, Karsavin concluded that the cosmos contains everything in an embryonic state and humanity develops from within. According to the doctrine of the metaphysics of history, the relative world will be wholly defied and made Absolute. In the fullness of being man and the cosmos will be fused into a living unity.²³

13. Evil (anartha), sin (papa) and unrighteousness (adharma)- For Karsavin evil and imperfection are not positive entities but are a privation, a lack of goodness. Because a person has not assimilated the fullness of Divine Being, pride replaces humility and combines with a greedy desire to possess other things.²⁴

Frank concluded that “rational theodicy is impossible” since “to explain evil would be to give a reason for it and thus to justify it.” How can reality that is born in God, alienate and divided itself, become not-God? “The responsibility for evil rests upon that primary element of reality which, though in God (for everything without exception is in God) is not God Himself, or is something opposed to Him.” Evil results when the person “mistakes its own inward center in its isolation from all else, for the absolute ground of reality.” “Non-being asserts itself as being.” “The only right attitude to evil is to reject it, to banish it, and certainly not to explain it.”²⁵

References

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⁴ Zenkovsky, *History*, pp. 855, 860; Copleston, *Philosophy*, pp. 357-59; Frank, *Unknowable*, pp. 73, 209-11, 219.

⁵ Lossky, *History*, pp. 204, 299-300; Valery Kuvakin, "Sergei Bulgakov," in *A History of Russian Philosophy* ed. Valery Kuvakin (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), pp. 630-31.

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⁸ Lossky, *History*, pp. 211, 215-16, 302-04; Zenkovsky, *History*, p. 906.

⁹ Zenkovsky, *History*, pp. 855-858; Frank, *Unknowable*, p. 208.

¹⁰ Zenkovsky, *History*, pp. 845-46, 885-87, 900; Lossky, *History*, p. 303.

¹¹ Zenkovsky, *History*, pp. 855-57, 860-62, 869; Lossky, *History*, p. 275; Frank, *Unknowable*, pp. 56-57, 274-75.

¹² Lossky, *History*, pp. 225-26, 300-02, 304-05; Zenkovsky, *History*, p. 886.

¹³ Lossky, *History*, pp. 106-07.

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