

Study on the Specificity of L.P. Karsavin's Historico-philosophical Approach

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Abstract—The article deals with some specific features of L. Karsavin's approach to the history of philosophy. The peculiarities of the position expressed by this philosopher concerns various traditions of the World philosophy and, in particular. And Russian philosophy is being discussed. The central issue is the Karsavin's version of the metaphysics of all-unity. The results of the usage in his historical and philosophical research of some Mediaeval philosophical categories and especially those of Nicolas Cusanus by Karsavin is being described and evaluated. The character of the Russian philosopher's "Platonism" in the context of the reception of the Platonic legacy by representatives of the Russian tradition of all-unity metaphysics, mainly by V. Solovyov, is specified. The article contains detailed characteristics of the role and significance of Karsavin's approach to the philosophy and the history of philosophy for the Russian and continental philosophy.

Keywords—*all-unity metaphysics; dialectics; Platonism; pantheism; religious philosophy; personalism; the Absolute; trinity; scholastics; eschatology; creationism; medieval studies; patristics; hegelianism; theophany*

I. INTRODUCTION

Karsavin was a professional historian of the Middle Age, and this qualification largely determined the specificity of his approach to the history of philosophy as such and his sustained interest in the medieval philosophy in particular. It can be generally stated that in the history of thought he sought and found conceptions which he felt were relevant and seminal as being possible intellectual and spiritual guidelines in his original creative philosophical work. In his "Philosophy of history", Karsavin describes his historical and philosophical affiliation quite explicitly. "The metaphysics of all-unity belongs to a long tradition of the philosophical thought. Its foundation is Plato's philosophy; it has been elaborated and substantiated by the Neoplatonists and the Fathers of the Eastern church, further by Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa. It is more or less clearly and deeply manifested in the philosophical systems of Leibnitz, Shelling and Hegel. Finally, it is the characteristic feature of the Russian national philosophical thought." [1]

In Karsavin's later work, we find the following and a more detailed explication of his predilections in philosophy.

"As for me, this system is associated with the theology of the Church Fathers, especially with the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, and in the Latin West with the theology Nicolas Cusanus and even Eriugena, these two metaphysicians of an Eastern style, who remained somehow suspect by the orthodoxy; as far as Russia is concerned, I would mention the slavophylans whose theology has been determined by the influence of the German idealism, as well as the representatives of Academic theological tradition (especially established by Bolotov, A. Spassky, Nesmelov). I perceive Vladimir Solovyov as a catholic. And, surely, I'm seen as a heretic by the eyes of contemporary Russian theologians" [2]. It should be mentioned, however, that Karsavin in his quality of a historian of philosophy was largely indebted to V. Solovyov who was the founder of the Russian branch of the all-unity metaphysics. And in is a sufficient reason to set aside any doubt that for Karsavin's thinking, the Solovyov's metaphysics was highly significant and thias cannot be explained away exclusively by some catholic trends of the latter.

II. NICOLAS CUSANUS AND KARSAVIN'S METAPHYSICS OF ALL-UNITY

The ideas and concepts of Nicolas Cusanus were of crucial importance for all representatives of the aforementioned Russian school. However, the Karsavin's position in this context is even more unambiguous. If the creative legacy of the great Cusanus was for him not, strictly speaking, all that mattered, still it did matter very much. His first great work in the domain of religious philosophy, "Saligia" (1919), was essentially an elaboration of the author's version of all-unity metaphysics according to Cusanus' guidelines and style. In this work, a great deal of effort is given to the concept of the Absolute as perfect all-unity, which was first developed by Cusanus [3]. In his later works on the religious philosophy, namely "De principiis" and "On personality" the thinker elaborated a conception of all-unity as a Tri-unity which is dialectically self-developing through stages of self-separation and self-reunification, and this conception is essentially akin to Cusanus' platonic dialectics. But it his aforementioned earlier work he introduced a rather radical interpretation of the Cusanus' famous proposition that, from the formula "God is all," it

necessarily follows that every creature is a divine being [4]. Karsavin insisted that every being, and “the most hideous and wretched not excluded”, is a theophany [5].

One can evaluate such a position as an obvious pantheistic bias even within the scope of the tradition of the metaphysics of all-unity which regularly has been reproached of being nothing else but pantheism. Still, V. Solovyov did never go so far as to perceive a theophany directly in wretchedness. Rather, he wrote about an ability to “recognize the splendor of the Divinity” “under the rough material bark”. By the way, Karsavin always, his earlier work not excluded, strived to avoid the extreme pantheism and advocated creationism similarly as Cusanus did. (This idea remained alien to Solovyov’s thinking). Moreover, he stressed that there was an “essential” difference between the God and the creature. “The man is created by God in unity with the God, in an identity of every kind to him except of an essential one.” [6]

One can hardly doubt that the idea of all-unity, which is foundational for Karsavin’s creative work in the domain of religious philosophy, is based on many different sources. All-unity is the very core of his religious anthropology; according to him, the thought, the sentiment and the will of the human being are the thought, the sentiment and the will of God [7]. In his interpretation of the God as all-unity and of the human being as a theophany, the Russian thinker found an intellectual foundation for his conception of the philosophy of history in Cusanus’ legacy as well as in principles of the German classical idealism (primarily represented by Hegel). The subject, i.e. the agent of the history is for him nothing else but the mankind in its all-unity and its historical being is intimately and inseparably connected with the Absolute Being.

Nevertheless, the dialectics of the “great Cusanus” supersedes the influence of the German idealists and remains for Karsavin its characterization as a most important historical and philosophical guideline in his creative activity in the domain religious philosophy. We read the following consideration in his work “On freedom”: “In the absolute Being-as-all-unity, all its constitutive aspects and, correspondingly, all aspects of the created being are both mutually distinct and non-distinct; the most various being reside in the most various being and preserves in itself and by itself its individual aspect of the All, as well as the All itself. A creature which is essentially an all-unity necessarily exists in the All-unity.” [8] This discourse completely corresponds to Cusanus’ conception of an “absolute humanity which originally resides in the human being”. The Russian follower of Cusanus, according to the metaphysical universalism of the latter’s ontology as expressed in the formula “everything in everything”, consistently applies the corresponding categories to the “humanity in all-unity”. It is accomplished in Karsavin’s philosophy of history. The humanity as and in all-unity and in all-unity potentially exists in the immediate moments of its historical being and is represented in every historical “individuation”. Karsavin in this context seeks to avoid a “historical” pantheism and considers the dialectics of God-human being relations as an interaction between an “imperfect all-unity of the created”

and the “absolute and perfect all-unity”. Therefore, it seems quite reasonable to conclude that Karsavin’s thought is based on Cusanus’ theological heritage to a much deeper extent than the works of other representatives of the Russian religious philosophy of the 20-th century¹.

The personal image of Karsavin is remarkably and symbolically twofold. He may be regarded both as “medieval person” and as a “Renaissance person”. Many researchers of Karsavin’s creative legacy pointed out that his philosophizing was characterized by a “scholastic” style. But the “Renaissance” vein is no less obvious in his writings. And it consists above anything else in a unique reincarnation of the heritage of one of the Renaissance philosophical giants, viz. Nicolas Cusanus, in the work of the Russian medievalist. Karsavin constantly appeals to Cusanus’ legacy in “Saligia” and “De principiis”. In his other book which was dedicated to another and tragical figure of the Renaissance, viz. Giordano Bruno, Karsavin also pays a special attention to Cusanus [9].

Symbolically enough, Cusanus in this latter book is characterized as a thinker who endeavored to combine and unite in his worldview the spiritual experience of two epochs, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is his tremendous attempt “of a disclosure of the sense of the world in the Divinity” and not a Renaissance style pantheism that the Russian philosopher sympathizes to in the position of the brilliant cardinal and philosopher. He regards the philosophy of Cusanus as an outstanding archetype of a principally personal anthropocentrism, and this accent upon the personal is the distinctive feature of his thought in the background of the generally anthropocentric Renaissance ideas. Respectively, the all-unity itself obtains a personal dimension according to Karsavin and in its becoming is disclosed “as an extinction of the empirical opposition and disconnectedness, while the true personal connection is preserved, and this latter is the genuine foundation of the historical being” [10]. It is interesting to observe than such a thinker of an abstract and scholastic style as Karsavin may seem, displays apparent existential motives mainly in a philosophical “dialog” with Cusanus. Therefore one cannot be astonished by his especially high nay pathetic evaluation of the role of this outstanding theologian of the Renaissance “who provided the further generations with a program of philosophical elaboration which shows us the purpose of life and the thought” [11].

III. PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN KARSAVIN’S WORKS

Traditional issues of the Christian theology were constantly mentioned and discussed in Karsavin’s works. A good example is provided by his elaboration of the problem of origin and the sense of evil. On the one hand, in general he shared Origen’s view i.e. ascribed a metaphysical responsibility of the evil to the creature as incapable and averse to participate in the theophany process [12]; but on the other hand, he is not too far from Augustine’s position

¹ In a much wider extent than S. Frank who was enormously indebted to Cusanus, especially by his work “On the incomprehensible”.

who as is known compared the evil with silence and vacuity and thereby deprived it of any ontological status. Along with him Karsavin alleged that evil is not (a) being. Be he readily admitted that all and every being participates in the Absolute, including all possible imperfections and even malformations. Therefore he nevertheless did not attribute them ontological evil.

It may be remarked however that in this context we encounter a problem shared by other proponents of the all-unity metaphysics. It is well known that V. Solovyov in the end of his life became closely engaged in the issue of a possibly metaphysical nature of evil. But even in his late work "Three discourses on war, progress and the end of the world history", while depicting the embodiment of evil in a figure of Antichrist, Solovyov deprived him of an ontological status: he (and evil) is no more than an embodied "emptiness" [13]. And it should be reminded that although V. Solovyov had been characterized as a Platonist, he never applied this qualification to himself. He was an acknowledged translator of Plato's dialogues into Russian as well as the author of works on Plato and Neoplatonism (i.a. in the renowned Russian Brockhaus encyclopedic dictionary) but he always specified the difference of his own position from that of the Ancient philosophy explicitly enough. On the contrary, as has been already mentioned, Karsavin tended to rank himself among Platonists, as well other principal proponents of the Russian philosophy (slavophiles included).

The old issue of the relationship between Hegel and the Russian religious philosophy attracts now a new considerable attention [14]. For Karsavin, Hegel's philosophy was and remained "the most brilliant and productive" endeavor in the domain of the "metaphysics of history" [15]. And he felt this Hegel's precedent congenial enough in more than one aspect, viz. in Hegel's treatment of the concepts "development" and "change", in his understanding of the "subject-actor of the history", "the laws of history" and some other essential points. As far as the disagreement with Hegel is concerned, Karsavin invariably criticized the theory of progress in its different varieties, the Hegelian one not excluded.

IV. CONCLUSION

The very attitude of Karsavin in respect of the creative heritage of Nicolas Cusanus is evidence that our author was not really perplexed by a problem of distinction between the theological experience and the philosophical discourse in a proper sense. In the same vein he wrote e.g. about the "rootedness" of his philosophical views in the Patristic tradition with special reference to Gregory Nyssa [16]. Karsavin as well as the majority of the Russian religious philosophers believed that a Christian philosophy which brings together faithfulness to the spirit of a free philosophical enquiry with serious consideration of the wisdom found in the Ancient religious and theological tradition is both real possibility and a necessity. Karsavin demonstrated an exceptional attention and emphasis on the philosophical and theological vocabulary of the past epochs and in his activity as a historian of philosophy he cooperated

to the task of reestablishing the continuity of epochs with an exemplary consistency and thoroughness. It seems that he could not have proceeded differently. For him, "All-unity" had become the principle of the historical-philosophical research.

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