

Lev Karsavin: Theological path of all-unity

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This article introduces the theological and philosophical thoughts of Lev Karsavin, who was one of the most creative representatives of Russian religious philosophy in the early 20th century. His conception was historically the last amongst the great systems of Russian metaphysics of all-unity. This conception gave an opportunity for developing an understanding of the relations between God and the world, and the act of creation as gift of God.

Keywords: Karsavin; metaphysics; all-unity; Godmanhood; creation; theophany.

Introduction

Russian thinker Lev Platonovich Karsavin was one of the most original minds of religious metaphysics of the 20th century and the most interesting proponent of the philosophy of all-unity. He was born in 1882 in St. Petersburg and studied at the Historical-Pedagogical Faculty of St. Petersburg University. Karsavin started his scientific career as a historian with scientific specialisation in the religious life, theology and mysticism of Western Europe in the Middle Ages. His scientific interest explains his profound knowledge of Western European culture and history, which he studied deeply during numerous foreign scholarships.

In 1912, Karsavin became a lecturer, and in 1916, professor at St. Petersburg University. He was one of the most educated and talented intellectuals of his time, and he became one of the most active and significant persons in the cultural life of Russia. He wrote many academic and popular texts, and gave many talks and lectures about medieval religious life and thought. In 1920, he became the co-founder and professor of the Theological Institute in St. Petersburg Orthodox Academy. During the same period, he regularly lectured in churches on theological and philosophical themes.

During the Russian Revolution, Karsavin, as a free-minded thinker with strong Christian intentions, entered into an explicit conflict with Communist ideology. In 1922, Karsavin and his family were expelled by the Soviet government and deported to Western Europe, along with other famous Russian intellectuals and philosophers. In Berlin, he was elected as a Friend of the Chairman of the Bureau of the Russian Academic Union in Germany. He was also the co-founder of the Obelisk Publishing House, which organised the publication of the works of many Russian emigrants. This period of his life was his most prolific with regard to metaphysical and theological writing. During this period, Karsavin created and developed his highly original and interesting variant of theological metaphysics of all-unity. From 1926, he lived in Clamart, near Paris, where he participated in the intellectual life of the Russian community, especially in the work of the Russian–Eurasian movement.

In 1927, D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky proposed Karsavin for the position of Professor of History at Oxford University, but Karsavin declined the proposal. In the same year, Karsavin received and accepted an invitation to be the Chair of History at the Lithuanian University in Kaunas. After moving to Lithuania, he quickly became one of the leading intellectuals in the country. However, in 1944, the Soviet authorities removed him from his post at the university. From 1944 to 1949, Karsavin served as the director of the historical-art museum in Vilnius, but in 1949 he was arrested, accused of participating in the anti-Soviet Eurasian movement and in facilitating the overthrow of Soviet state. In March 1950, he was sentenced to 10 years in forced labour camps, where he later died of tuberculosis in 1952, at the age of 69. His unnamed grave was rediscovered only in 1990.

Karsavin's works: A brief overview

The development of thought of Karsavin was highly controversial and complex. He started his career as a historian of the medieval age but later he turned to historiosophy, or the

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philosophy of history. Karsavin understood that the roots of history are unhistorical, and because of this, he turned to Christian metaphysics for an interpretation of the ontological relation between the creator and creation.

Early historical works of Karsavin explored the religious life and the thought of the Western Middle Ages. His first dissertation was *Essays on religious life in Italy in the XII–XIII centuries*, and his second work was *Fundamentals of medieval religiosity in the XII–XIII centuries, mainly in Italy* (Karsavin 1915). His methodology of historical inquiry was not only descriptive but also explications of deep ontological foundations of the medieval consciousness, which was essentially theological. In the restless year of 1918, he turned to the publication of his book, titled *Catholicity* (Karsavin 1918), in which he energetically rejected the view of the incompatibility of Eastern and Western Christianity and explicated their essential unity in spirituality, mysticism and metaphysics. This book symbolised the transition of Karsavin from the history of religion to that of Christian metaphysics. A highly interesting experience of lyrical-metaphysical meditation was revealed in the short book, titled *Saligia* ('A very brief and thoughtful reflection on God, the world, man, evil and the seven deadly sins'), which was stylised under a medieval mystic tractate. He also published a very profound and original book, titled *Noctes Petropolitanae* in 1922, dedicated to the metaphysics of love as a gift of God.

After 1922, Karsavin became more and more interested in this line of theology, and because of the explicit scholastic background of his thought, he tried to develop a metaphysical argumentation and intended to build a systematic theory of being. During the period 1923–1931, he wrote such works as *The Way of Orthodoxy* (Karsavin 2003), *Holy Fathers and Church Teachers* (Karsavin 1994), *Philosophy of History* (Karsavin 1993), *Giordano Bruno* (Karsavin 2016), *Dialogues* (Karsavin 1923), *On First Principles* (Karsavin 1925) and *On Person, The Poem of Death* (Karsavin 1992). During the latter period of his life, Karsavin created several lyrical and poetic texts.

Theological method and practical approach

Permanent interest in classical theological metaphysics was common amongst Russian religious thinkers of the 20th century. They searched for a universal religious renewal on the path of intellectual and artistic creativity. In an age of sheer criticism regarding metaphysics and the domination of positivistic and post-positivistic worldviews, Karsavin and other Russian religious philosophers, such as S. Frank, N. Lossky, P. Florensky, S. Bulgakov and N. Berdyaev, appealed to classical theological metaphysics.

Vladimir Soloviev laid the path for the development of this kind of speculative thought and came to be seen as

the intellectual and spiritual 'father' of Russian religious philosophy of the 19th century. As a metaphysician, Karsavin belonged to the tradition of the philosophy of all-unity, which possessed deep historical roots in the Modern Russian thought, which was reanimated by Soloviev. The idea of all-unity can be explained as the answer to the key ontological question about relations of one and many, or about the unifying of the multiplicity of beings. In other words, all-unity is the form of being in which parts are identical to the universal whole, but they do not lose their own uniqueness. Obviously, such a controversial task cannot have a univocal solution and hence, presence of variations in metaphysical systems of all-unity is a fact.

Of course, the genealogical relations of theological metaphysics of Karsavin to the philosophy of Soloviev were extremely complex. On the one hand, he had deeply embraced the concept of all-unity and, on the other hand, Karsavin read Soloviev critically and creatively. Karsavin (1925) wrote:

The idea of all-unity of God and Man, as the whole of the created cosmos, the idea of Godmanhood is my supreme and basic idea. From this idea all of my statements occur and return. (p. 65)

The central concept in the theological metaphysics of Karsavin is Godmanhood (in Russian *Bogochelovechestvo*), which describes the ontological aporia: 'God is all that exists and the only being', and therefore, 'God without man' (Karsavin 1925). However, man and God are absolutely opposed to each other, and yet man exists. Therefore, 'God is both a man and the perfect unity of God and man'. Incarnation is the apex of communication of the infinite and the finite, which includes four aspects of all-unity: (1) God as Absolute all-unity, (2) created all-unity, different from God in that, when it is, there is no God, but it is itself God's 'nothing', (3) complete created all-unity, striving for its improvement as an ideal commodification with God and (4) a relative unity, all-unity becoming perfect through its completion in God.

The idea of all-unity is laid as the foundation of the systematic metaphysics of being, and Karsavin embraced this idea in different ways. Firstly, as a professional historian, he clearly saw the fruitlessness of the positivistic approach in historical science and the necessity of a metaphysical foundation of historiography. Secondly, as a highly creative thinker, he was also the uncial example in all of the great traditional Russian religious thought, who intended not to overcome dogmatical foundations of Christian theology but to piously and creatively explicate all of the treasures of dogma. If church dogma is the Absolute truth, individual reception of it is not Absolute but depends on the skills and the intention of every person.

Individual rethinking and an explanation of the meaning of dogma is not heresy unless it is not acclaimed as the Absolute

truth. Moreover, permanent moving to the fullness of participation in the Absolute truth is the goal of the church.

There are several reputed interpretations of the theological metaphysics of all-unity of Karsavin. The famous historian of Russian philosophy, V. Zenkovsky, defines the philosophy of Karsavin as 'pantheism' (Zenkovsky 2003). From the point of view of classical theology, the speculative narrative of Karsavin really has pantheistic tendencies. The monistic resolve of the aporia of relation of the Absolute and the non-Absolute is the decision of a kind of metaphysics of all-unity. Only God exists in his own sense, and all creatures exist, not in themselves, but only in him. God is the all-unity of himself, and other than him exists only as the drift from nothing into God. Creatures are not possessed of an immanent existence, or autonomous nature, but all of their existence is through their participation in God. Such interpretation explains why Karsavin used the famous metaphysical principle *coincidentia oppositorum* [coincidence of opposites], which goes back to Nicholas of Cusa (Karsavin 1925). F. Copleston, in line with this interpretation of his reading of Karsavin, understands his metaphysics as the original mixture of classical theism and pantheism (Copleston 1986). Well-known Russian philosopher and historian of philosophy, N. Lossky, classifies Karsavin's metaphysics as personalistic, because concepts of all-unity and Godmanhood in this philosophical system provide the possibility for including all the created cosmos in communication with God through man (Lossky 1991).

The book, *On First Principles* (first title – *Christian Metaphysics*) is the central text of Karsavin's transition from history to metaphysics and theology. The ambitiousness of the conception of this book is indicated by his choosing of the same title as the famous book by Origen. This highly interesting book was Karsavin's conception developed as an interpretation of the relation of the Absolute to the non-Absolute. He starts from the thesis that the world is an explication or manifestation of God as a theophany. Such an interpretation of the relation of God and the world is following the line of reasoning by thinkers such as Plotinus, Origen, Eriugena, Cusanus, Schelling and Hegel.

Regarding Karsavin, in the act of creation Absolute gives himself to un-existing otherness of to nothing, which becomes a creation being. However, the creature is not self-created, or even the possessor of relative creativity. In order to explain our own understanding of the act of creation, Karsavin (1925) wrote:

'In order to really be Absolute, the All-Good must give Himself up to such an "Other" that does not exist, is Absolute nothingness'. Absolute implicitly includes all creatures that are explicitly actualised in the act of creation. (p. 49)

If creatures do not exist autonomously, but only as the other of the Absolute, then in this pantheistic concept, division of nature and grace is impossible. Because of this, Karsavin's Christian metaphysics has some intersection with Catholic *nouvelle theologie* thinkers such as Hans Urs von Balthasar.

These theologians also reject the neo-scholastic distinction of grace and nature, and promote the integral approach for understanding created beings in relation to the Absolute.

In spite of the important similarities between Karsavin's metaphysics of tri-unity and theological triadology, his approach is more speculative or dialectical. In this kind of metaphysics of tri-unity, hypostases of the Holy Trinity become moments of the self-development of the divine substance. Karsavin (1992) gave such a definition:

The Divine Trinity – that is, the Father or eternally the equal and unchangeable certain primordially of God's essence, the Son or His self-separation and definition, and from the Father through the Son, the outgoing Holy Spirit or His reunion and resurrection – reveals God's essence as the perfect unity of the three Persons, or Tri-personal Deity. (p. 49)

Thus, we see how Karsavin used the dialectical approach of philosophy in the theological interpretation of the immanent Trinity. In dialectical interpretation, every divine person understands the different forms of relations to the one substance, and this interpretation reveals essential similarities with the Hegelian process of self-becoming of the Absolute spirit and with the transcendental idealism of Fichte. The triadology of Karsavin possesses the same problems as any other attempt of interpretation of the immanent Trinity through metaphysics of one, and many, or all-unity.

Interpretation of the relations between God and the Word is the crucial theme in philosophy of all-unity. In the theological metaphysics of Karsavin, absolute freedom of God is the only answer for the question about the origin of created beings. However, this absolute freedom is the opposite to the necessity of being in metaphysics. God as good is self-communication of him in creatures, which exists only in this act. The act of self-communication of God, with regard to Karsavin is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is self-emptying and, on the other hand, it is the act of self-claiming. Thus, God-Love and God-Justice are different modes of perception of God in the human mind.

Results

In the metaphysics of Karsavin's world is the created Absolute, because God included in himself both the uncreated and the created, the infinite and the finite, This dialectical relation is very similar to the Hegelian concept of Schellingian narrative, but in opposition to the classical theology, which claims that the infinite is the attribute of God, but creation is not infinite but finite. The question, which Karsavin has tried to answer, is not about the existence of an Absolute creator but about the existence of finite creatures. The answer to this question is the incarnation of God. Therefore, Karsavin gives the Christian answer to the central question of metaphysics: why something exists?

In his book, *Holy Fathers and Church Teachers*, Karsavin explains his own understanding of theology as such, and the theology of Fraters in particular, which is different from the

traditional school of Eastern Orthodoxy. According to Karsavin's way of thinking (1925), theology is an act of creativity but not a repetition of the past, or opposite to philosophical rational inquiry:

Theology is the area of free cognitive searching. Based on it, philosophy cannot become un-free. Will it be freer if, contrary to the truth, it recognizes its prerequisites as non-religious and thereby limits its subject and its methods? Of course not. (p. 96)

Thus, for Karsavin, theology and philosophy are not enemies but companions on the road to the Truth.

Of high importance to Karsavin was that the Eastern Orthodox theologian possesses the event of incarnation. Karsavin (1925) wrote:

Incarnation is the centre and origin of all history. Thus, Christianity is not defined by the past or future but otherwise – past and future defined by Christianity, past future – as the explication and realization of it, future – as the trust in it and desire for it.

Paradoxical coincidence of the infinite and the finite, divine and created in Christ is the origin and manifestation of theosis of all creatures.

Therefore, as far as Karsavin is concerned, the first act of creation is connected with the second act of theosis of all creatures in Christ. But, the relation of the Absolute and the non-Absolute presupposes the self-restraint of the Absolute, that is, kenosis of the infinite to the finite. Also, such a relation presupposes the possibility of created contingency becoming infinite by participating in the Absolute. For Karsavin, Christ as the Godman is the origin of actual Godmanhood, because in him Godmanhood exists eternally and will be explicated throughout the history of salvation.

A very important motif of Karsavin's thought, which resonates with the gnoseology of Greek Church Fathers, is the unity of reason and faith. Regarding this Karsavin (1992) stated:

The aim of Christian is an imitation of Christ. For achieving this goal first of all, it is necessary to his approach to All-wisdom, unity of knowledge and life, which is a true belief. (p. 13)

Thus, the teachings about the nature of faith of Karsavin is similar to the Catholic doctrine, in which faith is not the opposite of reason but on the contrary, a source of any knowledge. Karsavin claims that faith and reason are not in opposition but are synergic tools for the knowledge of God. He rightly claims that the full rejection of the possibility of the knowledge of God, as well as the idea that we can achieve that knowledge by reason alone – both ways are mistaken. Karsavin (1925) believed that only living true to the knowledge is the way to God: 'The most perfect empirical God-participle, which contains both the vital and cognitive, we call true faith.' The concept of 'living truth' is central to Russian religious metaphysics. The dynamic unity of all human faculties and existential engagement in God as the living Truth are the opposites of sheer, rationalistic knowledge.

Conclusion

Of highly original and controversial thought, Karsavin was the product of a turning-point epoch in Russian intellectual and religious consciousness. On the one hand, it was an apex of philosophical and theological creativity, which developed under the profound influence of Soloviev. On the other hand, the catastrophic events of the Russian Revolution forcibly put an end to this era, and all this largely determined the thinking of Karsavin and other vivid religious thinkers of this epoch. The tragic biography of Karsavin is in resonance with his intellectual development, which is unique in the deep synthesis of the Western and Eastern theological traditions. Symbolically, he, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, takes his last Communion in the camp from a Catholic priest.

All of Lev Karsavin's thoughts were directed towards the interpretation of the revelation of a Triune God, who mysteriously opened himself for us. Understanding God as all-unity, which includes all of creation, does not reject the infinite difference between God and the world. As we demonstrated, all of Karsavin's thoughts were intended towards the participation in the Triune God as a form of all-unity of being. The Christian metaphysics of Karsavin is not a holistic system, which requires systematic perception and reception. On the contrary, putting deep questions, often on the verge of heresy, giving the theme and language for discussion, Karsavin stimulates our thoughts, pushes us to think for ourselves and gives inspiration forever to new theological inquiry.

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Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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