The Eternal in Russian Philosophy

By Boris P. Vysheslavtsev


Penelope V. Burt’s translation of Boris Petrovich Vysheslavtsev’s Vechnoe v russkoi filosofii (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1955) makes a fine contribution to the rapidly-growing corpus of Russian religio-philosophical works in English translation. This important effort, spearheaded in large part by Boris Jakim, includes Jakim’s The Pillar and Ground of the Truth, by Pavel Florensky (Princeton 1997) and The Bride of the Lamb, by Sergius Bulgakov (Grand Rapids 2002), and Vladimir Wozniuk’s Politics, Law, and Morality: Essays by V.S. Soloviev (New Haven 2000). The West’s understanding of the vital role that not only Russian religious philosophy and literature, but also Orthodox patristic and hagiographical writings have played in the formation of Russia’s thousand-year-old cultural identity is further informed by the similarly-rapid appearance in English translation of such works as Wisdom From Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan, 1866–1938, by Archimandrite Sophrony (tr. Rosemary Edmonds, Crestwood 1995) and The Northern Thebaid: Monastic Saints of the Russian North, translated by Fathers Seraphim Rose and Herman Podmoshensky (Platina 1995). Thus Burt’s translation of Vysheslavtsev’s book adds to the West’s canon of works revealing the different (i.e., non-Western) ways in which the Russian religious mind conceptualizes major philosophical and theological issues. Without a genuine recognition and understanding of such books, the West can scarcely hope to apprehend the fullness of Russian religious philosophy’s contributions to world civilization.

A philosopher and theologian, Vysheslavtsev (1877–1954) was a distinguished professor in those subjects at Moscow State University from 1917–1922, when he was exiled from Russia along with many of Russia’s most brilliant intellectuals. He lectured in Berlin, Paris, and Geneva, making Paris his home; among other significant activities of these years, he taught at the Orthodox Theological Institute and edited the renowned YMCA Press. He died in exile in Geneva. His major accomplishments include the elaboration of a ‘philosophy of the heart’: his book Serdce v khristianskoj i indiiskoj mystike (The heart in Christian and Indian mysticism, 1929) represents the first systematic attempt at an Orthodox interpretation of this problem. Vysheslavtsev’s work also was concerned with culture and anthropology, as well as questions of the theory of culture. Burt points out in her Translator’s Introduction that Vysheslavtsev, like Bakhtin, demonstrated an abiding concern with the “unfinalizability” of the person’ (ix), a religio-philosophical and deeply Christian concept. His philosophy is imbued with an Eastern Christian
consciousness, yet it is not parochial or tendentious.

Vysheslavtsev’s essays, assembled under the title The Eternal in Russian Philosophy and written during the years of his exile, range throughout Russian and Western intellectual history. His writing manifests a thorough familiarity with the philosophical traditions of the Classical and Medieval West, as well as with ancient Indian mystical philosophy. It is steeped in Russian philosophy, religion, and literature (concerning the last, he cites, among others, Derzhavin, Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Soloviev, Tolstoy, and Blok), and also draws from Orthodox patristic writings, the theology of the ‘Russian School’ (Alexander Schmemann’s term) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the wisdom of the saints. In situating Russian religious philosophy within the Hellenic and Judaeo-Christian traditions, the author does not sacrifice Russia’s unique contributions to this body of thought.

The collection’s bookends, the essays ‘The Varieties of Freedom in Pushkin’s Poetry’ (Ch. 1) and ‘Immortality, Reincarnation, and Resurrection’ (Ch. 14) suggest their author’s erudition and sustained engagement with universal literary and religio-philosophical ideas. Each essay emerges as a tour de force of a major philosophical idea in its many-faceted permutations, whose complex threads Vysheslavtsev unravels and explicates through the course of its history. In ‘The Metaphysics of Freedom’ (Ch. 4), for example, he investigates the relationship among law, grace, and freedom within the framework of pre-Christian (Jewish and Hellenic) and Christian religious discourse. In his argument he examines the ways in which two stages of freedom have been defined in the history of philosophy, focusing on the central ethical question of the transition from the first stage (arbitrary freedom of the will) to the second (a ‘sublimated freedom’ that voluntarily embraces positive values, 39). Both Chapters 4 and 5 (the latter titled ‘The Problem of Power’) emerge as especially compelling in providing correctives to traditional Russian and Western thought on the concepts, as understood in New Testament Christianity, of freedom and power. Vysheslavtsev’s essays also probe the depths of such topics as salvation (as resolving the tragic contradiction of life), the religious meaning of the productive opposition of subject to object, and the metaphysical implications of self-knowledge and selfhood.

Central to Vysheslavtsev’s thought in this book is the distinction (applying to all areas of human inquiry and endeavor—spiritual, aesthetic, social, and political) between ‘debasement’ (reduction to the lowest, most stable category of existence) and ‘sublimation’ (elevation to the highest, yet most fragile category). He develops it most profoundly in his analysis of Marxism (Ch. 6, ‘The Inherent Tragedy of the Sublime’), stating ‘true sublimation is possible only for the one who knows the category of “the sublime,” “the sacred,” who knows the sublime God, who knows the hierarchy of being and the hierarchy of values’ (71). To expose baseness, one must know the sublime. In fact, Vysheslavtsev opines, the modern age has lost the ‘higher knowledge of the heart,’ the ability to distinguish between good and evil and to be able ‘to evaluate them accurately’ (64). He concludes: ‘[t]he remedy for this deafness and blindness can be found only in Christianity, for it broadens and deepens the ethical judgement’ (65). In his estimation, Marx and Freud cannot
participate in ‘true sublimation’ because for them the “sacred and sublime” are illusions’ (71).

Vysheslavtsev’s writings become even more forceful and urgent when viewed in the context of the Russian apocalypse of the turn of the twentieth century: the author witnessed, deeply pondered, and was personally affected by the rise of Marxism-Leninism in his native country. For example, he deconstructs Marxism’s claims that the proletariat differed from the bourgeoisie and was not materialistic by affirming that proletarians elevated above all else the desire to satisfy their bourgeois needs. He continues, ‘[i]f one starts talking about a spiritualizing proletariat, it means that one repudiates Marxism and crosses into religious territory’ (66). Ultimately he condemns Marxism’s reduction of everything ‘to the lowest motives’ as a ‘pathos of profanation’ characterized by ‘aesthetic and ethical loathsomeness,’ the failure of its art, the vulgar style of its press, and the absence of anything sacred—leading inexorably to the justification of crime. Because profanation involves a turning away from God, only a true elevation and true sublimation produce a turning towards God (71).

Burt’s translation is elegant and offers a smooth rendering of the original text. Like all translators of Russian religious philosophy, she faces difficult problems in conveying major concepts in English. She translates ‘bogochelovek’ as ‘the Divine Human’ (35) and ‘bogochelovechestvo’ as ‘Divine Humanity’ (55), in line with the new crafting of the concept of ‘God-Man’ introduced by Boris Jakim in his translations of Soloviev’s works. Later in the text, however, she uses the older term ‘God-Man’ (76, 84). The question of consistency arises, but one should not criticize Burt for failing to solve what may be an unsolvable problem in translating Russian religious philosophy into English. Her translation is of a consistently high quality, and features a sensitivity to the cultural and theological issues informing Vysheslavtsev’s arguments. I also commend William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. for an impeccable job of editing and production.

Vysheslavtsev’s *The Eternal in Russian Philosophy* is a pathbreaking book, heartbreaking in its insightful and profound analyses of the human condition and the tragic paradoxicalness *cum* salvational potential inherent in Christianity. I recommend it to readers desiring a better understanding of Russian spirituality and its connections with the West. The book is a must for specialists, and for undergraduate and graduate libraries.
Much of Russian philosophy has been unavailable to or unexplored by Western thinkers, which is unfortunate because the uniqueness of the Russian vision has much to contribute to Western dialogue. The Eternal in Russian Philosophy helps fill this intellectual lacuna by offering a genuinely philosophical introduction to the themes of Russian religious thought -- freedom, the Much of Russian philosophy has been unavailable to or unexplored by Western thinkers, which is unfortunate because the uniqueness of the Russian vision has much to contribute to Western dialogue. Start your review of The Eternal in Russian Philosophy. The fate of the philosopher in Russia is painful and tragic. Nikolai Berdyaev. The Russian Idea. In a certain sense, Russia has suffered not from a lack, but from an excess of philosophy. In other countries the supreme value and the highest level of authority is assigned to religious or mythological beliefs, or to economic profits, while in communist Russia it was philosophy that served as the ultimate criterion of truth and the foundation of all political and economic transformations. Various conceptions of Russian philosophy have led scholars to locate its start at different moments in history and with different individuals. However, few would dispute that there was a religious orientation to Russian thought prior to Peter the Great (around 1700) and that professional, secular philosophy in which philosophical issues are considered on their own terms without explicit appeal to their utility arose comparatively recently in the country’s history. Despite the difficulties, we can distinguish five major periods in Russian philosophy. In the first period (The Period of Philosophical Remarks), there is a clear emergence of something resembling what we would now characterize as philosophy. Russian philosophy as a separate entity started its development in the 19th century, defined initially by the opposition of Westernizers, advocating Russia’s following the Western political and...