

Abstract Submission for the International Conference  
EUGENE TRUBETSKOY—ICON AND PHILOSOPHY

Section on Metaphysics and the Theology of Icons

Benedictine Abbey in Tyniec, ul. Benedyktynska

Krakow, Poland [www.tyniec.benedyktyni.pl](http://www.tyniec.benedyktyni.pl)

June 3-6, 2018

# *Postmodern Theology and the Metaphysics of Icons*

Michael Heather & Nick Rossiter

Northumbria University UK

[michael.heathet@cantab.net](mailto:michael.heathet@cantab.net), <http://nickrossiter.org.uk/process/index.html>

## **Background**

The prime mover on the theology of Russian Icons is the Lawyer and Philosopher Prince EVGENII NIKOLAEVICH TRUBETSKOI (1863–1920). He is noted for his exposition of the modern understanding of the Russian icon as a work of art.

Originally put forward in three lectures before and during the Great War these lectures are deeply rooted in his intellectual background and environment of the school of religious philosophy founded by Vladimir Solov'ev<sup>1</sup> (1853-1900) and summed up by him as the metaphysics of *All-Unity*. This led on to his theory of *Godmanhood* present in Christianity with God as both immanent and transcendent in the Trinity of God, man and matter. Christ as God incarnate unites the spiritual with physical matter in human flesh. However His body is transfigured which by holistic thinking enables the transfiguration of all beings. Solov'ev's third person of the trinity appeared to him as Sophia the personification of divine wisdom in

---

<sup>1</sup>Samuel D Cioran, Vladimir Solov'ev and the Knighthood of the Divine Sophia

female form (complementing *Godmanhood*). In the Orthodox Church Sophia has a virtual<sup>2</sup> canonised existence as St Sophia who becomes identified with the Virgin Mary.

Solov'ëv's aim to develop a Christian philosophy of the modern world was espoused by Trubetskoi's elder brother Prince Sergei Nikolaevich Trubetskoy (1862–1905) who extended Solov'ëv's work further to the concept of absolute consciousness as a more advanced understanding of Solov'ëv's metaphysics of *All-Unity* and also into the realm of logic by assigning a truth value to every phenomenon. Such is epistemologically conceived as endowed with some content of consciousness expressed as God's *idea* or *form* in a Christian Platonic sense. Absolute consciousness is then the sum of all such truths but with an internal and external *form*: the exoteric consists of God's *ideas* of this world and the esoteric as God's *ideas* about Himself. This generates a *world-view* to be equally founded in both faith and reason but where faith trumps reason because true understanding requires the special faith that comes by God's grace.

*Metaphysics in Ancient Greece* had been the subject of the elder Trubetskoi's thesis for his Master's degree where he had defended the argument that the classical philosophy of Ancient Greece lay at the origin of both Christian scripture and theology. His next natural step was *The Teaching on Logos* - the subject of his doctoral thesis that spans both Greek philosophy and Christianity. This paper seeks to show these are all ingredients that surface in iconography.

The Trubetskoi's were a distinguished Russian family from Novogradok in the western part of present day Belarus and dubbed for the golden age of the icon during the 14<sup>th</sup> Century as a 'Russian Florence'. The father of the two brothers was co-founder of the **Moscow Conservatory**, and their mother was a big influence on her sons' religious thought. Although never acknowledged by him Eugene may have been influenced by Anna Nikolaievna Schmidt (1851-1905) who had a mystical relationship with Solov'ëv and his group. She held quite advanced feminist views for that period and treated the Third Person of the Trinity as the feminine aspect of God.<sup>3</sup>

Eugene published widely including the following: on slavery in Ancient Greece, 1886; the philosophy of St. Augustine, 1892 (Master's dissertation); history of the philosophy of law, 1893-1899; the idea of God's Kingdom in Gregory VII and the thinkers of his time, 1897 (Doctoral thesis); the philosophy of Nietzsche – a critical essay, 1904; the social utopia of Plato, 1908; The meaning of life, 1918.

## Icons: Theology in Colour

---

<sup>2</sup>Sophia is currently the name given to an Artificial Intelligence robot aspiring to human wisdom. See <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-charlie-rose-interviews-a-robot-sophia/>.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Nikolaievna Schmidt, *Third Testament of the Holy Spirit*, Compiled from diaries and letters available as an e-book, Translated by Daniel H Shubin, 2017.

Nevertheless although not published until 1973 Eugene's most famous works are his three lectures under the title of *Icons: Theology in Colour*<sup>4</sup>. They are acclaimed<sup>5</sup> for recognizing the real significance of icons for a modern age but in some ways they are a critique of modernity from an earlier spiritual age through the eye of the icon and in that respect go much further into the realm of postmodernism. Features to be examined that may bear this interpretation are as follows:

- Eugene took Solov'ev's 'world-view' to be one of faith and reason where *sobor – the Community*<sup>6</sup>- was to be of every breathing creatures including animals<sup>7</sup> all living in peace with one another.
- It is to be the kingdom of God that is heaven on Earth in contrast to the Hell on Earth of contemporary times.<sup>8</sup>
- Old religious art opposes the 'image of the beast' and the horrors of war that led in earlier times to the development of the Old-Russian icon of the 14<sup>th</sup> century by those who put their thoughts into colours not words.
- 'By expressing spiritual life with *nothing but the eyes* of a perfectly motionless figure, the artist symbolically conveys the immense power of the spirit over the flesh'<sup>9</sup>.... Like great paintings icons are to be treated as royalty let them speak first<sup>10</sup>
- The starting point is to release icons from their sumptuous jeweled casings (*rizas*) but 'shallow estheticism'<sup>11</sup> that shuts them off from view- a form of 'unconscious iconoclasm'<sup>12</sup>. Silenced for centuries now the icon is able to speak to us.<sup>13</sup> With only its shell on view and often 'done over'<sup>14</sup> with later coats of paint we cannot understand its soul<sup>15</sup>
- Cosmic Sophia leads us from chaos to cosmos, linked with the idea of the *unity of all creation*.<sup>16</sup>
- Colour rainbow refraction of heavenly light<sup>17</sup>

---

4A World View in Painting (Monograph, 1915), Two Worlds in Old-Russian Icon Painting (Monograph 1916) and Russia and her Icons (*Russkaia Mysl*, January/February 1918). See Eugene N Trubetskoi, *Icons: Theology in Colour* Translated from the Russian by Gertrude Valarie, St Vladimir's Seminary Press (1973).  
5History of Russian Philosophy vol 2 Princes Sergei and Eugene Trubetskoy 27 792-811.

6with a wide meaning to include *Cathedral, gathering and assembly* according to Eugene's translator Gertrude Valarie, *ibidem*, p 19.

7*ibidem*, p 29.

8*ibidem*, p 15.

9*ibidem*, p 23.

10*ibidem*, p 27.

11*ibidem*, p 42.

12*ibidem*, p 95.

13*ibidem*, p 35.

14*ibidem*, p 93.

15*ibidem*, p 43.

16*ibidem*, p 87.

17*ibidem*, p 82.

- Modern day is ruled by *Meshchanstvo* (genteel petty-bourgeois vulgarity)<sup>18</sup> with a great divide of two infinities with a humdrum middle<sup>19</sup>
- The silken image of St Sergius<sup>20</sup> reminds us of his intention to restore edenic relations between man and beast<sup>21</sup>
- Miraculous transmutation of the faithful into Christ's body<sup>22</sup> is 'to unite mystically with him on our entire beings'<sup>23</sup>
- According to Doestkovesky 'beauty will save the world'.<sup>24</sup> We already *had* the theurgic art of the healing power of beauty with the miracle-working icon.<sup>25</sup>
- Traits of images of saints are threefold: ascetic unworldliness; subordination to the church as a whole; and specific burning toward the cross as in all church architecture and painting.<sup>26</sup>
- The supernal world of a flaming green sky<sup>27</sup> leads upward to the empyrean world of divine glory<sup>28</sup>.
- Each colour has its 'other worldly' meaning especially the divine gold *assist*<sup>29</sup> as an ethereal lighting compared to everything around but not relating to Jesus' humanity only his glory<sup>30</sup>
- Architecture built with Italian assistance but by decree of Ivan III in Russian style as in the Moscow cathedrals of Assumption and Annunciation where the bulbous domes covering the *sobor Community* pointed glowing to the sky like a tongue of fire expressing a fervour of emotion.<sup>31</sup>

## Metaphysics

At the dawn of the 20th Century there emerged a metaphysical movement based on a spiritual philosophy that independently influenced a small number of unconnected scholars across the World including advanced thinkers like Henri Bergson (1859-1941) in France, Alfred North

---

18ibidem p 66.

19ibidem, p 67.

20ibidem, p 71.

21ibidem, p 88.

22ibidem, p 91.

23ibidem, p 92.

24ibidem, p 37 & p 94.

25ibidem, p 38.

26ibidem, p 43.

27ibidem, p 46.

28ibidem, p 43.

29ibidem, pp47-48.

30ibidem, p 49.

31Ibidem, p 80.

Whitehead (1860-1947) at Cambridge in England and William James in the USA. Although quite disparate in their backgrounds there was one common notion that captured their attention and that was the overarching power of metaphysics.

It seems that Solov'ev with totally different aspirations and from a geographically distant culture to the West was caught up in that same (what Whitehead calls the) Age-Spirit. The basic notion is that metaphysics is at least two orders of thought above the usual mainstream reductionist way of thinking in terms of models whether expressed in words or mathematical symbols. The hierarchy may be represented as in the figure.

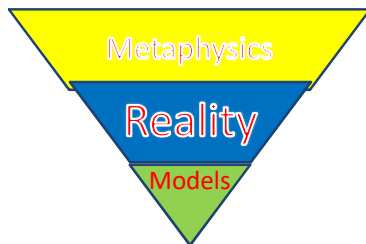


Figure of the metaphysical hierarchy

It was the elder Trubetskoi who took up the concept of metaphysics and studied it for his Master's dissertation but unfortunately he died suddenly in the year 1900 and clearly never completed his studies of metaphysics. It seems that the younger brother was unable fully to appreciate the topic was to be treated 'top down' and not bottom up. This is a very critical issue to be pursued here for its fundamental significance in theology.

## Postmodernism.

Solov'ev's work like the other metaphysicians in Europe were at the vanguard of postmodernism which came through naturally from their work critiquing modernism. Postmodernism is really a return to pre-modernism<sup>32</sup> and this can hardly be better demonstrated than in the message of Eugene Trubetskoi. His domain is theology and his work on icons is permeated by an unconscious postmodern theology that has only been articulated at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>33</sup> However the pre-modern theme is not limited just to the medieval period but to the classical period of Geek Philosophy as recognized by the members of Solov'ev's group. However this has been further developed more recently by further finessing the classical period as equivalent to a natural Old Testament for Western Christianity with Neo-Platonism as a natural New Testament.<sup>34</sup>

Postmodern mathematics in a natural version of Category Theory is able to uncover the adjoint relationships that exist between Chaos and Cosmos the essence of wisdom which provides a scientific understanding of the beauty of iconography in metaphysics. Relevant adjunctions are;

---

<sup>32</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Theory & History of Literature)* Manchester (1984)

<sup>33</sup>See for instance David Ray Griffin *Process Theology: On Postmodernism, Morality, Pluralism Eschatology and Demonic Evil* (2017).

<sup>34</sup>Catherinative Theology and Keller *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* Columbia (2014).

Chaos <=> Cosmos; Dialectic <=> Rhetoric; Logos <=> Erôs

The last is particularly significant because it is found wanting in Judaeo-Christianity but in Plato's world the highest form of pure beauty is the expression of divine eroticism.<sup>35</sup> It is this adjointness Logos <=> Erôs that lies at the soul of the icon that has been glimpsed by Prince EVGENII NIKOLAEVICH TRUBETSKOI.

---

35Jill Gordon *Plato's Erotic World: From Cosmic Origins to Human Death* Cambridge (2012).