

Cosmic Feminine in “Synthetic Esoteric Philosophy” of Vladimir Shmakov

Stanislav Panin

A notion of divine feminine characters and discussions that highlighted such themes as a social role of the woman or ontological meaning of love, marriage and sexuality played an important role in Russian philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. The background for these discussions was provided by considerable theological tradition that had been existing in Russia for centuries. At the same time, actual changes in the social role of women raised prominently an interest to these themes. This raise of interest affected all parts of Russian society, including esoteric authors. One of them was Vladimir Shmakov (died in 1929), an influential Russian esoterist who provides us an example of an esoteric interpretation of the topic of divine feminine.

Although Shmakov and his ideas are influential among contemporary esoterists in Russia and Ukraine, scholars have made relatively little efforts to study his ideas in previous years. The most important academic publications on this topic include Arthur Gevorkyan’s article in which he compares images of Dionysus and Apollo represented in Shmakov’s works with those in works of Nietzsche,¹ and a biographical entry in a book *Russian Philosophers of 19th and 20th Centuries* written by Elena Zorina.² Besides that, Anatolii Egorov, a scholar from Saint Petersburg (Russia), published a brief overview of Shmakov’s biography and discussed some of his ideas in a series of articles. Finally, several historical documents related to Shmakov, which included memoirs of direct participants of esoteric groups of that time provided during NKVD interrogations in 1920s, were published in Alexander Nikitin’s book dedicated to the history of early twentieth century Russian esotericism.³

Little is known about Shmakov’s biography. He was born around 1880s⁴

¹ Arthur Gevorkyan, “A problem of Dionysus and Apollo in works of F. Nietzsche and V. Shmakov” (in Russian), *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 6 (1999): 121-132.

² Elena Zorina, “Shmakov Vladimir” (in Russian), in *Russian Philosophers of 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. P. Alexeyev (Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2002), 1096-1097.

³ Alexander Nikitin, *Esoteric Masonry in Soviet Russia* (in Russian) (Moscow: Minuvshee, 2005).

⁴ Egorov mentions a version that Shmakov was born in 1887, but he also adds that there is no particular evidence for this date. Zorina avoids stating any particular date in her biographical entry on Shmakov.

and was a railroad engineer. He also was interested in different aspects of philosophy and esotericism and tried to create his own system of “synthetic philosophy.” In the first years after 1917 revolution, he continued to work in Moscow until Stalin came in charge in 1922, which triggered a series of repressive actions against esoteric groups. We know that in 1923 Shmakov still lived in Moscow and his followers gathered as a sort of a small esoteric club that included approximately twelve regular members and a number of secondary figures who communicated with Shmakov on different occasions from time to time.⁵ In 1924, however, Shamkov decided to leave Soviet Russia. He moved to Germany, then to Prague and, finally, to Argentina, where he lived until his early death in 1929.

Before we proceed to a direct examination of Shmakov’s ideas, we should contextualize his works and discuss some sources that had influenced this author. One of the most important of these sources was a doctrine about Sophia, or Divine Wisdom, that was popularized at the turn of the twentieth century by Orthodox religious philosophers Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) and Pavel Florensky (1882-1937).

The doctrine has a long history in Russian culture. The Greek name “Sophia” had come in philosophical lexicon from the Bible, particularly from a deuterocanonical *Wisdom of Solomon* (Σοφία Σαλωμωνος in Greek). In chapters from six to eleven, the author describes Wisdom (Sophia) as an anthropomorphic character that plays a role of a medium between God and the humanity: “She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her [...] To fix one’s thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought. The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God”.⁶

For many followers of Russian Orthodox Church, Sophia was an important character, and there even exists an iconographical tradition of Sophia. One of the most famous depictions of this kind is an icon Sophia God’s Wisdom from Novgorod, the history of which can be traced back to the fifteenth century.

⁵ Nikitin, *Esoteric Masonry in Soviet Russia* (in Russian), 382.

⁶ Wis. 6:13-19. The Bible is quoted throughout the text from Catholic Edition of New Revised Standard Version.



Pic. 1. Depiction of Sophia according to iconographical tradition of Novgorod

In Russian religious philosophy, Sophia was often described as a divine entity that was created by God in the very beginning of the history and participated in the process of creation, in accordance with Proverbs: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. [...] When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker.”⁷ However, the interest to Sophia was not only philosophical one, but also mystical. Particularly, Vladimir Solovyov described a several mystical experiences during which he had visions of Sophia and achieved instructions from her. One of these conversations with Sophia took place in British Museum, where Solovyov studied Gnostic and Cabbalistic texts.⁸

⁷ Prov. 8:22-30.

⁸ Jonathan Sutton, *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 1988), 20.

This mystical and philosophical tradition of sophiology has obviously influenced Russian esotericism and vice versa. Shmakov, in particular, directly quotes works of Solovyov⁹ and Florensky,¹⁰ discusses their ideas and demonstrates a knowledge of their works. Moreover, Shmakov knew Florensky in person. One of Shmakov's fellow esoterists and students, Vsevolod Beliustin, described it in the following manner: "[...]different Moscow mystics gathered around Shmakov, sometimes they appeared, and then disappeared again from Shmakov's horizon. Among them, there was a famous mystic-priest Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky."¹¹

In *The Sacred Book of Thoth: Tarot Arcana*, published in 1916, Shmakov develops his ideas about esoteric understanding of the feminine in commentaries for the second (Popess) and the third (Empress) Arcana. In commentaries for the second Arcanum, Shmakov calls it Isis, Transcendental Consciousness and Wisdom. According to Shmakov, "Cosmic Spirit without beginning, the Source, the Creator and the Foundation¹² of everything, in the aspect of the second Arcanum transmits itself into the doctrine of the Divine Matter, the Great Mother of everything, Divine Isis, the Absolute Truth which is the Initial Body of the Spirit."¹³ In his description of this Great Mother, Shmakov describes her as the Truth and the Wisdom, directly quoting a passage from *Wisdom of Solomon* together with passages about Cybele and Isis from different sources.¹⁴ The second Arcanum, according to Shmakov, depicts the divine feminine principle that expresses itself in all these manifold forms. If the second Arcanum tells the story about a celestial, intellectual aspect of divine feminine, the third Arcanum depicts it in as "Original Divine Nature"¹⁵ i.e. in its more material dimension. In Shmakov's Cabbalistic interpretation of Tarot, first ten Tarot Arcana correlates directly with sephiroth. Particularly, Chokhmah, means wisdom in Hebrew, correlates with the second Arcanum, whereas the third Arcanum, associated with Binah, is described as the Divine Nature, the Divine Soul, or, to put it in other words, as a divine aspect of physical world.

In *Tarot Arcana*, one can find several references to the image of Sophia derived from Orthodox tradition. Particularly, the name "Wisdom" in a quite specific form "*Премудрость*" (*Premudrost'*), which was also used in Russian translation of the title of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, appears several times throughout the text

⁹ Vladimir Shmakov, *The Sacred Book of Thoth* (in Russian) (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sophia," 2008), 106, 414, 457. Vladimir Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian) (Kyiv: Sophia, Ltd., 1994), 30-31, 238-239.

¹⁰ Shmakov, *The Sacred Book of Thoth* (in Russian), 104, 107. Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 273-274.

¹¹ Nikitin, *Esoteric Masonry in Soviet Russia* (in Russian), 382-383.

¹² Shmakov uses here an obsolete word "*Зиждатель*" (*Zizhditel'*), literally "those, on whom is based something; those, who provides with the possibility of something."

¹³ Shmakov, *The Sacred Book of Thoth* (in Russian), 99.

¹⁴ Shmakov, *The Sacred Book of Thoth* (in Russian), 100-101.

¹⁵ Shmakov, *The Sacred Book of Thoth* (in Russian), 113.

on different occasions. Nevertheless, the only case when Shmakov directly uses the name Sophia in this book is discussion of the fifteenth Arcanum (The Devil), where he writes that "the essence of woman is the being inside herself, it's inner self-assertion, and these are precisely those qualities that characterize Eternal Truth, Wisdom, Sophia."¹⁶

To find more extensive discussion of the concept of Sophia, we should proceed to another book, *Foundations of Pneumatology*, published in 1922. In this book, Shmakov explicitly discusses the conception of Sophia with a direct reference to Solovyov, with whom Shmakov disagree about the relation of Sophia and God. According to *Foundations*, Solovyov tried to introduce Sophia as the fourth aspect of the Trinity and in this regard misinterpreted its true nature.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this particular disagreement does not mean that Shmakov dismisses ideas of Solovyov in general; on the contrary, on many occasions he quotes Solovyov as a philosopher, whose ideas should be regarded quite seriously. To clarify his own conception of Sophia, Shmakov provides a Cabbalistic interpretation of the nature of Divine Wisdom, whom he associates with Daath, an "invisible Sephira" which is not represented in classic forms of Cabbala at all, but plays a prominent role in some esoteric currents. Daath is described in *Foundations* as an intermediate realm between the God (represented by three higher Sephiroth) and the creation (seven lower Sephiroth). Therefore, Daath, or Sophia, is neither a Hypostasis of God, nor a part of the creation or a synonym of any other hypostasis. Instead, it is a "phase of transcendental dialectical process, an idea of exposure of Reality itself."¹⁸

Sophia, however, is not the only important feminine character of Shmakov's cosmology. In the thirteenth chapter of *Foundations*, he discusses images of two feminine deities, Isis and Astarte. The first one, which is, according to Shmakov, an equivalent for the Holy Spirit of Christianity, expresses the idea of divine spiritual love that is a key to mystical exaltation and communication with the divine. Astarte, on the other hand, is a result of "avidya," i.e. ignorance, a source of illusions based on the attachment to the mundane world. Isis, according to Shmakov, is a symbol of love in its higher sense, a love which leads to spiritual insights and is a necessary part of a person's self-development. Astarte, on the other hand, is a symbol of carnal love in absence of any spiritual dimension. This kind of love, according to Shmakov, leads to self-destruction and death.

It is worth to mention, however, that Shmakov was by no means a proponent of ascetics when it comes to sexuality. Instead, he praised as the highest one a kind of love that is realized on physical plan as a sexual intercourse, while at the same time this carnal relationships and sexual ecstasy remind partners about higher realms of reality and therefore stimulates farther spiritual work. Exclusion of one of these aspects, either physical or spiritual, leads, according to Shma-

¹⁶ Shmakov, *The Sacred Book of Thoth* (in Russian), 387.

¹⁷ Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 106.

¹⁸ Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 106.

kov, to perversions of “carnal orgies” and “radical asceticism.”¹⁹ The first one is described as immersion into sexual relationships without any particular goal, when those relationships become “the goal, the path and the method.”²⁰ At the other pole, there is radical asceticism, when, on the contrary, a fight with carnal instincts itself became the ultimate goal. The most developed type of such an approach, according to Shmakov, is represented in cults that praise a castration, an example of which is Russian religious movement of “Skoptsy.”²¹

The right way that avoids both of these extremes is either a way of a sacrament of marriage in which relationships retain both physical and spiritual aspects, or a “harmonic asceticism,” which does not fight with carnal aspects of human beings but rather feel no necessity in them. Harmonic asceticism, writes Shmalov, “is not a rejection of immutable laws of the nature, it is not a fight against sexuality, but overcoming of quasi-originality of the flesh, its transformation into a symbol of spirit.”²² This approach illustrates general dialectical method of Shmakov, according to which interaction of opposites is crucial for the evolution of the universe. The love, including mundane love between people, is, therefore, an embodiment of this eternal universal principle. As Shmakov puts it, “love is a living tablet of the Almighty, – and this doctrine was proclaimed in the same manner by Bhagavad Gita and Gospels, Hellas and Cabbala, Quran and Hegel.”²³

The study of works of Vladimir Shmakov demonstrates a complexity of spiritual and intellectual life of early twentieth century Russia. It was a time of active philosophical discussions, a time of dialogue and interplay of different philosophical, religious and esoteric ideas. While Orthodox religious thinkers of that time, particularly, Solovyov and Florensky, demonstrated a sincere and often benevolent interest in such topics as Cabbala, Gnosticism and magic, Russian esoterists like Shmakov were, in turn, influenced by the works of these and other Orthodox authors. Moreover, esoteric writers were directly engaged in philosophical dialogue, they analyzed, criticized and commented both Russian and Western European philosophical texts and influenced philosophical discussions.

A bunch of factors defined specific characteristics of those philosophical and esoteric discussions, particularly when it comes to the topic of divine feminine. One of them was a fact that traditional religions faced a growth of natural sciences, scientism and materialism, which actualized a necessity for better explanation of relations between God and the Universe. The development of philosophical sophiology, according to some scholars, was, at the first place, a result of a struggle for such explanations.²⁴ This attempt to find a middle ground between science and religion lead religious thinkers to the study of esoteric sources, because

¹⁹ Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 224.

²⁰ Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 223.

²¹ Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 224.

²² Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 225.

²³ Shmakov, *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian), 215.

²⁴ Nikolai Semenkin, *Philosophy of God-seekers* (in Russian) (Moscow: Politizdat, 1986), 61.

from the very beginning of its existence modern esotericism aimed to provide such a middle ground. Therefore, there is no surprise that the roots of late nineteenth century philosophical sophiology was close to Western esotericism, which is obvious in cases of Solovyov's studies of ancient Cabbalistic texts and Florensky's conception about magic as a source of philosophical idealism. This fact in turn predictably predetermined an interest to sophiology in esoteric circles, as we saw in the case of Shmakov's works.

Another important factor that shaped discussions about divine feminine characters in Russian philosophical and esoteric literature was the growth of interest to such topics as sexuality and social gender roles that characterized the turn of the twentieth century. In this regards, Russian esotericism demonstrated the same tendencies as there were at the same time in other parts of Europe. For instance, one can think about A.E. Waite's extensive narrative about Shekhinah and the mystery of sex, let aside such figures as A. Crowley who used quite provocative methods to actualize these topics.

Bibliography

- Gevorkyan, Arthur. "A problem of Dionysus and Apollo in works of F. Nietzsche and V. Shmakov" (in Russian), *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 6 (1999): 121-132.
- Nikitin, Alexander. *Esoteric Masonry in Soviet Russia* (in Russian). Moscow: Minushee, 2005.
- Semenkin, Nikolai. *Philosophy of God-seekers. Critique of Religio-Philosophical Ideas of Russian Sophiologists* (in Russian). Moscow: Politizdat, 1986.
- Shmakov, Vladimir. *Foundations of Pneumatology* (in Russian). Kyiv: Sophia, Ltd., 1994.
- Shmakov, Vladimir. *The Sacred Book of Thoth: Tarot Arcana* (in Russian). Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sophia," 2008.
- Sutton, Jonathan. *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1988.
- The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version. Catholic Edition*. San Francisco: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2010.
- Zorina, Elena. "Shmakov Vladimir" (in Russian), in *Russian Philosophers of 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. P. Alexeyev, 1096-1097. Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2002.

