

***PŪRVĀPARAPRAJÑĀBHINANDANAM***  
**EAST AND WEST, PAST AND PRESENT**

**Indological and Other Essays  
in Honour of Klaus Karttunen**

EDITED BY

BERTIL TIKKANEN & ALBION M. BUTTERS



# STUDIA ORIENTALIA 110

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# FROM THE HISTORY OF INDIAN STUDIES IN RUSSIA: GERASIM LEBEDEV AND THE FREEMASONS

*Yaroslav Vassilkov*

## ABSTRACT

Gerasim Lebedev (1749–1817) was the first Russian and probably the first European to go to India with the specific intent to study its religion – “ancient wisdom”, which he interpreted as the original “primeval Christianity”. The unorthodoxy of this approach may be explained through Lebedev’s obvious association with Freemasonry.

## GERASIM LEBEDEV AND HIS HERITAGE

At the beginning of the 19th century, a particularly notable chapter was written into the history of Indian studies in Russia. The gifted musician and self-taught Indologist Gerasim Lebedev (Herasim Lebedeff) returned to his homeland after a long stay in India. He was the first Russian to go to India with the clear goals “to learn the Bramgenic teachings”, “to comprehend the ways of the people”, and “to acquire knowledge about their languages and wisdom”.

Lebedev lived in India, first in Madras and then in Calcutta, for fourteen years. With the aid of Indian tutors, he succeeded in learning Bengali and spoken Hindustani, which was at that time the lingua franca throughout the subcontinent. He also “got some knowledge about the Shomskrita [i.e. Sanskrit] language”. During his stay in Calcutta (or Kolkata, as he preferred to spell it), Lebedev established the first European-style theatre in Bengal, for which he wrote plays in Bengali. In spite of insufficient education, he was able to isolate from an avalanche of new information what he believed to be (and what really was) truly important. He was willing to share the knowledge he acquired, not only with his compatriots but the whole Christian world.

Upon his return from India, Lebedev published in London one of the first grammars of the new Indo-Aryan languages, focusing mostly on spoken Hindustani (Lebedeff 1801). In 1802, he founded in St Petersburg the first printing house



in Europe to use Bengali script. It was there that Lebedev's principal work, *An Impartial Review of the East Indian Bramgens' Systems, of their Sacred Rites and Folk Customs* (henceforth abbreviated as IR), was published in 1805. In this book, as well as in his unpublished works, Lebedev made an attempt to acquaint the educated circles of Russia with India's rich heritage. For a number of reasons,<sup>1</sup> the book remained virtually unnoticed. Furthermore, all of Lebedev's attempts to draw the attention of Emperor Alexander I and his government to the advantages of trading with East India, as well as his efforts to establish a tradition of Indian studies in St Petersburg, met with failure.

During the Soviet period, Lebedev's deeds finally attracted a certain amount of interest. The text of his "Impartial Review" was partially republished. Manuscripts of other works were found in archives, but unfortunately did not receive the attention they deserved. In the IR, researchers were mainly interested in Lebedev's deep respect for Indian culture and his obvious concern for the people of India oppressed under colonial rule. Lebedev's discovery and interpretation of "Indian wisdom" lay outside the purview of Soviet academic research, whereas Lebedev himself had considered it the most important part of his work.

In 2005, following the initiative of Nikita Vladimirovich Gurov (1935–2009), a group of St Petersburg Indologists (Elena K. Brosalina, Eugenia R. Kryuchkova, and Yaroslav V. Vassilkov) launched a research project entitled "The heritage of Herasim Lebedev, the first Russian Indologist". A considerable amount of work was done in the following years. A number of manuscripts from the St Petersburg archives, either previously unidentified or known only by their titles, were brought to light: Lebedev's draft materials for his unpublished grammar of the Bengali language were studied (Kryuchkova 2007); Lebedev's attempts at translating texts from the Old Testament into the languages of India were discovered (Gurov 2006); Lebedev's rendering of some passages from the *Bhagavadgītā* into Russian was found in his "mathematical manuscript" (Vassilkov 2006); a Sanskrit poem attributed to Śaṅkarācārya was recognised in a text earlier thought to be a poem in Bengali (Altshuller 1963); and Lebedev's translation of the poem was shown to be the first translation from Sanskrit into Russian (Vassilkov & Gurov 2007).<sup>2</sup>

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1 One reason is that, having spent 25 years outside Russia, Lebedev returned to a country where a new, reformed literary language was in currency. During Lebedev's stay in London, he was told by the Orthodox priest at the Russian Embassy, Yakov Smirnov, that his works were "incorrigible" since they were written "without the style currently used in Russia" (*Russko-indijskiye otnosheniya* 1965: 490).

2 For the results of this research project, cf. <iling.spb.ru/projects/lebedev.html>. Lebedev's main works and research papers by the members of our group are available in PDF format.

## LEBEDEV'S INTERPRETATION OF HINDUISM

The contents of the manuscript bearing the title “Systematical elementary speculative and essential foundations of the East Indian Bramgens’ Arithmetic” (SF) came as the biggest surprise. Previously supposed to be an appendix to Lebedev’s “Arithmetical Tables”, a text of purely “mathematical” nature, it had escaped the attention of philologists and historians. In reality, it is the first volume of the “mathematical” manuscript, the “Arithmetical Tables” being the second one.

The “Tables” demonstrated Indian rules for counting, specifically as applied to the monetary system; it was a practical guide compiled for Russian traders and travellers, in order to facilitate their business in India. But Lebedev was convinced “that the arithmetic of the Bramgens, as well as their alphabet, contains mysterious meanings of Indian Divine Wisdom and that certain numbers are perceived sometimes as signs of a Deity or of a Divine quality”. He believed that “the said arithmetic of the Bramgens is founded upon their philosophical and theological system and serves them as a means to mental contemplation of the God and as the key to the mysteries of nature”. Lebedev decided, therefore, that the “Tables” needed a preface to introduce what, in his view, was lurking behind Indian arithmetic (i.e. the religious doctrine of Hinduism).

Comparing SF (written in 1816 especially for Emperor Alexander I) with Lebedev’s description of the Hindu religion published in the “Impartial Review” in 1805, we can see that Lebedev was consistent in his high appraisal of Hinduism. This point of view contrasted sharply with that of his European contemporaries, for unlike most of them he did not perceive “paganism” or “idolatry” or even polytheism in Hinduism. Lebedev was convinced that Hinduism was the “most secret knowledge of God”, combined with “a profound theory”. His description of Indian culture in IR and other works is predicated on the premise that Hinduism is nothing but a form of Christianity. Moreover, according to Lebedev, though this type of Christianity is “obscured” or “blurred” by certain superstitions inherited from ancestors or borrowed from aliens, it is of unique importance for the whole of mankind, as it is based on the revelation given by God to the First Man. Addressing Emperor Alexander I in his preface to IR, Lebedev expresses his belief that acquaintance with the doctrine of “primeval Christianity” that he had discovered in India would help “to create a bond among the human race scattered over the earth, to disseminate in the Universe true knowledge of God, true Faith and Law, to strengthen the mutual desire of peoples for benevolence and to unite peoples’ abilities for the restoration of the universal commonweal”.

What is the premise upon which Lebedev’s belief is based, that Hinduism constitutes a “primeval Christianity”? First, Lebedev interprets Trimūrti (the

well-known three Hindu gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva) as “one-essential Trinity which they call in their language ‘the Triad’ – *Troiko*”. According to Lebedev, the god Brahmā (“*Brormgo*”) is “Creator of Heaven and Earth, of all visible and non-visible creatures” (using words from the Apostles’ Creed of the Orthodox Church). Lebedev substitutes the name of Viṣṇu, the “second person of the Holy Trinity”, with Kṛṣṇa (the name of his incarnation on Earth). Moreover, he uses a form that hints at his identification with Christ (*Krishtyo*, *Krishtnyo* or *Krishtna*). He also calls *Krishtna* the “incarnation of the Son of God” who was sent to Earth. Elsewhere (IR, Ch. 1) Lebedev mentions the two names of the “Trinity’s second person”: *Krishtnyo* and *Bishtnyo* (i.e. Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu). The first, according to Lebedev, means “the Anointed” (i.e. the Messiah, Christ). The second he interprets as meaning “of two natures”, which again has a parallel with Christ (“God-man”). Lebedev remarks further that as soon as an adept of Hinduism is “anointed” and introduced into the community, he “is called Bishtnyob (= Vaiṣṇava) which means ‘a Christian’”.

“The third person of the Holy Trinity” in the Hindu “system”, according to Lebedev, is “*Shib*” (i.e. Śiva), whom he defines as “Transfigurer” and “Renovator”, and believes that he is responsible for “governing the lives and deaths of all people living on the face of Earth.”

Lebedev continues: “The Trinity described above is specially characterized by its three-ness,” but in combination with a certain “inscrutable spiritual being” forms one Godhead in *four* persons (i.e. hypostases). Since it is difficult to find any points of likeness between Śiva and the Holy Spirit of Christianity, Lebedev was apparently forced to add a fourth hypostasis to the Hindu “Trinity”. This “fourth person” of the Godhead is defined by Lebedev as “Adgi Atma, [...] the Soul of the Universe” (Sanskrit: *adhyātmā*, which includes, among other things, the meaning of ‘highest Spirit’). Lebedev obviously viewed “Adgi Atma” as being identical to the Holy Spirit of Christian doctrine.

Finally, Lebedev identifies the Hindu goddess Durgā with Sophia, “The Wisdom of God”, calling her “Krishtyo’s mother” who fed him with the milk of her breast. This surely has no foundation in Hindu mythology. Yet Lebedev identifies Durgā with the Virgin Mary to such an extent that he remarks: “The Graeco-Russian Christian church celebrates her [Durgā’s] feast on the same day [as the Hindus do].” The image of Durgā, as Lebedev presents it, “does not differ greatly from the image of the Mother of God as represented by Christians: both representations have a crown, bracelets and necklace, the only difference being that in Indian representation the face is painted black”. Such an assertion is, to put it mildly, a gross exaggeration.

In IR, Lebedev ascribes to the Hindus the cult of spiritual beings whose host he identifies with the Christian nine-tiered hierarchy of angels. This arrangement, based upon Old and New Testament sources, was first formulated in the treatise “Celestial Hierarchy” (c. fifth century AD) attributed to St Dionysius the Areopagite. But the Hindus do not have such a classification. Similarly unconvincing is Lebedev’s comparison of the Hindu myth of Narasimha (“Lion-man”, one of Viṣṇu’s incarnations) with the “Lion from the tribe of Judah” mentioned in the Apocalypse (Revelation 5:5).

Lebedev also finds numerous similarities in the Hindu and Christian rites. Ritual bathing performed by the Hindus in the waters of the Ganges is interpreted “according to our Saviour’s words: ‘I tell you the absolute truth, if anyone is not born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.’” (John 3:5). The Holy Communion, too, is identified with the distribution of leftovers from sacrificial food (*prasāda*) at the end of the Hindu temple service. Lebedev seems to be unaware of the profound differences between Hinduism and Christianity in matters of dogma (e.g. the Christian belief in the Resurrection is not in accord in any way with the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation).

### LEBEDEV’S FRIENDS AND PATRONS

Where could a young musician with a poor educational background get the idea that made him stubbornly search behind the mythology and ritual of Hinduism for a profound religio-philosophic system, and identify this “ancient wisdom” (contrary to the facts and with a good measure of wishful thinking) with “primeval Christianity”?

The only possible answer to this question has been suggested in the pioneering research of Nikita V. Gurov, the results of which were formulated in his paper “New facts about G.S. Lebedev: Why did Gerasim Lebedev go to India?”. Prepared for the Indo-Russian conference on Gerasim Lebedev and his heritage in the city of Yaroslavl’ (December 2009), the paper was not read because of N.V. Gurov’s untimely demise. A recently published abstract of the paper (Gurov 2010), however, introduces the idea that Lebedev was most probably sent to India by order of Grand Duke Paul (the future Emperor Paul I).

Lebedev himself points out in IR that in his research he was “governed by the Monarch of ever-blessed memory” (i.e. Emperor Paul I). In his preface to SF, Lebedev writes: “Your Majesty’s parent [...] during his visit to Paris, in his kind approval of my endeavour to travel in order to pursue, according to my abilities, enlightenment for the good of our Motherland, *granted his Royal wish that I went to East India*” (*Russko-indijskiye otnosheniya* 1965: 510–511). This piece of

evidence is usually ignored: researchers generally interpret Lebedev's reference to the benevolence of Alexander's father as an attempt to solicit support from the Emperor (cf. Kemp 1958: 169). But when, upon his return from India, Lebedev was staying in London with meagre resources and writing to Emperor Paul I, either directly or via A.A. Samborsky (the archpriest at the Royal court and tutor of the Grand Dukes Alexander and Konstantin), he persistently referred to the trip as undertaken "in accordance with the Monarchal design" or simply "in order to fulfil Thy wish".<sup>3</sup>

Now another question arises: why would the Grand Duke wish to send the musician Lebedev to India? It should be noted that the year 1782, the year when Lebedev was introduced to Paul in Paris, was a particularly remarkable one in Paul's life. Certain evidence indicates that it was in 1782 that the Grand Duke Paul, while travelling in Europe under the name of "Count of the North", joined a Masonic lodge. Regardless of whether or not Paul had, as some scholars believe, joined the Brotherhood earlier (during the late 1770s), his Masonic interests and contacts in 1782 raise no doubts. His two closest friends and travel partners across Europe at that time were outstanding Masons. Prince Alexander Borisovich Kurakin (1752–1818), Paul's friend from childhood and a Mason of the "Swedish system", was the Grand Master of the "Saint Alexander" lodge (Bakunina 1991: 44). The other man, the sailor and geographer Sergei Ivanovich Pleshcheev (1752–1802), was a long-standing Mason who, while at the time interested in the ideas of L.K. de Saint-Martin, would later become a Rosicrucian and member of the "Learned Friendly Society" headed by N.I. Novikov (Vernadskij 1991: 122–124). These two introduced Lebedev to the Emperor, and he recalled later their "kind benevolence". Another Mason in close contact with the Grand Duke during his trip through Europe was the Archpriest A.A. Samborsky (1732–1815), confessor for Paul and his wife Maria Fedorovna. This was the person to whom Lebedev addressed his letters from India and London. Serving for a number of years in the Orthodox church at the Russian embassy in England, it is likely that Samborsky joined the Brotherhood there (cf. Cross 1980: 268). Another Mason to whom Lebedev repeatedly applied for help was the Russian ambassador in London, Count S.R. Vorontsov (1744–1832), who must have been taking part in the activities of English Masonic lodges (Cross 1980: 314).

It should be noted that Lebedev was brought to Europe in 1777 by Prince Andrei Kirillovich Razumovsky (1752–1836), who was on his way to Naples to accept the post of Russian ambassador (but for certain reasons was forced to remain in Vienna). Razumovsky, in the tradition of his family, was an eminent

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3 N.V. Gurov, personal communication.

Mason. Later, in the reign of Emperor Alexander I, he worked to legalize the activities of the Masonic lodges in Russia. A great music lover and musician himself (playing the violin), he always had in his entourage musicians who could be used for playing “Masonic music” in particular. Lebedev was at his service as a cellist. In Vienna they parted, however. Razumovsky allowed Lebedev to go on a European concert tour, giving him letters of reference intended for the European and Russian nobility. The Prince himself would stay in Vienna, becoming deeply attached to this city. He later returned to Vienna as Russian Ambassador and, after the retirement, lived there until his death. He remained etched in the memories of Vienna’s citizens as the owner of the excellent Schuppanzigh (Razumovsky) string quartet (in which he himself sometimes played) and as a patron of Mozart and Beethoven (both of whom, incidentally, were Masons).

Lebedev had one more benefactor among Russian nobility that deserves mentioning here. On his return to Russia after twenty-five years of being away, Lebedev found himself totally forgotten by society. While still in London, he had fallen out of favour with the government in the last year of Emperor Paul’s reign. But back home, Lebedev soon managed to win the goodwill of the highest authority of the state, the new Tsar himself. Lebedev was introduced to the young Emperor Alexander I by the military governor of St Petersburg, Mikhail I. Kutuzov (1745–1813), who in 1812 would serve as Commander-in-chief of the Russian army in its victorious war against Napoleon. It appears that Kutuzov used the occasion of one of his daily reports to the Tsar to introduce Lebedev. After the audience, Kutuzov twice addressed the State Secretary D.P. Troshchinsky on Lebedev’s behalf. A letter of 16 January 1802 finds him “humbly asking [...] to favour him (Lebedev) with your benevolence” (Ovchinnikov 1960: 77, 79). Kutuzov was at the time one of the most influential Masons in Russia.<sup>4</sup>

It is likely that Lebedev was supported in the early part of his stay in India, as he had been in Russia, by influential members of the Brotherhood. According to his later accounts, soon after his ship dropped anchor in the harbour of Madras a boat appeared with a courier bearing an invitation from the Mayor. The latter gave the musician a warm reception, provided him with lodgings, and engaged him for two years on very good terms. In this way Lebedev enjoyed a comfortable stay in Madras (Lebedeff 1801: II). Moving to Calcutta, he once again enjoyed a hearty welcome. Although he attributed this to the “shining light of the High Monarch’s blessedness” which accompanied him during his journey (Lebedev 1805: IV), it seems more reasonable to assume (following N.V. Gurov) that the

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<sup>4</sup> Member of several lodges in Germany and Russia, M.I. Kutuzov had been initiated into the 7th grade of the “Swedish system” of Freemasonry.

cause was due to his Masonic connections. Modern research testifies to the fact that any foreign traveller arriving in Calcutta or another large colonial centre would first head for the local lodge, since it was the surest way to win the sympathies of the local elite (Karpel 2001). Moreover, being a musician made Lebedev the welcome guest of any Masonic community. It was in those years that the practice of musical performances in the lodges became widespread. Lebedev's great contemporaries, Mozart and Johann Christian Bach, wrote "Masonic music" which was performed at the meetings of their lodges.

In some of his writings, Lebedev expresses gratitude to his benefactors and "friends", usually referring to them by their formal titles and other designations of social status (e.g. "Captain William Syddenham, then Town Mayor of Madras", "Colonel Alexander Kyd, then Town Mayor of Calcutta", "the late Honourable Justice Hyde", "the Honourable Company's Council John Shaw, Esquire" (Lebedeff 1801: II, III)). Many of Lebedev's Calcutta contacts (e.g. the aforementioned Justice John Hyde; John Shore, Governor-general, Baronet, Supreme Council at Fort William; Robert Chambers, Knight, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; Francis Gladwin, Esquire, Collector) were not only state and Company officials, but also founders and leading members of the Asiatic Society. While they were probably members of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Bengal, Lebedev could not mention this even in a hand-written document, much less a published work. On joining a lodge, every Mason was made to swear an oath of secrecy concerning the Brotherhood.

Of special interest is Lebedev's "Memorandum", written in English in 1797 when he was in Calcutta. This text, which describes Lebedev's hardships in detail, was intended for those people to whom he intended to apply for help. As already shown, such people were usually influential Masons. This is probably why Lebedev, while writing this text, came very close to breaking the oath of silence. In the paragraph expressing Lebedev's gratitude to his patrons, he initially wrote "to Mr Birch & Mrs Makenzie and to many others it being not [...] delicate to name them here." The names "Mr Birch" and "Mrs Makenzie" do not occur anywhere else in Lebedev's writings. It is also worth noticing that in both of these cases there is no indication of their social status (for instance, compare "Mrs Makenzie" with "Mrs E. Hay, Lady of the Secretary to the Government" in the same paragraph). Who are Lebedev's mysterious benefactors, hidden behind these modest surnames? I would suggest that "Mr Birch" refers to Richard Comyns Birch, known in the 1780s as an outstanding member of the Provincial Grand Lodge perfectly versed in Masonic tradition and in the 1790s as *Grand Master* (Firminger 1906: XXVII, XXXI, 156). John Mackenzie was the name of the *Provincial Deputy Grand Master* in 1786–1788 (i.e. at the time

of Lebedev's arrival to Calcutta (Firminger 1906: 46, 49, 60); "Mrs Makenzie" may, therefore, refer to his wife or widow. In other words, by mentioning these two names Lebedev intended to hint at the support of his previous undertakings by the highest figures in the Calcutta Masonic community. However, it seems that Lebedev eventually decided that any mention of his Masonic patrons would be "not delicate" and in the final form of the document struck their names out.

## HINDUISM THROUGH THE EYES OF A FREEMASON

Could it be that Lebedev joined the Freemasons merely in order to get support for his research and other activities? This possibility is certainly to be ruled out, primarily because Lebedev shared the basic ideas of the Brotherhood. These ideas found clear expression in his approach to Hinduism, in particular in his desire to elucidate its "Christian" core. During the initial stages of its development, Freemasonry aimed at a reunification, on a meta-level, of the principle branches of Christianity. Very soon, however, it took on an ultra-ecumenical character (to use modern terms). Freemasons viewed their teaching as identical to a certain proto-religion of humankind and traced it to the revelation given by God to the First Man. Thus they anticipated, in a way, such concepts as the *philosophia perennis* of A. Coomaraswamy and A. Huxley, or the "primeval monotheism" of some ethnologists. Often they termed this "ancient wisdom" the "true" or "initial Christianity": "Since the beginning of the world it [wisdom] was with the Patriarchs, was by them transmitted and then kept in sacred secrecy in Chaldean, Egyptian, Persian temples, [...] in all the mysteries and initiations of the Hellenes, [...] was taught in the desert and in Jerusalem as the new Grace revealed by the Saviour; and the same [wisdom] [...] existed among Indian, Chinese, Arabic philosophers and with other nations famous for their science" (Elagin 1998: 232). Indians often figure in similar lists as the bearers of secret knowledge. A late 18th century text from a Masonic archive describes true wisdom as being guarded by "a congregation of the chosen whom we find under the names of soothsayers and astrologers among Chaldeans, as philosophers among the Greeks and Romans, as *Bramins among Indians* [Italics are mine. – Ya.V.], as Druids and Bards among Britons" (Sakharov 2000: 177).

It is therefore no accident that a Russian translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* was printed at the University printing house headed by Nikolai Novikov, an outstanding educationist and leader of Moscow Freemasons (Baguat-Geta 1788). It was translated (from the English translation done by C. Wilkins) by another Mason, Alexander A. Petrov, only three years after Wilkins's work was published in England. One also finds successive translations and several editions of a book



very popular among Russian Masons, “Economy of Human Life” by R. Dodsley (London, 1750), which contains a moral teaching attributed to a “certain ancient Brahmin”.

All of this explains how Lebedev’s journey to India could primarily have been about finding hidden Indian wisdom, as well as why he found a “primeval Christianity” in the Hindu religion. Lebedev was looking at Hinduism through the prism of Masonic ideas. For instance, in his description of the Hindu “system”, he first considers the notion of the One God in three or four hypostases and then the hierarchy of celestial beings (angels of different classes). Here Lebedev followed a convention introduced by Pseudo-Dionysius and accepted by the mystics J. Boehme and E. Swedenborg, whose works were very popular with Freemasons. Their deep interest in this topic can be seen in Novikov’s publication in 1784 of “Celestial Hierarchy”, a well-known treatise by Pseudo-Dionysius.

Lebedev’s attempts to find a counterpart of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, in the “theological system” of Hinduism also reveal Masonic theology. Freemasons identified “the Wisdom of God” with the core of their secret doctrine, calling themselves “Sophia’s bridegrooms”. They inherited their exceptional interest in this image from the European tradition of esoteric Gnosticism deeply rooted in antiquity. However, Lebedev’s choice of the goddess Durgā (Kālī) as the Hindu counterpart of Sophia was far from perfect.

It is remarkable that in SF Lebedev converts the dialog between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna from the *Bhagavadgītā* into a revelation given by the second person of the Hindu “Trinity” (*Krishnyo*, according to Lebedev) to the First Man, who has been created by God the Father (*Brombo*, or *Brahmā*). Such a transformation would have been inexplicable if we did not know that, according to the view of Lebedev’s Freemason contemporaries, God revealed Christian doctrine along with the rites to Adam prior to his Fall (Luchinskij 1902: 512; Gagarin 2002: 133).

There is an engraving in IR depicting Cosmic Man, Atma (likely identical with the First Man), lying on a leaf floating in the waters (Lebedev 1805: 4). The source of this image must have been the figure of Viṣṇu at the time of *pralaya*, floating in the boundless waters on a leaf of the *aśvattha* tree. But the representation of the human figure in the engraving virtually coincides with an image of the “man reborn in Christ” (i.e. the man who has returned to the state enjoyed by Adam in Paradise) found in a Masonic book of the same period (Russian translation of J.G. Gichtel’s “Eine kurtze Eröffnung und Anweisung der dreyen Principien und Welten im Menschen”, made in 1789; see *500 Years of Gnosis* 1993: 206, pl. 61a). Particularly remarkable in both cases are the circles drawn on the body of the man, bearing some symbolic meaning (Fig. 1).

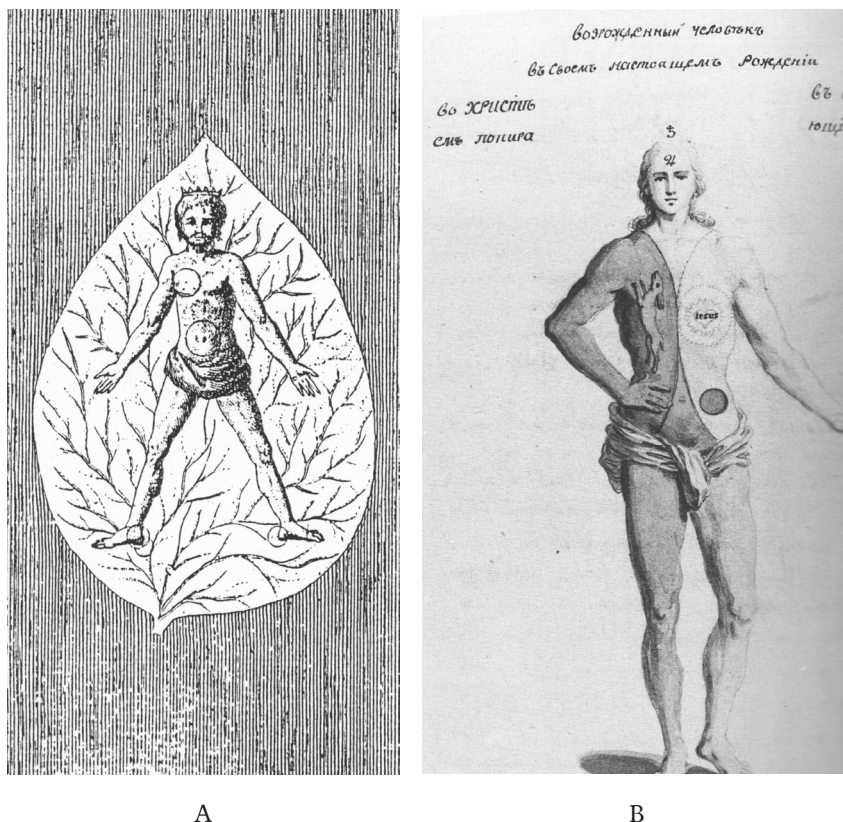


Figure 1. A – engraving in IR depicting Atma, the Cosmic (or the First) Man. B – the image of a perfect man who returned to the state of Adam before the Fall, from a Masonic book (500 Years of Gnosis 1993: 207). The circles drawn on the body of the “man reborn in Christ” mark the centres in which the three universal principles or elements are focused.

The vocabulary and phraseology employed in Lebedev’s works often betray a Masonic background (e.g. his favourite terms *lyubomudrie* “love of wisdom”, *lyubomudry*, *lyubomudrtsy* “wisdom-lovers”, or such expressions as “universal commonweal”).<sup>5</sup> The phrase “key to the mysteries of Nature” (which Lebedev uses, for example, in his address to Emperor Alexander I in SF) is a common formula found in mystical writings of the time.<sup>6</sup>

5 Cf. the title of a Masonic book by K.H. Lobreich von Plumenoek (B.J. Schleiss von Loewenfeld), published in 1779 and later translated into Russian: *Influence of the true Freemasonry on the Universal Commonweal of the States...* (500 Years of Gnosis 1993: 256–257).

6 *The Key to the Mysteries of Nature* by Karl von Eckartshausen, translated into Russian in 1804–

Lebedev was unable to explain the similarities between Hinduism and Christianity from a historical angle. His preface to IR provides both the viewpoint of the Church historians, according to which Christianity was brought to India by the Apostle Thomas, and the viewpoint of Indians who “firmly insist” on the idea that “they received all their knowledge from the Creator of all living, through Primeval Man”, who in turn passed it on to his offspring. Further in the IR Lebedev offers an alternative “historical” version: the revelation was indeed given to the Patriarchs, but Abraham, according to Lebedev, came to Canaan from India. This is the reason why the memory of Abraham’s ancestors and other Prophets has remained in India, as well as the memory of other sacred figures, from Adam to Jesus Christ (Lebedev 1805: 14)! Finally, Lebedev writes in SF: “The Bramgenic wisdom proves, by its system, that it was spread to Egypt, China, Greece and Italy from East India.” For a long time, it was in decline in all those countries, but its rediscovery now, during the reign of “the most famous, pious monarch Alexander I”, “enables us to stop the spreading of teachings by false writers, which defiled the Christian Law at all times, and helps us to learn this Law in all its original and unspoiled purity”.

If Lebedev was naïve and inept in his attempts at “historical” reconstruction, it was not his fault. During his time, the study of history was in its infancy. The task of establishing a correlation between the chronologies of Indian and Mediterranean (European) civilizations was beyond his reach. In brief, Lebedev’s concept of Hinduism as “primeval Christianity” was purely fantastic.

Does this mean that nothing but harm was done by Gerasim Lebedev’s search (based on the Masonic ideas) for an Indian “ancient wisdom” associated with “primeval Christianity”? Definitely not. The worldview of Freemasonry at that time held that the spiritual experiences of other religions have their own value, which implied that profound religious and philosophical concepts that took shape in Asia could also enrich European culture. Following this principle, Lebedev was able to see what his contemporaries failed to notice. Lebedev revealed that Hinduism is not a collection of mythical fables or the worship of multi-armed idols: hidden behind the mythological language and symbolic imagery are a profound religious doctrine and philosophical system (e.g. Lebedev himself several times uses the word *Bedanto* for Vedānta). As a matter of fact, Lebedev was probably the first to present Hinduism in terms of what we define today as a post-Axial, soteriological religion that contains teachings on the path to emancipation. That is to say, from the angle of the historical typology of reli-

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1821 (4 volumes), was not the first book with this title read by Russian Masons.

gions, he perceived Hinduism more accurately than did most of his European contemporaries.

I would be happy if this paper were even in the least measure useful to my friend Klaus Karttunen in his lifelong fundamental research on the history of Oriental studies in Europe.

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