

Vladimir Solov'ev's Legacy after a Hundred Years¹

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Vladimir Sergeevich Solov'ev belongs to the history of Russian thought and Russian culture not only through his works. Another piece of this history is the special little tradition of marking the date of his death, the custom of *commemorating Solov'ev*. In part, this tradition is, apparently, a product of the well-known thanatocentrism of Russian and Orthodox consciousness, their obsession with the theme of death and resurrection. As has been noted many times, the Russian culture of Solov'ev's period was a culture of commemoration, in which the deaths and the anniversaries of the deaths of spiritual leaders and teachers were especially significant events. In particular, among Solov'ev's notable texts we find "Three Addresses in Memory of Dostoevsky" [Tri rechi v pamiat' Dostoevskogo] and "Three Characterizations" [Tri kharakteristiki] of deceased philosopher colleagues. But an even weightier and more important point is that, irrespective of any general factors or of the reaction of society, the death of this thinker turned out to be a profound spiritual event; to this I shall return.

The collection issued by the Put' publishing house in 1911 was described in the preface simply as "a decadal commemoration of Solov'ev." Bringing together articles and speeches by Aleksandr Blok and Viacheslav Ivanov, Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov, Evgenii Trubetskoi and Vladimir Ern, it became an event in philosophical life and laid a firm foundation for a tradition, the first seeds of which had been sown even earlier with the publication after the thinker's death of a commemorative issue of *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* [Problems of Philosophy and Psychology]. The twentieth anniversary of Solov'ev's death was marked in revolutionary Petrograd by a commemorative session of the Free Philosophical Association on 15 August 1920; Blok again made a speech. In those years the epoch itself was dying, and the culture of commemoration was going through its final apotheosis. A few months later, in January 1921, the epoch's tragic tenor [as Anna Akhmatova called Aleksandr Blok—Trans.] delivered his famous speech "On the Calling of the Poet" [O naznachanii poeta] at a commemorative celebration of Pushkin, which did not mark an anniversary, and soon thereafter, just a year after his speech on Solov'ev, Blok himself was commemorated. The epoch was dying, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of Solov'ev's death was marked no longer in Russia but in emigration. In Paris there was a session of the Religious-Philosophical Academy, with speeches by Berdiaev and Boris Vysheslavtsev; Father Sergei Bulgakov conducted a requiem and also made a speech. Lectures and publications followed in all centers of the diaspora. Then there came a rupture in Russian religious

¹ This paper was originally delivered at the International Jubilee Congress in Memory of Vladimir Solov'ev, Moscow, August 2000.

thought: in the diaspora it inevitably dried up, while in the homeland it was prohibited and persecuted. The epoch finally came to an end in the period after World War II, and its end is also associated with the commemoration of Solov'ev: Simon Frank's last article, written in 1950 during his terminal illness, marked the fiftieth anniversary of Solov'ev's death.² The rupture was not fatal, however, and gradually, by air and underground routes, the next epoch crept up in its wake. On the seventieth anniversary of the philosopher's death, on 31 July 1970, he was commemorated in communist Moscow—not publicly, of course, but privately and in semi-underground fashion. This seventy-year commemoration, with a requiem for Solov'ev and a few short lectures, was arranged by Father Aleksandr Men and a group of young Christians close to him, one of whom happened to be myself. The memory of the Christian philosopher and his cause began to return to Russia by catacomb paths.

This is the tradition to which our event today belongs. Its essence is obvious: turning to the memory of Solov'ev has become one of the forms of self-awareness of Russian thought, a kind of periodic self-assessment in the form of a report to Solov'ev, a self-association with self-reference to Solov'ev. It is also characteristic of Russian thinkers to turn to Solov'ev at the end of their creative paths, in their works written shortly before death: this was true of Blok, Frank, and Losev. And these are only a few of the facts that show that Solov'ev's role in Russian philosophy and culture is by no means confined to the influence of his texts. There is a *Solov'ev phenomenon* that possesses many dimensions and has acquired the indisputable significance of a *cultural symbol*. All the main dimensions of this phenomenon bear a symbolic load, and this is not at all surprising when we consider that Solov'ev's image in Russian culture was formed almost wholly by the Russian symbolists. The classic outline of Solov'ev's symbolic image was given by Blok in the essay he wrote for the decadal commemoration. The leitmotif of this memorable text is Solov'ev as an embodied symbol. Let us recall: "He passed by in a *different* image, and carved his sharp, clear, nonhuman silhouette into people's hearts. This was certainly no longer a living man but a symbol."³

Besides the symbolic status of Solov'ev's figure, the image created by the symbolists fixed all its main aspects, all his *symbolic faces*. First of all, of course, is Solov'ev as the *Knight of Sophia* (the Virgin of Wisdom, Eternal Friend, Eternal Womanhood): the knight-monk, according to Blok. The Sophian face predominates in the symbolist image, and the Sophian motif was enthusiastically taken up by all the symbolists. Alongside it is another face, equally inseparable from Solov'ev—the face of the *prophet*. From time immemorial people have interpreted the prophet's role in two ways: the prophet is viewed as a forecaster or soothsayer, who can see into the future, and as an accuser, who lays bare the true face of the present with its blemishes. Even during his lifetime, Solov'ev won a firm reputation on both scores. Cries of "Prophet! Prophet!" resounded down the corridors after the reading of his celebrated denunciatory paper "On the Decline of the Medieval Worldview" [Ob upadke srednevekovogo mirosozertsaniia] in October 1891. The final period of his life, which is considered to have begun with "Pan-Mongolism" [Panmongolizm], written in the autumn of 1894, is

² S.L. Frank, "Dukhovnoe nasledie Vladimira Solov'eva," *Vestnik RKhD*, no. 121, 1977, pp. 173–81.

³ A. Blok, "Rytsar'-monakh," in *Sbornik pervyi. O Vladimire Solov'ev* (Moscow, 1911), pp. 96–7. Blok's italics.

dominated by eschatological visions and firmly fixes in the philosopher's image the second side of a prophet's mission. "Bearer and herald of the future," Blok called him.⁴

Also very closely connected with Solov'ev is the face of the champion of Christian unity, of the unification of the churches. Interchurch relations are a sphere of knotty problems and grave conflicts. Yet, the Solov'ev phenomenon appears as a symbol in this sphere as well. His position on this issue changed a number of times. Sometimes his thought was tinged with enthusiasm, a utopian schema, as in his famous project of a world theocracy in the form of an alliance between the Russian tsar and the Roman pope. But behind all the vacillations in his assessments and views, his passionate desire for Christian unity, his devotion to the idea of such a unity and his readiness to serve it never changed. His image, therefore, became a symbol of the very idea of unity. Like any true symbol, it acquired concrete embodiments, and one such embodiment was the philosopher's own death. His nephew and biographer recounts that after Solov'ev was buried someone left two icons on his grave: an Orthodox icon of Christ's Resurrection from Jerusalem with a Greek inscription and a Catholic icon of the Ostrobrama Mother of God with a Latin inscription. And Sergei Solov'ev concludes: "Thus the tomb of the great theologian was forever stamped with his favorite idea—the idea of the unification of the churches. Vladimir Solov'ev's grave is a pledge of future unity."⁵

Closely related to this is another face—Solov'ev as a *Christian humanist*. Politics and social relations are even farther from the ideal sphere than interchurch relations. But here too the philosopher's image has acquired symbolic features. All Christian countries believe that the life of society and relations among people should be subject to Christ's commandments, but this rule ceased to be especially binding long ago. It has become a nominally recognized dogma with which a clever mind can reconcile anything it wants, be it personal actions or social practices. But individuals for whom Christ's commandments are the most real and concrete norm for all their relations with their neighbors appear from time to time. Solov'ev was, undoubtedly, one of them. For him Christianity meant the fullness of kenosis—devoted self-sacrifice and charity, rejection of violence (although not of the Tolstoyan variety), intercession on behalf of all the abandoned and oppressed. "Solov'ev," Frank writes, "provides a fundamental grounding of what may be called Christian humanism."⁶ But he provided not only a grounding. Here, he believed, one must be not a theorist but a practitioner, and for all his otherworldliness he immersed himself in the issues of the day, spoke out against both the terror of the regicides and the execution of these regicides, wrote in defense of the Jews, Finns, and Poles, insisted on the necessity of a Christian politics and a social Christianity, and began the whole campaign for social justice with himself, doing all he could and giving away all he possessed.

Then there is another series of faces that belong to the image of Solov'ev, expressing various facets of his chief peculiarity, a peculiarity that was perceived as his strangeness, his estrangement from all that is conventional, from any earthly order. These

⁴ A. Blok, "Vladimir Solov'ev i nashi dni," in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1962), vol. 6, p. 155.

⁵ S.M. Solov'ev, "Biograficheskii ocherk," in V.I. Solov'ev, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 7th ed. (Petrograd, 1921), p. 48.

⁶ Frank, "Dukhovnoe nasledie Vladimira Solov'eva," p. 176.

are the favorite faces of the textbooks: Solov'ev, the mystic visionary; Solov'ev, the wanderer; Solov'ev, the ascetic, the holy fool, the eccentric, the crank, and so on. These faces are not contrived; they are necessary and organic to the image. However, in view of their textbook character there is no need to dwell on them here. After them there remains, perhaps, just one face, the last and most important one for us. Solov'ev is the first Russian thinker to construct a philosophical system of his own and become the founder of a religious-philosophical tradition. Let us acknowledge that this too is a symbolic face: the founding father acquires in retrospect the features of an archetype, becomes a symbol of that which he had founded. While externally ramified and uncoordinated, Solov'ev's thought possesses a tight core consisting of a number of major interconnected and highly productive conceptions. The conception of *Godmanhood* is the productive principle of a dynamic, process picture of the world and of being, of a philosophy of history and eschatology. The conception of *total-unity* is universal: to name only its chief functions, it defines an ontology, provides the principles of a theory of integral knowledge, supports a method for the critique of abstract principles, and serves as a methodological principle that supplies both a means of creating concepts and a means of combining or unifying all parts of a philosophical system. Finally, the mythologem of *Sophia* in Solov'ev also becomes a multidimensional and multifunctional conception: it is introduced into the construction of total-unity and facilitates the task of harmonizing total-unity with trinitarian and Christological theology; it serves as a unifying link that makes it possible to introduce into philosophy many realities of religious-mystical experience; and, finally, it lends Solov'ev's system an esthetic tinge and a certain understated and not fully expressible presence of the feminine principle.

As I have pointed out repeatedly, this complex of ideas successfully combined the approaches of classic European philosophy and the intuitions of the Russian-Orthodox mentality, finding a certain equilibrium or meeting point between professional philosophical discourse and Slavophile attempts to express the authentic experience of Russian and Orthodox culture. This opened up creative possibilities, and they proved to be substantial. It is true to say that the whole period of the flourishing of Russian religious philosophy or the religious-philosophical renaissance was merely the realization of the powerful developmental impulse that Solov'ev's philosophy imparted to Russian thought. And this means that once again the Solov'ev phenomenon appears as a symbol—a symbol of the fruitful union of the principles of Western and Russian-Orthodox mind.

What I have cursorily described is the canonical image of Solov'ev, as it was shaped by his direct heirs—Russian symbolism and the religious-philosophical renaissance. It is surprising that subsequent history, right up to our own time, has hardly changed this image in any significant way. Cultural consciousness has undergone radical change, symbolism has given way to other and then yet other trends. The very principles of perceiving and approaching reality have changed. But the image of Solov'ev created by symbolism has remained, perhaps, the most stable of its legacies. Alternative versions have been few and weak. Of course, they began to emerge even earlier than the canonical image, as an inevitable reaction to the strangeness and novelty of the Solov'ev phenomenon. In conservative church circles, the philosopher could not but acquire the reputation of a madman (Pobedonostsev was firmly of this opinion), false prophet (the title of a well-known article about Solov'ev by Antonii Khrapovitskii), or heresiarch.

Oddly enough, this was not very different from the way Solov_’ev was perceived in directly opposite, “advanced” circles—among the irreligious intelligentsia, positivistically inclined professors, and the like. For the sake of completeness, let me also mention Solov_’ev’s reception by “Soviet philosophy,” where he appeared as the leading figure in the camp of obscurantists-idealists, whose false doctrines helped to keep the masses under the yoke of the oppressors. Understandably, none of these approaches gave rise or could give rise to a viable alternative to the symbolist image. It has only been supplemented by studies of specific themes in the thinker’s life or work.

This absence of further movement reflects the fate of the entire tradition of Russian religious philosophy. The religious-philosophical renaissance, which was contemporaneous and typologically related with Russian symbolism, was the last stage of its creative development. In philosophy, the diaspora’s thought was confined to summing up the results. No coherent new stage has arisen to this day; but only a new stage could have created a new full-fledged image of Solov_’ev in its many dimensions. And so, there is an unbreakable connection between the fate of the image, the fate of Solov_’ev’s legacy, and the fate of the entire tradition of Russian religious speculation. Today the fate of the tradition is open and in question. In post-Soviet Russia religious thought, like thought in general, has yet to show any creativity; it still has to make the transition from studying its heritage to creatively developing it. A new contemporary understanding of Solov_’ev is part of this central task, and at present we can only try to indicate the first approaches to such an understanding.

To move on to a new image we must depart from the old one. But for a philosopher to depart means to come as close as possible: close enough to see the meanings that are contradictory and opposed to the old image. Today, we find the working tool of deconstruction most convenient for performing such critical work in the world of cultural symbols. In Nabokov’s *Gift*, there is a well-known metaphor that sums up, as it were, what the author does there with the image of Nikolai Chernyshevsky. When people are confronted by sudden change—a disaster, migration, or perestroika — they select from their possessions the things they need most, and it turns out for mysterious reasons that in pride of place among the saved objects hangs a massive portrait of a bearded personage whom no one can identify—someone’s grandfather from Rostov, or perhaps not.... Here is a model example of a deconstructive metaphor for a cultural symbol. In practice the method is often, but not necessarily, seen as a way of debunking ideas or as a postmodernist carnival stand: it is simply the contemporary version of a culture’s critical self-analysis. In this sense, being subjected to deconstruction is the inevitable fate of a cultural symbol: the means of its reflection in the system of the culture and the condition of its effectiveness in that system.

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Now we have before us the face of the *Knight of Sophia*, the symbol of loyal service, without fear or reproach. Such a symbol is defined by the object or altar to which service is rendered; thus, this first and principal face of Solov_’ev turns our attention to the problem of Sophia. After Solov_’ev much has been said about this problem, and, in particular, there have been enough deconstructive approaches to it. Therefore, we do not need to seek out the principles of deconstruction here, but rather we need to comprehend the various deconstructive arguments in their unity. The mythologem of Sophia is complex and multifaceted both in its history and its semantic structure. The problem of

Sophia in Solov'ev fully inherits this complexity. Even the most cursory analysis requires us to distinguish at least three planes or dimensions of the problem: the theological-philosophical plane, which itself has a complex structure, the lyrical-artistic plane, and the personal, experiential plane. We must start with the last, for all the other planes arise only on its foundation.

Solov'ev presents the experiential basis of Sophian service and doctrine with disarming simplicity in "Three Meetings" [Tri svidaniia], which he called "a little autobiography." He presents three spiritual events, and all three are mystical visions that have the character of an encounter with Divine Being in a feminine form. This is the unconditional core of the philosopher's spiritual experience, the source that nourishes his entire inner life. "Three visions," Evgenii Trubetskoi wrote, "proved sufficient to fill the thinker's entire existence with meaning."⁷ These culminations of Sophian experience define its essence and meaning, its mystical nature but, of course, do not exhaust its full scope. Solov'ev describes his experiences not only in the poem but also in the text *Sophia* [La Sophia], written right after he saw the third vision. The elements of dialogue here are partly a literary form, but partly also the consequence of the actual dialogical situation in which the interlocutor is the same Being, Sophia, and her presence is attested by the instances of mediumistic writing. The true form and measure of dialogicality clearly cannot be established, but it is indisputable that the text reflects the experience of presence and encounter, under the influence of which the writing acquires the special features of *writing-in-the-presence*. In addition, there are a number of other testimonies concerning Solov'ev's mystical experiences, in letters and memoirs. The testimonies are not very numerous, and the facts no longer pertain directly to Sophia. Let me recall just two points. First, we know from Vera Pypina-Liatskaia that Solov'ev recounted how in Egypt he had visited hermits-ascetics and "tested their mystical ecstasies on himself. He wanted to see the famous light of Thabor and did see it."⁸ This is the only record of the philosopher's involvement in hesychastic asceticism, and, in spite of its importance, it is absolutely isolated, unconfirmed, and inconsistent with the detailed account of Solov'ev's sojourn in Egypt we have. Second, almost all the other facts pertain to the period after "Three Meetings" and concern demonic visions, manifestations no longer of luminous but of dark spiritual powers. "He often had visions of the devil,"⁹ Sergei Solov'ev writes.

This factual outline demonstrates that throughout his career Solov'ev was a man with an intense mystical life, with a clear gift and propensity for suprasensuous perceptions. Here, above all, lay the unusual nature of his personality, his "nonhumanness," as Blok put it, which captivated the symbolists. But it is necessary for us to discern the kind or typology of his experience, and here we must again start out from his own testimony. In a frequently quoted letter of 1877,¹⁰ he gives two sets of three names: first, Gichtel, Gottfried Arnold, and Pordage, followed by Paracelsus, Böhme, and Swedenborg. The first three are those who "had personal experience almost the same as

⁷ E.N.Trubetskoi, *Mirososertsanie V.I.S. Solov'eva* (Moscow, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 357.

⁸ See S.M. Lukianov, "O V.I. S.Solov'eva v ego molodye gody," in *Materialy k biografii*, 2d ed. (Moscow, 1990), bk. 1, p. 309. V.A.Pypina-Liatskaia's memoirs were first published in 1914.

⁹ S.M. Solov'ev, *Zhizn' i tvorcheskaiia evolutsiia Vladimira Solov'eva* (Bruxelles, 1977), p. 358.

¹⁰ V.I.S. Solov'ev to S.A. Tolstaia, 27 April 1877, *Pis'ma V.I.S. Solov'eva*, ed. E.L. Radlov (St. Petersburg, 1909), vol. 2, p. 200.

mine” (note that this was written after “Three Meetings”), while the second three are titled “real people” in respect to the level of their Sophian speculation. In other words, he acknowledges his closeness to the first set in terms of experience and to the second set in terms of both experience and thought. There is nothing mysterious about his selection of names. He marks out a well-studied trend in Western mysticism—the mysticism of Sophian visions, which includes quite a few other figures (for example, Suzo and Baader), and in its chief features is indeed close to what we know of Solov_’ev’s experience.

This whole line of visionary mystics, including Solov_’ev, is distinguished by a characteristic structure of experience. The complete structure of mystical experience consists of three spheres: (1) “raw experience,” or the direct data of perception and feeling; (2) the procedures of testing and verifying, purifying and assessing the experience; and (3) the interpretation and integration of the experience. Inasmuch as the field of mysticism abounds with every conceivable kind of false experience, the second of these spheres is of critical importance, and the degree of its development is an indicator of the authenticity and reliability of the experience. The main criteria and procedures used here are supraindividual and intersubjective; they are worked out and applied in the context of one or another tradition or school of experience. For this reason, the most authentic models of Christian mysticism (ignoring purely speculative mysticism), in particular, are found within the church. But a distinguishing feature of the individualistic and extrachurch mysticism of Sophian visionaries is the practically complete absence of the sphere of testing experience and even of the very concept and possibility of such testing. Experience here remains unpurified, “dirty” experience, and a significant gap or hiatus opens up in the structure of the spiritual event: a sort of short circuit occurs when the mystic proceeds from the raw material of perception immediately to far-reaching philosophical and theological generalizations. By the way, it was not vulgar materialists but the founders of Christian mysticism, the desert fathers, who warned people that visions can arise, for example, “from touching a certain spot in the brain and from the inflammation of the veins in the brain” (Evagrius Ponticus, fourth century). As far as we know, neither Solov_’ev himself nor his critics raised the question of the character and structure of his experience. But this question, in addition to its importance in its own right, leads us to a number of new themes.

First, we can already draw a typological line dividing Solov_’ev’s mystical experience (and all constructions erected on its foundation) from the Orthodox mystical-ascetic tradition and, in general, from any developed school of spiritual experience. All such schools rely on the synthesis of mystical experience and ascetic experience into a strict discipline or spiritual method, in the framework of which the three-sphere structure of raw experience, purification, and interpretation is set up. True, Solov_’ev was always extremely ascetic, but he did not link in any way his mystical life and his asceticism. The spheres of mystical contemplation and of askesis were radically separated, and this split is crucial. Starting with the gap in the structure of his experience, we discover the same elements of hiatus and separation in the structures of his behavior and personality. In the structures of experience we find not just the absence of a sphere of purification and verification but the absence of any method and discipline; and this absence of method and discipline is a very characteristic feature of the philosopher’s model of behavior. Mystical-ascetic experience is holistic; it includes also the corporeal aspect, and the

discourse of the body is integrated into a single organization of experience. In Solov'ev the split between mystical contemplation and askesis generates an element of separation in this aspect as well—a sort of split between personality and corporeal being. His natural being, excluded from the activity that absorbed the soul and spirit and slighted by aimless and disordered askesis, became unstable and discordant with the whole. Thus, although he was endowed from birth with an excellent physical constitution, by his forties he was a physical wreck; he looked twice his age and was unable to work without the help of red wine. But the discourse of the body in Solov'ev, on the planes of both creativity and personality, is a profound theme, full of surprises, and I shall return to it when I discuss the fate of Sophia.

And so, in Solov'ev the raw experience of visions is followed directly with conclusions, a philosophical and theological interpretation. The defective structure of the experience cannot but affect the interpretation: the absence of any procedure to purify and deepen the experience is reflected in the quality of thought. The thought is enchanted and impassioned, *enticed* by the vision; it is sure that the vision holds the key to all the mysteries of the world and of being. Under this impulse it starts to move in an excited and irrepressible fashion, to draw schemata, and to build constructs of the universe, theogonies and cosmogonies. Inasmuch as thought here does not deal with itself, it builds with readymade materials, taking them from anywhere and, first of all, from preceding constructs of the same kind. As a result, the first interpretation and integration of Solov'ev's Sophian experience turns out to be global schematization or, as he put it, “the synthesis of all religions and the synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science.” The language of this interpretation comes from the Kabbala, gnosticism, and the late Schelling, and its historico-cultural context is the whole marginal, paraphilosophical aura of European thought—the mysticism of Renaissance *Natürphilosophie*, hermeticism, occultism, freemasonry, and the like. And Solov'ev himself calls this genre of thought, which is isolated from the great traditions of philosophy and theology, quite properly theosophy. The great philosophical tradition is almost left aside because, on the whole, the level of his reflection falls short of the philosophical tradition, and the great theological tradition is ignored because it cannot give Sophia the place Solov'ev desired.

Such are the first conclusions of deconstruction. We have looked into the Sophian face and found that its source is impure experience, which generates an excited outpouring of second-rate eclectic thought. As an experiential phenomenon, Solov'ev's Sophian mysticism belongs to a marginal visionary movement, which diverges radically both from the Orthodox hesychastic tradition and from Christian church mysticism as a whole.¹¹ As a philosophical phenomenon, it develops in the element of superficial schematization, with “a cabbalistic-gnostic and theosophical-occult bent” (A.F. Losev). During Solov'ev's career, however, only the properties of the experience itself remain unchanged, while its interpretation undergoes enormous development.

¹¹ One of the first to note this was Georges Florovsky. Still in his early period, before he was ordained and before he wrote *Ways of Russian Theology* [Puti russkogo bogosloviia], he wrote sharply and clearly: “Solov'ev did not know *ecclesiastical Sophia* at all. He knew Sophia by Böhme and his followers, by Valentin and Kabbala. And *this Sophiology is heretical ... in Solov'ev everything is redundant, while the principal is completely absent*” (Florovsky to Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, 22 July [4 August] 1926, *Symbol* [Paris], no. 29, 1993, pp. 205–6). Florovsky's italics.

The early schematic-gnostic transcription of Solov'ev's experience is very soon replaced by a different one, and this change is a fundamental threshold: here *the philosopher is born*. With astonishing speed, in the space of two or three years, three works containing Solov'ev's complete philosophical system appear: *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge* [Filosofskie nachala tsel'nogo znaniia], *Lectures on Godmanhood* [Chteniia o Bogochelovechestve], and *The Critique of Abstract Principles* [Kritika otvlechennykh nachal]. It is not enough to see this phenomenon merely as a new reading of the Sophian experience, a new kind of service by the Knight of Sophia. Here we find a new face of his image, inseparable from the Sophian face but nonetheless not merged with it (despite the etymology!)—the face of a *philosopher*. Solov'ev's gift for philosophy was evident from the start, and the first, original form in which it manifested itself was his vision of things and phenomena, of the whole range of being under the sign of universal unity: *total-unity*. This ancient philosophem, *εν και παν*, is already apparent in his earliest work, "The Mythological Process in Ancient Paganism" [Mifologicheskii protsess v drevnem iazychestve]. Alongside the mystical motif of Sophia, the philosophical intuition of total-unity is a prime element of Solov'ev's creative personality, its nourishing root and source. But total-unity was far from being his discovery; it was not a new idea; and had he possessed only this nourishing source, he would have been doomed to philosophical repetition. Analogously, had only Sophia been its source, he would have found himself in the same place in the history of thought as Gichtel and Gottfried Arnold. What created the philosophical phenomenon of Solov'ev is the combination of these two sources: the *encounter of Sophia and total-unity*.

Solov'ev's system is the direct fruit of this encounter. There is no need to outline it here; today it is set out in textbooks. But it is worth recalling what the appearance of this system signified and what effects it had. As we can clearly see from our vantage point a century later, its significance was very different in different philosophical contexts. Naturally, it played a most important role in the history of Russian philosophy. To describe this role is also unnecessary, for it is generally recognized that Solov'ev's philosophy inaugurated a new period in the development of Russian philosophy. It changed the very type of Russian philosophizing and raised Russian thought not only to a new stage but also to a new status. Solov'ev's works supplied Russian religious thought with a language and apparatus for expressing its themes and created a working fund for its development at the level of professional European philosophical discourse. They gave a powerful impulse to this development by outlining a series of problem fields and indicating ways of working on them. They carried an appeal to continue the work initiated in them, and this appeal was taken up quickly and energetically.

By contrast, in the context of European philosophy Solov'ev's system could not possibly have had such resonance. All that was new in it for Russia was not so new for the West. For the European philosophical process it did not offer fresh possibilities and was not especially close to contemporaneous currents. In its strivings and pathos it had something in common with those quests for the renewal of European thought that rejected the dominant positivist, scientific, formalistic spirit and were embodied most clearly in Nietzsche's and Bergson's work. But this common ground did not amount to closeness in terms of ideas. Moreover, these strivings of Solov'ev's thought were realized very imperfectly as yet. Only later did Solov'ev actually develop the ideas and tendencies that were close to the future developments in European thought.

The imperfections of the system were felt most sharply by its author. From Solov'ev's own point of view, judged in terms of his plans, the system appeared in the most negative light—as a failure. It did not satisfy him and he abandoned it. The reasons are transparent: both of Solov'ev's principal faces, united in the two senses of the word “philosopher”—servant of Sophia and servant of philosophy—had to be embodied in the system, and both embodiments turned out to be pale and distorted.

As a philosophical phenomenon, the system did not meet the tasks placed before it and did not fully reflect Solov'ev's gift for philosophy. The tasks were to create and demonstrate in action an integral alternative mode of philosophizing: alternative not just to positivism, as in his first dissertation, but to all modern European metaphysics and, most immediately, to German idealism. For all its grandiosity, this task, unlike his early gnostic speculations, should not be attributed to a tinge of *mania grandiosa*. In the life of philosophy, as in any life, there are organic rhythms of stagnation and renewal, and renewal is achieved here only by returning to the sources, by new reflection on the fundamental principles of philosophical discourse. Stagnation is expressed typically in the formalization of discourse, in the domination of abstract dogmas and constructs—and we see in retrospect that Solov'ev's philosophical intuition was accurate: the European thought of his period really had reached the point at which it again needed to be purged of excessive abstractness. This was later achieved in many ways and was finally captured in the formula “the overcoming of metaphysics.” Thus, Solov'ev's intention was justified, and in its own way it was even traditional. Equally traditional, however, was the root of his failure: the execution was inadequate to the intention.

The key to the new mode of philosophizing, according to Solov'ev, lay in replacing the old, abstract concepts by new ones, which he called positive or religious. The philosopher defined “abstractness” here as “the hypostatization of predicates” and on this basis deemed *being* [*bytie*] an abstract principle and *the existent* [*sushchee*] a positive one. However, any analysis of concepts—today we can refer to Heidegger—will conclude that in terms of abstractness the existent (*Seiende, ens, τὸ ὄν*) is in no way preferable to being (*Sein, esse, τὸ εἶναι*). The rejection of being in favor of the existent quickens particularizes ontology but does not in any way overcome abstractness. Solov'ev proposed merely a formal, abstract device that gives an illusory overcoming of abstractness. As it is known today, to overcome abstractness we need to transform discourse not formally but substantively, to enrich it with new dimensions—energetic-activistic or existential, personalistic, dialogical, and so on. An overcoming of this kind was lacking in Solov'ev's system and only began to appear in his work much later, in the 1890s. The lack of any substantive idea of the nonabstract is also evident in the fact that Solov'ev did not find an adequate term for nonabstract principles and resorted to the clearly inept “affirmative principles” [*polozhitel'nye nachala*]: affirmative is the same as positive, and Solov'ev sharply rejected positive philosophy. Furthermore, in terms of its principles of construction the system did not in any way go beyond the stereotypes of abstract constructs. All the philosophical sections were built according to the standard model: a supreme concept was chosen—a certain image of Positive Total-unity—and by a Hegelian type of deduction triads of derivative concepts were inferred from it. The whole bore the defects typical of systematic philosophizing. It had broad scope and a rich system of concepts, but at the same time it was eclectic, reflecting the influence of [Immanuel] Kant and [Arthur] Schopenhauer (as the author himself later noted) and of

[G.W.F.] Hegel and [F.W.J.] Schelling (which he did not mention). Most importantly, this whole did not achieve its basic aims. But, although Solov'ev soon distanced himself from his system, it would unjustifiably occupy a central place in his legacy. This error of reception was repeated in Florenskii's case: the first great achievement—striking, but for the author himself only a beginning, bearing the imprint of imperfect early experience—became fixed in the reception of his opus as the main achievement associated with his name and overshadowed his final and mature work.

The situation was no better with regard to his Sophian tasks. In his system, Sophia did not occupy the place of universal empress and sovereign, although this is precisely what mystical experience demanded. The central and supreme position was occupied by total-unity; Sophia, as introduced in the “Seventh Lecture on Godmanhood,” appears as just one of its representations. For Sophian experience, however, the relationship is exactly the opposite: total-unity and other philosophical categories merely represent Sophia in various ways, partly revealing and partly concealing her, serving, if you like, as her academic pseudonyms. These pseudonyms, together and separately, were clearly unable to manifest the Empress Sophia with the radiance and power of personal presence that she displayed in “Three Meetings.” And the Knight of Sophia did not deem the system that he had constructed a worthy expression of the face of his Eternal Friend.

And so the tasks remained, and Solov'ev could not but return to them. Ten years later he made a decisive attempt to establish Sophia openly and explicitly in her rightful place in the sphere of philosophy and theology. And this new attempt, undertaken in the third part of his book *Russia and the Universal Church* [Rossiia i Vselenskaia Tserkov'], diverts him fatally to the slippery path of his early *Sophia*. Of course, “the years of life passed not in vain” and Solov'ev could no longer write in a jargon consisting of a mixture of gnosticism, cabbala, and simplified Schelling. But he discovers that except for the gnostic myth, the deviation into gnosis, there are simply no other ways to develop ontology as Sophiology, to make Sophia an independent and central figure in the drama of being. And willy-nilly he weaves the next version of this myth—theosophical fantasies about the world soul, the fall of Sophia, the tortuous path of her restoration, and so on and so forth. On the theological plane, this leads him to a frankly Khlestakovian dogmatics in which Sophia is “the substance of the Divine Trinity,” which is embodied in the threefold Divine-Human Being: its “manifestation” is Christ, its “supplement” is the Holy Virgin, and its “dissemination” is the Church. And although *Russia and the Universal Church* was the most pro-Catholic of all of Solov'ev's works, its third part was so unambiguous that, as Sergei Solov'ev writes, his Jesuit friends accused him of heresy and refused to have anything to do with the book's publication.

But again, for the umpteenth time, the creative spirit of the thinker comprehends, overcomes, and surpasses itself. Like the early system, the theosophical schema of *Russia and the Universal Church* was abandoned by its author and had no continuation. What is more, he completely abandoned the Sophiological tendency itself: in his abundant works of the 1890s there are no longer any Sophiological constructions or speculations. And the circumstance that these years were the final stage and summation of his path gives this fact a profound significance. According to the Christian vision of history, which Solov'ev fully shared, any path, any chain of events acquires its meaning at the very end; therefore, the absence of Sophiology from the finale of Solov'ev's work must be

understood as a significant result and lesson of his entire opus. The meaning of Solov'ev's Sophian path lies in his final refusal to construct a doctrine of Sophia.

His renunciation of Sophiology was not, however, a renunciation of Sophia, of the original experience of the "Three Meetings." On the contrary, it was dictated by his loyalty to this experience, by his striving finally to find a reading of it that would not be false and distorting. Let us recall what we noted of the structure of this experience: it had no sphere of testing and purification and was not checked against criteria by reflection. Such experience could not be a reliable basis for drawing philosophical and theological conclusions concerning the reality underlying it; it lacked the properties necessary for either philosophical or theological experience. Solov'ev was led precisely to this conclusion by dissatisfaction with his attempts to develop a doctrine of Sophia. But besides this negative result he managed to discern, or at least intuitively sense, the true nature of his experience, and this finally enabled him to interpret that experience adequately. The picture of Solov'ev's work in the 1890s leaves no doubt that at this mature stage Sophian experience continues to play an undiminished motivating and nourishing role. But now he interprets it differently: as an *esthetic and erotic experience*.

In its esthetic aspect, Sophian experience became a rich source of lyrical poetry, especially about nature. It was in this period that Solov'ev created his best verses, and this cogently suggests that his former reading of his experience in terms of an all-encompassing philosophical-theological synthesis was forced: as soon as the doctrine of Sophia faded away the lyrical poetry of Sophia began to flourish. However, the disappearance of Sophiology, of course, entailed major changes in Solov'ev's philosophy. It too arrived at the stage of final maturity, and at this stage the philosophical and Sophian aspects of his work and personality came into harmony with one another. Previously the Knight of Sophia was, as we have seen, a theosophist, and this has to be understood in two senses. As a *theo-sophist* in the literal sense, he made Sophia into God, affirmed her as the Divine Being, deified her; as a theosophist in the ordinary sense, he developed his thought in the theosophical mode, as a system of free or liberating divine wisdom. At the new stage he ceased to be a theosophist—again in both senses. He no longer deified Sophia and remains simply one who renders her service, who loves her: a *philo-sopher*. At the same time he abandons the theosophical mode of philosophizing. To break with theosophy means to break with great syntheses as external ideological tasks with which thought is charged—and thought, liberated, finally turns inward and descends deeply into itself. And here it becomes clear that the deepening of relations with Sophia and with philosophy are merely two aspects of the same process; namely, the deepening of relations with experience, the deeper penetration into experience as a source.

In one late text, Solov'ev writes: "We must begin with the indisputable data of consciousness . . . immediately accessible states of consciousness as such—that is what is truly self-evident and what gives a real foundation to speculative philosophy."¹² Here and in other texts, he makes it clear that this turn to the experience of consciousness and assertion of the primacy of experience must not be the old empiricism. A philosophy built on experiential foundations must reflect these foundations in a new way and must find for itself a different constitution that at the same time would get rid of "the pitiful stupidities of Descartes and Leibniz."¹³ With these aims, his thought definitely fits into the context,

¹² V.S. Solov'ev, "Tri kharakteristiki," in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 8, p. 418.

¹³ V.S. Solov'ev to N.N. Strakhov, 8 December 1888, *Pis'ma V.S. Solov'eva*, vol. 1, p. 56.

the line of transformations of European philosophy that Bergson and Husserl were initiating at the time. Furthermore, although his reliance on “the indisputable data of consciousness” is obviously reminiscent of Bergson, in his reflection on experiential foundations and the philosophical act itself, especially in *Theoretical Philosophy* [Teoreticheskaia filosofia], Solov’ev clearly reaches the positions of phenomenology. Moreover, he manages to outline and build on these positions sufficiently well for Helmut Dahm to express the frequently quoted opinion that “the conclusions of Solov’ev’s philosophy . . . anticipated almost all the methods of German phenomenology.”¹⁴ The task of establishing the true depth of Solov’ev’s progress toward phenomenology is still before us, and its time has come. It is beyond dispute, however, that Solov’ev’s death cut short his intense effort in this direction, an effort that had already borne fruit.

I mentioned above that at his mature stage, Sophian experience revealed itself to Solov’ev also as erotic experience. In this aspect, it nourished strenuous thinking about the foundations of love, sex, corporeality, and femininity. The new attitude to experience attained at this stage had a clear effect on the character of this thinking: Solov’ev does not construct theories but records inner contradictions and aporias, poses themes in a new way, points out acute problems, and outlines answers only in the form of cautious hypotheses. And so, instead of yet another doctrine of Sophia, there arises something less precarious and ephemeral that may be designated as a *topos of Sophia*—a field, complex, or node of deep and indivisible problems that can be explicated and analyzed but hardly solved in full. Here the very name “Sophia” practically disappears: ordinarily it is replaced by the less committing “Eternal Femininity.”

Solov’ev’s approach to the problems belonging to the *topos of Sophia* has a number of specific features. Chief among them is a sharp dualism, a division in all the principles, in the entire sphere of love and femininity. With each of these principles he associates not one but two different elements that confront each other as elevated and base, as beautiful and ugly. Thus, in love he follows Plato in distinguishing and counterposing the spheres of Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos; he opposes Eternal Femininity to what he calls “feminine nature as such”; and so on. The source of this division is indicated very clearly: it is sex, sexual intercourse, and reproduction. He constantly bears in mind the struggle of Christian thought against the dualism of the Neoplatonists, who loathed the flesh, and emphasizes that only animalistic coupling, not the flesh as such, is the object of his condemnation and loathing. The sexual sphere for Solov’ev is not simply base: it pollutes with baseness all that it touches; it is the very core, the *locus of the base* in created being. Solov’ev severely belittles sex, expresses contempt and disgust for it, and declares that what really defines man is the perception of sex as shameful. Such an impassioned, wounded attitude to a theme invariably has a basis in real life: it must be rooted in the structures of personality and psyche, and must be connected with models of behavior and possibly with specific events. One memoirist writes: “I noticed that Solov’ev had some kind of unhealthy attitude to childbearing. A pregnant woman produced an unpleasant impression in him. . . . It seems to me that Solov’ev was sexless by compulsion, perhaps sexless against his will, due to peculiarities of his bodily constitution. . . . This man lived in opposition to nature. The strongest striving for the spiritual was combined with something of the opposite

¹⁴ H.Dahm, *Grundzüge russischen Denkens* (Munich, 1979), p. 33.

nature.”¹⁵ In connection with “the opposite,” we may recall that, according to E. Radlov, the famous N.A. Liubimov “threatened that if Solov_’ev did not stop picking on him in the press, he would reveal in print that Solov_’ev engaged in masturbation.”¹⁶ There are quite a few sources of this kind, but what is needed is not a raw compilation of them but *a reconstruction of the whole personality context of the gender theme in Solov_’ev*; and this large task, which calls for psychoanalytical insight, has not yet been solved or even seriously posed.

It is even more important, however, to understand the conclusions and solutions at which the philosopher arrived. Because of their “strangeness,” they are widely known, but for the same reason, as a rule, they have been left unanalyzed. And yet Solov_’ev developed, in the form of a few hypotheses, an impressive Gender Project, a sketch of a new constitution of the whole gender sphere. The project has two central motifs: first, the image of asexual Eternal Femininity and, second, the task of “regenerating human nature,” transforming it by joint divine-human action in accordance with principles that Solov_’ev defines as “androgynism, spiritual corporeality, and Godmanhood.” In the image of Eternal Femininity, it is quite noticeable that the image is created not so much by theoretical reasoning as by some sort of personal need. Apart from a sharp separation from sex and participation in Eternal Beauty, everything in it is indefinite and contradictory. In particular, A.F. Losev observes that in order to conform to the predicates associated with it, Eternal Femininity would have to be considered not a feminine but a feminine-masculine principle. Let me add to this that the ideal of the Androgyne and the Ideal of Eternal Femininity are hardly compatible. However, it is absurd to analyze Solov_’ev’s project or utopia as a logical construction. It is important to capture the vital nerve of the whole project, of the entire topos of Sophia—and, having set ourselves this aim, we see that it is by no means a matter of simply eradicating sexuality and building an asexual gender sphere. We shall be able to capture this nerve only when we include in our field of vision another fundamental principle: for what lies concealed behind Solov_’ev’s strange thoughts, nourishing and guiding them, is the ancient intuition of the *connection between sex and death*.

This mystical intuition has persisted through the ages, but neither science nor philosophy has had anything to say about it. Only relatively recently have some points of the connections been drawn, and suddenly we notice that Solov_’ev’s strange ideas are amazingly consonant with them! First, as the idea of Eternal Femininity suggests, the spheres of sexual distinction [*pol*] and sexual behavior [*seks*] do not coincide: there are organic phenomena that possess sexual distinctions but do not reproduce sexually. Second and more important, death in the strict sense, as the termination of life and the formation of a corpse, is an inevitable concomitant of sexual behavior. We may say, albeit very loosely, that the stage of the emergence of eukaryotic cells with sexual reproduction in the course of evolution is the threshold at which sex and death enter the world together and in interconnected fashion. (We may also conjecture that this event, passing through all the levels of genetic memory, was eventually reflected in the mythologem of the Fall.) Third, unlike the theme of death, the theme of immortality cannot have any meaningful formulation at the biological level. A living entity that is not subject to death nonetheless goes through changes; however, it is impossible to define its

¹⁵ E.I. Boratynskaia. See S.M. Lukianov, *Materialy k biografii* (Moscow, 1990), bk. 3, vyp. 2, pp. 25, 27.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 65.

identity in such a way as to allow us to determine whether the entity remains “the same” or changes into a “different” entity. For this reason, it is only at a higher, meta-biological level of organization that “immortality” emerges as a concept and problem. In a purely biological world it is impossible to draw distinctions among the concepts of immortality, death in a different entity, life in a different entity, and life through death. With the presence of (self-)consciousness these concepts should become distinguishable, but again, science and philosophy as yet have nothing to say about this. These are open-ended problems that cannot be called unimportant. Solov’ev tells us hypothetically, without insisting on it, that in order to overcome the principle of death it is necessary to effect a polar transformation of sexuality by redirecting its energies, and this is “the supreme path of love” on which sexual behavior as we know it will disappear, but sexual distinction, as Eternal Femininity and as “true androgynism without the external mixing of forms,” will remain. He views this overcoming of death on the supreme path of love in a meta-anthropological perspective, not as biological immortality (for him, as for contemporary science, this is nonsense) but as spiritual-corporeal and divine-human immortality; it is tempting and absurd to draw an empirical path to this goal. Here, in this vision of divine-human meta-anthropological strategy, which arises from the interweaving of the principles of love, sexual distinction, and death, lies both Solov’ev’s closeness to Fedorov and his fundamental distance from the latter.

This entire cycle of Solov’ev’s later thoughts is interesting in many respects. First of all, it may be viewed in the light of the Freudian theory of sublimation, but for the moment I shall leave this thread aside: it should be considered as part of the whole complex of psychoanalytic problems and motifs associated with Solov’ev. Next, anthropological reality is seen here in a dynamic key; the philosopher thinks in terms of active anthropological strategies and cardinal changes, extending as far as the transformation of human nature itself. We should bear in mind that in his time everyone (with the sole exception of [Friedrich] Nietzsche) regarded both human nature and the entire anthropological situation as quite static, allowing for only the gradual improvement of man under the influence of social progress. The anthropological dynamism of late Solov’ev is close to the hesychastic tradition, which affirms that human nature can be deified. But Solov’ev himself was not aware of this closeness and retained to the end a prejudiced negative idea of hesychasm. Of course, he is also close to today’s situation in which the anthropological dynamic is steadily increasing and cardinal anthropological changes and breakthroughs are no longer a matter of theory but of life. One of the spheres in which these breakthroughs are especially striking is precisely the gender sphere, with which Solov’ev’s intuitions are directly connected. Today this sphere is full of discussions, experiments, and new models. In this stormy atmosphere Solov’ev’s thought may have a contribution to make, reminding militant feminism of the depths of being with which all the processes here are connected.

And last, a point far removed from the issue of the day. Christianity has not unraveled the knot of the principles Love–Sex–Death and has not solved the acute problems and aporias concealed within it. Christianity categorically affirms Love as the fundamental principle of divine being. But this fundamental principle is realized in the mutual relations of the Hypostases of the Holy Trinity, in the “perichorisis” or perfect exchange of being among Them, and there is neither a feminine nor a sexual principle in this trinitarian *oikonomia*. Then what relation do woman and sexual love bear to this

Love? There are many answers, and that means that as yet there is no answer. Christ's cause is victory over death, and participation in this cause of victory over death is affirmed as the only thing that is needed, the one overriding axis of human existence. But what relation do woman and sex have to this victory over death? There are many answers, and that means that there are no answers. And as long as the problems are open-ended, Solov'ev's thought, with all its strangeness, will arouse a lively interest in them.

* * *

Sophia and philosophy are as basic and pivotal to Solov'ev's creative personality as they are to his symbolic image. All the rest is less significant, more peripheral, although each symbolic face, at one time or another, came to the fore and obscured the other faces. Solov'ev has been portrayed especially frequently and especially easily as a prophet. This face, as I have mentioned, was part of the philosopher's public reputation: society and, as they say today, the mass media persistently endowed him with the title of prophet and it accompanied him throughout his life. Some used this title with a measure of irony and even mockery, but on the whole educated society seriously attributed to him a prophetic role in both its aspects—as soothsayer and accuser. The fate of this role today is the easiest target for deconstruction. The test of a prophet is simple: time goes by, and all that he foretold comes to pass, while that which he condemned crumbles. A century has gone by, and one broadcasting station has honored the thinker's memory with a program titled “Solov'ev's Defeat” [Porazhenie Solov'eva], the idea of which was explained clearly and simply: it is obvious that everything he foretold and called for has not come to pass, and that which he exposed is flourishing. . . . Sophia, theocracy, the unification of the churches, capital punishment . . . just take any idea he preached! I have no reply. I can only remind the reader that before the post-Soviet media debunked Vladimir Solov'ev as a prophet, he himself had done so. Always treating it as an imposed role, he described and rejected it twice—in 1886 and in 1891—in jocular carnival verses, where he said, in particular: “I was raised to the rank of prophet by my enemies, They gave me this name to mock me.”¹⁷

But the prophetic face also has another meaning, another layer, besides the popular clichés. We continue to appraise Solov'ev's later texts and his perception and vision of events in the last years of his life as prophetic, although we know that in the direct sense there is nothing prophetic in them and that, apart from some general, easily guessed features, they present absolutely no pictures of the future that have been vindicated. After the complete deconstruction of the prophetic element in the usual sense, there is still something that compels us obstinately to recognize this element. It seems to me that, despite the absence of vindicated predictions, Solov'ev shows us something true and inaccessible to the ordinary observer. This perception is right, and this “something” is the *eschatological vision of historical being*. That which is most valuable and important in Solov'ev's notorious eschatology, which saturates his later texts, from “Pan-Mongolism” to “Concerning the Latest Events” [Po povodu poslednikh sobytii], lies not in the direct content of these texts but in the special quality of thought and way of seeing events, in his application of *eschatological optics*. This optics shows us not what the future will look like, but what the presence of the future, the presence of the end in the fabric of historical existence looks like, what the eschatological dimension of history

¹⁷ V.S. Solov'ev, “Skromnoe prorochestvo,” in his *Stikhotvoreniia*, 7th ed. (Moscow, 1921), p. 105.

looks like. Nietzsche was striving to convey this same presence when he said: “The immediate and the most remote future are the measure of all todays,” but he did not manage to convey it with such power. And such a demonstration can also be called prophecy; this is consonant with Solov’ev’s own interpretation of prophetic service that appears at the end of *The Justification of the Good* [Opravdanie dobra]. At this profound level the Prophet and the Philosopher are neighbors: the Prophet teaches the experience of the future—and already present—end of all things, while the Philosopher teaches the experience of future—and already present—death.

In respect of the theme of Christian unity and the unification of the churches, Solov’ev’s face appears at first glance clear and coherent. It is indisputable that he always regarded the unity of Christians not only as a very important spiritual principle (John 17:11) but also as an urgent duty requiring action; and he strove to do what he could. It is also indisputable that for him the Christian community, the church, was always, even at the early stage when he was close to the Slavophiles, the Universal Church, the boundaries of which were wider than those of Orthodoxy and, in any case, included Catholicism. For him, therefore, in contrast to the Slavophiles, the commandment of unity meant the cause and duty of the unification of the churches, and he was devoted to this cause throughout his life. However, we cannot stop with this general picture: we must understand Solov’ev’s views and goals regarding interconfessional problems, his concrete prescriptions and actions. And as soon as we delve into these questions, the clear picture begins to grow murky. Nowhere, perhaps, did the philosopher’s positions change—or oscillate!—as much as they did in this sphere. Everything changed radically: his appraisal of each of the churches, the expected form of the united church, and the paths to the goal.... If we set aside the changing aspects (in particular, his famous schemata of theocracy), we shall find, perhaps, just two firm points: *papism* and *anti-Byzantinism*. He always believed that the power and authority of the pope should extend to all Christians, for “in the Christian world there is only one center of lawful and traditional unity, [and] all true believers should unite around it”¹⁸ And he was convinced that in Byzantium the principles of Christianity had been radically distorted and that this also had a negative effect on Russian Christianity.

Hence it is understandable that his positions should have been distinctly pro-Catholic and, as is well known, in 1896 he even formally joined the Catholic Church. But it is important to note that, while they were *pro-Catholic*, these positions were nonetheless far from being *Catholic*. His Sophian doctrine of the church was from the start rejected by Catholic theology, and other parts of his Sophiology were no less foreign to it. The cult of Sophia and Eternal Femininity is quite far removed from the Catholic mysticism of Mary, and the general type of his religiosity has little in common with Catholicism. His individualistic mysticism was definitely of the Protestant type, as his own list of mystics whose doctrines were close to his own indicates (see above).¹⁹

¹⁸ V.S. Solov’ev to Eugène Tavernier, May or June 1896, V.S. Solov’ev, *Pis’mo*, ed. E.L. Radlov (Petrograd., 1923), pp. 221–2.

¹⁹ It may be noted that Solov’ev did not include in this list the Catholics Seuse and Baader, that is, precisely the branch of Sophian mysticism that developed within Catholicism. It is also worth to recall his own words: he once said to Lev Lopatin, “I am usually considered to be a Catholic, but in reality, I am much more a Protestant than a Catholic” (L.M.Lopatin, “Pamyati V.I.S. Solov’eva,” *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*, no. 105(5), 1910, p. 635; cited by A.F.Losev, *Vladimir Solov’ev i ego vremia* (Moscow, 1990), p. 398).

Finally, his relations with the Orthodox Church are very difficult to describe, for it is impossible to grasp what his affiliation with it meant to him. In the 1880s he wrote *The Spiritual Foundations of Life* [Dukhovnye osnovy zhizni], in which he portrays Orthodox spirituality, life in Orthodoxy, with true insight as his own, not as others' spiritual foundations. In 1896 he, perhaps, abandoned Orthodoxy or, perhaps, not: from the fact that he concealed his adoption of Catholicism Father Sergei Bulgakov concludes that he wanted to remain in Orthodoxy *as well*, thus performing "a church experiment in personal union."²⁰ But in a letter from the same period he called the Orthodox Church a "Greco-Russian synagogue, the rules of which were not written for him" and developed ideas that amounted in essence to the view that one can continue to belong to this church purely externally without having to "declare one's solidarity" with it.²¹ In the winter of 1896–97, a census was conducted in Russia, and in this connection Solov'ev told Princess E.G. Volkonskaia, who was a secret Catholic: "Under confession, I wrote 'Orthodox-Catholic.' Figure it out, officer!"²² We can agree that not only the census official would have difficulty figuring out this situation.

How then are we to define what positions he defended and whom he represented in his interconfessional activism? The standard answer is the following: he belonged to Orthodoxy, but at the same time he deeply valued and loved Catholicism; and in striving for their union he set a noble example and served as a symbol of Orthodox ecumenism. From what I have said above, however, things appear differently: he was a mystic of the *Protestant* type who belonged genetically to *Orthodoxy* and was theoretically convinced that all Christians should unite under the pope, that is, with *Catholicism*. And in this picture we immediately recognize Solov'ev's other face, which for some reason we did not notice here before: that of the *homeless wanderer in interconfessional space*.

²⁰ The event of Solov'ev's conversion to Catholicism remains to this day unclear on many important details, starting with the rite performed for the conversion. The usual rite includes the recitation of a text in which the convert condemns and renounces his former faith; and if Solov'ev performed *this* rite, there are no grounds for speaking of his continued affiliation with Orthodoxy. According to a number of sources, however, the usual rite was changed in this case. According to some testimonies (M. Gavrilov, on the basis of texts by Bishop d'Herbigny and Cardinal Rampolla), the ceremony used was devised personally by Pope Leo XIII; according to others (L.V. Ivanova's account of the adoption of Catholicism by Viacheslav Ivanov), there was also a "declaration" written by Solov'ev himself. According to Gavrilov, after reciting the Tridentine Creed Solov'ev declared: "I belong to the true Orthodox Church, for it is precisely in order to profess true Orthodoxy without impairment that I, not being a Roman Catholic (*latinianin*), recognize Rome as the center of universal Christianity." It is not known whether this sentence is the declaration by Solov'ev that Viacheslav Ivanov wanted to recite upon his conversion to Catholicism. But in any case the two philosophers evidently performed an identical rite, the only difference being that Solov'ev kept it secret. As a result of the rite, Ivanov became a Catholic in the full and usual sense, while remaining Orthodox in a certain subjective sense, in his own opinion. Logically, we must conclude that this was also Solov'ev's case; but it is impossible to make this conclusion fully reliable without further information. As Gavrilov tells us, "the case of Solov'ev's conversion to Catholicism is preserved in the Vatican archives." This is, undoubtedly, the most important of known unpublished sources connected with Solov'ev, and we must hope that it will finally be made public (see M.N. Gavrilov, O.I., "V.S. Solov'ev i katolichestvo," in V. Solov'ev, *Russkaia ideia* [Brussels: Zhizn' s Bogom, 1974]; and L. Ivanova, *Vospominaniia: Kniga ob ottse* [Moscow, 1992], p. 196).

²¹ V.S. Solov'ev to V.L. Velichko, 20 April 1895, *Pis'ma V.S. Solov'eva*, vol. 1, pp. 223–4.

²² V.S. Solov'ev to E.G. Volkonskaia, December 1896 or January 1897, cited by M.N. Gavrilov, "Byl li V.I. Solov'ev katolikom ili pravoslavnym?" *Symbol* (Paris), no. 41, 1999, p. 315.

What could such an extraterrestrial figure, such an *anima candida* accomplish by way of unifying the churches in a situation shaped by a complex and oppressive age-old legacy? Solov'ev's efforts were doomed for lack of suitable means; and then in the "Short Story of the Antichrist" [Kratkaia povest' ob Antikhriste], he replaced his arbitrary cerebral schemata of theocratic projects by recasting the whole theme in an eschatological perspective. The recasting was effected in an elevated and beautiful style, but now there were no longer any ideas of how to build interconfessional relations in today's real situation, not in the end of time. The unreality of Solov'ev's ideas on the interconfessional problem could not be more obvious than it is today, when throughout the Orthodox world there is a rising spontaneous wave, not especially unleashed or instigated by anyone, of antiecumenism and when the cause of Christian unity is in full retreat, not because of external but of certain profound intrachurch reasons. His vacillating and unclear position between the confessions has inevitably given rise to ambiguity in his legacy in the interconfessional sphere. Viewed from the West, Solov'ev's legacy is easily seen as a symbol of lofty idealistic striving for Christian unity and the unification of the churches. This view is not false, nor is it complete; there are also other facets. If we look at Solov'ev's legacy from the East, from the point of view of Orthodoxy, we discover that his positions, his pro-Catholic argumentation, and his "experiment in personal union" are in almost all respects based not on the logic of "Orthodox ecumenism" ("along with the truth of Orthodoxy, there is also worth and value in the positions of other confessions"), but on the logic of pro-Catholic polemic ("on all the principal questions of interconfessional disagreements, the position of Orthodoxy is wrong and that of Catholicism is true"). In fact, these positions tend not so much toward ecumenism, toward a sisterly equality among confessions, as toward the adoption of Catholicism. Such an influence of his legacy is a living reality. Beginning with Viacheslav Ivanov and Sergei Solov'ev, a great many Russian Catholics abandoned Orthodoxy for Catholicism under Solov'ev's influence. This is what a contemporary historian writes: "In the 1890s ... a community of Russian Catholics of the Eastern Rite started to form out of the circle of followers of the philosopher V.S. Solov'ev in St. Petersburg."²³ In the light of all these facts, the face suffers a split: a "prophet of unification", yes; but at closer look, an "agent of influence" as well. The secret character of his "personal union" has given rise to a classic tussle for his soul. The stream of claims and counterclaims continues to our times: "Solov'ev should be considered the intellectual father (*ideinyi otets*) of Russian Catholicism"²⁴; "Solov'ev was and died a Catholic"²⁵; "V. Solov'ev ... did not leave Orthodoxy"²⁶; and "Solov'ev always was and remained only Orthodox."²⁷ To all the old tussles among the confessions a new one was added, which was a personal contribution of the "prophet of unification."

Solov'ev's face as "Christian humanist" has the broadest content, but I shall devote the least space to it. His social philosophy, his Christian ethics and politics, his

²³ M. Shkarovskii, "Russkie katoliki v Sankt-Peterburge (Leningrade)," *Symbol* (Paris), no. 38, 1997, p. 83.

²⁴ P.M. Volkonskii, "Kratkii ocherk organizatsii russkoi katolicheskoi tserkvi v Rossii," *Symbol* (Paris), no. 38, 1997, p. 146. First published in Lviv in 1930.

²⁵ Gavrilov, O.I., "V.S. Solov'ev i katolichestvo," p. 2.

²⁶ V.V. Zen'kovskii, *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (Paris, 1950), vol. 2, p. 18.

²⁷ Losev, *Vladimir Solov'ev i ego vremia*, p. 391.

theory of social Christianity—these themes have been researched more extensively than any others. The reason for this is that they are not only important but also simpler, clearer, and less ambiguous than many other themes in the thinker’s legacy. For that reason, deconstructive reinterpretation is not as necessary in this sphere. Instead of surveying the theme, therefore, I shall merely draw one parallel that reveals some topical implications and potentialities in Solov’ev’s ethics and social philosophy. If we set aside the radical differences of philosophical style, then we cannot but see in these branches of philosophy some substantial similarities—not only in a number of ideas but also in the very spirit and pathos of their thought—between Solov’ev and Emmanuel Lévinas. They start with the structure of the foundations of discourse: both philosophers insistently assert the autonomy and primacy of ethics in relation to metaphysics and ontology. By no means is this generally accepted, and for each of them the given thesis is an important part of the basis of his mature doctrine. Let us recall that Solov’ev posited the proposition concerning “the independence of moral from theoretical philosophy” only in *The Justification of the Good*, revising his earlier view, which he had expressed in the *Critique of Abstract Principles*. Next, let me note a profound conceptual point. One of the key constitutive concepts for the entire sphere of ethics and social philosophy is the concept of the Other, which in classical metaphysics was always treated on the basis of the philosophy of identity. However, both Solov’ev and Lévinas reject this treatment and insist upon a weightier, indestructible otherness of the Other, upon its noncoincidence with the self in any metaphysical or empirical situation or transformation. One of Lévinas’s chief tasks is to present the constitution of the Other as a “true Other” that cannot in principle be conceived of by analogy with my self. As for Solov’ev, in a polemic with Schopenhauer, he argues that the mutual relation of beings and persons, “their mutual connection . . . is neither ‘direct identification’ nor ‘a lifting of the boundaries between the self and the not-self’ . . . the connection embraces the fullness of definite differences.”²⁸ Another point of no small importance: Lévinas and Solov’ev equally recognize the sphere of suffering as the decisive sphere in which the moral sense is formed and tested. “It is only through suffering,” Lévinas writes, “that a being enters a realm in which connection with another is possible.”²⁹ “The foundation of the moral relation to other beings,” Solov’ev says, “can only be com-passion [*so-stradanie*], not co-rejoicing [*so-radovanie*] or co-enjoyment [*so-naslazhdenie*].”³⁰ It would not be difficult to multiply examples. It would be fruitful, in particular, to compare Solov’ev’s analysis of pity with Lévinas’s analytics of responsibility for the Other. And in general one cannot fail to see the evident similarity between their visions of the whole sphere of interhuman relations. This likeness is deeper and more organic than, let us say, the similarity between Solov’ev’s and Bakhtin’s ethics of participation, because it touches upon basic moral intuitions, upon the moral cast of the personality. Lévinas’s ethics, which incorporates the experience of World War II, may be considered the most authoritative ethical conception today. Therefore, our comparison tells us that even with the most resolute deconstruction, Solov’ev’s role in contemporary philosophical life does not correspond to Nabokov’s metaphor of the provincial grandfather’s portrait.

²⁸ V.S. Solov’ev, *Opravdanie dobra* in *Sobranie sochinenii. v vos’mi tomakh*, vol. 7, pp. 85–7.

²⁹ E. Lévinas, *Vremya i drugi* (St. Petersburg, 1998), p. 76.

³⁰ Solov’ev, *Opravdanie dobra*, p. 78.

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But what is this role in reality? The time has come to draw conclusions, to sum up the fate of Solov'ev's legacy, and this means precisely to examine the last remaining face—*Solov'ev as the founder of a philosophical tradition*. The path of this tradition, of Russian religious metaphysics in the twentieth century, is very well known, and we have only to regard it from the Solov'evian viewpoint to understand its relation to Solov'ev's legacy. This question is completely clear only at first glance. Yes, the religious-philosophical renaissance, the entire culture of the Silver Age rested on Solov'ev, traced its origins to Solov'ev, and created the cult of Solov'ev. But any cult stands in need of deconstruction, and, in essence, all the theses of this deconstruction have already been set out above. Undoubtedly, the Silver Age took up many of Solov'ev's ideas, so that the leading ideas among them developed into whole tendencies. Sophia became the central concept of Russian Sophiology, total-unity the central concept of the metaphysics of total-unity, and Godmanhood the central concept of Christian evolutionism, which spread far beyond the boundaries of Russian thought. But for all that, for all its exaltation of Solov'ev, the Silver Age proved deaf to his difficult experience and to his chief lessons. Solov'ev created a doctrine of Sophia, but by no means did he bequeath a duty to construct doctrines of Sophia. On the contrary, his experience, his lesson is that such doctrines are failures, that they do not do justice to the essence of original mystical experience. He created the first Russian philosophical system, but by no means did he bequeath a duty to construct systems. On the contrary, his experience, his lesson is that we need to overcome systematic philosophizing, to go beyond its constructions to concrete problem-solving, to a different philosophical mode. In exalting Solov'ev, however, the Silver Age set about constructing philosophical systems and Sophiological doctrines. It proved to be the heir to the worst, not the best, to what was early, not what was mature in Solov'ev's experience, and embraced that which he himself had renounced. In its chief features, in its general type, Solov'ev's systematic philosophy was outdated even at the time it appeared—but this is precisely what Russian thought chose to follow. Conversely, Solov'ev's only work that was innovative in its philosophical profundity, free of hasty schematization, of Russian imprecision and striving for literary effect—I refer, of course, to *Theoretical Philosophy*—was scarcely noticed. And it was only natural that, for all its brilliance, the philosophy of the Silver Age lacked staying power and was short-lived. In Russia its development was cut short by force, but in the diaspora, where it could have continued, it exhausted its inner potential and came to an end. Today this whole world of thought, which flashed for a short time, is already gone. It is only part of a history that has ended. Later, in a Russian culture that was split into émigré and Soviet camps, the fate of Solov'ev's legacy was, of course, also split. With the religious-philosophical renaissance finally at an end, diaspora thought managed to find new soil and establish a new creative stage. Instead of constructing metaphysical systems, it undertook a deeper exploration of Orthodox experience, renewed a living connection with its patristic and ascetic sources, and developed a new, contemporary reading of the Eastern Christian discourse, the authentic spiritual and intellectual tradition of Orthodoxy. Known under the somewhat conventional names of neo-patristics and neo-Palamism and taking its place in the broad context of general Orthodox and Christian life, this current of religious thought remains active today. But it is far removed from Solov'ev. The source that

nourishes its creativity is the experience of Byzantine theology and hesychastic askesis, which Solov'ev did not accept and did not understand. He did not see, because he did not want to see, that an Eastern Christian discourse did exist (although he gave expression to many of its ideas), and even Frank, in his article in praise of Solov'ev, pointed out that "Solov'ev underestimated the spiritual wisdom of Eastern theology, which Western Christianity is now discovering."³¹ His legacy, therefore, has played no role in the new current. Here I should add that in the course of time, this current has increasingly overflowed the banks of Russian thought and in its present form can no longer be considered part thereof. The leading role within it has passed to Greek theology, and since the death of Father Ioann Meindorf (1926–92), the role of Russian authors has been quite insignificant. As a result, today one can hardly speak of any kind of living creative tradition of Russian religious philosophy. The tradition has grown weak and came to a standstill; moreover, even before this happened it had clearly distanced itself from Solov'ev's legacy. If we again recall the three great conceptions that constituted the core of Solov'ev's thought, *Godmanhood–Total-unity–Sophia*, we shall have to admit that all three, being by the nature "grand narratives" of a defunct essentialist metaphysics, have been left by the wayside both in Eastern Christian discourse and in Western philosophy—and are now sterile. Such are the final conclusions of deconstruction—and in their essence they bring to mind Chaadaev's famous joke: the chief sights in Moscow are the great bell that has never rung and the great cannon that cannot be fired (known as the Tsar-Cannon—S.S). The result of examining the last of Solov'ev's symbolic faces can be expressed in the deconstructive metaphor: *Vladimir Solov'ev as the Tsar-Cannon of Russian philosophy*. Let us hope that this metaphor is applicable only at this point in time, for both Solov'ev's thought and the tradition of Russian religious philosophy as a whole still have creative potential. It is useful to emphasize, however, that as of today the metaphor does apply to Russian thought and to Solov'ev's legacy.

While the attitude of diaspora thought to Solov'ev's legacy can be defined briefly as a *departure from Solov'ev*, a similar brief formula for Soviet philosophy would be the *struggle against Solov'ev*. There is no need to dwell on this part of the fate of his legacy, although here too his image is symbolic: Solov'ev as leading representative of a hostile religious-mystical worldview. The struggle against this worldview was one of the chief tasks entrusted to Soviet philosophy, and every philosophy department in the Soviet Union had to be an active center in the struggle against Solov'ev's legacy. This was true right up to the transition to the post-Soviet stage. This transition brought with it lies, ambiguity, and cynicism in abundance, but nowhere are they as concentrated as in philosophy. Yesterday's agency of ideological terror turned in the twinkling of an eye into today's stronghold of free thought, and the professional persecutors of Russian religious philosophy declared themselves guardians and teachers of Russian religious philosophy. Soviet philosophy became post-Soviet philosophy without displaying the slightest sign of internal criticism and purification, without making the slightest *gesture of repudiating* the dirt and blood on which it had fed as part of the machine of terror. And this has a direct relation to the fate of Solov'ev's legacy. The philosopher possessed a very acute and sensitive moral sense, and I have especially emphasized the primacy of ethics in his thought. But the situation I have

³¹ Frank, "Dukhovnoe nasledie Vladimira Solov'eva," p.179.

described implies, perhaps, not the flouting as much as the obtuse absence of ethics, the amputation of this entire sphere from the consciousness of the philosophical community, if not from that of Russian society as a whole. It has always been said that there is an element of tragedy in Solov'ev's fate, in his projects and ideas. And when Centers for the Struggle Against Solov'ev rename themselves Hearths of Burning Love for Solov'ev and arrange celebrations in his honor at which they extol the moral loftiness of his teaching, a new page is added to Solov'ev's tragedy. But he was spiritually prepared for his tragic fate, for the possibility of the Antichrist's distortions and counterfeits. For all his distance from Orthodox askesis, the tragic motto of Saint Siluan of Athos comes closest to Solov'ev's eschatological world-perception: Hold on to your mind in hell and do not despair! A century after his death, the words Blok spoke on the twentieth anniversary of his death ring true: "Vladimir Solov'ev, who in his lifetime 'found no refuge between two warring estates,' has still not found that refuge."³²

A distinguishing feature of Russian reality has always been its fantastic interweaving of falsehood and truth. Alongside post-Soviet usurpations, genuine work on Solov'ev is beginning to be done in Russia (and has always been done in the world). While criticizing his early schemata and global projects, I have found quite a few ideas, principles, and approaches—mostly from the late, mature period of his legacy—that remain relevant and profound; and many of them find a response and creative reception today. In this new work there are new difficulties and dangers. The gaudy ideas of the early Solov'ev may again obscure the mature Solov'ev, who remains insufficiently studied and understood. In place of the old symbolist image there may emerge a diffuse set of reflections in which Solov'ev appears as a fighter for new noble causes: Solov'ev as ecumenist, feminist, democrat, environmentalist, and so on. Present-day efforts have yet to generate either a living tradition or impressive achievements. There is nothing we can boast of at the centennial commemoration of Solov'ev. And as we try to assemble a coherent image of the thinker out of scattered fragments, to comprehend the mysterious experience of his late period, to break through the stifling post-Soviet lies, we rediscover the truth of Vladimir Sergeevich Solov'ev's last words: *The work of the Lord is difficult*

³² Blok, "Vladimir Solov'ev i nashi dni," p. 159.