Between Mysticism and Politics: The Continuity in and Basic Pattern of Vladimir Solov'ëv's Thought

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Abstract

Vladimir Solov'ëv, informal “founder” of the current of Russian religious philosophy which gained some prominence in the early 20th C with thinkers like N. Berdyaev, S. Frank and S. Bulgakov, based his social and political philosophy as well as his program of “Christian politics” (an attempt to bring the world as close to the Kingdom of God as possible, while steering clear from any idea of “building” God's Kingdom on Earth) on a series of personal mystical encounters with Sophia, understood by him as, simultaneously, Eternal Femininity, Divine Wisdom and World Soul. The paper argues that this vision remained the foundation of his entire world-view, despite the fact that he initially articulated a more “utopian” vision of a world-encompassing “free theocracy,” while later in his career he elaborated, in *Opravdanie dobra* [The Justification of the (Moral) Good], a more realistic, but still “ideal-theoretical” vision of a just Christian state. Highlighting the tension between Solov'ëv's advocacy of a free and plural sphere of public debate and his own “prophetic” position based on privileged access to divine wisdom, the paper ends with a discussion of the intrinsic and unsolvable tension between religion and politics, and with the claim that there is a fundamental opposition between holistic mystical visions and a recognition of the political, understood as the ubiquitous possibility of both conflict and concord among humans.

Keywords

mysticism – divine wisdom – Sophia – sophiology – holism – Christian politics

The name Solov'ëv is transcribed in a wide variety of ways in most languages. For the purposes of this essay I will refrain from unifying the various versions: given that similar names do not feature, no confusion should ensue.

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Votre parole, ô peuples de la parole, c'est la théocratie libre et universelle, la vraie solidarité de toutes les nations et de toutes les classes, le christianisme pratiqué dans la vie publique, la politique christianisée; c'est la liberté pour tous les opprimés, la protection pour tous les faibles, – c'est la justice sociale et la bonne paix chrétienne.

VLADIMIR SOLOV'EV, 1889¹

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Your word, O peoples of the Word, is free and universal theocracy, the true solidarity of all nations and classes, the application of Christianity to public life, the Christianizing of politics; freedom for all the oppressed, protection for all the weak; social justice and good Christian peace.

VLADIMIR SOLOVIEV, *The Russian Church and the Papacy*, p. 48

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Solovyov's visions, if indeed they occurred – or rather, in whatever way we can understand them to have occurred – arose in his own consciousness from his own intimate experiences, unique to him.

JUDITH DEUTSCH KORNBLATT, 2009²

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Introduction

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a worldview emerged and consolidated into a prominent current of thinking that is mostly characterised today as 'Russian religious philosophy'. Most of its fundamental ideas sprung from the 'founder', Vladimir Sergeevič Solov'ev (1853–1900), with followers like Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Semyon Frank (1877–1950) developing them further. While this article will in the main discuss Solov'ev, the other thinkers are given consideration in a concluding outlook. Moreover, to complete the picture, other

¹ Soloviev 1978, pp. 150 et seq.

² Kornblatt 2009, p. 4.

publications dealing with both Solov'ev and several of his followers will be referred to.

Although this current cannot be really considered a school and each of the thinkers represented very different positions, there are two characteristics they share enabling us to consider them in terms of a unity. Firstly, they are united by a 'total vision' of reality which, via so-called sophiology, can be traced back to explicit, mystical encounters with Sophia, the divine wisdom of the Old Testament and the world soul of Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism; and secondly, most of the exponents of this current were intensely interested in ethical, socio-economic and political questions, an interest that then saw them attempt to develop a 'Christian politics' based on the aforementioned total vision.

Our view of this current is distorted by the fact that these thinkers were increasingly suppressed in Soviet Russia from 1920 and then in the USSR from 1922: Frank, Berdyaev and Bulgakov were expelled, Florensky died in a camp; their works were extremely difficult to find. However, this 'Russian religious philosophy' continued to exist in emigration until after the Second World War, before, from the late 1980s onwards, it began enjoying a revival back in Russia itself.

In the first section of this article I will sketch the background to this important current, emphasising the very specific nature of the Russian context in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The second section will deal with the life and work of the originator. The third section is devoted to taking a closer look at Solov'ev's insights in the fields of social and political philosophy, while the fourth and final section analyses the fundamental problem of mediating between religion and politics, which leads us to formulating a hypothetical outlook on the future.

1 Background and Context

Traditionally, the relationship between the state and church in Russia is very different to the one familiar in the Western Christian world. The transition from paganism to Byzantine Christianity in 988 was initiated by Prince Vladimir, while the Reformation and Counterreformation hardly reached the world of Orthodox Christianity, and the Enlightenment was imported from outside sources and imposed from above. Although the Orthodox churches were always connected to secular power, unlike the Roman church they never became secular powers themselves.

To begin we must consider the Byzantine legacy. Of paramount importance here is the model of a 'symphonic' relationship between *Imperium* (Caesar) and *Sacerdotium* (Patriarch).³ This relationship threatens however to degrade from the fragile balance of a 'division of labour' between equals in the direction of a *Caesaropapism*, i.e. into a hierarchical relationship wherein the Caesar is elevated above the Patriarch and indeed sacralised. The converse degradation, a hierocracy (*Papocaesarism*), is conceivable, but did not manifest itself in Byzantium (one can make a case for Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Geneva at the time of Calvin, or the Papal State). Over the course of history, the Orthodox churches have attempted – with varying success – to remain independent of the political authorities and to play their own part in the symphony; the price that had to be paid was the focusing on Church life, liturgy, personal (not to be confused with individual) morality and salvation as well as an intensified, eschatologically-motivated turn away from worldly – including political, but also economic – affairs.

From 1453 CE, i.e. after the fall of Constantinople (or its opening for Islam in 857 H depending on the perspective taken), Russia became a key factor, thus shifting the focus of Orthodox Christianity in a north-easterly direction. The transition of Russian Orthodoxy into independence (autocephalous already since 1448 and with its own patriarch recognised by the other Orthodox churches since 1589) went hand in hand with the idea of a 'Third Rome': after the fall of the first and second Rome, it was now Moscow's mission to preserve and defend Christianity for the whole of mankind, an aspiration still maintained today.⁴ Here a critical stance is taken towards the first – papal – Rome, the leader of which is recognised as a patriarch but whose title as the pope of the whole of Christianity is rejected; invariably polemical is the attitude towards Protestantism, understood as a renouncement of the idea of a tradition and a manifestation of an individualistic and rationalist principle; and extremely aggressive is the outlook on newer, charismatic movements within the broad scope of the Christian tradition, e.g. the Jehovah's Witness, the Mormons or the Pentecostal churches.

Beginning in 1652 the Moscow Patriarch Nikon implemented a church reform that in substance meant a return to the Byzantine rite, but factually led

3 See Kostjuk 2005, especially chapter 1, "Geschichtliche Wurzeln des orthodoxen Politikbegriffs" and Van der Zweerde 2009, pp. 47–62.

4 For example by Metropolitan Hilarion in the Moscow Patriarchate: "We must not fear a strong Islam but a slackening Christianity" [Митрополит Иларион: "Мы должны бояться не сильного ислама, а слабого христианства"].

to a schism. The so-called Old Believers or Old Ritualists (староверцы respectively старообрядцы), called *raskol'niki* [раскольники, i.e. schismatics] by the official church, adhered to their own tradition. In the highly symbolic year of 1666, the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church expelled the schismatics, meaning that even closer ties were formed between the Patriarchate and the state. A few decades later Peter the Great broke any remaining resistance of the Church by introducing a further reform, creating a situation in which no new patriarch was elected since 1700—from 1721 onwards, the Patriarchate was replaced by a Holy Synod based on the Swedish model. The Church was directly controlled by the state, a situation that continued until 1917, i.e. through the lifetime of Vladimir Solov'ëv, who became embroiled in an acrimonious personal dispute with the *oberprokurer* at the time, Konstantin Pobedonoscev. The subordination of the Church to the state brought with it the definitive end of the symphony model; first during a brief intermezzo around 1917 and then since 1988, after the end of the Soviet period, when the Russian Orthodox Church had to subordinate itself to the regime and existed in a 'golden cage' [*zolatja kletka*], could the principle of symphony be revived, albeit only as a normative ideal and not as a feasible goal. At present, the relationship between Church and state in Russia is best described as a close cooperation informed by mutual interests.

Theological and religious thought developed mainly outside the Church in nineteenth-century Russia, exemplified by prominent figures such as Pëtr Čaadaev (1794–1856), Aleksey Khomyakov (1804–1860) and Ivan Kireyevsky (1806–1856). Not just within the Church, but also in the burgeoning *intelligentsia*, both Slavophile and Western-oriented thinkers – no matter whether they were conservative, reformist or revolutionary, religious or atheistic – were subjected to the constraints of censorship and in some cases even direct persecution or expulsion.⁵ Religious, philosophical and political thinkers alike encountered enormous obstacles, whereby the revolutionary anarchists, the 'Narodniks' [*narodniki*], and the communists, were subjected to the tightest controls and suppression. Although the political and ideological control abated somewhat towards the end of the century in academic circles (the professional journal *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* [Questions of Philosophy and Psychology] began publication in 1889, while between 1890 and 1907 the Russian version of the Brockhaus Enzyklopädie, the Brokgauz-Efron, was published between 1890 and 1907), the formation of a more or less open public sphere took longer, pushed forward by the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. The

5 See Goerdts 1995, especially III.2, "Raum und Zeit der russischen Philosophie. Drei Lagen", pp. 45–71.

conservative and reactionary Tsarist rule found itself increasingly confronted with a furiously-paced socio-economic and intellectual modernisation and differentiation of society. This impacted on the church and clergy, particularly the lower levels, although it took until the liberation of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1917 (separation of state and church, the All Russian Council, the restoration of the Patriarchate) before progressive and worldly leanings were able to be expressed openly.

Allowing for a certain degree of simplification and a few important exceptions,⁶ it can be argued that until 1917 the traditional detachment from worldly affairs shown by the Russian Orthodox Church, including its limitation to the sacerdotium, on the one hand, and the ‘decapitation’ of the Church by the reforms of Peter the Great and the ensuing subordination to the state on the other, merged in the same direction. The Russian religious tradition tended – to use Weberian terminology – towards *other-worldly* rather than *inner-worldly* asceticism.⁷ The Russian Orthodox Church’s lack of a social, let alone a political position, forms the background against which Russian religious philosophy emerges and plays out, its initiator one of the outstanding intellectual figures of the second half of the nineteenth century: Vladimir Solov’ev.

2 The Initiator: Vladimir Solov’ev

Vladimir Solov’ev was born in 1853, the son of a very pious mother and a rather liberal father, Sergei Solov’ev, a famous historian at Moscow University. Attracting attention as a wunderkind, at an early age he had read Spinoza, and he studied natural sciences and philosophy at Moscow University, but also Orthodox theology at the academy in Sergiev Posad.⁸ After the successful defence of his first dissertation, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy*, in 1874, and the second dissertation, *Critique of Abstract Principles* in 1880, he seemed predestined to embark on an academic career. In 1881, however, he held a public lecture, during which he pleaded with the new Tsar Alexander III not to impose the death penalty on the revolutionary assassins of his murdered father, Alexander II, the ‘Liberator’, and thus show himself to be a genuine *Christian* prince, a move that quickly put an end to Solov’ev’s career.⁹ He subsequently

⁶ See Valliere 2000 and Michelson 2017.

⁷ Weber 2005, p. 423.

⁸ For a positioning of Solov’ev in the field of political theology, see my article “Give God’s Kingdom What is God’s Kingdom’s: Political Theologies in Late 19th C Russia”.

⁹ Solov’ev 1989, vol. 1, pp. 39–42. See my article “Vladimir Solov’yov on Terror, Love & Violence”.

lived as an independent writer and publicist without any permanent residence. He gained fame during his own lifetime and was often at the centre of public discussion. He wrote scholarly works throughout his life, including a planned translation of all of Plato's dialogues, around 200 articles for the aforementioned Brokgauz-Efron Encyclopaedia and a large systematic work on practical philosophy, *The Justification of the Good* [*Оправдание добра*; 1894, second edition 1899].¹⁰ The diversity of his interests and activities is astonishing; he also wrote poetry, polemicized on the controversial issues of nationalism and anti-Semitism, and translated from several languages, for example poems by Petrarch, Heine, Virgil and Tennyson. He was incredibly productive: the first Russian edition of his completed works spans twelve volumes and four volumes of letters, while the first complete critical edition, currently being compiled, is planned to encompass twenty volumes, fifteen devoted to works and five to letters.

Solov'ëv's first philosophical love was Spinoza, followed by German Idealism, in particular Schelling, European mysticism (e.g. Jakob Böhme), Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, the Church Fathers and the Kabbalah. Crucial were his repeated mystical experiences. Over the course of his life, Solov'ëv claimed to have had several irrefutable, personal encounters with divine wisdom, which he understood to be the *essential* unity of the Trinity (i.e. not as a fourth hypostasis, but as the very 'hypostaticity' that combines the three hypostases),¹¹ but also as the world soul or eternal femininity. Actively seeking such encounters (itself a fascinating story!), he expressed them in various literary forms, such as an autobiographical sketch, a series of poems and, most prominently, in *La Sophia*,¹² a work in French that he left incomplete; it was published in 1978 in Lausanne and first translated into Russian only in the post-Soviet period. Partly in dialogue form (between Sophia and 'the philosopher'), partly in automatic handwriting and in sketches and diagrams, the text is barely comprehensible in many places due to its combination of extreme directness and equally extreme abstraction.¹³ It is hardly surprising that for this text of seventy-five

10 Probably Solov'ëv's main philosophical work as far as social philosophy and ethics are concerned, this book has been translated several times. The 1918 English translation by Nathalie Duddington was edited by Boris Jakim: Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good; An Essay on Moral Philosophy*; recently, a new translation and first critical edition was published by Thomas Nemeth: *Vladimir Solov'ëv's Justification of the Moral Good. Moral Philosophy*.

11 Soloviev 1978, pp. 248–250. NB: the section referred to is missing from the translation by Herbert Rees, which has left out the Sophianic parts of Solov'ëv's text, giving priority to the demonstrably "catholic" parts.

12 For the biographical side, see for example Sutton 1988, pp. 19–21.

13 NB: = Rouleau 1978; the first edition in French and Russian, i.e. including a Russian translation of the French original, but also the fragments (mostly in Russian) that are lacking

pages, which is not only incomplete but also has an unclear structure, Solov'ev failed to find a publisher in Paris. The text relates how Sophia discloses to the philosopher, i.e. Solov'ev personally, the definitive truth, including the truth in relation to society and politics. Today this may seem exotic, but Solov'ev himself was undoubtedly completely serious. My hypothesis is that *Sophia* is in fact a key text, one that formed the very basis of his thinking until the end.¹⁴ He expressed this view in similar terms in letters between 1876 and 1890: after a crisis of faith in his youth, his fundamental metaphysical ideas and mystical beliefs remained unchanged.¹⁵

The reasons behind why the text remained incomplete are threefold in my view. Firstly, Solov'ev simply lacked the time because he had to return to Moscow to recommence teaching. Secondly, it had become clear to him that with the text he had laid the foundation for a grand undertaking which would occupy his attention for the rest of his life and leave hardly any time or space for other scholarly work or activities. And thirdly, in his view – as in the view of Sophia – the knowledge conveyed here is *absolute knowledge*, and hence it went far beyond the narrower boundaries of a philosophical treatise and, in any case, it would expose him as a heretic and gnostic. Here we need to keep in mind that, as Oliver Smith has emphasised, Solov'ev was also a child of the Enlightenment and not interested in developing a secret esoteric teaching 'for adepts' but sought to convey and articulate something comprehensible and rationally verifiable: "Soloviev was moved not by an exclusionist understanding of an arcane and deeply personal intuition, but by a genuine faith-seeking understanding".¹⁶ Thus moved to find alternatives (besides allusions and references in his prose, namely in the *Lectures on Godmanhood*, and in a semiautobiographical short story and the play *The White Lily*),¹⁷ Solov'ev composed poetry throughout his life.¹⁸ Indeed, his poetry proved very influential, for example for the so-called Symbolists (Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius and Dmitri Merežkovskij amongst others). One of his most famous poems is Три свидания / *Three Encounters* (1898). This poem encapsulates his whole life of

in the French edition, is: В.С. Соловьев, *Сочинения*, том второй 1875–1877, pp. 7–161 and 162–181 (планы и черновики); an annotated English translation has been published by Judith Deutsch Kornblatt: *Divine Sophia*.

14 The same hypothesis is the fulcrum of the recently published work by Henrieke Stahl, *Sophia im Denken Vladimir Solov'evs*; see my review in the *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* (forthcoming).

15 Rouleau 1978, p. xii.

16 Smith 2011, p. 9.

17 See Kornblatt 2009 for the most relevant passages.

18 While many of Solov'ev's poems exist in English translation(s), there is not, to my knowledge, a complete edition available that matches the edition by Zinaida Mints (Solov'ev 1976).

active, mystic engagement with divine truth. It shows that the thinker is not moved to recant or relativize even the slightest detail of his original inspiration: while he spoke of “humorous verses”, creating an ironic distance, at the same time he emphasised that he was depicting “the most significant moments of my life until today”.¹⁹ In this poem, more than twenty years later, he brings together his own three visions (Moscow 1862, London 1875 and Egypt 1876). Of the long poem of fifty four-line stanzas, I present a selection of stanzas, with Russian original and English translation side by side, in order to convey a sense of the poetic beauty and concrete meaning.

Три свидания

(Москва – Лондон – Египет,
1862–75–76)

Three Encounters²⁰

(Moscow – London – Egypt, 1862–75–76)

Заранее над смертью торжествуя
И цепь времён любовью одолев,
Подруга вечная, тебя не назову я,
Но ты почувешь трепетный напев...

Triumphing over death before its season,
With love I overcame the chain of time,
Eternal friend,²¹ to call you I've no reason,
For you will simply sense my halting
rhyme ...

Не веруя обманчивому миру,
Под грубою корою вещества
Я осязал нетленную порфиру

Suspicious of this lying world of pretence,
Beneath the vulgar shell of earthly shine,
I've touched your royal imperishable
resplendence,

Я узнавал сиянье божества...

And known the radiance of the divine ...

Не трижды ль ты далась живому
взгляду –
Не мысленным движением, о нет!
В предвестие, иль в помощь, иль в
награду
На зов души твой образ был ответ.

Did you not thrice give way to my
perception?
Mere cerebration it was not at all!
As portent, or as aid, or reparation,
Your image came to answer my soul's call.

19 Kornblatt 2009, p. 264; for the text itself, in Russian, see Solov'ëv 1976, pp. 125–132; in German: Solov'ëff 1988, pp. 33–41; in English: Kornblatt 2009, pp. 263–272.

20 English translation taken from Kornblatt 2009, pp. 264–272.

21 In the original, “friend” is in the female form, “*подруга*”.

И в пурпуре небесного блистанья	And in the purple of the sky's resplendence
Очами, полными лазурного огня,	Your brimming eye o'erflowed with azure blaze.
Глядела ты, как первое сиянье Всемирного и творческого дня.	You looked about, like the first radiance Of creation's universal day of days.
Что есть, что было, что грядёт вовеки – Всё обнял тут один недвижный взор...	What is, what was, what ever will be – Was there embraced in one motionless gaze.
Синеют подо мной моря и реки, И дальний лес, и выси снежных гор.	Below run blue the rivers and the sea, And alpine snows and distant forest ways.
Всё видел я, и всё в одно лишь было – Один лишь образ женской красоты... Безмерное в его размер входило, – Передо мной, во мне – одна лишь ты.	I saw it all, and all I saw was one. A single image of all female beauty ... The immeasurable encompassing its sum. You stand alone before me, and within me.
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Ещё невольник суетному миру, Под грувою корою вещества Так я прозрел нетленную порфиру И ощутил сиянье божества.	While still a slave to this world's hollowness, Beneath the vulgar shell of earthly shine, I glimpsed the royal imperishable resplendence, And felt the radiance of the divine.
Предчувствием над смертью торжествуя И цепь времён мечтою одолев, Подруга вечная, тебя не назову я, А ты прости нетвёрдый мой напев!	Triumphing over death by premonition, With dreams I overcame the chain of time, Eternal friend, to call I have no reason, But you'll forgive my poor, uncertain rhyme.

Drawing on these mystical experiences, the core of Solov'ëv's undertaking can be understood as an integral whole embracing thought, life and work, whereby life and teaching come together as one.²² Couched in less favourable terms, one

22 See Van der Zweerde 2003; in (somewhat fragile) Russian translation: Эверт ван дер Звейрде, "Живая мысль Владимира Соловьёва," in: *Взгляд со стороны на историю русской и советской философии; сборник статей*, pp. 314–332.

could say that Solov'ëv had sought and found an absolute position, one that provided him with a guiding principle just as positive as that of the positivism dominant at the time – both were opposed to more pragmatically inclined and sceptical positions like neo-Kantianism. It is obvious that on several occasions Solov'ëv was reacting to what was historically and socio-politically in vogue, and that he had to cope with disappointments as to the reception of his work and activism, which in part explains the shifts within in his own position. The Russian public was generally favourably disposed to him (certainly also due to him being a 'good human being' who shared the earnings from his work with other, more needy persons and kept very little for himself), and although he was frequently criticised, his moral integrity or intellectual competence were never doubted. At the same time though, his work failed to have any formative impact on the political, social and ecclesiastical reality in Russia.

Solov'ëv's life came to an end at the age of forty-seven in utter exhaustion, and this exhaustion may be related to "spirit" [Дух] in three ways. Firstly, the thinker pursued an ascetic way of life, renouncing much, but combined with an abundant intake of spirits, foremost red wine: while red wine had the advantage that it helped him maintain his energy levels, this 'spiritualisation' led to insomnia and physical exhaustion.²³ Secondly, from the very outset Solov'ëv had sought to establish contact with the *spirit* of the world (albeit in an indirect manner, because it was mediated by the *soul* of the world, Sophia – as well as by a few worldly Sophias, i.e. women with that name), immersing himself not only in spiritual traditions (the desert fathers, Gnostics, mystics), but also actively taking part in spiritualist séances while in London and orchestrating the mystical visions of Sophia for himself. Thirdly, in an almost symbolic habit, he splashed himself with medical spirits to ward off bedbugs, even drinking it at times prophylactically, so that in caricatures he was depicted in a 'cloud of spirits'. Aside from the personal dimension, namely the self-imposed mission to realise eternal truth in this world, this also highlights the tension between a synthesising but simultaneously individual project of theoretical, practical and poetic realisation of a vision of the unity of all on the one hand, with an increasingly modernising, differentiating and individualising spiritual, socio-economic and political reality – processes taking place at a rapid pace in Russia at the time.

It is with good reason that Solov'ëv considered a 'separating and thus isolating individuation [*obosoblenie*]' to be the greatest enemy, evident across all relevant fields: the intellectual (diversity of philosophical and worldview currents), the socio-economic (individualism and competition; the social

23 See Sutton 1988, p. 27.

question), and the political (class struggle, divisive particularist parties). In the final years of his life (1899–1900) this moved him to write the apocalyptic *A Short Story of the Antichrist*. This story is often approached and understood as an autonomous text; in fact, it is embedded in a polyphonic dialogical text entitled *Three Conversations on War, Progress and the End of World History*. Here Solov'ev is present himself in the voice of the enigmatic 'Mr Z.', who then reads the *Antichrist* story as part of a conversation, whereby authorship is explained indirectly: the narrator of the story is a monk called 'Pansophius' ['Pansofij', 'Пансофий'; akin to 'All-Knower' or 'All-Wise']. Moreover, the text is prefaced with a motto taken from a poem by Solov'ev yet to be published at the time, which Mr Z. [i.e. Solov'ev] then explains, "I think it is the work of the author [i.e. Pansophius] himself".²⁴ Thus, the author of the *Short Story* is Vladimir Solov'ev, but it is told by the monk Pansophius and brought up by Mr Z., who appears in the *Three Conversations* [Tri razgovora] written by the same Solov'ev, in which Solov'ev can be recognised in Mr Z., but precisely as *one* voice in a polyphonic discussion. This multiplying of authorship, in conjunction with a typical combination of earnestness and self-sarcasm, enables Solov'ev to maintain the position of final arbitrator, i.e. the director behind the scenes, without exposing himself to accusations of affirmatively heralding an impending apocalypse.

In my view, literary devices of this sort serve primarily to avoid identification with one of the presented positions, while simultaneously allowing a closeness to all positions. The *multiple* positions evident in the conversation, wherein a woman simply called the 'lady' conducts the deepest and most detailed dialogue with Mr Z. (reprising, on a more 'equal' level or indeed in an inverted hierarchy, the pattern of the dialogue between female wisdom and male philosopher), are all, at the least, plausible, with the exception of the position taken by the prince (representing the pacifist Tolstoy): the clearly 'superior' position of Mr Z., the literally 'all-knowing' position of Pansophius and.....the *non-knowing* position, for the manuscript comes to an abrupt end shortly before the apotheosis. Although clearly apocalyptically informed, the story is not necessarily pessimistic: a gentle passage, prepared by humankind, to the kingdom of God on earth is one of the possibilities, while for Solov'ev, who in other writings clearly opposes any kind of 'Promethean' ideal and Mangodhood [čelovekobožestvo], the final decision resides with God.²⁵ Man simply does not know ... For someone like Solov'ev, this not-knowing intensifies and increases

24 Solovyov 1990, p. 159; for a full English translation of the poem "Panmongolism" see Soloviev 2000, pp. 293 et seq.

25 Cf. Smith 2011, p. 11.

in times of rapid transformation, and Russia was in the grip of such a dynamic at the end of the nineteenth century. This may explain why he was searching for a secure fixed point – and failed to find one.

This intrinsic tension is also evident in Solov'ëv's systematic works on political and social philosophy. Several commentators have tried to distinguish between three phases in his development: one based on fundamental principles, another more practical and optimistic, and one apocalyptic, or in other terms: theosophical, theocratic and theurgic; or, put differently again, a preparatory, a utopian and a positive. Because every periodisation in this vein always possesses some kind of relative validity, I prefer to take up Oliver Smith's diagnosis and speak of shifts and developments on the basis of an enduring vision.²⁶ Here consideration also needs to be given to what Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has extensively studied Russian religious philosophy, emphasised, namely that Solov'ëv's vision of All-Unity [*vseedinstvo*] was always tied to the idea of Divine Humanity [*bogočelovečestvo*], and in such a way that this was not (only) in the sense of an abstract idea of 'divinising' man but (also) in the sense of a concrete, historically manifested God-man in the person of Jesus Christ. According to Balthasar, this 'purifies' the formalistic schemata of Neo-Platonism and German Idealism.²⁷

3 From Sophia to Politics

Specifically, in terms of the relationship between Solov'ëv's mystical experiences and his social philosophy and political project, I would like to propose the following periodisation: during an initial phase Solov'ëv developed his fundamental vision; in a second phase (elsewhere categorised as theocratic and utopian) he then elaborated his idea of a 'free theocracy'; and the third phase led to his conception of a Christian state (broadly speaking: a reformed Russian multinational imperium, whereby the motif of the katechon is not to be forgotten). Important here is that Solov'ëv, who had always denied the existence of autonomous evil, i.e. the devil, in the traditional sense, discovered the Antichrist in his later life and indeed gave an account of a personal encounter: in 1898, on a second journey to Egypt, perhaps searching to revive or renew his earlier mystical experience,²⁸ Solov'ëv – as he perceived it – encountered the Antichrist in the cabin of the steamer, became embroiled in a physical struggle

²⁶ Smith 2011, pp. 6–9.

²⁷ See Martin 2015, pp. 112–115.

²⁸ See Kornblatt 2009, p. 23.

and was left unconscious and exhausted.²⁹ Aside from the details of this (also mystical?) encounter, it is clear Solov'ëv had moved away from his earlier conviction that evil, whether individual or collective, is without substantial ground and exists "only by permission of the good".³⁰ As a result, it now becomes imperative for Solov'ëv that this substantial evil be resisted – and this tragically-tinged view found its expression in his later works, for example – as already indicated – in his rejection of Tolstoy's pacifism in the *Three Conversations*. And should the devil, the Antichrist, in fact exist, then a free theocracy is also under threat even if all humans renounce their 'egoistic individuation' and seek to genuinely strive together for the good.

Although this shift is very clear, I would like to qualify the idea of a break, not least because already in his socio-philosophical or political-philosophical main work *The Justification of the Good* [Opravdanie dobra] Solov'ëv had emphasised that the main function of the state, of criminal law and of war is to fight evil and thus enable the attainment of the good. He commenced writing this work in 1894, a few years before the reported encounter with the devil. Instead of a break, I think we witness here a contrast between an optimal, absolutely best vision and a less than optimal, second-best option, i.e. two levels of the 'ideal theory' – a contrast comparable to the one employed by Immanuel Kant in *Perpetual Peace*, between a world government as the sole reasonable solution to the political question and an association of sovereign states, which can be understood as a precursor to the League of Nations and the United Nations, i.e. a 'second-best' option. Another contrast similarly contoured is that used by John Rawls when distinguishing between a *metaphysical* and *political* liberalism. In our case, *both* conceptions, the free theocratic and the Christian state, can be traced back to Solov'ëv's 'unity-of-all' vision as sketched out in *La Sophia*. This vision is at once foundational and final, coinciding with the 'end' of history, with the whole of Creation returning to its origin via a process of humanisation [očelovečenie] and spiritualisation [odukhotvorenje].³¹ Two 'projects' are then derived from this absolute ideal: the first project, the theocratic, articulates what humanity needs to become aware of and reflect on as an ideal, namely a triadic government encompassing the whole of humanity; and the second – 'moderate' – project articulates the idea of a real state, Christian and just. This moderate project would then be still an exemplar of 'ideal theory' but far more realistic, and that also means that it can furnish

29 See Allen 1978, p. 310.

30 Allen 1978, p. 309.

31 See Smith 2011, p. 144.

criteria for judging factually existing states. The crux joining both projects is that they are *human tasks*.

The text *La Sophia* remains a constant in the foundations of Solov'ëv's thinking and creativity, delineating the 'primal scene' of a project that is certainly not limited to politics and society but rather embraces them within a far grander vision. Here the true philosophy and the true universal religion is disclosed – or: revealed – to the philosopher, whereby it is striking that the whole undertaking is consequentially developed in a series of triads or tripartite divisions, a way of thinking also identifiable in other texts of the philosopher and in which Solov'ëv's own activity is easily discernible.³² This consequential 'triadism' means that there are *three* main fields of human activity: *practice*, *theory* and *poiësis*, also termed by him 'free theocracy, free theosophy and free theurgy', or in a further version, integral society, integral thinking and integral creativity (together forming: integral life [*cel'naja žizn'*]). The final form, the poiëtic, as a free theurgical 'divine creative' activity, is the 'highest' – and so poetry stands superior to philosophy. In turn, mysticism [*mistika*], i.e. *precisely what Solov'ëv performs in La Sophia*, is the highest form of *poiësis*. The system set out by Solov'ëv in this text is at once practical, theoretical and creative, i.e. the divine creation is completed humanly and brings about union and the unity of all on all of these levels. The unity is brought about by love and, also unsurprisingly, is endangered by the aforementioned separating and isolating individuation (in thinking: by determinations employed to create dichotomies instead of distinctions). Love is a theme Solov'ëv elaborated many years later in one of his main works, *The Meaning of Love* [*Смысл любви*], a treatise translated into several languages, whereby he had already presented the basic forms in earlier works: love has two forms, a positive love that is absolute, and negative love or hate, grounded in the exclusive, egoistic self-love, which is only a relative, i.e. dependent, and basically 'parasitic' love; positive love has three stages: the natural, the intellectual and the absolute, whereby on each stage it is possible to distinguish between an ascending and a descending love [*amour ascendant* and *descendant*], with absolute love ultimately transcendent [*amour transcendant*].³³

It needs to be emphasised that Solov'ëv's mystical method is rather problematic from an Orthodox-Christian viewpoint because it is romantic-individualistic and hence 'worldly'. Theologically it is controversial because it entails a 'supplementary revelation' of truth; Sophia is a bridge between the holy trinity and a human, for she is at once divine wisdom and a living and

32 The best explanation of this system I know of is to be found in Kline 1974, p. 164.

33 See Rouleau 1978, pp. 75–77.

animating world soul.³⁴ Solov'ev's sources of inspiration include thinkers like Jakob Böhme and Emanuel Swedenborg, while the Orthodox-Christian mystical tradition, as expressed in Eastern Monasticism and Hesychasm, is largely absent.³⁵ On the surface it can be said that it all very much revolves around Solov'ev himself, for instance in a diagram where he identifies himself as the figure of the third and final testament [see below].

Where true love, conferred to him from the eternal-feminine divine wisdom, seems rather traditional (traditional in the sense of Neo-Platonism) and is at the very most surprising in the consequence and extension to themes like patriotism and church history, it is the *historicising* tendency, derived primarily from Hegelian philosophy of history, which leads to unexpected results. In the main written-out text Solov'ev remains somewhat modest: "The thoughts of the Soul are expressed by modern philosophers. Through geniuses, it directly communicates what it thinks to men who are capable of understanding and expressing these revelations well. This is the theoretical incarnation of Sophie. The development of modern philosophy. Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg, Schelling. The real incarnation of Sophie. The universal religion".³⁶ In the notes the formulation is somewhat more daring: "The teachings of Boehme and Swedenborg are the fullest and highest theosophical expression of the old Christianity. The positive philosophy of Schelling is the first embryo, weak and incomplete, of the new Christianity or the universal religion – of the eternal covenant".³⁷ A diagram follows:

Новоплатонизм – Каббала [Neo-Platonism – Kabbalah]	Закон [Law]	Ветхий Завет [The Old Testament]
Бэм – Сведенборг [Boehme – Swedenborg]	Евангелие [Gospels]	Новый Завет [The New Testament]

34 For another perspective on the figure of Sophia, see the special issue: Manon de Courten (ed.), *The Icon and the Bridge. Sophia in Orthodox Culture*, and Andrew Padgett/Evert van der Zweerde, *Sophia Across Culture. From Old Testament to Postmodernity*.

35 Solov'ev was criticised on this point by Sergei Khoruzij for example.

36 Kornblatt 2009, p. 161; original: "Les pensées de l'âme sont exprimées par les philosophes modernes. Ce qu'elle pense, elle le communique, tant immédiatement que par le moyen de génies, aux hommes capables de comprendre et de bien exprimer ces révélations. C'est l'incarnation théorique de Sophie. Le devenir de la philosophie moderne. Jacob Böhme, Swedenborg, Schelling. L'incarnation réelle de Sophie. La religion universelle." (Rouleau 1978, p. 74).

37 Kornblatt 2009, pp. 171 et seq. Original: "Учения Бэма и Сведенборга суть полное и высшее теософическое выражение старого христианства. Положительная философия Шеллинга есть первый зародыш, слабый и несовершенный, нового христианства или вселенской религии – вечного завета."

Шеллинг – я [Schelling – me]

Свобода
[Freedom]Вечный Завет [The
Eternal Testament]³⁸

But then Sophia comments, incorporated into the text in automatic writing, in other words allegedly *directly* actuated by her, and Solov'ev receives messages in two different languages: in French, with a second message in Russian, while part of the automatic writing remains unreadable: "Sophie: eat a little more today. I don't want to see you waste away. My dear. We want to prepare you for the grand mission that you must fulfil".³⁹ As almost inevitably in Solov'ev's work, the 'egocentric' self-glorification is followed by a relativizing of his importance; irony and humour are immediately present.

What is revealed by Sophia, the divine, eternal and feminine truth, to the philosopher about politics and society in this dialogue, is kept brief, but for that it is very explicit and essentially anti-political. It is the final part of the manuscript and takes up just on two pages. Therein he depicts a universal society based on the principle of love, structured according to ascending and descending love and hierarchically organised from an upper 'One' to a lower 'Plurality'. The highest instance is Sophia, in direct relationship to the elected of humanity [*les élus de l'humanité*] (necessarily to men, since she is female [*nécessairement des hommes car elle est femme*])⁴⁰ and so on in descending order, ever increasing in number and ever alternating in sex, until the family is reached at the bottom, where love is tied to material needs and reproduction: "Thus the family is only the lower grade on the social scale, and individuals of the higher grades cannot have a⁴¹ family properly speaking."⁴²

The free theocracy [*свободная теократия*] is understood as part of bringing Creation to complete perfection, and since this completed perfection of Creation is a specifically *human* task, then it is a case of co-creation. In his vision of free theocracy Solov'ev follows the schema of the three offices [*munus triplex*] developed by Eusebius of Caesarea, which he called services [*služenija*]: King – High Priest – Prophet [NT, Hebr. 1:1–3], transformed into state, church and prophetic public. At the end of his political-philosophical

38 Kornblatt 2009, p. 83 and 172.

39 Kornblatt 2009, p. 172; original: "Mange un peu plus aujourd'hui. Je ne veux pas que tu t'épuises. Mon cheri. Nous voulons te préparer pour la grande mission que tu dois remplir." Соловьёв, *Сочинения*, 2, p. 177.

40 Kornblatt 2009, p. 162; original in Rouleau 1978, p. 76.

41 Kornblatt here mistranslates "ne peuvent posséder de famille" as "cannot possess the family [which in French would be "ne peuvent pas posséder la famille"]", contrary to the correct Russian translation as "не могут обладать семьей".

42 Kornblatt 2009, p. 163; original in Rouleau 1978, p. 77.

main work he explicitly points to the *third* service: “Along with the bearers of unconditional authority and [unconditional] power, there must be bearers of unconditional freedom in society”.⁴³ This public society is to be *free* and thus it is inevitably *plural*: the locus where Solov’ëv wants to convince others of the truth of his vision (and this *was* the motivation behind his publicist activities) is simultaneously the place where others can confront and oppose it – or simply ignore it. As François Rouleau has shown, in his theoretical ideal Solov’ëv becomes the prisoner of an ambiguous practical-religious problem: the more he emphasises unconditional human freedom, the less clear it becomes why this society must be Christian and universal, and not in the form of a pure utopia, but in actual history. Solov’ëv is supposed to have claimed that “universal history is the realization of utopias”.⁴⁴ This however does not solve the problem, for the consequence of this is that so long as utopias are not realized, history is not yet universal.

4 The Unsolvable Problem: Mediating between Religion and Politics

Solov’ëv did not limit himself to elaborating utopian visions however. He strove to become engaged *with* his utopia *in* social reality and have an impact there. As a “genuine prophet [истинный пророк]”, i.e. a “pinnacle of shame and conscience [вершина стыда и совести]” and a “social figure who is unconditionally independent, fearless in the face of anything external and subordinate to nothing external”,⁴⁵ on several occasions he addressed the Russian Tsar and the state directly: in 1881 through a lecture in which he requested the Tsar to show clemency and not impose the death sentence on the murderer of his father [see section 2 above]; in 1890 with an open letter (co-written with others, including Tolstoy) published in *The Times* calling on the Russian government to protect persecuted Jews in Russia instead of turning a blind eye to the pogroms;⁴⁶ and in 1891 with a request, once more in the form of a letter,

43 Solov’ëv 2015, p. 416; original: Solov’ëv 1988, p. 542. The 2015 English translation by Thomas Nemeth of Solov’ëv’s *magnum opus* is the best to date, and the only critical edition of the text.

44 English translation from the French mine, EvdZ. Original: Rouleau 1978, p. xviii and p. 348: in the magazine *L’Univers* of 18/12/1893, Eugène Tavernier summarized a speech by Solov’ëv which he gave in 1893 at the Cercle du Luxembourg, but never published, and quote Solov’ëv: “N’oublions pas, dit hardiment M. Soloviev, que l’histoire universelle est la réalisation des utopies.”

45 Solov’ëv 2015, p. 416; original: Solov’ëv 1988, p. 542.

46 See Soloviev 2000, pp. 291–292 for the text of this letter; original in Solov’ëv 1989, vol. 2, pp. 281–2.

to do more for those suffering from famine or at least to support rather than hinder the work of charity organisations.⁴⁷ That these attempts ultimately proved unsuccessful takes nothing away from the courage they required.

So too his *publicistika*, pursued in a variety of forms, foremost in the 'bulky journals and magazines', the most important forum of public discussion at the time, was characterised by an unconditional prophetic tone, while however invariably addressing the real important problems plaguing Russian society and politics, such as issues involving religious policy, Polish independence, the 'Jewish question' and many more. In dialogue with French colleagues Solov'ëv also explicitly expressed his views on the *social question* [*la question sociale*] at a time when in Western Europe above all Catholics (including the Vatican with *Rerum Novarum*) but also Protestants were turning more decisively towards politics.⁴⁸ *En passant* he extended the Kantian categorical imperative in applying it to non-human nature: "If he [i.e. man, EvdZ] has the right to exploit nature for his use and for that of his fellow creatures, he also has a duty to cultivate and perfect this nature for the good of the lower creatures themselves, who must consequently be considered not as a simple means, but also as an end".⁴⁹ Here, too, Solov'ëv campaigned vigorously for a 'Christian politics'. The tendencies proving feasible for contemporary modern life were then further elaborated by several followers, for example the theologian and philosopher Sergei [from 1917: Father Sergij] Bulgakov, who as a 'Christian-socialist' Duma deputy actively advocated Christian politics for a short time.

This is why it makes sense to take a look at those thinkers who as direct successors drew inspiration from Solov'ëv's vision. Influenced by the stormy developments unfolding in Russia during the first decade of the twentieth century, their positions fork out in very different, at times even contrary directions. On the one hand this concerns mainly Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Semyon Frank, three important Russian thinkers who, influenced by Solov'ëv, moved from Marxism to Idealism and took a 'progressive' position. While their political philosophies vary, all three are informed by the basic relationship between a mystical experience and a political vision in the context of rapid modernisation.⁵⁰ On the other hand however, it also pertains to the conservative thinkers Pavel Florensky, Aleksei Losev and the traditionalist monarchist

47 See De Courten 2004, pp. 283–305, pp. 437–477.

48 Soloviev 1978 [1892/7] pp. 301–304; English translation "The Social Question in Europe," in Soloviev 2000, pp. 32–36.

49 Soloviev 2000, p. 35; original in Soloviev 1978, p. 303.

50 See Van der Zweerde 2013.

Ivan Il'in,⁵¹ extremely popular in Russia today. In all six cases the idea of a 'sophiology' (speech [-logy] of Sophia) grounded in a mystical experience that is about, but also in the name of and to a degree imparted by divine wisdom, plays a pivotal role in the political-philosophical position developed by the respective thinker, whereby position here refers to an attitude towards politics and to concrete political activity.

Hypothetically this could be developed into a systematic comparative study with the working title *The Three Positions of Sophia towards Politics*. The first would be the fundamental *negation* of the political as nothing but the expression of a purely negative relationship, a negation to be found most clearly in Florensky and Losev. This position is conditional on Solov'ëv's determination of hate (in *La Sophia*) as 'self-separation' [*samoobobsoblenie*] based on and driven by egoism, in other words, 'negative love'. The second position is the more activist attempt through Christian politics (*khristianskaja politika* in Solov'ëv and Bulgakov) to bring about a state in which the political is elevated into the condition of a *positive* love pervading all of society, i.e. the overcoming of negative love (self-love, chauvinism, nationalism) by positive love (altruism, loyalty, patriotism). One encounters this in Solov'ëv in his 'utopia' of a free theocracy, which, led by the Russian Tsar [king] and the Roman pontiff [priest], would be a universal Christian kingdom of freedom and positive love. It is also to be found in Bulgakov's vision of a fundamental churchification [*ocerkovlenie*] and spiritualisation [*odukhotvorenie*] of the whole of society, including politics and the economy, and from there ultimately bringing about the transformation of Creation, including nature and indeed matter itself. In Bulgakov this leads to – as in Henri Bergson – to a positive evaluation of technology. The motif of a free theocracy is also discernible behind Berdyaev's analysis of Russian communism in *The Truth and Lie of Communism*: the problem of communism is atheism (the *lie*) and a collectivism installed at the cost of freedom; communism shares its *truth* of social justice with Christianity however. A communist society *without* suppression and *without* atheism would be a free community of all, unified in Christian faith. The third position would thus be the attempt to introduce the second position *into* the existing political game. Theoretically, this option is expressed in the 'second-best' political philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ëv, in texts like *Opravdanie dobra* [Justification of the Good, 1897/1899] and *Pravo i npravstvennost'* [Law and Morality, 1897],⁵² where he develops a

51 On Florensky see also Van der Zweerde 2001; on Il'in see idem, "Theocracy, *Sobornost'* and Democracy – Reflections on Vladimir Putin's Philosophers" [forthcoming].

52 See Solov'ëv 2015 for *Opravdanie dobra* / *Justification of the Good*; for *Pravo i npravstvennost'* / *Law and Morality*, see Soloviev 2000, pp. 131–212, and Solowjow 1971.

position that has led some commentators, for instance Andrzej Walicki, to interpret Solov'ëv as a *liberal*.⁵³ With the liberals he shares the defence of the unconditional dignity of the individual,⁵⁴ and he was also liberal in the sense of recognising basic rights of the individual like the freedom of expression,⁵⁵ but not in the sense of economic liberalism and most certainly not liberal democracy. Attempts to ascribe Solov'ëv a democratic political philosophy, as for example Aristotle Papanikolaou does, are only appropriate to a limited degree: "Solov'ëv and Bulgakov saw it [liberal democracy] as the necessary precondition for realizing divine-human communion".⁵⁶ Any attempt to bring these thinkers closer to liberalism, socialism and perhaps even communism or democracy, founders on the fact that while they were all willing to recognise the 'truth' of these currents, they nonetheless rejected their 'materialism', looking instead everywhere for the possibility of human *self-improvement* rather than taking the individual for just as he/she is.

Although a positive appraisal of democratic relations is simply not to be found in Solov'ëv, a democratic attitude emerges amongst the followers, for example, as mentioned by Papanikolaou, in Bulgakov, albeit not in the guise of a theoretical position but more as a practical concern and mode of political activity: in the second Duma elected in 1907 he – an independent member for the district of Orël – represented a 'Christian socialism', only to soon become very disillusioned with parliamentarianism.⁵⁷ The acceptance of democratic relations in the sense of the third 'position' clearly corresponds to Frank, the 'most contemporary' of the Russian philosophers of religion, who in *The Spiritual Foundations of Society* [Dukhovnye osnovy obščestva]⁵⁸ indeed arrives at the view outlined by Papanikolaou, namely that a democratic constitution provides the best foundation for realising the essentially still Sophianic spiritual approach. This approach appears in the form of mystical experience in most of these authors; for Bulgakov specifically also in his experience as a priest in a religious community.

For all the differences, the three positions share the fundamentally negative evaluation of the political, a limited and hesitant acceptance of politics and state authority as a *necessary* evil, and a rejection – grounded in a mythical

53 Walicki 1987.

54 See Poole 2010 and 2017.

55 See for example Wood 2017, pp. 157 et seq.

56 Papanikolaou 2012, p. 53.

57 See Bulgakov 2017 [1912], pp. 65–72.

58 English translation: Semyon L. Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society. An Introduction to Social Philosophy*; a German translation is available in the *Gesamtausgabe* of Frank's works: *Die geistigen Grundlagen der Gesellschaft*.

vision or experience of the unity of all – of all forms of ‘exclusionary’ plurality: economic competition (instead of cooperation), formation of competing and divisive political parties (instead of corporatist collaboration), and social fragmenting (instead of organic communality or *sobornost*’).

5 In Conclusion: The Unresolved Tension

Vladimir Solov’ëv’s religious-political thought can be explained in two ways; firstly in relationship to the stormy socio-political history of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century; and secondly, within the framework of the development of Orthodox thought in facing up to the challenges of modernisation, secularisation, etc. The relationship between these two referential frameworks is one of enormous tension, in particular in Russia, which like no other country opposed modernisation, all the more so following the assassination of Alexander II, and was rightly considered to be a bulwark of reactionary Europe, anti-revolutionary, anti-Enlightenment and anti-democratic. At the same time, however, the aristocratic intellectual elite in Russia, and more generally the intelligentsia, who were no longer exclusively of aristocratic descent but increasingly came from a diverse array of groups in society, was strongly Europeanised and effectively part of a pan-European intellectual sphere. This tension is not only palpably evident in Solov’ëv’s life and work, but takes up and plays a central role in it. Thus, Solov’ëv seems to be *at once* highly contemporary and totally remote from the world, *at once* ‘integral’ and contradictory. This substantial tension, the expression of the objective tensions and antagonisms of his time, needs to be distinguished from the personal tensions of his life, for instance in his career or in his love life, although both are certainly tied to each other in some ways. Many of the tensions coming to light in the thought and life of Solov’ëv are *philosophical* or, in a somewhat broader perspective, *spiritual symptoms of the tensions in Russian society and culture of his time*. These tensions, burgeoning in the founder, are then more clearly contoured and expressed in the lives and works of his immediate followers.

The tension between religious experience, secular reason and politics in thought and action, in the integral whole of thought, life and work sought by Solov’ëv, corresponds to the tension between, firstly, his personal, mystical-religious experience, secondly, the rapid development of science, the economy and a modern bureaucratic state apparatus, and thirdly, an incipient political life, one that was characterised by experiments in local self-administration, the *zemstvos*, which led to a bourgeois-liberal current that advocated a constitutional monarchy, on the one hand, but also by an increasingly authoritarian

regime on the other, which led, as is well known, to the Russian intelligentsia adopting a revolutionary outlook.

The differentiation of society, the development of a capitalist, market-oriented economy, the 'secularisation' of science, including philosophy, the individualisation and the forming of various political groupings are by no means an exclusively Russian phenomenon, quite the contrary. Perhaps these developments occurred in Russia at a greater pace than elsewhere, and accordingly the intellectual reactions were more intense and vehement, not to mention more contradictory. The figure of Solov'ëv is thus 'symptomatic' in so far as he, to an almost unprecedented degree, tried to bring together all these developments, and indeed *all* of them, into a single universal conception of reality, and not just to think about them as belonging together, but to actively 'create' them together, without ending in a conservative or reactionary position – and at a time (already in the second half of the nineteenth century, quite openly from 1881 however) in which the regime in Russia, only considered as an *ancien régime* after 1917, was moving increasingly towards conservatism and reactionism.

That the realisation of such a synthesis, either in the form of a universal free theocracy (the optimal solution), or in the form of a Christian, free but not 'liberal' constitutional monarchy (the 'second-best solution'), failed to come about, can hardly be considered surprising. Thereby, the second vision, although a theoretical ideal, is far more realistic. At the same time, in Solov'ëv's thought and action motifs find expression which enjoy far greater currency in religious, particularly monotheistic traditions: the fundamental rejection of political conflict and the formation of parties, the acceptance of democratic, parliamentary politics as a necessary evil (and not as the positive expression of human diversity), the preference for an organic and hierarchically structured society, the call for social justice, tolerance towards deviating positions, whether within one's own tradition (in the case of Russia the Old Believers) or outside it (for instance Jews or local Muslims), and finally the striving to create a situation in which love and freedom are not mutually exclusive but enter into a harmonious synergy.

In the history of Solov'ëv's impact both tendencies, of withdrawing from and of engaging with the world, are discernible, reflecting the tensions in his own thought. Amongst the former are the poets of Russian Symbolism and many thinkers of theosophical, anthroposophical and sophiological cast. The latter include the political economist, philosopher and (later) theologian and priest Bulgakov, who attempted to give the idea of Christian politics a concrete form and later, while in exile in Paris, became actively involved in politics and social causes, or Frank, who although somewhat less directly politically

active, remained keenly interested in political and social issues until the end of his life, with his *Dukhovnye osnovy obshchestva* the most eloquent elaboration of the social philosophy inspired by 'sophiology'. Generally speaking, the Solov'ëv-inspired social and political philosophy can be characterised as moderately progressive, a philosophy searching for a 'middle' ground between or beyond right and left, fundamentally eschewing polarity and polemic, and strongly advocating community and communality, geared towards achieving a reconciliation between the individual and the collective. Here the difficult to translate concept of *sobornost'* is to be understood as an updated version of Solov'ëv's idea of a unity of all, shifted from the church context to now apply to the social sphere. What is common to all these thinkers is the resistance to any form of excluding individualism, whether this be on the level of human persons (one continually finds the claim that 'person' is more than 'individual'), on the level of single nations or ultimately that of the world religions.

As a generalising – and thus hypothetical – conclusion it may be claimed that mysticism, when it is concerned with a view of reality seeking the unity encompassing all, when it is pan(en)theistic or holistic, must necessarily lead to a fundamental negation of the autonomy of the political, understood as a dimension wherein real conflict is always possible. This does not mean that this dimension of the political cannot be thought from a mystical viewpoint – it does mean, however, that it can only be thought of in a *negative* sense, as the particularisation, separation and self-sufficiency of the single, the finite and the individual. In this respect mysticism and politics are irreconcilable: a vision of the unity of all grounded in mythical experience forms the background against which every kind of conflict, and thus the political as such, demonstrates itself to be non-substantial and non-essential, and thus can only be approached and understood in terms of what is needed to *overcome* it. The Orthodox thinkers considered here would deny that the state, the law or politics are positively part of Creation. Instead, they are seen as subsequent human inventions needed to fight evil; as a consequence, however, a sphere for freedom arises for humans or humanity, for undertaking (co-)creative action, including in the social realm, for the good. In thinkers like Solov'ëv and Bulgakov one encounters the idea that humanity is to complete and perfect Creation.

The tension between mysticism and politics is to be found in every society, but in a 'secularising' society, where reason and rationality combine with individualisation and plurality, it is expressed more intensely. In my view this ultimately comes down to the fact that a vision of universal oneness, both of the universe and humanity, can have at once a radically politicising and a radically depoliticising impact, which means that it can lead variously to a universalistic liberation theology, to political fanaticism, to a moderate activism or

a world-negating quietism, i.e. to a spectrum of political positions where the common denominator is a negation of any intrinsic legitimacy of conflict. This pertains to Christianity, but also to Judaism and Islam, not to mention for example Marxism (a paradox of the former USSR is that a socio-economic system expressly based on a theory, Marxism-Leninism, which articulated a *radical* and reductionist politicisation of all social and cultural realms, led to a just as radical depoliticising of the newly established society: in the USSR there was no space for recognising the political). In the *Sermon on the Mount* [Matt. 5–7] the basic elements for an upheaval of social relations in the direction of a pacifist and just world community are very obvious; at the same time, however, it is easy for the current Moscow Patriarchate to understand itself, both politically and theologically, as a katechon, to view Moscow as the ‘third Rome’, to decry liberalism and the universalist, individualist human-rights discourse as the *anthropocentric* work of the Antichrist, and to justify the close connection of the national church to the Russian state.⁵⁹ Both possibilities exist in the Christian tradition and both can be activated.

Biography

Evert van der Zweerde is Professor of Political Philosophy at Radboud University (Nijmegen, the Netherlands). He studied philosophy and Russian at the universities of Nijmegen, Moscow [MGU] and Fribourg, and defended his PhD, on Soviet history of philosophy as a discipline in the USSR, in 1994. His research focuses on, on the one hand topics in political philosophy (civil society, ideology, democracy, and the relation between politics and religion), and, on the other hand, on (political) philosophy in Russia and the former USSR. Recent book publications: *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012; co-edited with A. Brüning), *Futures of Democracy* (Eindhoven: Wilde Raven, 2014; co-edited with B. Leijssenaar and J. Martens), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2015; co-edited with A. Agadjanian and A. Jödicke), a collection of essays in Russian: *Vzliad so storony* (St Petersburg: Aleteiya, 2017) and, in Dutch, *Over grenzen; een filosoof in den vreemde* (Eindhoven: Wilde Raven, 2017). He is

59 See for example: “While visiting the monks’ republic of Athos last year with President Putin, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Kyrill, stated in no uncertain terms: Russia has taken over responsibility for Orthodox Christians throughout the world from the Byzantine imperium, which brought Christianity to Russia.” *Neobyzantinisches Russland Katechon in Moskau*, FAZ 8.02.2017.

currently working on two books, one on the history of political philosophy in Russia, the other on the social and political philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ev. He is also associate editor of *Studies in East European Thought* and co-editor (with Alison Assiter) of the book series "Reframing the Boundaries; Thinking the Political" which appears with Rowman & Littlefield International.

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