

The Mystical Experience of Sophia in the Life and Work of Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev

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The life and work of the prominent Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev was deeply influenced by his mysterious experience of Sophia – the mystical vision of the personified divine wisdom. This study seeks to shed light on this mystical experience, and thus to illumine the work and personality of this intriguing Russian thinker. Methodologically, it attempts to do so, firstly, by offering a historical and textual analysis of Soloviev's personal description of his mystical experience in the poem *Tri svidaniia* (En. *Three Meetings*). Secondly, the study sketches the hermeneutical context of Soloviev's vision of Sophia in connection with precedent instances of sophiological thinking in the biblical and Christian tradition. Thirdly and most importantly, the study offers an interpretation of Soloviev's mystical experience in the light of his biographical information and his philosophical work, especially in the context of one of the most important conception of Soloviev's religious thinking, which is the idea of *all-unity* (Ru. *vseedinstvo*).

1 Introduction

Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev (1853–1900) unquestionably belongs among the greatest intellectual figures in the history of Russia [1]. On the one hand, he is recognized by his readers and commentators as the author with a brilliant philosophical mind, strict logic and clear expression. Nikolai Lossky (1951, 133), for example, has characterized Soloviev as “*the first to create an original Russian system of philosophy and to lay the foundations of a whole school of Russian religious and philosophical thought which is still growing and developing*”; and Hans Urs von Balthasar (2004, 282) has described the Russian author in his art of philosophical synthesis “*perhaps second only to Thomas Aquinas*”. On the other hand, Soloviev is known as a mystic, a man with occult gifts and some strikingly real experiences of confrontation with evil (cf. Trubetskoi 1913, 1–34; Losev 2011, 433–443). Indeed, Soloviev’s broad personality encompassed both of these polarities expressed by Nikolai Berdiaev (1992, 244) in terms of the epithets “*the daytime Soloviev*” and “*the Soloviev of the night*” [2].

Behind both of these dimensions in Soloviev (1966b, 86), however, there was a single source – the experience that he called “*the most significant thing that had ever happened in my life*” – his mystical vision of Sophia, the divine wisdom [3]. This mystical experience both provided Soloviev with an overarching aesthetic and eschatological vision for his philosophical synthesis and generated his lifelong quest for Sophia in the broad realm of spiritual experience. Having had such crucial role in Soloviev’s life and work, what – or rather, who – is the Sophia of his mystical experience?



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2 A Short Biography of Soloviev

Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev was born in Moscow on January 28, 1853. He was the son of Sergei Mikhailovich Soloviev (1820–1879), the famous Russian historian. Vladimir displayed his philosophical genius already as the university student with his 1874 master thesis *Krizis zapadnoi filosofii: Protiv pozitivistov* (Ru. *The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against Positivists*). He further elaborated his criticism of modern thought in the major philosophical works of his early period *Filosofskie nachala tsel'nogo znaniia* (Ru. *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge*, 1877) and his doctoral thesis *Kritika otvlechennykh nachal* (Ru. *A Critique of Abstract Principles*) defended in 1880.

In his subsequent work, Soloviev became preoccupied with the ideal of the universal free theocracy, which he believed to represent the goal of the world's historical development. With somewhat utopian fervor, he sought to promote religious progress in the society towards this ideal. In this effort, Soloviev became a vigorous advocate of the ecumenical rapprochement between the Christian East and the West. His major writings from this period were *Velikii spor I khristianskaia politika* (Ru. *The Great Controversy and Christian Politics*, 1883), *Istoriia i budushchnost' teokratii* (Ru. *History and Future of Theocracy*, 1886), and the French title *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle* (Fr. *Russia and the Universal Church*, 1889).

In the last decade of his life, Soloviev returned to his former interests in speculative philosophy. His major writing from this period is a systematic work on moral philosophy, *Opravdanie dobra* (Ru. *Justification of the Good*, 1896). However, Soloviev's most famous work is his last publication written in the form of Platonic dialogs on the theme of evil and its ramifications in human history, *Tri razgovora* (Ru. *Three Conversations*, 1900), which ended with a short story about the coming of the Antichrist at the end of time before Christ's Parousia. Soloviev in this work presented his final view on human history, in which the realization of God's kingdom was to come not from a linear development into theocracy, but rather as a result of the apocalyptic struggle between Christ's Church and the evil embodied by the Antichrist.

3 The Mystical Vision of Sophia in Soloviev's Autobiographical Account

A vision of Sophia, the personification of divine wisdom – the religious idea of paramount significance in Soloviev's life and work – entered into his life with an extraordinary vision, first experienced at the age of nine. This fact is recorded by Soloviev in his autobiographical poem *Tri svidaniia* (Ru. *Three Meetings*), written shortly before his death in 1900. While the explicit sophiological themes are present in several works by Soloviev, and implicitly or as an inspiration are present virtually in all his work, his personal account of mystical experiences with Sophia is limited to this poem.

According to *Tri svidaniia*, Soloviev's first encounter with divine wisdom in the figure of a woman of exquisite beauty, which occurred while attending a church service on the feast of the Ascension in Moscow. In his poetic description, the figure of the woman was surrounded by unearthly light – “a golden azure” [4] she held a flower and nodded to him with a radiant smile. The vision that apparently lasted only for a short moment made the nine-year-old Soloviev oblivious to “earthly things” and filled him with a heavenly love (Soloviev 1966b, 81).

The experience of the vision of Sophia repeated itself on two other occasions in the sequence of several months, when Soloviev was 22 years old. According to the poem, the second mystical vision took place in London, while Soloviev conducted research as a visiting scholar in the British museum on the sophiological texts in Gnostic and Mediaeval Latin manuscripts. This vision was the immediate cause for Soloviev's abrupt decision to travel to the Cairo desert in Egypt, where his third and final mystical encounter with Sophia took place. This was Soloviev's most extensive vision of Sophia. In the poem *Tri svidaniia* (1966b, 84), Soloviev described the content of his mystical experience in the following verses:

*What is, what was, and what will be were here
Embraced within that one fixed gaze...
I saw it all, and all of it was one
One image there of beauty feminine...*

In this crucial text, Soloviev characterized his mystical experience of Sophia in terms of an all-embracing vision of unity. Everything was contained in his “one fixed gaze” of Sophia. All of reality was somehow related to this vision; he con-

ceived Sophia as the key to a unified representation of reality, or *vseedinstvo* (Ru. *all-unity*), which became the central concept of his religious philosophy.

The mystical vision of Sophia thus inculcated in Soloviev a lifelong devotion to divine wisdom – not as an abstract or formless idea, but a vivid, personified ideal of eternal feminine beauty. Sophia inspired and permeated virtually all of Soloviev's intellectual work: his critique of autonomy in Western philosophical thought and search for a new philosophical synthesis, his program of Christian unity and work on the reunion of the churches in a universal theocracy, which he notably characterized as “*the social incarnation of the divine wisdom*” (Soloviev 1889, 259) [5].

4 The Figure of Sophia in the Biblical and Christian Tradition

Whatever might one think about the precise nature of Soloviev's mystical experience, the personified conception of divine wisdom is certainly not alien in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Soloviev's experience had biblical precedent in the accounts of the wisdom of God in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In the *Book of Proverbs*, the *Book of Wisdom*, and the *Book of Sirach*, wisdom figures as a personified being, an eternal companion of God, with feminine traits. She is described as the first of God's creation, who was present and helping in all of God's work of creation and was intimately familiar with His intentions and purposes. Divine wisdom, as personified in the Old Testament, delighted in human beings and her mission was to teach and guide them in the art of a beautiful life (See Proverbs 8:1, 9:6; *The Prayer of Solomon* in Wisdom 9 and Sirach 24).

Examples of a mystical encounter with Sophia, the divine wisdom, similar to that of Soloviev, are also evident in the hagiographical tradition. For example, there is a striking parallel between Soloviev's childhood vision of Sophia and an account in the ancient *Life of St. Constantine – Cyril*. St. Constantine (ca. 827–869), later called Cyril, was a Greek priest and scholar, the originator of the Cyrillic alphabet; with his brother St. Methodius (ca. 820–885), he led a Christian mission to the Slavic population in Great Moravia in Central Europe. The authorship of Constantine–Cyril's biography is accredited to his brother Methodius, or sometimes to the most prominent scholar of their disciples, St. Clement of Ohrid (ca. 840–916). In this account, the seven-year-old Constantine had a dream in which a city official offered him the hand of any maiden of his native town, Thessaloniki; he

chose the most beautiful woman, whose name was Sophia (Vragaš 1991, 31).

Similar sophiological themes are, furthermore, present in the poetry of Dante Alighieri and Johan Wolfgang von Goethe (cf. Kornblatt 2009, 76–82), and, more recently, in the religious thought of Teilhard de Chardin (cf. 1968, 191–201) and Thomas Merton (cf. 1996, 301–305).

5 Soloviev's Occultism and Eroticism

In his on-going quest to conceptualize and contextualize his experience of Sophia, Soloviev gradually acquired a comprehensive knowledge of the theme of divine wisdom in religious literature, by surveying virtually all the relevant sources from Scripture, the ancient patristic, Gnostic and Kabbala literature as well as protestant mystics of the Baroque period. Soloviev's biography written by his nephew Sergei Mikhailovich Soloviev (2000, 186) specifically mentioned Soloviev's study of the theme of Sophia in the religious work of the Swiss alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1541) and protestant authors: Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), a Lutheran mystic and theologian; his disciples in Germany Johann Georg Gichtel (1638–1710) and Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), and John Pordage (1607–1681) in England; and the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).

Soloviev's effort to perceive Sophia was not only intellectual, however. Apparently, it inspired his spiritual explorations, including his youthful entanglement in spiritism. Well into his in his twenties, Soloviev participated in séances and considered himself a powerful medium for communicating with the spirits of the dead. He repudiated spiritism early in his life, calling it later not only vain but inherently sinful. However, he continued to practice mediumistic writing for an extended period of his life. Many of Soloviev's manuscripts have preserved markings and notes apparently scribbled in a state of trance. These marks were most copious in his early manuscripts; they were present also in his later writings, although less frequently. These notes, especially when longer, often gave an impression of “love letters” from Sophia to Soloviev (cf. Kornblatt 2009, 83–85, including a photocopy of Soloviev's mediumistic markings).

Soloviev's interest in occult practices apparently stemmed from his explorations in religious epistemology understood broadly as a possible realm for communicating with spiritual beings – the souls of the dead, angels, and, above all, with the Sophia of his mystical visions. However, exposure to such

practices also seems to have brought undesired consequences: as he mentioned to his friends on more than one occasion, he suffered from demonic attacks. These experiences might have been hallucinations generated by his morbid sensitivity and neurosis, however, Soloviev was convinced that his perceptions of evil spirits had an objective basis (cf. Trubetskoi 1913, 20–21; Losev 2011, 440–442).

Perhaps these eccentricities in Soloviev's religious worldview originated in his deep sacramental spirituality, developed somewhat anomalously outside the context of liturgical piety. While he respected, venerated, and more regularly than not received the Christian sacraments as the efficient sign of Christ's redeeming grace, he seemingly did not allow liturgical worship to inform his religious thought and practice. This by no means implies that Soloviev's religious philosophy was not sacramental in the broad sense of the word. As Trubetskoi (1913, 22) has written, "It belonged to the fundamentals of [note: Soloviev's] worldview that the material world was not an autonomous and self-contained whole, but rather a sphere of manifestation and incarnation of spiritual forces."

For Soloviev, the world was a great sacrament, the efficient sign of the love of the Creator, the token of divinization, of the *all-unity* (Ru. *vseedinstvo*) already in progress, in the process of realization. Mediation between God and the world was for Soloviev linked with his vision of Sophia, and theologically, primarily depended upon the dogma of the incarnation; however, the paschal mystery did not receive appropriate attention in Soloviev's religious philosophy. Thus, his apocalyptic reconstruction of his eschatological thought in the final work of his life was apparently due not only to the collapse of his theocratic theory, but also to his personal encounter with the powers of darkness, whose existence he had denied as a young philosopher.

Another intriguing part of Soloviev's sophianic spirituality was the role of women in his life. When asked whether he had ever been in love, and how many times, Soloviev answered, "Seriously – once; otherwise – twenty-seven times" (quoted in Lossky 1951, 89). The latter was a humorous reference to various fleeting romances during his life. In the first part of the answer Soloviev was most likely speaking of his long platonic relationship with Sofia Khitrovo, the adopted daughter of the Russian nobleman and writer Alexei Konstantinovich Tolstoi (1817–1875). Née Bakhmeteva, Khitrovo was born to Tolstoi's wife Sofia Andreevna as a single mother. She separated from her husband Mikhail Aleksandrovich Khitrovo several years after their marriage, but they never officially divorced. Soloviev maintained a platonic relationship

with Khitrovo for about a decade and devoted to her most of his poetry.

Soloviev's eroticism, however, was paradoxically intertwined with his high ideal of celibacy. He was in the most precise sense of the word a platonic lover of beauty; to him, the erotic drive was bound with an aesthetic contemplation of the ideally beautiful in an eternal embrace of divine love; thus, his amorous relationships always remained on the platonic level. In his experience of erotic attraction, Sophia, his only true beloved, seemed to merge her own beauty with the contours of an individual woman. In the end, however, his devotion to the universal ideal always prevailed over any special relationship he had with any woman. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has written (2004, 293), "Soloviev lived in an habitual state of 'baptized Eros' directed toward Sophia" – "despite occasional and impassioned relationships with earthly women, which remained, however, unrequited or unconsummated, signifying for him no more than transitory embodiment of his 'secret mistress.'"

6 The Philosophical Conceptualization of Sophia in Soloviev's Religious Thought

In his religious philosophy, Soloviev conceptualized his mystical experience of Sophia into a unified representation of reality, which he called *vseedinstvo* (Ru. *all-unity*). He first introduced his concept of *vseedinstvo* in his dissertation on the *Critique of Abstract Principles*. In an entry for the *Brockhaus-Efron Encyclopedia*, Soloviev characterized *vseedinstvo* as a relation of a single principle to everything in a positive sense (in contradistinction to the abstract concept of being, derived negatively, by elimination of all aspects other than the being): "the relation of an all-encompassing spiritual-organic whole to the living members and elements in it" (1966a, 231). Soloviev elaborated this philosophical idea from a contemplative, sophiological vision of reality as the universe of living and spiritual beings created by God with a specific purpose – the single principle to which everything is related – love. As Semion Frank (1974, 10) commented, "intuition of this unity determines the whole of Soloviev's world-conception".

On the basis of his pivotal idea of *oneness* (Ru. *vseedinstvo*), Soloviev has at times been considered a pantheist thinker. According to Lev Shestov, Soloviev's conception of all-unity was based on an abstract philosophical conception of God in the manner of Spinoza or various trends in German idealist philosophy (cf. Desmod 2000, 185–210). However, the

allegation of pantheism ignores the fundamental orientation of Soloviev's philosophical thought, which was decidedly at odds with "abstract principles," including any purely abstract or formalist idea of God. Soloviev's religious thinking stemmed from a conception, which was, in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar (2004, 284–285) [6]:

alike beyond personalism (God as the free 'hen') and beyond vulgar pantheism (God as 'pan'). The Greeks emphasized the 'pan', the Jews the 'hen'; but the Christian God [note: as in Soloviev's religious philosophy] is in the truest sense both 'hen' and 'pan'.

In the light of Soloviev's sophiology, one can notice a clear distinction between his religious philosophy and pantheism. There is an inherent link between Soloviev's mystical vision of Sophia and his philosophical conception of all-unity. The latter was for Soloviev neither a general, nor an abstract idea. As Konstantin Mochul'sky has commented (1951, 19):

The spiritual all-unity [note: vseidinstvo] is [note: for Soloviev] not an amorphous element, nor a lifeless energy: it is a living and personal being, a human image. It is the image of feminine beauty.

What the vision of Sophia conveyed for Soloviev was not an abstract idea of pan-unity as a total realm of undifferentiated being; rather, his conception of reality was integrated into an all-encompassing unity as an object of God's personal love. Perceived as the perfect image of feminine beauty, the Sophia of Soloviev's mystical vision seemingly embodied God's idea of humanity or an ideal humanity, in which all people – and by an extension, all of creation – was participating. Soloviev's entire intellectual thought was devoted to reflection on history as a process of realization – a development – of the high status of human beings as contemplated in the ideal of Sophia. In Soloviev's theology, Sophia thus figured both as the primordial ideal and an eschatological vision of creation, brought by divine love to its originally intended perfection, to all-unity.

It might be said that Soloviev's mystical experience of Sophia resulted in his intellectual synthesis, an overarching aesthetic vision, the universal goal toward which all thinking tends as its point of ultimate culmination. This vision laid the foundation of both his spirituality and his religious philosophy. His spiritual growth stemmed from a life-long asceticism practiced as a submission of lower motives to the pursuit of his high ideal of integrity and a sublimation of lower desires within his elevated aesthetic love for all-unity. Accordingly, Soloviev's intellectual development may be seen as a method

of thinking which integrated the lesser parts into a higher synthesis contemplated in his vision of universal unity.

In Soloviev's extended intellectual development, sophiology was eventually encompassed in a majestic vision of all-unity as a mystery of the universal – the Catholic Church. At the center of his theological synthesis was the dogma of the Incarnation: the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in the person of Jesus Christ. Soloviev perceived in this mystery a nexus of the ongoing process of God's unification with created reality: the summation of this process was the eschatological goal of all-unity, of love between God and His creation. Sophia in this theological vision represented Soloviev's idea of the other in the polarity of God's love for His creation. In the light of Christian Revelation, Sophia was perceived by Soloviev as the Immaculate Virgin, the Bride of the Lamb, the Church, and the sacrament of creation. "The theme and content of Soloviev's aesthetic is nothing less than this," Hans Urs von Balthasar commented (2004, 283):

The progressive eschatological embodiment of the Divine Idea in worldly reality; or the impress of the limitless fullness and determinacy of God upon the abyss of cosmic potentiality... By this means, the total meaning of the world's evolution is clearly established for the future: the development of humanity and the totality of the world into the cosmic body of Christ, the realization of the eschatological relation of mutuality between the Incarnate Word and Sophia, who receives through the Word her final embodiment as His Body and His Bride.

Soloviev's philosophical idealism was thus seamlessly woven into the Catholic theology of the Church as the universal sacrament, God's instrument for divinization of creation.

The idea of development clearly had a central place in Soloviev's philosophical and theological thought. With his aesthetic vision of the eschatological goal of the world, he perceived everything in a process of all-becoming unity. Development was thus for Soloviev the key concept of dynamic unity, allowing him to grasp the fragments of our knowledge in their relation to the eschatological fulfillment of reality, the all-unity, their ultimate purpose. Development might be seen as Soloviev's method of thinking: a way of organizing all elements of knowledge into a form of unity contemplated in Sophia.

7 Conclusion

It has become a rather common feature in the literature about Soloviev to consider him a “mystic,” thus conveniently summing up the seemingly diverse strands of his exceptional personality. Considering Soloviev a mystic is true but can easily be misunderstood: the term “mysticism” in colloquial use can imply something irrational or phantasmagorical. Regarding his religious philosophy, Soloviev owed to his mystical experience of Sophia his idea of *vseedinstvo*, the focal point of his thinking. From this mystical core, the rest of his religious philosophy developed as a magnificent work of reason, tirelessly refining, digesting, and applying the principles in his system of faith until it virtually coalesced with Catholic dogmatic teaching. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has written (2004, 284):

The muddy stream [note: of Gnosticism, Kabala and modern sophiological literature] runs through him as if through a purifying agent and is distilled in crystal-clear, disinfected waters answering the needs of his own philosophical spirit, which can live and breathe only in an atmosphere of unqualified transparency and intelligibility.

Soloviev’s poetry and religious philosophy thus most likely originated in a genuine mystical experience – his three mystical encounters with Sophia. These most likely comprised all his mysticism in the narrow sense of the word. However, it should be remembered that he was an artist, a poet. As Losev has argued (2011, 443), much of Soloviev’s mysticism was in fact his aesthetic sensibility and capacity to grasp things in a poetic imagination by an allegorical personification of the ideal.

Notes

[1] The name Владимир Сергеевич Соловьёв is variously transcribed from the Russian Cyrillic into the Roman alphabet. For all Russian names and words, this study uses the modified Library of Congress transliteration system (ALA-LC) with omission of diacritical marks and ligatures common in academic studies. The ALA-LC system is used with two exceptions: first, in the case of Soloviev, “i” is substituted for the apostrophe indicating the Russian soft “ь.” This usage respects the transcription of Soloviev’s name in his original French publications and has remained its most prevalent form in international literature; accordingly, “Soloviev” (rather than “Solov’ev”) is used consistently in the main body of

the text. Second, in Russian names and surnames, the suffix “-ий” is transliterated as “-y” in accord with popular English usage (thus “Dimitry” rather than “Dimitrii;” “Lossky” rather than “Losskii”). However, in the footnote references of the translations of works by Soloviev and other Russian authors, the different choices of transcription by publishers are retained. This explains occasional discrepancies in spelling of Russian names between the footnotes and the main text.

- [2] For other appraisals of Soloviev’s work and personality referred here, see the works in the reference section by Vasily Zenkovsky, Konstantin Mochul’sky, Dimitry Stremoukhov, Johnatan Sutton, and Paul Marshall Allen.
- [3] Since 2000 the Russian Academy of Sciences has issued a new critical edition of Vladimir S. Soloviev’s collected works edited by A. A. Nosov *et al.* with the title *V. S. Soloviev: Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moskva: Nauka, 2000); to date, four volumes of the projected twenty-volume collection have appeared. All quotations from Soloviev’s work are from the older collection *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solovieva*, the second edition of the ten-volume collected works of Soloviev edited by S. M. Soloviev and E. L. Radlov (St. Petersburg: Prosveshchenie, 1911), reprinted in 1966 by Zhizn’s Bogom in Brussels with two additional volumes with Soloviev’s letters, poems, translations and miscellaneous texts.
- [4] The textual analysis of the poem *Tri svidaniia* in this article follows the English translation of the poem by Boris Jakim, *The Religious Poetry of Vladimir Solovyov* (San Rafael, CA: Sematron Press, 2008), 99–107.
- [5] The references to Soloviev’s *La Russie et l’Eglise universelle* are to the original French text published in 1889 in Paris by Albert Savine. In the 12-volume Brussel edition of Soloviev’s collected works in Russian, this work was included in Russian translation by G. A. Rachinsky.
- [6] The Greek expression *hen* (Gr. ἓν) means “one,” *pan* (Gr. παν) means “all,” “everything.”

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