Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:

Buy me a coffee https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology

PATREON https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb

PayPal https://paypal.me/robbradshaw

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbet-01.php

Religion, State & Society, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2002

Carfax Publishing
Taylor & Francis Group

Nation, State and the Incarnation in the Political Writings of Vladimir Solov'yev: The Transfiguration of Politics

MATTHEW RAPHAEL JOHNSON

The social and political philosophy of Vladimir Solov'yev has been little studied in English. His combination of Orthodox theology and Hegelian dialectics has placed Solov'yev at the fringes of interest among political theorists in the English-speaking world. Only recently have his writings on politics been translated into English.[1] Orthodox theology can find much of interest in Solov'yev in terms of developing its own understanding of the political universe, which it has yet to do.

The central notion of Solov'yev's social theory is the Christian idea of transfiguration. Cynical western concepts relating to humanity such as free-market competition and utilitarian ethics are for Solov'yev transformed and recreated by the fact of Christ's Incarnation. If human nature has been deified (or given the promise of deification) through the dual nature of Christ, then humanity is called to a life far beyond the physical and material. Humanity, once its collective nature is cleansed by the Resurrection, is to become fully spiritual, and hence ethical for the first time in its history. History is no longer the mere clashing of individual material interests or vulgar power politics, but is now cognisant of the fact that mankind is changed fundamentally given the reality of the Incarnation, and a truly ethical humanity is no longer utopian speculation. Vulgar and nonspiritual concerns such as 'self-interest', national imperialism, competition and so on are now transfigured into a truly ethical solidarity. The centre of Christian history, then, is the realisation of deified human nature within human societies.

This essay will deal specifically with the questions of nationalism and the role of the state in the context of Solov'yev's notion of the transfiguration of the human person and the human community. For Solov'yev, the transformation of humanity under the Christian ideal, made manifest through the Incarnation, is a gradual process. History is the symbolisation of this process, and this process itself is the very essence and *telos* of history. Being heavily influenced by Hegelianism and Herderism (and German romanticism generally), Solov'yev was impressed with the idea of a civilisational maturation process: that is, the familiar dialectical motion of humanity coming to know itself in overcoming the various obstacles to the achievement of the full Idea of human personality. For Hegel, this is a purely secular process, inherent in the very nature of human thought on the one hand and its reciprocal relationship with its objectification on the other. Solov'yev, being an

ISSN 0963-7494 print/ISSN 1465-3974 online/02/040347-09 © 2002 Keston Institute
DOI: 10.1080/0963749022000022897

Orthodox Christian, saw this process as reaching a new level at the Incarnation, where human nature, as an ontological entity, was unified with the divine nature. Christ's Transfiguration and His Resurrection meant that human nature was likewise transformed, and the reality of sin after the Ascension meant that humanity needed to actualise this transformation into 'godmanhood'.[2] For Solov'yev, the idea of the Incarnation meant that the process of human perfection became the world historical task transcending all others; it became the substance of history. Christ's coming in history meant that the possibility of perfection existed, that is to say, the overcoming of sin and the transfiguration of the universe, but that it became enmeshed with the secular life of politics, indeed inseparable from it.

This process of the transfiguration of humanity has two components, distinct but related. The first is the personal, metaphysical and theological. These, of course, could be further subdivided. Closely related to these, and existing in reciprocal fashion with them, is the second component – the specifically social. For Solov'yev, the transformation of one's personality is both brought about by the transformation of the social sphere, and is itself constitutive of it. The familiar Orthodox notion of the transformation of all nature – personal, mental, emotional, physical – by the energies of God manifesting themselves through the Church is a deeply-embedded part of Solov'yev's views on politics and history. For Solov'yev Christianity is not merely about the transformation of the individual soul, but about the transfiguration and metamorphosis of the entire universe into a single unity under the divine rulership of Christ Himself. This unity is made truly manifest in the ethical sphere by the gradual overcoming of crude materiality and egoism in the social sphere; that is, by man's gradual emancipation from the forces and demands of animal nature.

The Dialectics of Internalisation

The transformation of political life and social relations is brought about dialectically. The final synthesis is the interpenetration of complete human freedom with the ethics of Orthodox Christianity: that is, the free manifestation, spontaneously, of the Christian understanding of man and his relationship to the created world.[3] The life of Orthodoxy is thus completely to penetrate the soul, reasoning and will of an individual not as an external force or objectified set of dogmas, but rather as an integral part of the human personality, both socially and personally. This is to come about by the synthesis of a clash between two specific tendencies in human development: formal religion and formal (that is, abstract) reason.

Solov'yev considers a coercive and primitive Christianity – which he associates with the western medieval period – unworthy of the ethical core of Christianity. In other words, a Christianity which needs to be enforced is not the true religion at all, but takes on the character of a civil religion and is thus contaminated with material and egocentric concerns. An externalised Christianity is not rooted in the free will of an individual which Solov'yev believes to be the central ethical concept of Christian moral theology.

> In Christianity and the Church of the Middle Ages, the Christian God, the Divine principle revealed by genuine Christianity, was converted into an external principle entirely alien to the true human principle, and in this capacity was condemned sooner or later to lose all its power. The result of this process of exteriorization was that man detached himself from God and declared that God does not exist. Nevertheless, there remained of

> Christianity an infinite desire in the human spirit to realize something better on earth, a reign of truth in this world, in spite of the fact that the true character of a reign of truth was lost.[4]

Formal religion was merely an external principle, one imposed and maintained by coercion; it was an 'official religion' which, according to Solov'yev, had numerous nominal adherents in consequence of its being part of the civil structure of a society rather than an internalised principle of life. Of course, the above quote is pregnant with its own reaction: that is, western rationalism, which responded to the coercive methods of nominal Christianity by elevating human reason to the status of divine revelation. This is the second moment in the dialectic:

> But very quickly after the overthrow of the old order, it was discovered that reason is an indeterminate and indifferent formal principle, which can by means of its analysis shatter traditional forms of life, but is incapable in itself of giving content to life. Reason receives living content either from Divine being or from material existence. When the first was shut off, only the second remained. Thus, we see that after the proclamation of the purely human principle of the laws of reason, animal passions were given free rein.[5]

Now, Solov'yev can be forgiven his crass oversimplification of roughly one thousand years of western history. Christianity in medieval Europe was no more based solely on force than the modern world is based solely on reason. His point rests on a much higher level of abstraction. There is no doubt, however, that his notion of 'medieval Christianity' does not merely mean feudal France, but is a deliberately vague reference to imperial Russia as well, and moreover a swipe at the Slavophiles, who had long claimed that until the unfortunate reign of Peter I Russian religion was based on communal freedom rather than coercion. Nevertheless, whatever their context, these passages constitute Solov'yev's formal description of the dialectic of internal transformation. It is not difficult to see the synthesis and conclusion. For Solov'yev, Christian truth, only partially manifest in feudal society, would enter into substantial communion with the legitimate aspiration of human freedom manifest in modern rationalism. Christianity would then reach its apogee, the free and spontaneous living of the Orthodox life, transforming all social and economic relations according to its principles. As Solov'yev writes in his *Lectures on Divine Humanity*:

> From this one can see the great significance of the negative Western development, the great purpose of Western civilization. This civilization represents a complete and consistent falling away of human natural forces from the divine principle, their exclusive self-assertion, their striving to found the edifice of universal culture upon themselves. From the insolvency and fatal failure of this striving comes self-denial, and self-denial leads to a free unification with the divine principle.[6]

In other words, in order for humanity freely to realise the good, western rationalism has to exist. This is the liberation from the nominal and enforced Christianity of earlier ages. The emptiness of human reason will soon manifest itself, however, leading the human mind back to its roots in religion and reconciliation with the divine principle, though this time without leaving the freedom of Enlightenment rationalism.

Nationalism

One of the elements of the official Christianity Solov'yev believes is to be found in medieval Europe, and specifically in imperial Russia, is its – for lack of a better word – tribalism or exclusivism. The Christian truth is not meant merely for a determinate set of social relations, cultures and societies: its purpose is to unify the entire globe in one Christian commonwealth. However, this ultimate purpose does not preclude the existence of nations in their particularity. Nationalism is a theory of social relations which claims that cooperation, civic friendship, mutual sacrifice and a popular notion of the common good can exist only when a society shares many moral, religious, linguistic, ethnic and historical commonalities. These lead to shared meanings and common frames of reference which are requisites for civic virtue.

For Solov'yev, however, 'nationalism' and 'nationality' are two radically differing concepts. Nationalism is synonymous with 'imperialism'. It is aggressive, violent and based merely on a myopic universe which does not recognise the personhood of others. Solov'yev repeatedly claims that this is a pagan notion, a pagan idea of the self and the community, one based solely on 'national self-interest' which was destroyed at the Transfiguration and through the universal redemptive work of Christ.[7] It is a pseudo-ethical notion based on crass national egocentrism and partakes in no way of the universal nature of Christ's deification of human nature in general.

> The politics of interest, the aspiration to one's enrichment and to empowerment, which is characteristic of the natural man – is a pagan concern, and resting on this ground, Christian nations return to paganism. Affirmation of one's exclusive mission, the deification of one's nationality, is the ancient Judaic point of view and by accepting this point of view, Christian nations fall into Old Testament Judaism.[8]

Solov'yev describes nationalism: 'We should love our nation and serve its good with all our means, but we have the right to be indifferent to other nations; in the event that their national interests clash with ours, we are obliged to treat those foreign nations with hostility.' He goes on: 'nationality is only a fact of nature, which does not have any kind of moral significance ...'.[9] It would be more accurate to say that this is imperialism or national jingoism, rather than nationalism proper. The main historical theorists of nationalism, Herder and Bosanquet, among others, do not define nationalism this way. On the other hand, Solov'yev is precisely in the tradition of Herderian nationalism when he defines 'nationality':

> National creativity, that is, that which the nation actually realizes, is universal to the extent that its true national *self consciousness* is also universal in its object. A nation does not conceive itself abstractly as some empty object, separately from the substance and meaning of its practices. On the contrary, it conceives itself precisely in, or with respect to, that which it does and wants to do, in what it believes and what it serves.[10]

A synthesis is thus visible here as well. On the one hand, an empty cosmopolitanism has no content and no substance upon which to base moral judgments. It is a moral contradiction (and this leads to a higher synthesis) in that the judgments it makes about society come from some national or determinate social basis which cosmopolitanism leaves unarticulated. The social theory of cosmopolitanism is something which arose from a determinate national consciousness, specifically, the European West. On the other hand, an imperialist version of 'nationalism' is self-

contradictory, for it claims self-determination for itself while, in principle, denying it to others subject to it. Neither one can stand on its own, and thus they pass over into the idea of 'nationality', or the very reality of a legitimate and truly ethical patriotism. The synthesis between these two elements is found as a metaphor for the transformation of the individual soul through Christian truth:

> Neither is it required that the nation neglect its material interests and not think at all about its own aims; it is required only that it not place its soul in this, not make this its ultimate goal, not serve this. And for that reason, both material property and self consciousness of the national spirit themselves become positive forces in subordination to higher considerations of Christian duty – real means and tools of the moral good, because the acquisitions of this nation then really go for the use of all others, and its greatness really extols all humanity.[11]

The purpose of the synthesis described above is not that the material be overthrown (as the Monophysites and Gnostics taught), but rather that it be transformed. Nationhood is not evil, but, as a product of nature, it must be transfigured, that is, infused with the universal goodness manifest to mankind at the Incarnation. Empty and blind nature must be transformed into spirit, and thus national egotism must be transformed into a substantial nationality with the entire human species as its end.

Before the Incarnation, politics was an empty or contentless universal (the Roman Empire) or the self-contradictory ethics of a myopic tribal politics (the Israelites). The Christian synthesis, then, actualised by the Incarnation, is politically speaking the transformation of tribal relations into a universal which is simultaneously particular: that is, a universal which is manifested by the specific national and cultural norms which make human society possible.[12] Similarly, the notion of freedom, for Solov'yev, is not that the material interest is to be overthrown, on the grounds that self-interest is not a proper basis for human action, but that such self-interest is to be vivified by the universal ethical truth of the Incarnation and Transfiguration. The joining of the divine to the human which defines the Incarnation means that human beings can come to understand that personal self-interest is not contradictory to divine truth (but in fact is required of it), and that divine truth cannot be manifest in human action unless it is done through free choice. This is the final end and purpose of history from a social point of view. This is also the relation between nationality and social morality: nationality is the infusing of the universal divine truth of the Incarnation into the tribal politics of the prechristian era without destroying either, but manifesting the proper complementarity inherent in both.

The State

Solov'yev's main contribution to a theory of the state is in its moral, rather than administrative, role. In this area Solov'yev betrays even greater dependence on Hegel.[13] It is safe to claim that, for Solov'yev, the state is something far more complex than merely a set of administrative units and its concomitant police powers. In the most general sense, the state here is one of the more important agents in the transformation of social life in accordance with Christian truth.

The state is a necessary institution. It is, in a sense, the crystallisation of the necessity of human social intercourse:

> If I desire to realize my right or guarantee to myself a sphere of free action, then, of course, I must make the measure of this realization or the volume of this free sphere conditional on those fundamental requirements of the community interest or the common good, without the satisfaction of which there can be no realization of my rights and no guarantee of my freedom whatsoever.[14]

Of course, this notion of the state is common enough in rationalist and western constructs as well, but for Solov'yev it merely represents the formal side of political authority. The morally significant nature of authority becomes clearer as one reads further: 'The State is the necessary condition of human education, of cultural progress. Therefore, the principal adversaries of State organization are also necessarily the principal adversaries of culture and education.'[15] This is the transition point between the merely formal and the morally substantial notion of the state. The moral nature of political authority, then, has to do with the very transformation of society Christ brought to the world:

> If legal relations are being perfected, in fact, becoming more just, more humane, then – one may ask, What force governs this perfection? The plenitude of legal representatives is the State – but, according to western conception, the State itself is only the expression of a given legal condition – and nothing more. Therefore, either it is necessary to recognize the progress of law and the perfection of humanity, which is bound up with it, ... will always take place on their own, as a physical process, during which any assurance that this process will led to something better is lost; or it is necessary to acknowledge that the west European conception of the State is inadequate and to search for another.[16]

In other words, the western idea of the state, that is, the representative of a given state of affairs, must give way to a dynamic conception of the state that understands itself as the primary social agent of human transformation. Moreover:

> Law is ... the balance of individual and common interest. But both sides are interested not only in the maintenance of their existence or in the preservation of the given status of the community, but also in its perfection. Law is the conditional realization of the moral principle in the given social sphere. Being conditional, it is imperfect, but as the realization of moral principle, which is in itself absolute, it is subject to perfection. Positive laws, which govern the life of society, should more and more become conformed gradually to the moral law, that is, become gradually more and more just and philanthropic, both in themselves and in their application.[17]

Solov'yev characterises the Byzantine political model, with all its admitted flaws, as being organised around a 'supralegal' principle which is not bound up with the balance of political and social pressures, and is therefore permitted to change as the process of human transfiguration continues.[18] It is precisely for this reason that Solov'yev maintains his allegiance to the principle of monarchy – that is, to the institution which is not bound by constitutional or legal patterns, and can thus modify legal relations in accordance with the needs of transforming humanity: '... Christian monarchy is an autocracy of conscience. The bearer of supreme authority, which has been commissioned to him from the God of Truth and Mercy, is not subject to any

limitations besides moral ones; he can do everything that accords with conscience, and nothing that is against it.'[19] And further:

> In order for this progress of the legal situation in a moral sense, or the transformation of community relations in the direction of the social ideal, to be both successful and worthy of its objective, it should be the concern of human freedom; and at the same time it cannot be left to the arbitrary will of individual people. Therefore, a delegation of divine authority to a Christian autocrat, with his absolute freedom and absolute responsibility, is necessary.[20]

The existence of Christian truth and of the means by which it is gradually realised over the life of a civilisation means that formal structures such as constitutions or legislatures are impediments to the implementation of the changing nature of social relations. For Solov'yev, it is precisely by the Incarnation that utopia is possible.

The formal definition of law is the manifestation of the equilibrium of the competing interests within a society – interests which, in synthesis, provide the formal principles of mankind's social transfiguration. These competing interests are exactly two: 'These two interests – individual freedom and social welfare – are contracted for the purpose of abstract thinking but are equally binding morally and in reality coincide with one another, Law comes into being from their encounter.'[21] Solov'yev elaborates further, adding special emphasis: 'Law is the historically dynamic determination of a coercive equilibrium between two moral interests – the formal–moral interest of individual freedom and the material–moral interest of the common good.'[22]

The distinction between legal and moral requirements is that the law, primarily, provides a basis for moral action. It has a moral basis, but this is highly limited because law deals only with outward actions. On the other hand, moral injunctions are 'essentially unrestricted and all-embracing; it presupposes an absolute aspiration to moral perfection'.[23] The synthesis between the moral and the legal becomes the formal idea of the community:

> If human society as a union of moral beings cannot only be a natural organism but essentially a spiritual organism, then the development of society, that is, history cannot only be a simple organic process but is also essentially a morally free process psychologically as well, that is a series of individual, conscious, and responsible actions.[24]

Thus the moral community is a synthesis of individual and social interests which is enabled to reach perfection by, on the one hand, the Incarnation and Transfiguration, and, on the other, the historical process of human realisation of its perfection.

The Dialectic of Freedom

There are two natural forms of political life. The first is the tribal life of the clan, the primitive tribal life, with rule based on unmediated custom. Its closeness, its immediacy and its basis in family ties will eventually, because of its lack of self-sufficiency, break down and force the clan apart. The victims of such a breakdown need a new justification for social life and organisation. The second form of political life, in modern times, is the social contract, which (according to the theory) comes into existence (to put it in oversimplified terms) after the tribal life, in all its historical particularity, falls apart.[25] Drawing directly on Hegel, Solov'yev posits the

ultimate social synthesis, the complete interpenetration of communal solidarity with individual freedom and self-determination. Unlike Hegel, however (and most modern left-wing thinking), Solov'yev believes that only the spiritual unity of the Incarnation, that is, the possibility of utopia once human nature has been sacralised and deified, guided by the sacramental ethics of the church, can actually produce this final synthesis. Radicalism of the sort propounded by Murray Bookchin and Herbert Marcuse is heavily influenced by Hegel, but the final utopian synthesis, they claim, derives solely from the power of human reason in relation to an impressive development of material conditions and the wisdom of philosopher/activists. Now although human reason can discern the outlines of a true and human freedom, argues, Solov'yev, its realisation can be brought about only by a divine force. Society is to become an icon of the Trinity, a dynamic community of love and perfect freedom manifested and maintained by the energies of God.

> What is a truly Christian culture? A truly Christian culture establishes in all human society and in all its activities the same relationship of the three principles of humanity's being that was realized individually in the person of Christ. As we know, this relationship consists in the free harmonization of the two lower principles (the rational and the material) with the higher, divine principle through their voluntary subordination to it, through their subordination to it not as to a coercive force but as to the good. For such a *free* subordination of the lower principles to the higher one, in order that they may *of themselves* come to recognize the higher principle as the good, requires them to be independent.[26]

The final analysis here is that law, the specific symbolism of human perfection, is brought about by the clash of the two natural forms of social organisation: that is, the organic development of human relations on the one hand, and the idea of free contract on the other. The progress of such social perfection is made not only possible but almost inevitable by God's promise of divinisation.[27]

Notes and References

1. Recently, a new translation by Vladimir Wozniuk of many of Solov'yev's lesser-known political works has been published under the title *Politics, Law and Morality* (Yale University Press, 2000).
2. The notion of this transformation, from a theological and metaphysical point of view, is quite beyond the scope of this essay, though it comprises the centerpiece of Solov'yev's philosophy in general. See Solov'yev's *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (Lindisfarne Press, New York, 1995).
3. The ethics of Orthodoxy is little more than Orthodoxy itself: the gradual release of the human soul and will from materiality. Socially, this is the elimination from ethical life of egocentrism, ethnocentrism and materialism.
4. 'Christianity and revolution' (1881), in Wozniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–6, here p. 3.
5. *ibid.*, p. 4.
6. Solov'yev, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
7. I find this approach to the 'national question' far more satisfying and theoretically robust than the 'modernist' school of nationalism, which generally busies itself primarily with delegitimising nationalism as such. For a first-rate treatment of these approaches in comparative perspective, one should consult the excellent work by Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (Routledge, London and New York, 1998).
8. 'Morality and politics' (1891), in Wozniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–20, here p. 11.

[9] *ibid.*, p. 13.

[10] 'Nationality from a moral point of view' (1895), in Wozniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–54, here p. 52.

[11] 'Morality and politics', p. 13.

[12] Orthodoxy does something similar in that the universal truths of Orthodox Christianity are manifest particularly within various national jurisdictions. This sort of thing might be one example of what Solov'yev is talking about.

[13] See G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (1831), trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford University Press, New York, 1952).

[14] 'The significance of the state' (1895), in Wozniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–65, here pp. 54–55.

[15] *ibid.*, p. 57.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 61.

[17] *ibid.*, p. 63.

[18] *ibid.*, p. 61.

[19] *ibid.*, p. 62.

[20] *ibid.*, p. 63.

[21] 'Law and morality' (1897), in Wozniuk, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–213, here pp. 150–51.

[22] *loc. cit.*

[23] *ibid.*, p.146.

[24] *ibid.*, p.133.

[25] It seems that the Roman Empire is another type of development altogether. In his *Russia and the Universal Church* (1889), for example, Solov'yev seems to believe that the universality of the Roman Empire was in part a divinely inspired preparation for the incarnation. On the one hand, Israelite particularism provided the genesis of the communal solidarity mandated by the moral law, and, on the other, the universality of the Empire was its counterpart in the universality of humanity, ethics, law and the Christian mission. See Herbert Rees (trans.), *Russia and the Universal Church* (Geoffrey Bles, London, 1948).

[26] Solov'yev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, p. 171.

[27] 'Law and morality', p. 136.