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THE MEANING OF LOVE:

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV

AND NIKOLAI FYODOROV

Françoise Lesourd

Over many years, beginning in 1881, Vladimir Solovyov engaged in a running dialogue with Nikolai Fyodorov. Their long discussions in the library of the Rumyantsev Museum where Fyodorov worked are well known, and were immortalized in a drawing by Leonid Pasternak, the father of the Nobel prize-winning poet. According to Nicolai Lossky, Fyodorov was even one of the precursors of Solovyov.¹ While Lossky does not specify the nature of the filiation between the two, it appears in essence to lie in the refusal of any form of thinking that is unconnected to action, and unconcerned with bringing about “what ought to be.”

The work by Solovyov that most echoes Fyodorov’s thought is *The Meaning of Love*, and it can even be said to both incorporate and develop the latter’s ideas, but also on occasion to challenge them.

It is a work that contests with pungent irony the conventional thinking about carnal love, which—so Solovyov states—is not linked to the continuation of the species. It is simply an objective fact—and he cites a certain number of concrete examples which demonstrate,

¹ See Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 75–80.

paradoxically, that the stronger the amorous passion becomes, the less the multiplication of the species appears to be of importance; it is even, he states, the dissociation of the two that characterizes human love: “it is in man, compared to all the rest of the animal realm, that multiplication is least prevalent, when sexual love attains its fullest meaning and greatest power.”²

For him, the specific characteristic of human love is that it magnifies individuals in their absolute singularity, in what distinguishes them from the species. However, this also brings us back to the ethical postulate inherited from Kant and often restated by Solovyov, particularly in *The Justification of the Good*, which states that the human being is always an end and must never be considered a means:

When I am pitiless or indifferent to others, consider myself at liberty to injure them and do not think it my duty to help them, they appear to me not what they really are. A being appears as merely a thing.³

The very idea that “individual love” could be an “an instrument of service for the ends of the species”⁴ is in contradiction with the idea that man, as a superior being, represents “end of the process of the creation of the world.”⁵

² Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 21.

³ Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, 71.

⁴ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 36.

While the individual cannot be a means of ensuring the continuation of the species, no more can it fulfill the same function within the framework of the historical process: “individuality possesses an independent significance, and cannot . . . be merely an instrument of ends of the historical process external to it.”⁶ The rejection of the idea of progress flows, therefore, from the same source as the original conception of carnal love developed above. In this respect, there is a striking convergence with the thinking of Fyodorov, who never ceases to assert with even more pungent irony the absurdity and, more particularly, the immorality of progress, in which the new generations feed upon their predecessors, and then proceed to eliminate them.

Of course—writes the latter—the educated can always argue that in the past the elderly were physically eliminated, whereas today they are merely objects of contempt. Is it not a sign of real progress that physical assassination has been replaced by elimination of the intellect? Progress has truly made great strides, one could say!⁷

“From a biological standpoint, progress is when the young devour their elders, when sons oust their fathers; from a psychological standpoint, it replaces love for their fathers by cold superiority and contempt towards them, it is the moral, or rather, the amoral elimination of the fathers by their sons.”⁸

⁶ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷ Fyodorov, “Vopros o bratstve,” 52.

⁸ Fyodorov, *Ibid.*, 51.

Solovyov for his part considers that the love of parents for their children, which is commonly presented as a natural extension of the passion of love, is destroyed, rendered meaningless, by the succession of generations, that baleful infinity which he denounces: “the succeeding generation directly and quickly abrogates its predecessors and convicts them of the absurdity of their existence, to be straightaway, in its own turn, convicted of the same absurdity at the hands of its own offspring.”⁹

Progress, thus described, which is at once absurd and immoral, is opposed by the intimately linked forces of religion and memory in the commemoration of the dead. In *The Justification of the Good*, in which Solovyov seeks to identify “the fundamental facts of morality” among the three essential feelings that go to make up these fundamentals: shame, pity, and reverence; the last of which concerns everything that we assume to be above ourselves (*pietas*) and corresponds to the veneration of our fathers, or more simply the love of children for their parents: “every rational being comes to recognize its dependence upon something invisible and unknown.”¹⁰ Such is the meaning of the hearth-home: the domestic altar on which a flame is kept burning in memory of the forefathers. For his part, Fyodorov condemns “the transformation of the hearth, the altar to the forefathers, into a culinary instrument.”¹¹ According to him, “when the human race becomes that coming together of all its sons to celebrate the memory of all their fathers, as though they were but one father, then the hearth-home of this family will be the sun itself.”¹²

⁹ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 48.

¹⁰ Solovyov, *Justification*, 76.

¹¹ Fyodorov, “Vopros o bratstve,” 67.

¹² Fyodorov, *Ibid.*, 138.

Like love, the ancestor cult stands opposed to the absurd elimination of one generation by another and the triumph of the lie represented by a separate terrestrial existence of the living as much as of the dead. And yet, despite a shared lucidity of gaze on the absurdity of the mere automatic succession of generations, and a shared conception of the origins of religion, there also exists a latent though not always clearly apparent divergence between Solovyov and Fyodorov. It is well known that the great project of the latter was to unite the whole of humanity in a “common task” capable of resuscitating all past generations, “the forefathers” (and actually bring them back to life, through men’s concerted action), the ultimate aim being to make all of humanity immortal. In Fyodorov’s utopia, all attention is concentrated upon the forefathers. In *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, he writes:

so that the ways of man may meet the ways of God . . . what is important is not the prediction but the joint, fraternal, common action—that bequeathed to us by our forefathers. The business of our time is to turn the hearts of the sons towards their fathers (Gospel of Saint Luke 1:17—this is the business of our time, instead of “turn[ing] the hearts of the fathers to the children,” as in the Gospel¹³)—it is to this that God calls us.¹⁴

When Solovyov asserts the need to overcome “the base, rectilinear form of limitless propagation, i.e., the repetition of one and the same organism in the monotonous replacement

¹³ Here too Fyodorov modifies the text of the Gospel, as he is sometimes wont to do, but in this case quite radically.

¹⁴ Fyodorov, “Vopros o bratstve,” 68.

of single temporal existences,”¹⁵ he appears to be co-opting Fyodorov’s central idea. But this is merely an impression, as in reality the exclusively retrospective nature of the latter’s conception is foreign to him: “parents cannot be for their children the end of their life, in the same sense that children are for their parents.”¹⁶ Complete “reciprocity” of this sort is impossible. In contrast, Fyodorov’s “common task” consists precisely in making “fathers” and ancestors the aim of the whole existence of the succeeding generations.

Solovyov’s attitude towards conjugal and family life (to which he refers using the profoundly disparaging definition of “everyday triviality”, in Russian *obydenshchina*) stands as a sort of challenge to conventional thinking. This can be interpreted as an echo of his unhappy love for Martynova (in the context of which *The Meaning of Love* was written), visible in particular in the sentence: “a most powerful love is very frequently unshared,”¹⁷ but going beyond this biographical episode, it is clear that his acute sensitivity to everything that could be termed “everyday triviality” irrevocably damned earthly love: “When you look at the facts, instead of the poetry of a central, eternal reuniting, we merely find a superficial, more or less prolonged, but at all events temporary, more or less intimate, but nevertheless exterior, rapprochement of two beings constrained within the narrow limits of the prose of everyday life.”¹⁸

Where Solovyov and Fyodorov diverge is over the role and place of sexual love, which the latter ultimately aims to eliminate. Solovyov, on the other hand, considers that the power of love, and more precisely of carnal love—he insists on this point—is what

¹⁵ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 110.

¹⁶ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 51.

characterizes humanity. “There is only one force that can, in a very real way, undermine from within the very foundations of egoism at its roots, and this is precisely love and essentially sexual love.”¹⁹ The love of which he writes is in no way disincarnate. Sexual love alone possesses sufficient force to tear down the barriers of egoism. But this force, instead of serving the continuation of the species, the perpetuation of society and of culture is redirected “within” the human personality, thus contributing to its transfiguration and hence to its progression towards perfection: “The power of this spiritual-corporeal creativeness in human beings is only a transformation or directing inward of that same creative power which in nature, being directed outward, produces the [bad] infinity of physical propagation of organisms.”²⁰ Contrary to Fyodorov’s assertions, the mere fact of the “simple abstinence from the act of generation will by no means deliver [the human being] from death”²¹—it is not a first stage towards immortality, or the refusal of the bad infinity embodied in the succession of the generations.

There is a “false spirituality” that eludes the veritable question, that of the transformation within: the other forms of love, by which “a false spirituality and an impotent moralism would desire to replace sexual love,” fail to satisfy “the two basic demands without which the resolute abrogation of [ipseity] . . . is an impossibility”²²—the first of these forms being mystical love, in which there is an excessive disparity between the one that loves and the object of this love, and the second, as we saw above, being the love of parents for their children, which excludes any real reciprocity.

¹⁹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 73.

²² Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 47.

Solovyov never loses sight of the Platonic ideal, the ultimate meaning of love, which consists in restoring the wholeness of the person, and in realizing the “free unity of the male and female principles, preserving their formal individualization but having surmounted their essential separateness.”²³ But here we find the specific terminology used by Fyodorov (division, in Russian *rozn*’), and the trinitary model which is always present in his writing, the idea of “union without confusion,” in which the notion of unitotality finds its source. Its effect is to abolish the limits of an individuality hitherto closed in on itself. It leads to an “abrogation of selfishness,”²⁴ draws mankind out of its “false self-assertion,”²⁵ and once more finds the image of God in the loved one, or simply enables the latter to be seen as he or she truly is, by restoring their absolute value in the eyes of the Creator.

As with Fyodorov, Solovyov’s ideal is not beyond reach, rather it represents an undertaking proposed to humanity, a task to be accomplished, which will transform humanity from within as he puts it: “but the task of love has never been stated consciously, and therefore never resolved, as it should have been.”²⁶

This approach envisioning the ideal as a task to be accomplished represents the same type of thought, a point noted by Nicolas Lossky, as we mentioned earlier. Solovyov’s precise preoccupation is the way things should be, both in *The Meaning of Love* and also, especially, in *The Justification of the Good*. In *The Meaning of Love*, he takes the example of speech, of everything it means for human culture and society, a faculty which is constantly being developed and perfected, and which has accompanied all human evolution: “it would be

²³ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁴ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁵ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁶ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 56.

exceedingly sad to relate to it merely as a natural process . . . as if we speak as birds sing . . . but should never make of language an instrument for the coherent imparting of certain thoughts, a means for the attainment of rational ends we consciously set ourselves.”²⁷ Language is at once a natural process and a product of human culture and man’s conscious creative activity.

The same is true of love. It is a human capacity that must be developed; it too, therefore, represents a task to be accomplished, and must not remain “entirely in the obscure regions of tumultuous affections and involuntary attractions,”²⁸ but rather must be the object of conscious transformations. Unlike language, love belongs to the sentiments and emotions; in this respect, a conception close to Fyodorov’s thinking can be observed: the idea that human nature itself is not immutable, that it can be the object of a truly conscious overhauling process.

Indeed, there is an essential concept current at the time that needs to be taken into account in this connection, that of evolution. Even if Fyodorov is fiercely hostile to Darwinism insofar as it further narrows the distance between man and animal, the influence of this theory cannot be overlooked. But the—originally anti-religious—idea of evolution came to be, as it were, inserted into the divine project for the world. There remained the idea that if human nature is capable of evolution, if it has been able to adapt increasingly effectively to its environment, then it is perfectible and—to extend this theory further—can indeed be transformed, through conscious action. Man thus becomes a co-participant in the work of God: “The psycho-physical process of the restoration of the Divine image in material

²⁷ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ Solovyov, *Ibid.*

humanity has no means to perfect itself by itself, apart from us.”²⁹ Humanity must “consistently carry . . . farther and right to the end what has already been given in germ, in the very nature” of the task, “in the very basis of the process.”³⁰

The universal regeneration promised by Christ cannot come about without us, moreover “it depends upon us that Christ should rise from the dead in His humanity,”³¹ states Solovyov, in this lecture “On the Collapse of the Medieval World-conception”: “Christianity, as a divinely-human religion, presupposes divine action, but requires at the same time activity on the part of man.”³² In this respect, his position appears to coincide with that of Fyodorov, and yet the latter reproached him with not developing his ideas as far as he should have done, and with failing to draw all the consequences from them: the need to involve all humanity in the common task of resuscitating the dead, the outcome of which would not be the end of the world, but rather escape from the Last Judgment. As Fyodorov puts it: “*The realization of truth before the end of the world is impossible*, says Solovyov, thereby demonstrating that he has devoted little thought to the common task which consists in averting the end, that of the earth and of the whole universe; the end is only inevitable for a nature abandoned to its blindness.”³³

Subsequently, as Solovyov anticipated, the religious dimension gradually came to be eliminated from this great work. This voluntarism was to find its true expression after the revolution, in a number of artistic and literary currents, in particular, with all its ambiguity, in

²⁹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁰ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 58.

³¹ Solovyov, “The Collapse of the Medieval World-Conception,” 64.

³² Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 61.

³³ Fyodorov “Proekt soedineniya tserkvey,” 382.

work such as that of Andrei Platonov.³⁴ The fundamental transformation of human nature was also the dream of Proletkult in the 1920s.³⁵ But we can see that the roots of this dream are to be found in a much earlier period, and Fyodorov's doctrine is an essential pointer to this. When mention is made of a "common task" which is to lead humanity to perfection and immortality, it should be underscored that it is not a matter of a "superman" but of the human species taken as a whole.

In the area of pre-revolutionary thought, Fyodorov occupies an essential place. But his doctrine also prefigures the ideas expounded by Bergson in *Creative Evolution* (published in 1907) and the thinking later considerably expanded in the work of Teilhard de Chardin, who sees the "evolutionary law" embodied in each human being as "the *vast vital current*, one trickle of which forms us . . . it is our subjection to the great task of development of which we, for one brief hour, are no more than the artisans."³⁶ In this area, then, the Russian thinkers can be considered precursors.

It is the sign of an era in which, so it appeared, human possibilities could be developed almost infinitely, in which grandiose transformations could be envisaged. But by the same token mankind is seen as bearing a new, overwhelming responsibility, that of re-creating itself anew, as it were, in a very concrete way. The most characteristic expression of this is Fyodorov's famous statement: "Our body must become our cause."³⁷

³⁴ See Heller, "Résonances fiodoroviennes: *La Mer de jouvence* d'A. Platonov."

³⁵ See Brémeau, "Le cosmisme proletarian."

³⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War*, 27.

³⁷ Quoted from Bernstein, *Future of Immortality*, 104.

Ideal love, in Solovyov's eyes, possesses this creative potential: it is one form taken by this participation of man in the work of God. Ideal love, he argues, reinstates the image of God in every man, and makes possible the victory over death and the achievement of concrete immortality. In this respect, Solovyov's assertions are somewhat enigmatic: as true love recognizes the loved one's absolute signification in reality, it "really rescues us from the inevitability of death and fills out our life with an absolute content."³⁸ This is a natural evolution: nature itself tends to free us from the constraints of the species and its uniform perpetuation (to "produce posterity and then to die)."³⁹ Thanks to all the spiritual potential contained in love, it is possible to override the law of death, according to which there exists a "contradiction and antagonism between the species and the individual."⁴⁰ Thus, the idea of evolution extends as far as to include a victory over death—but what exactly does this victory consist of? Solovyov's position is complicated by the meaning he attributes to the term "genuine reality," by which he also means phenomena of a spiritual order.

For humanity to be able to free itself from death is therefore a legitimate historical process; as regards this point, Solovyov entirely adopts Fyodorov's position on immortality: "If in the biological process nature is striving ever more and more to limit the law of death, then must not humans in the historical process completely abrogate this law⁴¹? Immortality, then, is the end and the aim of the historical process: Solovyov appears to fully espouse Fyodorov's great project for immortality, both that of making humanity immortal and that of resuscitating all past generations: "Then every living thing on earth would recover from its

³⁸ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 68.

³⁹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁰ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴¹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 72.

evils and maladies, would be free and immortal. But in order that they may be at the same time happy, one more condition is necessary: they must forget their parents, forget the actual authors of this new prosperity.”⁴² This is what is unthinkable and morally unacceptable. Logic requires that “a human being, having attained the highest perfection” would need “to snatch away from Death all its prey.”⁴³ If not, the most acceptable course of action, morally speaking, would be to renounce such immortality.

Solovyov’s position reproduces word for word Fyodorov’s teachings, reflecting first and foremost his refusal of the idea of progress, with all the victims it implies, and which the men of the sixties were so ready to accept. Michael Hagemester reminds us that Sergei Bulgakov, in his article entitled “Apocalypse and Socialism,” describes in a similar vein “this repugnant image of descendants partying on the tombs of their ancestors.”⁴⁴ But what is called into question is as much Dostoevsky’s idea of paradise (as expounded by Ivan Karamazov). The traditional representation is unacceptable if paradise is reserved for a certain number—the elect—while part of humanity would be condemned to eternal torment.

But at the same time, Solovyov poses a question that seems at first sight completely absent from Fyodorov: what, precisely, is worthy of immortality? It is here that we see his scathing condemnation of everyday triviality, which appears to be even more relevant today, accompanied by an irony that lends a particular dynamic quality to his presentation: “The incompatibility of immortality with such an existence is plain at the first glance.”⁴⁵ It goes without saying that the name of Tolstoy, and *The Death of Ivan Ilitch* must be mentioned here.

⁴² Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴³ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁴ See “Bulgakov, “Khristianstvo i sotsializm,” 21; Hagemester, “Fiodorov,” 66.

⁴⁵ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 67.

“For such a life,” says Solovyov, “death is not only inevitable, but even extremely desirable. Is it possible without dreadful anguish even to picture to oneself the existence, prolonged without end, of any society lady, or sportsman, or card-player?”⁴⁶

This, then, is Solovyov’s first major objection: is it worthwhile resuscitating cannibals? In his letter to Fyodorov, he observes: “resuscitating humanity at the level of the cannibal would be both impossible and absolutely undesirable.”⁴⁷ Yet, Fyodorov’s project, for its part, aims to make humanity immortal in its totality and without exception, and he repeatedly states that salvation should be afforded to all, and that ultimately even Judas was saved, for he repented.

Immortality, for him, supposes that humanity has reached the stage of perfection; it therefore constitutes the end of a progression towards the renewal of humanity. Without perfection, immortality is meaningless. Ultimately, there is no real disagreement between them, and the condemnation of contemporary urban civilization in Fyodorov is even stronger than that of the “card-player” in Solovyov. The process of bringing ancestors back to life and defeating death is considered inseparable from that which leads to perfection.

All this must be the outcome of what Solovyov calls “the spiritual exploit.” Moreover it is not unreasonable to suppose that it is specifically Fyodorov that he has in mind here, for the latter’s whole existence represented a form of “spiritual exploit” (*dukhovnyy podvig*). It requires a mental effort to attain immortality: “Let us suppose,” writes Solovyov, “that some human has so strengthened his spirit by consistent concentration of will and consciousness,

⁴⁶ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁷ Solovyov to Fyodorov, mid 1880s (Solovyov, *Pis'ma*, 346).

and so purified his bodily nature by ascetic achievement,”⁴⁸ that he “attain[s] complete spiritualization and immortality.”⁴⁹ Although Solovyov adds the restriction that this supposition is “something completely fantastical,”⁵⁰ these terms cannot but remind us of Fyodorov’s extraordinary mode of existence.

It is well known, from numerous sources, including N. Lossky whom we may quote, that Fyodorov

liv[ed] an intensive spiritual life . . . He occupied a tiny room and slept not more than four or five hours a day on a bare hump-backed trunk, resting his head on some hard object . . . He wanted to possess no property, and never had even a warm overcoat.⁵¹

Among the intelligentsia, thinkers and writers, this modest, totally disinterested man was considered an immense authority, and in particular by Vladimir Solovyov. In his letters, the latter refers to him as his “teacher” and “spiritual father.” However, there are not many such letters: we only know of two, dating from the mid 1880s.

In the first of these, written shortly after they first made acquaintance, Solovyov states that he accepts “*unconditionally* without the need for any further conversation”⁵² Fyodorov’s

⁴⁸ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 103.

⁴⁹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Solovyov, *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 75.

⁵² Solovyov to Fedorov, 1881. Quoted from Smith, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Spiritualization of Matter*, 108.

great project of resuscitating the dead and making humanity immortal, and that “since the appearance of Christianity” this project is “the first advance of the human mind along the way of Christ.”⁵³

Yet, in *The Meaning of Love*, written at least ten years after these letters, Solovyov indirectly questions the type of perfection towards which humanity should aim, as described in Fyodorov’s project. For the latter, human perfection is first of all linked to knowledge: mankind will need to possess such a vast wealth of knowledge that it allows him, in effective reality, to resuscitate the dead fathers.

But, Solovyov objects, “omniscience” is incompatible with human liberty: it is “our ignorance about the interconnecting bond of concrete particulars in the unity of the whole” that “leaves us, notwithstanding, freedom of action, which, with all its consequences, has already entered from all eternity into the absolute and all-embracing design.”⁵⁴ It is man’s ignorance that guarantees his freedom of choice. Moreover, as was pointed out above, it is difficult not to see a Promethean temptation in Fyodorov’s doctrine, even though Fyodorov himself completely rejected this possibility. According to Solovyov, in Fyodorov’s future “psychocracy,” humanity “put[s] a screen in front of divinity,”⁵⁵ and from this perspective, “God would not really be visible behind mankind.”⁵⁶

The progression of humanity towards immortality, the creative development of universal life, demands the active participation of man, and yet it must always be borne in

⁵³ Solovyov to Fedorov, mid-1880s (Solovyov, *Pis'ma*, 345).

⁵⁴ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 105.

⁵⁵ Solovyov to Fyodorov, mid 1880s (Solovyov, *Pis'ma*, 347).

⁵⁶ Solovyov to Fyodorov, mid 1880s, *Ibid.*

mind that it “is not created by us.”⁵⁷ Solovyov highlights one aspect of Fyodorov’s project, which is inescapably present even if the latter absolutely refuted the suggestion: not only does man become a co-creator, but he also becomes the equal of God. Whether it was his intention or not, his project was not religious in its principle, but what it leads to is the obsolescence of religion.

Solovyov was aware of certain hidden or unrecognized implications of Fyodorov’s project: in particular that paradoxically, despite his negative attitude towards the “learned” as a separate social category (or rather because of it), he places science so high that it came to replace religion. He writes to Fyodorov: “our enterprise must have a religious, not a scientific, character, and must lean on the believing mass and not the reasoning intelligentsia.”⁵⁸

This is something that Fyodorov repeats incessantly, without accepting the idea that in fact, according to his conception, man takes the place of God. Discovering therein the hidden potential of Fyodorov’s theory, Solovyov also underscores the astonishing link between it and certain trends, certain currents of thought, that were to become fully apparent in the twenties, in particular those that revolve around the proponents of the current known as “God-building” (*bogostroitelstvo*). Solovyov both anticipated and announced these later developments.

The dialogue between the two thinkers was pursued over more than a decade, and there were several facets to it, but what perhaps is most revealing of its nature is the article by Fyodorov entitled “A Project for the Union of the Churches,”⁵⁹ published in answer to the

⁵⁷ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 105.

⁵⁸ Solovyov to Fyodorov, mid 1880s (Solovyov, *Pis'ma*, 347).

⁵⁹ Fyodorov, “Proekt soedinenija cerkvej,” 370–87.

lecture given by Solovyov in 1891 entitled “On the decline of the medieval world-view.”⁶⁰ The date is significant because 1891 was the year of a great famine caused by an exceptional drought, which claimed many victims, especially in regions far from the capitals. The date explains why this great undertaking aimed at ensuring the salvation of humanity foregrounds the relationship to nature, which is indeed of concern to all (and which is why this thinking is particularly relevant to today).

On becoming an official religion, Christianity took on certain aspects of paganism, writes Solovyov. It attached too much importance to the external manifestations of faith, that is, to ritual. Some who were aware of a major deformation of Christianity—which they no longer saw as a work of transfiguration, but one that had spread its efforts too widely in “works” aimed at ensuring salvation—withdraw from society. In a sentence that might be reminiscent of Fyodorov, Solovyov speaks of “the contrast between *the paganism of the city* and *the Christianity of the desert*.”⁶¹ But the latter form of Christianity, through its “pseudo-Christian” individualism and its “false spiritualism,” changed the relation with the world. Nature came to be considered an “evil principle,” whereas it is not of itself evil, but only “passive and inert.”⁶² Paradoxically, it is the progress of Modern Times, through the smoothing of human relations, that has come closer to the Christian ideal, whereas it claimed to reject it. But the relationship with nature has not changed, far from it: “Against the pseudo-Christian spiritualism which regards nature as an evil principle, they [the modernists] put

⁶⁰ Solovyov, “The Collapse of the Medieval World-Conception,” 60–71. The exact title of the lecture Fyodorov refers to, given on October 19, 1891, was “O prichinakh upadka srednevekovogo mirosozertsaniya” (On the Causes of the Collapse [or Decline] of the Medieval World-View).

⁶¹ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶² Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 69.

forth another equally false view that nature is lifeless matter and a soulless machine.”⁶³ And, in revenge, “offended” nature responds by refusing to feed humanity! Which is why a truly living Christianity, envisaged as a universal task, implies a revision of our collective relationship to nature.

Indeed, 1891 was the year in which a discovery made by the American army made a particular impression on Fedorov: it claimed to have managed to trigger rainfall by firing cannon rounds up into the sky. Thus it was shown that the implements of destruction could be used for the salvation of humanity by regulating nature. The date is particularly relevant as that year nature had demonstrated just how much of a “blind force” hostile to man it could be, and that it needed to be studied, controlled and enlightened by reason. Instead of submitting himself to this blind force often identified with necessity, man needed to learn how to control it: for Fyodorov too, redemption had as much to do with nature as with humanity.

But for him, the redemption and salvation of humanity is played out in the present world, in “genuine reality.” He explicitly excludes the idea of transcendence: “*The search for meaning is the search for a goal, a cause, a common task.* Those who do not accept this must . . . assume an external, transcendental existence (the religious philosophy of history).”⁶⁴ Or rather, somewhat astonishingly, according to him the resurrection of the dead must occur in immanence, that is, here on earth, as the outcome of human effort, without supposing the transition to another dimension, or some sort of end of the world: if the Apostle Paul speaks of the “longanimity of God,” “does that not mean that the teaching of Christianity can produce an effect, that union may occur, and that in this case the transition to a new heaven, a new

⁶³ Solovyov, *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁴ Fedorov, *What was Man Created for?* 79.

earth, will take place non-catastrophically, without judgment, that it will be the work of humanity itself, having become the docile instrument of the divine will . . .?”⁶⁵

He contrasts this form of resurrection, which he calls transcendent resurrection, with the evil resurrection, which he also calls “the resurrection of anger” (the anger of God at the inaction of men indifferent to His will), which will herald in hell and eternal torment, the necessary corollary to a paradise reserved for the chosen few: if “The human race . . . fails to unite in the task of learning about the blind force, but instead submits to it . . . [it] can only expect a transcendent resurrection, brought about not by ourselves, but from without, not through the action of our own will, but even against it, a resurrection of anger, of the last judgment, of the condemnation of some (the sinners) to eternal torments, and others (the just) to contemplation of the torments of the former.”⁶⁶

The Last Judgment then assumes the full meaning of its Russian designation, the “terrifying judgment,” as this resurrection would then be accomplished not by us, but in spite of us, and would be the punishment reserved for humanity if it fails to unite in a common undertaking aimed at universal salvation.

Fyodorov’s relation to the concept of transcendence is somewhat obscure, ranging from pure and simple acceptance to a refusal to take into consideration domains that are in any case outside the human sphere, just as, in the Middle Ages, everything in the field of knowledge that manifested “vain curiosity” was condemned: “we set a limit to vain human

⁶⁵ Fyodorov, “Proekt soedineniya tserkvey,” 372.

⁶⁶ Fyodorov, “Supramoralizm ili vseobshchiy sintez,” 402.

curiosity, directed towards the transcendent, towards thought without action,”⁶⁷ extending as far as the great project of a world and life without end or interruption.

Although the strongly retrospective character of Fyodorov’s thinking is not to be found in Solovyov’s presentation, their common ideal was to restore the world to its supposed pristine purity. In his book *Solovyov and gnosticism*, Alexei Kozyrev describes the links between Solovyov’s thinking and Origen’s conception of apocatastasis.⁶⁸ Therein lies the meaning of love: it is the force that not only restores the divine image in the loved one but also restores the world to its original purity and the human being to its masculine and feminine bi-unity. But Solovyov never ceases to remind us that perfection “is not of this world,” moreover, in a letter to Fyodorov, he underscores that “the mere physical resurrection of the dead itself cannot be the goal in and of itself.”⁶⁹

It is this that arouses Fyodorov’s indignation, as he notes in quite violent terms after this presentation: “one might wonder whether Solovyov was actually aware of the meaning of what he was saying; whether, for instance, he understood that salvation, like redemption, is only the abstract form of the task of resuscitating all the dead, or whether he realized that extending salvation ‘*to the full circle of the life of man and the century*’ and, equally, ‘*beginning to realize salvation in our reality*’ means transforming the force of nature, which is the bearer of death, into a life-bearing force, in order to resuscitate the dead?”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Fyodorov, “Vopros o bratstve,” 46.

⁶⁸ Kozyrev, *Solovyov i gnostiki*, 172.

⁶⁹ Solovyov to Fyodorov, 1881. Quoted from Smith, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Spiritualization of Matter*, 108.

⁷⁰ Fyodorov, “Proekt soedineniya tserkvey,” 383.

For both writers, the task that humanity must accomplish vis-à-vis itself is precisely that of attaining perfection in genuine reality; nevertheless there remains an ambiguity, something unsaid. As Fyodorov points out: “On the matter of the common task of resuscitating the dead, not only does [Solovyov] nowhere state his position clearly and openly, but he has also undertaken to conceal his thoughts so carefully that, in the discussion prompted by his presentation, not even the slightest mention was ever made of the common task or of resurrection.”⁷¹

This ambiguity doubtless originates in what Solovyov actually understands by the term “genuine reality”: for him, it transcends the limits of empirical existence. This is something he underscores in *The Meaning of Love*: “The true being of the human being in general and of each human in particular is not exhausted by his given empirical manifestations.”⁷² In this statement, he highlights a point with which Fyodorov is in total disagreement: “True salvation is regeneration or a new birth; but new birth presupposes the death of the old false life—and no one wants to die.”⁷³ It was precisely this passage through actual death, seen as a necessity for redemption and transfiguration, and for the resurrection of the flesh itself, that Fyodorov refused to accept, and against which he elaborated his grand project.

Curiously, despite these fundamental disagreements the two thinkers remained very close, while continually returning to a sort of ever-unresolved misunderstanding. This may perhaps be explained by the extreme importance attached in those years to the human capacity

⁷¹ Fyodorov, “Proekt soedineniya tserkvey,” 384.

⁷² Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 59.

⁷³ Solovyov, “The Collapse of the Medieval World-Conception,” 65.

for creation; it may also be the case that anticipation of great upheavals to come made the dream of apocatastasis easier to understand and brought it closer.

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