

down your most Holy Spirit upon your apostles at the third hour, take him not from us, O Good One, but renew him in us who pray to you." And then, the fullness of the Eucharist: lifting up the chalice "on behalf of all and for all." Everything and everyone, no matter who they are, or where they are or what they are doing, I can bring them into this Eucharist.

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Liturgy creates space for us to "lay aside all earthly cares" while giving us strength to return to precisely those same cares with renewed faith. But worship can become meaningless without active cultivation of an inner life; and inner life dries up without the community of worship. A candle on its own is easily blown out, but when bundled together with others its flame quickly relights. Liturgy and spirituality are deeply connected.



## Love, Sex, Beauty: Encountering Vladimir Solovyov on Eros and the Divine Sophia

Michael Martin

In Woody Allen's film *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, the protagonist (Allen, of course) tells another character that he thinks love and sex are not the same thing, but opposites, "because love creates stress and sex relieves it." For some, I am sure, it is the other way around. Nevertheless, Allen's one-liner points to a tension concerning these apparently warring faces of attraction.

In our culture, we find many casualties of this war. Witness, for one, the sorrowful spectacle of exploitation and exhibitionism found on MySpace, where it seems every young woman's keenest hope is to become a stripper or a lingerie model, every young man's to be a gangbanger. I recall a line of Apollinaire, "It was and I would prefer not to remember it was during beauty's decline."<sup>1</sup> In this desire for self-promotion and attention, which so rapidly diminishes the dignity of the human being, love ends up as the first casualty.

In philosophical and theological circles, the relationship of love and sex is a long-standing problem. It stands at the crux of the dilemmas of human life, questions of the body and the soul, and questions of the real and the ideal, of *eros* and *thanatos* are forever being asked. The Freudian response is, I believe, insufficient, as are almost all such attempted responses in our day. Reconciliation of the biological imperative with the

<sup>1</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone," *Selected Writings*, trans. Roger Shattuck, (New York: New Directions, 1971), 121.

search for transcendence remains unachievable in these demesnes; it always will.

One person who meditated long and hard on this problem was the English poet and divine John Donne. In his early work "The Flea," for example, Donne's poetic genius manifested itself most tellingly in the *carpe diem* school of love poetry. Love was a game with conquest the object; its prize the taking of a maidenhead. Donne's concentration on sexual conquest as a youth, however, transfigured in his maturity into a desire for intimacy with God. In Holy Sonnet XIV, for instance, the poet compares the love of God to rape:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,  
Labour to admit You, but O, to no end!  
Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto Your enemy:  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.<sup>2</sup>

Donne knew from experience, both sacred and profane, that love is a game. But he realized that while we may think we pursue a sexual or amatory goal, it is really God who pursues us. In this sense, *eros* functions simply as a variety of divine bait.

This concept is nothing new. Plato discusses this situation first in the *Phaedrus* and then again in the *Symposium*. His discussion of *eros* in the latter is particularly intriguing. There, Socrates' teacher Diotima describes love as a desire for "the

<sup>2</sup> *John Donne's Poetry*, ed. A.L. Clements (New York: Norton, 1966), lines 1-14.

everlasting possession of the good."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere in the *Symposium*, Plato describes love in homoerotic terms, even to the point of pederasty.

The culture of Plato's Athens characterized itself by a virulent strain of homoeroticism, which, I suppose, might be a point of interest for postmodern perspectives on homosexuality. Yet both are tragic. In his work, Plato meditates upon morality, upon the good, the true, and the beautiful – concepts postmodern culture views with disdain if not unbridled derision. On the other hand, Plato's homoeroticism – and his culture's – is homoerotic at the expense of the feminine. The ancient Greeks valued homosexuality because they deemed women inferior to men. This is a repulsive logic; but it is logic, nevertheless, though grounded on a false assumption.

Since the dawn of Christianity the problem of the erotic has persecuted Christians with impunity, both within and without the precincts of the Church. Saint Paul, in the seventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, is all at sixes and sevens as to how to treat the dilemma of marriage vs. celibacy. He affirms that to remain celibate would be best if possible, though he concedes it usually is not. Origen, who only missed out on being counted a Church Father by a too vivid strain of Platonism, castrated himself when the temptations of the flesh proved too much to bear, an extreme response to say the least. Origen's solution points to the assumed antagonism many have suggested exists between sex and the soul, or, as one might better say, between *eros* and *psyche*.

The cultural milieu into which the Church was born was marked by licentiousness and excess as well as by asceticism and fundamentalism. In short, it was very much like our own era. Doubtless, the pagan world, like ours, was antagonistic to Christian sensibilities; but the biggest problem presented to the Church in its infancy – and throughout its history – was within the Christian fold itself. I speak here of Gnosticism.

Various sects in the Gnostic communion vacillated between extreme celibacy and extreme license. Jean Guittion describes the Gnostic attitudes toward sexuality adroitly. "One

<sup>3</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937 [1892]), 1:330.

thing is incontestable," he writes. "The problems of sex, generally wrapped in silence and left to haunt man, were brought out into broad daylight by the Gnostics. The Gnostics tried to exorcise sex by sublimating it."<sup>4</sup> Postmodern gnosticism tries neither to exorcise sex nor sublimate it, but is content with removing sex from secrecy and bringing it "out" into broad daylight in all of its variants and deviations.

In the ancient world, the highest initiates of the Manicheans, following some of their Gnostic forebears, eschewed sexual intercourse, as did the latter Albigensians. The Church taught that such extremism was wrong; yet, at least in the West, the Church upheld celibacy as the ideal, however implicitly. This mixed message did not do much to alleviate the problem. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, though opposed to them vehemently, admitted that the Albigensian heretics were often much more pious than many of their counterparts obedient to Mother Church. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic clergy in Languedoc gave themselves more often to pleasure and excess than to prayer and fasting, making their pious Albigensian counterparts look all the better by comparison.<sup>5</sup>

The Church continues to struggle with Gnosticism, and it continues to struggle with *eros*. Spurious imaginations of human sexuality confront the Church throughout postmodern culture, from the ready availability of pornography on the Internet – also pervasive as the slightly watered-down pornography available through the mass media – to the controversy concerning so-called "gay marriage." And, as we have been so painfully made aware, the struggle and confusion surrounding *eros* touches even the clergy. It manifests itself like a disease.

Pope Benedict XVI treats of this disease in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. The problem, he points out, is that the postmodern culture has turned sexuality into "a commodity, a mere thing to be bought and sold" which achieves its end in the

<sup>4</sup> Jean Guilton, *Great Heresies and Church Councils*, trans. F.D. Wieck (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 60.

<sup>5</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967, 1989),

debasement of man.<sup>6</sup> The postmodern culture focuses on sex at the expense of love, much as Plato's culture focused on homoeroticism at the expense of the feminine.

What would Vladimir Solovyov think about the postmodern condition of love in the Church and in the Western world? Solovyov, a philosopher, theologian, literary critic, and poet, was born in Russia in 1853 and died there in 1900. He was also a mystic and developed a theology based on his experience of a being he identified as the "Divine Sophia." In many ways, the Divine Sophia, whom Solovyov affectionately called his "Eternal Friend," resonates with Goethe's "Eternal Feminine," though there is much more to her than that. She drove the Russian ever onward to profound insights into the Christian mystery, to confidence in the Chalcedonian dogma of the dual nature of Christ, and to a conviction of the ever-present reality of the ideal in our world. In his life, this great lover of wisdom wrote often on the dilemma of sexuality versus love.

In *The Justification of the Good*, one of his final works, Solovyov describes the "positive side" of human sexual love as "being in love,"<sup>7</sup> a theme to be found in his earlier treatment of the subject in *The Meaning of Love*.<sup>8</sup> However, he also recognizes a negative side of human sexual love, what he calls "the essential and moral evil of the carnal physical act itself."<sup>9</sup> He even goes so far as to contemplate some future renunciation of the "evil natural way" of child-bearing in favour of one not shared by the animal kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Meaning of Love* Solovyov speaks more eloquently. Simon Frank regards this book as "a true work of genius."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. Nathalie Duddington, ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, trans. Jane Marshall, rev. and ed. Thomas R. Beyer, Jr. (Hudson: L'Indisfame, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Justification*, 124.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> S.L. Frank, "Introduction," trans. Nathalie Duddington, *A Solovyov Anthology*, ed. Frank (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974 [1950]), 24.

On the other hand, Solovyov's nephew and biographer, Sergey Solovyov, lists it as not among the philosopher's finest works.<sup>12</sup> Here, I would concur with Frank. *The Meaning of Love* is a work of genius, but it is more meditative than Solovyov's books treating grand schemes and projects (*The Justification of the Good; Russia and the Universal Church; Lectures on Divine Humanity*). *The Meaning of Love* is an intimate work befitting its subject.

Solovyov presents a very positive outlook on erotic love in this little book. Perhaps, as a lifelong celibate, he had a lot of time to consider the problem?<sup>13</sup> More probably, he was drunk on his love for another Sophia, Sofya Mikhailovna Martynova, called "Sappho" by her circle.<sup>14</sup> Solovyov's two engagements ended in stalemates; indeed, he was more familiar with the intoxication of "falling in love" than with "the ache of marriage." His is an idealistic view of love consonant with the ethos of Romanticism, though "baptized" into the Christian mystery. Solovyov holds an idealistic view, but this does not render it incorrect. In fact, from the Christian perspective, it may be that his is not only correct but one of the most thoughtful and accurate philosophical-theological descriptions of the ideal reality of erotic love. Rather than get into an evaluative, Thomistic approach comparing and contrasting eros with *philia* and *storge* and seeing how they measure up to *agape* (the preeminent approach of Western theologians), Solovyov takes eros as it is, and examines its place in the Kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Sergey M. Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyov: His Life and Creative Evolution*, trans. Aleksey Gibson (Fairfax: Eastern Christian Publications, 2000), 391.

<sup>13</sup> Olga Matich, in *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's Fin de Siècle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 79–80 suggests that Solovyov may not have been *perpetually* celibate and was, at times, prone to obscenities and was not completely inexperienced sexually. This may or may not be true; but my point is that Solovyov was not speaking out of theory, but from experience.

<sup>14</sup> Sergey M. Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyov*, 384.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Deutsch Kornblatt deems Orthodox/Eastern Christian spirituality as having a more "holistic" view towards love as opposed to the perceived Western antagonism between eros and *agape*, though she admits that "love has not been a major subject of inquiry in Orthodox as opposed to

Solovyov's definition of erotic love should be distinguished from carnal lust. Erotic love, exemplified in the experience of "falling in love," embodies a higher ideal for Solovyov. There is something evocative here of the mythos of chivalry, the search for the Holy Grail, and the aesthetic of the Troubadours; and the great sagas of love (Tristan and Iseult, Romeo and Juliet, Dante and Beatrice) might serve as typologies for this love, imperfect though they be. Most importantly, according to Solovyov's insight, is the fact that when we "fall in love," we recognize the truth of another,

not abstractly, but essentially, transferring in deed the center of our life beyond the limits of our empirical personality. By so doing we reveal and realize our own real truth, our own absolute significance, which consists just in our capacity to transcend the borders of our factual phenomenal being in our capacity to live not only in ourselves, but also in another.<sup>16</sup>

Though Solovyov admits this love cannot be fully realized, he nevertheless counts this transcendent experience, this "revelation of the ideal being," not as a chimera but as a foreshadowing of the world transfigured. As Solovyov recognizes in his essay on Plato, upon *Eros*' entrance into an "earthly being, he at once transforms it."<sup>17</sup> But in a statement resonating with his mystical encounters with the divine Sophia, he describes the reality of love, the object herself: "The heavenly object of our love is only one, always and for all humans one and the same — the eternal Divine Femininity."<sup>18</sup>

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Western Christian theology." See Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "The Transfiguration of Plato in the Erotic Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov" in *Transformations of Eros* by Vladimir Solovyev (St. Paul, MN: Grailstone, nd), 77–101; 80.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Meaning of Love*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Solovyev, *Transformations of Eros: An Odyssey from Platonism to Christian Eros*, trans. Richard Gill (St Paul: Grailstone, nd), 60. Published previously as Vladimir Solovyev, *Plato* (London: Stanley Nott, 1935).

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Meaning of Love*, 93.

In love poetry, in much painting and sculpture, and even in the *Song of Songs*, we witness the beloved as *beautiful*. Beauty, seen as a construct of a cultural meta-narrative, is a topic the majority of postmodern intellectuals treat with contempt. But the attraction through the eyes, as distasteful as some may view it, remains the primary means of furthering the biological imperative. "[E]ros begins," writes Allan Bloom, "sad but true, founded on ideals of bodily beauty."<sup>19</sup> An element of transfiguration takes place in the experience of this kind of beauty; and just as Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor momentarily revealed his essence to Peter, James, and John, so is the revelation of the essential beauty of the beloved to the lover momentary. In his discussion of the revelation of the beautiful in nature, Solovyov utilizes language that assumes a nearly phenomenological cast. In the revelation of beauty, writes Solovyov, "the ideal principle takes possession of the material fact and is embodied in it; and for its part, the material element, embodying in itself ideal content, is transformed and becomes resplendent."<sup>20</sup> And as with nature's beauty, so it is with the essential beauty of the beloved. Experience of the beautiful embodies an experience of love; and love reveals the beautiful. But what is it we love?

In the *Symposium* Diotima tells Socrates quite plainly, "[T]here is nothing which men love but the good."<sup>21</sup> This sentence may be the *fiat* of Romanticism. Doubtless, Goethe's "Eternal Feminine" is rooted in the idea, as is Saint Augustine's observation that love for "the things of this world" masks a desire for God.<sup>22</sup> But love for the things of this world leads to sin as well as felicity, as Virgil counsels Dante in *The Purgatorio*:

<sup>19</sup> Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 15.

<sup>20</sup> V.S. Solovyev, *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk, (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 2003), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Jowett trans., 1: 330.

<sup>22</sup> St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. E.B. Pusey, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 10.27.

Thus you may understand that love alone is the true seed of every merit in you, and of all acts for which you must atone.<sup>23</sup>

This desire permeates the universe like a law of physics. Solovyov elucidates that the philosophers of the Middle Ages deemed what we now call the Law of Gravity, "the force of attraction," as "love."<sup>24</sup> Love, indeed, grounds us in our humanness and in God. As Saint John tells us, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).<sup>25</sup> Love – eros as well as *storge*, *philia*, and *agape* – evinces the activity in the world of a transformative agent.

The problem, of course, is that we mortals cannot maintain the level of intensity characteristic of falling in love, whether we speak of love for God or romantic love, in deed or in imagination. Truly, it is impossible to do so for fallen beings. Both lover and beloved fade in the overwhelming light of the ideal. Then the eternal beloved degenerates into a caricature of love. We become enamoured with mere attractiveness or sensuality and mistake it for beauty. Or, worse, we become indifferent to the existence of beauty and consign it to the flames of relativism. This category mistake – equating beauty with appearance – afflicts all incarnated in the flesh. But, thankfully, it does not do so at all times. Love strikes everyone. As Benedict XVI writes, echoing Plato, "love looks to the eternal."<sup>26</sup> It looks to the eternal in each human being as well as to the eternal in God.

When my son Tommy was ten-years-old, he told my wife and me of a dream he had had. In the dream, he was playing baseball in our yard with his brother Dylan, and Dylan smacked the ball into one of our garden beds. In this bed grow

<sup>23</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi, (New York: Mentor, 1961), Canio XVII: lines 102–05.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, trans. Peter Zouboff, rev. Boris Jakin, (Hudson: Lindisfarne, 1995), 54–72.

<sup>25</sup> All quotes from the Bible are from *The Jerusalem Bible* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>26</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 9.

roses, and a small cement statue of the Virgin Mary stands among them. When Tommy went to retrieve the ball it rested near the Virgin's feet. As he searched through thorns for the ball, he bumped into her foot. But she was no longer a statue, no longer two-feet high; she stood full-sized and real. He looked up at her, and she smiled at him. We asked Tommy what she looked like. He said that she was young, maybe twenty-years old, and beautiful. When we asked what he meant by "beautiful," he became befuddled (he was only ten) and simply answered, "She didn't have freckles." Tommy, incidentally, has freckles.

When children have beheld the Virgin Mary, whether at Fatima or Medjugorje, at La Salette or Lourdes, they always say the same thing about her: she is eighteen to twenty years old and indescribably beautiful. When asked about the beauty of Our Lady, the visionaries from Medjugorje put it this way:

Well, really, we haven't told you anything about that – her beauty cannot be described – it is not our kind of beauty – that is something ethereal – something heavenly – something we'll only see in Paradise – and then only to a certain degree.<sup>27</sup>

I may not be able to describe this beauty, but I can imagine it *in feeling*. This is the transcendental beauty Plato wished to attain, the *Aphrodite urania* as opposed to *Aphrodite cytherea*. This is what Solovoyov called the "eternal Divine Femininity." Solovoyov witnessed this beauty three times in his life, once at the age of nine and twice at twenty-three.

His experience at nine occurred in May, on the Feast of the Ascension, 1862.<sup>28</sup> During Divine Liturgy in the Chapel of Saint Tatyana at the University of Moscow, the congregation chanted the cherubicon: "Let us, who mystically represent the Cherubim, bringing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating

<sup>27</sup> "Description of Our Lady of Medjugorje," <http://www.medjugorjeusa.org/description.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> The story of Solovoyov's visions of his Eternal Friend are oft repeated. See Sergey M. Solovoyov's account, 35–36; 129–36; Paul M. Allen, *Vladimir Soloviev: Russian Mystic* (Blauvelt: Steiner, 1978), 23–28; 109–19.

Trinity, set aside all earthly cares...." As the deacon censed the church and the faithful, young Volodinka (the diminutive used by his family) fell into a swoon. The people disappeared. The hymn, like the music in dreams, fell below the threshold of his awareness. And she was there: a woman of extraordinary beauty appeared holding a blue flower. She smiled and was gone.<sup>29</sup>

Who was she? Solovoyov always identified her as Wisdom, Sophia. Solovoyov's grandfather, the priest Mikhail Vasilevitch Solovoyov, may have helped the youngster conclude that this was a vision of the figure who speaks in Proverbs:

When he established the heavens I was there,  
When he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;  
When he made firm the skies above, when he fixed  
fast the foundations of the earth;  
When he set for the sea its limit, so that the waters  
could not transgress his command;  
Then was I beside him as his craftsman, and I was his  
delight day by day,  
Playing before him all the while, playing on the  
surface of his earth;  
And I found delight in the sons of men (8: 27–31).

Like the child visionaries of Medjugorje and Fatima, Solovoyov described a being of incredible beauty. Unlike them, he fell into a period of virulent atheism as a youth, from the ages of thirteen to eighteen. Also, unlike any child visionaries I know of, he became a philosopher, though he was already a lover of Wisdom.

<sup>29</sup> Sergey M. Solovoyov, *Vladimir Solovoyov: His Life and Creative Evolution*, 35, reports that his uncle's first vision of Sophia was on the Feast of the Ascension in 1862, as does Paul Allen in *Vladimir Soloviev: Russian Mystic*, 23. However, in his poem, "Three Meetings," Vladimir Solovoyov describes this as taking place on a Sunday in "Ascension Church." See *Vladimir Solovoyov's Poems of Sophia*, trans. Boris Jakin and Laury Magnus (Variable Press, 1996).

Following his foray into denial and atheism, Solovyov returned to belief. At university, he studied sciences before switching to arts, taking his degrees in philosophy. He also studied at the Moscow Religious Academy where, Florensky believed, Solovyov's so-called "sophiology" was forged.<sup>30</sup> Mindful of his experience of the Eternal Friend he had had as a child, Solovyov began to study all he could of Sophia. This brought the young philosopher to Swedenborg, to Boehme, to Baader, and to Gnosticism.<sup>31</sup> Solovyov's syncretistic manner of entertaining a diverse body of opinion and doctrine, what Stephan Finlan calls "a colourful and eclectic range of mysticism and philosophy," led the thinker to considerations of occultism, Hermeticism, and Gnosticism regarding Sophia.<sup>32</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar describes Solovyov's foray into such dangerous theological territory in this way:

because in reading all these and many others he fully appropriates them for himself, the muddy stream 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 (in contrast to that of so many of his speculative compatriots) can live and breathe only in an atmosphere of unqualified transparency and intelligibility.<sup>33</sup>

In the course of his research, Solovyov undertook a trip to London to make use of manuscripts concerning Gnosticism and kabbalah in the British Museum. There he once again was

<sup>30</sup> Sergey M. Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyov: His Life and Creative Evolution*, 87.

<sup>31</sup> For a thorough overview of Solovyov's "occult" sources, or at least those from beyond accepted Christian traditions, see Kristi A. Groberg, "The Feminine Occult: Sophia in the Russian Religious Renaissance: A Bibliographic Essay," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 26 (1992): 197-240.

<sup>32</sup> Stephan Finlan, "The Comedy of Divinization in Solovyov," *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephan Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene: Pickwick, 2006), 168-83; 74.

<sup>33</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume III: Studies in Theological Styles: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, et al., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 292.

granted a vision of his Eternal Friend who told him to meet her in Egypt. As any mad lover would, Solovyov obeyed, and beheld her once more in the desert. He recorded these experiences with her in his autobiographical poem, "Three Meetings."<sup>34</sup>

Some of Solovyov's commentators suggest that his experience of Sophia stands as central not only to his life but also to his philosophy. This is the opinion of David Bentley Hart, which was likewise held by Simon Frank.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, V.V. Zenkovsky, in his monumental *A History of Russian Philosophy*, while acknowledging that Solovyov was "preoccupied" with the idea of Sophia, does not see evidence of this in his philosophy.<sup>36</sup> One has to wonder if Zenkovsky was familiar with Solovyov's work! Sophia permeates Solovyov's philosophy, his life, his being. But it would be wrong to say that Sophia is his fundamental insight into the nature of the universe: Solovyov's beliefs that Christ is the God-Man and his confidence in the truth of the Resurrection hold this distinction. It is Sophia, however, that drew him to these conclusions and supplied him with proofs.

But herein resides the problem. What does Solovyov mean when he speaks of the divine Sophia? In *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, he describes Sophia as "God's body, the matter of Divinity" which unites to the Logos in the divinization of the world.<sup>37</sup> However, in the same lecture cycle he also describes Sophia as "ideal or perfect humanity, eternally contained in the integral divine being, or Christ."<sup>38</sup> In *Russia and the Universal Church* he calls Sophia "the guardian angel of the world" and the agent of "pan-unity," another of Solovyov's key philosophical/theological insights.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he connects

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Poems of Sophia*, 23-39.

<sup>35</sup> See David Bentley Hart, "Foreword," *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, xxxix and Simon L. Frank, "Introduction," 27.

<sup>36</sup> V.V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, trans. George L. Kline, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 2: 479.

<sup>37</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Russia and the Universal Church*, trans. Herbert Rees (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948), 167. Florensky, for one, even though



Sophia to Christ, the Virgin Mary, and to the Church. The language he uses to limn this is startling, as if words alone cannot contain the concept. Here is a particular example:

[mankind's] reunion with God, though necessarily threefold, nevertheless constitutes only a single divine-human being the incarnate *Σοφία*, whose central and completely personal manifestation is Jesus Christ, whose feminine complement is the Blessed Virgin, and whose universal extension is the Church.<sup>40</sup>

Solovyov continued to refine his attempts to define Sophia. In his lecture on Auguste Comte (1898), he says,

Sophia, the divine Wisdom, approximates now to Christ, now to Our Lady, thus not admitting of complete identification either with Him or with Her.... This great, royal and feminine Being, which is not God, not the eternal Son of God, not an angel, not a saint ... is no other than the true, pure, and perfect humanity, the highest and all-embracing form and the living soul of nature and of the universe, united to God from all eternity and in the temporal process attaining union with Him and uniting to Him all that is.<sup>41</sup>

It is difficult to understand what Solovyov means by "approximates." It seems that in statements such as these, Solovyov the philosopher is subsumed by Solovyov the mystic.

And that may be how it should be. Simon Frank, for one, argues that Solovyov never succeeded in elucidating his ideas about Sophia because "the task he set himself is essentially unrealizable":

he follows Solovyov in many regards, criticized this concept of Solovyov's as a badly veiled pantheism. On this point, he writes, "[O]ur entire work, in its antinomian spirit opposes Solovyov's conciliatory philosophy" *Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans., Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 433.

<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Russia and the Universal Church*, 176.

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *A Solovyov Anthology*, 57–58.

The difficulty lies, in the last resort, in the impossibility of explaining in rational and logical terms the relation between the Creator and the creature. Our apprehension of it must inevitably remain mystical, i.e. meta-logical, and can only be expressed in categories that belong to the realm of the "unity of opposites."<sup>42</sup>

For this reason, Frank believes that the attempts to "rationalize" and systematize the idea of Sophia assayed by Bulgakov and Florensky "also fail to achieve their purpose in spite of all their subtlety."<sup>43</sup>

One could argue that central to the entire motif of Solovyov's Sophia is the Virgin. Mary's "yes" was the most profound event in the history of humanity, ushering in the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church. Furthermore, from a scientific standpoint, assuming the virgin birth to be true, the physical body of Jesus would be very close genetically to the body of His mother; that is, "God's body, the matter of Divinity," quite literally derived from the body of Mary. As Florensky affirms, "the Body of Christ came out of her, after all."<sup>44</sup> Solovyov infers this when he speaks about the world soul: "Insofar as it receives the divine Logos into itself and is determined by the divine Logos, the world soul is humanity, the divine humanity of Christ, the body of Christ, Sophia."<sup>45</sup>

Solovyov's understanding of Sophia, however, has more often than not brought him into contention with theologians. As Hart observes, "the figure of Sophia, admittedly, arouses more than a little suspicion among even Solovyov's more indulgent Christian readers.... To his less indulgent readers, she is something rather more sinister."<sup>46</sup> Solovyov has been accused of trying to introduce a fourth hypostasis into the dogma of the Trinity, of Gnosticism, and of occultism. As A.V. Kartashov, writes,

<sup>42</sup> S.L. Frank, "Introduction," *Solovyov Anthology*, 12–13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12; note 1.

<sup>44</sup> Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, 253.

<sup>45</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Hart, "Foreword," *Justification of the Good*, xxxix.



The mystical horse on which Solovyov flies over the formidable abyss that exists between God and the world is the long-deserted and forgotten Sophia. Repeating thousand-year-old ancient attempts of the Hellenic philosophy, the biblical hokism, the rabbinical Cabala, and the wild Gnostic science-fiction writings, to fill by illusion the abyss between the Creator and His creatures, Solovyov chooses for this purpose... Sofia, and thus infects our religious-philosophical thinkers and poets for a long time... No gradualness, no bridges of eons can possibly cross the ontological breach between two polarities [God and world].<sup>47</sup>

Solovyov's followers, Bulgakov and Florensky, suffered the same criticisms; and Bulgakov even stood trial on charges of heresy in the Orthodox Church (he was exonerated). Bulgakov had some particularly poignant words for his critics on the topic of Sophia:

it is the problem of a dogmatic *metanoia*, nothing less than a change and a renewal of human hearts. The doctrine of divine Sophia has nothing to do with putting forward any new dogma, and certainly cannot be described as a new heresy within Christianity, although such is the attitude adopted by certain "guardians" of the faith, who see in complete stagnation the only guarantee of a true faith, and dread all new ideas accordingly.<sup>48</sup>

I wonder what it is that impels some to become so skittish when it comes to discussing the theology of the Sophia, present as this figure is in canonical scripture. It does not seem to

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Archimandrite Alexander Mileant, *The Greatness of God and the Triviality of Gods*, trans. Ana P. Joyce and Barbara Olson, Missionary Leaflet #E66b (Los Angeles: Holy Protection Russian Orthodox Church). Brackets in source.

<sup>48</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*, trans. Patrick Thompson et al. (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1993), 13.

me to be a suggestion that Sophia *is* Christ, or that Christ is Sophia. I do not see how one can confuse the "When he established the heavens I was there" of Proverbs with the "I and the Father are one" of St John's Gospel. And, furthermore, is the "he" of Proverbs, from the Christian perspective, not Christ, the Logos? St John again tells us "All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be." Surely, the Sophia of Proverbs is something other than the Godhead.

On the other hand, some feminist theologians have co-opted the idea of Sophia while subjecting it to their own creative genius, often ignoring or disregarding Solovyov's work altogether. Some of this frame of mind hold that Sophia is the Hebrew appropriation of a near eastern goddess whose teachings have been "pirated" into the New Testament and abused by "Roman ecclesiology and Mariology."<sup>49</sup>

This is also the position of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose entire theology seems to be an elaboration on her optative misreading of Luke 7:35, "Wisdom is vindicated by her children."<sup>50</sup> In her entire discussion of Sophia, Schüssler Fiorenza fails to mention Solovyov at all. At the very least, this shows an intolerable ignorance of the theological background of the matter.

The Christianity found in the theology of Schüssler Fiorenza is of a type that Tolstoy might approve, but which Solovyov would have found repugnant. For example, Schüssler Fiorenza calls Christ "a wise teacher, who in his concrete life relates to our ongoing quest for a gracious G\*d. The Sophia-G\*d [why not S\*ph\*-G\*d?] of Jesus loves all humanity irrespective of ethnic or social links and shows concern for liberation and empowerment of the underprivileged."<sup>51</sup> This reduction of Jesus to the level of a sensitive social philosopher would have made Solovyov vomit.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Cady, Marian Roman, and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 77.

<sup>50</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 157.

Schüssler Fiorenza's colleague, Jane Schaberg, blazes in her work that the Virgin Mary was no virgin. She asserts that the Theotokos did not receive her child through the Holy Spirit, but that she became impregnated through seduction or rape. Schaberg describes her theory as being in the "illegitimacy tradition,"<sup>52</sup> though this is rather an abuse of the definition of "tradition," if by it we mean "something handed down." I prefer to call it the "illegitimate tradition."

In the work of Schüssler Fiorenza and Schaberg we find a theology not based on redemption and resurrection, but a system of social ethics. This theology is materialistic, rationalistic, and lacks the vivifying spirit of faith and mysticism. Therefore, it is sterile and already inclines toward death. Truly, as Solovyov said many times, if one seeks an ethical system there is no good reason to choose Christianity.

I do not know how to make sense of Solovyov's Sophia — other than as an individuality. And I do not know how to understand this individuality other than as related to the Virgin.<sup>53</sup> David Matual suggests that while Solovyov's early thoughts about Sophia are tinged with Gnosticism, as the thinker matured he associated her more and more with the Theotokos.<sup>54</sup> Bulgakov and Florensky, following Solovyov's lead, deem the Virgin the physical manifestation of the Sophia (the *creaturely* Sophia) as Jesus is the physical manifestation of the Logos.<sup>55</sup> Von Balthasar questions whether Solovyov's visions of the divine Sophia were not, in fact, apparitions of the Virgin.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the distinctions — at least when speaking of Solovyov's *experience* of Sophia, rather than his exegesis —

<sup>52</sup> Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 74.

<sup>53</sup> Kristi A. Groberg, "The Feminine Occult," relates that V.V. Rozanov suggested Solovyov's writing about his encounters with the Divine Sophia influenced a burgeoning Cult of the Virgin in early twentieth century Russia, 210.

<sup>54</sup> David Mantual, "Mary and Eucumenism in the Eschatology of Vladimir Solovyov," *Diakonia* 29 (1996): 175–88.

<sup>55</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 126; Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 253.

<sup>56</sup> Balthasar, *Glory*, 3:292.

are murky when comparing Solovyov's description of his Eternal Friend with those visionaries relate of the Virgin. For me, Dante's vision of the Virgin in the Empyrean comes immediately to mind. It begins

Virgin Mother, daughter of thy son;  
humble beyond all creatures and more exalted;  
predestined turning point of God's intention.<sup>57</sup>

Dante's magnificent prayer is a beautiful poetic metamorphosis of Aquinas's discussion of the theology of the Virgin in the *Summa*.

Aquinas also touches upon the subject of divine Wisdom, distinguishing between *Sapientia increata* (uncreated Wisdom) and *Sapientia creata* (created wisdom). "When we say 'Wisdom was created,'" he writes,

this may be understood not of Wisdom which is the Son of God, but of created wisdom given by God to creatures: for it is said, "He created her [namely, Wisdom] in the Holy Ghost, and He poured her out over all His works" (Eccclus. 1:9,10).... The saying may also be referred to the created nature assumed by the Son.<sup>58</sup>

Aquinas goes on to admit that the details when parsing the scriptural connotations of the word "wisdom" (and even "Holy Spirit") are inexact at best.

In *Liber Meditationem*, a work spuriously attributed to Saint Augustine, the unknown writer distinguishes between *Sapientia increata* and *Sapientia creata*. Of these Wisdoms the writer says, "just as the illuminating light is differentiated from the illuminated light, so great is the difference between You, the highest, creating Sapientia and that Sapientia which is

<sup>57</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1970), Canto XXX: lines 1–3.

<sup>58</sup> *Summa* 1, article 3, English translation from *Basic Writings of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945). Scriptural passage in original.

created."<sup>59</sup> One could easily apply this distinction to the distinction between Christ and the Theotokos. But this, of course, moves us into dicey theological territory.

Some, for example, want to take this concept a step further and call Mary-Sophia the feminine face of God, regurgitating some of the most ancient and primitive Gnostic heresies. Schüssler Fiorenza makes Jesus Sophia's prophet, radically demoting the second Person of the Trinity to a radically inferior post. Some go so far as to replace God the Father with Sophia, vulgarly praying, "Our maker, Sophia, we are women in your image, with the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life...with nectar between our thighs we invite a lover...with our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations."<sup>60</sup> This is what heresy really looks like. Were it not so sadly uncouth, it would be comical.

The Church has always taught that salvation came to the world through Jesus, and Jesus came to the world through Mary; but from this it does not follow that Jesus is merely Mary/Sophia's "prophet." She was of course His Mother, and the impetus for His first miracle at Cana; she was present at His Crucifixion, and the apostles gathered around her in prayer at Pentecost. She is present to those millions who pray to her every day. In "Three Meetings," Solovyov similarly invokes his Eternal Friend:

Triumphing beforehand over death  
And having overcome the aeons' chain  
With love, eternal beloved, I will not name you,  
But my tremulous song will reach your ears.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation*, trans. James Morgante (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1998), 71.

<sup>60</sup> Susan Cyre, "Fallout Escalates Over 'Goddess' Sophia Worship," *Christianity Today*, April 4, 1994, 74.

<sup>61</sup> *Vladimir Solovyov's Poems of Sophia*, 23.

For what is the Virgin, if not the "Eternal Friend" of humanity?

