

Ecumenical Rebirth of Vladimir Solovyov after Meeting with Bishop Strossmayer

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UDK: 261.8-05
Solov' ev, V. S. * 262.12
Strossmayer, J. J.
Pregledni članak
Primljeno:
8. ožujka 2016.
Prihvaćeno:
30. svibnja 2016.

Summary: *This article describes Vladimir Solovyov's spiritual development from the perspective of his views on relations among Christian churches. The text reflects his search for spiritual nature of the world and universal religion, which would roof Christianity. Due to his visions, Solovyov returns from his early tendency to syncretism to Orthodoxy. His meeting with Bishop Strossmyer opened his mind to the importance of the role of the Catholic Church and the papacy considered critically until then. From this moment Solovjov's Christian identity was open, so that he became a prophet of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century.*

Keywords: *Vladimir Solovyov, Bishop Josip Strossmayer, Christianity, ecumenism.*

Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) ranked (almost immediately after his death) as one of the greatest representative of Russian intellectuals of the 19th century. Moreover, his influence is not restricted to Russian society – he greatly influenced the European thinking of the 20th century. He was routinely compared to the greatest thinkers, as evidenced by the nicknames he was given by his followers: 'Origen'¹ and 'the Russian Newman'². Given that the second nickname was used mainly to emphasize Solovyov's conversion to Catholicism (as in the case of Newman), in this article, we try to present the development of his views. An important milestone in his search for unity among Christians was his visit to Zagreb, Croatia and his friendship with Bishop Josip Strossmayer. We divide the text by sections representing various stages of Solovyov's encounters with the Christian confessions: from the idea of the

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¹ Viz V. NIKOL'SKIJ, *Russkij Origen XIX veka VI. S. Solov' jëv*. Sankt-Peterburg: Nauka, 2000.

² Viz M. d'HERBIGNY, *Un Neumann russe, Vladimir Soloviev*. Paris: [s. n.], 1911; in English: *Vladimir Soloviev: A Russian Newman*, London: R. and T. Wasbourne, 1918.

universal Church, to criticism of Western Christianity and, finally, to his vision of ecumenism.

Solovyov's search for the universal Church and criticism of Western Christianity

In his youth, Vladimir Solovyov went through a rather complicated transformation. He grew up in faith in an intellectual family, but he rejected the faith during his adolescence and became a supporter of materialism and evolutionism (rather systematically and deliberately). However, considering the consequences of these world-views led him to an existential crisis; a mystical experience with the Wisdom of God made him abandon them. Gradually, Solovyov returned to the faith in God; firstly at the intellectual level: he accepted philosophical arguments and came to understand the dark tendencies in his will, later, his faith became fortified at the emotional level as well thanks to the above mentioned mystical experience in which he perceived the all-unity.³ His whole life, Solovyov sought to synthesize: it was a reflection of the unity that he came to see in his mystical experience in the Egyptian desert. In his initial remarks from Cairo, in which he described his conversation with the Wisdom of God, he criticizes the historical forms of Christianity and he searches for a universal religion that includes not only the synthesis of all religions, but also a synthesis of all knowledge.

»Modern Catholicism and Protestantism are withered tree branches that do not give fruit, and the time has come to cut them off. If you call Christianity the whole tree, then the universal religion is nothing more than the final product of Christianity, Christianity in its perfect form; but if the universal religion is to be sought in the roots and trunk, then Christianity is not a universal religion.«⁴

His religious conception of the world further developed. At the beginning, Solovyov was an advocate of *pluralistic theology* with an accent on syncretism. With the progress – and following the example of the Church Fathers – he also integrated various aspects of knowledge from main world religions into the all-embracing Christianity with the central point in the incarnation of the God-man Jesus Christ. During this period, he reached the point when he was set to determine the nature of the Church. His attempt to research ecclesiological question in pure honesty brought him many a crisis, many disputes and quarrels: his mystical knowledge of the universal unity was unacceptable for the climate in society and the Church. Moreover, he had to deal with Slavophilia and, eventually, to make a ‘Copernican’

³ For details, see K. SLÁDEK, *Vladimír Solovjov: mystik a prorok*. Olomouc: Refugium, 2009.

⁴ V. SOLOV'ĚV, *La Sofia, L'Eterna Sapienza mediatrice tra Dio e il mondo*. Torino: San Paolo, p. 20.

turn toward the Catholic Church, but he always perceived it as part of his vision of the Universal Church.

Solovyov's perception of the Church changed partially even before he left – in the summer of 1886 at the invitation of the Roman Catholic bishop Josip Strossmayer – to Zagreb, Croatia. It was also in Zagreb where the first part of his study *History and Future of Theocracy* appeared. Before his departure to Zagreb, Solovyov wrote a letter to Bishop Strossmayer and Strossmayer invited him to visit. In Zagreb, Solovyov clarifies his position on the role of the Slavs: they should overcome the conflicts among the Christian churches and should unite the Church.

»The fate of Russia, the Slavs and the world depends on the unification. We the Russians, the Orthodox and the entire East are useless until the sin that has destroyed the Church schism is not effaced.«⁵

In the subsequent revision of his conclusions Solovyov abandons his earlier proposition of the universal religion, superior to Christianity. Nevertheless, true to his Slavophilism, Solovyov remained critical to the western form of Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) and he underlined the uniqueness of Eastern Orthodoxy. In the first part of his *Philosophical foundations of a complex knowledge*, Solovyov outlines the historical process to which he returns further, especially in the second, eleventh and twelfth lecture in *Lectures on Divine Humanity*. He describes the anti-Catholicism fight in Europe and he points out that he cannot support neither of the fighting sides. He documents the decay of Catholicism on the example of the key figure of the Apostle Peter, while the contemporary culture of the West he sees as the culture of the apostle Judas.

»When the defenders of culture justly reproach Catholicism for the use of violence against its enemies, it is as if they followed an example of their patron Apostle Peter: he, in in Gethsemane garden, drew his sword to defend Christ; when they justly reproach Catholicism for forming and formulating a worldly form for things that are immanently divine, it is as if they followed the example of the same Apostle, who wanted to set up a camp for Jesus, Moses and Elijah on Mount Tabor during his Transfiguration, by the same coin can the defenders of Catholicism reproach the current culture for its pursuit of material affluence and wealth right after its fall-away from the Christianity and religious principles, and for finding the worst example in another Apostle: the one who sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver.«⁶

⁵ From Solovyov's letter to Strossmayer, in: *Vyšehrad, List pro křesťanskou kulturu*, I., 25–27 (1946), p. 55.

⁶ V. SOLOV'JEV, Čteníja o Bogočelovečestve, Stat'ji, Stichotvorenija i poema, Iz »Trech razgovorov«. Sankt-Peterburg: »Chudožestvennaja literatura«, 1994, p. 44–45.

In the last chapters of this work, Solovyov sees Catholicism on the basis of the exegesis of the passage on the temptation of Christ in the desert; he applies such a temptation (to use the word of God to gain material goods; to use your divine powers to mend one's own pride; and to use violence (i.e., the evil) to good goals) to the Catholic Church. Of course, according to Solovyov, the Catholic Church is completely succumbed in such sins. The decline of the Church reaches its depth in the universally hated Jesuit order. Paradoxically, the members of the Society of Jesus were to become his major supporters after his death.

»In Jesuitism – the extreme and purest expression of the Roman Catholic principle – the essential driving force is the appetite for power, not Christian zeal; nations are not submit to Christ, but to the authority of the Church, and, of course, the confession of the Christian faith is no longer required – all you need to do is to confess to the Pope and obey ecclesiastical authorities.«⁷

The difference between the Christian East and West is marked rather clearly; Solovyov keeps pointing the important role of Orthodoxy:

»The East – with all the powers of its spirit – gravitates toward the divine and protects it; by doing it, it perpetuates tradition and asceticism; the West, on the other hand, uses all of its energy on the development of human principles, which inevitably leads to the loss of the divine truth, distorted at first – and rejected in full in the end.«⁸

Solovyov rethinks his attitudes and he visits Zagreb

In the third essay from *Three speeches in Memory of Dostoyevsky* from February 19, 1883, Solovyov suddenly and unexpectedly changes his paradigmatic perception of the Church. In the essay, Solovyov is rather restrained towards the constant search for »a plank in the eye« and the causes of the disintegration of the West (as he did in the heydays of his Slavophilism period), but points towards the universal sin of division. He does not follow Petr Chaadayev and »Westerners« in their praise for the West and Catholicism; for the first time, he speaks about a necessary unity between the churches and in this is the main task of the Russian mission.

»The division between the East and West based on conflict and antagonism, mutual murder and hate – such a division should not exist in Christianity, and

⁷ V. SOLOV'JEV, Čtenija o Bogočelovečestve, Stat'ji, Stichotvorenija i poema, Iz »Treh razgovorov«, p. 195.

⁸ V. SOLOV'JEV, Čtenija o Bogočelovečestve, Stat'ji, Stichotvorenija i poema, Iz »Treh razgovorov«, p. 200–201.

if it does, it is a great sin and a great misfortune. But just at the time, when this great sin occurred in Byzantium, Russia was born to redeem it.«⁹

Gradually, Solovyov began to look for the positive sides of Catholicism and I dare to say that none of the Orthodox thinkers of that time went as far as Solovyov. For a positive evaluation of the role of Catholicism in history (traditionally perceived as schismatic and heretical papacy), Solovyov was abundantly criticized by Slavophiles Alexander Kireev and Ivan Aksakov.¹⁰

In 1883, Ivan Aksakov decided to censor Solovyov's article, specifically the parts in which he presented his new attitude towards Rome. Solovyov responded and sent Aksakov a letter, in which he pointed out the negative impact of prejudice against Catholicism and hostility against the papacy; in his view, such an attitude brings no positive value for the future. Solovyov recognizes the historical failures of the papacy, but he tries to find a spiritual understanding for the future of Christians. He asks for a spiritual renewal, a new understanding of eternal Rome – not just the then-obvious failure (and, certainly, Solovyov didn't mean to ask only the Orthodox side for such an understanding).

»It seems to me,« Solovyov wrote to Aksakov, *»that you are looking only at papistry, but I'm looking at great, holy and eternal Rome, essential and inseparable part of the universal Church. It is in such a Rome that I believe, I bow down before it, I love it with all my heart and with all the spirit of my soul I wish to restore it, for the unity and integrity of the universal Church.*«¹¹

Solovyov's effort to create a platform for the unification of the Catholic and Orthodox churches appeared interesting for some Catholics, especially the aforementioned Zagreb's Roman Catholic bishop Josip Strossmayer. Needless to say, this further worsened Solovyov's position in the Russian Orthodox Church. Solovyov's visit in Zagreb in 1886 had a positive effect: it has increased the Roman Catholics' interest in Solovyov's vision of the united Church. The Croatian Bishop Strossmayer turned out to be Solovyov's soul mate. Together, they discussed all the controversial aspects of Catholicism. Solovyov sent to Strossmayer his »Promemoria«: a collection of Solovyov's letters (written in French) in which he praised the wisdom of Pope Leo XIII., defined the dogmas of the first seven ecumenical councils as a pillar for the unity of the Church and appealed to the Council of Florence.

⁹ A. LOSEV, (ed.) *Vladimir Sergejevič Solov'jev, Sočinenija v dvuch tomach*. II, Moskva: Mysl, 1988, p. 316.

¹⁰ On the dispute between Solovyov and Kireev and Aksakov, see S. SOLOV'JEV, *Vladimír Solov'jev: žizň i tvorčeskaja evolucija*. Moskva: Respublika, 1997, p. 195–215.

¹¹ From Solovyov's letter to Aksakov, in: *Vyšehrad, List pro křestanskou kulturu*, I, 25–27 (1946), p. 54.

Although Bishop Strossmayer believed that Solovyov (whom he called »anima candida pia ac vere sancta«, i.e. 'a pure, pious and truly holy soul'), eventually will convert to Catholicism¹², Solovyov participated in the liturgy of the Serbian Orthodox Church while in Zagreb. After his return to Russia, he had to deny in-the-meantime widespread opinion that he became a Catholic. His »ambivalent« attitude can be explained by his search for the true Christian identity, which includes both of the two Christian traditions.

Vladimir Solovyov lived his Orthodoxy within the Catholicity of the undivided universal Church, a vision that he introduced in 1888 in Paris in his book *Russia and the Universal Church*. In this book, Solovyov argues in favor of the Catholic Church as the universal and supra-national organization. In the introduction, he defines the three fundamental characteristics of the universal Church following from its divine-human nature:

»The Universal Church (in the broad sense of the word) reveals three divine-human unity: the unity of the priesthood, in which the divine Principle, absolute and unchangeable, predominates and creates the Church in the strict sense – the Temple of God; then there is the royal unity, in which the human principle dominates and it creates a Christian state (the Church as a Living Body of God); and finally, there is the prophetic unity, in which the divine and the human meet in a free and mutual union, creating thus a perfect Christian community (the Church as the Bride of God).«¹³

In three chapters, Solovyov tries to create a basis for unity between the divided churches. The first part deals with the Russian religious history, Russian Christian identity and its mission; it moreover argues against the anti-Catholic Slavophiles and the problematic relations among the Orthodox churches. In the conclusion, Solovyov states:

»The apparent inability to find or create the Center of the unity of the Universal Church in the East obliges us to look for it in another place. Above all, we must recognize our own nature, especially the fact that we are an organic part of the great Christian body; hence we have to acknowledge our close solidarity with our brothers in the West, and the fact that they do have a central authority – and that we lack it. This is a moral act, an act of justice and love, and admitting just that would be a tremendous step forward and a necessary condition for all the future development.«¹⁴

¹² S. SOLOV'JEV, *Vladimir Solov'jev: Žizn' i učenje*, p. 234.

¹³ V. SOLOVIEV, *La Russie et l'Église universelle*. Paris: Deuxième Édition, 1889, p. 16.

¹⁴ V. SOLOVIEV, *La Russie et l'Église universelle*, p. 82–83.

The second part, entitled »*The Ecclesiastical monarchy founded by Jesus Christ*« is rich exegesis of biblical texts; Solovyov uses them to illuminate topics such as the importance of divine-human nature of Christ for understanding the Church, the figure of Peter and his profession of faith in Christ at Caesarea Philippi: »*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*« (Mt 16:16), and the subsequent provision of Peter as the »rock« with the »keys to the kingdom of heaven«. These episodes show Solovyov's acceptance of the role of the papacy, especially his favorable interpretation of the pontificate of Leo the Great as the supreme authority on the Council of Chalcedon. The papacy in Solovyov's vision of the universal Church acquired a whole new meaning.

»*St. Peter the Apostle has the primacy of power; But why should be the Roman Pontiff a follower of the primacy? [...] Since we have admitted a primary supreme power in the Universal Church instituted by Christ in the person of St. Peter, it means that we have to accept the fact that this power is somewhere. And the obvious impossibility to find the place anywhere else than Rome should be a sufficient reason to agree with the renowned Catholic thesis.*«¹⁵

Solovyov's shift in the biblical exegesis of Peter's attitudes is highly significant for his understanding of Catholicism. While in Slavophilism period, Solovyov conceived the role of Peter as the archetype of the papacy – a priori, with his sins (the attempt to build tents in the Transfiguration on Tabor, violence in the arrest and subsequent betrayal), now is Peter – though still in the light of the Roman succession – viewed through the prism of his conversion, his confession of faith in the Messiah and Christ's bestowing him the administrator and the executor of the power in the Universal Church. When explaining the role of Rome in the seventh chapter, Solovyov used a witty pun: the Italian name for Rome »Roma« gives – read backwards – »amor«, 'love'; Rome, then, holds the presidency of love.

Ecumenical Identity of Vladimir Solovyov

Solovyov's »turn« towards Catholicism was, apparently, reflected in his dream, as Karel Jindřich says. Dreams were to Solovyov »windows« to the invisible realities and he paid attention to them. Karel Jindřich met Solovyov in 1898 and they talked about – then already officially banned – Solovyov's *Russia and the Universal Church* and the restrictions on religious freedom imposed by the government. To that, Karel Jindřich said:

»*He told us a dream he had as a young boy. In the dream, he met a Catholic hierarch and approached him to ask for his blessing. The hierarch looked disap-*

¹⁵ V. SOLOVIEV, *La Russie et l'Église universelle*, p. 156.

*provingly away, at first, but eventually, he blessed him. That dream later came through: in 1883, Solovyov got introduced to the papal legate Cardinal Vanutelli, who arrived to Moscow for the coronation of Alexander III. Solovyov came to him with his hands folded crosswise according to the Orthodox custom, and before he started talking to him, he approached him and bowed awaiting his blessing. The Cardinal, surprised by such a behavior, stood there for a moment puzzled, but when he realized Solovyov was waiting for the blessing, he gave it to him graciously.*¹⁶

Solovyov tried to be a living proof of the undivided Church; obviously, he had to deal with accusations that he transfers from one denomination to another, and that he freely moves between »firmly« established ecclesiastic criteria. Nikolay Lossky in his *History of Russian Philosophy* expressed Solovyov's attitude aptly:

*»Catholics believe that Solovyov departed from Orthodoxy and clung to the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, Solovyov has never broken up with Orthodoxy. He was convinced that the Western and Eastern Church are bound by uninterrupted mystical bond to which the outside division is meaningless.*¹⁷

Sergei Solovyov gives testimony to his uncle's secret inclination to Uniats, based on the ceremony of his friend, the Russian Eastern Rite Catholic priest Nikolai Tolstoy. Tolstoy was originally an Orthodox priest who – also under the influence of Solovyov – transferred to Uniats:

*»On February 19th, 1896, the Remembrance day of Leo the Great, the Roman Pontiff, whom Solovyov greatly respected, he received Holy Communion from the hands of father Tolstoy. Before the liturgy, he confessed the Tridentine profession of faith.*¹⁸

Given all the disputes sparked by his attitude, towards the end of his life Solovyov did not have much faith in the possibility of a unity envisioned by the Universal Church; in particular the vision of cooperation between the Pope and Czar was very bleak. Hence, the unity of the Church was envisioned in the end of history, in the context of the apocalyptic battle between Good and evil; in his *Three conversations*, it happens in the 21st century. At the end of this work, he »provocatively« refers to the final eschatological subordination of Orthodoxy (as presented in the archetype of an old man, John) and Protestantism (impersonated by Professor Pau-

¹⁶ K. JINDŘICH, *Vzpomínka na Vladimíra Solovjeva*, a supplement in: V. SOLOVJEV, *Tři rozhovory*. Praha: Zvon, 1997, p. 229.

¹⁷ N. LOSSKIJ, *Istorija ruskoj filosofii*. Moskva: »Svarog i K«, p. 98.

¹⁸ S. SOLOVJEV, *Vladimir Solov'jev: Žizn' i tvorčeskaja evolucija*, p. 318.

li) to the spiritual leadership of the Pope Peter: this, in turn, reveals the visible unity of the undivided Universal Church.

»*And the venerable John began to speak: 'So, little children, we have not parted, and now I say to you, it is time to carry out Christ's last prayer about His followers, that they should be one even as He with the Father is one. So for the sake of this unity of Christ, we revere, little children, our well-beloved brother, Peter. May he feed the last of Christ's sheep.'* And he embraced Peter. Then Professor Pauli went up to him. *'Tu est Petrus', he said to the Pope, 'jetzt ist es ja gründlich erwiesen und ausser jedem Zweifel gesetzt.'* He seized his hand firmly with his own right hand and gave his left to the venerable John with the words: *'So also, Väterchen – nun sind wir ja Eins in Christo.'* Thus was accomplished the union of the churches in the darkness of the night on a high and lonely place.«¹⁹

There are two key moments in Solovyov's life that were used both by the Catholics and the Orthodox to give more significance to their part in the sacrament – and to diminish the role of the other denomination. The moments were Solovyov's participation in the Uniat's liturgy and Last rites received by an Orthodox priest.²⁰ I believe that Solovyov's prophetic intuition can be utterly understood only in the context of a gradual change after the 2nd Vatican Council, thanks to the new ecumenical vision that better reflects the eschatological reality of unity among Christians – that Solovyov saw.

Conclusion

From the presented facts it became clear that concerning the Ecumeny Solovyov oscillated between his original Slavophile position highlighting the role of the Orthodoxy – and his subsequent Catholic view, in which he recognized the papacy, to his concept of universal faith as envisioned in the existence of the spiritual, mystical and historically inseparable Universal Church. We could read the 2nd Vatican Council's decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* analogously: the ecumenical need to find unity among Christian churches. Proposing this, Solovyov was far ahead of his time, and he was a prophet of ecumenism in times, in which no one could even imagine this way of thinking, especially not with such a depth: such was even inconceivable. Yet, already then and there, there appeared new impulses supporting Solovyov's vision – and thus the new era of relations between Christians could open. There is one point of certainty: Vladimir Soloviev recognized the important role of the Pope for unity among Christians; a very topical issue in Catholic-Orthodox dialogue now.

¹⁹ V. SOLVOYOV, *War and Christianity, from the Russian point of view. Three conversations*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915, p. 183.

²⁰ A. TESKOVÁ, *Vladimír Solovjev v české literatuře*, in: *Slovanský přehled*, XVIII. (1926), p. 503.