

This brilliant study of Russia’s greatest religious philosopher delivers much more than its title suggests. The “spiritualization of matter” is the focus of a broad-ranging inquiry into Vladimir Soloviev’s conception of the kingdom of God. Soloviev characterized the kingdom of God as “the central idea of Christianity,” and Oliver Smith himself recognizes it as the philosopher’s “dominant theological motif” (11, 109). It encompasses the whole of Soloviev’s philosophy; the spiritualization of matter is a part. Smith’s book, despite its modest claim to being about one part, is really about the whole. It conveys that whole effectively and powerfully.

The first chapter (“The First Things”) is the longest, and the most difficult and abstract. It deals with Soloviev’s metaphysics, which conceives the absolute as all-unity (vseednoe), as the union of the one and many, the union of the absolute in itself with its manifested and multiple other (the world). Smith emphasizes that the foundations of Soloviev’s metaphysical system, “the ground of all his philosophizing” (3), are his early mystical experiences of Sophia or Divine Wisdom. Soloviev soon gave his mystical vision of all-unity rational expression in his theoretical works. Smith’s masterful exposition concentrates on Soloviev’s “perichoretic view of the hypostatic absolute” (55), which refers to the inner logic of the absolute’s creative movement out from itself, its self-manifestation through its three hypostases: the Godhead (which Soloviev also designates by the Kabbalistic term em-soph), Logos, and Holy Spirit. The agent of all-unity is Logos, “the moving power of all being which relates each thing to every other, God to the world, and the world to God” (75).

In the second chapter (“Humanity”), Smith turns to Soloviev’s touchstone concept of theanthropy (bogochelovechestvo, also translated as Godmanhood, divine humanity, or the humanity of God). Even the term reveals the philosopher’s “inability to think the divine without the human” (93). Though Smith does not dwell on the point, theanthropy is a development of the Chalcedonian formulation of Christ the God-man’s two natures, divine and human, which in him are unmerged yet undivided. Soloviev in effect extends Chalcedon to all humanity, emphasizing that the divine (the image of God in us) must be freely recognized and embraced by the human (i.e., by reason and will, the distinctively human principles). Our task is to bring our nature into ever closer “likeness” or conformity with God. Christ achieved this perfect conformity, and he did so through, in Soloviev’s words, “an act of the rational human will” (120). As Smith elegantly puts it, “The humanity of Christ is ‘spiritualized’ or divinized not despite his humanity but because of it” (119). We are to follow Jesus’s example and teaching: “Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, one of Soloviev’s favorite verses, which Smith might have quoted). This is the true, divine-human (theanthropic) path to the kingdom of God: divine in that God is the ideal of perfection, human in that the task of perfectionibility is ours. For Soloviev, the kingdom of God accomplishes the spiritualization of matter, and again Christ shows how it happens: having perfectly conformed his humanity to his divinity, he was resurrected, his “new flesh” spiritualized and transfigured. The spiritual body of the risen Christ is an important part of Smith’s thesis.

The last two chapters (“Prophecy” and “The Last Things,” with an “excursus” between them) address the important issue of the nature of Soloviev’s “apocalyptic turn” in the last few years of his life. Contrary to the view that Soloviev abandoned his former belief in the efficacy of human agency in the realization of the kingdom of God, Smith sides with those (notably Judith Deutsch Kornblatt) who stress continuity. Although he maintains that the
kingdom of God always remained a divine-human project for Solov'ev, he does argue for a profound shift in the nature of the human contribution—from reason and will to feeling and imagination, in particular to love and beauty. In making this argument, which will long be discussed by Solov'ev scholars, Smith explores a range of topics: Solov'ev's assessment of Plato, his concern over various “counterfeits” (including some of his own former enthusiasms) for the genuine good and truth, his understanding of prophecy as the highest form of theanthropic consciousness and activity, and of course his philosophy of love and aesthetics. At points Smith (influenced by William Desmond) seems to push Solov'ev's theanthropic balance too far in the direction of the transcendent divine and the "pathos of the end," at the expense of the immanent human side of the equation. That takes nothing away from the major contribution that he has made to the study of Russian religious philosophy.

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