Randall A. Poole

The Greatness of Vladimir Solov'ëv: A Review Essay

In 1950, Semën Frank, himself no mean Russian philosopher, wrote that “Solovyov is unquestionably the greatest of Russian philosophers and systematic religious thinkers.” With the appearance over the last decade or so of a series of translations, new editions, and scholarly works on Solov'ëv, we have never been in a better position to assess his greatness. In this essay I shall argue that Solov'ëv’s reputation as Russia’s greatest philosopher rests on the essential humanism of his core concept, Godmanhood (bogochelovechestvo). This thesis is not new. Berdiaev wrote that humanism is a constituent part of Godmanhood, the realization of which depends on free human activity. Frank contended that the truth of humanism is a religious truth, namely, the universal principle of Godmanhood—in his words, the “potential divinity” of humanity and even all creation—and that “the significance of Solovyov is to have once more faced this decisive problem in all its depth and importance.” More recently Paul Valliere, whose work will figure prominently here, has written that “the concept of bogochelovechestvo was the vehicle for a


principled and profound Orthodox Christian humanism.” Valliere and other scholars, including Richard Gustafson, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Marina Kostalevsky, have, however, explored Solov’ëv’s humanism in greater depth than earlier writers. They have demonstrated that it gives his thought an overall impressive continuity, revising traditional interpretations such as Trubetskoi’s and Mochul’skii’s, which stressed the discontinuities across the philosopher’s main intellectual periods, especially in the case of his last, apocalyptic phase. In what follows I will consider these new directions in Solov’ëv scholarship, while developing further the three main elements of his humanism—human autonomy, dignity and perfectibility—concentrating for this latter purpose on Lectures on Godmanhood and Justification of the Good, both of which are available in new editions and which are the most important works of the philosopher’s earlier and later periods, respectively.

**LIFE, WORKS, CONCEPTS**

Vladimir Sergeevich Solov’ëv was born in Moscow in 1853, the son of Sergei M. Solov’ëv, the leading Russian historian of his generation. After receiving a classical gymnasium education, Vladimir graduated from Moscow University in 1873. In November of the following year he defended his master’s thesis, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against the Positivists*, his first book. It anticipated the broader Russian revolt against positivism by about twenty years and made Solov’ëv into something of a celebrity. He began lecturing at Moscow University and the Moscow Higher Courses for Women, but in June 1875 went abroad for research on

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5 Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology* 12. Subsequent page references to this work will be cited parenthetically as “MRT.”

6 In addition to *Modern Russian Theology*, Valliere has also written major essays on Solov’ëv and modern Orthodoxy in *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*. The important volume edited by Kornblatt and Gustafson contains sets of essays on Solov’ëv, Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, and Semën Frank. The three essays on Solov’ëv were written by Gustafson, Kornblatt, and Maria Carlson. Kostalevsky examines the friendship and interrelated thought of Russia’s greatest philosopher and one of its two greatest novelists. This review essay also takes into account other works of scholarship (Jonathan Sutton and Andrzej Walicki) and translation (Boris Jakim and Vladimir Wozniuk), as cited below.


gnosticism and mysticism at the British Museum. There he had a mystical experience of Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, who directed him to travel to Egypt. In the desert he saw her again. Returning to Moscow in the summer of 1876, he resumed teaching and wrote his second book, *Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge* (1877). Within a year he moved to St. Petersburg to take a position in the Ministry of Public Education. In early 1878 he delivered his famous *Lectures on Godmanhood* to audiences of nearly a thousand that included Dostoevsky. In April 1880 the young philosopher defended a brilliant doctoral dissertation, *Critique of Abstract Principles*, and then began teaching at St. Petersburg University. The author of four books in six years was twenty-seven years old,” as Valliere observes.

These early works, all highly theoretical, advance the main outlines of Solov’ëv’s philosophical system. It was a metaphysics of the “unity of all” (*vseedinство*), which conceived the cosmos as the manifestation or “other” of the divine absolute in the process of its own becoming or self-realization. The unity of all, the return of (perfected) creation to the creator, was to be achieved through Godmanhood, which refers to humanity’s divine potential and vocation, the ideal of our divine self-realization in and union with God. Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are called to actively work for this ideal, that is, for the Kingdom of God and universal transformation in the unity of all, in which all will be one in God. This work involves striving toward “free unity” among the three spheres of life: “free theurgy” in creativity, “free theosophy” in knowledge, and “free theocracy” in social practice. The third element of Solov’ëv’s metaphysics of cosmic redemption is Sophia, the subject of his mystical experiences. Sophia is the

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9 For an insightful discussion of the similarities between gnosticism and Solov’ëv’s religious philosophy, concentrating on the idea of Sophia, see Maria Carlson, “Gnostic Elements in the Cosmogony of Vladimir Soloviev,” in *Russian Religious Thought* 49–67.
10 *Filosofskie nachala tsel'nogo znaniia*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1: 250–406. There is no English translation.
11 *Chteniia o Bogochelovechestve*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3: 1–181. There is no English translation.
12 *Kritika otvlechenykh nachal*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2: v–xvi, 1–397. There is no English translation.
14 Solov’ëv distinguishes between two poles of the absolute. The first is self-subsistent (God), the second is in the process of becoming (man), “and the full truth can be expressed by the word ‘Godmanhood.’” *Kritika otvlechennykh nachal* 315–324, quotation at p. 323. This metaphysics fits squarely within the neo-Platonic and Christian tradition of soteriology and theogony, which Leszek Kolakowski has described as God’s “self-enriching alienation.” Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*, vol. I, trans. by P. S. Falla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 7–80.
15 *Filosofskie nachala tsel'nogo znaniia* 286–287.
Divine Wisdom by which God created the world, the unity and divinity of creation. Since the highest form of creation is humanity, the point where creation most reflects its creator, Sophia can be described as ideal humanity, humanity as it ought to be, as conceived by God. Our task is to perfect ourselves and transfigure the world according to their divine, Sophic essence. Indeed the great theme of Solov’ëv’s philosophy is human perfectibility.16

Compared to the theoretical focus of his first four books, Solov’ëv’s work in the 1880s took a somewhat different direction. On 1 March 1881 Emperor Alexander II was assassinated by terrorist revolutionaries. Later that month Solov’ëv gave a public speech in which he appealed to the new tsar, Alexander III, to show Christian mercy on the regicides who had killed his father. In particular, he asked that they be spared the death penalty, which he regarded as an unconscionable violation of human dignity.17 Solov’ëv’s plea was poorly received by both his audience, who booed him, and Alexander III, who when he heard of the speech ordered the philosopher to “refrain for a certain time” from lecturing in public.18 This was a mild measure, but Solov’ëv felt it necessary to resign his positions at the Ministry of Public Education and St. Petersburg University. Thenceforth he lived as an independent scholar and publicist, devoting himself to his writings.

In the 1880s they focused on various aspects of his project for establishing a worldwide “free theocracy,” which would reunify Eastern and Western Christianity under the spiritual authority of the Roman pontiff and the imperial dominion of the Russian tsar, all in preparation for the Kingdom of God on earth.19 Disappointment with Russia as the messianic agent of universal theocracy, and more generally with the external forms of his theocratic ideal, led Solov’ëv to return to philosophy

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16 It is the first of the “central teachings” identified by Jonathan Sutton in his The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov: Towards a Reassessment (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988). In some ways Sutton’s book, based on his doctoral thesis, inaugurated the current wave of Solov’ëv studies. It is full of insights but somewhat schematic in its approach.

17 Solov’ëv was a lifelong opponent of capital punishment. He wrote devastating critiques of it in his long essay Law and Morality: Essays in Applied Ethics (1897) and in a shorter one, “Retribution (On the Spanish-American War)” (1898), a remarkable piece that also deals with another of his abiding concerns: freedom of conscience. Both are included in Politics, Law, and Morality: Essays by V. S. Soloviev, ed. and trans. by Vladimir Wozniuk (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 111–123, 171–184.

18 On Solov’ëv’s speech and its reception see Kostalevsky, Dostoevsky and Soloviev 78–80.

19 His works of the period include Dukhovnye osnovy zhizni (1882–1884), translated as God, Man and the Church: The Spiritual Foundations of Life by Donald Attwater (London: James Clarke, 1938); “Velikii spor i khristianskaia politika” (“The Great Schism and Christian Politics”) (1883); “Evreistvo i khristianskii vopros” (“The Jews and the Christian Problem”) (1884); Istoriia i budushchnost’ teokratii (The History and Future of Theocracy) (1887); L’Idée russe (1888); La Russie et l’Église universelle (1889), translated as Russia and the Universal Church by Herbert Rees (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948); and Natsional’nyi vopros v Rossii (The National Question in Russia), two vols. (1888, 1891).
proper in the 1890s. This period culminated with a major treatise on ethics and social philosophy, *Justification of the Good* (1897).20 His final work was *Three Dialogues on War, Progress and the End of World History, with a Brief Tale of the Anti-Christ* (1899–1900).21 He died on 31 July 1900.

Some of Solov'ëv’s works have long been available in English, and more are now thanks in particular to the remarkable efforts of Boris Jakim and Vladimir Wozniuk. Jakim has translated *The Crisis of Western Philosophy* for the first time and has produced excellent new editions of two seminal texts: *Lectures on Divine Humanity* and *Justification of the Good*.22 The reissuing of these last two volumes in easily accessible editions is itself a great service, even before taking into account Jakim’s expert revision and editing of the Zouboff and Duddington translations, respectively. Wozniuk has also produced a series of wonderful volumes that collect and translate many of Solov'ëv’s most important essays.23

**SOLOV’ËV AND RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY**

Together with the new translations is new scholarship. Most notable is the work of Paul Valliere, whose magnum opus, *Modern Russian Theology*, raises our understanding of Solov'ëv and Russian religious philosophy to a whole new level. The middle part of the book (five chapters) is devoted to Solov'ëv. In addition, Valliere wrote the chapter on Solov'ëv (as well as the introduction to the Orthodox tradition) in *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*.24 As he explains in his introduction to *Modern Russian Theology*, the “new

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20 *Opravdanie dobra: nравственная философия*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8: 3–516.
22 See notes 1 and 8 above.
24 The first volume of this remarkable set contains an editors’ introduction; three chapters on the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions as a whole; chapters on twenty leading Christian thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and two concluding chapters on Christian jurisprudence and political philosophy. The second volume is a sourcebook of writings from the twenty thinkers. Apart from Solov'ëv, the Orthodox thinkers presented in the set are Nicholas Berdyaev (by Vigen Guroian), Vladimir Lossky (by Mikhail M. Kulakov), Mother Maria Skobtsova (by Michael Plekhon), and Dumitru
key” in the subtitle is the phrase Fr. Alexander Schmemann used to describe the development of Russian philosophical theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The “Russian school” of Orthodox theology was new in recognizing the need to go beyond patristics and to (rationally and philosophically) “justify the faith of our fathers,” as Solov’ëv famously put it. It was also new in appreciating that Orthodoxy had to engage modern society. Modern Russian theology was, in other words, a liberal project. In addition to the three thinkers treated by Valliere, religious philosophers of the “Russian school” included the brothers Sergei and Evgenii Trubetskoi, Semën Frank, Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Florensky, and Lev Karsavin.

The Russian school evoked a reaction after the Russian Revolution among émigré Russian theologians, led by Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky, whose “neopatristic school” achieved prominence by mid-century. The contrast between the philosophical and neopatristic approaches to Orthodox theology frames Modern Russian Theology and Valliere’s chapters in The Teachings of Modern Christianity. The distinction is not, of course, that one school rejected patristic theology while the other embraced it. It is that the Russian school felt free to mediate and interpret the patristic sources through the intellectual resources of modern philosophy, while the neopatristic school felt tradition-bound to commend an apophatic (negative) or mystical approach, which it saw as more authentically patristic. In contrast to the Russian school, the neopatristic school has also, for the most part, eschewed theological interpretation of legal, social, and political questions.

The Russian school’s most recondite idea, and the best example of its philosophical development of patristic theology, is Godmanhood, first systematically advanced by Solov’ëv. The concept, as “the vehicle for a principled and profound Orthodox Christian humanism” (in Valliere’s apt evaluation quoted above), was central to the whole project of the Russian school. In many ways Modern Russian Theology is a history and reconstruction of the idea among the book’s three main figures (a type of pre-history in the case of Bukharev). The concept is the key to understanding Solov’ëv.

Stăniloae (by Lucian Turcescu).

27 Feodor Bukharev occasionally used the term, but it is still, in Valliere’s phrase, “pre-philosophic” in his works. Modern Russian Theology 33.
28 Evgenii Trubetskoi wrote that “it constitutes the center of his entire doctrine, philosophical and religious, the basic content of all his teaching.” Trubetskoi, Mirosozertsanie Vl. S. Solov'eva, vol. 1: 325. Konstantin Mochul'skii considered Godmanhood the “height of his creativity.” Mochul'skii 10.
GODMANHOOD AND THE MEANING OF ABSOLUTE HUMAN VALUE

Bogochelovechestvo is a difficult term to translate. The traditional translation, following Zouboff, is “Godmanhood.” Jakim uses “divine humanity,” while Valliere proposes the “humanity of God.” Bogochelovechestvo, Valliere explains, is an abstract noun formed from Bogochelovek, God-human or God-man, a name for Christ (MRT, p. 11). The concept’s overall meaning is conveyed by the teaching of St. Athanasius and other church fathers that “God became man so that man might become God.” This formula consists of two key elements: kenosis (the humanization of God in the incarnation) and theosis (the deification of man). The “humanity of God” captures very nicely the kenotic and incarnational aspect. It concisely expresses the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon (451): In Christ two distinct natures, the divine and human, are united without “division or confusion” in one person. The human retains its distinct identity even alongside the divine, a clear vindication of its intrinsic worth. The “humanity of God” also perfectly describes the essence of the idea of Sophia, as we shall see. But it does not work as well for the theotic aspect of Athanasius’s formula, which, I believe, the more important one for Solov’ëv. For him, bogochelovechestvo meant the (potential) divinity of humanity as much as the humanity of God. “Godmanhood” more readily suggests Solov’ëv’s conception of God and man as ultimately one absolute, divine-human being: divinity that is also human (intrinsically and not only in the incarnation) and humanity that is also divine (by origin and vocation). Crucially, it also conveys the idea of a state that is to be achieved, in a way that neither the “humanity of God” nor “divine humanity” does.

Godmanhood was not an initial dogmatic premise for Solov’ëv, but rather the logical conclusion of sound philosophical method. His point of departure, as Valliere indicates, is the mystery of human consciousness. Consciousness is a mystery because it cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts or explained by nature.

29 Solov’ëv quotes Athanasius and knew well the work of other eastern church fathers, especially Maximus the Confessor, on whom he wrote an article for the Brockhaus-Ephron encyclopedia. See Richard Gustafson’s seminal essay, “Soloviev’s Doctrine of Salvation,” in Russian Religious Thought 31–48.

30 As Gustafson writes, Solov’ëv made theosis “the cornerstone of his theology of Godmanhood.” “Soloviev’s Doctrine of Salvation,” 39. One of the places Solov’ëv refers to the idea is his essay “Plato’s Life-Drama” (1898), where he writes that the eastern fathers recognized the highest purpose and destiny of man to be perfect union with God—deification or theosis. This essay is included in Politics, Law, and Morality 213–254 (here, p. 248). According to Valliere, “Soloviev was one of the first modern thinkers to recognize the distinctiveness and vast implications of the idea.” “Vladimir Soloviev,” The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature, vol. 1: 561.

31 Mochul'skii uses these two phrases together to gloss “bogochelovechestvo.” Mochul’skii 10.

32 For Solov’ëv’s conception of the absolute, at once divine and human, see note 14 above.
This mystery is good reason for supposing that being is not confined to the natural universe in space and time and for positing a transcendent metaphysical reality, which most idealists call the absolute and think of as the ground of consciousness.\(^{33}\) This was Solovëv’s basic approach (MRT, p. 124). He works with the idea of the absolute at several levels. At the highest, he describes it as the “unity of all” (vseedinство).\(^{34}\)

The idea of the absolute is the subject with which Solovëv began his famous Lectures on Godmanhood. Valliere devotes an entire chapter of Modern Russian Theology to them, and for good reason: “Lectures played the decisive role in establishing bogochelovechestvo as the central theological idea of philosophic Orthodoxy” (MRT, p. 144). Solovëv’s philosophical method, proceeding up to the divine from analysis of the human, is brilliantly deployed from the very beginning. In the first three lectures, he introduces important aspects of his philosophical anthropology by looking at the decline of religion and rise of secular humanism in modern European intellectual history. He contends, in particular, that contemporary European consciousness lacks a clear idea of the absolute and that this is reflected in its understanding of human nature. His remarks, though somewhat cursory, are highly revealing of his own approach to the problem of the absolute and the ground of human value.

Religion, according to the philosopher, is, or should be, about the absolute, but the “pitiful thing” that was contemporary religion, “instead of being all in all,” was increasingly marginal.\(^{35}\) Modern western civilization, having abandoned the task of dealing with the absolute on its own terms, “is striving to substitute something for the rejected gods” (LDH, p. 2). This unconscious religious striving has given rise to two powerful ideologies: socialism and positivism.\(^{36}\) As forms of modern

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\(^{33}\) Berdiaev expressed this same idea in The Destiny of Man (1931): “The very fact of the existence of man is a break in the natural world and proves that nature cannot be self-sufficient but rests upon a supernatural reality.” This is quoted by Vigen Guroian, who demonstrates in other respects as well how much Berdiaev was inspired by Solovëv. “Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948),” in The Teachings of Modern Christianity, vol. 1: 576–611 (here, p. 591).

\(^{34}\) Valliere’s translation of vseedinство is the “whole of things,” which strikes me as too pale. It is usually translated as “all-unity,” sometimes as “total-unity.” Kostalevsky’s version, in Dostoevsky and Soloviev, is “unitotality,” which is flawed. I believe that credit for the resonant and accurate “unity of all” goes to Greg Gaut (at least I recall first seeing it in his work). See his fine essay “Can a Christian Be a Nationalist? Vladimir Solov’ev’s Critique of Nationalism,” Slavic Review 57.1 (Spring 1998): 77–94.

\(^{35}\) Vladimir Solov'yov, Lectures on Divine Humanity, ed. by Boris Jakim 1–2. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically as “LDH.”

\(^{36}\) Within twenty years the idea that socialism and positivism were secular forms of religion, eschatology in the guise of science, would become a major theme among Russian religious thinkers such as S. N. Bulgakov and P. I. Novgorodtsev. See in particular Bulgakov’s essay “Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress,” in Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian
humanism, both proclaim human dignity. In this Solov'ëv recognizes their truth: they are right in thinking that human beings are absolute. But they are wrong in supposing that human beings can be absolute without the absolute, that we can be absolute in value while also being only facts among a multitude of other facts (LDH, pp. 18–19). Thus Solov'ëv’s main criticism of modern humanism is that, in Valliere’s formulation, it does not appreciate the implications of its basic assumption (MRT, p. 147). Solov’ëv draws out these implications and concludes that the very capacity to conceive of ourselves as absolute entails the reality of the absolute, i.e., a theistic metaphysics.

The Russian philosopher distinguishes between two aspects of human self-understanding. The first is “negative absoluteness,” which “consists in the ability to transcend every finite, limited content,” to never be satisfied with it and constantly strive for more (LDH, p. 17). Negative absoluteness describes the nature of consciousness, which is to transcend facts, evaluate everything according to ideals, and to strive in our thought and action toward those ideals—morality in the broad sense. It is the basis for human perfectibility or infinite development. Negative absoluteness presupposes a positive end toward which the whole process of infinite development tends; this is “positive absoluteness,” the entire fullness of being or “unity of all.” Secular humanists stop at negative absoluteness, failing to recognize that the capacity for infinite striving and development—their (and Solov’ëv’s) precious ideal of human perfectibility—in itself implies the reality of the positive absolute. From this logic Solov’ëv draws a striking conclusion: “belief in oneself, belief in the human person, is at the same time belief in God” (LDH, p. 23).37

The reasoning behind this conclusion—that negative entails positive absoluteness—is that there is something radically “unnatural” about our self-conception and human consciousness in general. The idea of “absolute,” present in our thought at all levels whether we consciously recognize it or not, is a striking anomaly in an empirical world of relative facts. Even such evaluations—the world as “empirical” and facts as “relative”—demonstrate the inevitability of the absolute perspective of consciousness. It is the nature of the mind to evaluate, and in doing so we rely on absolute, ideal norms (LDH, p. 30). The data of empirical experience convey nothing of these ideals and norms. The upshot is that our capacity to evaluate—and to value and perfect ourselves as absolute—when experience confronts us with only facts, starkly contradicts the naturalistic (i.e., atheistic) worldview. In other words, the very idea of “absolute,” as in our own self-conception, implies its reality.


37 Solov'ëv retained the basic idea behind positive and negative absoluteness, but reformulated it in his later works. In Justification of the Good he refers to it simply as consciousness of absolute perfection (God) and our capacity for perfectibility according to that consciousness (see below).
There is another aspect to Solov'ëv’s understanding of absolute human value, one that goes to the heart of his concept of Godmanhood. The Russian philosopher takes “absolute” quite literally. Absolute means that which cannot be surpassed or excelled. To say this of human beings is necessarily to equate our value with God’s, which is precisely what Solov’ëv does. He uses both “absolute” and “divine” to describe the value of human beings: “The human person... has absolute, divine significance” (LDH, p. 17). Since (by definition) there can be no gradation at the level of absolute, human beings and God are equal in value. We are equally persons, or, in other words, all persons are divine, beginning with God. This divine-human equality has momentous implications. It alone makes possible genuine, free union between man and God.

Such a union would be impossible if the divine principle were purely external to humanity, if it were not rooted in human personhood itself. If it were not so rooted, our relationship to the divine principle could be only one of involuntary, fateful subordination. The free inner union between the absolute, divine principle and the human person is possible only because the latter also has absolute significance. The human person can unite with the divine principle freely, from within, only because the person is in a certain sense divine, or more precisely, participates in Divinity (LDH, p. 17).

Human freedom relative to God is so important because it is the essential condition of the fuller realization of human divinity. Thus the human person “is in a certain sense divine” because our divinity is an intrinsic potential that must be freely, humanly realized, and this is impossible without divine-human equality. The realization of our divine potential rests on human autonomy, self-determination, and freedom of conscience. This is a highly distinctive aspect of Solov’ëv’s thought: the realization of our divinity—Godmanhood—depends on the proper exercise of our humanity. With little exaggeration does Valliere write, in his own explication of Lectures on Godmanhood, that “no Russian thinker had ever brought such a rich offering to the altar of thought” (MRT, p. 149).

ANTHROPOLOGY, CHRISTOLOGY, SOPHIOLOGY
Solov’ëv calls human consciousness of the absolute the divine, religious, or mystical principle in man. It is one of three principles in his philosophical anthropology or conception of human nature. The other two are the material principle, by which human beings are part of the natural world, and rational freedom or autonomy (reason and morality), which is the distinctively human principle, the middle

38 In another formulation Solov’ëv writes, “… Divinity belongs to human beings and to God, but with one difference: God possesses Divinity in eternal actuality, whereas human beings can only attain it” (LDH, p. 23).
39 Or, as he writes in his introduction to Solov’ëv’s writings in the second volume of The Teachings of Modern Christianity: “In scope and originality of thought, no Russian thinker ranks ahead of him” (p. 425).
principle between the divine and material (LDH, p. 158). The human principle is the capacity for self-determination in the direction of either the material or the divine, the capacity to “become” more (or less) than we presently are, to infinitely perfect (or degrade) ourselves (LDH, p. 142). Solov'ëv sees the capability to “become” as distinctively human. Non-rational beings do not “become,” they can only “be” what they are by nature; their natural capacities are realized over the course of their life by instinct, not self-determination. God, too, according to Solov'ëv, can only “be,” in that he is already perfect. Only human beings (and in principle other free rational beings) are capable of “becoming,” which, if directed toward the divine, takes the form of infinite self-perfection. The autonomous human element, as noted above, is an indispensable component of Godmanhood.

Solov'ëv develops his tripartite conception of human nature in the last two Lectures on Godmanhood, as part of his Christology. His philosophical anthropology in effect extends the Chalcedon dogma of the two natures of Jesus Christ to all human persons and even to all existence, with the divine nature thus becoming more an intrinsic potential that must be freely realized by the human. The possibility of such a free, human realization of the divine was vitiated by the Fall (in the first Adam), which enslaved human will to nature, but was restored by the incarnation (in the second Adam). The human realization of the divine—our deification (theosis) and through us the spiritualization or divinization of the cosmos—while restored by Christ as a possibility, remains a task that we must actively work to accomplish. Otherwise the Kingdom of God, understood as deified humanity or Godmanhood, would have come with him. It is something we must take responsibility for and work toward as the goal of human progress, not something to be awaited from the external action of divine grace. Thus Solov'ëv’s Christology revises mainstream Christian ideas of salvation since Augustine if not

40 He stresses this human capacity to “become” in many of his works. In Justification of the Good he calls it the “essentially human attribute” (Jakim edition, p. lv). In The Meaning of Love (1892–1894) he writes that human consciousness is formed by “universal ideal norms” and a “sense of truth” by which we evaluate the phenomena and facts of life. “Considering his actions with this higher consciousness, man can infinitely perfect his life and nature without leaving the boundaries of human form. And therefore, he is indeed the supreme being of the natural world and the effective end of the world-creative process.” This essay is included in The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics 83–133 (quotation at p. 92). Also see “The Idea of a Superman,” in Politics, Law, and Morality 255–263.

41 As S. L. Frank observes in his introduction to A Solovyov Anthology 15–16.

42 Orthodox theology in general has not drawn the sharp opposition between nature and grace that has characterized much of western Christian thought. See Valliere, “Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition” and “Vladimir Soloviev,” The Teachings of Modern Christianity, vol. 1: 508, 554. For Solov'ëv, “grace” comes as human beings freely perfect themselves and is a result of that process. See, for example, Istoriia i budushchnost' teokratii, in Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 4: 337–342.
earlier: with Solov’ëv Christ does not so much save us as make it possible for us to save ourselves. For Russia’s greatest religious philosopher, “salvation” largely meant the self-realization of our own intrinsic divinity.43

The patristic doctrine of theosis is the theological core of the concept of Godmanhood, but Solov’ëv dramatically broadened it, shifting the emphasis from mysticism, monastic contemplation, and asceticism to an activist, socially-premised conception of human perfectibility. This transformation is what makes Godmanhood the main idea of liberal, modern Russian theology, Valliere’s overall theme.44 To make the connection even more concrete, Valliere develops the idea of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, as the specifically humanistic, progressive aspect of Godmanhood. Sophia is part of Solov’ëv’s Christology, a metaphor to better understand the creative principle in God. In his terms, Christ as Logos is the self-manifestation of God, while Christ as Sophia is the eternal “other” in relation to which God manifests himself. This divine “other” can be nothing but ideal or perfect humanity (LDH, pp. 113–114). As Valliere puts it, “Christ as Sophia is the humanity which God sees and loves from all eternity” (MRT, p. 159). It is the humanity of the Wisdom of God, or simply the humanity of God. Valliere makes Sophia the basis of a soteriological (or salvific) theology of culture. “For Soloviev,” he writes, “human beings are divinizable... as creative agents engaged in... politics, science, education, the arts, technology and so on. To put it another way, Christ the humanity of God has the power to divinize human “wisdom,” i.e., culture, and in this capacity is appropriately called Sophia. The name fits the function. The function supports the project of Orthodox engagement with modern civilization” (MRT, p. 161).

Valliere has shown great interest in Russian sophiology, especially Sergei Bulgakov’s development of it.45 His interpretation is itself a sophic, creative effort

43 I would argue that Solov’ëv’s philosophical anthropology does not rest on the Christian dogmas of a human nature corrupted by the Fall and redeemed by Christ. One can simply take the three principles as a description of human nature and proceed from there. However, the triumph over and spiritualization of the flesh in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ is more distinctively Christian. Solov’ëv himself calls it “the final and distinctive truth of Christianity.” Dukhovnye osnovy zhizni, in Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 3: 375. Gustafson, “Soloviev’s Doctrine of Salvation,” 36–38, provides a good, concise reading of this section of Lectures on Godmanhood, which Solov’ëv largely repeats in The Spiritual Foundations of Life.

44 The essential liberalism of Solov’ëv’s religious philosophy has also been demonstrated by Andrzej Walicki in his magisterial Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). I would identify three defining criteria of Solov’ëv’s liberalism (and perhaps of liberalism more generally): respect for the absolute value of the human person (human dignity), a commitment to the rule of law (i.e., the forcible defense of human rights), and a general belief in the possibility of human progress or perfectibility.

45 In addition to the third part of Modern Russian Theology, also see his “Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization,” in Russian Religious Thought, ed. by Kornblatt and Gustafson, and most recently “The Theology of Culture in Late Imperial
to bring out what is distinctively modern about the idea of Godmanhood: that theosis rests on the ever fuller development of human potential or on human perfectibility, a necessarily social and cultural enterprise.

HUMAN AUTONOMY AND DIGNITY. SOLOV’EV AND DOSTOEVSKY
The conception of human nature (divine-human-natural) that Solov’ëv introduced in Lectures on Godmanhood forms the basic philosophical framework of his subsequent works. In them he stresses that human autonomy, the middle principle and the condition of Godmanhood, is the ground of human dignity. In Critique of Abstract Principles he embraced Kant’s conception of human autonomy and dignity, calling it the “essence of morality.” It is striking that for Solov’ëv, who in Valliere’s expression was “God-intoxicated from the beginning” (MRT, p. 126), the divine principle is not, by itself, the source of human dignity. The source is self-determination and perfectibility according to our consciousness of the absolute or divine. In Lectures on Godmanhood, Solov’ëv affirms absolute human value, human divinity, and divine-human equality, but it is really autonomy, the self-realization of our intrinsic divine potential, the capacity to become divine (theosis), that is the core of human dignity. Were this realization externally rather than internally determined (heteronomously rather than autonomously), human dignity would be deprived of its basis. “Salvation” apart from human free will would violate human dignity or at any rate be accomplished past it. For this reason, the source of human dignity is not God but Godmanhood. This is the humanist thread that runs through Solov’ëv’s philosophy.

Solov’ëv was very concerned that human autonomy not be overwhelmed by the divine principle. This led him to downplay or reconceptualize the role of miracle, revelation, and dogma in religion, all of which, he feared, risked undermining true faith, autonomy, and self-determination by purporting to manifest the divine as if it were something external and knowable as a positive fact. He understood, with


46 Kritika otvlechennykh nachal, in Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 2: 44. He closely paraphrases Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals at some length. In fact much of what he presents as a paraphrase is a direct translation of key passages from the Groundwork. Kritika otvlechennykh nachal 44–62.

47 This connection between human dignity and theosis is most explicit in Justification of the Good (see below).

48 One of the many places Solov’ëv specifies his view that true faith cannot be coerced but

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Dostoevsky, that miracles can enslave, impairing the free, human realization of the divine. This understanding shaped his Christology, which, as we have seen, is philosophical and universalistic. He maintained that “strictly speaking, the incarnation of Divinity is not miraculous, that is, it is not alien to the general order of being” (LDH, p. 157). In his 1891 speech “The Collapse of the Medieval Worldview,” he commented on Luke 9: 49–56 as follows: “James and John did not know the spirit of Christ, and they did not know it just because they believed above all in His external miraculous power. Such power there was, but it was not the essential thing.” 49 The Russian philosopher closest to Solovëv, Evgenii Trubetskoi, expressed the spirit of his Christology in writing, remarkably, that “Christ’s complete sacrifice saves man not as sorcery from outside, but as spiritual influence *liberating him from inside* and transforming his nature only on the condition of the autonomous self-determination of his will.” 50

As Valliere points out, the one and only substantive reference to the life of Jesus in *Lectures on Godmanhood* is the biblical story of the three temptations of Christ (MRT, p. 162). Solovëv interprets the story as Christ overcoming the temptations of flesh (in refusing to turn stones to bread), pride of mind (in not tempting God by casting himself down), and the will to power (in rejecting worldly dominion). The Russian philosopher says that the third temptation is the strongest because it might be motivated by a sincere desire to lead the world that “lieth in wickedness” to the good:

- But to use coercion, which is evil, in this way for purposes of good is to admit that, in itself, good is impotent, that evil is stronger than good... The human will [in this case of Christ] is directly challenged with the fateful question of what it believes in and what it wishes to serve—the invisible power of God or the power of evil that openly reigns in the world? (LDH, p. 162)

Dostoevsky faithfully attended Solovëv’s *Lectures on Godmanhood*, delivered from the end of January through March 1878. A year later the great novelist presented his own interpretation of the three temptations in the “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.”

It is difficult to judge precisely the extent and direction of influence between these two epochal Russian thinkers. After 1877, as Marina Kostalevsky writes in

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49 The speech is translated in *A Solovyov Anthology* (quotation at p. 62).

50 E. N. Trubetskoi, *Smysl zhizni* (Berlin: Slovo, 1922) 204 (italics his). Valliere, evaluating Solovëv’s approach to miracle, revelation, and dogma, suggests that it was a type of “mystical universalism” that valued immediate religious experience over tradition and authority, the mystical content of dogma over the historical shell (MRT, p. 168). This explanation is fully compatible with Solovëv’s concern to preserve human autonomy, the free development of religious consciousness, and freedom of conscience.
her insightful study of them, “the sympathy and friendship between Dostoevsky and Soloviev acquired the depth and significance of a spiritual phenomenon.” In the last volume of his monumental study of Dostoevsky, Joseph Frank writes more prosaically that their friendship was “very close.” In Dostoevsky’s version of the gospel story, Christ rejects all three temptations for the plain purpose of preserving people’s freedom of conscience (their autonomy) and out of fundamental respect for their dignity. But in thus respecting the humanity of human beings, Christ has placed too heavy a burden on them, so the Grand Inquisitor seeks to “correct” his work, using the coercive means of “miracle, mystery, and authority” for the “good” end of making people into a happy and harmonious anthill. Human autonomy and dignity, as I have tried to show, are Solov’ëv’s central themes, although they are not as focused in his account of the three temptations of Christ as in Dostoevsky’s.

The two thinkers shared the same overall theological anthropology. In the last of his “Three Speeches in Memory of Dostoevsky” (1881–1883), Solov’ëv applied his tripartite conception of human nature to Dostoevsky himself, remarking that “he was at one and the same time mystic, humanist, and naturalist.” Years later he wrote, “An exclusively factually based, blind faith is incompatible with the dignity of the human being.” Religions founded on such faith “always end either with diabolical blood-thirstiness or bestial shamelessness.”

51 Marina Kostalevsky, Dostoevsky and Soloviev 63. The five chapters of her book explore how Solov’ëv shaped the critical reception of Dostoevsky, the years of friendship between the two writers (1873–1881), the opposition of the ideas of the God-man and man-god in their writings, their understanding of the theocratic ideal, and certain aspects of their philosophical ethics.


53 Frank, Dostoevsky 388, writes that in Solov’ëv’s version “there is no hint of the intense pathos of freedom expressed in Dostoevsky’s treatment of this same great theme, nothing similar to the sublimity of his emphasis on Christ’s rejection of the temptations in order to safeguard the liberty of human conscience and preserve humankind from enslavement to external and material forces.” This judgment neglects the larger context of Lectures on Godmanhood.

54 Kostalevsky 15–16.

55 The speeches are the first chapter in The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics 1–28, quotation at p. 24. They are at the center of Kostalevsky’s excellent chapter on Solov’ëv and the development of Dostoevsky studies in Russian literary criticism. Solov’ëv was far more consistent in his humanism than was Dostoevsky, respecting and working to promote the human dignity of Jews, Poles, and other minorities in the Russian empire, in sharp contrast to Dostoevsky. By the 1890s Solov’ëv did not hesitate to criticize Dostoevsky’s chauvinism, as Kostalevsky notes (pp. 32, 76, 144).

SOCIAL AND LEGAL PHILOSOPHY. FREE THEOCRACY

For Solov'ëv Godmanhood was, as noted above, a necessarily social and cultural project, since human perfectibility, the ever fuller realization and development of human potential, is inconceivable apart from society and history. This takes us to Solov'ëv’s social and legal philosophy, which he treats as a branch of moral philosophy (applied or “objective” ethics in contrast to pure or “subjective” ethics). He presented his moral philosophy (pure and applied) in Critique of Abstract Principles and then, in a revised and definitive version, Justification of the Good. Valliere deals with Solov'ëv’s moral and social philosophy in a chapter of Modern Russian Theology devoted to Critique of Abstract Principles, “the masterpiece of Soloviev’s early career,” and more comprehensively in The Teachings of Modern Christianity, where he also takes account of Justification of the Good.

Critique of Abstract Principles, written concurrently with Lectures on Godmanhood, is an indispensable exposition of Solov'ëv’s whole system. It is regrettable that this classic work of modern Russian philosophy has not yet been translated. The first half is devoted to morality and the social conditions for its realization and development, the second to epistemology and metaphysics. An “abstract principle” is one that is abstracted from and mistaken for the whole, whether the whole is person, society, or, ultimately, the “unity of all.” Solov'ëv shows how the material, human, and divine principles can each be abstracted or put in place of the whole. Even so, he is much less concerned with the dangers of rational autonomy (the human principle) being an abstract principle than of it not being firmly included in the whole, between the material and divine principles. The vision of the social whole that he lays out in his doctoral dissertation is “free theocracy,” “free” precisely because it purports to respect human autonomy.

In Solov’ëv’s social philosophy, the principle of rational autonomy takes the form of law, based on recognition that human beings are persons, ends-in-themselves, and bearers of rights. 57 In Valliere’s felicitous expression, “law is grounded in metaphysical personhood (freedom and reason), the inalienable glory of the human being.” 58 Despite certain changes in his legal philosophy between Critique of Abstract Principles and Justification of the Good, Solov'ëv remained convinced of the basic principles of law that he set forth in his dissertation. 59 He reprinted its two main chapters on law, together with two sections from Justification of the Good, in his essay Law and Morality: Essays in Applied Ethics (1897), which

59 Both Walicki, Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism, and Valliere, “Vladimir Soloviev,” tend to emphasize the changes, but the overall continuity is also impressive.
serves as a good overall statement of his philosophy of law. Thanks to Wozniuk, it is now available in English.60

For Solov'ëv the virtue of law is that it makes possible the realization of all higher potentials of human nature, for it is the very condition of civilized life and peaceful society. Law makes people equal in a way that they are not in the state of nature or in unlawful societies, where the strong brutalize the weak and themselves in the process. By equalizing human relations, law enables people to develop as persons. It is an essential spiritualizing force. This was Solov'ëv’s ultimate justification of law and, more generally, of “objective ethics.” In Critique of Abstract Principles he emphasized his essentially negative or classically liberal conception of law.61 In Justification of the Good he modified his formulation, although I think not the basic conception, in attributing (relative) moral value to law itself. In the later work he defined law as a “compulsory demand for the realization of a definite minimum of the good, or for a social order which excludes certain manifestations of evil.” He then explains that society is necessary for people to “freely perfect themselves.” But society, he says, cannot exist if anyone who wishes can rob, maim, and murder. Law forcibly prevents this and so “is a necessary condition of moral perfection; as such it is demanded by the moral principle itself, though it is not a direct expression of it.”62

Law is an essential but not the highest principle of Solov'ëv’s social philosophy. It deals with the means by which people pursue their ends, but not the ends themselves. Solov'ëv was not satisfied with the liberal individualist response that people determine their own ends and pursue them within the limits of the law. He believed that society ought to have a positive content, a morally normative end that would unite its members. Meanwhile law divides them. In Critique of Abstract Principles, he wrote that the equality of all before the law actually means that “all are equally limited by law, or all equally limit each other; this means there is no inner or positive unity among them, only their correct division and demarcation.”63 Only the divine or mystical principle in human nature, not law, can provide inner, positive unity among people. The philosopher provides a succinct formulation of his social ideal in the preface to his book. The ultimate moral significance of society, he writes,

60 Politics, Law, and Morality 131–212.
61 Kritika otvlechennykh nachal 152–155.
is determined by the religious or mystical principle in man, by virtue of which all members of society are not limits for each other, but rather internally fulfill each other in the free unity of spiritual love, which must be immediately realized in a spiritual society or the church. Thus the normative society has as its foundation a spiritual union or the church, which defines its absolute ends.  

But the realization of the divine principle in society must be approached freely and consciously, it cannot be based on external clerical authority or blind faith, it must fully respect the human principle of rational autonomy, both in morality—where it takes the form of freedom of conscience—and law. “Thus the true, normative society must be defined as free theocracy.” It was the way to the realization of humanity’s divine potential (Godmanhood).

Valliere explicates Solov’ëv’s theocratic ideal with great sensitivity. The meaning of that ideal has long vexed scholars. A society freely united in love of God, all of whose members seek to fulfill each other in that love, is one that has attained a vastly higher level of moral development than anything in Solov’ëv’s day or ours. The Russian philosopher may have wanted to suggest that the Kingdom of God would not be possible until, at least, “free theocracy” was. Kostalevsky proposes, helpfully, that theocracy was both means and end: “For Soloviev, the aim (the abiding foundation) was theocracy in the sense of the Kingdom of God, while the means (the practical action) was theocracy in the sense of a form of society that is capable, due to its attained perfection, of entering into the Kingdom of God.”

Solov’ëv believed that free theocracy, both as means and end, rested on the reunification of the church. He devoted himself to this cause—ecumenism, as it

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64 Kritika otvel’chennykh nachal viii–ix.
65 Kritika otvel’chennykh nachal ix.
67 Kostalevsky 115. “Theocracy” is a poor term for the Kingdom of God. Although it literally means “the rule of God,” by firm historical association it connotes an earthly state in which power is exercised by the church. Thus, one of E. N. Trubetskoï’s main criticisms of Solov’ëv is that he introduced state power into the Kingdom of God, where it surely can have no place. Trubetskoï, Mirosozertsanie VI. S. Solov’ëva, vol. I: 178, 567, 578. Solov’ëv himself, however, stated that the Kingdom of God “is obviously incompatible with the state.” Justification of the Good 386. In his earlier essay “The Great Schism and Christian Politics” (1883) he said the same: in the Kingdom of God “there no longer is any power or domination.” This essay is translated in part in A Solovyov Anthology 75–101 (quotation at p. 82). Valliere proposes that “theonomy” may be a better name than “theocracy” for Solov’ëv’s ideal. “Vladimir Soloviev,” 550–551.
68 His first and most important work laying out his conception of the church and ideal of church unity is “The Great Schism and Christian Politics.” In it he applies his tripartite, Christological model of human nature to the church. Eastern Christianity represents the divine element and Western Christianity the human, but the historical development of each has been one-sided or “abstract.” The ideal of the church, in contrast to these historical distortions, is the free inner union of both the divine and human elements.
would come to be called—in the 1880s. He even had an operational plan to make his vision a reality: Christendom was to be reunited by an alliance between the Russian emperor, Alexander III, and Pope Leo XIII. Nowhere, perhaps, is it more clear that Solov'ëv the mystic had difficulty distinguishing between this world and the next one. Pope Leo XIII had a better sense of the difference: when he learned of the plan he said it was a beautiful idea but impossible without a miracle. Surely it operates on a very different level than free theocracy as a philosophical ideal stipulating a moral transformation so radical that it would bring humanity to the threshold of theosis.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE GOOD

In the 1890s Solov'ëv came to agree, it seems, with Leo’s verdict. He grew disillusioned with his practical (or so he had imagined) plans for theocracy, though never with the ideal itself. The great Russian famine of 1891–1892 was a turning point, convincing him of the huge gap between Russian reality and his theocratic ideal. He returned to the type of philosophical work that had engaged him a decade earlier. Justification of the Good appeared in 1897. By common consensus it is the most important Russian work of moral philosophy. Arguably it is one of the great modern works of ethics and religious philosophy more generally. It is Solov'ëv’s most powerful and systematic defense of human dignity—the book’s overall theme.

Justification of the Good is divided into three parts, “The Good in Human Nature,” “The Good from God,” and “The Good through Human History.” In the first part Solov'ëv applies the three principles of human nature to an analysis of moral experience, identifying three “primary data of morality”: shame, compassion, and reverence. Shame corresponds to the material principle in human nature, compassion to the purely human, and reverence to the divine. He regarded religious experience (reverence) as a very important component of moral experience, so much so that his overall conception is really moral-religious experience. Part II of Justification of the Good, “The Good from God,” develops this aspect of his moral philosophy. Throughout he emphasizes the immediacy and authenticity of our religious experience. “The reality of the Deity is not a deduction from religious experience but the content of it... God is in us, therefore He is.”

69 Solov'ëv was involved in organizing famine relief. E. N. Trubetskoi argued that Solov’ëv’s disappointment with Russian state and society in the wake of the famine spurred the collapse, or at any rate marked de-utopianization, of his theocratic idea. Mirosozertsanie VI. S. Solov’ëva, vol. 2: 3–38.

70 The Justification of the Good 144. Subsequent page references cited parenthetically in the text.

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the veracity of moral-religious experience as testimony to the ultimate nature of reality is the foundation of his whole philosophy.

Solov'ëv delineates the content of religious experience into three constituent elements: consciousness of God as absolute perfection, consciousness of our own imperfection, and conscious striving toward divine perfection. Our consciousness of divine perfection is the “image of God” in us and our striving to perfect ourselves according to that image is our “likeness” to God (p. 145). This is a creative and powerful interpretation of the “image and likeness” verses (Genesis 1:26, 9:6); Solov'ëv will often invoke it. He also refers here (and on a number of occasions) to Matthew 5:48—“Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect”—but explains that the imperative can only be accomplished by the process of becoming perfect (perfectibility), so that “be perfect” actually means “become perfect” (p. 147).

Russia’s greatest religious philosopher now explicitly defines human dignity as consisting in our consciousness of absolute perfection (the image of God) and in our striving to perfect ourselves (the likeness of God) (p. 152). He calls the image of God the power of representation (of absolute perfection) and the likeness of God the power of striving (to achieve it). This “double infinity” belongs to every person. “It is in this that the absolute significance, dignity, and worth of human personhood consist, and this is the basis of its inalienable rights” (p. 176). Further, the human person contains an element of intrinsic value, “which can never be merely a means—namely, the possibility, inherent in it, of infinite perfection through contemplation of and union with the absolute fullness of being” (p. 196). And in perhaps the most capacious lines from Justification of the Good, Solov'ëv writes, “The absolute value of man is based, as we know, upon the possibility inherent in his reason and his will of infinitely approaching perfection or, according to the patristic expression, the possibility of becoming divine (theosis)” (p. 296).

Human autonomy, dignity and perfectibility are the conditions, we know, of Godmanhood or the Kingdom of God, which Solov'ëv defines here, in a pivotal chapter of Justification of the Good, as the “unconditional principle of morality” (the title of the second chapter of the book’s second part): “participate, as fully as in thee lies, in the work of making thyself and everyone more perfect, so that the Kingdom of God may be finally revealed in the world” (p. 152). The Kingdom of God, he says, cannot be expected by the immediate action of God. Indeed “God has never acted immediately”—a striking comment meant to reinforce the necessity of free human participation in God’s work. Why, he asks, wasn’t the Kingdom of God established long ago or from all eternity? “What was the need for all these centuries and millenniums of human history,” which will no doubt long continue (p. 149)? The answer, clearly, is that the Kingdom of God must be humanly realized, through our self-determination toward the divine and the self-realization of our divine potential. His premise throughout is that an achieved perfection is greater than one that is bestowed.71

71 Sutton 74–75. Sutton demonstrates that Solov'ëv was indebted to Schelling on this central
The gradual realization of human potential in history, the process of human perfectibility and striving toward Godmanhood, is called progress. It is the subject of Part III of *Justification of the Good, “The Good through Human History.”* The fundamental principle of his social philosophy is human dignity, the “moral norm of social life,” as he calls one of his chapters. The just society ought to recognize that each of its members has the right to a dignified or worthy existence, and it ought to materially provide, where necessary, for this right (pp. 296–298, 306). In this belief that the state ought to provide a certain minimum welfare for its members, Solov’ëv was a modern “new” liberal.72 His defence of the right to a dignified existence is the context in which he refers to theosis (p. 296), mentioned above. In doing so, Valliere writes,

Soloviev drew on patristic piety to protest dehumanizing social conditions and so managed to connect the *summum bonum* of contemplative monks with the travails of the working class in Paris and Petersburg. Soloviev had the natural-born philosopher’s ability to make connections between things that seem to most people to lie worlds apart. One can begin to appreciate why it was Soloviev and not someone else who inspired the Russian religio-philosophical renaissance of the early twentieth century.73 His views on criminal justice, including his devastating critique of the death penalty, are also quite modern and entirely consistent with the “moral norm” of human dignity.

Progress seems to be the very concept of the “justification of the good” and to explain why humanity was not created perfect, why the Kingdom of God is our task rather than God’s gift.74 (Were it merely a gift, it ought to have been given from the moment of creation, in order to prevent human evil.) That Godmanhood is an ideal to be achieved can only mean that perfectibility is itself the highest good, and so justifies the “absolute” good (God) for permitting (or enabling) the whole process.75

72 Walicki 195–196, 203–205. The subtitle of Walicki’s chapter on Solov’ëv is “Religious Philosophy and the Emergence of the ‘New Liberalism.’”

73 “Vladimir Soloviev,” 562.

74 “Perfection is not a thing which one person can make a gift of to another; it is an inner condition attainable through one’s own experience alone” (pp. 150–151).

75 Solov’ëv writes that in God there can be no process of becoming perfect, only “eternal and unchangeable” perfection (p. 150). This seems inconsistent with his overall philosophical approach. If an infinite perfection, one that transcends itself and increases in perfection, is greater than one that is “eternal and unchangeable,” then that must be God (as the greatest possible perfection). Many of Solov’ëv’s uses of the term “absolute” imply “infinite absolute,” and the very concept of Godmanhood surely suggests that God is enriched in the process of our perfection. This whole problem may explain Solov’ëv’s introduction of two poles into the absolute (see note 14 above). Interestingly, Berdiaev, indebted in so many ways to Solov’ëv, rejected the traditional notion of God as unchangeable and immovable. See Guroian, “Nicholas Berdyaev,” in *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law,* Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes Vol. L, No. 1–2, March–June 2008
In other words, the justification of the good is a type of theodicy: perfectibility as the highest possible good justifies the costs (moral evil), although how must remain unfathomable to human minds.\textsuperscript{76}

Solov'ëv remained reluctant, even in \textit{Justification of the Good}, to part with his ideal of “free theocracy,” although he scrupulously avoids the term itself. He calls not for separation of church and state but rather for their distinction, fearing that complete separation would lead to the conflation and usurpation of the functions of one by the other. He still spoke of a Christian state that recognizes “\textit{the supreme spiritual authority of the universal Church}” (p. 394), and even of the harmonious cooperation of prophet, priest, and king in working to bring about the Kingdom of God (pp. 401–403). These are good reasons to conclude, with Valliere, that, “for all its modernism and moderation, \textit{The Justification of the Good} remains the work of a mystic, a prophet, and a Christian theocrat.”\textsuperscript{77}

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This conclusion reflects the tendency of recent scholarship to emphasize the overall continuity in Solov'ëv’s thought. Even his last work, \textit{Three Dialogues on War, Progress and the End of World History, with a Brief Tale of the Anti-Christ}, is now being seen in this light.\textsuperscript{78} The traditional interpretation, following Trubetskoi, held that by the end of his life Solov'ëv was overwhelmed by a new awareness of the power of evil and repudiated his former belief in progress and human perfectibility, or at least their culmination in the Kingdom of God on earth.\textsuperscript{79} Solov'ëv had indeed acquired a heightened sense of the evil threatening the world, but his response was not passive resignation, but a redoubled commitment to struggling against it (contrary to the Tolstoyan doctrine of non-resistance). Active resistance to evil makes sense only within a continued framework of historical progress (or at least relevance). In the course of the 1890s Solov'ëv had abandoned his preoccupation with the “external designs” (his term) of universal theocracy,\textsuperscript{80} especially Russia’s messianic role, and in general became more realistic about the historical

\textsuperscript{76} Solov'ëv writes that God permits evil since to do otherwise would violate freedom and be a greater evil, “for it would render perfect (i.e., free) good \textit{impossible} in the world; on the other hand, God permits evil inasmuch as it is \textit{possible} for His Wisdom to extract from evil a greater good or the greatest possible perfection” (p. 152). Possible for His Wisdom, not ours. Both Valliere and Kostalevsky appear to reject the idea that the justification of the good is a theodicy. Valliere, “Vladimir Soloviev,” 553, and Kostalevsky 171.
\textsuperscript{77} “Vladimir Soloviev,” 564.
\textsuperscript{80} Kostalevsky 118.
realizability of the Kingdom of God, perhaps finally recognizing, as Trubetskoï insists, that it is a transcendent ideal, not an earthly possibility. But he continued to believe that history—human progress—was the necessary preparation for the Kingdom of God, whether it comes on earth or we come to it. It remains our responsibility, and we shall not enter it until we have achieved theosis. As Judith Deutsch Kornblatt puts it in her pathbreaking article on *Three Dialogues*, “salvation comes, even in this most apocalyptic of works, only because of, and by means of, human participation.” \(^8^1\) Salvation meant what it always had for Russia’s greatest philosopher, the autonomous self-realization of our divine potential. His last words were “hard is the work of the Lord”—because it is our work, and it continues. \(^8^2\)

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\(^8^1\) Kornblatt, “Soloviev on Salvation,” 70.

\(^8^2\) Quoted by Frank 27.