THE ECUMENICAL VISION OF VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV

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Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) ranks among the last great idealist philosophers of the nineteenth century. However autonomous and creative he may have been in that tradition, he operated within an existing European intellectual current. It was not, however, as a philosopher, but as a religious thinker that he was ahead of his time. Solovyov was a confirmed advocate of the unity of the Christian church, an ecumenist before the term existed.

Solovyov highlighted the universality of Christianity and elaborated it in a world-wide view of history. Thus he emphasised a central aspect of Christianity which had hardly been developed in the Russian church. In spite of the fact that there is ample reason for being critical of the monumental and utopian character of this vision, it remains Solovyov's eternal merit that he stripped the vision of the church of Russian national narrow-mindedness. This does not only make him historically unique, but also permanently of topical interest in his country, where religion and nationalism never cease establishing new relations. Catholic ecumenists, too, can gain inspiration from Solovyov: there is a clear balance in his unifying vision of the church, because, while acknowledging papal authority, he argues in favour of preserving the specific character of the churches.

Yet there is an important difference between Solovyov's ecumenism and modern ecumenism. The point of difference is not the strange notion that the Russian tsar and the pope were supposed to accomplish the unity of the churches: that aspect was abandoned by Solovyov himself later on. There is a more profound difference with the striving for unity pursued by the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Solovyov's Christian universalism was to an important degree based on a philosophical concept of unity, as well as on a geographical-cultural concept of East and West being mutually complementary.

Solovyov's ecumenical vision is a religious continuation of his aspiration to achieve a synthesis of philosophy and theology. Solovyov strives for a "philosophy of wholeness", in which Christian revelation and human history have been integrated, and in which church unity is a necessary datum and the harmony between church, state and society a logical consequence of that unity. Modern philosophers find it difficult to deal with the religious broad-mindedness of this world view and theologians in their turn have difficulty in dealing with the philosophical character of the exegesis of dogma. For that
matter, Solovyov here finds himself in the tradition of Schelling's *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, although he is far more church-oriented than Schelling.

In this article I intend to study Solovyov's ecumenical vision as far as these two points are concerned: the way in which he puts the concept in a philosophical framework and the geographical paradigm. I shall do this on the basis of Solovyov's major religious-philosophical work *Lectures on Godmanhood* (1881) and the studies on theocracy *The Great Controversy and Christian Politics* (1883), *Judaism and the Christian Question* (1884) and *History and Future of Theocracy* (1887).

In the philosophical and geographical-historical approach Christianity is turned into a collectivist concept and the personal aspect of religious experience is lost. This approach differs from our modern view of Christianity, in which personal choice and experience of faith have an important place and where the church as an institution is no longer the natural pivot of society and partner of the state. In other words, Solovyov's collectivist view of faith does not fit in with our secularised society.

Of permanent value, however, in this vision are the appeal for church unity and the emphasis on the coherence of Christianity and the social and political section of human existence. And it may also be said beforehand that amidst all the rationalisations of Christianity Solovyov acknowledges the priority of the act of faith on the part of man and he knows that religious experience precedes thought. Solovyov, however, immediately states that a reasoning person cannot be satisfied with this, just as a scientifically-minded person cannot be satisfied with merely enjoying the light and warmth of the sun, but will develop physical and astronomical theories about the solar system. Or, as Solovyov says in the preface to one of his theocratic writings: it is a matter of "justifying the faith of our fathers by raising it to a new level of rational consciousness; of showing how that old faith, stripped of the chains of local isolationism and national self-conceit, coalesces with eternal and universal truth."  

**Philosophic Christology**

The leitmotiv in Solovyov’s religious thought is the universalist character of Christianity. Universality (*vselenskost*) is perhaps the term, most frequently used in Solovyov's oeuvre. It is the religious counterpart of the philosophic "all-oneness" or "pan-unity" (*vseedinstvo*), with which the ontological

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2 Istorija i buduščnost' teokratii [History and Future of Theocracy], S.S. vol. IV, 243.