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THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF VLADIMIR
SOLOV’ÈV (1853–1900)

VLADIMIR SOLOV’ÈV, MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND ‘SOUND
POLITICS’*

My task today is to present some reflections on the legacy of the
nineteenth-century Russian religious philosopher, mystic, and poet,
Vladimir Sergeevich Solov’ëv, one hundred years after his death.
I feel very honoured indeed that the Faculty of Theology here in
Olomouc has invited me to do this. As far as possible I will pursue
this task in the spirit of a meditation. Moreover, I wish this to be
a meditation that gives due weight to the poetic element, which I
believe to have been quite prominent both in Solov’ëv’s life story
and his writings. I cannot hope to capture either the breadth or
the complexity of his religious philosophy in the time I have at
my disposal. At best I can bring out certain of his dominant ideas
and preoccupations. It is important fully to recognise the edifying
and inspirational nature of his writings. He was a masterful univer-
sity lecturer, even at the age of twenty-one, attracting enormous
crowds to hear him speak at Moscow University and then in St
Petersburg. He won the admiration of Leo Tolstoy and especially
Fyodor Dostoevsky.1 Vladimir Solov’ëv belongs to the long Russian
tradition of ‘God-seekers’ (in Russian, bogoiskateli), just as do his
two so much more famous contemporaries Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.
He was a ‘fighter of the spirit’ and a skilled polemicist, one who
frequently disarmed his enemies through self-parody. He had a
highly developed sense of the incongruous and the absurd, rather
similar to Lewis Carroll, and (also like Carroll) a fondness for word
play. His writing career lasted a mere twenty-six years, but in that
time he published several very substantial philosophical and theolo-

gical works. Solov’ëv’s dying words, as he lay ill and broken at the age of forty-seven, were: *Trudna rabota Gospodnya*, ‘The Lord’s work is difficult’.²

Before I embark on my description of his achievements and legacy, I would like to present three quotations from his philosophical and theological works, quotations which, to my mind, express insights that are characteristic of Solov’ëv’s spirituality:

From Solov’ëv’s *Three Speeches in Memory of F.M. Dostoevsky* (1881–1883):

‘Not to be led astray by the apparent domination of evil, and not to renounce the inapparent good on account of it – [this] is a feat of faith.’³

From Solov’ëv’s *The Spiritual Foundations of Life* (1882–1884)

‘The essence of the world’s evil consists in the alienation and discord of all beings, in their mutual opposition and incompatibility.’⁴

From *The Drama of Plato’s Life* (1898):

‘He [wanted] practically to oppose evil, to rectify worldly falsehoods, to help [alleviate] worldly sufferings.’⁵

Here I also add two quotations from Solov’ëv’s poetry, as follows:

‘If desires take flight, akin to mere shadows,
If promises are no more than empty words,
Is it at all worthwhile living in the gloom of errors?
Is it worth living if truth is dead?’⁶

‘The harmony of our universe is made up of
Sonorous laughter and muffled sobbing’.⁷

I propose to share with you some of my most recent thinking about Solov’ëv and his legacy. My own first encounter with Solov’ëv’s religious thought took place in 1973, very shortly before I graduated from the Russian Department of the University of Durham. I read the chapter on Solov’ëv in Nikolai Lossky’s *History of Russian Philosophy*, and knew from that point on that in some way or other Solov’ëv’s ideas would continue to engage my mind. Since that time my attitude towards the philosopher has changed in various ways. At one quite early point in my postgraduate research I became