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Two Tales on the Antichrist: Soloviev, Nietzsche, and Posthumanism

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Abstract

Vladimir Serggevich Soloviev (1853-1900) is widely considered the greatest philosopher in Russian history. His thought, which attempts to synthesize the various currents in the Western philosophical tradition with Christian theology and with the natural sciences, finds its highest point in the concept of Godmanhood (Bogochelovechestvo). In the final decade of his life, when the works of Friedrich Nietzsche start gaining popularity in the Russian Empire, Soloviev has the opportunity to confront the German philosopher's theories on the Superman with his own view of human self-transcendence. My paper shall argue that Soloviev's reading of Nietzsche may be a valid starting point in order to evaluate our theories concerning the future of mankind, and of human self-perception. This will take into account the recent rise in popularity of the so called Posthuman philosophies, such as transhumanism, genhumanism and critical posthumanism. These philosophies are in general strongly indebted to Nietzsche's view of the Superman, which is often a point of departure to challenge the anthropocentrism that is still present at every level of human discourse. However, Soloviev argues that Nietzsche's Ubermensch is not different from what the Antichrist represents in Christian theology, namely a symbol of false transcendence that ends up lowering human dignity and preventing any real self-overcoming. If we take into account Soloviev's view, we will discover that it is possible to construct a philosophy of human self transcendence that is more receptive to the Christian religious tradition than what Nietzsche's explicitly anti-Christian theory has to offer.

Keywords: Soloviev, Nietzsche, Antichrist, Religion, Posthumanism.

Introduction

Much of the history of humankind, and of its most notable pursuits such as philosophy and the sciences, may be conceived of as a struggle for transcendence. By this, I do not necessarily mean that such a struggle was or is directed towards the supernatural or even a fixed idea of humanity. Rather, it may simply be directed at overcoming hurdles, be they concrete or abstract, that provide us with a tangible sensation of danger, incompleteness and so forth.

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This, in a sense, may be seen as Soloviev's point of departure. The Russian philosopher considers the entire history of life on Earth to be a progressive process of assimilation to God. Channelling both Auguste Comte and Charles Darwin, albeit rejecting the former's atheism and the latter's a-teleological biological theory, Soloviev considers biological evolution to be a foundational part of the process leading to the union of man and God, namely, *Godmanhood*. In his view, man is therefore the pinnacle of human evolution, its very apex that renders unnecessary any further bodily metamorphosis. Surely this is not because man is physically superior to other creatures, which he most evidently is not, but rather because he no longer needs to have such physical advantage, given that he can now use his reason to overcome natural obstacles without recurring to brute force or bodily modifications. For instance, Soloviev says:

> (Man) has no need at all to have many eyes in place of two because with these two eyes weak vision (in the literal sense) is eliminated by invented human means like telescopes and microscopes.With these two eyes he can become a prophet and a superman, whereas a creature of another organic form, supplied even with a hundred eyes, is still only a fly. (260.)

One crucial thing that all of the above makes us note when we undertake the task of evaluating Soloviev's (and Nietzsche's) ideas concerning the human being, and the possibility of transcending it, is that the Russian philosopher develops the central tenets of his own theory of human self-transcendence independently of his German colleague. Conversely, his theory of the Superman (sverkhchelovek) is but one of the natural developments of his larger metaphysical project, that of the all-unity (vseedintsevo*)*. As the great 20th century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says:

> Soloviev's skill in the technique of integrating all partial truths in one vision makes him perhaps second only to Thomas Aquinas as the greatest artist of order or organization in the history of thought. (235)

From this we understand that Soloviev is perhaps one of the last great builders of grand philosophical systems, taking roots, in this sense, in the German idealist tradition, albeit with the unmistakable intention of going beyond it and coming up with a philosophy with a more explicitly Christian flavor. It would be a mistake, however, to think that all Soloviev wants is push Hegel or Schelling into mainstream Christian orthodoxy. It is rather the case that those two, and the other great representatives of Western philosophy, represent formidable sources of inspiration for him[1], but by no means the sole ones. Other important sources for him include Gnostic and Western mysticism (especially authors such as Paracelsus, Emanuel Swedenborg and Jakob Boehme), his own Russian tradition (from Ivan Kireevsky to Nikolai Fedorov), and, most importantly, his own religious experiences, other than the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, to which he belongs[2].

It is from this last source that his concept of Godmanhood takes departure. To put it more clearly, the human-divine union is a theme that has historically been dear to the Eastern Christian tradition, and Soloviev is neither the first nor the last of the Orthodox authors to concern himself with it. If such a theme, generally expressed using terms such as *theosis* or, more rarely, *theopoiesis*, could be summarized using a single formulation, that would certainly be the classical Athanasian pronouncement according to which "God became man so that man may become god". This sentence, we must immediately consider, need not be taken to entail

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1 For instance, from the times in which he is but a young researcher at the British Museum on a bursary from the University of Moscow, Soloviev gives himself the task of completing the metaphysical project, already begun by Boehme and Schelling, of integrating reason and revelation into a unified and coherent system. See Glazov (2016, p. 139). For an insightful and pugnacious criticism of Soloviev's relationship with German idealism from another noteworthy Russian religious philosopher, see Shestov (1927-1928).

2 It is sometimes argued that Soloviev became a Roman Catholic in the 80s of the 19th century. While his relationship with the Roman Catholic Church is exceptionally close, especially during this decade, authors such as S.L. Frank (1950) effectively disabuse us of this hypothesis, and scholars have on the whole moved on from it since then.

either polytheism or pantheism, even though it is true that some contemporary scholars, such as David Bentley Hart (2022, 2025), other than Soloviev himself and other high-profile Russian religious philosophers, tend to view the Christian language of deification in a decidedly non-dualistic fashion.

In any case, the Christian doctrine of theosis can only be understood in light of 2 Peter 1:4, which promises that believers "may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature" (NRSVue). Even if we leave aside the theological speculations that have been made on this passage, it is self-evident from the Biblical text that, in the Christian narrative, the believer's encounter with God cannot be met with a mere acknowledgement of an external fact, nor is it simply the confirmation that their faith longs for. Rather, such experience brings about a radical transformation in the believer, who, as a consequence, shall rise above all of the fallen aspects of human existence and be transfigured. In other words, in Christian theology, human self-transcendence is both possible and necessary. Thus, God is not a spook or a concept upon which human beings project an idealized version of themselves, as philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach would have it. On the contrary, God is precisely the one who makes this transcendence possible and accessible to all of humankind.

1. The quest for the Superman

We have already seen that Soloviev articulates his own vision of human divinization through the lenses of his project of all-unity. What this means is that, in his philosophy, *theosis* is no longer a uniquely mystical theme framed as the ascent of the single soul to God. With Soloviev it acquires a more thoroughly holistic dimension. The Muscovite philosopher presents his concept of Godmanhood by articulating it moving from history and religion (Lectures on Godmanhood), from ethics (The Justification of the Good) from ecclesiology (Russia and the Universal Church) and even from erotic love (The Meaning of Love).

This holistic focus is not limited to methodology. Godmanhood itself is not, at its core, something reserved only for particularly profound monks or mystics. On the contrary, it is the natural *telos* of the whole humanity, and this necessarily implies that, when God created human beings, he did so willing from eternity that they reach Godmanhood. Hence, if the history of man is also the history of the Godman, the divinely guided history of a nature that reaches its apex in man only to enter, by virtue of its very essence and not as a negation or a supernatural imposition on it, into communion with God (cf. Soloviev, 1948, p. 122).

Now, we understand that, given that God is both the originator and the point of arrival of human transcendence, it is necessary to spend a few words on Soloviev's view of God and of the importance of Christian theology for his understanding of Godmanhood. According to the Russian philosopher, two views of God were predominant before the advent of Christianity, namely the pagan and the Jewish. The first one, which characterizes much of the refined theologies of the non-Jewish antiquity, from Parmenides to the religions of India, tends to think of God as an impersonal, omnipervasive Absolute. Thus, according to Soloviev, the great merit of this, extremely diverse, pagan thought is to have freed God from all sorts of contingency: God is the ultimate, necessary reality underlying everything in existence. Conversely, Jewish thought, while not being able to rise up to the levels of conceptual speculations such as Parmenides' concept of Being or the Brahman of Indian religions, has nevertheless shown originality in thinking of God not as a cruel spiritual tyrant demanding human sacrifices (such as the Old Testament describes some of the dieties of neighboring and hostile populations) but as a local yet powerful, personal god with whom it is possible to enter into a true relationship. This schematization may be as simplistic as one wishes it to be, but it is essential in order to understand the religious framework for Soloviev's view of Godmanhood. The essential innovation of Christianity, argues the Muscovite, is that it no longer sees the two views outlined above as necessarily incompatible alternatives, but rather as two moments of one dialectic

which has Christianity itself as the resulting synthesis. What this means is that the Christian God is at one Absolute and personal. Now, if Christianity inherits from Judaism the belief according to which it is possible to enter into a relationship with God, and from Hellenic philosophy the notion of the Absolute character of divinity, then a relationship with God is a relationship with the Absolute, and the union with him is likewise union with the Absolute. It is precisely this union, this Godmanhood, that allows man to become the Superman.

2. Who is the Superman? The Godman versus the Ubermensch

We have seen thus far the religious and philosophical underpinnings of Soloviev's concept of Godmanhood and of the Superman, which, as we have also pointed out, he elaborated independently of Nietzsche's philosophy, which began circulating in Russia only toward the end of both philosophers' lives (they both passed away in the year 1900). It must be also said, however, that Soloviev's discovery of Nietzsche coincides with a general darkening of his philosophy and of his mystical experiences. Thus, Soloviev is quick to liken Nietzsche's own view of the Superman with the Christian figure of the Antichrist, which is, in turn, the object of some of his very latest works. As is known, the Antichrist of Christian theology presents itself as a kind of "negative Christ", a kind of anti-Messiah preaching immorality, chaos, and the notion that humanity needs to turn its back to God and worship the devil instead. Soloviev, as the author of *A Short Tale on the Antichrist*, has this evil figure embody precisely the characteristics mentioned above. So, he has his own Antichrist say: "Christ came before me (…) but that which comes later in the order of time is, in essence, more primary. I come last, at the end of history, precisely because I am the perfect and definitive savior." (Soloviev 2014, p. 12). So, as the book unfolds, the Antichrist will conquer a position of power over the entire world that no historical conqueror or military leader has ever been able to achieve. Evidently, this shows that Soloviev believes that, even if the Antichrist's activity is but a pernicious parody of Christ's, it is still a kind of imitation of it. But, as all that we said above shows, this imitation of Christ "works" because it still presupposes that transcendence is possible. Imitation of Christ, who is the first and the archetypical Godman, is imitation of the one who effectively bridged the gap between the human and the divine, thereby becoming the authentic Superman. We can say that Soloviev's Antichrist achieves that kind of quasi-unlimited power because he understands what Nietzsche understands as well. All this is made explicit when Soloviev directly addresses Nietzsche. In his words:

> Isn't the unfortunate Nietzsche right, after all, when he maintains that all the virtue, all the value, of a man is in the fact that he is more than a man, that he is a transition to some kind of other, higher being? (87).

According to Nel Grillaert, who authors an impressively thorough study of the reception of Nietzsche by some of the greatest names in Russian religious philosophy:

> The confrontation with Nietzsche's Übermensch then, spelled out to overcome the death of the old God, alarmed the religious philosopher (i.e. Soloviev, addition mine) and provoked him to disprove this corruption of his own ideal of the sverkhchelovek. (90).

While, at first glance, one may be tempted to think that Soloviev does not, after all, see too much of value in Nietzsche, given the snarky and somewhat dismissive treatment that he at times reserves to the super-philologist, it becomes clear, upon further reading, that he acknowledges the German philosopher as an opponent of monumental caliber. As we already saw, part of the difficulty in Soloviev's challenges with Nietzsche is that the latter does not present a philosophy completely alien and radically at odds with his own. When the Muscovite philosopher notices that Nietzsche's ideas are starting to receive much consideration and admiration among the Russian cultural elites, his reaction is more joyful than one could have guessed. Having replaced the fame of Kant, Hegel and Darwin among Russian intellectuals, Nietzsche is at least one who can remind them of the importance to strive for transcendence,

that is, to achieve the status of Supermen. And, if Russian intellectuals used to feel superior to the men of the streets by virtue of their knowledge of humankind's less than noble origin, thereby falling into an ironic paradox, they now understand that it is no longer enough for them to assume their own superiority and merely conform to what their social status requires of them (cf. Soloviev 2000, p. 263). Thanks to Nietzsche, the members of the intelligentsia are now encouraged to work in order to create their own values ex nihilo.

And yet, to this promising element in Nietzsche's philosophy corresponds something much subtler and more dangerous, that Soloviev could never see even in the most resolutely atheistic of the Western philosophers before him. Nietzsche makes himself the apostle of the same thirst for transcendence that Soloviev also shares, but presents it in a completely anti-theistic and anti-religious fashion. Nietzsche promises the same kind of transcendence that Soloviev and all of Christianity promise, but affirms that not only is God not necessary for such transcendence to be achieved, he is also a pernicious obstacle to it. Also, Soloviev tends to think of Godmanhood in terms of destiny of the entire human race, which results in a stark opposition to Nietzsche's aristocratic sensitivities. In Soloviev's system, everyone, from the greatest genius to the "last man", is called to participate in the Universal Church, the perfect divine-human society, which is a perspective completely alien to Nietzsche's rejection of the priestly influx on the "slave revolt in morality" (24).

3. The Mangod and the Antichrist

Having illustrated the main differences between Soloviev's view of the Superman and Nietzsche's, we need now to turn our attention to the problem of the Mangod, and to what brings Soloviev (and other, younger Russian religious philosophers, for that matter, such as Semyon Frank and Nikolai Berdyaev) to identify this new figure with Nietzsche's *Ubermensch,* and, ultimately, with the Antichrist.

As should be easy to understand, Mangodhood (chelovekobozhie) represent an inversion of Godmanhood. While this term originates with the atheist philosopher Nikolai Speshnev (Grillaert, p. 109), it is Dostoevsky who popularizes the term among the Russian intelligentsia. Despite the fact that the term *chelovekobog* appears only three times in his writings (Grillaert, p. 107) one of his best known works, *Demons*, tells precisely the story of a man, Aleksei Kirillov, with whom the strife towards Mangodhood is chiefly associated. The classical religious formulation of theosis, or Godmanhood, is clearly impossible and absolutely unthinkable if one postulates that God does not exist. Therefore, if God is not, man's only choice is to assert his own will, to realize that, having created the idea of God, he is himself the creator of values who pursues self-transcendence only for himself. While Soloviev does not explicitly use the term chelovekobog to refer to the Antichrist (or to Nietzsche's Superman) it is clear from his description of this Christian figure that he thinks of him as the archetypical Mangod, just as we saw him present Jesus Christ as the archetype of the Godman.

Now, one observation that we may make at this point is that, despite the fact that Nietzsche explicitly refers to himself as the Antichrist, his Superman does not resemble too much the Antichrist of the Christian tradition or of Soloviev's own *Short Tale.* Nietzsche's Zarathustra, for instance, proclaims: *"*I teach you the overman. Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?[3]" (2006, p. 5). This is significant for two reasons. First, this shows that, unlike what we see in Soloviev's Antichrist, there is a sense in which Zarathustra, the main prophet of the Superman, has a liberatory role. He does not claim that everyone can become a Superman, of course, but his journey presupposes that some can be taught to pursue and attain self-transcendence. Conversely, the Antichrist comes to seduce, enslave and subjugate the whole humanity under himself by all means necessary.

3 "Overman" is a widespread and even more literally correct translation of the German *Ubermensch*, I use the term "Superman" to render both the German word and its Russian equivalent *sverkhchelovek* into the same English term.

Secondly, if what we just said is true, then it follows that Nietzsche's *chelovekobozhie* is not so much due to the particular direction that his philosophy takes than it is rather due to its very point of departure, namely, the willingness to determine and change the human condition without taking God into account. Thus, it becomes of secondary importance whether one wants to rediscuss the human trajectory and destiny in order to enslave or to liberate (or do neither thing). The very thought that man has something that is not of God as its *telos* or its essence is, it follows from Soloviev's speculations, already belonging to the way of the Antichrist.

4. Soloviev and posthumanism

Having framed the debate concerning the Superman in Russian religious thought and Soloviev's reception of Nietzsche's philosophy, we may now finally move on to analyze whether Soloviev's Christian view of Godmanhood as authentic transcendence of humanity can be relevant to the problems posed by the so-called posthuman philosophies in our day. It must be immediately pointed out that posthumanism is very much an umbrella term, encapsulating within itself a great deal of distinct currents of thought. In very broad terms, posthumanism as a movement seeks to de-center the human and move past the anthropocentrism that has characterized the virtual entirety of Western philosophy. As Francesca Ferrando, herself a leading posthumanist philosopher, puts it:

> What Posthumanism puts at stake is not only the identity of the traditional centre of Western discourse- which has already been radically deconstructed by its own peripheries (feminist, critical race, queer, and postcolonial theorists, to name a few). Posthumanism is a post-centralizing, in the sense that it recognizes not one but many specific centers of interest (30).

While Ferrando does not bind posthumanism to any teleological horizon, James Brusseau (2023) takes the word to mean something that "accelerates innovation to change *what* we are. AI and technology convert us into something other than human." So, there definitely is a teleology in this case.

While posthumanism (critical, cultural etc.) generally takes root in French post-structuralism and third wave feminist theory[4], transhumanists are currently very active in the debates concerning the relationship between their movement and Nietzsche's philosophy. In an extremely bold move, the transhumanist philosopher Max More claims: "I can state with absolute confidence that such an influence (i.e. of Nietzsche on transhumanism) exists. I know that because his ideas influenced my own thinking." (28).

Finally, we get to genhumanism (i.e. generative humanism), a lesser known philosophy, for which Brusseau (2023) finds a philosophical antecedent in Deleuze and Guattari, frames in more individualistic fashion than he does posthumanism and transhumanism. According to him:

> what I am doing generates who I am, more than my identity determining what I do. This dynamic allows nomads to be understood not as those who escape their local reality to be somewhere different, but as those who escape where they are to become someone else. (2025).

As we can now see, all these philosophies, regardless of what they make of Nietzsche's Superman or of whether they acknowledge an influence from Nietzsche or not, are based precisely on what Soloviev would immediately consider akin to the thinking of the Antichrist, namely the attempt to redefine the human being in a way that ignores its essential *telos* towards union with God.

Now, this does not mean that a non-Christian philosophy is strictu sensu impossible or that philosophy must return to the role of ancilla theologiae, which is a notion Soloviev would likewise reject. It does, however, raise some questions that we will see in the conclusion.

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4 Rosi Braidotti, another noteworthy posthumanist thinker, explicitly builds her philosophy chiefly on Spinoza. See Braidotti (2013).

Conclusion

The Polish philosopher Jan Krasicki concludes, in a most insightful article of his, that "philosophy is waiting for the Incarnation. (…) If there is no Incarnation, there is no God and there is no man, or at least we are approaching their ends (as Foucault notices)" (2002, p. 139). There is little doubt that Soloviev would endorse this sentiment wholeheartedly. Now, this is not the place to argue for or against the truthfulness of the Christian narrative, but one can surely make the case that the concept of Godmanhood presents a powerful alternative to both Nietzsche's account of the Superman and posthuman rejection of the instrinsic worth of man. What Soloviev's vision presents us with, in our estimation, is the notion that the human being – *every* human being – is necessarily destined for union with God, and defined by his very ascent towards the infinite. In other words, it presents a thoroughly Christian account of man that cannot be collapsed into the modern humanistic anthropology that both Nietzsche and posthumanism seek to tear down.

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