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## The Meaning of Love in V. Solovyov and P. Florensky

The main topic here is the drawing of a comparison between the concept of love in the works of Vladimir Solovyov and Pavel Florensky. Both authors point to the connection of love to the Divine Sophia, a theme which became central to Russian religious thinkers following the path opened by V. Solovyov himself. P. Florensky is one of the main sophiologists who developed a concept of love as friendship, in contrast to V. Solovyov who elaborated more on erotic love.

Before focusing on these thinkers, we have to understand the differences between the various aspects that are described by the same word, "love." Indeed, the single noun "love" contains many different aspects which were distinguished by the ancient Greeks with four different words: *eros*, *philia*, *agape* and *storge*.

Pavel Florensky explained the difference between these four types of love in the letter about Friendship in his book *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914).<sup>1</sup> The difference between the four kinds of love depends on their quality and on the object towards which they are oriented. Firstly, Florensky describes *eros* as the re-orientation of one's all feelings toward a single object with the implication of passionate, sensual and jealous tones. Secondly, *philia*, or love as friendship, is the inclination towards a person based on similarities of the soul: this creates satisfaction and feelings of self-saturation. Thirdly, *storge* expresses a familiar organic connection which is typical of the bond between family members. Finally, *agape* is based on a rationalized love during which the object is appreciated because of his or her qualities: *agape* is a kind of love which follows the act of free will and one's own rational decision. *Agape* and *philia* are very similar in their rational and moral aspects. However, *agape* lacks immediate action that is not mediated by reason, one that originates in the heart and connected to love as in *philia*. Based on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* Florensky explains that *philia* is connected to the beloved persons and *agape* is connected

not to a person but to his or her attributes and specific characteristics. This is why *agape* can be considered a kind of love that is impersonal and abstract. However, it is also a moral love because it is determined by the will, consciously directed and determined by rational elaboration. This kind of love is free. On the contrary, *philia* is not free and is an expression of a natural inclination towards another person. In this sense it is similar to *eros* although *eros* is more inclined towards a sensual and affectionate approach. In relation to *eros*, *philia* is more directed towards similarities and proximity with another person.

At this point, we will discuss why V. Solovyov decided to focus his interest on erotic love and why P. Florensky prefers love as *philia*. Solovyov is the first Russian sophiologist who tried to reconcile the Christian East and the Christian West. His followers created a particularly inspired period at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, now considered the golden age of Russian philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Solovyov's poetry and aesthetic theories determined the movement of Russian symbolism. Symbolist poets lauded Sophia<sup>3</sup> as an eternal feminine and Beautiful Woman. Through this image they wanted to illustrate the idea of the Wisdom of God. Solovyov's mystical experiences are connected to his vision of Sophia. For the rest of his life he wanted to rationally express this kind of experience in his philosophical system. Jonathan Sutton described Solovyov as a philosopher in this way:

Solovyov is deemed to be the "father" of Russian philosophy, but one question to ask is this: *did* he establish a school of philosophy that owes its origin directly to him? Not really. He exerted an influence which is more *oblique* than the founding of a "school." His mode of thinking goes far beyond the confines of academic philosophy, to be sure, and over the course of several generations it has helped to shape modern Christian spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

In the same way, we can see Pavel Florensky's thoughts which are based on the mystery of his own mystical experiences that cannot be transmitted directly. Both Solovyov's and Florensky's philosophy aim to achieve the ideal

<sup>2</sup> In an interview in the program "Философские имена" *Философия отца Сергея Булгакова*, Kozyrev stated that Silver Age of Russian literature, in particular of Russian poetry, corresponds to a period of Golden Age of Russian philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek *Sophia* corresponds to *Hokmah* in Hebrew which is described in the biblical texts as a creation of God and in later Jewish mysticism as a divine hypostasis, *Ein-Sof*, the Endless and the ten *sefirot*.

<sup>4</sup> J. Sutton, *Vladimir Solovyov as Reconciler and Polemicist*. [in:] *Vladimir Solovyov: Reconciler and Polemicist*, eds. E. van der Zweerde, W. van den Bercken, M. de Courten, Leuven 2000, p. 1.

<sup>1</sup> P. Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. B. Jakim, Princeton 2004.



and eternal being described as Sophia or Divine Wisdom. In both cases, their thoughts were formulated in the context of scientific progress of the time.

Solovyov lived in a period of classical science which passed over the revolution and influenced Florensky in a different way. Solovyov emphasised atomic theory and the principle of universal gravitation. He also integrated organic thought and evolutionary theory into his philosophy. He was more naturalistically oriented than Florensky who incorporated into his philosophical system the theory of relativity, quantum physics and Cantor's set theory,<sup>5</sup> particularly the concepts of discontinuity and actual infinity. In relation to the all-unity truth (*всесоюзная истина*), considering their different approach to science, Solovyov embraced the all-unity of elements, while Florensky exchanged elements for symbols. According to Solovyov, all beings are connected and total unity is an extended continuum. In *La Russie et l'Église Universelle* Solovyov described different steps towards total unity:

the first, determined by universal gravitation, which makes the lower world a relatively compact mass and creates the material body of the universe. There is the *mechanical unity* of the whole. [...] The Word takes possession of this idealized material, as the proper medium of its formative action; projects imponderable fluids into all the parts of the universe; envelops all the members of the cosmic body in a network of ether; manifests the relative differences of these parts and places them in fixed relationships, and thus creates a second cosmic unity more perfect and more ideal, the *dynamic unity* realized by light, electricity and all the other imponderables, which are simply modifications or transformations of one and the same agent. [...] Nevertheless, it aspires always towards this union, and will not confine itself to the contemplation of the heavens and the shining stars, to immersion in the fluid ether; it absorbs the light, transforms it into living fire and as the fruit of this new union produces from its loins every living soul in the two kingdoms of plants and animals. This new unity, the *organic unity*, with inorganic matter and the etheric fluids as its base and medium, is the more perfect in that it forms and governs a more complicated body by a more active and universal soul.<sup>6</sup>

Florensky, on the other hand, emphasised the discontinuity and actual infinity within the holistic conception of total-unity. This different approach to the total-unity is connected to a different view of Sophia:

Solovyov understood Sofia as the realisation of the divine idea by way of unity in the manifold, as a matter penetrated by the principle of unity which was potentially/infinite only at each stage of the godhuman process. According to Florensky, two aspects were interwoven. Sophia is cosmos and symbol. As cosmos, Sophia is the accomplished unity in the manifold of its forms, elements and figures. As a symbol, Sophia itself is a discrete personality which is interconnected with all other personalities [...]. As a symbol, Sophia is an accomplished total unity, she is actual infinite.<sup>7</sup>

On the basis of these two philosophical approaches, we can compare the concept of love in the works of Solovyov and Florensky. We will see that the two thinkers emphasized two different kinds of love. Solovyov was much more involved in theories related to love as *eros*, while Florensky elaborated love as *philia*.

Solovyov described Sophia as both a male and female entity that corresponds to the ideal humanity. This androgynous ideal should be restored within every single man or woman but at the same time there is an erotic tension which leads to the unitotality of all.

In *The Meaning of Love* (1892–1894)<sup>8</sup> Solovyov distinguished five paths of erotic love which progress from the lowest negative paths of hell and physical attraction through the positive human experience of *eros* like marriage, procreation or ascetism, culminating in the supreme path of divine love as a sign of rebirth. Solovyov develops a kind of transcended *Eros* in response to the Platonic *Eros*. In Solovyov's view, Platonic *Eros* gives way to the resurrection of mortal nature in a new dimension in which man transforms himself into Godmanhood as an expression of spiritual-corporal union. But as Solovyov described in his work *The Life Drama of Plato* (*Жизненная драма Платона*), Plato did not realize his intuition about *Eros* as it was described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Plato's *Eros* seems to be more the fruit of theoretical speculation than of life experience. It is because in this historical period there was no experience with Godman who appeared on the Earth with Jesus. Godmanhood is a result of a divine-human process during which a human being becomes its active part. Solovyov described the theory of this divine-human process in the book *Lectures on Godmanhood*.<sup>9</sup> Paul Valliere reminded that Mochulsky described Solovyov's theory as "an inverted Platonism."<sup>10</sup>

5

Florensky was probably the first advocate of Cantor's set theory in Russia, see F. Haney, *Religious Thought and Natural Science in Vladimir Solovyov and Pavel Florensky: A Comparative Study of their Conception of Rationality*, [in:] Vladimir Solovyov: *Reconciler and Polemicist*, op. cit., p. 271.

6

V. Solovyov, *Russia and the Universal Church*, trans. H. Rees, London 1948, p. 165.

7

F. Haney, *Religious Thought and Natural Science in Vladimir Solovyov and Pavel Florensky*, op. cit., pp. 279–280.

8

V. Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, trans. T. R. Beyer, Aurora – Colorado 1995.

9

V. Solovyov, *Lectures on Godmanhood*, trans. P. Zouboff, San Rafael – California 2007.



In Plato the appearance of the object produces the recollection of its idea sleeping in the human soul; in Solov'ev it is the other way around: the idea living in the soul makes possible the perception of the object. In [Plato] the movement is from below to above, *de reallibus ad realia*, while in [Solov'ev] the movement is from above to below, *de reallibus ad realia*. The human being responds to the condescension of the idea through his own creative activity. Thus, the process of cognition in Solov'ev is shown to be a *divine-human process*.<sup>10</sup>

As was the case of comparison between Solov'ov's and Florensky's relation to science, here we can also see an evaluative process fuelled by erotic love.

In Florensky's elaboration of love as friendship he focuses much more on the love for truth which is antimomical and includes potential and actual infinity. He distinguished two kinds of truth: all-unity divine truth (*Истина*) and human truth (*истина*): "the love for the absolute, infinite, divine Truth (*Истина*) requires relative, finite, human truth (*истина*)."<sup>11</sup> There are two ways to achieve the infinite Truth through the finite truth: "directly, through the intuition of the whole, or indirectly, by stepwise discursive thought (*дискурсия*)."<sup>12</sup>

Truth and total-unity are interconnected and both Solov'ov and Florensky understand them as a living entity, the all-unity objective idea which contains it all. Truth is the central concept of Florensky's book *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* which is constructed as a series of twelve letters dedicated to an unidentified "brother," "elder" and "Guardian."

The eleventh letter is dedicated to Friendship but it is not the only letter where Florensky referred to love. Even in the fourth letter dedicated to Truth he spoke about love but in a different way than in the eleventh letter. Love from the fourth letter is a spiritual activity which can appear only in a purified consciousness. Only this kind of love permits the knowledge of Truth. However, there is a difference between love as a psychological condition and an ontological act typical of Christian love.

In the eleventh letter, love is related to the society which should be constituted from brothers. Florensky pointed out that religious community is connected through two kinds of bonds: a personal connection between people and an idea of the whole of the community. In ancient times, the personal bond was mediated by *eros* and the principle of mankind was *storge*. These two

loves created a metaphysical stability of existence of society. Christian society, on the other hand, was based on *philia* in the personal sphere and society was connected by *agape*. In fact, according to Florensky, *philia* is a spiritualized and transformed *eros* and *agape* is a spiritualized and transformed *storge*. Agapic brotherhood within Christian community is expressed through the communion of the Holy Body and Blood. *Philia* or Friendship is created by sharing fraternal and sacramental acts. According to Florensky we can live in relation of friendship only if we have a Friend but at the same time we can have a Friend only if we are living among friends. It seems that a Friend can be understood symbolically as Christ.

To conclude, both Solov'ov and Florensky aim for the unification of the whole through love and their elaborations complement each other. Solov'ov's erotic love is more connected to esoteric Christianity which included gnostic and kabbalah teachings.<sup>13</sup> Elevated sexual love leads humanity to the androgonic union which reflects Sophia. Florensky focused his interest more on different aspects of love within a Christian community. However, it is not important whether man starts from the idea of Truth, from the idea of Good or the idea of Beauty because these three ideas all form the One. Everything is interconnected in the whole total-unity. With the scientific revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the theory of relativity and quantum physics, a new view of the physical world emerged. It does not mean that previous discoveries are not valid anymore; they are always valid, but on different levels of reality, which is one. Likewise, we can discuss different kinds of love and explain their differences between them but in the end, ontologically, Love is only one and all Love is the One.

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<sup>10</sup> P. Vallere, *Solov'ev and Schelling: Philosophy of Revelation*, [in:] Vladimir Solov'ev: *Reconciler and Polemicist*, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> F. Haney, *Religious Thought and Natural Science in Vladimir Solov'ev and Pavel Florenskij*, op. cit., p. 284.

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