

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
103 (2), pp. 68-91, 2025

Love as Ontological and Eschatological Principle in Vladimir Solovyov's Thought: A Philosophico-Theological Analysis of *The Meaning of Love*

Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI

Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI

"Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania

Email: ciprian.toroczcai@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract

This study explores in depth the theological conception of love in the thought of Vladimir Solovyov, with a special focus on his seminal work *The Meaning of Love*. Starting from the premise that love is neither a mere biological instinct nor a passing emotional state, but rather an ontological act and an eschatological calling, the analysis seeks to show how Solovyov proposes a synthesis between eros and agape, body and soul, the human and the divine.

The text is structured into six chapters, covering Solovyov's theological vision of love, its impact on the Russian émigré theologians (such as S. Bulgakov, N. Berdyaev, G. Florovsky, Vl. Lossky), and a sustained critique of religious moralism and modern erotic nihilism (as expressed in thinkers like A. Schopenhauer, S. Freud, Fr. Nietzsche, and J.-P. Sartre). The final chapter argues the contemporary relevance of Solovyov's vision in the face of affective crises and the challenges of posthumanism.

By offering a comparative, well-sourced, and theologically engaged perspective, the study presents Solovyov not merely as a mystical philosopher, but as a *prophet of ontological communion and of personhood transfigured through love*. Love is revealed not only as a human experience but as an icon of the Kingdom—a space where being is given, shared, and sanctified.

Keywords

Love, Eros and Agape, Ontology, Sophiology, Eschatology, Vladimir Solovyov

I. Introduction

In the modern history of Christian thought, few figures have provoked as many contrasting and powerful reactions as Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900)¹. Philosopher, theologian, poet, mystic, and visionary, Solovyov was, already during his lifetime, a restless spiritual conscience—torn between fidelity to the Russian Orthodox tradition and a deep desire to open it to universality, to dialogue with the West², with modern philosophy, and with the horizon of future humanity. In this tension, which made him at times revered, at times marginalised, Solovyov produced a body of work of rare intensity, in which metaphysics intertwines with theology, and love becomes the living core of an eschatological vision of man and the world.

His work *The Meaning of Love* (*Смысл любви*), written between 1892 and 1894, is perhaps one of his most daring and intimate texts. Initially delivered as a series of public lectures at the People's University in Moscow, the book sparked controversy precisely because Solovyov approached the love between man and woman not as a mere psychological or social fact, but as an ontological mystery and prophetic act, with cosmic and soteriological implications. At a time when Christian morality had in many respects become a juridical codification of good, and the positive

¹ Maxime HERMAN, *Vie et œuvre de Vl. Soloviev*, Éditions universitaires, Fribourg, 1995; Andrew LOUTH, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers. From the Philokalia to the present*, SPCK, London, 2015, pp. 13-26; Paul VALLIERE, "Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900): Commentary", in: J. WITTE, F. S. ALEXANDER, *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 33-105. Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/64.

² For a discussion of Solovyov's relationship with Rome, see Mark EVERITT, "Vladimir Solov'ev: A Russian Newman?", in: *Sobornost/ECR* 1 (1979), nr. 1, pp. 23-38; Michel d'HERBIGNY, *Un Newman russe: Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900)*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1911; Teresa OBOLEVITCH, "The Metaphysical Foundations of the Ecumenical Project of Vladimir Solovyov", in: *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 67 (2015), nr. 1-2, pp. 33-45. See also L. BROPHY, "Vladimir Soloviev: a Russian Newman", in: *The Irish Monthly*, 75 (1947), pp. 478-483; A. PAPLAUSKAS-RAMUNAS, "Vladimir Soloviev au delà de l'Est et de l'Ouest", in: *Études Slaves et Est-Européennes/Slavic and East-European Studies*, 3 (1958), pp. 25-31; J. LIKODIS, "Vladimir Soloviev («The Russian Newman») on Christian Politics and Ecumenism", in: *The Catholic Social Science Review*, 16 (2011), pp. 195-211.

sciences sought to reduce love to an adaptive instinct, Solovyov firmly rejected both lifeless moralism and spiritless naturalism.

At the centre of this work lies a radical and powerful idea: true love is participation in the Absolute, an affirmation of the other's being as eternal value—a call to resurrection. This idea is not merely formulated as lyrical metaphor but as a theological and philosophical thesis, sustained by rigorous logic and infused with the living breath of spiritual experience. “To love means to say to the other: you must not die”³—this sentence encapsulates Solovyov's entire vision and theological anthropology.

Solovyov's book must be read against the backdrop of a major spiritual crisis that marked the end of the 19th century. Russia was under the influence of Western-European thought, and theology was fractured into at least three dominant tendencies: a conservative and moralistic strand, represented by Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky, who emphasised the educative and juridical function of dogma; a positivist and psychologising tendency, which infiltrated even religious discourse; and finally, a mystical and spiritual renewal, in which Solovyov played a decisive role.

From his earliest writings, Solovyov exhibited a vocation for synthesis: between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between spirituality and culture, between earthly love and divine revelation⁴. This vocation is evident in *The Meaning of Love*, where we encounter not a dualistic vision (body vs. spirit), but a unifying anthropology in which sexual love, when lived truthfully, becomes both symbol and vehicle of ultimate union between humanity and God. He does not reduce eros to biology, but transfigures it, transforming it into a mystical path toward deification. In this sense, Solovyov stands as one of the first modern Christian thinkers to reclaim erotic love not as a concession to nature, but as an icon of Trinitarian love.

This approach was met with reserve or even hostility in some Orthodox theological circles. Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky, for example, held that Christian love should be understood in terms of ethical compassion

³ Vladimir SOLOVIEV, *Le sens de l'amour: essais de philosophie esthétique*, transl. T. D. M., Aubier, Paris, 1946, p. 24.

⁴ See Vladimir SOLOVYOV, *War, Progress, and the End of History including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ. Three Discussions*, transl. A. Bakshy, London, 1915.

and moral obligation⁵. In his view, the emphasis fell on Christ's psychological suffering and the believer's ethical imitation thereof. For Solovyov, however, love is not duty but transfiguring vision; not moral compassion but ontological affirmation of the other's being. This tension between ethics and ontology would later shape and divide 20th-century Russian theology.

Fr. Georges Florovsky, in *Ways of Russian Theology*, offers a balanced yet critical reading of Solovyov, acknowledging his prophetic strength while cautioning against a potential syncretism that drifts away from the patristic ethos⁶. For Florovsky, returning to the Church Fathers is the only authentic path for theology, while for Solovyov, Christian truth cannot be confined to the past—it must be actualised, prophetically lived, and reshaped into new forms. In this regard, Solovyov is closer to the great mystics than to the scholastic dogmatists: he thinks theology with the heart and lives love as embodied dogma.

The Meaning of Love decisively influenced the entire generation of Russian émigré thinkers in the 20th century: from Sergei Bulgakov, who deepened the theology of love through Sophiology, to Pavel Florensky, who viewed love as the living form of truth; from Nikolai Berdyaev, who transformed Solovyov's intuitions into a philosophy of freedom, to Paul Evdokimov, who famously wrote that love is the surest path to theosis⁷.

This study proposes a detailed theological and philosophical analysis of the key ideas in *The Meaning of Love*, with particular emphasis on the eschatological dimension of love. We will explore how, in Solovyov's thought, love is not merely the beginning of a human relationship, but a prophecy of ultimate unity, a mystery of deification, and a salvific ontological force.

⁵ Antonie HRAPOVITSKI, *L'idée morale des dogmes de la T.S. Trinité, de la divinité de Jésus-Christ et de la rédemption*; transl. A.M. du Chayla; Paris, 1910.

⁶ Georges FLOROVSKY, *Ways of Russian Theology*, vol. 1, Nordland Publishing, Belmont, MA, 1979, pp. 109-127.

⁷ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *La femme et le salut du monde*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1978, p. 79.

II. Love as Spiritual Reality and Ontological Principle

At the heart of Solovyov's entire reflection on love lies a profoundly ontological vision: love is not an accident of psychological life, nor a mere instinct culturally adorned, but an act of recognising the ultimate reality of the other. This perspective reclaims love as a path of ontological communion at a time when it was either biologically vulgarised or dismissed by a spirituality suspicious of the body.

For Solovyov, what defines authentic love is not affective intensity or sensory attraction, but the will to affirm the other's being in its eternal and unique fullness⁸. In a defining passage, he writes: "To love means to affirm that what is in you and in the beloved does not belong to the mortal and passing world, but is eternal, indestructible, absolute"⁹. This sentence encapsulates his entire anthropology: the person is not a relative or accidental entity, but a being called to eternity.

II.1. Against Biologism and Sentimentalism

Solovyov denounces two major distortions of love prevalent in the modern world: a materialist one, which reduces love to "a biological mechanism of the species", and a sentimentalist one, which turns it into a "fleeting psychological adventure"¹⁰. In both cases, love is stripped of its profound reality and becomes either a physiological phenomenon or a narrative fiction.

In contrast, Solovyov affirms a spiritual realism¹¹: love is the most real and creative act, as it calls being into existence, giving ontological weight to the other. Essentially, it is a Christological act: just as God, through love, created the world, so too love between humans participates in this creative dynamism. Thus, love is not merely an emotion, but an act of co-creation.

⁸ See Teresa Obolovitch, "All-Unity according to V. Soloviev and S. Frank. A Comparative Analysis", in: *Forum Philosophicum* 15 (2010), nr. 2, pp. 413-425.

⁹ Vladimir SOLOVIEV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Vladimir SOLOVIEV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, pp. 18-22.

¹¹ Oliver SMITH, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Spiritualization of Matter*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, MA, 2011, pp. 147-162.

Ontologically, Solovyov argues that love grants access to the “profound being” of the other, to what is absolutely irreducible and unrepeatable. When I love, I do not relate to a “specimen of the species,” but to a unique face, called to eternity. In this sense, love becomes the recognition of the sacred and ineffable character of the person. This intuition would later inform the theological personalism of the 20th century, particularly in its Orthodox form.

II.2. The Person – The Eternal Face in the Other

According to Solovyov, love does not merely create relationship, it creates personhood. Through love, the other ceases to be an anonymous entity and becomes an absolute “you”. This insight is closely related to the theology of the image, later formulated by Vladimir Lossky, and, in more poetic terms, by Fr. Pavel Florensky.

Fr. Florensky writes that “the face of a person is the visible revelation of an invisible presence”¹². Solovyov goes further, suggesting that love unveils the face not only as aesthetic beauty, but as eternal essence, called to communion. In the act of love, the other is seen in the eschatological light of what he or she will become in Christ—not as they are now, but as they will be fulfilled.

This understanding elevates love to the level of a prophetic act. Love becomes, in the deepest sense, a foreseeing of resurrection. Rather than accepting the other’s death, authentic love metaphysically rejects it. To love means to declare: “You cannot die. You are destined for eternal life”. This is what Solovyov calls “love’s claim against death”¹³—a formula that echoes the biblical power of the *Song of Songs* (8, 6): “Love is strong as death”. François Lesourd emphasizes that for Solovyov, love transcends mere human emotion and becomes an ontological act with cosmic implications. Lesourd notes that Solovyov views love as a force that leads towards the restoration of unity between the human and the divine¹⁴.

¹² Paul FLORENSKY, *La colonne et le fondement de la vérité*, L’Age d’Homme, Paris, 1994, p. 198.

¹³ Vladimir SOLOVIEV, *Le Sens de l’amour...*, p. 77.

¹⁴ Françoise LESOURD. “Le Sens de l’amour et le dialogue entre Vladimir Soloviov et Nikolaï Fiodorov”, in : *Slavica Occitania*, 47 (2018), pp. 47-62.

II.3. Love as the Beginning of Deification

In Solovyov's thought, love is not merely a personal experience but a soteriological path. It becomes the space in which the person opens to grace and begins to be transfigured. If, in Orthodox tradition, *theosis* (deification) involves synergy between divine grace and human will, love is the very arena of that synergy. In loving, one exits the self, renounces possessiveness, and enters into the logic of self-giving, which is the very logic of the Trinity.

Solovyov does not construct a technical dogmatics of deification, but he offers a fundamental intuition: love is the real premise of *theosis*, for it breaks egoism and places the person within the Trinitarian structure of existence. In this sense, love is not merely an expression of the divine image, but an icon of the future life, of that moment when "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15, 28).

This idea is later taken up and deepened by Paul Evdokimov, who affirms that "in love, the structure of the Kingdom is already revealed"¹⁵. In this logic, love becomes an eschatological event, an anticipatory presence of the Kingdom. To love means "to live the other as mystery, not as object"—which, theologically speaking, means to recognise the other as a living altar¹⁶.

III. The Essence of Sophia in Solovyov's Thought¹⁷

In Solovyov's philosophical and theological framework, Sophia represents more than an abstract principle; she is a divine personification of wisdom, embodying the essential relationship between God and the world. Drawing inspiration from the mystical traditions of both East and West, Solovyov

¹⁵ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *La femme et le salut du monde*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Ciprian Costin APINTILESEI, "Sofia Divină și Sufletul lumii în metafizica lui Vladimir Solovyov", in: *Studii Teologice XVI* (2020), nr. 2, pp. 75-92.

¹⁷ Vladimir WOZNIUK (ed. and trans.), *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics by V. S. Soloviev*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2003, pp. 6-7, 11, 15, 75, 99-100, and 116.

sees Sophia as the bridge between the divine and the human, the creator and the created.

Sophia, for Solovyov, is not confined to any one theological tradition but acts as a unifying figure across different spiritual paths. Her role is central in the cosmic drama of the world's redemption, providing the wisdom necessary to guide humanity toward its ultimate union with God. For Solovyov, Sophia is the feminine principle of the divine, a force that transcends individual religious systems, appearing both in Christian theology and in other spiritual traditions. Solovyov's understanding of Sophia is influenced by both Neoplatonism and Eastern Christian mysticism, where wisdom is seen not only as a virtue but as the living presence of God's spirit in the world.

In this theological context, Sophia is linked to the concept of love. Solovyov sees love as the vehicle through which Sophia reveals herself to humanity. Love, in his thought, is not a mere emotional state but a participation in the divine—a force that allows individuals to experience the presence of Sophia in the world¹⁸. Love and Sophia are intimately connected, as love is the means by which humanity comes to understand and unite with the divine wisdom represented by Sophia.

III.1. Love as the Ontological Expression of Sophia

Solovyov's concept of love is closely tied to his understanding of Sophia as an ontological reality. For him, love is not just an emotion or a psychological state, but an ontological act, a participation in the very being of God. Love is the act of recognizing the divine presence in the other, and through that recognition, becoming one with the divine wisdom embodied in Sophia.

In his writings, Solovyov emphasizes that true love transcends selfishness and egoism. It is not merely about the gratification of desire but about the affirmation of the eternal, divine nature of the other. Love, in this sense, is the manifestation of divine wisdom (Sophia) in the human world. This view stands in stark contrast to the reductionist, biologically

¹⁸ Alexander KOSCHEWNIKOFF, "Die Geschichtsphilosophie Wladimir Solowjews", in: *Der Russische Gedanke*, 1/3 (1930), pp. 305-324.

determinist views of love that were prevalent in Solovyov's time. According to Solovyov, love is the ontological force that connects human beings to the divine wisdom, and through this love, humanity can move toward its ultimate redemption and union with God.

This view of love as an ontological act is deeply connected to Solovyov's mystical theology, where love becomes the means of encountering Sophia. In his view, love is not just a spiritual emotion but a divine action, a co-creative force that allows humanity to experience the divine wisdom and participate in the process of salvation¹⁹. As Solovyov writes, "To love is to affirm that what is in you and what is in the one you love does not belong to this fleeting, mortal world, but is eternal, indestructible, and absolute"²⁰. This profound statement encapsulates the essence of Solovyov's theology of love, where love is a cosmic principle that transcends the limitations of time and space, uniting the human and the divine.

III.2. The Role of Sophia in the Eschatological Vision of Love

One of the most compelling aspects of Solovyov's theology is his eschatological vision of love. Solovyov understood love as not only a present, ontological reality but as a prophetic vision of the unity that awaits humanity in the Kingdom of God. In Solovyov's thought, love is not only an act of union in the present but a foretaste of the future - a profound communion with God and all creation that will be fully realized in the eschaton.

This eschatological dimension of love is deeply intertwined with Sophia, as Solovyov sees Sophia as the one who will guide humanity toward this ultimate union with God. Sophia, as the divine wisdom, is the instrument of salvation, leading humanity through love toward its fulfillment in the divine Kingdom²¹. For Solovyov, love is the path to eschatological unity, and Sophia is the guiding force that leads humanity toward this final communion.

¹⁹ Greg GAUT, "Christian Politics: Vladimir Solov'ev's Social Gospel Theology", in: *Modern Greek Studies Year Book*, 10/11 (1994-1995), pp. 653-674.

²⁰ Vladimir SOLOVYOV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, p. 24.

²¹ Martin GEORGE, *Mystische und religiöse Erfahrung im Denken Vladimir Solov'evs*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1988.

As Solovyov writes in his *Le Sens de l'amour*: "In true love, the mystery of universal unity is revealed, the divine harmony in which all beings will find their place and their meaning"²². This statement encapsulates Solovyov's eschatological vision of love as not merely a human experience but as a cosmic event that anticipates the final reconciliation of all things in the divine wisdom of Sophia.

In Solovyov's thought, Sophia is not merely a philosophical abstraction or a distant theological concept. She is the divine wisdom that comes alive in the human experience through love. For Solovyov, love is the means by which humanity can experience and unite with the divine wisdom, transcending the boundaries of individualism and egoism. Love, in this sense, is the path to Sophia, the sacred force that brings humanity into communion with the divine, and ultimately, into eschatological unity.

This vision of love as the ontological and eschatological path to Sophia offers a profound alternative to both the reductionist views of love that dominate the modern world and the sterile moralism that reduces love to mere duty. Solovyov's theology of love invites humanity to experience love as the ontological force that connects us to the divine, transforming not only our relationships with others but also our relationship with God.

In his philosophical-theological unfolding, Vladimir Solovyov does not merely affirm love as an ontological principle, but raises it to the status of a theological event. Love is not just an inner movement, but a sacred act, rooted in the Trinitarian structure of being - a passage from *eros* (love as desire) to *agape* (love as self-giving). Unlike Anders Nygren, who sharply separates the two, Solovyov does not oppose them dialectically but integrates them into a Christological and eschatological vision.

Solovyov clearly perceived the dangers of moralism that divorces spirit from body and spiritualism that abstracts love from lived experience. For this reason, he constructs a theology of the beloved body as sacramental space, as the locus of divine self-giving.

In Solovyov's vision, the body is not a mere envelope or temporary function of the soul; on the contrary, it is the very place where the other is

²² Vladimir SOLOVYOV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, p. 54.

revealed in full ontological dignity. Thus, love cannot be separated from corporality without losing its authenticity.

The movement from *eros* to *agape*, in Solovyov, is a process of ontological transfiguration. It is not about denying *eros* - that is, the passionate desire for communion - but about permeating it with light, integrating it into a higher spiritual structure. Love is no less *eros*, but more *agape*. It is desire that gives, passion that sacrifices, ecstasy that creates eternal being.

This vision strongly contrasts with that proposed by Anders Nygren in his influential work *Agape and Eros*. For Nygren, *eros* and *agape* are irrevocably opposed paradigms: *eros* belongs to Greek thought - ascending, possessive, egocentric - while *agape* belongs exclusively to the Christian revelation - self-giving, unilateral, disinterested²³. In Nygren's logic, any synthesis between the two is suspect and corrupts the evangelical message. Solovyov rejects this conflictual model. He sees *eros* as a fundamental creaturely force, rooted in the desire for communion, and *agape* not as its annihilation but its redemption - its liberation from egoism and its opening to transcendence. Love thus becomes the space of synergy between natures, where the human is filled with the divine without losing its personal, sensitive, embodied character. In this sense, divinised *eros* becomes operative *agape*.

A similar synthesis is found in C.S. Lewis' *The Four Loves*, where the British author distinguishes four types of love: *storgé* (affection), *philia* (friendship), *eros* (romantic passion), and *agape* (charity). For Lewis, *eros* can ascend to *agape* when subjected to grace and opened to unconditional giving²⁴. This deeply resonates with Solovyov's view, in which conjugal love is not an inferior kind of love but a real path toward deification, provided it is lived in truth and self-sacrifice.

Ultimately, Solovyov places his theology of love in the eschatological horizon of universal communion. Love between persons becomes a prophecy of final unity, a foretaste of the transfigured state in which "God shall be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15, 28). In true love, the mystery of

²³ Anders NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, transl. Philip S. Watson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, pp. 97-132.

²⁴ C.S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves*, HarperCollins, London, 2012, pp. 101-119.

universal unity is unveiled - the divine harmony in which all beings shall find their place and meaning.

This vision turns love into not merely a moral virtue, but a soteriological force, a real participation in divine economy. Love becomes the very beginning of the Church in its essential form - not as institution, but as mystical communion. This conception profoundly influenced Sergei Bulgakov, who spoke of a “eucharistic cosmos” and the vocation of love as the “energy of sophiological unity”. It was also taken up by Paul Evdokimov in his reflection on conjugal love as “an icon of the Kingdom.”

Thus, for Solovyov, the love between two human beings is not an emotional accident, but a living prophecy of what the world must become: unity in diversity, communion without absorption, self-giving without loss. In authentic love, the light of the Kingdom already shines.

IV. Solovyov and the Russian Émigré Thinkers

The theological and philosophical influence of Vladimir Solovyov did not end with his life or with the collapse of the Russian Empire. His legacy survived revolution, exile, and the historical catastrophes of the twentieth century, leaving a profound imprint on some of the most important thinkers of the Russian émigré community. From the first decades of the post-revolutionary exile, Solovyov’s figure became a polarising reference point: for some, he was a prophet of unity and a forerunner of theological personalism; for others, a cautionary example of philosophical syncretism.

It is essential to distinguish between two contexts of reception: on the one hand, pre-revolutionary Russia, where Solovyov directly influenced figures like Pavel Florensky and the early spiritual renaissance; and on the other hand, the Russian diaspora, especially in interwar Paris and the Orthodox intellectual world in the United States, where his work was taken up, reinterpreted, or contested by theologians such as Sergei Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Lossky, and Paul Evdokimov.

This chapter examines how Solovyov’s legacy echoed within these

diverse theological voices, shaping – even where contested – the deepest currents of twentieth-century Russian Orthodox thought in exile.

IV.1. Sergei Bulgakov: Love as a Sophiological Principle

Fr. Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), perhaps the most systematic theologian of the Russian émigré community, inherited many of the central themes of Solovyov's thought and integrated them into his sophiological vision. For Bulgakov, love is the form through which God leaves Himself without losing Himself and embraces all creation in His wisdom²⁵. This phrase encapsulates a cosmic theology of agape, one in which we feel the profound influence of Solovyov.

Solovyov was the first to present love not merely as an ethical act or an emotional experience, but as an ontological and eschatological principle. Bulgakov develops this idea further and places it at the heart of his theology of the Incarnation: Christ is the love of Sophia incarnate, and the Church is the body of love in history²⁶. This echoes Solovyov's view of love as the mystery that unites the human and divine, yet it adds the emphasis of Sophianic theology, wherein divine wisdom (Sophia) is the channel through which love operates cosmically.

However, Bulgakov is more theologically balanced and more careful about dogmatic delimitations. Whereas Solovyov faced criticism for his alleged heterodox tendencies, Bulgakov sought to articulate a theology that fused Orthodox rigor with the mystical intuitions Solovyov had opened up.

Solovyov's influence on Bulgakov is clear in his theology of love, but while Solovyov was often seen as a visionary and prophet, Bulgakov sought to ground these visionary elements in a more structured theological system, ensuring that love's cosmic implications were understood within the framework of Orthodox dogmatics²⁷.

²⁵ Sergei BULGAKOV, *Du Verbe incarné. L'Agneau de Dieu*, trans. Constantin Andronikof, L'Age d'homme, Paris, 1982, p. 113.

²⁶ Sergei BULGAKOV, *Du Verbe incarné...*, p. 118.

²⁷ Walter SISTO, *The Russian Sophiological Synthesis: Sergius Bulgakov and the Dialectic of Faith and Science on Death and Evolution*, in: Teresa OBOLEVITCH, Paweł ROJEK (eds.), *Faith and Reason in Russian Thought*, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków, 2015, pp. 173-182.

IV.2. Georges Florovsky: The Theology of Love and Patristic Demands

Fr. Georges Florovsky (1893–1979), in his foundational work *Ways of Russian Theology*, formulates a strong critique of the modern theological syncretism that he saw exemplified in Solovyov's work. Florovsky warned against the danger of replacing the patristic ethos with speculative philosophical systems influenced by Hegelian or romantic thought²⁸.

For Florovsky, love is first and foremost a Trinitarian gift, revealed in the ecclesial and sacramental experience of the Church. In this sense, Florovsky distinctly distances himself from Solovyov, whom he regards as a theologian “without the Church” - meaning that Solovyov's philosophical synthesis was perceived as being outside the bounds of the living tradition²⁹.

Despite this criticism, it is impossible to ignore that Florovsky implicitly adopts some of Solovyov's insights, particularly the idea of the prophetic nature of love. Even though he reformulates these ideas in terms of patristic sobriety, the concept that love is the beginning of deification remains present within Florovsky's work. While Florovsky would not affirm Solovyov's sophiological system, the idea that love is an ontological, transformative force remains a shared point of reflection. Florovsky's theology, however, is more focused on the need for a return to authentic patristic teachings, and he saw Solovyov's approach as overly speculative and philosophical. Nonetheless, Solovyov's prophetic vision of love as a transformative divine energy finds its echo in Florovsky's ecclesial understanding of divine grace, which becomes fully revealed through the sacramental life of the Church.

IV.3. Nikolai Berdyaev: The Person as Creative Love

For Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), deeply influenced by Solovyov, love is the space in which the absolute freedom of the person is revealed.

²⁸ Georges V. FLOROVSKY, *Ways of Russian Theology*, vol. 1, Nordland Publishing Belmont, MA, 1979, pp. 109-127.

²⁹ G. FLOROVSKY, “Reason and Faith in the Philosophy of Solov'ëv”, in: Ernest J. SIMMONS (ed.), *Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014, pp. 283-297; Paul L. GAVRILYUK, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014.

If Solovyov had stated that “to love means to affirm the eternity of the other”, Berdyaev translates this formula into the language of existential personalism: love is not biological determinism or a social function, but an ontological event of freedom and communion³⁰. He critiques traditional morality and exalts love as a “revelation of the ultimate meaning of being”. For Berdyaev, the person is not truly realised until they love; without love, they remain locked in individualism and death. In this sense, Berdyaev takes up Solovyov’s eschatological vision: love is an anticipation of resurrection.

However, Berdyaev goes even further than Solovyov in emphasising the creative freedom of the human person. For him, love is not merely participation in the absolute, but an act of creating meaning³¹. This vision brings Berdyaev closer to Christian existentialism and places him as a bridge between Solovyov’s mystical insights and the dialogue with Western thought.

While Solovyov viewed love as an act of theosis, Berdyaev focuses more on its liberating creativity—how love gives rise to new forms of existence, thereby making the person a creative subject within the world³².

IV.4. Vladimir Lossky: Love as Ecclesial Mystery

Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) was perhaps the most reserved in his engagement with Solovyov, preferring a definitive return to the apophatic and mystical theology of the Eastern Fathers. In his seminal work *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Lossky rejects any systematic philosophy of love and insists that love is a mystery of communion in the Holy Spirit³³.

³⁰ Nikolai BERDYAEV, *Le destin de l’homme dans le monde actuel (Pour comprendre notre temps)*, Librairie Stock Delamain et Boutelleau, Paris, 1936, pp. 93-102.

³¹ Antoine ARJAKOVSKY, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1925–1940*, transl. Jerry Ryan, Notre Dame, 2013, pp. 92-118.

³² See N. BERDYAEV, *The Problem of East and West within the Religious Consciousness of Vl. Solov’ev*, transl. S. Janas, http://www.krotov.info/library/02_b/berdyaev/1911_053_eng.html; D. STRÉMOUKHOFF, *Vladimir Soloviev and His Messianic Work*, transl. E. Meyendorff, Belmont, 1980.

³³ Vladimir LOSSKY, *La théologie mystique de l’Église d’Orient*, Cerf, Paris, 1944, pp. 56-79.

While Lossky does not openly engage with Solovyov's ideas, his reflections on the iconic nature of love resonate deeply with Solovyov's vision of love as an ontological affirmation of the other's eternal destiny³⁴. Solovyov's insight that love is a prophetic vision of resurrection finds its expression in Lossky's theology of the Holy Spirit: love, for Lossky, is not sentimental or metaphysical, but eucharistic and ecclesial.

Lossky's focus on love as a mystery within the Church does not diminish the depth of his engagement with Solovyov's ideas but rather reformulates them in ecclesiological terms. For Lossky, the person becomes truly realised only in love—but this love is not simply a personal feeling; it is a grace-filled communion in the Holy Spirit. In this light, Solovyov's eschatological love is incarnated and consummated within the Church, as a communion of persons destined for eternal life in Christ.

Lossky's refusal to engage with love as metaphysical does not negate the deeper, prophetic elements of Solovyov's thought; rather, it underscores the importance of ecclesial life in the theological process of deification. Love, for Lossky, is at the very heart of the Church's mystery.

4.5. Paul Evdokimov and the Legacy of Pascal Love

Paul Evdokimov (1901–1970) can be considered one of the most successful “interpreters” of Solovyov within the Western context. In works such as *La femme et le salut du monde*, Evdokimov affirms that the love between man and woman is an “icon of the Kingdom” and that marriage is “martyrdom in two”³⁵. These phrases reveal a direct influence from Solovyov's “The Meaning of Love”, in which love is not merely a personal emotion but an ontological reality, a mystical act of transformation.

For Evdokimov, love is a theological act, eucharistic, and prophetic. He manages to combine the sobriety of the Orthodox tradition with the lyrical-philosophical intuitions of Solovyov in a manner that is both accessible and profound. Where Solovyov intuited the depths of love, Evdokimov explicates them in a way that integrates the Church's sacramental life.

³⁴ Brandon GALLAHER, “The «Sophiological» Origins of Vladimir Lossky's Apophaticism”, in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66 (2013), nr. 3, pp. 278–298.

³⁵ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *La femme et le salut du monde*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1978, pp. 77-82.

Paul Evdokimov's work on love in marriage as an act of sacrifice echoes Solovyov's understanding of love as self-giving and transfiguring. He builds upon Solovyov's recognition that love is a path to deification, but he also provides a clear ecclesiological framework, wherein love becomes not just a personal act but a witness to the life of the Church, and indeed, to the Paschal mystery of Christ.

Evdokimov's theology reintroduces Solovyov's ideas into the context of post-war Orthodox theology, not as speculative philosophy, but as living reality in the sacramental and communal life of the Church. In Evdokimov's vision, love is both the highest mystery and the most radical expression of Christian hope.

V. The Critique of Moralism and Erotic Nihilism

In his meditation on love, Vladimir Solovyov does not limit himself to an idealistic construction or a lyrical exaltation of eros. He formulates a double critique: on the one hand, of rigid theological moralism, which reduces love to a juridical-religious obligation; on the other, of modern erotic nihilism, which reduces it to a biological impulse, an instinct, or a psychological mechanism. This dual rejection is no accident - it reflects a firm spiritual stance against the anthropological crisis of modernity. At the core of Solovyov's critique lies the conviction that love is an ontological and prophetic reality - a revelation of the other's being as absolutely irreducible, as eternal mystery.

V.1. Theological Moralism and the Case of Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky

Solovyov lived during the rise of one of the most prominent figures of conservative Russian Orthodoxy: Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky (1863–1936), a key intellectual and later head of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR). In his influential work *The Dogma of Redemption*, Khrapovitsky proposed an interpretation of salvation in psychological-moral terms: Christ, he argued, redeems humanity not

through metaphysical sacrifice, but through his moral compassion and suffering in the face of human sin. In this vision, Christian love becomes primarily a model of behaviour - *imitatio Christi* - expressed through active compassion.

Although Solovyov does not directly polemicise with Khrapovitsky, his entire conception of love runs counter to this moral reduction. For Solovyov, love is not a virtue or obligation but an ontological event - one that creates being, affirms eternity, and opens the human person to the eschaton. He does not call us to “feel compassion,” but to recognise in the other an absolute presence, destined for resurrection.

Moralism, whether religious or secular, is in this view a form of reductionism: it reduces being to behaviour, love to norms, and the person to ethical obligation. Solovyov sees in love a sacred transgression of such limits - a return to the original image of God in man, which is not a rule, but a mystery.

V.2. Schopenhauer: Love as Biological Illusion

One of Solovyov's indirect intellectual adversaries is Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher of radical pessimism and will. In his well-known essay *Metaphysics of Sexual Love*, Schopenhauer describes romantic love as an unconscious strategy of the species - a mechanism of natural selection that deceives individuals into believing they love persons, when in fact they are subconsciously drawn to favourable genetic combinations³⁶. In this perspective, *eros* is not even a genuine personal emotion, but a biological disguise for reproductive instinct.

Solovyov responds to this vision with powerful metaphysical counterpoints. For him, love is not an instrument of the “will-to-life” (*Wille zum Leben*), but rather an anticipation of eternity. While Schopenhauer sees the body as a site of determinism and instinct, Solovyov understands it as an altar of transfiguration. He does not deny the biological component of love, but he absolutely refuses to reduce love to that level. On the contrary,

³⁶ Arthur SCHOPENHAUER, *Parerga et Paralipomena. Aphorismes sur la sagesse dans la vie*, trans. Jean Alexandre Cantacuzène, Germer Baillière, Paris, 1880, pp. 179-204.

he offers a mysticism of the body, in which purified eros becomes a path to deification³⁷.

Whereas Schopenhauer sees love as an illusion born of the species' interest in reproduction, Solovyov regards it as the personal affirmation of the other's eternal being - a recognition not of usefulness or instinct, but of a mystery destined to share in divine life.

V.3. Nietzsche and Freud: Love Between Resentment and Sublimation

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche launches a fierce attack on Christian love, which he interprets as a refined form of resentment - a morality of the weak who, unable to dominate, fabricate values like compassion and humility. According to Nietzsche, love that claims to be selfless is nothing more than disguised will to power, exercised by those who wish to subjugate others through guilt and sacrifice. Love, in this sense, is not affirming of life, but rather its domestication and negation³⁸.

Solovyov offers a fundamentally different view. In *The Meaning of Love*, he does not preach a weak or sentimental love, but a love that is strong through self-giving - a Paschal love. Love is not denial of life, but its transfiguration. Solovyov does not shy away from suffering, but he interprets it in a resurrectional key: the love that suffers is the love that resurrects. In opposition to Nietzsche's "will to power," Solovyov affirms the power of communion.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud interprets love as sublimated sexuality. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he argues that all forms of "higher" love are ultimately repressing and redirecting the libido—turning instinctual drives into socially acceptable behaviours³⁹. In Freud's view, love is not a metaphysical or theological reality, but a cultural valve for managing repressed desires.

³⁷ Vladimir SOLOVYOV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, pp. 38-54.

³⁸ See Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *La Généalogie de la morale*, transl. Henri Albert, Editions Mercure de France, Paris, 1900.

³⁹ Sigmund FREUD, *Le Malaise dans la civilisation*, transl. Ch. et J. Odier, Les Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1971. Une édition électronique a été réalisée par Gemma Paquet: https://ia600603.us.archive.org/0/items/malaise_civilisation/malaise_civilisation.pdf.

Solovyov counters this psychological reductionism with a restoration of meaning. Love is not a compensation for frustrated desire but a sacramental unveiling of the other's personhood. It is not merely sublimated instinct, but a participation in divine eros, where the body and soul unite in a mystery that transcends biological necessity. Thus, both Nietzsche's critique of Christian weakness and Freud's interpretation of love as instinctual sublimation are met by Solovyov's vision of love as a path to eternity, as a creative and ontological act that affirms both the body and the soul in light of the resurrection.

V.4. Sartre: Love as Possessive Gaze vs. Prophetic Vision

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre defines love as "the desire to be loved" - a relationship that, inevitably, leads to the desire to possess the freedom of the other⁴⁰. According to Sartre, the one who loves wishes to be the indispensable object of the beloved's gaze, to captivate and control their subjectivity. However, this goal is inherently paradoxical and doomed to failure, because the moment the other becomes object, they cease to be a subject. Thus, for Sartre, love collapses into alienation: a permanent struggle between freedom and objectification.

Solovyov presents a diametrically opposed vision. For him, love is the affirmation of the other's freedom as absolute and eternal. Love does not seek to possess but to recognise; it does not constrain, but reveals. Where Sartre sees power and competition, Solovyov sees gift and prophecy.

In Solovyov's theology of love, the beloved is not a mirror of the self or an intentional object, but a mystery that transcends representation. The beloved is a "thou" destined for resurrection, whose being is affirmed not by domination but by reverence. To love, in this framework, is to gaze eschatologically - to see not what the other is now, but what they are called to become in eternity. This represents one of the most radical oppositions between two anthropologies: Sartre's vision of existential conflict and isolation, and Solovyov's vision of deification in communion.

⁴⁰ Jean-Paul SARTRE, *L'Être et le Néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1943, pp. 364-385.

Through his double critique - of both religious moralism and modern erotic nihilism - Vladimir Solovyov does not merely construct a theology of love, but rather an eschatological anthropology. He refuses to accept that love is only duty or only instinct. For Solovyov, love is a mystery: a participation in God, a call to deification, a prophecy of a reconciled world.

On one side, he rejects moralism as a reduction of love to obligation - an ethics of behaviour stripped of ontological depth. On the other, he opposes modern biological and psychological models that empty love of transcendence, reducing it to mechanism, will, or sublimation.

Against Schopenhauer's cynical determinism, Nietzsche's resentment-based suspicion, Freud's sublimation theory, and Sartre's existential despair, Solovyov proposes a transfigured eros: love as recognition of the eternal mystery in the other. For him, to love means to proclaim that the beloved is destined not for death, but for resurrection.

Thus, his theology of love serves as a spiritual response to modernity's crisis of meaning and anthropology. By restoring love to its ontological and eschatological dignity, Solovyov reopens the path toward a renewed vision of the human person - not as a sum of instincts or behaviours, but as a being called to communion and eternity.

VI. Solovyov's Theological Relevance in the 21st Century

In the current context, marked by deep affective crises and the challenges of posthumanism, the reflection of Vladimir Solovyov on love gains remarkable relevance. The twenty-first century is witnessing a fragmentation of human relationships, emotional desensitisation, and a tendency to reduce love to mere biological interactions or technological connections.

Solovyov presents a vision where love is not merely an internal movement but a sacred act, rooted in the Trinitarian structure of existence—a passage from eros (the love of desire) to agape (the self-giving love). This vision integrates eros and agape without opposing them dialectically, unlike Anders Nygren, who sees them as irreconcilable.

For Solovyov, eros is not reduced to biological instincts or psychological drives, but rather is transfigured into a mystical path of deification⁴¹.

Solovyov's eschatological vision of love, as a prophetic anticipation of the final unity of humankind in God, offers a profound antidote to contemporary trends of trivialising or instrumentalising love. It speaks directly to a time in which relationships have become more fragmented, commodified, and alienated. In the face of these affective crises, Solovyov's vision serves as a reminder of love as ontological, as a space in which human beings transcend their isolation and discover the eternal truth of the other.

Mihai Neamțu, in his work *The Ages of Love: How Do We Transform Happenstance into Destiny?*, explores how love can be transformed from an ephemeral accident into an assumed destiny. Neamțu underscores the importance of emotional maturity and the conscious assumption of love as a spiritual journey, a transformation of the self and of the relationship into a path of salvation⁴². This approach resonates with Solovyov's view of love as a sacrament of the divine, a transformative act that points to the eternal.

Thus, in the face of the posthumanist challenges - where bioengineering, artificial intelligence, virtual love, and mechanical reproduction dominate - the theological vision of love proposed by Solovyov remains relevant not in a technological sense, but in its eschatological and ontological depth. Love is a call to resurrection, not efficiency; a call to communion, not programming. Solovyov offers a vision of humanity's renewal that transcends the individualistic and commodified models of modern life.

VII. Conclusion

The theology of love presented by Vladimir Solovyov remains, more than a century after its formulation, one of the most provocative and consistent syntheses of modern Christian thought. In an age dominated by rationalism, secularised biology, and sterile ethical systems, Solovyov

⁴¹ Vladimir SOLOVYOV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, pp. 38-54.

⁴² Mihai NEAMȚU, *Vârstele iubirii. Cum transformăm întâmplarea în destin?*, Doxologia, Iași, 2016, pp. 101-123.

dared to place love—not as a transient emotion, nor as a mere function of the species, but as an ontological principle and eschatological energy—at the heart of human and divine existence. His vision was not simply a theoretical construct but a spiritual stance against the degradation of the human person.

Solovyov's thought suggests that true love is not a mere worldly or transient emotion, but a divine recognition of the eternal and indestructible nature of the beloved. Love, in his view, affirms the eternal essence that resides in both the lover and the loved one, elevating them beyond the limitations of time and mortality⁴³. Solovyov affirms love as the place of the absolute.

This perspective was embraced and transformed by some of the greatest thinkers of the Russian diaspora. Sergei Bulgakov placed love at the heart of his Sophiological theology of communion, while Paul Evdokimov offered an ecclesiastical interpretation of marital love as “martyrdom in two”. Nikolai Berdyaev emphasized the creative freedom of love, while Vladimir Lossky reaffirmed love as a eucharistic mystery of communion in the Holy Spirit. Even Georges Florovsky, though critical, could not ignore the profound questions raised by Solovyov.

Solovyov understood that one of the greatest errors of modernity is the disunity between body and soul, between love and truth. On the one hand, love is trivialized—reduced to instinct or psychology. On the other hand, it is moralized in a sterile manner—emptied of any real energy, transformed into a far-off ideal. Against these extremes, Solovyov proposes a love that gives being, a love that prophesies and transfigures.

This vision proves to be prophetic in the face of the affective crises of contemporary life. In an age where relationships are increasingly fragmented, intimacy is replaced by performance or transactional affection, and the body is often separated from meaning, Solovyov's vision appears as a call for ontological restoration. The crisis of love is, in reality, the crisis of perceiving the human being as a mystery—and Solovyov proposes a return to this mystery.

⁴³ Vladimir SOLOVYOV, *Le Sens de l'amour...*, p. 24.

Moreover, in the face of the challenges posed by posthumanism, Solovyov's theological vision of love is all the more relevant. Bioengineering, artificial intelligence, virtual love, and mechanical reproduction—all these modern mutations attest to the profound rupture between love and the body, between person and destiny. Here, Solovyov offers not a technological solution, but an eschatological vision: love is a call to resurrection, not efficiency; to communion, not programming.

Mihai Neamțu reaffirms, in an updated anthropological key, this vision of love as ontological transformation. Neamțu speaks of the need to move from happenstance to destiny, from emotional consumption to mature fidelity - a transition that is impossible without a spiritual rooting - without an understanding of love as a path to salvation, as Solovyov so clearly outlined.

Faced with fragmented eros and banalized agape, Solovyov proposes a mystical synthesis: love as the icon of the Trinity, as the event in which the human person opens to the fullness of being in the other. This is not an idealized love but one that assumes suffering, death, and the cross - but in the name of a deeper life. Therefore, Solovyov should be understood today not just as a religious philosopher, but as a prophet of humanity reintegrated into grace.

In conclusion, Solovyov's theology of love remains one of the most living testimonies of the Orthodox thought's capacity to provide responses to the spiritual challenges of the age. It is a theology that does not shy away from the body, does not shrink from the affective, and does not trivialize the mystery. On the contrary: it is a call to love to the fullest - to love not only the other, but also the very truth of human being in God.