



183. Aug. 25/Sept. 7, 1975. Apostles Bartholomew and Titus

Categories : [Letters](#)

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Dear Father Michael [Azkoul],

Evlogeite!

Please forgive, again, my long delay in writing. I have finally finished the chapter on Soloviev and have a number of comments. Some small points and corrections (mostly typographical) I noted in the text, as you said I might. The bigger comments I shall give here.

First of all, I am very impressed with the chapter and the conception of the book as a whole; this is very needed. There just hasn't been this kind of serious, philosophical study of any of these "Russian Religious thinkers." The problem, of course, is that there will be few readers precisely because of the depth of the study and the need for some philosophical background to get through it. I'll say something about publishing ideas at the end of this letter.

Second, it is obvious that you are an "understater." This is good, because it gives an objective and fair tone to the whole presentation. But in a few places—I noted one or two—a few more words are perhaps needed to emphasize the difference between this anti-Christian philosophy and Orthodoxy.

Now some more specific comments:

I think you have too much underemphasized (just mentioning it only once or twice) Soloviev's chiliasm. I have a feeling that this is the key to his whole philosophy, being that which he specifically shares with precisely the mainstream of 19th-century European thought (not just the official philosophers). The whole outburst of the Romantic-revolutionary movement at the end of the 18th century (visible even in art, in architectural plans, and in sectarian movements)—is it not precisely an outburst of chiliastic fervor, rather akin to the earlier Anabaptist movement, but now spreading to the whole of society and becoming the mainstream of European thought and life, the "answer" to Christianity, as it were? And I rather think that just about all the currents of 19th-century thought are in one way or another chiliastic currents, which offer different solutions to the one pressing question before the modern mind: how to bring about heaven on earth, make Christianity a thing of this world. The early Socialist "prophets," St.-Simon, Fourier, Owen, are certainly chiliasts, and Soloviev, in reacting against the later materialist phase of Socialism, seems very kin in basic chiliastic outlook to these "prophets"—to St.-Simon more than the rest, because he was the most "philosophical" of the three. There were other "crazy" 19th-century thinkers who have since been forgotten with whom Soloviev is also probably kin—for example, Fabre-d'Olivet with his



theocractical speculations. In a word, I think it would be good to point out how much S. is of his time, is in the mainstream of 19th-century European thought in addition to being in the age-old gnostic tradition; and specifically, how his thought is another answer to the chiliastic problem which 19th-century European thought put before all its thinkers.

This savor of chiliasm seems to run through all the thinkers you examine (Berdyaev being only the most explicit and spectacular of the chiliasts), popping up in such concepts (so central to today's "ecumenical" thought) of the "new religious consciousness," the "divinization of the world" (p. 64 of your MS), etc.

Bound up with chiliasm and the "new age" is the "superman," which I see that Florevsky explicitly endorses. Soloviev was against Nietzsche—but is not his "Godmanhood" a more "theological" form of the same idea?—as when on p. 25 of your MS he says that man ceases to be "merely human." (Cf. Dostoyevsky who correctly contrasted the Orthodox God-man with the new revolutionary mangod; thus *The Possessed*) Perhaps more emphasis could likewise be placed on this idea of man becoming a "god" in a new historical epoch, as opposed to becoming a god by grace in Orthodox.

A final point: on p. 3 you note that S. came under the influence of Kireyevsky. A paragraph or page here on the contrast between these two thinkers would be appropriate—they really represent the two major "paths" of 19th-century Russian religious thought, and both are major figures. Both of them tried to give a religious answer to the Western rationalism-secularism then invading Russia, but Kireyevsky found the answer in the Holy Fathers and a philosophy founded entirely in them; whereas S. rejected such a "narrow Orthodoxy" for the broader pan-Christian gnosticism. ?., while perfectly Orthodox, was out of harmony with his times, and his philosophy was largely forgotten; S. was precisely in harmony with his times, and that is why his philosophy finds so many disciples.

I.M. Kontzevitch has this to say about Kireyevsky and Soloviev (*Optina Monastery and Its Epoch*, Jordanville, 1970, p. 218):

"It might seem that V. Soloviev was a continuer of the work of Kireyevsky. And in fact, in his master's dissertation, 'The Crisis of Western Philosophy,' he took his world-outlook entirely from Kireyevsky: the synthesis of philosophy and religion, the view of Western philosophy as a development of rationalism, the idea of the wholeness of life, of metaphysical knowledge.... But to Western thought he opposed not Russian Orthodoxy, but rather the foggy speculations of the (non-Christian) East. And in his further creative work V. Soloviev remains not only outside the "philosophy of the Holy Fathers," but even outside Orthodoxy.... And Soloviev, thanks to his exceptional influence on his contemporaries, having at first made use of Kireyevsky's ideology, later led the awakening Russian religious thought from the path which the latter had shown to it."

You might note also that the tradition to which Kireyevsky joined himself continued right up to the Revolution and beyond—i.e., it is the "traditional" Orthodoxy represented today by the Russian



Church Abroad, which stands with its whole philosophy and theology against the gnostic tradition of Soloviev-Florensky-Bulgakov, etc. There are no theses written on this traditionalist Orthodoxy, both because it is out of step with the times, and because its representatives-are almost all clerics (with the exception of a few thinkers like Constantine Leontiev).

Florensky and Bulgakov I am still reading, and by a most providential “accident” we have recently received the long-sought booklet of Archbishop John on Bulgakov’s Sophiology. I haven’t read it yet, but will give comments and quotes together with the MS when I return it, hopefully before too long!

As for a publisher—is it possible Nordland, the publisher of Florovsky and of John Dunlop’s book, might be interested? At any rate, it would be very good to have some kind of synopsis of the whole book, “boiled down” to 50 pp. or less, for a more “popular” readership—any possibility for this? Also, will you have any comments, perhaps as a final chapter, on the Soloviev-gnostic tradition in Russia today? There is a series of articles just beginning in *La Pensée Russe* (Paris) on “Soloviev as Read in Russia Today,” Could we also see your chapter or pages on Vekhi? Our own proposed book on the Russian Religious Intelligentsia will hopefully be started after the first of the year, and your work will make our labors easier.

Please let us know of progress on the MS, publisher, etc.

With love in Christ,
Seraphim, monk