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Mysticism? Vladimir Solovyev as  
Philosopher**

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## **Russian Modernism or Mysticism? Vladimir Solovyev as Philosopher**

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### **Abstract**

The place of Russian philosophers has always been problematic within the Western philosophical tradition: the two most highly acclaimed thinkers in Russia, Vladimir Solovyev and Nikolai Berdyaev, are primarily philosophers of religion, and so in the West they are not considered to be fully philosophers in their own right. Western philosophy and religion have been divided into two autonomous disciplines, while in Russia the fields are closely related with little demarcation between them. The interconnectedness between philosophy, religious thought, and literature in Russian culture may be seen in the writings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, both known not only for their literary masterpieces, but for the philosophical and ethical dimensions of their work and thought.

Widespread amongst Russian cultural theorists is the view that the period of Russian Modernism (1880s-1920s) produced several philosophers, chiefly Solovyev and Berdyaev. While both thinkers have written extensively on topics concerning metaphysics, eschatology, and ethics, their arguments and premises are fundamentally grounded in orthodox Christianity, a tendency shared by almost all thinkers of Russian Modernism. None of the Russian Modernist philosophers were able to make a comprehensive break with religion and mysticism, a prerequisite for modern philosophy in the Western post-Kantian sense of the word. Those thinkers who made no recourse to religion and in fact rejected it—Alexander Herzen, Mikhail Bakunin, and Leon Trotsky, among others—were materialists whose work forms the core of Soviet Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

While Solovyev may be only a *philosophe*, and not a philosopher proper from the Western standpoint, I will argue that under a broader interpretation of what philosophy is, his work must be considered primarily philosophical and not just “mystical,” a designation which carries negative connotations in Anglo-American analytic philosophy, but which represents no objection from a Russian point of view.

**Keywords:** Russian Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Russian Mysticism

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Russia is a land of contradictions, enigma and extremes, and cannot therefore be measured or evaluated by ordinary considerations. As in other respects, so in the area of philosophy, Russia holds a unique if problematic place. A brief look at the table of contents of a handbook of Russian philosophy would show why—from a Western philosophical tradition—Russian philosophy is not a straightforward, clear-cut academic discipline. Many of the philosophers listed are notable writers, religious thinkers, social activists, and revolutionaries, and only a handful are professional philosophers, i.e. academic philosophers whose only or primary concern is to study philosophy systematically as a body of knowledge. True to long-standing tradition, Russians do not perceive any discrepancies in considering Feodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Mikhail Bakunin, and Alexander Herzen all to be philosophers in their own right, even though the first two are world class writers, Bakunin a revolutionary, and Herzen a political activist and theoretician. Anticipating objections to the Russian philosophical tradition, Kelly (1998), in her opening remarks on an essay titled ‘Russian philosophy,’ observes that ‘Russian thought is best approached without fixed preconceptions about the nature and proper boundaries of philosophy.’ A similar assertion is made by Copleston (1986) who advises his readers ‘to take a broad view of the relevant field and not to worry much about distinctions between the history of philosophy, the history of ideas, and the history of social theory and religious thought.’

Unlike the Anglo-American tradition where philosophers are professional academics engaged in the systematic inquiry into the various branches of philosophy, Russian philosophers—or as they are more commonly referred to in Russian as *mysliteli* (thinkers)—blend religion, social activism, and philosophical thinking in their writings. In this respect Russians are much closer to those ancient Greek thinkers whose philosophy was informed by religion. In the contemporary Western philosophical canon, there is a marked distinction between religion and philosophy. The crux of the contention between Russian and Western philosophy lies in this very distinction. By this measure, Vladimir Solovyev, who is considered by Russians to be the Russian philosopher *par excellence*, would not be considered a philosopher proper, but a *philosophe* in the vein of Rousseau and Voltaire, or a mystical philosopher such as Simone Weil.

One of the reasons why Solovyev is considered by Russians to be their foremost philosopher and is held in such high esteem is the fact that he was the first of the Russian philosophers who undertook the methodical study of philosophy and produced a number of works concerning the different branches of philosophy: ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and metaphysics, as well as publishing a treatise on the history of modern Western philosophy. His philosophical works include publications such as *The Crisis of Western Philosophy* (1873), *The Philosophical Foundations of Integral Knowledge* (1877), and *Criticism of Abstract Principles* (1878). In the mid-1850s when Solovyev was engaged in his philosophical pursuits, German philosophers were widely read and debated in Russian intellectual circles, and members of the Russian intelligentsia were familiar with the works of contemporary

German philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer and others. Solovyev may be best described as a mystical Kantian, who instead of just reinterpreting and reworking Kant's philosophy actually added his own dimension to it. Seeking synthesis between philosophy and Christianity, Solovyev developed Kant's theory of knowledge; to Kant's two sources of knowledge, reason and experience, he added intuition. The very contribution that Solovyev made to philosophy, paradoxically, causes him not to be considered a philosopher proper in the Western canon, and he is therefore associated with that particular branch known as mystical philosophy. Expounding on Solovyev's metaphysics, Copleston (1986) makes the following remark:

*[T]o western philosophers who are representatives of the analytic current of philosophical thought this speculation (metaphysical and theosophical) is apt to seem fantastic. When Solovyev is discussing empiricism or rationalism, or criticizing Descartes, they see him as a philosopher, whether or not they agree with all that he says. But when he starts talking about the Absolute and Sophia and Godmanhood, they probably think that his thought belongs to another world.*

At this point it would be relevant and useful to offer a brief overview of the Russian social and cultural scene of the nineteenth century, the period when Solovyev was producing his works. Copleston's observation on Solovyev's metaphysics cited above would hold true for most other non-Marxist Russian philosophers such as Nikolai Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, or Vasily Rozanov whose philosophical foundations were informed by a Christian conception of the world. What is of note here is that these religious thinkers were active around the time of Modernist activity in Russia, a dynamic period known for its rejection of religion and traditional values. Russian Modernism (1880s-1920s) was distinguished by the engendering of new ideas and new movements in the arts and literature, and is associated with the names of such illustrious cultural figures as Vasily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, and many more. The poetics of the Modernists such as Vladimir Mayakovsky was to '*épater le bourgeois*' (to shock the bourgeois) and they were instrumental in creating bold, new modes of thinking in the period just preceding the October Revolution of 1917. Russia, being the land of contradictions and discrepancies, alongside the radical Modernists also produced a movement that was deeply religious or mystical in character. Solovyev was an important figure who exerted a deep influence on a mystical group of poets and writers known as the Symbolists or the poets of the Silver Age. More will be said later about Solovyev's impact on this movement.

One of the circumstances that solidified the ties between philosophy and religion and spirituality in Russia is the fact that since the 1820s Russian identity was defined in respect, or in opposition, to Western civilization. Russia's identity as a nation started to be reshaped as the 'Other' of the West,

namely in opposition to its material progress and secular institutions. This major upheaval in self-identification, an identity crisis of sorts, emerged as a result of the publication of a series of letters— *Philosophical Letters*— by Pyotr Chaadaev. In the first of the letters, published in 1828, Chaadaev compared Russia, detrimentally, to the West. Chaadaev not only denounced serfdom, he also claimed that Russia had made no valuable contribution to the world, and anything that may be of value created by Russia, originated in the West. He even went further and extolled the role of the Catholic Church in advancing the idea of social progress in the West (Copleston, 1986). Even before Chaadaev's open letter, the Russian intelligentsia was divided into two social-political camps: Slavophiles and Westernizers. As the name suggests, the proponents of the Slavophile camp saw the future of Russia in indigenous Russian values and adhered to an Orthodox Christian conception of the world. The Westernizers, on the other hand, were mostly atheists, and believed that Russia should found its institutions on the progressive, democratic principles espoused in the rest of Europe. Distinguishing between the two camps, Chamberlain (2004) observes

*So what was the difference between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles in the end? It was in their underlying philosophy of ethics in relation to knowledge. The Slavophiles were religious conservatives, the Westernizers atheist progressives, which put them in different philosophical camps with regard to science and reason. The Slavophiles, perfectly represented by Khomiakov in this respect, were skeptical of the civilizing power of reason.*

Slavophiles espoused 'Hegel's model of progress, which started with naïve community,' while the Westernizers 'looked forward to that social complexity' that Hegel later moved on to (Chamberlain, 2004). Solovyev belonged to the Slavophile camp that espoused the view that politics, law, and all other aspects of civic life should be governed by religion. And like so many Russian philosophers who came before 1917, he was keen on linking philosophy with religion, and reason with intuition. Characterizing Russian philosophical thought and its connections to religion, Lossky (1951) observes that unlike the hard sciences, philosophy represents its national character, and therefore one may speak about the national peculiarities of German, French, English, American, and Russian philosophy. And accordingly, the subjects of study are based on each nation's interests and experience such as the sensuous, the practical, or religious experience. Discussing the ideal of integral knowledge in Russian philosophy, Lossky explains:

*The whole truth is revealed to the whole man. ... It is only through combining all his spiritual powers—sense experience, rational thought, aesthetic perception, moral experience and religious contemplation—that man begins to apprehend the world's true being and grasp the superrational truths about God.*



Lossky's observation would seem not only to lend support to the Russian philosophical viewpoint that integral knowledge is as valid as empirical knowledge, but that integral knowledge is more complete, as it contains the 'whole truth.' In this connection Zouboff (1944) notes:

*... while there is no doubt that in its technically philosophical aspect Slavophilism was wholly based on Hegel and still more fully followed Schelling, it should not be forgotten that for the Slavophiles philosophy, especially metaphysics and epistemology, was subsidiary to their major theme of the Church and the State viewed in the light of the Christian conception of history.*

This statement helps shed light on the Slavophile mindset, and consequently on the mindset of Russians in the late nineteenth century. It should be noted here however that this mindset or outlook is prevalent even today when there has been a revival of Russian nationalist sentiment in the new post-Soviet Russia. Russians generally tend to consider religion and theology to be legitimate branches of philosophy. Given this position, it may not be too problematic to accept Solovyev's stance on religion—specifically his belief in Christian eschatology—as a philosophical premise rather than theology.

Given the *Zeitgeist* of Russia of the nineteenth-century, it is not difficult to see how Solovyev, initially a student of mathematics and physics, become inspired by religion. Solovyev was born in 1853, a time when Russian society was undergoing major changes in all the different spheres. On the political front the notable Populist movement—the *Narodniki*—was strong at that time, along with the Emancipation of the Serfs that was decreed in 1861 by Tsar Alexander II. On the cultural front prominent writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were at the height of their creative genius in the 1860s; masterpieces such *Anna Karenina* and *Crime and Punishment* were produced in that decade. Solovyev's worldview was not only shaped by this turbulent yet productive period in Russian history, his family background also played a significant role in his religious formation. Born into an academic family—his father was a renowned historian—he was deeply influenced by his grandfather who was a priest. While Solovyev experimented with an atheist phase for a brief period of time, from early childhood he had a mystical bent. In a poem written shortly before his death he describes his first mystical experience that he had during a church service at the age of nine. He believed himself to have had a vision of Sophia, the 'Eternal Feminine' and the principle of divine wisdom in Eastern Orthodoxy. This experience was to have a lasting impact on his life. Solovyev's contribution to Eastern Orthodoxy was his concept of the Divine Sophia as the unifying principle of God, humankind, and the universe.

Even though Solovyev is best known and respected in his native land for his religious and mystical writings, he actually produced works in philosophy. Interestingly enough, his philosophical works come at the very beginning of his career as a philosopher and towards the very end of his life. According to

Lossky (1951), while the beginnings of independent philosophical thinking in Russia can be traced back to Ivan Kireyevsky (1806-1856) and Alexei Khomiakov (1804-1860), it was Solovyev who was ‘the first to create a system of Christian philosophy in the spirit of Kireyevsky’s and Khomiakov’s ideas.’ In Russia positivism was at its height in the 1870s, and Solovyev’s first philosophical work *The Crisis of Western Philosophy (Against the Positivists)* published in 1874, as the title would suggest, is a ‘dense critique ... of [the] entire philosophy of Western rationalism from John Scotus Erigena onwards’ (Jakim, 1996). In this seminal work Solovyev divides the different stages of the development of Western philosophy into three major currents or phases: 1. faith as the prevailing authority, 2. faith and reason as equally dominant, and 3. reason as the prevailing authority (Jakim, 1996). According to Solovyev, all three currents are one-sided and lack synthesis. The idea of synthesis and unity between reason and faith, intuition and empirical knowledge, and unity between humankind, the universe, and the divine is a thread that flows through Solovyev’s entire body of work. As he was to argue along the same lines in his later works, Solovyev tried to make a case against Western philosophy—the positivists—claiming that it had reached an impasse. Solovyev contends that contemporary Western philosophy—pure rationalism and pure empiricism—is impoverished as faith plays no part in this canon. Solovyev was distrustful of the scientific knowledge of the positivists that disapproved of faith and intuition as valid sources of knowledge.

In *Crisis*, offering both an overview and an in-depth analysis of modern Western philosophy, Solovyev demonstrates that just as human beings consist of substances and qualities that range from lower (chemical and organic substances) to higher forms (consciousness and spirituality), so is philosophy built upon various stages of development. According to Solovyev the higher or later stages of philosophy are built upon the earlier stages that lacked synthesis and inclusiveness; later stages of the development of philosophy have strived towards synthesis. In *Crisis* Solovyev took upon himself the task of explaining to his Russian audience the dispute between the rationalists and the empiricists.

Following the Western philosophical tradition, Solovyev divided modern Western philosophy into pre-Kantian and post-Kantian, and argues that starting from Descartes, each philosopher or philosophical school was more developed than the previous one. Therefore, not surprisingly, Solovyev denounces Descartes for being the foremost proponent of rationalism—a school of thought that he strongly disapproved of—because of its stance on spiritual intuition as a source of knowledge. As for Spinoza’s monism, while Solovyev finds that it has progressed from Descartes’ philosophy, he considered it to be inadequate to serve as a viable philosophical foundation. The Western philosopher whose theory Solovyev found to be closest to his own was the German rationalist Leibniz. Leibniz’s philosophical works treated the questions of free will, sin, and good and evil, questions that were of deep interest to Solovyev himself. Moreover, Leibniz was a theist who maintained that God chose the best possible universe, and preestablished harmony between the mind and body. Leibniz is one philosopher who permitted the consideration of God in his work,

and therefore, Solovyev does not outright refute Leibniz's theory. The empiricists, or the Anglo-Scottish philosophers, as Solovyev sometimes refers to Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, on the other hand, were the subject of intense scrutiny and examination by Solovyev in this work. The positivists, as Solovyev scornfully referred to them, collectively represented for him the ills of the 'new philosophy.'

Discussing Bacon's work, Solovyev shows his intense distaste for the 'new brand' of philosophy: empiricism. Solovyev states that Bacon is only important in so far as he happens to be the founder of the new school of empiricism; apart from that, Bacon's work, according to Solovyev, lacks import. He dismisses Bacon's work as 'vulgar,' claiming that it lacks philosophical character. Solovyev sums up Bacon's views in a few short sentences, disparaging him for wanting 'to free the mind from deceitful suppositions or preconceived notions.'

Turning to Hobbes' contribution to philosophy, Solovyev once again uses the word 'vulgar' to evaluate it, since for Hobbes everything is comprised of physical substance. While Solovyev considers Locke's philosophy to be '*interesna*' (interesting), his own interpretation of Locke is an interesting one too: he calls Locke a subjective idealist, pairing him with Berkeley and not with Bacon and Hobbes. In Solovyev's view, Locke deviates from the objective realism of his predecessors and 'twists' in the opposite direction. For Solovyev, Locke's theory that the human mind possesses no innate knowledge and is a *tabula rasa* implies that all knowledge about the external world is subjective. Therefore Solovyev claims that by Locke's view 'all matter boils down to subjective elements, and exists in our imagination and does not exist on its own,' which would make Locke a subjective idealist rather than objective realist. Since Hume was a skeptic and an atheist, or a polytheist at best, he is denigrated as having had profoundly negative implications for metaphysics, just as Kant had read Hume. Summing up Hume's theory of relationality and causality, Solovyev remarks that Hume reduced the objective world into the chance sequencing of unrelated ideas, and truth to the unconditional unknown *x*. According to this view no metaphysical knowledge would be possible.

For Solovyev Hegel's philosophy of ideas and concepts based on logic and objective truth embodies the inadequacy of Western rationalist philosophy, its inability to compete with religion as far as the question of theory and practice was concerned. Solovyev argues that the domain of philosophy, by its very nature, is limited only to theorizing and lacks the capacity to affect change. Solovyev states that if a philosopher in his capacity as philosopher wished to bring change in real life through his theories of ideal orders and norms of actuality, then theory would remain theory and would not yield any practical outcome. Solovyev asserts that philosophy cannot achieve a 'double victory' over the faith of people or over the social order that is founded on that faith. If faith is strong and the social order sound, then philosophical thinking is powerless to influence any change.

In Solovyev's view, religion on the other hand—he names the Catholic Church—can and does have the ability to influence the mind of an entire nation

and thereby usher in practical changes in the form of social institutions. Given the fact that at the time when Solovyev wrote this treatise, his motherland Russia had an autocratic monarchy and consequently lacked strong secular institutions, it is perhaps not surprising that he would discount Hegel's ideas about the practical side of philosophy. For Hegel scientific, social, political, and legal institutions manifested the practical aspect of philosophy. Western Europe, by the mid-nineteenth century, at the time when Solovyev was at the height of his career, had secular institutions firmly in place and did not require the authority of the church or religion to guarantee its citizens certain basic civil rights.

It is ironic that Solovyev perceives the inadequacy of Western philosophy due to its lack of practical application, when at the time he was writing his philosophical works, Marxist philosophy had become influential in revolutionary circles in Russia. Following Marx's famous thesis that 'the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to change it,' radical Russian political movements were espousing and advancing the theories of Marx and Engels to change their world, their social order. Perhaps it was precisely because Solovyev saw the signs that positivist materialist philosophy—the very philosophy that he was so critical of—was rapidly gaining ground in Russia, and its influence was becoming widespread, capturing the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen, that he chose not to recognize it. And perhaps that is why even when he discusses socialism and denounces it, he does not mention Marx or Engels by name. It was as if by not including these two philosophers who were succeeding in making real change in social and political institutions, Solovyev could halt the dissemination of this materialist philosophy in tsarist Russia.

Solovyev concludes his critique of Western philosophy by asserting that positivism as a philosophical school was untenable and unsound, as in Solovyev's reading, positivists affirm the system of empirical sciences as the only true knowledge and negate all unconditional beginnings, religious and philosophical. This position, in Solovyev's view, confirms the limitedness and harmfulness of positivism.

Solovyev's renown as philosopher does not rest on his purely philosophical works, but is derived through his series of lectures on the Eastern Orthodox concept of 'Godmanhood': *bogochelovechestvo*. In his first lecture on 'Godmanhood', delivered in Moscow in 1876, which drew a large audience, Solovyev expounds his vision that the ultimate objective of history is the union of the divine beginning with humankind. The changes in social organizations and the evolution of religious beliefs all represent the preparatory stages of this union of God and man (Zouboff, 1944). This idea was based upon his conviction that Russia and Eastern (Russian) Orthodoxy are historically destined to be the savior of all humanity. In his view the French Revolution, while having espoused the principles of equality, liberty, and brotherhood, did not accomplish its goals of equalizing people from a moral point of view. Solovyev grants that the French Revolution 'established civil liberty,' but given that there still existed 'social inequality' in France (in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century at the time his lectures were delivered), the ‘emancipation,’ in Solovyev’s opinion, took place only from ‘one dominating class to subjugation to another.’ Solovyev contends that true equality can only be achieved through the practice of a Christian social order that is based on ‘unconditional, supernatural and superhuman’ principles. The idea of the unconditional beginning lay at the core of Solovyev’s belief in religion, and the unconditional nature of it, according to him was what rendered religion its moral superiority over socialism, positivism, or other philosophical theories of social justice and civil liberties. Making a case in favor of a Christian social order, Solovyev (1944) lays out his conception of religion:

*Religion, speaking generally and abstractly, is the connection of man and the world with the unconditional beginning, which is the focus of all that exists. It is evident if we admit the reality of this unconditional beginning, it must define all the interests and the whole content of human life; consciousness must depend upon it; and to it must be related all that is essential in what man does, learns, and creates.*

Solovyev concludes his series of lectures with a call for accepting the Godman, Christ, not just externally, but internally, as he believes that this free acceptance will lead to the regeneration of a new, spiritual man, a spiritual humankind that will accept the law that was given ‘in the revelation of Christ.’ He firmly believed in the Second Coming of Christ when Christ the Godman would transform humankind into the state of ‘mangodhood’, a state that would elevate human beings to be God-like. This progression would thus usher in the final historical era, an era distinguished by universal peace and harmony, an era where there no longer will be sin, evil, or suffering.

The other fundamental concept that was connected with the idea of ‘Godmanhood’ was the idea of the Divine Sophia, the principle of the Eternal Feminine, a concept that he promoted and developed into a cult-like status. For Solovyev, Sophia represented the world soul and therefore was the integral link between God (the transcendental being) and human beings (nature). Explaining the concept of Sophia in relation to ‘Godmanhood’, Solovyev (1944) states:

*Insofar as she receives unto herself the divine Logos and is determined by Him, the soul of the world is humanity—the divine manhood of Christ—the body of Christ, or Sophia. Conceiving the unitary divine beginning and binding by this unity the entire multiplicity of beings, the soul of the world thereby gives the divine beginning its complete actual realization in everything; ... God is manifested in all creation as the living, active force, or as the Holy Spirit.*

Originally envisioned as a religious concept, the idea of the ‘Eternal Feminine’ developed into a cultural phenomenon, as it exerted an enormous

influence over a new generation of poets—the Symbolists or poets of the Silver Age—a mystical branch of Russian Modernism. The Russian Symbolist movement which was comprised not only of poets, but also of novelists, playwrights, artists, and philosophers is greatly indebted to Solovyev’s vision of the Divine Sophia and the ‘Eternal Feminine.’ At the core of the worldview of the Symbolists lay Solovyev’s mystical philosophy and it served as the inspiration of these poets. The Beautiful Lady or the ‘Eternal Feminine,’ central themes in the poetry of the Symbolists, acquired a cult-like following among the proponents of this school, as they considered the Divine Sophia to be the embodiment of the world soul and the source of harmony on earth. It is due to this very concept that many of the Symbolists hailed Solovyev as a prophet. While Solovyev’s status as a philosopher may be a point of contention and debate, his influence on Russian Modernist culture is profound and uncontested.

Evaluated by the Western philosophical standard, Solovyev may not have earned the title of philosopher proper, but he certainly was a philosopher of religion by any measure. If he were to be judged by the yardstick of his own standard, he was a philosopher in the sense that he preferred philosophers to be—individuals who are able to effect change and to have a lasting, practical impact on a nation’s psyche. Solovyev succeeded in capturing the imagination of his fellow citizens at a critical period in Russian history when Russia was undergoing major change and transformation. Through his writings, both philosophical and religious, he was able to have a profound influence on a particular generation of cultural figures who in turn were able to offer a different, idealistic vision of a future Russia on the eve of the October Revolution of 1917. The status of Solovyev as a philosopher should not be evaluated by the sole measure of the modern Western philosophical tradition. His place and contribution as a philosopher should be assessed by a broader matrix where it is permissible to bring in a mystical dimension to philosophy and where there is room for intuition and integral knowledge to be acknowledged as potentially valid sources of knowledge. If not a full-fledged philosopher by the analytic model of philosophy, then Solovyev should be at the very least granted the status of a philosopher-mystic who was, as Zouboff (1944) writes, a ‘Christian pragmatist ... fighting against the separation of the practical from the ideal—from the *Christian* ideal.’ Solovyev’s legacy continues, to this day, to serve as the inspiration for creativity and artistic endeavors among Russians and Russophiles everywhere. His thought and works were instrumental in creating an understanding in modern Russia of philosophy as rigorous and systematic, and helped make philosophy more accessible to a broad audience. After Solovyev philosophy in Russia was no longer the exclusive province of professional, academic philosophers, it was made available, so to speak, in the public domain for debate and discussion.

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