

Fr Sergi Bulgakov on Christianity and Judaism

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As has been the case for decades now, YMCA Press continues to make available works by Russian thinkers whose contribution can be judged only when the full range of their writings is properly accessible. In the relatively near future, and if the economic situation allows, we may see Russian publishing houses in Moscow, St Petersburg and elsewhere assuming this crucially important task, especially if they manage to publish materials that have been locked away in the archival holdings of Soviet research libraries. In any case, even if scholars and editors on Russian soil do succeed in restoring their heritage, we should still recognise the enormously valuable role played by YMCA Press from its base in Paris.

This article has been prompted by the recent publication by YMCA Press of a collection of writings on Jewish nationhood and the situation of the Jewish people by Fr Sergi Bulgakov, the prominent Orthodox theologian and philosopher (1871–1944).¹ The articles in the collection span the years 1915 to 1942, the most substantial of these belonging to 1941 and 1942, the very height of the Second World War.

Particular features of Bulgakov's reflections upon Jewish identity and the Christian world will be treated here. However, first it is necessary to consider the way in which Russian thought has tended to focus upon cultural comparisons, surveying European, Asian and other societies and setting features of those societies in contrast to 'Russian' structures and values. This endeavour has taken Russian philosophers into the realms of social history, anthropology and theology, excursions that have impressed non-Russian readers by their very ambitiousness, but also caused doubts as to the objectivity of the project and of the eventual findings put forward. If it is indeed the case that the writings of one or another Russian philosopher in the field of historical-cultural comparisons are flawed, the fundamental reasons for this need to be studied, and these writings then set properly in the context of the more well-founded and positive insights of the philosopher in question.

Over the years many scholars and other commentators have expressed a profoundly negative view of Russian philosophy, dismissing it as largely derivative and lacking in fully developed theories of knowledge. It has even been common practice to deny the Russian tradition the name of 'philosophy' altogether, on the grounds that it appears to lack the rigour and critical discipline that feature so prominently in Western European philosophy. In important respects Russian philosophy is indeed different in kind from Western European types of philosophy. It has tended to place less emphasis upon theories of knowledge than do other traditions, and has been shaped by different preoccupations.

The form of speculative thought developed by Russian thinkers is, essentially, religious and ethical. Key concepts such as *personhood* and *communality* were elaborated in the light of explicitly religious values and were considered to be virtually inseparable from such values. They, in turn, imparted a religious significance to other, less obviously religious, concepts and drew them within the range of religious discourse and speculation. To many Russian philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it appeared entirely fitting that they should be concerned with providing an affirmation of religious, explicitly Christian, values. If their endeavour should take them beyond the bounds of philosophy and theology in the narrower sense, then so be it.

In addition to the centrality of religious perceptions, another distinguishing feature of Russian thought is its abiding concern with *history*. Notions of history have been made to serve both religious and anti-religious goals in Russia. The idea of the 'inexorable forward march of historical progress' belongs to the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which dominated Soviet life for three-quarters of a century. An awareness of history's role marked the later teachings of Russian Populism, the ideas propounded by Slavophiles and Westernisers during the nineteenth century and, much earlier, the notion of Moscow as the 'Third Rome'. There were individual thinkers, such as Nikolai Berdyayev (1874–1948), who viewed history as the ground or basis for an especially creative type of philosophical speculation,² while others felt ensnared by the categories of historical thought and found it extraordinarily difficult to work with categories other than these. This latter situation was experienced by a number of dissident intellectuals during the 1960s and 1970s, who were keenly aware of the poverty of the historical determinism at the heart of Marxism-Leninism, and struggled to forge a coherent outlook that dispensed with that historical basis of thought. Endeavouring to distance themselves from the official ideology and pursue another, more creative line of thought, the dissident thinkers found themselves limited by the very *attempt* to define their thought as 'distinct' from the official line, and their writings still appeared to be 'coloured' by received notions of the way that history operates.

In large measure, Russian thought came to be defined through processes of opposition to, or contrast with, other influential traditions of thought. Profoundly uncertain about the strengths and virtues of their own nation and the worth of their contribution on the world stage, the Russian people (or the educated minority among them) were much preoccupied by comparisons between themselves and other nations. They strove to understand the animating principle that guided other nations and cultures so as to be better equipped to understand and define the character of their own nation. Self-knowledge and self-definition were attainable, they believed, and a close study of the course of history would reveal the principles that caused nations either to flourish or to wither. A large proportion of the speculative writings in this area are devoted to the question of whether Russia should emulate the ways and traditions of Western Europe. The notion that Russia belongs to Asia rather than to Europe also exercised influence on the Russian mind. Beyond the frontiers of Russia (sometimes firmly sealed), cultural centres such as Constantinople, Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, Paris, London and Berlin have evoked a variety of responses, from uncritical idealisation to fear of infection by 'bacilli' in the form of alien values and ideas. What is common to these responses is the desire to understand and affirm the worth of 'Russian' values. The various attempts that Russian thinkers made to assess Jewish nationhood and culture need to be considered in the context of the Russians' own strong drive to achieve deeper self-understanding.

The other principal respect in which Jewish nationhood, religion and culture were important to Russian thinkers is this: *here* was the ground where their own Christian faith was firmly rooted. Ever intent upon self-understanding, they believed that a full and informed view of Jewish life and faith would bring them to a better appreciation of Christianity. They sought to study the initial forms of Christian life within the Jewish community, the points of continuity and distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This was familiar terrain for Christian theologians; the religious philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900) worked to make the Judaic aspect of Christianity apparent and immediate to lay believers too.

The present collection of articles by Bulgakov shows him to have been a man for whom the enriching quality of the 2000-year link between Judaism and Christianity and its more negative, burdensome aspects were equally evident. His stance was that of the believer who readily sees the many points where his Christian life is shaped by the Judaic legacy. This does not prevent him from expressing the conviction that 'in the fullness of time' the Jewish people will acknowledge Jesus Christ (pp. 132–3, 135).

According to Bulgakov, the very presence and continued survival of the Jewish people throughout the course of history set them apart from other peoples. In this sense the Jewish people form 'the axis of world history' (p. 65). They have survived the vicissitudes of a turbulent history and waves of persecution and succeeded in keeping intact their belief system and communal values, whereas other, formerly prominent peoples have faded and withdrawn from the world stage.

The main body of the book consists of a three-part study entitled 'Rasizm i khristianstvo' ('Racism and Christianity') (pp. 19–140). This was written at a time when the physical destruction of the Jews had already become a practical objective for the Nazis. The first section of this study treats 'racism in relation to Christianity' (pp. 19–37). Bulgakov draws the reader's attention to the complete and deliberate inversion by the Nazis of fundamental Christian values, accompanied by an attempt to *conceal* the incompatibility between their creed and Christianity. As he sets out and then demolishes the ideas of a prominent Nazi ideologue, one discovers the depth of Bulgakov's scorn for the poverty and crudeness of thought at the heart of the ideas he is exposing. Although the point might seem self-evident in the post-Holocaust world that we know now, the Nazi world-view is presented by Bulgakov as being wholly inadequate and *impoverished*. It is shown to be founded upon the crudest form of biological naturalism (p. 25 and *passim*), deeply flawed ideas about nationhood and blood kinship, and a thoroughly distorted mythology and symbolism in which masculine self-assertion is accorded supreme value. Given how crassly inadequate the ideology was, Bulgakov might have deemed it beneath contempt but for the fact that in 1941 and 1942 Nazi victory appeared possible, and the forcible imposition of their ideas would follow upon victory.

As one would expect, Bulgakov is concerned with spiritual considerations as well as with the practical dangers arising from the Nazi threat. In particular, his Christian sensibility finds expression in those passages where he brings out the worth and central importance of the individual human person (pp. 48–9). He stresses the indestructible aspect of human personality, its creativity and richness, a richness that derives from participation in the 'perfect' humanity of Christ (p. 48). As far as the Nazi ideologues are concerned, the positive facets of individual personality are entirely beyond their comprehension. Bulgakov views individual personality *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the light of Christian Scripture. Nazi ideologues arrived at their conception of the individual by means of a deliberate and constant diminution of the values that make for completeness and spiritual health. The notion of spiritual health is indeed

apposite, for the type of racism that the Nazis preached had elements of a *religious* outlook on the world (p. 19). It aimed to provide a new ethos of self-assertion, principally racial and national self-assertion, an ethos that brings it into direct confrontation with authentic forms of Christianity (pp. 24–5, 27, 30–3 and *passim*). It proceeded by way of attacking the authority of the New Testament and especially the Old Testament (pp. 20, 32), misrepresenting the nature of the love that Christ preached and calling into question the stature and significance of Christ Himself (pp. 20–1).

Bulgakov defines the stance of Nazism in relation to Christianity, but he also characterises the Nazi creed as openly expressing racial rivalry in relation to the Jewish people (p. 35). In Sections 2 and 3 of ‘Rasizm i khristianstvo’ he moves to a broader canvas and defines National Socialism in relation to Bolshevism and the interrelationship between both of these and Jewish messianism. General comparisons between totalitarian creeds and descriptions of them as surrogate forms of religion have, perhaps unfortunately, become common fare for us. This makes it difficult for us to gauge the force of Bulgakov’s words at the time they were written. Clearly, though, he was aware of the magnitude of the oppression inflicted on the Russian people (p. 125), the history of which had yet to be documented by Solzhenitsyn, Dimitry Pospelovsky and others. He knew that the Jewish people faced the threat of physical annihilation, but could not have known the particular forms that this had begun to take. Given the open aggression of the Nazi regime and the level of hostility directed at the Jews from the outset, he could be certain that the measures taken against them would be extreme.

It needs to be recognised that, solicitous as he was for the welfare of the Jewish people, Bulgakov did not consider them to be *above* criticism. Rather, it was precisely on account of their special status and spiritual destiny that he felt obliged to criticise them (pp. 100–1). He considered that they had failed to keep true to their particular destiny as ‘the Chosen People of God’: some Jews had yielded to the temptation of seeking an earthly Messiah and an earthly kingdom (p. 132). By their nature Jews were incapable of indifference towards God and religion; if they rejected their spiritual tradition, they tended to embrace extreme atheism. In this connection, Bulgakov writes of the many Jews who contributed to the success of the Bolshevik seizure of power and participated in the persecution of religious believers (pp. 124–5). He goes on to say that the Jews’ responsibility for the excesses of Bolshevism is very considerable and that it is not simply proportionate to their numbers. In these passages we detect an early instance of a viewpoint that has found frequent expression in recent years, namely that the Jews are responsible for the misfortunes brought upon Russia by the Bolshevik revolution, and that a significant proportion of the atheistic intelligentsia who helped speed the process were not Russians, but Jews.

Section 3 of ‘Rasizm i khristianstvo’ is especially revealing, and sets out Bulgakov’s reflections upon the likely course of future developments. He does express confidence in the eventual overthrow of the German regime and writes of this as being morally beneficial for Germany itself, allowing the country to rid itself of racism (pp. 87–8). Of course, he is far from underestimating the gravity of the situation at that point in the war. He sensed the apocalyptic nature of events, and implied that an ‘apocalyptic’ type of spirituality was appropriate for these times.

Bulgakov gives expression to a curious variant of Russian messianism by proclaiming that, in the unfolding of future events, the Russian *and* Jewish peoples will occupy a central place (pp. 136–7). It was his firmly held view that the special destiny of the Jews had been ordained *for all time* and set down in Scripture; accordingly, it was not

appropriate for the Russian people to seek to dislodge the Jews. According to his account, the Russians have their own particular mission to accomplish. A period of religious persecution has prepared them to achieve this (pp. 126–7), and he predicts a great religious renaissance.

Bulgakov defines the Russian people's mission in the following words:

This people has the great religious calling to make apparent the strength and depth of Orthodoxy, both in the creative sphere and in life. (p. 127) . . . More than all the peoples of history, this is the people of the future, a people that has not as yet revealed itself or uttered its 'word'. This same people represents the future of the entire world. . . . It cannot be otherwise, for such is the Divine hierarchy. (pp. 128–9) . . . Obviously, not a single one of the peoples of history is destined for religious creativity to the same extent as the Russian people. (p. 140)

This heightened sense of Russia's mission may be taken to reflect, at least partly, Bulgakov's anxiety regarding his country's survival and welfare in the face of the Nazi onslaught it was then enduring. It is also the fruit of a particular form of wide-ranging historical speculation in which the spiritual and cultural destiny of various prominent nations is considered and a moral hierarchy is established. National character, points of affinity between particular peoples, contrasts and tensions all form the subject matter of this 'philosophy of history'. As was mentioned earlier, this is a mode of thinking in which Russian philosophers have felt naturally inclined to engage. In Bulgakov's case, the cultural-historical survey he provides is informed by a deep conviction that the riches of the Orthodox faith should be imparted to all peoples and that the Russians will bring this about. This position, when adopted by persons of lesser stature, integrity and discipline, can degenerate into overt nationalism of a quite threatening kind, which Bulgakov himself would have been the first to deplore.

His writings on the Jews are marked by a strongly felt desire to acknowledge the strengths of Jewish spirituality, national character and communal values. In his view, this stance accorded fully with commitment to the Christian faith. Like Vladimir Solov'ev before him, Bulgakov emphasises the need for Christians to adopt a properly open and 'Christian' attitude towards the Jews.³ He denounces antisemitism in the strongest of terms (p. 84) and stresses that it is wholly opposed to the spirit and precepts of Christianity. He understood that a considerable part of the hostility directed against Jews was rooted in a very basic envy which, in the pages of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, takes the form of racial rivalry. This is compounded by the antisemite's response to the notion of the Jews being 'the Chosen People of God', set apart from other peoples.

The study of Judaism and its 'messianic' element, besides having intrinsic value of its own, can help one to arrive at a more complete understanding of Russian forms of messianism. Russian philosophers and theologians whose own thought systems contained a discernible 'messianic' element were certainly drawn towards reflection upon their Judaic legacy, none more so than Vladimir Solov'ev. His Jewish contemporaries were struck by the depth of his knowledge of the Old Testament,⁴ the commentarial literature as well as the Scriptures themselves. Some of the central concepts he employed derive their potency from his recognition of their place in Jewish spirituality and their applicability to the New Testament.⁵ Certain of his works merit particular mention as examples of an accepting response to Judaism: the first section of his uncompleted work *Istoriya i budushchnost' teokratii* (*The History and Future of Theocracy*), which even in its unfinished state fills almost 400 pages in

the *Collected Works*; a 50-page work entitled *Yevreistvo i khristiansky vopros* (*Judaism and the Christian Question*); and an article of considerable distinction and significance, *Talmud i noveishaya polemicheskaya literatura o nem v Avstrii i Germanii* (*The Talmud and the Most Recent Polemical Literature about it in Austria and Germany*).⁶

Jewish messianism appears to have exerted an attraction upon thinkers who have in some measure yielded to a utopian ideal, and here again Solov'ev illustrates the case. His utopian yearnings reflected Jewish, Christian and Platonic strands, and led him to formulate a spiritual ideal according to which 'all worldly falsehood' would be rectified and 'all worldly sufferings' alleviated.⁷ At several points he altered his views as to which institution would be most likely to bring about this 'Kingdom of Heaven on earth', but the ideal endured almost to the last year of his life. In the late 1880s he came to view the Roman Catholic Church as the prime instrument of Providence, but by the following decade that was no longer the case. What remained constant in all this was the prominence of the Russian people as a spiritual force. In an article he had published at the age of 24, the Russian people appeared as the third great 'force' on the world stage, the people who had not yet 'uttered their "word"' or achieved glory, but would, in time to come, achieve the ideal balance between social cohesion and freedom of the individual.⁸ This notion of future prominence and a spiritual wealth yet to be revealed is present, almost word for word, in the final part of Bulgakov's 'Rasizm i khristianstvo' (pp. 128–9 in the present collection). Both Solov'ev and Bulgakov think in terms of the Russian people as a purifying, moral force heralding a new age, *ex Oriente lux*.

There were reasons why the Russian people assumed a more negative aspect in Solov'ev's eyes. Looking at the realities of life around him, he detected widespread social injustice, a submissive clergy, the state's inexcusable reliance upon censorship, and deeply un-Christian antisemitism. These became particular targets of his criticism, and to him they betrayed a deplorable lack of will to establish a *truly* Christian society. Solov'ev's anger at his compatriots was all the greater because they had, in his view, failed to accomplish their appointed mission.⁹ He had been sure that the Russian people were charged with the task of defending authentic Christian values, and he could barely come to terms with their failure to perform that task. It almost brought about a personal loss of religious faith at the very end of his life.

Solov'ev juxtaposed the complacent and half-hearted Christianity of contemporary Russia and the consistency and intensity of faith among the Jews. He was deeply impressed by the desire of Jews to see spiritual ideals translated into precepts that affect or transform life at a practical level.¹⁰ Passages in his *Yevreistvo i khristiansky vopros* comment on how unreasonable it is to expect Jews to accept the Christian faith when so many Christians themselves fail to abide by its central precepts.¹¹

Solov'ev's preoccupation with the close accord between faith and practice among Jews finds very striking expression in his article *Talmud i noveishaya polemicheskaya literatura*. . . . Here one comes across a phenomenon that must be rare, if not unique, in the history of Russian-Jewish relations: a Christian philosopher rooted in the Russian Orthodox faith provides a statement of justification that a Jew might use in response to criticism from Christians. This particular statement (four pages in length) is highly critical of Christians and very sympathetic to Jews who reject Christianity on the grounds that its adherents have failed to apply Christians precepts in their lives or in the regulation of their society.¹² This statement enables us to gauge the depth of Solov'ev's disillusion. Here Christians appear in an unfavourable light when

compared with Jews; elsewhere they are unfavourably compared with Muslims. Jews and Muslims alike are praised on account of the *consistency* with which they apply their spiritual precepts in *all* spheres of life.

Bulgakov and Solov'ev both believed that Christians had much to do to 'bring their own house in order'. One of the most telling ways that Christians could demonstrate at least their *will* to accomplish this would be actively to seek a reconciliation with the Jews and put a definitive end to the violence perpetrated against them. As the present collection shows, Bulgakov was fully prepared to confront the complexities of Jewish-Christian relations. Such criticism as he did direct at the Jews was prompted by a desire to see them retrieve their position of prominence as a religious people. He sought to arrive at a sound assessment of their past and present legacy to the Christian world.

Notes and References

- ¹ Fr Sergi Bulgakov, *Khristianstvo i yevreisky vopros* (YMCA Press, Paris, 1991).
- ² N. Berdyayev, *The Meaning of History* (Geoffrey Bles, London, 1936); see especially Chapter 1. For Berdyayev's ideas on the destiny and significance of the Jewish people, see Chapter 5, pp. 86–107. Full Russian title: *Smysl istorii: opyt filosofii chelovecheskoi sud'by* (YMCA Press, Paris, 1969), 1st edition, Berlin, 1923.
- ³ Bulgakov, *op. cit.*, p. 134; Vladimir Solov'ev, *Yevreistvo i khristiansky vopros* (1884), in *Sobraniye sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva* (Foyer Oriental Chrétien, Brussels, 1966), Vol. IV, p. 135.
- ⁴ F. B. Getz, *Ob otnoshenii Vl. S. Solov'eva k yevreiskomu voprosu*, in *O Vladimire Solov'eve: pervy sbornik* (Put', Moscow, 1911).
- ⁵ Jonathan Sutton, *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov: towards a Reassessment* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988); see Chapter 5 on terms including 'sacred corporeality' and 'theocracy'.
- ⁶ V. S. Solov'ev, *Istoriya i budushchnost' teokratii* (1885–1887), *Sob. soch.* IV, pp. 241–633; *Yevreistvo i khristiansky vopros*, *Sob. soch.* IV, pp. 133–85; *Talmud i noveishaya polemicheskaya literatura o nem v Avstrii i Germanii* (1886), *Sob. soch.* VI, pp. 3–32.
- ⁷ Solov'ev, *Sob. soch.* X, p. 470.
- ⁸ Solov'ev, *Tri sily* (1877), *Sob. soch.* I, pp. 227–39.
- ⁹ Sutton, *op. cit.*, Chapter 8.
- ¹⁰ Solov'ev, *Yevreistvo i khristiansky vopros*, *Sob. soch.* IV, pp. 148–9.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- ¹² Solov'ev, *Talmud i noveishaya polemicheskaya literatura. . .*, *Sob. soch.* VI, pp. 28–32.