1

The Foundational Antinomy of the Christian Philosophy of History

In Christian consciousness there inevitably struggle against each other two conceptions, two perceptions of history: the optimistic-chiliastic and the pessimistic-eschatological. Both of these have deep roots in Christianity and at the same time are incompatible with each other. Their mutual relationship can be defined as an antinomistic conjunction: here we have a religious antinomy, logically irresolvable but nonetheless psychologically felt. Between them there exists no logical conflict of contradictory claims, but rather an antinomy of judgments, the nature of which Kant illuminated in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in his analysis of the unavoidable antinomies of pure reason. Such antinomies cannot be and ought not to be reconciled—for they are irreconcilable—but rather they must be understood in their genesis and significance. Then they can, at least, be explained as expressing different sides of or conditions of unified being, which, nonetheless, reason with its current powers is unable to contain and to understand without contradictions. In antinomies there is given experiential, graphic proof of the supra-rational character of being, or, what is the same thing, of the insufficiency of the powers of reason for adequately comprehending it. The presence of antinomies inevitably leads us to the conclusion that the current state of being is transitional, unfinished, and, in this obvious incompleteness, it now reveals openings to different possibilities of consciousness.[1]

1. This antinomic nature of consciousness was noted with the striking force of philosophical intuition by Dostoevsky (who would hardly have known Kant) in his materials for *Demons*, first published in the appendix to the eighth volume of its sixth

For non-religious consciousness, life simply *happened*, it is an accident; for religious consciousness, life is *given* and, as given from above, it is holy, full of mystery, of depth and enduring significance. And life is given to our consciousness not in the form of an isolated, individual existence, but rather of the lineal, the historical, the universal, the global; it arises in the infinite flow of life proceeding from the Fountain of life, the God of the living [Mark 12:17] who does not know dependence and who created not death but life [Wis 1:13]. In the face of this universal and cosmic life, and, therefore, in the face of history, responsibilities are placed on us, along with the "talents" entrusted to our use [Matt 25:14–30] from the very moment of our birth. For religious consciousness, history is a holy sacrament, and one that furthermore possesses meaning, value, and significance in all of its parts, as was deeply felt in German classical idealism, especially in Hegel. But at the same time history is also our task, our work; we can and we must relate to history "pragmatically," as its creators. But human activity cannot be realized apart from the individual setting of goals, apart from historical tasks and ideals; they arise in the consciousness of the actor with the same necessity as that by which we, when looking ahead, see the horizon. We can, of course, choose not to look ahead at all and therefore never see the horizon, but, if we lift our eyes, we inevitably have it before us, and even more than this, we cannot shake the feeling of its attainability, the illusion that we can reach it; and after our consciousness has become fully sober, we cannot shake the feeling that it is possible at least to walk towards it. We are surrounded by historical horizons in which, with more or less clarity, this or that goal is projected, in which a chiliasm with some content or another is foreordained.

We may be completely free of Judaistic chiliasm, of hope for a historical miracle as a *deus ex machina*, for the interference of supra-historical and supernatural forces in history, having recognized that the historical path in its entire expanse is completely open for man. We may even be thoroughly

printing. Stavrogin (the prince) says here in a conversation with Shatov: "I don't understand why you consider the possession of a mind, that is, consciousness, the greatest of all possible existences? . . . Why do you reject the possibility of a secret? Note also that, perhaps, unbelief is natural for man, and this precisely because he puts mind above all; since mind is a property only of the human organism, he thereby neither understands nor wishes to understand life in another form, that is, life beyond the grave—he does not believe that *that* life is higher. On the other hand, the sense of despair and wretchedness is proper to man by nature, for the human mind is so constituted that at every moment it doubts itself, is not satisfied with itself, and man is therefore prone to consider his existence inadequate. We are, clearly, transitory beings, and our existence on earth is, clearly, a process, the uninterrupted existence of a chrysalis transitioning into a butterfly."

permeated by that pragmatist conviction that history is wholly our domain and that supernatural forces of grace act in history not in a directly miraculous fashion but instead by irrigating or nourishing the roots of the human soul, in those depths where human strivings and decisions ripen. But from the formal-chiliastic perception of the historical horizon, i.e., from the actual faith in the attainability of the ideals of progress, we can never be set free. Granted, in such a perception of history we constantly and consciously substitute only the part for the whole, the phenomena accessible to us for the inaccessible noumena, but we are not in a condition to be freed from this historical phenomenalism—not unless we reject our active-optimistic relationship to history, the striving for historical harmony, for the resolution of dissonance, for progress. The religious perception of history was most strongly manifested of course in the prophets, as the fruit of their enthusiasm and inspiration; it is inseparably bound up with Christianity too, and thus also somehow bound up with it is this entire complex of feelings and ideas.

Granted, if we attempt to consistently think through this complex of ideas imposed on us by the practical character of history, by our practical historical reason, we will be easily convinced that a horizon is nothing more than a necessary optical illusion and is thus for that reason unattainable, and that progress is permitted only through infinite movement, in a bad infinity. We are convinced that before us lies an antinomy, quietly slipping from our hands like a shadow when we want to catch it. We must fall into a self-blinding illusionism, must acknowledge the validity of a *Fata Morgana*, must reconcile ourselves with a bad infinity, must come to believe in the reality of the horizon in order to become completely comfortable with the theory of progress; we must fall into historical harmonism and, having numbed ourselves to other ideas and perceptions, we must affirm the conditional as the unconditional. This historical chiliasm, torn from its religious roots and reborn in the humanistic theory of progress that is so widespread in our days, leads humanity to a religious hibernation, makes it unable to take flight because it has grown heavy and fully content with itself and the world.

Of course, in these circumstances the only language that can speak in a commanding fashion is that of religious and mystical experience, which authoritatively rouse us from sleep and allow us to feel the other, tragic side of being. The day's din of temporality alternates with night's whisper of eternity, and under the swelter of life, the icy breath of death occasionally blows by, and when this breath enters a soul, even just once, that soul can thereafter hear this silence even in the middle of the din of the market, can feel this cold even under the scorching sun. And he who in his own experience

has recognized the real power of evil as the foundation of worldly tragedy loses his erstwhile credulity towards history and life. In the soul, sadness settles deep within, and in the heart there appears an ever-widening crack. Thanks to the reality of evil, life becomes an auto-intoxication, and not only the body but also the soul accept many poisons, in whose face even Metchnikoff[2] with his antitoxins is powerless. A historical sense of self is colored by a feeling of the tragic in life, in history, in the world, it is freed from its eudaimonistic coloring, it is made deeper, more serious—and darker. The idea of *eudaimonistic* progress with the hope for a final harmony is more and more crowded out by the idea of *tragic* progress. According to this idea, history is the ripening of tragedy and its final act; the last page is marked by an extreme and already unbearable tension; it is the agony followed by death, which lies in wait both for individuals and for humanity as a whole, and only beyond the threshold of death does new life await. Such a sense of the world ceases being chiliastic; it becomes eschatological.

Eschatologism, according to its two-fold character, can be either bright, to the extent that within it there exists a presentiment of otherworldly harmony (the "air of resurrection"), or dark, to the extent that it is colored by a presentiment of the approaching end and of the calamities preceding it. (A similar two-fold character characterizes personal eschatology as well, our personal relationship to death.) In early Christianity the tones of joyful eschatologism predominated: with fervor they prayed at that time, "come, Lord Jesus," [Rev 22:20] and with impatience they awaited his near advent. In the eschatologism of later Christianity, the dark tones conquer, there predominates the expectation of the Antichrist and of the final trials. But in both these worldviews anti-historicism is equally strong: the feeling of empirical reality and of its immediate demands is dulled, just as when a person who, in preparation for death, loses the taste for and interest in daily affairs and concerns while thought focuses on what is unmoving and eternal. The feeling of the transfiguration of the world, of the implacable battle with its elements, of the contingency of history and of our present life more generally, leads the spirit beyond the borders of history and even of the world, and it dulls its sensitivity to the impressions of the latter, makes it not of this world. Sometimes this eschatological worldview comes over the masses (as in our *Raskol* at the time of Peter [the Great])[3] like a spiritual

2. Ilya Ilyich Metchnikoff (1845–1916), a pioneer in immunology, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1908. —Trans.

3. "Raskol," Russian for "split" or "schism," refers to the most important religious movement of seventeenth-century Russia. It signals the division of the Russian Orthodox Church into two halves, the official Church following the liturgical reforms of Patriarch Nikon in 1653, and the "Old Believers" who worshiped according to the older rites these reforms altered. The anathematization of Old Believers in 1666–67, as well

epidemic; at other times it completely abates. The eschatological worldview does battle with the chiliastic, but at the same time it is practically united with it, though in differing proportions. One or the other tone prevails and colors the general mood.

Nevertheless, if we try to make eschatologism the sole guiding principle of history and take it to its natural conclusion, then we will be persuaded that here too we have to do with antinomy. Eschatology denies history for the sake of eternity, the empirical for the sake of the transcendental. But still eschatology does this only within the limits of the temporal and the relative, and thus it inevitably falls under the influence of these limits. To the extent that eschatologism is an intimate mood of the personality, the music of the soul, it remains a living and genuine mystical experience. But convert it into an abstract norm, into a dogmatic idea, and it too turns out to be only a historical program—a violent one at that—which barbarously maims living life, i.e., it becomes an embodied contradiction. It is only this life that is given to us in an unmediated and immanent fashion, and only in it and through it are we able to be born to a new life, outgrowing it only from within it.

Meanwhile, this pseudo-eschatologism turns its squeamish grimace, its cold animosity, precisely towards productive life, raising the denial of history to the level of a historical program that is then implemented by violence, i.e., by the most earthly of means. It is this that defines the dark "medieval," "monastic," "ascetic" relationship to life which provoked against itself, as a natural reaction, that chiliastic humanism that is equally one-sided. This false eschatologism lit the pyres of the Inquisition, raised persecutions against human thought and freedom, justified spiritual despotism, and ultimately incited against itself a hatred that lives to this day. And its falsehood consists primarily in the fact that eschatologism can function only as a personal worldview, as a personal mood, but not as a historical program, which is, furthermore, not even implemented in oneself but time and again imposed instead on the bodies of others. Precisely in this way does there arise the hypocrisy of pseudo-eschatologism so typical of this trend.

And so, the attempt to resolve the problem of a Christian philosophy of history in the light of only the immanent or only the transcendent, the chiliastic or the eschatological, cannot consistently be pursued to its endpoint and thereby reveals the antinomical character of these solutions. This antimony is felt in the experience of every person in accord with the

as official state persecution, increased the apocalyptic fervor of the Old Believers, a significant number of whom practiced self-immolation as a form of social and religious protest. —Trans.

character and the depth of this experience. In the teaching of V. S. Solovyov[4] we see the classic example of such antinomism. Beginning with the *Lectures on Divine-Humanity*[5] and other works of his early period, he exhibits a greatly optimistic and harmonious worldview[6] in which abstract principles predominate and are reconciled in the coming synthesis (under the marked influence of N. F. Fedorov).[7] He ends, however, full of torment, with the rending dissonance of "Three Conversations" and "The Tale of the Antichrist" with its radical eschatologism. Such a mood was a turning point for the author himself too, for after "The Tale of the Antichrist" it was possible only either to die to the world, hiding himself away in the desert, or simply to die, and the foreword to "Three Conversations" is full of this presentiment of near death. Solovyov briefly lifted the veil of Isis and looked into that abyss into which a mortal may not look with impunity, just as it is not granted to mortal man to know either his own future or the time of his death, the time of his personal "end of the world." The spiritual biography of Solovyov in this sense presents an example, unique in recent philosophy, of the radical exacerbation of the problem of history with its antinomism. In his spiritual evolution what is revealed is precisely this antinomism. It is impossible simply to say that Solovyov rejected his former worldview and went over to another; no, both in essence belong to one and the same Christian worldview which he always confessed, and in fact he never fully rejected either of them, but in his religious experience both members of the antinomy were joined at various times in his life with varying psychological force.

Solovyov, however, knew of this antinomy and took it into account. This, unfortunately, cannot be said of Konstantin Leontiev,[8] who expressed

4. Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov (1853–1900), a literary critic, ecumenist, theologian, and philosopher, was one of the most oustanding religious thinkers of Russia's nineteenth century. He is considered the father of the Russian religious renaissance. In his philosophical and theological work he especially thematized God's wisdom, or "Divine Sophia," as a locus for tying together diverse theological doctrines; his writings in this vein set the course for the Russian sophiological school, of which Bulgakov became the premier representative in the twentieth century. —Trans.

5. An English translation can be found under the title, Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine-Humanity*. —Trans.

6. We find the most clear expression of this mood in the recently published letters (*Russian Thought*, 1910, V) of the philosopher's youth written to Ekaterina Vladimirovna Selevina [Solovyov's maternal cousin —Trans.]. Here we read, among other statements: "The conscious conviction that the present state of man is not as it should be means for me that it should be changed, transfigured. I do not recognize the existence of evil as eternal, I do not believe in hell."

7. Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1829–1903), Russian philosopher and futurist who greatly influenced the Russian Religious Renaissance. —Trans.

8. Konstantin Nikolayevich Leontiev (1831–91), Russian philosopher who

the mood of a one-sided, radical eschatologism with an almost complete devaluation of earthly life[9] (neither can it be said of Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov, who represents the opposite extreme). However, in Leontiev this worldview is complicated by and still enveloped in his aestheticism, in his Nietzscheanism, in the individual particularities of both his taste and even of his literary talent. He does not notice, or he ignores, the antinomical character of the problem, but this very thing is what makes so hateful to him a "rosy" Christianity in which religion is viewed primarily as oil for greasing the wheel of the social mechanism or of the chariot of progress, in which it is valued as a means to achieve extrinsic goals. If the first, for all his seriousness and sincerity, sins through an impious attitude to life, then the second is distinguished by an impermissible lack of seriousness towards the dark side of Christian eschatologism, towards its dualistic-tragic understanding of history. One cannot make the sole guiding motif of life the idea of the inevitability of death, but banishing from thought the remembrance of the hour of death is the height of religious frivolity. It is necessary to live with full respect for life and concern for it, but but we must nonetheless live, although never forgetting death and preparing for it by our very living.

I conclude with a comparison. In one of his most significant letters[10] to the late A. N. Schmidt,[11] V. S. Solovyov recounts the following dream that an old dame (A. F. Aksakova[12]) had concerning him: "She saw that she had a letter from me, written in my normal handwriting which she called *pattes d'araignée*.[13] Reading the letter with interest, she noticed that inside was enfolded yet another letter written on gorgeous paper. Unfolding it, she discovered a word, written in magnificent handwriting in golden ink, and

predicted apocalyptic catastrophes for Russia in the twentieth century. —Trans.

9. "In the place of Christian beliefs about the afterlife and asceticism there appeared humane utilitarianism; instead of the thought of loving God, of the salvation of the soul, of union with Christ, we have preoccupation about the universal practical good. Contemporary Christianity is no longer seen as divine, as a simultaneously awe-inspiring and dreadful teaching, but instead as infantile prattle, an allegory, a moral tale whose sensible interpretation is economic and moral utilitarianism" (*The East, Russia, and Slavdom*).

10. I have in my possession only a *copy* of this letter, but this, however, was provided to me by A. N. Schmidt herself. It is marked April 23rd, 1900. [On Schmidt see n11 below —Trans.].

11. Anna Nikolaevna Schmidt (1851–1905), a Russian journalist and mystic whose visionary work, *The Third Testament*, made a major impression on many figures of the Russian Religious Renaissance. —Trans.

12. Anna Feodorovna Aksakova (1829–89), a Russian memoirist. She was the daughter of the Russian poet Feodor Tyutchev and the wife of Ivan Aksakov, a prominent Slavophile author. —Trans.

13. French: *spider legs* (cf. English "chicken scratch"). —Trans.

at that very moment she heard my voice: 'Here is my real letter, but wait to read it,' and right then she saw me enter the room, bent under the weight of an enormous sack of copper money. I drew forth from the sack and threw on the floor a few coins, one after another, saying: 'When all the copper has come out, that's when you'll get to the golden words.'"

Not everyone will have golden words written in his inner letter, but all bear within themselves a certain secret; even if they are not always conscious of it, all possess their own personal apocalypse. But it cannot be disclosed until we have spent all our copper money, until we have rendered to life all that is owed it . . . .

1909–10