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Book review

Рецензия

On the Way to the Integrity of Knowledge*

Book review:

T. Obolevich. *Faith and Science in Russian Religious Thought*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 240 pp.

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Abstract

This review is focused on the book *Faith and Science in Russian Religious Thought* written by Professor Teresa Obolevich and published by *Oxford University Press* in 2019. This book has become a landmark event among historians of Russian philosophy. The review examines the main ideas of each of the book's chapters and shows that they all represent a new look at the problem of the relationship between faith and reason in the history of Russian thought. It is noted that the author of the book follows the idea of Russian philosopher Semyon Frank, raised in his article "Religion and Science." Obolevich shows that Russian religious thought was not on the side of confrontation between religion and science but on recognizing two parallel paths with two different subjects of knowledge: the world and God. At the same time, Obolevich analyzes the stages of essential knowledge in Russian thought as a form of synthesis of the scientific and religious path. The review also notes that this author's approach to examining the history of Russian philosophy is a very successful attempt to substantiate the relevance of Russian thought in the 19th–20th century in the context of the sociocultural challenge of the current stage of European society's development.

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Keywords: faith and reason, religion and science, Russian religious philosophy, integral knowledge, synthesis, history of Russian philosophy.

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На пути к целостности знания*

Рецензия на книгу:

T. Obolevich. *Faith and Science in Russian Religious Thought*. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. – 240 pp.

Аннотация

Настоящая рецензия посвящена книге профессора Терезы Оболевич «Вера и наука в русской религиозной мысли» («*Faith and Science in Russian Religious Thought*»), вышедшей в издательстве «Oxford University Press» в 2019 году и ставшей знаковым событием в среде историков русской философии. В рецензии рассматриваются основные идеи каждой из глав работы и отмечается, что все они представляют новый взгляд на развитие проблемы соотношения веры и разума в истории русской мысли, в рамках которой акцент делается на проблеме диалогического сосуществования религии и науки. Отдельно отмечено, что в данном случае автор книги следует за идеей С.Л. Франка, озвученной в статье «Религия и наука», и показывает, что русская религиозная мысль стояла на позиции не конфронтации религии и науки, а на позиции признания двух параллельных путей с двумя различными предметами познания: миром и Богом. В то же самое время Оболевич показывает этапы развития в русской мысли идеи цельного знания как формы синтеза научного и религиозного путей. Также в рецензии

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отмечается, что такой подход автора к рассмотрению истории русской философии является весьма успешной попыткой обосновать актуальность русской мысли XIX—XX веков в контексте социокультурных вызовов современного этапа развития европейского общества.

Ключевые слова: вера и разум, религия и наука, русская религиозная философия, цельное знание, синтез, история русской философии.

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Professor Teresa Obolevich's book *Faith and Science in Russian Religious Thought* has become one of the notable facts among historians of Russian thought. Teresa Obolevich is well known in modern Russian studies thanks to her fundamental works and research on the testimony of Russian philosophers and theologians. In addition, Professor Obolevich is a recognized archival expert of the Russian intellectual emigration and a researcher who discovered the previously unknown writings of Russian religious philosopher Semyon Frank, and his correspondence with representatives of both Western and Russian philosophical thought. Professor Teresa Obolevich was one of the first academics in Eastern Europe to investigate Semyon Frank's philosophical views and intellectual heritage. In addition, the researcher revealed the legacy of one of the outstanding women of the Russian diaspora, a historian, writer, philosopher, and theologian Mirra Lot-Borodina. In recent years, Professor Obolevich has been researching materials from the archives of Fr. Georgy Florovsky, a Russian theologian, a representative of the Russian neo-patristic school, and a prominent figure in the ecumenical movement of the 20th century.

Interestingly, in *Faith and Science in Russian religious thought*, Obolevich follows her two main heroes, Florovsky and Frank. The study under review is a classic work on the history of Russian thought, capable of standing on a par with the texts of Nikolai Lossky, Vasily Zenkovsky and, above all, with the famous work of Georgy Florovsky, *The Paths of Russian Theology*. On the one hand, Obolevich's research responds to Florovsky's critical

attitude to the main trends of Russian philosophy, in which he discovers a lot of romantic, Protestant, and socialist elements. Obolevich tries to show a holistic path of development of Russian thought and present its history as a kind of organic whole, where the key is the concept of unity, integrity, and completeness. On the other hand, the thinker's influence on the author of the book is clearly discernible. The author sympathizes with Florovsky's ideas of neo-patristic synthesis and his view of the Russian philosophical discourse as a disguised Christian Hellenism.

The book begins with an assertion of the significant influence of the Byzantine patristic tradition on Russian thought and understanding of the essence of the concept of truth.

Obolevich emphasizes that in Russian thought, philosophy is associated with religious faith, referring the reader to the statement of John Damascene: "philosophy is knowledge of both divine and human things, that is to say, of things both visible and invisible. Philosophy, again, is a study of death, whether this be voluntary or natural... Still again, philosophy is the making of one's self like God... Philosophy is the art of arts and the science of sciences... Philosophy, again, is a love of wisdom. However, true wisdom is God. Therefore, the love of God, this is the true philosophy" [Obolevich 2019, 7].

At the same time, Obolevich's research ideologically follows Semyon Frank. It is crucial for the author to show the fundamental difference in the perception of science and religion in the West and Russia. Obolevich concludes: "Some scholars in the West are inclined to reformulate traditional religious convictions in the light of contemporary science. Orthodox thinkers, by contrast, tend to reinterpret scientific theories in the light of theology. Paraphrasing the title of one of Peacocke's famous books, Russian thought the path leads not from science towards God but God towards science" [Obolevich 2019, 171]. The desire for a single and consistent picture of the world presupposed faith as a necessary part of consciousness for Russian thinkers. By the way, "in the West, scholars deal with the problem of the relationship between science and religion primarily from a methodological point of view. The scientific worldview maintains a putative neutral position concerning religion; because the empirical method cannot cross the borders of the material world" [Obolevich 2019, 172–173]. It is worth noting that Semyon Frank was one of the first in Russian religious thought who noted this feature. In his work *Religion and Science*, the philosopher substantiates the thesis that religion and science are two ways of explaining the same reality, namely the essence and origin of the world, life, and man. Of course, Professor Obolevich's ideological adherence to Semyon Frank is no coincidence. In the book under review, Frank receives the status of a philosopher in the classical sense of the word, along with Nikolai Lossky and Pavel Florensky. For them, the question of the relationship between scientific and religious knowledge

was the cornerstone of their perception of the world and the characteristics of the methods of its cognition.

Obolevich precisely structures her work, brilliantly showing how the question of cognition of the world evolves into the form of the relationship between science and religion in the Russian intellectual area, starting from the Christian period of Medieval *Rus'*. This approach also helps to elucidate the concept of "scientific knowledge" as rational and "unscientific knowledge" as religious or intuitive knowledge. In this vein, Obolevich singles out an essential pair of concepts for all Russian thought, namely "faith" and "reason."

Obolevich emphasizes that the epistemological attitude in the Russian tradition appears precisely during the period of the Christianization of *Rus'*. For a long time, monks, icon painters, and exegetes of the Bible were called philosophers. During this period, a division into two types of knowledge appears the natural path (knowledge of the material world) and *theognosia* (mystical vision of God).

On the one hand, there is a clear distinction between the essence of God and the created world or between theology and science. However, on the other hand, there is no insurmountable distance between religious faith and scientific knowledge. Cosmology is even beginning to be understood as part of theodicy and science as a special liturgy. From this, early religious thinkers tried to show the role of the rational perception of faith.

Obolevich recognizes that the relationship between faith and causality (theology and science) coexisted in the Eastern Christian tradition in two variations. First, this is the version put forward by John of Damascus and other supporters of the so-called orthodox scholasticism, i.e., that the world could be known as a field of divine action. Second, this is the position of St. Gregory Palamas and other apologists of *hesychasm*, supporters of mysticism and asceticism, namely an adequate understanding of God and the universe, which is recognized as a field of divine action is impossible. In any case, religion and science were inseparable from each other. That was a period of Christian Enlightenment when the church and religious institutions still played a key role.

Following the traditional approach of most researchers of Russian thought, Obolevich proclaims the period of reforms of Peter I and subsequent processes in Russian society aimed at the development of the secular Enlightenment as the next critical stage in the formation of the criteria for "scientific knowledge" and its difference from unscientific knowledge.

As a result, secular knowledge continued to gain ground. Heliocentrism was recognized in the 17th century. The Russian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1724. However, even this does not violate the coexistence of religion and science: the principle of methodological naturalism calls not to appeal to supernatural factors but also not to deny the existence of God. From an Orthodox point of view, science and theology have never been two

alternatives. Scientific knowledge was not a threat to faith. Science did not go into the substantiation of the existence of God, as into the truth, incomprehensible to human beings.

Russian universities, unlike Western ones, did not have the faculties of theology. Instead, the task of teaching this discipline was given to the Holy Synod. That was one of the grounds for distinguishing between secular disciplines and “mysterious knowledge.”

Obolevich rightly notes that Russian philosophy was formed on this platform. The search for foundations for the synthesis of religious and scientific knowledge, faith and reason became a key task for Russian thinkers. By the way, the author of the book aims to substantiate the thesis that, although Russian philosophers criticized Western secularization and called for the preservation of the principles of the Christian worldview (more often, the principles of Eastern Christianity with its intuitive, not rational grasp of truth), they nevertheless opposed the restriction of freedom on behalf of the institutionalized church.

Indeed, Russian philosophers have created concepts within the framework of which they called to turn to the inner religious feeling and experience, its interpretation, independent of the pressure and restrictions from social and state institutions. The key concepts were metaphysical freedom and personal responsibility directly related to it. Their ideas were about a person's free and conscious choice of Christian truths as the basis of their being. According to Russian philosophical thought, this process of cognition of religious and moral concepts through self-knowledge could lead to a conscious behavior of a person in society, a good attitude toward themselves, others, and other social institutions.

Obolevich conducts a historical and philosophical reconstruction of the ideas of Russian religious philosophers and shows that they tried to define a thoughtful form of relations between science and religion and secular and religious principles.

Peter Chaadaev was the first Russian thinker who sanctified this problem. Obolevich begins the section devoted directly to the consecration of the views of individual thinkers with an analysis of his views. It should be noted that the book brilliantly illustrates Chaadaev's views of Christianity as a valid idea linked to social issues. It was important for the thinker to synthesize secular and religious principles and create a rational combination of religious teaching with the pressing issues of the day. Namely, to develop the concept of a believing reason and highlight its specifics, designated in the *Philosophical Letters* as Christian reason. Chaadaev himself defined Christian reason as an instinct for truth. That is a consequence of the moral principle transferred from the realm of actions to one of consciousness. In essence, it was important for Chaadaev to provide a synthesis of faith and science, faith and philosophy, and faith and culture. Obolevich sees in Chaadaev a seeker of harmony, who opened the way for Vladimir Soloviev, the

defender of reason before faith and faith before reason, showing that all rational human activity is the result of the participation of divine consciousness. Without giving up its own abilities, a limited human mind should seek the support of the primary, i.e., the divine, which it is ultimately subordinated to. Only a believing scientist deserves to be called an expert: the scientific and religious ways of knowing are different, but the result is a holistic and unique synthesis of these two ways.

The fifth chapter is an extended version of Obolevich's article on science and religion in Alexey Khomyakov's philosophy. Here, the views of the Slavophiles are presented in detail. The author shows that the Slavophiles fought not against "reason" but against rationalism, which rejects the religious, spiritual basis of human existence. The opposition between science and religion is a product of scholasticism and Western Christian tradition. The author shows that there is no such opposition in the Eastern Christian tradition from the point of view of the Slavophiles. The rational method is one of the stages in the knowledge of the world, which is necessarily supplemented by a religious, intuitive grasp of the truth about the world given in revelation. Only in this format can one speak of living, positive knowledge about the holistic world and life. Ivan Kireevsky, in particular, considered the integral reason as a kind of alternative to the entire Western epistemology, qualifying it as too generalized and as the kingdom of abstract reason and deathly learning. He finds confirmation of his idea in the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Church.

The analysis of the concepts of integral life and living knowledge used by the Slavophiles becomes a reference to the subsequent section in the seventh chapter on Soloviev's "integral knowledge." Obolevich shows that Soloviev's theoretical constructions could be considered a vivid example of the rejection of not metaphysical, but of naive religious consciousness in favor of the consciousness of the philosopher. Furthermore, Obolevich emphasizes that Soloviev's concept of integral knowledge reproduces a whole complex of epistemological and ontological concepts that formed deeply affected by various epochs of cultures. Indeed, in the book under review, it is brilliantly shown that the concept of integral knowledge in Soloviev's philosophy is multivalued and multidimensional. The integrity of human cognitive abilities, the synthesis of philosophy, science and religion, the unity of reason and faith, the ability to comprehend the true being and integral life, within which there are no differences between cognitive and ontological attitudes.

The chapter *Faith and Science in Russian Literature* contains the most novel approach devoted to discussing the relationship between religious and scientific principles in Russian thought. Obolevich shows that the question of the relationship between science and religion in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy is revealed primarily from the perspective of the relationship between faith and reason, which, in reality, is key to both Russian geniuses' creativity.

Moreover Obolevich emphasizes the inadmissibility of Dostoevsky's scientific (mathematical) proof of God and the foundation of faith.

It is important to note that if from the point of view of Obolevich Dostoevsky works with the terms faith and rationality, science, and religion, then Leo Tolstoy transfers this issue into the sphere between ethical and scientific. The author gives an original interpretation of this problem, based on the analysis of the novel *War and Peace* and concludes that Tolstoy differs from other thinkers due to his unique understanding of the religious picture of the world and asserts the priority of the ethical over the scientific.

However, it should be noted that the question of the relationship between the scientific and the religious became essential for Russian philosophers in the first half of the 20th century. Obolevich firstly singles out Semyon Frank, Nikolai Lossky, and Pavel Florensky. She emphasizes the influence of Vladimir Soloviev on the majority of representatives of Russian religious philosophy of the 20th century.

Obolevich intricately constructs the narrative in the chapters devoted to the philosophers of the 20th century so that one can trace their mutual influence on each other and their constant intellectual dialogue. The main point of the philosophers' critique aimed at societal adulation with science, prevalent at this time. The philosophers argued that science alone was unable to explain the holistic picture of the world. Obolevich does not stipulate whether such a critique was intentional or not. Nevertheless, the very fact of elucidating the gaps in the philosophers' theories is precious. This point raises the question about the interaction between science and religion and not their separation. Even if science and religion complemented each other, as Frank argued, or science itself had a metaphysical-religious basis as in Lossky, some variables would undermine their rigor. Obolevich identifies Lossky's most crucial thesis that the conditions for the possibility of evolution cannot be created by evolution itself, which inevitably forces us to speak about a specific primary source, which, in turn, has a divine nature. In the ninth chapter, Obolevich shows an exciting point in the philosophy of Florensky. Having an excellent mathematical background, he understood that even the most precise of all sciences contains antinomies. In the philosophy of Florensky, Obolevich notes a line according to which the world cannot be entirely rational, and therefore, it needs something intuitive, a kind of religious experience. Also, in the chapter devoted to Frank, Obolevich meticulously shows how the philosopher built the ontological connection between science and religion. In other words, the author brilliantly illustrates the methods that Russian philosophers used in their struggle with the ideas of positivists, showing that for a holistic living knowledge of the world, a scientific method alone is not enough. Thereby, she embeds the philosophers of the 20th century into a single ideological and metaphysical field with the Russian thinkers of the 19th century.

The author continues her attack on positivism in the chapter on existential philosophy. She demonstrates how one can criticize scientism without questioning the achievements of science. Obolevich describes Nikolay Berdyaev's opposition to the "small" *ratio* to the large *Logos*, drawing attention to the slavishly objectified status of science for Berdyaev and as to Leo Shestov's position that experience is more complex than any scientific experiment. She even compares Shestov with Kant, as the two philosophers who do not threaten science but liberate faith from scientific oppression.

Obolevich pursues the same line of reconciliation further, resolving the imaginary ambivalence of Sergey Bulgakov's attitude to reason through the opposition of faith and science. In the same chapter, Obolevich introduces the reader to Alexey Losev's argument, explaining why science requires immersion in the context of faith. Naturally, the question "how could this contextualized science work" arises. Obolevich smoothly transitions to the chapter on cosmism, where "the synthetic tendency reaches its peak" and science becomes a means of a deeply spiritual view of the world. In the final chapter on neopatristics, the asymmetric representation of Russian religious thought regarding science and faith is finally developed. Having passed through severe criticism of the author, the approach of Florovsky, Evdokimov, and Nesteruk remains poignant for the book smoothly flowing into the conclusion of the entire text.

Obolevich hopes that the Western rationale helps the East cleanse religion from superstitions, and the Eastern respect for the Sacrament helps cleanse Western science of false idols. One can only hope to implement this essential peacekeeping task within the framework of Obolevich's reflection, purifying both East and West.

Professor Obolevich's book attempts to answer the key questions of the current stage of the formation of both European and Russian society through the prism of the history of Russian philosophy. In essence, the author shows to what extent the projects of Russian philosophers on the reconciliation of science and religion can be relevant in the context of solving the problem of post-secular society. After a long process of secularization, the relationship between the secular and the religious is evolving into a significant societal challenge. In this context, Obolevich's work is timely and relevant as it addresses the issue.