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SOPHIA, THE WISDOM OF GOD.
AN EASTERN CHRISTIAN POLITICAL THEOLOGY
IN THE SOPHIOLOGY OF SERGEI BULGAKOV

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Promoter

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Bibliography	III-XII
Introduction	XIII
CHAPTER I. THE HISTORY OF SOPHIA, THE WISDOM OF GOD	1
§ 1. THE SOPHIOLOGICAL CURRENTS	1
A. THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES	1
B. THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVES	5
C. THE Gnostic Movements.....	8
D. THE CHRISTIAN SOPHIOLOGIES.....	10
§ 2. THE RUSSIAN TRADITION	13
A. PRELIMINARIES	13
B. SOLOVYOV	15
CHAPTER II. THE CONCEPT OF SOPHIA IN THE THEOLOGICAL WORKS OF SERGEI BULGAKOV	19
§ 1. INITIAL FORMULATIONS	19
§ 2. THE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT	22
A. PRELIMINARIES	22
B. THE DIVINE SOPHIA AND OUSIA	24
C. THE DIVINE SOPHIA AND THE PERSONS OF THE HOLY TRINITY	27
D. THE CREATURELY SOPHIA	30
CHAPTER III. SOPHIOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY.....	36
§ 1. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOPHIOLOGY	36
A. WHERE IS “POLITICAL THEOLOGY” TO BE FOUND?	36
B. ARE SOPHIOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY ‘COMPATIBLE’?	39
C. SOPHIOLOGY - BETWEEN PANENTHEISM AND PANTHEOSIS.....	41
C. PANENTHEISM AS APOCATASTASIS, OR GOD’S LOVE FOR CREATION	45
§ 2. POLITICAL THEOLOGY	50
A. SOPHIOLOGY AS HISTORIOSOPHY.....	50
C. THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY.....	57
Conclusions.....	60.

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Introduction

Sergei Bulgakov is considered “the twentieth century’s most profound Orthodox systematic theologian”¹ and is perhaps one of the leading Russian theologians. His spiritual journey from Marxism through Idealism and in Orthodoxy is characteristic for an entire generation of Russian intelligentsia of the Silver Age. I have used the preposition “in” when describing the return to his child’s faith, since it describes best the dynamic nature of his always seeking mind. This is one of the main characteristics of his thought, namely the “unstinting intellectual honesty...unable to rest until the full implications of an adopted philosophical position have been faced”². Bulgakov’s curious mind which always analyzes the effects of his inquiries and searches for solutions is reflected in the pervasive and insightful character of his writings and in the numerous antinomies which he confronts³. Nonetheless, his philosophical and theological searches were always attuned to the latest developments in society, which is a characteristic of the Russian thinkers in general⁴. Bulgakov’s concern for the social and political which is still reflected in his later theological studies constitutes a convincing argument for a theological-political interpretation of his writings. All these fascinating features of his outstanding personality and brilliant intellect determined or I would more appropriately say attracted me to find out more about Fr. Sergei Bulgakov’s life and work.

There is a modern revived interest in Bulgakov’s thought which also encouraged me to explore his ideas and to analyze if and how can they be relevant for us today⁵. And the vast proportions, wide variety and the quality of his work were further stimuli in this sense. In addition to his great theological personality, Fr. Bulgakov was also a prophet and a visionary. He was a prophet inasmuch as he unmistakably sanctioned the social and political deviations of his time, and a visionary as he was able to see how they can be overcome in the future. One such prophetic vision was his proposal for sacramental communion between the Orthodox, Anglicans, non-Chalcedonian Christians, Roman

¹ Boris Jakim, introduction to *The Bride of the Lamb*, by Sergius Bulgakov (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), ix.

² Philip Max Walters, “The Development of the Political and Religious Philosophy of Sergei Bulgakov, 1885-1922: A Struggle for Transcendence” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 1978), 10.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 11-17. Among these antinomies which Walter calls “dilemmas” one will encounter “predetermination versus freedom,” “organicism versus individualism,” “maximalism versus minimalism,” “monism versus dualism,” or “immanence versus transcendence”. Bulgakov continued to question these paradoxical affirmations throughout his career and his vast and fertile philosophical and theological work was a product of this fruitful dialogue.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ For a comprehensive study on the reception of Bulgakov’s ideas among the modern theologians see Antoine Arjakovsky, “The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov and Contemporary Western Theology,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* Vol. 49, No. 1-2 (2005): 219-235. Among the theologians which were directly or indirectly influenced by Fr. Bulgakov or had an affinity with him Dr. Arjakovsky includes Olivier Clément, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, Karl-Gustav Jung, Paul Ricoeur, Teilhard de Chardin, Fr. Tomas Spidlik, Cardinal Hans Urs von Balthasar, Fr. Yves Congar.

Catholics, and the Episcopal Church in Protestantism⁶. As Bulgakov argued, since these Churches have preserved the priesthood the efficacy of their sacraments could not have been destroyed and therefore he “allows that unity at the Altar may in fact be a valuable precursor to dogmatic harmony”⁷.

Father Bulgakov’s intellectual evolution from Marxist political economy to philosophy and finally theology was another incentive for a theological-political analysis of his work. This was in fact the opposite path from mine own academic pursuits. While Bulgakov’s direction was from politics towards theology, mine was exactly the opposite. After having studied theology at a secondary level, I have continued with studies in international relations, and have acquired therefore an increasing interest in the relation between theology and politics. If an educated university professor renounced Marxism for Idealism to finally find a satisfying response only in theology, how could this influence the relation between religion and politics in his life and thought? Is this road unilateral or could there be a variety of legitimate paths and directions?

A tentative response would suggest that, although Bulgakov’s interest in Sophiology and theology in general grew stronger throughout his life, his former passion for economy, sociology, politics and philosophy was never fully suppressed. Very often his religious ideas were permeated by political and sociological ideas. For Bulgakov, religion was not a private act that aimed at isolating the individual from the community, but on the contrary. He also insisted that theology could be employed in many if not all other areas of expertise, being able to give a suitable advice and creative inspiration. The relation between theology and all the other sciences should not be considered as mutually excluding, but on the contrary complementary and indissoluble. Sophiology in this sense could be interpreted as a therapeutic instrument, designed to show the correct path and the aims to be followed by all sciences and arts. However, this position does not see theology so much as a science or a moral guide but rather as an art: the art of sophianic interpretation of the world. In this sense I understand Bulgakov’s Sophiology as the art of perfect communication and communion between two apparently opposite realms. It is the perfect unity between the divine and human realms, which was at first achieved in Christ and destined to be perfected in the entire creation. It is the art of distinguishing God’s presence within humanity, one that is able to proclaim us citizens of Heaven right in our present creaturely existence. It is the art of joy and creativity, the art of beauty and goodness, the true art of *theosis*.

⁶ Cf. Myroslaw Tataryn, “Sergei Bulgakov: Eastern Orthodoxy engaging the modern world,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 31/3-4 (2002): 320.

⁷ *loc. cit.*

CHAPTER I. THE HISTORY OF SOPHIA, THE WISDOM OF GOD

§ 1. THE SOPHIOLOGICAL CURRENTS

Looking back to the world history one can notice the high significance that the notion of wisdom had in the interpretations of philosophers and theologians. Most of them imagined wisdom as an ideal form of human knowledge, desired and praised by all. Wisdom was usually understood as the result of a lifetime process, involving not only the individual but the entire community and especially the elders. In this sense it represented a way to preserve and transmit the cultural values of a society from a generation to another. Others have argued that wisdom has divine origins or that it is the characteristic of gods, and therefore associated it with religious creeds and practices. Wisdom was then understood as a virtue which could be acquired only through a special relation with the divinity. In some cases it was personified in a feminine nature, as the divine consort of a god, or later as the Eternal Feminine⁸.

The theme of wisdom occupied a central place in the ancient Mediterranean world as well, as reflected in the sapiential literature of the Near East cultures, in Greek philosophy, or in the Jewish wisdom books. The link between wisdom and religious thought was also present in the Asian religious systems such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This worldwide concern suggests that wisdom has a fundamental value and it may imply that the entire regulation of life and society rests on its understanding and practice.

Today, wisdom has become a secular term, most frequently considered as a superior ability to understand and judge things. When the practical consequence of this faculty is also taken into account, the definition includes the capacity to make sound choices and to offer good advice. In this chapter I will analyze the main philosophical and religious roots of the Russian Sophiology with an emphasis on those currents which influenced or are believed to have influenced Sergei Bulgakov's Sophiology. This is necessary in order to verify the charges that at times were brought against his system, and mainly that of Gnosticism and pantheism. The chapter is divided in two main subdivisions, namely "The sophiological currents," and "The Russian tradition". In the first subdivision I will analyze the philosophical, biblical, gnostic, and theological theories and currents for which the notion of Sophia was significant. In the second one I will try to assess whether and which of these previous sophiological threads had an impact on the Russian Sophiology, with an emphasis on its founder, Vladimir Solovyov.

A. THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES

The notion of sophia has a long history in both the philosophical and theological systems. In Greek the word "sophia" underwent a progressive transformation from an

⁸ For example in the work of Goethe.

initial meaning, denoting a “sort of excellence in a particular domain that derives from experience and expertise”⁹, to a more specific one, which included “both a knowledge base and an intimate familiarity with the applications of that knowledge base”¹⁰. Sophia in this latter sense was arrogated mainly by the Sophists, who employed it in various domains, varying from mathematics to medicine¹¹.

We will find a more authentic philosophical understanding of sophia in the work of Plato, who sought to separate “the sort of genuine reflective wisdom modelled by Socrates,”¹² from the Sophist practical understanding of wisdom. As Mikhail Sergeev asserts, “the Greeks emphasized the intellectual rather than the practical aspect of Sophia”¹³. Plato will develop this approach into an “antisophistic conception of knowledge and expertise,”¹⁴ although still maintaining an ambiguous relation between knowledge (episteme) and sophia. As regards the relation between Plato and the Russian sophiologists, Mikhail Epstein agrees that:

Soloviev and his philosophical followers (sometimes strongly critical about their teacher), such as Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, and Aleksei Losev, tried to overcome or improve the one-sided idealism of Plato with notions of “religious materialism,” “concrete idealism,” or “Sophiology.” These improvements presupposed that the world of ideas must manifest and embody itself materially in the same way that Christ-God became Christ-Man.¹⁵

Neo-Platonic thinking was an even stronger influence upon Eastern Christianity during the first centuries. Its pantheistic understanding of “the world as essentially one with and emanating from the divine source of unity through the eternal ideas,”¹⁶ was

⁹ Scott Carson, “Sophia,” *Gale Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 10 (2006): 41.

¹⁰ *loc. cit.*

¹¹ *Cf. loc. cit.*

¹² *loc. cit.*

¹³ Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii and Berdiaev* (Lewiston, NY, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 29.

¹⁴ Carson, art. cit., 41.

¹⁵ Mikhail Epstein, “The Phoenix of Philosophy: On the Meaning and Significance of Contemporary Russian Thought,” *Symposion. A Journal of Russian Thought*, vol. 1 (1996), http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/ar_phoenix_philosophy.html#_ednref18 (accessed July 19, 2011).

He adds however, quoting Khoruzhii, that there is a basic distinction between the Platonic notions of objects and ideas and the Christian understanding of the relation between humanity and God. He argues that the Eastern Church Fathers taught a difference of nature between humanity and God, while maintaining their continuous communion through energies (grace). As a consequence, in the same article Epstein concludes that a “genuinely Christian philosophy would abandon such Platonic and Neo-Platonic conceptions as the total unity of an ideal world and would focus instead on existential intercourse between man and God, meditating on such spiritual processes as prayer, repentance, grace, introspection, silence, the unification of mind and heart--those acts of free will that truly mediate between the human and divine as distinct entities”. This idea would suggest that Plato’s influence upon the Russian thought resulted in a departure of the latter (at least in its Idealist form) from the authentic Christian teaching.

¹⁶ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 48.

answered by the Fathers with the introduction of the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, “according to which the divine unity creates a universe totally different from itself”¹⁷. Even so, Christian thought maintained and Christianized the neo-Platonic notion of “divine ideas” which matched its own understanding of the eternal plan of God regarding the creation of the world. This ‘eternal plan’ of God was “not inconsistent with the concepts found in the Jewish ‘wisdom’ literature, and even more concretely in the Johannine theology of the Logos”¹⁸. In its final form, this teaching was formulated in Byzantium during the hesychast controversy, by Gregory Palamas. What ought to be rejected was “the Platonic *kosmos noētos*,”¹⁹ the “world of spirit”²⁰, since this

represented an eternal reality outside of God, both impersonal and “substantial,” which would limit the absolute freedom of the creative act, exclude creation *ex nihilo*, and tend to diminish the substantial reality of visible creation by considering it only a shadow of eternal realities”²¹.

The influence of Platonism upon the Russian Intelligentsia was manifested in contrasting ways in post-Revolutionary Russia, given that “Russian communism emphasized the material and social aspects of the Platonic utopia, while religious thinkers emphasized its ideal and spiritual aspects”²². However, this divergence was not a consequence of Platonism itself, whose project was “not separation but unification of both worlds,”²³ but a result of a lack of cooperation between these two groups. Here one can draw a parallel between the unifying character of Platonism’s final project and the goal of Bulgakov’s Sophiology. As a former Marxist converted to idealism and finally to Orthodoxy he desired a reunification and to find an equilibrium between the material and the spiritual realities within Christianity. Therefore, I believe that the “ultimate project of Platonism,”²⁴ as described by Epstein, namely “the complementarity and even fusion of idealism and materialism,” could be also valid for Sophiology.

As we stated before, Plato has not distinguished clearly between *episteme* and *sophia*. This task went to Aristotle who will be the first to carry on such a definitive distinction. He differentiated, “not only between *episteme* and *sophia*, but also among those rational faculties and *phronēsis* (practical wisdom), *techne* (art, skill), and *nous* (intelligence, understanding)”²⁵. He used *sophia* not only to describe those who are

¹⁷ *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983; reprint 1999), 131.

¹⁹ *loc. cit.*

²⁰ Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 106.

²¹ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 131.

²² Mikhail Epstein, art. cit.

²³ *loc. cit.*

²⁴ *loc. cit.*

²⁵ *loc. cit.*

specialized in different areas of expertise, but also “to denote those who are ‘wise in general and not in one department’”²⁶. Because it included both the understanding of specific principles and the understanding of “the natures of the principles themselves,”²⁷ or the “knowledge of the original causes”²⁸ Aristotle concluded that *sophia* is the “most perfect modes of knowledge”²⁹.

The Stoics continued this tradition, considering “*sophia* as the perfection of human understanding (Seneca, *Epistulae* 89.4), and as consisting in a fully comprehensive and systematic grasp of the rational order in the universe”³⁰. Here we could make a parallel between the Stoic interpretation and that of Bulgakov’s sophiologic approach. Through his Sophiology Bulgakov strived to achieve a wide-sweeping worldview, although not necessarily “fully comprehensive and systematic,” based on the understanding of the sophianic principles underlying creation. Nevertheless, in his sophiologic outlook *Sophia* could be considered “the perfection of human understanding” only inasmuch as it is both human and divine. In any case, “perfection” in this latter sense should not be understood as a fixed and complete state of the human intellect, but rather as its capacity to be perfected, or “sophianized”.

The Stoics understood *sophia* as “knowledge of the divine and the human,”³¹ which they regarded as a “crucial underpinning for the goal of leading a moral life”³². In relation with this twofold stoic understanding of *sophia* we can draw another interesting parallel with Bulgakov’s description of *Sophia* as Divine and Creaturely which makes his Sophiology an integrative way of material and spiritual knowledge. Although he did not stress the ethical aspect of wisdom, Bulgakov considered Sophiology as an essential tool to understand and interpret the relation between God and humanity. For him this was a way to avoid the usual tension between dualism and monism, resolving it “in the synthesis of Divine-humanity”³³. The dualist extreme was preeminently manifested in the Gnostic separation between “Wisdom from above and Wisdom from below, representing the female or noumenal world, and the male or material world, respectively.”³⁴ Here again one can make a comparison between Gnostic dualism and the Russian liturgical tradition. We can find a reversed dualism in the Russian liturgical texts dedicated to the feasts of *Sophia*: while the mariological emphasis is related with the creaturely *Sophia*, the Christological emphasis refers to the divine one³⁵.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁷ Carson, art. cit., 42.

²⁸ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 30.

²⁹ Carson, art. cit., 42.

³⁰ *loc. cit.*

³¹ *loc. cit.*

³² *loc. cit.*

³³ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 14.

³⁴ Carson, art. cit., 42.

³⁵ Cf. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 4.

The apogee of the ancient understanding of sophia is reached by the philosophy of Plotinus, who considered it as a “pure intelligible sphere, but that which has its own becoming or life which is intelligible as well”³⁶. Here we can find an interpretation closer to that of Bulgakov, who regarded Sophia not merely as a theoretical concept, but as a living reality. Generally, Greek philosophy, with its early development of the notion of sophia can “be considered one of the sources of modern Russian Sophiology,”³⁷ together with the Holy Scripture and the Sacred Tradition.

B. THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

As a preliminary to the treatment of the biblical notion of sophia I would like to include a brief excursus on the relation between the Jewish wisdom tradition and the social and political milieu where it emerged. In the wisdom literature one can find an ancient tradition of political-theology, associated closely with “a certain political system, namely a monarchy headed by a king”³⁸. An argument in favour of this view comes from the fact that the “King of Israel himself was considered ‘a divinely appointed agent for organizing and imposing a just order upon earth which would embody the requirements of wisdom’”³⁹. This interpretation suggests that one of the functions of Jewish wisdom tradition was that of maintaining the status quo⁴⁰. Others interpreters, such as Leo Lefebure, have argued that the roots of the wisdom tradition are in fact to be found not among the upper level of the ruling class, but among the lower, ordinary people who⁴¹. In this case, wisdom was used as disapproval tool against the upper, wealthier classes. Regardless of its origin, one can already distinguish a political function of this wisdom tradition that was not only employed in theological circles but also applied in social and juridical matters⁴². In the same time it gives us a clue about how an early differentiation between the divine and human wisdom was made by this tradition. The Old Testament notion of Sophia is nonetheless dominated by the idea that “All wisdom is from the Lord, and with him it remains forever”⁴³.

The biblical word “sophia” translates the Hebrew “*Hokhmah* (also meaning ‘wisdom’)”⁴⁴. In the Old Testament, Sophia appears mainly in the Sapiential Literature, in the Proverbs, in the books of Jesus Ben-Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and in the Wisdom of Solomon. In the latter it is presented as “the emanation of God’s glory, the Holy Spirit, the immaculate mirror of his energy, nay, even the spouse of the Lord”⁴⁵. Litva states that Bulgakov’s understanding of Sophia, as a special entity related to God’s substance, is drawn

³⁶ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.* See, for example, Prov. 16:10.

⁴⁰ See. *Ibid.*, 40

⁴¹ See *loc. cit.*

⁴² See *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ Sir. 1:1

⁴⁴ Gilles Quispel, “Sophia,” *Gale Encyclopedia of Religion* 12 (2005): 8522.

⁴⁵ Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8522.

from the Sapiential Literature, mainly from the books of Proverbs and Psalms⁴⁶. Bulgakov himself makes a short review of the principal biblical passages where Sophia appears⁴⁷. He mentions that the Wisdom of God can have different meanings, such as “a quality”⁴⁸ in Proverbs chapters from 1 to 10, or “as something divine and quasi-hypostatic, though not a person”⁴⁹ in Proverbs 8: 22-31. Additionally, there is an “ontological interpretation of Wisdom”⁵⁰ as Bulgakov himself puts it, to be found in the books of Wisdom of Solomon and Wisdom of Ben-Sirach. These books are considered as “a sort of metaphysical commentary on Proverbs”⁵¹ which portray the Wisdom as “the master-workman of all,”⁵² the “pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty,”⁵³ and “the unspotted mirror of the power of God (*tou theou energies*) and the image of his goodness”⁵⁴ (Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 7). According to Maria Rigel Langella, since it presents the Wisdom as the maker of everything, this chapter⁵⁵ becomes essential in understanding Bulgakov’s theory⁵⁶. From this chapter one can learn that Wisdom engages humanity “through communication with specific individuals,”⁵⁷ and that she is active “in history and influences human affairs by guiding, teaching and saving her followers”⁵⁸.

Nevertheless, Bulgakov shows that Wisdom is not only a creative reality present with or in God, but also one which preserves and protects the world,⁵⁹ an active agent of the Providence (Wisdom of Solomon, chapters 10-12). However, Bulgakov’s intention is not to make a comprehensive exegetical analysis of these passages, and he finishes the Old Testament review concluding that this “striking image” of Wisdom would not allow any interpretation as an attribute or quality⁶⁰.

Bulgakov continues the biblical survey with a brief presentation of the New Testament occurrences. Apart from a verse which can be interpreted christologically (1 Cor. 1:24), and a few others which have no Christological connotation, most of the verses clearly present wisdom as property⁶¹. While the majority of these occurrences are of little help for Bulgakov’s argument against understanding Divine Sophia merely as one of God’s attributes, he asserts that “even this christological adaptation should be understood in the

⁴⁶ Cf. Litva, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁴⁷ See Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 26 - 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵¹ *loc. cit.*

⁵² *loc. cit.*

⁵³ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁵ i.e. chapter seven of the Wisdom of Solomon

⁵⁶ See Maria Rigel Langella, *Salvezza Come Illuminazione. Uno studio comparato di S. Bulgakov, V. Lossky, P. Evdokimov* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2000), 108.

⁵⁷ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 38.

⁵⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁹ Cf. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 27.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶¹ Cf. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 28.

light of, and in connection with, Old Testament Sophiology”⁶². An argument for this connection is also given by Stendhal, who asserts that “Wisdom literature...seems to have been studied in the school of Matthew, and related to Jesus, equating him with wisdom.”⁶³ James D. G. Dunn concludes his essay⁶⁴ with a reference to Christ’s own claim to be not merely a “teacher of wisdom,”⁶⁵ but as a teacher and minister “of God’s final will for his people Israel”⁶⁶ to be indeed the incarnate Wisdom⁶⁷.

Besides the image of Wisdom, Bulgakov discovered in the Bible “another striking figure, namely, that of the Shekinah, the Glory of God”⁶⁸. After the exposition of the biblical passages where Shekinah is described, and the interpretation of several prophetic visions related to this subject, Bulgakov concludes that in the Bible, the Glory of God “is obviously intended to represent a divine principle...it differs from God’s *personal* being, yet it is inseparably bound up with it: it is not God, but divinity”⁶⁹. In this sense Shekinah differs from the way in which Sophia is described, which at times allows for an understanding of Sophia “as either a created principle or a ‘property’ of God”⁷⁰.

After this short biblical survey Bulgakov finally concludes that “God has, or possesses, or is characterized by, Glory and Wisdom, which cannot be separated from him since they represent his dynamic self-revelation in creative action, and also in his own life”⁷¹. Furthermore, he adds that while the Old Testament remains silent about “the Face of God”, in the New Testament this is revealed “in its tri-personal nature”⁷². This allowed Bulgakov to assume that the “divine ‘substances’”⁷³ of Wisdom and Glory pertain to the Holy Trinity, and not merely to a single person, since the Bible does not allow for such an attribution⁷⁴.

Commenting on the image of the Holy Trinity as it is revealed by Scripture, Bulgakov affirmed that although such philosophical terms as “substance” are not to be found, there is nevertheless a “revealed teaching on the life of the triune God”⁷⁵ which can be

⁶² *Ibid.* 29.

⁶³ Krister Stendahl, *The school of St. Matthew, and its use of the Old Testament* (Doctoral dissertation, Upsalla, 1954), 142.

⁶⁴ James D. G. Dunn, “Jesus: Teacher of Wisdom or Wisdom Incarnate?” in *Where shall wisdom be found? Wisdom in the bible, in the church and the contemporary world*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 75-92.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁷ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁶⁸ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 29. I have added this short excursus on the biblical figure of Shekinah since it is crucial for Bulgakov’s “conception of the self-revelation of the Godhead in the double figure of Wisdom-Glory, which corresponds to the dyad of the Word and of the Spirit” in ⁶⁸ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 50.

⁶⁹ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 30.

⁷⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷² *loc. cit.*

⁷³ *loc. cit.*

⁷⁴ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

distinguished in its content. As Bulgakov also noticed, most of this material was unfortunately disregarded by the theologians in the process of development of the Trinitarian dogma. However, it is exactly in this point that John Milbank discovers the genius of the Russian sophiologists. Their originality was “to link the under-unexplored matrix of material in the Bible concerning wisdom with the new issues posed by modernity concerning nature, humanity and evil”⁷⁶.

C. THE GNOSTIC MOVEMENTS

The Gnostic tradition continued earlier beliefs in which Sophia occupied a significant role. This personified entity was interpreted in various ways, but was almost constantly presented “as the manifestation of divine insight”⁷⁷. Her role was to make divinity manifest in the world “as the light of god with us and in us”⁷⁸.

Stemming most probably from an Egyptian or Canaanite tradition, which assumed that a goddess is always in the face of the divinity “to please and entertain”⁷⁹ later Jewish traditions considered that God is either a female or that he has a wife⁸⁰. These ideas were confirmed by archaeological evidence in form of inscriptions which conveyed such names as Asherah or Anat Jahu, to designate the spouse of YHWH⁸¹. From Judaism this idea was taken further by the Gnostics.

Simon Magus, or the Magician was considered to be “the father of all heresy”⁸². He associated Sophia with the Holy Spirit, and considered her a divine figure having the role of divine consort⁸³. Being “the first Idea of God”⁸⁴ and “the spouse of the Lord”⁸⁵ she came down on earth “to produce the angels and powers that created the world”⁸⁶. After this initial cosmological act those powers “overwhelmed her and forced her reincarnation again and again”⁸⁷. Besides her initial role in cosmogony, she had a permanent and effective presence on earth afterward, as a result of her reincarnation. This allowed Simon to identify her with a Phoenician prostitute, rehabilitated by him and made his ‘divine’ consort, while he declared himself to be ‘the messiah’⁸⁸. The original trait of his teaching

⁷⁶John Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy: the New Theological Horizon,” http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers/Milbank_SophiologyTheurgy.pdf (accessed July 4, 2011).

⁷⁷ Marvin Meyer, “Gnosticism, Gnostics, and *the Gnostic Bible*,” in *The gnostic Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, (London & Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁹ Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8522-8523.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 8523.

⁸¹ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁸² Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, (Boston, MA: Beacon, ³2001), 103.

⁸³ Cf. Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8523.

⁸⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁸⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁸⁶ *loc. cit.*

⁸⁷ *loc. cit.*

⁸⁸ Cf. Jonas, *op. cit.*, 103.

was thus, to propose a feminine divine principle as “a means of redemption for all who believed in them both”⁸⁹.

“The Apocryphon of John”, a Gnostic text written in Alexandria, presents Sophia as “the last of the spiritual entities to come into existence”⁹⁰. Her thought “to make the likeness appear out of herself”⁹¹ determined her collapse into the cosmos where she fought “against the demiurge in her struggle to make man spiritually conscious”⁹². However, this episode called “the ‘suffering of the Sophia,’”⁹³ appears to be merely emotional when compared to the “substantial’ role it plays in the Valentinian system”⁹⁴.

Valentinus was one of the most preeminent Gnostic theologians, although his writings were considered rather mystical⁹⁵. In the second century BC he founded in Rome⁹⁶ one of the most influential Gnostic sects, which will become widespread all over the Roman Empire. According to his teaching, the world was divided into “a phenomenal world and a spiritual world, the Pleroma”⁹⁷. In the spiritual world there were 30 Aeons who emanated from the Father in pairs, the last of these being Sophia⁹⁸. Influenced by the Christian ideas, Valentinus taught that Sophia’s fault was her disdainful wish “to penetrate the mystery of ultimate being,”⁹⁹ which caused her fall, but also her redemption by Christ¹⁰⁰. After her fall “into passion and disgrace”¹⁰¹ the matter was formed and a Demiurge appeared (The Old Testament YHWH), “who shaped matter into our world”¹⁰². This episode of creation by the fall of Sophia appears in almost every Gnostic cosmogonic story, and is considered¹⁰³ to be the main difference between the Christian and the Gnostic descriptions “of Christ as Sophia”¹⁰⁴.

The Gnostics provide us with the image of a dual Sophia, “as the living entity which symbolized the integration of divine perfections and the sinful world of matter”¹⁰⁵. Valentinus taught about two manifestations of the wisdom: “a higher wisdom called Sophia and a lower wisdom called Achamoth”¹⁰⁶. Sergeev affirms that although the Russian sophiologists were not interested in the corrupted side of Sophia, they were still influenced

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 104.

⁹⁰ Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8523.

⁹¹ Jonas, *op. cit* 200.

⁹² Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8523.

⁹³ Jonas, *op. cit*, 202.

⁹⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁹⁵ Cf. G. W. MacRae, “Valentinus,” *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 14 (2003): 374.

⁹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 373.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁹⁸ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁹⁹ Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8523.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *loc. cit.*

¹⁰¹ MacRae, “Valentinus,” 374.

¹⁰² *loc. cit.*

¹⁰³ Cf. Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 32.

¹⁰⁴ *loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Meyer, “Gnosticism,” 5.

by the tendency to portray her “as a dual entity”¹⁰⁷. He contends that this “sophiological temptation”¹⁰⁸ was manifested in the writings of Solovyov, Bulgakov or Berdiaev, who “demonized Sophia when trying to understand the creation of the sinful world by the all-good and omnipotent Creator”¹⁰⁹. We will later analyze in which measure Bulgakov was influenced by Gnosticism in constructing his “dual” Sophia and whether he demonized Sophia or not when constructing his cosmology and theodicy.

D. THE CHRISTIAN SOPHIOLOGIES

Besides the Gnostic schools, Sophia continued to be present in the theological and philosophical mainstream circles. She is present in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and Origen, standing as another name for the Divine Logos, or Christ¹¹⁰. For Origen, Christ is the redeemer of the human nature, as He restored the possibility to acquire wisdom to every human person¹¹¹. Stating that the possession of wisdom was “the goal of human life,”¹¹² which was nonetheless impossible before Christ, Origen seems to connect wisdom with the notion of grace. This association seems to be supported by Augustine, who did not perceive wisdom merely as one of the “human virtues acquired by one’s own efforts,”¹¹³ but as “a precious divine gift achieved as a result of the super-natural act of God’s grace”¹¹⁴. In his treatise “On the Trinity”, after quoting the biblical statements that “God is love” and “God is light,” Augustine adds that God is also Wisdom, “the Father is wisdom, the Son is wisdom, and the Holy Spirit is wisdom, and together not three wisdoms, but one wisdom: and because in the Trinity to be is the same as to be wise, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are one essence”¹¹⁵. Here Augustine apparently relates the notions of love, light and wisdom with the essence of God. We can find the same treatment of wisdom in connection with God’s grace and God’s essence in Bulgakov’s Sophiology.

The symbol of Sophia as expressed in Holy Scriptures and in the writings of the Fathers of the Church was also conveyed through different liturgical texts and icons, and by the architectonic legacy of the churches built in the name of Sophia, and “dedicated to Christ, but to Christ in the aspect of *Sophia* – to Christ-*Sophia*”¹¹⁶. Nonetheless the symbol remained a mystery, as it was not elucidated by the Byzantine scholars¹¹⁷. This problem was disregarded in Rome as well, and the only place where it reached a fertile soil was the

¹⁰⁷ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 34.

¹⁰⁸ *loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁰ Carson, *art. cit.*, 42.

¹¹¹ Cf. Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 46.

¹¹² *loc. cit.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 47

¹¹⁴ *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁵ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, ed. Philip Schaff, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 3. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887).

¹¹⁶ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 2.

¹¹⁷ *loc. cit.*

newly baptized Russia, where “this mysterious and as yet undisclosed revelation of *Sophia* enshrined in the hieroglyphics of ecclesiastical architecture,”¹¹⁸ was later to be revealed to the world.

In the West the idea of the *Jungfrau Sophia* appeared in the seventeenth century Germany¹¹⁹ in the writings of Jacob Boehme, and is considered to be “the first in the history of Christian thought”¹²⁰. Boehme was a German mystic and theologian, regarded by Bulgakov as “perhaps the greatest genius among German thinkers”¹²¹. His ideas together with those of Eckhart represent “the secret dynamic of the philosophy of Hegel and Schelling, of F. Baader and the romanticists”¹²². Nikolai Berdyaev appreciates Boehme’s teaching of Sophia to be “of genius”¹²³ and totally original¹²⁴. Although there is agreement on Boehme’s brilliance and originality, the influence of his writings upon the Russian Sophiology is uncertain. Berdyaev assumes that Boehme’s Sophiology has influenced Solovyov, the father of Russian Sophiology, “imperceptibly and unconsciously...since Boehme is the source of the teaching about Sophia,”¹²⁵ although Solovyov himself was “quite hesitant to allude to him”¹²⁶. Bulgakov claims that although Boehme’s works were read by the Russian Freemasons and “had a lasting influence on Russian thought,”¹²⁷ the “modern Russian teaching on Sophia does not derive from these sources, but from holy tradition”¹²⁸. The question remains if Bulgakov includes Solovyov too in the notion of ‘modern Russian Sophiology’.

An even greater disagreement appears in relation to Boehme’s own teaching orthodoxy. While Berdyaev considers Boehme's Sophiology “profoundly and completely Christian,”¹²⁹ Bulgakov is highly critical. He charges Boehme for being, first of all excessively rationalistic, albeit his rationalism was of a different, mystical type¹³⁰. Bulgakov also argues that Boehme’s conception of God renders everything intelligible, explained and rationalized, leaving any room for antinomies, and thus placing him closer to the modern

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁰ Nikolai Berdyaev, “Studies concerning Jacob Boehme: Etude II. The Teaching about Sophia and the Androgyne. J. Boehme and the Russian Sophiological Current,” trans. Fr. S. Janos, *Put* 21 (1930), http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1930_351.html#br (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹²¹ *loc. cit.*

¹²² *loc. cit.*

¹²³ Nikolai Berdyaev, “Concerning Sophiology: (ArchPriest Sergii Bulgakov. Jacob's Ladder. Concerning Angels),” trans. Fr. S. Janos, *Journal Put*, no. 16 (1929), http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1929_343.html (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹²⁴ See Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹²⁵ *loc. cit.*

¹²⁶ *loc. cit.*

¹²⁷ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 7.

¹²⁸ *loc. cit.*

¹²⁹ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹³⁰ Cf. Serge Boulgakov, *La Lumière sans déclin*, trans. Constantin Andronikof (Laussane: L'Age d'Homme, 1990), 160.

theosophy¹³¹. Bulgakov also accuses him to present an emanationist system, resembling the anti-creationist theory of Plotinus¹³². Boehme's philosophical type resembles the monistic pantheism of Spinoza, although his character is more dynamic than that of Spinoza¹³³. All these issues are supplemented by Boehme's problematic rejection of matter, the flesh representing for him only a mask, a bark or a scale which is bound to disappear, excluding therefore any possibility of resurrection or transfiguration of matter¹³⁴. This tendency has consequences on Boehme's position on sex and his reluctant attitude towards marriage¹³⁵. The general ascetic inclination of Boehme's system finally becomes a refusal or negation of the world itself¹³⁶.

As regards Boehme's Sophiology, Bulgakov criticizes his androgynic theory which holds that the human sexual differentiation was caused by the Fall, the woman being created for man after he separated from the Jungfrau Sophia, the abstract principle of Wisdom¹³⁷. As Bulgakov further remarks, Sophia for Boehme is generally not a revelation of the Divinity, a theophany, but an 'auto-phany' which constitutes a moment of development in God himself¹³⁸. Boehme's negative attitude regarding femininity determined him to negate the immaculate character of the Mother of God, rejecting therefore the veneration of Mary¹³⁹. Christ was not born from the human Virgin, but only from the seed of the Jungfrau Sophia, leading Boehme to a monophysite and docetic conception¹⁴⁰.

Berdyayev blames Bulgakov for giving "a quite inaccurate explanation of the teachings of Boehme, especially the part concerning Boehme's teaching about Sophia"¹⁴¹ and for being "very unjust to him" in his book *Svet Nevechernii*¹⁴². One of the reasons for this sharp criticism can be Bulgakov's desire "to attain a purified theological teaching about Sophia, in accord with tradition"¹⁴³. Berdyayev seems to offer a less severe account of Boehme's ideas. He asserts that

The fall through sin is also a loss of his Sophia-Virgin, which has flown off to the heavens. Upon the earth instead has arisen the feminine, Eve. Man grieves with longing for his lost Sophia, his lost virginal state, the wholeness and chasteness...In

¹³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 160-161.

¹³² Cf. *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 163.

¹³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 167-168.

¹³⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³⁶ Cf. *loc. cit.*

¹³⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 249.

¹³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 249-250.

¹³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁴⁰ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴¹ Berdyayev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹⁴² The original version of *La Lumière sans déclin*.

¹⁴³ Berdyayev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

his teaching about androgyny Boehme stands in the same line, which is to be found in the "Symposium" of Plato, and the Kabbala¹⁴⁴.

Berdyayev also underlines the fact that Boehme's Sophia is essentially pure, representing "the integral wholeness and chasteness of man, the image and likeness of God in man"¹⁴⁵. This trait distinguishes Boehme from Solovyov, characterized in Berdyayev's view by "a great murkiness in his sophianic settings"¹⁴⁶. In Boehme's teaching

the theme of Sophia is a theme about the possibility of such a transfiguration [of the creature]. Boehme was not a pantheist, but he denied that a transcendent chasm exists between God and the creation, between God and the world. He did not think the world process to be something completely external to God and having no sort of relation to the inner life of the Divine Trinity.

The most important contribution of Boehme's Sophiology, one that has infused the Russian Sophiology as well, was its success to find a "co-unifying principle"¹⁴⁷ between God and humanity. This mediatory sophianic principle allowed to "overcome the hopeless dualism and the transcendent chasm"¹⁴⁸ that separated them, and to oppose "the process of godlessness and neutralisation of the creaturely world, the cosmos"¹⁴⁹.

From Germany Boehme's influence spread across the continent and particularly in England, influencing such personalities as the Anglican priest and Christian mystic John Pordage, who wrote various treatises on Sophia,¹⁵⁰ and the influential French philosopher Louis Claude de Saint-Martin¹⁵¹. The most excellent of his inheritors is considered however, the German philosopher and theologian Franz Xaver von Baader, "the greatest and most remarkable of the Boehmists and the most churchly in his world-outlook"¹⁵².

§ 2. THE RUSSIAN TRADITION

A. PRELIMINARIES

In his study Gilles Quispel considers that Sophiology was exported from Germany to Russia, manifesting a direct influence over the Russian Freemasons and the Russian

¹⁴⁴ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁵ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁶ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁷ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁸ *loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 6.

¹⁵¹ Berdyayev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹⁵² *loc. cit.*

sophiologists, such as Vladimir Solovyov and Sergei Bulgakov¹⁵³. Unlike Quispel, Berdyaev¹⁵⁴ and Bulgakov himself¹⁵⁵ prefer to consider the Russian Sophiology not as a development of the German one, but as a living aspect of the holy tradition of the Church, in perfect continuity with the Byzantine legacy, although expressing a particular trait of the Russian soul as well.

We can find these ideas developed by Nicholas Zernov, a Russian theologian and founder, together with Bulgakov and others, of the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius in Oxford. He dedicated a chapter of his book¹⁵⁶ to perform a detailed analysis of the Russian idea of Divine Wisdom. He saw Haghia Sophia or the Holy Wisdom as the “fundamental conviction of the Russian religious mind,”¹⁵⁷ namely “the recognition of the potential holiness of the matter, the unity and sacredness of the entire creation, and man’s call to participate in the divine plan for its ultimate transfiguration”¹⁵⁸.

Zernov also recalls the artistic manifestation of Sophia in the Russian Church, through icons which “expressed in a figurative way”¹⁵⁹ the popular belief:

that the cosmos did not merely reflect the Heavenly Glory, but had a potential personality and therefore could participate in the designs of its Triune Maker. Matter was conceived as spirit-bearing, as a living and responsive partner in the great drama of the fall and redemption.¹⁶⁰

We will later see how these intuitions of the Russian tradition regarding the sacredness of the matter and the unity of creation and its personality influenced Bulgakov’s notion of Creaturely Sophia. Concerning the artistic expression of Sophia, Zernov points out the churches dedicated to St. Sophia, among which the eleventh century cathedrals of Novgorod and Kiev “still represent some of the greatest achievements in ecclesiastical architecture in the country”¹⁶¹. However, unlike Bulgakov who maintained that these churches were associated with the Logos, Christ – Sophia,¹⁶² as a continuation of the Byzantine tradition, Zernov asserts that they were linked with the Theotokos - the Mother

¹⁵³ Cf. Gilles Quispel, *art. cit.*, 8523.

¹⁵⁴ Berdyaev notes: “essentially between the teachings of J. Boehme about Sophia and the Russian teaching about Sophia, as it was formulated among us, there is a difference”. In Berdyaev, “Studies concerning Jacob Boehme”.

¹⁵⁵ Commenting on the Western Sophiology, Bulgakov states that “it cannot altogether be accepted by modern Orthodox Sophiology, though this latter must give its due” in Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ See Nicolas Zernov, “The Divine Wisdom,” in *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), 283-308.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁵⁸ Zernov, *op. cit.*, 285.

¹⁵⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁶¹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁶² Cf. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 2.

of God, a sign which showed the maturity and creativity of the Russian religious thought¹⁶³. The departure from the Byzantine model was required in order to bring together Mother Earth¹⁶⁴, the ancient pagan belief widely circulated among the peasants, and the Christian veneration of the Mother of God¹⁶⁵. This connection, described by Dostoevsky “as one of the deep-rooted convictions of the Russian Christians,”¹⁶⁶ was for others a cause of scandal.

B. SOLOVYOV

While Dostoevsky’s desire to expose the insights of the Russian soul was manifested mainly in literature, thus being remote from any academic rationalization, his friend Vladimir Solovyov, was the first to attempt a “scholarly exposition of the Sophianic interpretation of Christianity”¹⁶⁷. Bulgakov, in his turn, recognizes him as “the first Russian sophiologist”¹⁶⁸. Solovyov was a complex spirit. He was a “philosopher, poet, polemical essayist, and literary critic,”¹⁶⁹ but also a “mystic and seer”¹⁷⁰ and “an original theologian”¹⁷¹. His personal spiritual evolution passing through a “naive Orthodox childhood, rebellious atheistic youth and then theorizing religious adulthood”¹⁷² can be reckoned as representative for some of his followers, such as Losskii, Berdyaev and Bulgakov. + Zernov – synthesis of theology&philo&science

Solovyov considered Sophia “a personal friend and a trusted teacher. For her sake he was ready to bear any sacrifice; in her service he found the final purpose of life”¹⁷³. This is not an allegory, but a personal, yet mysterious understanding of Sophia as “the Eternal Feminine, the Queen of Heavens or the Eternal Wisdom of God,”¹⁷⁴ whom Solovyov encountered during three visions, which are recollected in his poem “Three Meetings”¹⁷⁵. His theoretical expression of the doctrine of the Wisdom of God¹⁷⁶, still bearing witness of

¹⁶³ Cf. Zernov, op. cit., 286.

¹⁶⁴ For a detailed analysis of this myth see Joanna Hubbs, “Reconstructing the Russian Great Goddess: Mother Earth,” in *Mother Russia: the feminine myth in Russian culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 52-87.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Zernov, op. cit., 286.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁶⁸ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 9.

¹⁶⁹ Piama Gaidenko, “Solov’ëv (Solovyov), Vladimir Sergeevich,” trans. Boris Jakim, *Gale Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 9 (2006): 122.

¹⁷⁰ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 68.

¹⁷¹ Zernov, op. cit., 290.

¹⁷² Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 68.

¹⁷³ Zernov, op. cit., 290.

¹⁷⁴ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 69.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. *loc. cit.*

¹⁷⁶ For more information about Solovyov’s Sophiology see: Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov, *Divine Sophia: the wisdom writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Robert Slesinski, “Sophiology as a Metaphysics of Creation According to V. S. Solov’ëv,” in *Vladimir Solov’ëv: reconciler and polemicist*, ed. William Peter van den Bercken, Manon de Courten and Evert van der Zweerde (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 131-185; Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov’ëv*,

his mystical visions, appears for the first time in Solovyov's *Lectures on Divine Humanity*. His desire was "to conceptualize this mythological character by making it the foundation for a philosophical system"¹⁷⁷. In his *Lectures*, Sophia is understood as:

the eternal ideal prototype of humanity, as the world soul actively engaged in actualizing this prototypical idea, and as the fully developed divine-human organism. She is portrayed both as the active principle of the creative process and as its realized goal, the kingdom of God, the society of those participating in Divine humanity¹⁷⁸

For Solovyov, Christ and the Church represent "the ultimate manifestation of Sophia, the wisdom of God"¹⁷⁹. We can find at Solovyov a first attempt in the Russian religious thought to place Sophia in a Christian setting. However, Bulgakov considers Solovyov's Sophiology to be "undoubtedly syncretistic,"¹⁸⁰ presenting Gnostic and Western sophiological influences, while he recognizes in the same time the influence that Solovyov's thought manifested in his transition "From Marxism to Idealism,"¹⁸¹ and back to the Orthodox Church¹⁸².

Despite acknowledging Solovyov's "enormous merits in the setting of the problem,"¹⁸³ of Sophiology, Berdyaev admits that "it is regrettably [sic] impossible to say, that his teaching concerning Sophia was entirely chaste and renunciatory...[since] He allowed of a great murkiness in his sophianic settings"¹⁸⁴. Solovyov's fascination for Sophia was owed to her "features of feminine charm"¹⁸⁵. Although

In feminine beauty there is indisputably a glint of the Divine world...the woeful problem is in this, that with Vl. Solov'ev the image of Sophia becomes twofold, and deceptive images of Sophia appear for him.¹⁸⁶

As Berdyaev argues, for Solovyov Sophia was "totally and exclusively cosmic"¹⁸⁷. He did not perceive her "through a contemplation of the Divine Wisdom"¹⁸⁸ and she did "not possess,

Bulgakov, Losskii and Berdiaev (Lewiston, NY, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 75-89.

¹⁷⁷ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 69.

¹⁷⁸ Boris Jakim, introduction to *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, by Vladimir Solovyov, trans. Peter Zouboff, ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne, 1995), xiv.

¹⁷⁹ Sergeev, *Sophiology...*, 83.

¹⁸⁰ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 9.

¹⁸¹ This is the title of Bulgakov's 1903 book, a collection of essays reflecting his idealistic position in which he also asserts Dostoevsky's influence upon his thought.

¹⁸² Cf. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 10.

¹⁸³ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹⁸⁴ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹⁸⁵ *loc. cit.*

¹⁸⁶ *loc. cit.*

¹⁸⁷ *loc. cit.*

as with Boehme and Pordage, a direct relation to the Holy Trinity”¹⁸⁹. This is why Berdyaev concludes that “the Russian theological sophianism is certainly very distinct from the poetic sophianism,” the originator of which was Vladimir Solovyov. Andrew Louth recognizes that while Solovyov’s influence upon Bely, Blok or Florensky can be recognized, “the lines of communication between Solov’ev and Bulgakov are complex”¹⁹⁰.

It remains to be further assessed whether Solovyov’s Sophiology together with his ideas of Divine-humanity, theandry, or theantrophy, (*Bogochelovechestvo*) and total-unity was simply continued or totally transformed in the work of Sergei Bulgakov. Berdyaev considered that Bulgakov was “far removed from the sophianism of Vl. Solov’ev”¹⁹¹ and that he did not have any connection with the sophianism of Boehme. As stated before he also thought that the Russian theological Sophiology, which had been established by Pavel Florensky and Bulgakov himself, was clearly different from the poetic sophianism of Alexander Blok or Andrei Bely. Louth however, considers that Bulgakov resembles Solovyov in the treatment of Sophia as “an expression of mediation,”¹⁹² and also in identifying it with “that in virtue of which the three Persons are consubstantial,”¹⁹³ namely God’s substance, essence or *Ousia*. Moreover, Louth finds another common trait of Solovyov and Bulgakov in their common reference to the Russian churches of Holy Wisdom and the conceiving of Sophia not theoretically but as an experience¹⁹⁴. However, unlike Solovyov, who experienced her as a young beautiful girl, Bulgakov discerned her in the transfigured nature and in art¹⁹⁵.

With the exception of Berdyaev’s opinion, Solovyov’s influence upon Bulgakov is undisputed. But the mode and degree of such an influence are still open to discussion. Even Berdyaev’s assertion was made in 1930, when Bulgakov had already published his theological “little trilogy”¹⁹⁶. The things are further complicated by the considerable difference between Bulgakov’s early writings and those of maturity. In this regard Berdyaev evokes Bulgakov’s “greatest efforts to attain a purified theological teaching about Sophia, in accord with tradition”¹⁹⁷. Louth’s remarks can be helpful in assessing the general resemblance between Solovyov and Bulgakov, while regarding Solovyov’s influence upon Bulgakov the only explicit affirmation is related with the latter’s understanding of Sophia as *Ousia*¹⁹⁸. Louth himself recognizes that while Solovyov’s influence upon Bely, Blok or

¹⁸⁸ *loc. cit.*

¹⁸⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁹⁰ Andrew Louth, “Wisdom and the Russians: The Sophiology of Fr Sergei Bulgakov” in *Where shall wisdom be found?*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 175.

¹⁹¹ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹⁹² Louth, “Wisdom and the Russians...”, 176.

¹⁹³ *loc. cit.*

¹⁹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁹⁵ See *loc. cit.*

¹⁹⁶ This includes *The Burning Bush* (1927), *The Friend of the Bridegroom* (1927), and *Jacob’s Ladder* (1929).

¹⁹⁷ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Louth, “Wisdom and the Russians...”, 176.

Florensky can be recognized, “the lines of communication between Solov’ev and Bulgakov are complex”¹⁹⁹.

Among all these sometimes contradictory ideas one thing is certain. While Bulgakov could have taken up from Solovyov such concepts as “Godmanhood,” or “Divine humanity,” “total-unity,” or “Sophia,” it is certain that in his later career he struggled significantly to “Christianize” these concepts and develop their potential in his own dogmatic treatises. Even so, one can argue that Solovyov still had an indirect influence upon Bulgakov’s later works, inasmuch as the latter “remained a philosopher even when he turned entirely to theology”²⁰⁰. In this sense Berdyaev’s remark is cogent when he states that “Fr. S. Bulgakov desires to be a theologian, and not a theosophist. In this is the difficulty of his position”²⁰¹. We will further analyze his “great trilogy” in order to assess in what degree his project succeeded in this sense.

In the end of this chapter we are already able to notice that Bulgakov’s Sophiology, even in its early philosophical structure, was far removed from the ideas of Sophia as present in Gnosticism or pantheism. Nonetheless, these intuitions will be further detailed in the next chapters of our study. In the same time, we can appreciate Bulgakov’s contribution in the rediscovery of the biblical sophiological themes, together with the revival of different sophiological motives of the Fathers, in his intention to give his Sophiology a pure Christian foundation and content. We will examine in what measure he succeeded to do this in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175

²⁰⁰ V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2003), 896.

²⁰¹ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme...*

CHAPTER II. THE CONCEPT OF SOPHIA IN THE THEOLOGICAL WORKS OF SERGEI BULGAKOV

§ 1. INITIAL FORMULATIONS

In this second chapter I will attempt to give a brief account of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov's Sophiology, focusing mainly on those themes that were considered ambiguous and sometimes even heretical and which in the same time are important for a theological-political appraisal of his work. In this sense, while it constitutes an essential part of this study, the chapter has also a functional role. First of all it aims to develop the intuitions of the first chapter by evaluating the influences of previous sophiological currents on Bulgakov's later Sophiology. And secondly, it lays the foundation for the developing of these themes into a theological-political treatise of Sophiology, in the next chapter. The chapter will follow the structure of the main themes of Sophiology as presented in Bulgakov's works and particularly in his outline of Sophiology *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*.

As shown in the previous chapter, Bulgakov's philosophical outlook was significantly influenced by both Solovyov and Florensky²⁰². Yet, as Zenkovsky argues, their influence was distinct. While Bulgakov's metaphysics was deeply imbued with Solovyov's ideas,²⁰³ and particularly with the "basic idea of 'total-unity,'"²⁰⁴ it was Florensky's version of Sophiology that "first captured Bulgakov's mind"²⁰⁵.

Bulgakov employed it as an interpreting lens and applied it to his own ideas and beliefs, finally developing it into his own theological world-view. His desire was to purify the concept from any Gnostic influences, and to propose therefore a fully Christian concept of Sophia²⁰⁶. However, Bulgakov considered his undertaking not as something original and unprecedented, but as a continuation and a re-evaluation of the tradition of the Church, "a call neither to superstitious idolatry, nor to rationalistic contempt, but rather to creative understanding and development"²⁰⁷. For him Sophiology represented not a new dogma, nor a heresy "tinged with the peculiar exotic Oriental flavor of 'gnosis,'"²⁰⁸ but "a dogmatic *metanoia*, nothing less than a change and a renewal of human hearts"²⁰⁹. In this sense Sophiology was connected with the latest evolutions in society, dealing "with questions of

²⁰² Cf. V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2003), 897.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 896.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 894. Bulgakov notes: "Philosophy inevitably strives toward the Absolute, toward *total-unity*" in *Svet nevecherni*, 76. Quoted in Zenkovsky, *A History...*, 896. Zenkovsky states that "this brief note contains the key to Bulgakov's philosophic searchings" Zenkovsky, *A History...*, 896, n. 3.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 897.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Barbara Newman, "Sergius Bulgakov and the Theology of Divine Wisdom," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1978): 39.

²⁰⁷ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 5.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 13. The italics belong to the author.

practical everyday Christianity in our own time”²¹⁰ and highlighting the responsibility of the Church in the emergence of different regretful developments.

Sophiology was advanced in a structured way for the first time in Bulgakov’s 1912 work *Philosophy of Economy*²¹¹, which was in fact the first part of his doctoral thesis²¹². His desire was to present Orthodoxy in a way that would fit the latest developments in science and technology²¹³ in an era characterized by Bulgakov as “a time of decaying dogmatic self-consciousness, when religion is most frequently reduced to ethics, merely tinged with pietistic ‘sufferings’”²¹⁴. In order to achieve this goal, it was important for him to “set out the *ontological and cosmological* side of Christianity, which is partly revealed in the philosophy of economy”²¹⁵. But to realize this on the basis of “Kantianized and metaphysically emptied theology”²¹⁶ seemed impossible, and so Bulgakov turned to “the religious ontology, cosmology, and anthropology of Saints Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssus and other fathers of the church”²¹⁷. In the *Philosophy of Economy* the notion of Sophia “was an elusive concept that Bulgakov took care never to define precisely: Sophia consisted of the totality of eternal ideas that confronted God at the creation”²¹⁸. Nevertheless, this does not lead to a static image of Sophia, who is responsible only with creation, but to a dynamic one in which she becomes part of the everyday life. In this sense Sophia is a “constant flux, it is joyousness, it is play, it is wisdom, it is love”²¹⁹. This initial formulation of Sophiology was less theological and more philosophical, being correlated with the economic and social spheres²²⁰.

Bulgakov continued his study in Political Economy with a specific “understanding of the nature of the world and of man, i.e. a particular cosmology and anthropology,”²²¹ developed in his philosophic work *Svet nevechernii* (The Unfading Light), published in 1917. Bulgakov began this study with an analysis of the apophatic theology of Platon, Aristotle, Plotin, the Alexandrian and Cappadocian fathers, Jean Scot Erigène and Nicholas of Cusa, and the Jewish and German mystics²²². Bulgakov found a tension between the “absolute no” of the apophatic theology which did not allow for a positive doctrine of

²¹⁰ *loc. cit.*

²¹¹ Cf. James Pain, introduction to *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), xiii.

²¹² Cf. Constantin Andronikof, preface to *Bibliographie des Oeuvres de Serge Boulgakov*, by Kliment Naumov (Paris: Institute d’Études Slaves, 1984), 15.

²¹³ Cf. Pain, *op. cit.*, xiii.

²¹⁴ Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 37.

²¹⁵ *loc. cit.*

²¹⁶ *loc. cit.*

²¹⁷ *loc. cit.*

²¹⁸ Catherine Evtuhov, introduction to *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, by Sergei Bulgakov (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 10-11.

²¹⁹ *loc. cit.*

²²⁰ Cf. *loc. cit.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²²² Cf. Andronikof, *op.cit.*, 18.

God and the world, and the “absolute yes” of faith and religious experience in which humanity recognizes its Creator. This is why he believed that through faith, the relative can contemplate the Absolute, and as such can find itself in the Absolute, because outside the Absolute there is nothing²²³. But to know the Absolute means that a relation has to be established and this was carried out through creation. Here the figure of Sophia is introduced, “as the intelligible basis of the world”²²⁴. It implies that the basis of creation cannot be “simply ‘a thing in itself’ but belongs to God, is divine wisdom, and cannot be apprehended apart from God”²²⁵.

While Bulgakov did his best to prove the orthodoxy of the notion of Sophia, it was its universal character that contributed more to the success of his social philosophy as outlined in *Svet nevechernii*²²⁶. Even if she was already present in the Bible and in the writings of the Fathers, the notion of Divine Sophia “was much broader than Christianity; it had roots in Gnosticism and Judaism and parallels in Platonism (the World Soul); indeed, the sense of elusive and beautiful divinity would not be alien to a Muslim or even a Buddhist”²²⁷.

Describing the early formulations of Bulgakov’s Sophiology, Andronikof argues that between 1912 and 1935 these were performed in a rather disjointed and unfinished way, although presenting a continuous improvement²²⁸. In *Svet nevechernii* his quest was still ambiguous, mainly because Bulgakov employed the term “hypostasis,” even though placed between quotation marks, to describe Sophia as a ‘fourth hypostasis’²²⁹. While this particular way of using theological terms attracted the condemnations of some ecclesiastical authorities, the incident was later elucidated by Bulgakov in his essay ‘*Ipostas’ i Ipostasnost’: Scholia k Svetu Nevechernemu*’²³⁰. Moreover, it compelled Bulgakov to write a systematic treatise of Sophiology, namely *The Wisdom of God: A Brief Summary of Sophiology*²³¹.

While Bulgakov’s initial Sophiology was still elusive and in continuous search for new formulations, his mature Sophiology presented an entirely Christian understanding.

²²³ Cf. *Ibid.* This idea resumes well Bulgakov’s notion of ‘panentheism’ which will be further developed in his theological treatises.

²²⁴ Lev Zander, memoir to *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), xxiv.

²²⁵ *loc. cit.*

²²⁶ Cf. Evtuhov, *op. cit.*, 12.

²²⁷ *loc. cit.*

²²⁸ Cf. Andronikof, *op.cit.*, 38.

²²⁹ Cf. *loc. cit.*

²³⁰ For the English translation of the text see Anastassy Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, “Protopresbyter Sergii Bulgakov: Hypostasis and Hipostaticity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* Vol. 49, No. 1-2 (2005): 5-46.

²³¹ Sergei Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God: A Brief Summary of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke and Xenia Braikevitc (New York: Praisley and London: Williams and Norgate, 1937). A revised edition was published: Sergei Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne, 1993).

This does not imply that the later developments constituted a static and established system. As Lev Zander remembers, Father Bulgakov's thought was "tentative, always progressing and seeking a new approach"²³². His other disciple, Constantin Andronikof, noted that this continuous quest to penetrate further the mysteries of Christian revelation had at its center the struggle to establish a "binding energy" between them, which was found in the image of Sophia, the Wisdom of God²³³. This identification was not artificially constructed, since it was based on the substance of the Divinity itself, which by being love is also relational²³⁴.

My analysis of Sergei Bulgakov's Sophiology will concentrate on the late development of his "theological or...dogmatic interpretation of the world (Weltanschauung)"²³⁵, as outlined in his systematic treatise, "Sophia, the Wisdom of God: an Outline of Sophiology" and in his major trilogy "On Divine-humanity" (*O Bogochelovechestve*) which includes: "The Lamb of God," "The Comforter," and "The Bride of the Lamb" volumes.

§ 2. THE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

A. PRELIMINARIES

At the very core of Bulgakov's Sophiological system stands "the relation between *God* and *the world*, or...*God* and *humanity*"²³⁶. It is therefore not merely an attempt to formulate this relation and to unfold it into a theological system, but above all an ontological enquiry into the primordial bond between the Creator and creation. This relation is expressed using a term related to the person of the Divine Logos, first introduced by the Chalcedonian formula of the "God-human"²³⁷. However, Bulgakov did not try to limit the interpretation of this term to Christ, but intended to analyze its relation with every person of the Holy Trinity²³⁸. Therefore, the Chalcedonian "no" had to be developed into the sophiological "yes". As a result, from the "God-human" archetype as realized in the person of the incarnate Logos, the term was developed into "God-manhood" or "Divine-humanity" as initially employed by Solovyov in his "Lectures on Divine humanity"²³⁹. Not only was the term transformed but also its content enlarged so as to include "the theandric

²³² Lev Zander, *op. cit.*, xxiii.

²³³ Cf. Andronikof, *op.cit.*, 40.

²³⁴ Cf. *loc. cit.*

²³⁵ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 13.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²³⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 83.

²³⁸ Cf. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 16.

²³⁹ Cf. *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 14 n. 4.

union between God and the whole of the creaturely world, through humanity and in humanity”²⁴⁰.

However, in this undertaking Bulgakov did not intend to be innovator in the negative sense of the word. The originality of Sophiology was for Bulgakov not a scope in itself, since it was manifested more in the way of expression rather than in its content. As he claims, his main desire was to recover a forgotten Church tradition²⁴¹ that seemed essential for the revival of religious life of the twentieth century. In this sense Sophiology, by attempting to recover the ontological bond between God and his creation, is an alternative to both cosmism and anti-cosmism, “the two disintegrated aspect of the one divine-human theocosmism,”²⁴² as expressed in their historical form of secularization and Manichaeism. The potential of Sophiology resides in its all-embracing character and in its orientation towards life itself rather than being limited to pure academic speculations. Its uniqueness rests on its ability to provide a *via media* between the cosmism of Secularization and the anti-cosmism of Manichaeism. As Bulgakov puts it, only “a sophianic perception of the world in the Wisdom of God...can give us strength for new inspiration, for new creativity, for the overcoming of the mechanization of life and of human beings”²⁴³. And in this sense that was “a call neither to superstitious idolatry, nor to rationalistic contempt, but rather to creative understanding and development”²⁴⁴ on which nothing less than “the future of living Christianity”²⁴⁵ itself rests.

Before approaching the notion of Divine Sophia proper, it must be affirmed that for Bulgakov Sophiology was neither a dogma, nor simply his personal theological outlook, but a sort of panacea that could solve “all the dogmatic and practical problems of modern Christian dogmatics ascetics”²⁴⁶. While this vision could be considered overenthusiastic or romantic, its definition as “a theology of *crisis*, not of disintegration, but of salvation”²⁴⁷ brings it closer to our reality, dominated by the pressure various crises. Our goal therefore is to offer an accurate yet modern interpretation of Bulgakov’s Sophiology, hoping that our endeavour will contribute to a renewed interest in it, and eventually to the discovery of new and insightful solutions to the crises of our times.

Bulgakov’s interest in the notion of Divine Sophia was his desire to enrich the Aristotelian notion of “substance” or “essence”. As he notes, the term was interpreted by

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14. Here, the understanding of such an organic union between God and creation, which sometimes attracted Bulgakov’s accusation of pantheism, is expressed in completely orthodox fashion by proposing the human mediation between the two. After Incarnation nothing in creation remains simply material and after Ascension the human nature became part of the Divinity, so that we are now entitled to speak about Divine-humanity or Sophiology.

²⁴¹ See *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴² *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 20.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁴ *Id.*, *The Bride...*

²⁴⁵ *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 21.

²⁴⁶ *loc. cit.*

²⁴⁷ *loc. cit.* The italics belong to the author.

theologians both in the Eastern and Western Christianity “purely as a philosophical abstraction”²⁴⁸ which could not “embrace the divine revelation with regard to the one common life of the Holy Trinity”²⁴⁹. As Barbara Newman observed, Fr. Bulgakov

could not endure the presence of a sterile, ‘scholastic’ concept in the doctrine of the living God. By glossing the dry and colorless term *ousia* with the radiant name of Sophia, he thought to infuse a new fervour and vitality into dogma, without loss to orthodoxy.²⁵⁰

The starting point for this new approach to the dogma of consubstantiality was the “revealed teaching on the life of the triune God”²⁵¹ as it appears in the Old and New Testament. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, Bulgakov studied the Biblical passages describing Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and found support for his sophiological themes. Since we have already treated this issue we will not go into detail. It is important however to note that the essential quality of Sophia, that of being “quasi-hypostatic, though not a person”²⁵² or “personal, but not a person,”²⁵³ was inspired by such a Biblical passage, namely Proverbs 8: 22-31. After having investigated the Biblical references to Sophia, Bulgakov concluded that the “principle of Wisdom has never received satisfactory theological interpretation or application, so that even today it is overlooked by theology and only succeeds in creating misunderstanding”²⁵⁴. With all these in mind he proceeded to a further analysis of the notion of Sophia in relation to *ousia* or the substance of God, and with each person of the Holy Trinity individually.

B. THE DIVINE SOPHIA AND OUSIA

When considering these concepts and the potential relation between them one will naturally question if such a relation exists ontologically or is just a theoretical construct. Bulgakov was perhaps accustomed with such reactions and knew that theology “has failed to observe any relationship at all,”²⁵⁵ which for him equated with a denial of such a relation. But to do so is, as he said, to generate “a dualism in the Godhead”²⁵⁶ and to empty the concept of *ousia* of its content and manifestation²⁵⁷ which the Biblical text describes as Wisdom and Glory. Bulgakov argues that the dogmatic notion should never be separated

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴⁹ *loc. cit.*

²⁵⁰ Newman, *art. cit.*, 44.

²⁵¹ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 25.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵³ *loc. cit.*, n. 4

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁵⁶ *loc. cit.*

²⁵⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 31.

from the Biblical ones, if we want monotheism to be kept untouched²⁵⁸. Therefore, he concludes that on the terminological level and “for the sake of simplicity”²⁵⁹ we can “fuse this triad of definitions, Ousia=Sophia=Glory, and express its significance by any one of the three terms at random”²⁶⁰. At the same time, he adds, “it seems more natural to link the problems of our time with the term “Sophia” (further amplified by the term “Glory”)”²⁶¹. One can argue that such an arbitrary synthesis cannot simplify the theological language, but on the contrary would lead to ambiguity. Yet, for Bulgakov the fusion was necessary in order to save the concept of Ousia from becoming “an empty, abstract metaphysical schema”²⁶². Newman aptly summarizes Bulgakov’s motivation for such an understanding of Ousia:

Although theologians have traditionally spoken of the *ousia* in abstract and, most often, apophatic terms, Fr. Bulgakov will not tolerate any suggestion of the impersonal in his doctrine of God. At this point, therefore, he faces a dilemma: either accept the ‘compromise’ of an impersonal essence or allow Sophia to become a fourth hypostasis, as it were, and so vitiate the whole Trinitarian dogma. Significantly, he at first chose the latter alternative.²⁶³

It is notorious that in his early philosophical treaty Bulgakov called Sophia a “«quatrième hypostase»,”²⁶⁴ even if the expression was placed between quotation marks by Bulgakov himself. Zenkovsky shows that this “fourth” hypostasis becomes “a ‘third being’ between God and the world”²⁶⁵. He goes on to cite Bulgakov, stating that Sophia as a ‘*metaxu*,’ “cannot be conceived merely as the ideal cosmos...[God] *externalizes* Sophia [metaphysically], pouring upon it the life-creating strength of tri-hypostatic Love”²⁶⁶. The conclusion is that this “‘object’ of divine love must be a ‘subject, a person, an hypostasis””²⁶⁷.

Still, this formulation reflects Bulgakov’s initial philosophical struggles to ‘locate’ and describe the ‘place’ of Sophia in relation with God and creation. The initial and inherent terminological imprecision was further clarified in his study “Ipostas i ipostasnost”²⁶⁸ and in his theological treatises, by developing the notion of “ipostasnost,” which was commonly

²⁵⁸ See *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵⁹ *loc. cit.*

²⁶⁰ *loc. cit.*

²⁶¹ *loc. cit.*

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶³ Newman, *art. cit.*, 42.

²⁶⁴ Bulgakov, *La Lumière...*, 200.

²⁶⁵ Zenkovsky, *A History...*, 904.

²⁶⁶ *loc. cit.* The edits belong to the author.

²⁶⁷ *loc. cit.*

²⁶⁸ Sergii Bulgakov, “‘Ipostas’ i Ipostasnost’: Scholia k Svetu Nevechernemu” *Sbornik statei posviashchennykh Petru Berngardovichu Struve ko dnu tridtsatipariletiia ego auchnopolitsisticheskoi deiatel’nosti, 1890-1925* (1925), 353-71. For the revised and annotated English translation see Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, “Protopresbyter Sergii Bulgakov: Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1-2 (2005): 5-46.

translated as “hypostaseity,” “hipostasizedness,” or “hipostaticity”²⁶⁹. About this development Newman states that

in response to vigorous criticism, he [Bulgakov] corrected and refined his doctrine by developing the notion of ‘hypostaseity’ (*ipostasnost*). This term, as applied to the divine Sophia, denotes a Being which is not hypostatic, but ‘hypostasized’; personal, but not a person²⁷⁰.

To understand this concept properly it is necessary to correlate it with Bulgakov’s insistence on “the Palamite distinction between the transcendent divine essence and the immanent *energia*”²⁷¹. Only thus can one realize that Bulgakov understood Sophia “neither as the divine nature in itself nor as a mythological individual, but as an aspect of the divine nature *in action*, in relation”²⁷². In his article ‘Ipostas’ i Ipostasnost’ Bulgakov provided an initial formulation of “hypostaticity,” one that conveys a strong impression of personality, although not an isolated but always a relational one²⁷³. For him, hypostaticity

is the capacity to hypostasize oneself [*ipostasirovat’sia*], *to belong* to a hypostasis, *to be its disclosure*, *to give oneself up* to it. This is the special hypostatic state, not through one’s own, but through another hypostasis, *hypostasization* through self-surrender²⁷⁴.

The actual meaning of the expression depends on how the verb *ipostasirovat’sia* is understood²⁷⁵. As Gallaher and Kukota note, depending on the translation, *ipostasirovat’sia* (“the capacity to hypostasize oneself”²⁷⁶) can mean either “the capacity to be hypostasized in particular hypostases, which hypostasization is accomplished by a hypostasis in Sophia (the passive sense of *ipostasirovat’sia*),”²⁷⁷ or “the capacity and striving of Sophia to *give herself up* or to hypostasize oneself (*ipostasirovat’sia* in its literal reflexive sense)”²⁷⁸. Clearly, Bulgakov’s preference was for the first meaning, yet what was more important for

²⁶⁹ For a linguistic explanation of this term see Gallaher and Kukota, “Protopresbyter...,” 14.

²⁷⁰ Newman, *art. cit.*, 42.

²⁷¹ Sergii Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian political theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 165. Bulgakov made the parallel between the Palamite distinction and his Sophiological approach in his article ‘Ipostas’ i Ipostasnost’. For the English translation see Gallaher and Kukota, “Protopresbyter...,” 23-24.

²⁷² *loc. cit.*

²⁷³ Rowan Williams argues that “the commonest and easiest misunderstanding of Bulgakov’s language is precisely to take him as talking about a kind of heavenly individual rather than divine action and created process” in Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian political theology*, 180-181.

²⁷⁴ Gallaher and Kukota, “Protopresbyter...,” 28.

²⁷⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁷⁸ *loc. cit.*

him was giving Sophia a sense of living reality²⁷⁹. This personifying of Ousia as Sophia is essential if one knows that “the nature of a spirit is not a thing, but a living principle”²⁸⁰.

Finally we arrive at the goal of Bulgakov’s construct of Sophia as a living entity which possesses hypostaticity. This understanding is crucial if one tries to relate Sophia-Ousia with the intra-Trinitarian love that unites the persons of the Holy Trinity. Bulgakov argues that the Johannine definition “God is Love”²⁸¹ cannot posit love merely as a “quality or a property peculiar to God, but as the very substance and vigor of his life”²⁸². Consequently, if “the tri-hypostatic union of the Godhead is a mutual love”²⁸³, and Ousia-Sophia also “belongs to the realm of God’s Love”²⁸⁴ it is necessary that Sophia is itself love, “though love in a special and un-hypostatic embodiment”²⁸⁵. Being love, Sophia is loved by God and loves God in return²⁸⁶. In this way the ‘dead’ philosophical concept of Ousia becomes the “living and, therefore, loving substance”²⁸⁷ of Sophia which Bulgakov sought with so much passion. At his point the risk of personifying Sophia as a ‘fourth hypostasis’ increases, yet we have already seen how Bulgakov resolved it linguistically by coining the term “hypostaticity”.

C. THE DIVINE SOPHIA AND THE PERSONS OF THE HOLY TRINITY ²⁸⁸

After having considered the relation between Ousia and Sophia, with the brief conclusion that “the very conception of Ousia itself is but that of Sophia, less fully developed,”²⁸⁹ we will now present the relation between Sophia and each Person of the Holy Trinity. Before an individual account of Sophia could be made, Bulgakov found it necessary to eliminate the prejudice which associated of Sophia “only with one hypostasis, namely, that of the Son”²⁹⁰. This would imply that the other two Persons of the Trinity would not possess Sophia, an absurd idea which was overcome by such theologians as St. Augustine, as Bulgakov also shows²⁹¹. And due to the accent that Bulgakov places on Ousia, he expounds “the dogma of the Trinity as a revelation of the One God”²⁹². There is a “threefold character of the divine Sophia,”²⁹³ which means that “there is only the one

²⁷⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁸⁰ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 34.

²⁸¹ 1 John 4:8

²⁸² Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 34.

²⁸³ *loc. cit.*

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸⁶ Cf. *loc. cit.*

²⁸⁷ *loc. cit.*

²⁸⁸ This title matches the second chapter of Bulgakov’s *Sophia, the Wisdom of God*.

²⁸⁹ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 36.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁹¹ Cf. *loc. cit.*

²⁹² Newman, *art. cit.*, 49.

²⁹³ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 38.

substance, whose being is determined in a threefold manner”²⁹⁴. This “tri-unity of the single divine Sophia,”²⁹⁵ reflects Bulgakov’s distrust at any formulation of the dogma of the Trinity “in personalistic categories alone”²⁹⁶. As Paul Valliere argues, for Bulgakov “the divine *ousia* does not exist apart from the Persons, but it cannot be reduced to them, either,”²⁹⁷ for “if we consider Ousia only in the aspect of *personal* being, we effectively abolish it”²⁹⁸. Surely, “this is bad theology because it makes God ‘poorer than created spirit,’ construing his personhood as ‘an empty, abstract *ego* rather than as a vital spirit with a nature of its own.’”²⁹⁹

Based on the “Johannine affirmations: God is Spirit and Light and Love”³⁰⁰, Bulgakov presents the Divine Sophia, the interior life of the Holy Trinity as characterized by “the principles of self-knowledge, self-revelation, and self-giving”³⁰¹. With regards to the hypostasis of the Father, Sophia “connotes predominantly Ousia – prior to its own revelation as Sophia”³⁰² since He

possesses her as a *source* of revelation, as the mystery and depth of his hypostatic being, in a true sense as his own nature—*natura*—which has still to be manifest, and is to be disclosed in the hypostases which reveal him.³⁰³

This means that “the hypostasis of Father in himself remains undisclosed, for he is only revealed in the other hypostases by the power of his self-denying sacrificial love”³⁰⁴. With this notion we arrive at an extended concept kenosis in which “the Father ‘empties Himself’ in begetting the Son, and the Son in equally sacrificial love renounces Himself, content to be the Word of His Father only”³⁰⁵.

The Son in his turn is the Logos, the Second Hypostasis, one who “directly reveals the Father,”³⁰⁶ as “the image and radiance of his glory, his revelation in the world”³⁰⁷. In relation with Sophia Bulgakov distinguishes between “the hypostatic Word itself which speaks and the Words of words spoken, or the content of the Word”³⁰⁸. And he argues that “it is precisely this content of divine thought which is disclosed in the hypostasis of Sophia,

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁹⁶ Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 333.

²⁹⁷ *loc. cit.*

²⁹⁸ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 103.

²⁹⁹ Valliere, *Modern Russian theology...*, 333.

³⁰⁰ Newman, *art. cit.*, 49.

³⁰¹ *loc. cit.*

³⁰² Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 41.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

³⁰⁵ Newman, *art. cit.*, 49.

³⁰⁶ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 41.

³⁰⁷ *loc. cit.*

³⁰⁸ *loc. cit.*

or the divine Wisdom”³⁰⁹. In this sense the Word is “the self-thinking Divine Thought, *noēsis tēs noēseōs*, whose object and content is itself”³¹⁰. As Barbara Newman notices, for Bulgakov “all that is implicit in the Father is manifest in the Son, and the paternal Silence is fully expressed in the filial Word”³¹¹.

The Holy Spirit, as the Third Hypostasis is the one that “unites the First and the Second Hypostases, the Father and the Son”³¹². Therefore, the relation between the Third Hypostasis and Sophia is conditioned by the “hypostatic place of the Holy Spirit within the Holy Trinity”³¹³. Bulgakov defines that place as a relational kenotic existence in which

The Holy Spirit ‘proceeds’ from the Father to the Son, as the hypostatic love of the Father, which ‘abides’ in the Son, fulfilling his actuality and possession by the Father. In turn the Holy Spirit passes ‘through’ the Son (*emmesos*), returning, as it were, to the Father in a mysterious cycle, as the answering hypostatic love of the Son³¹⁴

In this way the Holy Spirit ‘loses’ itself in a kenotic self-giving to the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity, yet in the same time by doing so it can “achieve its own fulfillment as the hypostasis of love. He is Love within love—the Holy Spirit within that tri-hypostatic Spirit which is God”³¹⁵.

A characteristic of Bulgakov’s Trinitarian theology is what he calls “the dyad of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”³¹⁶ which reveals the Father. In this dyad “the Son *and* the Holy Spirit, together, inseparable and unconfused, realize the self-revelation of the Father in his nature”³¹⁷. This definition which echoes the Chalcedonian formula proposes a common revelatory work of the Two Hypostases, still maintaining their different participation. While the Word concerns the content, the Holy Spirit “relates not to the content, but to the special form”³¹⁸ of this self-revelation of Sophia since “Wisdom is the matter of Glory, [and] Glory the form of Wisdom”³¹⁹. Barbara Newman resumes this inner Trinitarian interrelation by saying that “while the Father is the primordial subject of Sophia and the Son her rational (*λογικός*) content, the Spirit is Her manifest splendor”³²⁰. In this sense

³⁰⁹ *loc. cit.*

³¹⁰ Bulgakov, *The Lamb...*, 108.

³¹¹ Newman, *art. cit.*, 50.

³¹² Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 45.

³¹³ *loc. cit.*

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46. Bulgakov found in St. Augustine the following schema: “the loving one/the loved one/love itself” in Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 66. Moreover, Bulgakov argues that such a schema is unique in the patristic literature, and its value is greater since St. Augustine “understood the Third hypostasis as hypostatic Love”.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

³²⁰ Newman, *art. cit.*, 50.

Sophia belongs to the Father, for he is her initial and ultimate subject. She represents the disclosure of his transcendence, of the silence and mystery of the Godhead; she is the Father manifesting himself through the Son and the Holy Spirit.³²¹

However, this belonging of Sophia to the Father does not exclude the other two Persons of the Trinity from participation to it. On the contrary, we can affirm with Bulgakov that “Sophia, as the self-revelation of Godhead, belongs to all three persons of the Holy Trinity”³²². It can be said that “the entire Holy Trinity in its tri-unity ‘is Sophia,’”³²³ and that in the same time each of the hypostases of the Trinity is Sophia³²⁴ with the necessary comment that such formulations “cannot be reversed”³²⁵. However, the mode in which they possess Sophia is specific for each of them: “the Father, *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God), possesses her as his revelation in the dyad of hypostases which reveals him. The Son possesses her as his own revelation, which is fulfilled, and accomplished through the Holy Spirit”³²⁶.

D. THE CREATURELY SOPHIA

Bulgakov could not accept any extreme interpretation of the apophatic way of knowledge which would hinder or even halt the theological discourse. In this sense he warned that any overemphasis on the *via negations* could lead to “a form of agnosticism which merges into practical atheism”³²⁷. Against such a deviation he brings the argument of the divine revelation which is God’s discovery in creation. Besides the general significance of these ideas, they also constitute Bulgakov’s own defense in front of the accusation brought against his Sophiology. Throughout his theological career Bulgakov has always tried to base his creative and sometimes provocative ideas on the witness of the Scripture and the Fathers of the Church.

With regards to the doctrine of creation things were further complicated by his desire to always see God in relation with creation and vice versa. Based on “the Biblical *in principio* and the patristic *ex nihilo*”³²⁸ Bulgakov identifies the beginning with the divine

³²¹ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 51.

³²² *loc. cit.*

³²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

³²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 53.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52. In the same paragraph Bulgakov argues that the opposite statement, i.e. “Ousia-Sophia is the Father, Son, etc.” cannot be accepted since it would contain what he calls “the heresy of impersonalism as regards the Holy Trinity” which means “to equate with the hypostases a principle which is in itself nonhypostatic although it belongs to the hypostases”.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

³²⁸ Newman, *art. cit.*, 53.

Sophia and nihil with the non-being, or becoming³²⁹. With this identification he tries to convey the fact that in the process of creation of the world the Absolute abandons his state of absoluteness and “establishes in dependence upon his own absolute being a relative creaturely being”³³⁰. Based on Basil’s the Great affirmation that “The notion of God is a relative one,”³³¹ and on Sir Isaac’s Newton similar assertion that “Deus est vox relativa”³³², Bulgakov concludes that it is only in relation with the relative being that the Absolute can be called God³³³. In the introduction to his translation from Bulgakov’s *Agnets bozhii* (The Lamb of God) Rowan Williams argues that for Bulgakov “God is in one sense not ‘God’ without creation – since ‘God’ is not the name of the divine essence (which cannot be named) but the name of the One who emerges from transcendence to be the God and maker of a universe”³³⁴. This moment constitutes for Bulgakov what he calls “the ultimate antinomy,”³³⁵ a “state in which the absoluteness of the Absolute is combined with the relationship joining the world to God, the divine life itself in the one hand with its manifestation in the created universe on the other”³³⁶. And here the cataphatic way finds its limit, “a bound which we cannot pass”³³⁷ and the human intellect “can do no more than recognize the existence of this antinomy, accepting both its postulates as equally necessary, though by their very essence mutually exclusive”³³⁸.

What is essential for Bulgakov’s Sophiology with regards to creation is his desire to understand “the positive foundation in God for creation”³³⁹. Without question this foundation which “freely necessary, determines the entire life of God, and outside of it nothing can be conceived in God”³⁴⁰ is love. In relation with creation this love can be considered ‘a free necessity,’ meaning that “it is equally ‘necessary’ for the God who is Love to love in Himself, in the Holy Trinity, in His nature, and in creation”³⁴¹. God’s love, as ‘free necessity’ is the reason for the creation of the world. This is enacted by “the force of God’s love overflowing beyond the limits of its own being to found being other than his own”³⁴². In a sense one can say that God “‘needs’ the world, not to be what God is or to satisfy a lack (the divine life is self-sufficient in the mutuality of the Trinity) but to express the illimitability of the outreach of love”³⁴³. Outside or without this ‘need’ the existence of creation would be inexplicable. It is the ‘need’ of love and goodness to share themselves in an overflowing joy toward the other.

³²⁹ See *loc. cit.*

³³⁰ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 60.

³³¹ *loc. cit.*, n. 4.

³³² *loc. cit.*, n. 4.

³³³ *loc. cit.*

³³⁴ *Id.*, *Towards a Russian political theology...*, 168.

³³⁵ *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 60.

³³⁶ *loc. cit.* See also Bulgakov, *Sophia.....*, 76.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

³³⁹ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 48.

³⁴⁰ *loc. cit.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁴² *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 73.

³⁴³ *Id.*, *Towards a Russian political theology...*, 168.

In God's love there is no lack or necessity, since "love is realized in God in all its fullness and possibilities"³⁴⁴. However, Bulgakov places exactly among these realized possibilities "the kenotic sacrifice of God's love that is expressed in the positing, alongside divine being, of creaturely, non-divine being, given to itself"³⁴⁵. This is the same as to affirm that "the world could not have been not created"³⁴⁶. This 'necessary' kenotic moment means that

the hypostatic God, eternally possessing this divine world as His own nature, releases it from the depths of hypostatic being into self-being, makes it the cosmos in the true sense, creates the world "out of nothing," that is, out of Himself, out of His own divine content.³⁴⁷

This is the Sophiological interpretation of which affirms that "the divine Sophia, 'released' from the triune God, appears as the 'creaturely Sophia,' the entelechy and telos of the emerging world"³⁴⁸. As Williams pointed, for Bulgakov Sophia "is a way of speaking about the non-arbitrariness"³⁴⁹ of the relation between God and creation since "the world's life is shown to be established on the same (sophianic) foundation as God's"³⁵⁰. And since "God is love, and love is God's ontological self-determination"³⁵¹ we can affirm that the world is nothing else but "that complex of relations that is God in eternity translated into process and temporality"³⁵².

For Bulgakov the divine and the creaturely worlds are essentially identical or, in sophiological terms, the Divine and the creaturely Sophia are identical in their essence³⁵³. And although this may seem difficult to accept, the opposite is yet more difficult, namely "to understand the entire *difference* between the Divine and the Creaturely Sophia"³⁵⁴. To accept Bulgakov's view is necessary to understand that for him the creation of the world is a divine act of self-determination in which "God posits Himself as the Creator"³⁵⁵. And this identity is not something accidental, "rather, God is the Creator by virtue of the inner necessity of His nature, divine love, because God is love, which is exhaustive and includes all its modes, and in particular love for creation"³⁵⁶. However, this total identification between the Divine and the creaturely Sophia do not imply in any sense that God and creation are identical. For Bulgakov even though "creatures exist by the power of God and

³⁴⁴ *Id.*, *The Bride...*, 51.

³⁴⁵ *loc. cit.*

³⁴⁶ *Id.*, *The Bride...*, 48.

³⁴⁷ *loc. cit.*

³⁴⁸ Newman, *art. cit.*, 53.

³⁴⁹ *Id.*, *Towards a Russian political theology...*, 169.

³⁵⁰ *loc. cit.*

³⁵¹ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 48.

³⁵² *Id.*, *Towards a Russian political theology...*, 169.

³⁵³ Cf. Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 50.

³⁵⁴ *loc. cit.*

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

their being is affirmed in God, they nevertheless form a different and special world, a world that is *new* in a certain sense”³⁵⁷.

At the same time there is a distinction between the Divine and creaturely Sophia in their relation with God. This differentiation runs as follows:

God *has* Divine Sophia. She belongs to God, and she herself in this sense *is* God, His eternal power and divinity, the *uncreated* divine essence. In contrast, the creaturely Sophia, or the world, belongs not to God, but to herself. She is created (or more precisely, is eternally being created) by God, is God’s creation. Although she is grounded in divine power and is capable of limitless deification, she is *not* God (even in her limit).³⁵⁸

Thus, we can find “two different forms of Sophia in God and in the creature”³⁵⁹ which can be differentiated “on the one hand, as the simple and simultaneous perfection of eternity, as against temporal becoming, and, on the other, as divine, against participated being”³⁶⁰. To understand better the idea that the creaturely Sophia is characterized by “becoming” and “participated being,” one must relate it with Bulgakov’s idea of “hypostaseity” or “hypostaticity” of Sophia. According to this idea “the creaturely Sophia requires a created hypostasis, its subject in the world,”³⁶¹ one that she finds in humanity. And since “humanity was created in *God’s image*,”³⁶² and for Bulgakov this image is not merely a metaphor but an *ens realissimum* which “establishes a true identity between the image and its prototype”³⁶³, we must accept ‘the primary and the ultimate antinomy of Sophiology’ which states that the creaturely Sophia is both identical and in the same time different from the Divine Sophia. And for Bulgakov this antinomy “only serves to express the still deeper antinomy from which all theological thought springs and to which it inevitably returns: that of the identity and distinction between God and the Absolute”³⁶⁴. Here we must recall the fact that for Bulgakov God is the Absolute in its relation with creation, so that “the Absolute is God, but God is not the Absolute insofar the world relates to him”³⁶⁵. Based on this antinomy one can interpret all the other paradoxes present in Bulgakov’s theology, for example the relation between God and the world or Divine and creaturely Sophia³⁶⁶.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 61-62. In a footnote to this passage Fr. Bulgakov notes that from this idea “an irreversible proposition of identity results: God is Sophia as Divinity, but Sophia or Divinity is not the hypostatic God” which runs similar to St. Gregory Palama’s distinction between God’s essence and energies.

³⁵⁹ *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 76.

³⁶⁰ *loc. cit.*

³⁶¹ Newman, *art. cit.*, 55.

³⁶² Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 78.

³⁶³ *loc. cit.*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁶⁵ *loc. cit.*

³⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 77.

The fact that between God as prototype and humanity as image there is a “true identity,” implies “not only the ‘divinity’ of humanity on account of the image of God in it, but also a certain ‘humanity’ of God”³⁶⁷. This identification of the two Sophia

remains problematic as a speculative postulate. If one takes the divine world to be the prototype of the visible universe, the postulate seems to imply a kind of pantheism. If, on the other hand, one imagines the divine world to be radically unlike the visible universe, the postulate leads to some sort of gnosticism.³⁶⁸

We will discuss the charge of pantheism in Bulgakov’s theology in the next chapter. As regards his charge of Gnosticism, this charge already becomes curious in the light of the previous affirmation, if pantheism and Gnosticism are opposite points of view. More than this, “the anti-cosmic dualism of Gnosticism solves no problems for the Orthodox seeker of dialogue with the world”³⁶⁹. Bulgakov was more likely attracted by pantheism although, as he has affirmed, by “an entirely pious one,”³⁷⁰ or as he preferred to call it, by “panentheism”. This position was designed to express “the profound link between divinity and humanity manifested in the creation of human beings and in the incarnation”³⁷¹ which implies, as we have already stated, “not only the divinity of human beings but also a kind of humannes [*chelovechnost*] in God”³⁷². Bulgakov could not accept a suppression of the human element or assign it “a secondary role in the cosmos,”³⁷³ and therefore his position opposes abstract pantheism, which “dehumanizes the world in order to deify it”³⁷⁴. Through his panentheism and “by means of Sophiology Bulgakov seeks a middle way between the extremes of abstract pantheism (a deified world lacking humanity) and abstract trinitarianism (a super-essential Trinity disconnected from the world)”³⁷⁵. Being always dynamic as it was oriented towards the real world, his position “will never possess the completeness or polish the extreme positions appear to have”³⁷⁶. Nonetheless, this incompleteness “is a weakness in a purely speculative context and in theological context and in theological contexts where doctrinal purity is valued above relevance to everyday human experience”³⁷⁷.

Although highly philosophic and theoretical, Bulgakov’s theology was at the same time deeply rooted and concerned with humanity. It was against contemporary issues such

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁶⁸ Valliere, *Modern Russian theology...*, 334.

³⁶⁹ *loc. cit.*

³⁷⁰ Bulgakov, *The Comforter...*, 199.

³⁷¹ Valliere, *Modern Russian theology...*, 335.

³⁷² *loc. cit.* The edits belong to the author.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 336.

³⁷⁴ *loc. cit.*

³⁷⁵ *loc. cit.*

³⁷⁶ *loc. cit.*

³⁷⁷ *loc. cit.*

as secularization and Manichaeism that he tried to formulate its ideas and propose solutions. As Nikolai Berdyaev signaled,

It is impossible to carry out a complete split between the Creator and the creation, a completely godless neutralisation and secularisation of the creation. The limits to this rift is [sic] revealed by naturalism, positivism and materialism, which have pervaded also the churchly consciousness, penetrated into the school theology. The sophiological theological efforts of Fr. S. Bulgakov signify a return to the sacred, the Divine cosmos, the restoration of the organic-mystical connection between God and the creaturely world.³⁷⁸

As Fr. Bulgakov suggested, the task of theology is to “overcome the secularizing forces of Reformation and Renaissance, not in a negative way or ‘dialectically,’ which is in any case merely theoretical and powerless, but in a positive way—through love for the world”³⁷⁹. And this recommendation is perhaps still valid today, when secularization increases in many areas around the Globe and the theological discourse becomes more and more specialized and thus very often inaccessible. For Bulgakov a solution to these problems can be achieved “only through a change in our conception of the world, and through a sophianic perception of the world in the Wisdom of God”³⁸⁰.

As we have proposed in the beginning we hope that with this chapter we have covered the main themes of Bulgakov’s Sophiology which are essential for a further theological-political reflection. In the same time we hope that with it we have confirmed the solid Christian foundation of this system and that its most innovative aspects could not in any way be considered heterodox or heretic. Besides this we have presented the basic notions of panentheism which will be further developed in the next chapter in relation with its political implications.

³⁷⁸ Berdyaev, *Concerning Sophiology...*

³⁷⁹ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 20.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

CHAPTER III. SOPHIOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY

§ 1. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOPHIOLOGY

A. WHERE IS “POLITICAL THEOLOGY” TO BE FOUND?

Right from the beginning I must state that the motivation underlying my desire to write a study on Political Theology was not based on a comprehensive knowledge of the subject but exactly on my desire to find out more about a theme that interested me. This is partly due to the fact that my previous academic preparation was oriented towards both, Theology and Politics, even if until now I have studied them in a separate way. Although my formation was based on both theological and political grounds my awareness of Political Theology as an autonomous academic field only begun with my studies at Leuven. Before this, the few connections I could make between religion and politics were driven mainly from my little book of prayer. From it I found out already at an early age that as Christians we have a duty to pray for our civil authorities, this being one of the “Nine ecclesiastical commandments”³⁸¹ of the Orthodox Church. Besides this specific demand the book provided a model of prayer as well. Among other requests, the text reads as follows:

“O Good One, strengthen our ecclesiastical and mundane leaders. Give them to reason what is good and useful for our Church and for our Country. Protect them from the visible and invisible enemies, so that they can direct us towards the path of prosperity with peace and with love”³⁸².

Thus, the Church urges us to pray for the leaders of the State, teaching us that their successful leadership has a theanthropic dimension, following St. Paul’s recommendation that

supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.³⁸³

From this we understand that their success does not rely exclusively on their political skills, but comes also from above, as “...every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”³⁸⁴ which can be interceded through the prayers of the people. We find

³⁸¹ *Carte de Rugaciuni* [Book of Prayers] (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române), 173.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁸³ 1Timothy 2: 1-4.

³⁸⁴ James 1: 17.

the same idea expressed by the European political theologians who insist that “human attempts at ‘enlightenment, ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’, conducted independently of God are doomed to fail”³⁸⁵.

Other few theological-political realities of my knowledge were the “God emperors” of Egypt, the Imperial cult of Rome, and the line of ‘divinely appointed kings’ of the Old Testament³⁸⁶ culminating with the person of David - Prophet and King. Besides these, I also came to learn about the “Theory of divine right” sustained by such monarchs as James I of England and Louis XIV of France and in contemporary period to witness that the British monarch is in the same time the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and that the Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church is the Sovereign of the State of Vatican City as well. These are living examples of the way in which the political and theological realms still overlap today. As I was to experience, all these ideas were only the first steps towards a passionate and sometimes intriguing journey.

A primary question naturally comes to mind when someone begins to explore a new academic subject, namely: “what does this subject aims at? What is its relevance?”. And as a response to this natural preliminary question I started to learn more about Political Theology. I understood that this is an area which analyzes the relation between religion and politics in general typically, structured upon a chronological criterion. When it examines the religious in its most general sense and the State as the political in its various historical forms it could include the entire span of world history³⁸⁷. When it refers to the study of the relations between the Church and the State, Political Theology would limit to ‘the Christian Era’³⁸⁸.

If we still want to narrow down the subject more we could employ the definition provided by Michael Kirwan; when he speaks about the modern-day Political Theology he understands specifically the “German Political Theology”³⁸⁹. He goes on to argue that this academic quest was a return to the Kantian method, “namely, addressing the philosophical

³⁸⁵ Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology. A New Introduction* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 126.

³⁸⁶ For more details see: J.G. McConville, *God And Earthly Power. An Old Testament Political Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

³⁸⁷ See Eric Voegelin, *Religiile Politice* [Political Religions], trans. Bogdan Ivaşcu (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2010). In his introductory study to the Romanian translation, Bogdan Ivaşcu remarks that Voegelin was able to move easily from Akhenaton to Plotin, from Louis XIV to Maimonides, from St. Augustin to Hobbes, Aquinas, Gioacchino da Fiore, St. Paul or Ernst Jünger, without necessarily following a chronological criterion, but making surprising connections between apparently incompatible realities. As early as 1938 he could critique “the modern attempt to separate the political sphere from any religious content” and perform “an essential radiography of the spiritual-intellectual level underlying the totalitarian movements”. My translation from: Bogdan Ivaşcu, “Ordine și istorie. Eric Voegelin și diagnoza modernității. Studiu introductiv” [Order and history. Eric Voegelin and the diagnose of modernity. An introductory study] in Eric Voegelin, *Religiile Politice* [Political Religions], trans. Bogdan Ivaşcu (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2010).

³⁸⁸ See Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999) whose comprehensive study encompasses a wide-ranging variety of themes and authors covering a period from the Late Antiquity to the Reformation, and constitutes an unique resource of theologico-political ideas.

³⁸⁹ Kirwan, *Political Theology...*, 126.

foundations of religious belief from the point of view of *practical* rather than theoretical reason (*ethics* instead of epistemology)³⁹⁰. This brief characterization already allows remarking a similarity between the approach of the classical Political Theology and that of Sergei Bulgakov. Even the latter was a religious ‘ontologist,’ a metaphysician preoccupied with the sources of existence, this does not imply that he disregarded the historical events of his time or that he neglected their ethical implications, but on the contrary.

Political Theology in its contemporary European form is the fruit of such German theologians as Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle³⁹¹. It has developed as a reaction against the Nazi drama and as such, pledged for the rejection of any privatization of religion which “has prevailed in the modern period, but at an unacceptably high cost: the negation of any kind of prophetic (what Metz calls ‘messianic’) power to challenge and oppose injustice”³⁹². So here we could find one of the main tasks of political theology, that is maintaining a public status and a critical voice which enables the Church to perform its prophetic duty. It allows her to criticize and condemn any form of structural sin and action directed against the integrity and well-being of the human persons. This “semantic vigilance”³⁹³ becomes much needed today when humanity confronts many crises and thus the risk of limiting or controlling democracy by some authoritarian leaders is increased.

A second approach is provided by Kirwan’s³⁹⁴ interpretation based on Peter Scott’s and William T. Cavanaugh’s *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*³⁹⁵. “Theology as critical reflection on the political”³⁹⁶ is a ‘risky business’, being ambivalent as it relies on the method and the purpose of those who enact it. It can be used by those who have power in order to impose more easily their will “by masking the conditions of alienation and injustice on which their privilege rests”³⁹⁷. In the same time it can be employed by such individuals as the Latin America liberation theologians who use “the strands of subversion and prophecy within Israel’s political traditions, as well as the assertion of God’s preferential option for the poor”³⁹⁸ and literally risk their lives to unmask any alienating form of religious belief³⁹⁹.

³⁹⁰ *loc. cit*

³⁹¹ See Johan Verstraeten, “Religion and Politics: Revisiting an Old Problem in Light of Different Models of Thought,” *Hapag: a Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2010): 13-36.

³⁹² Kirwan, *op. cit.*, 6.

³⁹³ Johan Verstraeten, “Catholic Social Thought as Discernment” in *Scrutinizing the Signs of the Times in the Light of the Gospel*, ed. Johan Verstraeten (Leuven: Peeters/University Press, 2007), 11-13.

³⁹⁴ Kirwan, *op. cit.*, 6-8.

³⁹⁵ Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

³⁹⁶ Kirwan, *op. cit.*, 6.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹⁸ *loc. cit*

³⁹⁹ Cf. *loc. cit*

A final approach is considered by Kirwan “best suited to a post-Marxist context”⁴⁰⁰ one that would presumably fit my home country, Romania. It regards Theology and Politics as “similar activities...constituted in the production of metaphysical images around which communities are organised”⁴⁰¹. In this case the role of Political Theology is to reveal “the false theologies underlying supposedly ‘secular’ politics and promoting the true politics implicit in a true theology”⁴⁰². Kirwan summarizes⁴⁰³ these interpretations as follows: “the maintenance of a *cordon sanitaire* between politics and religion,” the “reflection on unjust and alienating political structures,” and the “production of metaphysical images around which communities are organised”⁴⁰⁴.

B. ARE SOPHIOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY ‘COMPATIBLE’?

After having presented different definitions of Political Theology, it is now appropriate to consider if any of them could be compared with Bulgakov’s Sophiology and what its relevance would be in this case. As we have already seen, Sophiology is not a dogma for Bulgakov, nor even a theologoumenon, but rather a *Weltanschauung*, as he calls it himself⁴⁰⁵. This means that by its all-encompassing character it can be employed to interpret a wide range of theoretical notions and existing realities. More than this, as Bulgakov himself emphasized, “the sophiological point of view brings a special interpretation to bear upon *all* Christian teaching and dogma, beginning with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation and ending with the questions of practical everyday Christianity”⁴⁰⁶. This means that Sophiology can be adapted or used as an interpreting lens regardless of whether we consider theological, political, social or cultural realities.

In the Introduction to *Sophia, the Wisdom of God* Bulgakov already gave us a clear example on how Sophiology could be applied to different historical realities. First of all, he distinguishes two opposing tendencies existing within Christianity in his own time, namely a “world-denying Manicheism, which separates God from the world by an impassable gulf”⁴⁰⁷, and the “acceptance of the world as it is, combined with the submission to its values, which is termed ‘secularization’”⁴⁰⁸. These divergent stances, although problematic in themselves, constitute an even greater difficulty when they coexist within the same entity. This is happening in the Church each time “‘salvation’ is interpreted as a flight from the world, and is at the same time associated with a servile attitude toward it”⁴⁰⁹. Bulgakov argues that this is the reason why so many alienate from such Christianity and atheism

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰¹ Scott Cavanaugh, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁴⁰² *loc. cit.*

⁴⁰³ See Kirwan, *op. cit.*, 5-9.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁰⁵ See Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 13. Italics belong to the author.

⁴⁰⁶ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁰⁷ Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 14.

⁴⁰⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

become more frequent in modern societies⁴¹⁰. He also admits that in his time Christianity was “powerless to overcome this cleavage, this gulf between religion and the world which is apparent in modern life, for the gulf exists not only outside, but within Christianity itself”⁴¹¹. Sadly, today we can witness the same tendency of an ever increasing chasm between the two realms.

The same holds truth for what Bulgakov calls “‘Social’ Christianity...a sort of ‘applied Christianity’”⁴¹². In this regard as well

Christianity followed in the train of life, lagging behind, without assuming any leadership. Furthermore, how can one lead in regard to something which one does not accept, in which one does not believe, toward which one’s attitude is merely that of missionary adaptation, of philanthropy, or of moralism?⁴¹³

For all these developments Christianity bears the main responsibility. And perhaps a first step towards a resolution would be a public *mea culpa* springing from a *metanoia*, understood not merely as repentance but literally, as a “renewal of mind”. Necessarily, Bulgakov wonders if there still exists a ladder connecting heaven and earth or if this ladder is now “only a convenient emergency exit for those who wish to be ‘saved’ by forsaking the world”⁴¹⁴.

He finds an answer and a solution to the present crisis of Christianity in the “fundamental dogma of Christianity concerning Divine-humanity”⁴¹⁵. Although this doctrine was already formulated by the Church at Chalcedon⁴¹⁶, he argues that it was neither fully developed nor applied to the life of the Church itself. This doctrine praises the intimate bond between the Creator and His creation since “the creaturely world is united with the divine world in divine Sophia”⁴¹⁷. Although this expression may seem esoteric in its formulation, in fact it is only another way of affirming that all creation originates in God and therefore nothing created is alien to God, and at the same time that nothing can exist besides God:

Heaven stoops toward earth; the world is not only a world in itself, it is also the world in God, and God abides not only in heaven but also on earth with human

⁴¹⁰ See *Ibid.*

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴¹² *loc. cit.*

⁴¹³ *loc. cit.*

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴¹⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁴¹⁶ As Bulgakov himself admits the exact expression of “Divine-humanity” was not contained in the definition of Chalcedon, although the ideas of the God-Human, Godmanhood or Divine-humanity are implicit in it. See Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 83. Most probably Bulgakov ‘inherited’ the concept of *Bogochelovecestvo* from Solovyov, who introduced it to the Russian *Intelligentsia*. See Vladimir Solovyov, *Divine Humanity* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1995), xii-xiii and Solovyov, *Divine Sophia...*, p. 9, n. 12.

⁴¹⁷ Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 17.

beings...Divine humanity represents a dogmatic call both to spiritual ascesis and to creativity, to salvation from the world and to a salvation of the world.⁴¹⁸

We find in this passage a curious antinomial solution to the contemporary problematic antinomy of secularization and Manicheism. First of all, we are advised to “abstain” from the world, liberating ourselves from any passion which could affect our freedom, judgment, or love, yet without considering anything created by God bad in itself. At the same time we are urged to become actively involved in the world and to change it with a good and spiritual creativity which can be achieved only through sophianization of creation, that is, the cooperation between our own created freedom and God’s Divine Grace.

C. SOPHIOLOGY - BETWEEN PANENTHEISM AND PANTHEOSIS

The idea that the “world is not only a world in itself, it is also the world in God,” may appear pantheistic; a fact which is true only in part. Bulgakov had another term for it, calling it panentheism, which in this case is another word for Orthodoxy. The distinction between the two terms is that while in pantheism God can be defined as “pan-divinity and thus the absence of divinity,”⁴¹⁹ or, in a different translation, as “God as the All, with the consequent disappearance of God,”⁴²⁰ panentheism states that “all is in God or for God”⁴²¹. This short statement determines both the origin of creation “in God” and its final purpose “in God” without suspending creation as such. For Bulgakov, what characterizes pantheism is “the absence of the idea of the createdness of the world, and this absence is, of course, rooted in the denial of the existence of the Creator”⁴²² which finally equates pantheism with atheism⁴²³.

As noted previously, the similitude with pantheism is only partially valid. Bulgakov was also aware of this fact as well as of the possible charges he may receive, and therefore left a clear definition of what he understood by panentheism. He admitted that in a way his view could be equated with pantheism, “but an entirely pious one; or more precisely, as I prefer to call it in order to avoid ambiguity, it is a *panentheism*”⁴²⁴. Bulgakov views pantheism as a dangerous conception only if it is understood as a self-sufficient one, “for that would truly be pagan cosmotheism, the worship of creation instead of and in the capacity of the Creator”⁴²⁵. At the same time, he admits that “it is even less possible to reject

⁴¹⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁴¹⁹ *Id., The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 121.

⁴²⁰ Sergii Bulgakov, *Sergii Bulgakov: towards a Russian political theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 186. The italics belong to the author.

⁴²¹ *loc. cit.*

⁴²² Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 4

⁴²³ See *loc. cit.*

⁴²⁴ *Id., The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 199-200. The italics belong to the author.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid*, 200.

it totally, for it is a dialectically necessary movement in the sophiological cosmology”⁴²⁶. The very notion of creation *ex nihilo* implies that “no other principle of creation exists outside God or apart from God”⁴²⁷. This means that

There can be no source of the world but God. This is as much as to say that the world has been established in its being by God, that it has been created by God by his own power and out of himself. Therefore the creature is distinct from the deity itself not in respect of the source of its being, but only in respect of the particular mode of its reception of that being.⁴²⁸

Although these affirmations may appear shocking to some, they are part of Orthodoxy and its cosmology, and in any case, they are not pantheism which confounds Creator with the creation. This confusion is resolved, as Bulgakov argues, by Sophiology⁴²⁹. As he views it,

The divine foundation of the world (its “pantheism”) is determined not by the fact that the personal God Himself is present by His Personality in the world and thus is identified with it, but by the sophianicity of this foundation: God creates the world by and in Sophia; and in its sophianic foundation the world is divine, although it is at the same time extra-divine in its creaturely aseity.⁴³⁰

This idea was not fabricated by Bulgakov in order to have a unifying principle on which his Sophiology could be built. It was based on the Tradition of the Church which affirmed that

God contained within himself before the creation of the world the divine prototypes, *paradeigmata*, the destinies, *proōrismoi*, of all creatures, so that the world bears within it the image and, as it were, the reflection of the divine prototype.⁴³¹

⁴²⁶ *loc. cit.* Here Bulgakov bases his argument on two biblical passages, namely on Acts 17:28 and Ps. 104: 29-30. An intriguing similarity to Bulgakov’s argumentation can be found in one of his contemporaries, Nicholas Zenkovsky who argued that “Pantheism, like the ‘evil spirit’ in the Russian fairy tale, sticks so closely to ‘total unity’ that it is impossible to throw it off completely. Of course, this is not pantheism in the usual sense of the word; it does not identify or equate God with the world, but it relates to [sic, recte the] two in such a way that the Absolute becomes ‘correlative’ to, and inconceivable without, the world.” in Philip Max Walters, “The Development of the Political and Religious Philosophy of Sergei Bulgakov, 1885-1922: A Struggle for Transcendence” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 1978), 274.

⁴²⁷ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 61.

⁴²⁸ *loc. cit.* Bulgakov explains further this idea: “Let us make this assumption that with creation something new emerges in God, which did not exist before. But this in its turn cuts at the very roots of God’s absoluteness and self-sufficiency, and denies the fullness of divine life within him,” in Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 63.

⁴²⁹ See *Id.*, *The Comforter*, 200.

⁴³⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁴³¹ *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 64. Among the Fathers who sustained this opinion Bulgakov cites St. Athanasius, Pseudo-Dionysius, St. John of Damascus, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Augustine, and St. Gregory Nazianzen.

The world was thus created by God “by Wisdom and after the image of Wisdom”⁴³². This means that God’s substance constituted the foundation of creation, although He has created it out of nothing,⁴³³ which entails “the fundamentally divine character of the world”⁴³⁴. However, this is not pantheism, in which “the world is identical with God, and, therefore, strictly speaking neither the world or God exists, but only a world which is a god in process of becoming,”⁴³⁵ but panentheism, which affirms that “God confers on a principle which originates in himself an existence distinct from his own”⁴³⁶.

I believe that Bulgakov’s own argument for the unavoidability of a “panentheistic” view is self-evident. Therefore my intention is not merely to make the apology of his sophianic vision and to “defend” it against the charges of Gnosticism or pantheism. In what follows I will try to argue that Sophiology is an indispensable methodology for an accurate contemporary understanding of the relation between God and His creation in general, and the political and theological in particular. In its most basic intuition Sophiology insists that whenever we analyze political, social or cultural realities on the one hand, and divine ones on the other, we should never do it partially, i.e. separating God from the world and vice versa. On the contrary, we must strive to always be aware that God is always present in the world and that the world “is not only a world in itself, it is also the world in God”⁴³⁷.

I have already stated that panentheism can be considered as another term for Orthodoxy, understood in its most general sense. This is valid if we look back in the Orthodox Tradition and seek for the way in which different theologians understood Orthodoxy and its political implications. One notable case is that of Eusebius of Caesarea, the famous ecclesiastical historian. As he was “responsible for the almost complete assimilation of Hellenistic political thought by Eastern Christianity,”⁴³⁸ his main legacy is the “undaunted optimism that the power of God can and does transform not only men and women, but also societies and nations”⁴³⁹. We could consider this view as an early form of the ‘active panentheism,’ or a ‘panentheism *in actu*’ as Bulgakov would put it, which in this case is only another term for the Divine Providence.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴³³ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁴³⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 72. The same idea is expressed when he states that the fault of pantheism “is not that it recognizes a divine force acting in God’s creation and constituting its positive foundation, but only that this divine force in the world is equated with God Himself, Whose action or energy it is”⁴³⁵ in Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 200.

⁴³⁶ *loc. cit.* For a distinction between the pantheistic tendencies of Schelling, Hegel or Boheme and the Christian doctrine of Creation of the world see Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 134. The final argument in favor of the latter is that for it “the world is not self-evolution of God but creation, a work of God that proceeds not from the metaphysical necessity of self-revelation but from the creative inspiration of love in its freedom” in Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 134.

⁴³⁷ *Id.*, *Sophia*, 17.

⁴³⁸ Daniel Stringer, “The Political Theology of Eusebius Pamphili, Bishop of Caesarea,” *The Patristic and Byzantine review* 2 (1982): 147.

⁴³⁹ *loc. cit.* In its institutional aspect this attitude towards God’s Providence was expressed in Eusebius’ contribution towards the set up of a “Byzantine political structure and for the East’s attitude towards the interplay of Church and the State” *loc. cit.*

We arrive here at another implication of panentheism, which I consider to be the most relevant one for the study of Political Theology, especially from the perspective of Eastern-Christianity. Besides the account of the origin of creation, where Bulgakov elaborates a version of creationism as distinct from pantheism, his panentheism includes a narrative of the goal of creation as well. In this case Bulgakov calls it pantheosis⁴⁴⁰, a term which rather describes the process or the method of how this final goal could be achieved. Again, this theological neologism coined by Bulgakov is defined in contradistinction with another term representing the heterodox tradition, namely *Apokatastasis*. The parallel is perhaps made in order to contrast the mechanical “deus ex machina,” an a-historical or post-historical nature of *Apokatastasis*, with the free and active collaboration between God and humankind within history presented by the process of pan-entheosis or pantheosis.

For Bulgakov pantheosis cannot be simply an arbitrary eschatological decision of God which would suspend the freedom of individuals that He Himself established, as if God would contradict or deny Himself, but “the complete penetration of the creature by Wisdom, the manifestation of the power of Divine-humanity in the whole world”⁴⁴¹. In this sense pantheosis or panentheism represents nothing else but the Christian idea of *theosis*, the progressive deification of human persons and the spiritualization of the whole creation. While this notion will always be susceptible of upholding a certain restraint on human freedom, Bulgakov appreciates that “there will be nothing violent or mechanical about this accomplishment, nothing to violate or set aside the liberty of the creature”⁴⁴². He is positive that “the freedom of the rebellious creature cannot stand up to the end against the divine Wisdom on the empty resources of its own nothingness...Yet he [God] does not constrain freedom; he convinces it”⁴⁴³. That leads to an understanding of the “content of life”⁴⁴⁴ which is specific for the Orthodox Tradition of the Church, namely that “the creature to receive and effect after its own manner, in freedom, and endlessly to prolong that realization of the divine in the created Sophia, which is the Church”⁴⁴⁵.

Based on this concise definition one would remind that Bulgakov has an original view of the Church, which for him encompasses, as it does, the entire creation in its every single aspect. In its ultimate goal she⁴⁴⁶ is the space where deification of humanity takes place, the “realization of the divine in the created Sophia”⁴⁴⁷ through a continuous penetration of the latter by divine energies. One should assume that there can be no place

⁴⁴⁰ Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 147.

⁴⁴¹ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴² *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁴⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴⁶ I have used the feminine article when referring to the Church, based on the Romanian feminine gender of the noun.

⁴⁴⁷ In this formulation Bulgakov could have been inspired by the definition of St. Seraphim of Sarov, who affirmed that “the acquisition of the Holy Spirit [i.e., prophecy] is the goal of the Christian life” in Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 292. The editing belongs to the author.

for narrow-mindedness, clericalism, or religious hatred in this definition; neither can it justify caesaropapism, ethnocentrism or ultranationalism in its political implications. On the contrary, it would rather encourage innovation and openness to what is new, increased involvement of laity in the Church, and of the Church in society as well as irenic relations between different Churches. At the political level it would promote the separation between the Church and the State. And finally, it would sustain the efforts towards an increased global responsibility and the cooperation between the states at humanitarian, ecological, juridical, economical and diplomatic levels⁴⁴⁸.

C. PANENTHEISM AS APOCATASTASIS, OR GOD'S LOVE FOR CREATION

Based on the previous arguments, one would conclude that Bulgakov rejected any kind of idea of Apokatastasis. In fact, even the notion of pantheosis includes within it a certain understanding of Apokatastasis, as a restoration of "the image of God in man"⁴⁴⁹. This has already been accomplished through Christ's Incarnation, Suffering, Death and Resurrection and at the Pentecost, which represented "not only what in a certain sense can be called the apocatastasis of creation, its liberation from the vanity of original sin, but also its glorification and transfiguration"⁴⁵⁰. However, Apokatastasis will ultimately be, the work of the Father, "through the Son, by the Holy Spirit,"⁴⁵¹ not as "a new *creation* in the strict sense, but only [as] a restoration (apocatastasis) of the original creation, which is raised to its highest and ultimate being"⁴⁵². These are the events described by the author of the second letter of Peter regarding the creation of "new heavens and a new earth,"⁴⁵³ which were already foretold by the prophet⁴⁵⁴ and reminded by the author of the Revelation⁴⁵⁵.

The Apokatastasis presupposes a "*bodily* resurrection,"⁴⁵⁶ as well, and in this sense "resurrection is an apocatastasis; a human being is re-created in his original form, consisting of a soul and a body"⁴⁵⁷. However, when he mentions the city of God, "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven,"⁴⁵⁸ as "the Bride of the Lamb (vv. 9-10), that is, the Church,"⁴⁵⁹ Bulgakov portrays it as

⁴⁴⁸ In selecting the levels of cooperation between the states I was inspired by the titles of the main chapters of Peter Singer's *One World* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2002).

⁴⁴⁹ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 189.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁴⁵² *loc. cit.* The italics belong to the author.

⁴⁵³ 2 Peter 3: 10-13.

⁴⁵⁴ See for example Isaiah 65: 17 or Isaiah 66:22.

⁴⁵⁵ See Revelation 21:1.

⁴⁵⁶ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 435. The author bases his argument on Rom. 8:11 and 1 Cor. 15:38. The italics belong to the author.

⁴⁵⁷ *loc. cit.* See for example Ezekiel 37.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 521, citing Rev. 21: 2.

⁴⁵⁹ *loc. cit.*

the perfect revelation of God and the perfect communion with God. This is no longer a restitution (apocatastasis) of what has been lost, but the accomplishment of the new by the transformation and glorification of the old...⁴⁶⁰

This, as we have seen,⁴⁶¹ has already been achieved in the events on which the Church was founded, namely the Incarnation and the Pentecost. Therefore, the Church represents not merely a repetition of these events⁴⁶² but rather a continuous and real re-enacting of them, so that the world is constantly transfigured and spiritualized by God through her. By its gracious acts in general and especially through its sacraments the Church transforms the entire creation, 'ripening' it towards its final fulfilment in the New Jerusalem. There is a theandric aspect of this maturation of creation, and not merely a human independent development or divine Providence on its own. This is reflected in the divine pronouncement: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,"⁴⁶³ or "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them"⁴⁶⁴. From here we can assume that the transformative power which was given to the apostles in particular and to every Christian community in general, lies in their permanent communication and communion with Christ, which is Divine humanity in process.

Without going into much detail about Bulgakov's eschatological understanding of Apokatastasis, it is suffice to say that his ideas were highly complex and cannot be altogether equated with Origen's theory of Apokatastasis or Gregory of Nyssa's eschatology, although he was influenced by both⁴⁶⁵. Bulgakov's Eschatology covers the third section of his *magnus opus*, *The Bride of the Lamb*, being considered "the book's most profound chapter"⁴⁶⁶. Treating realities of the end times such as the Parousia, the Ressurrection and the Final Judgement, Bulgakov does not however limit to a simple exposition of these events, but analyzes their implications for his contemporary realities as well. These implications were studied by Philip Walters in his doctoral thesis mentioned above. He contends that Bulgakov's main achievement was his success in overcoming the dilemma of the antinomies inherent in the nature of the human life by adopting a different attitude towards life itself. As Walters comments on Bulgakov's approach, although "irreconcilable within secular time and space"⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 525.

⁴⁶¹ See note 38.

⁴⁶² We can see this in the symbolism of the Byzantine Liturgy, in which the life of Our Lord is reenacted every time this service is held.

⁴⁶³ Matt. 18: 18.

⁴⁶⁴ Matt. 18: 19-20.

⁴⁶⁵ An argument for this is that in his eschatology Bulgakov quotes both Fathers and most frequently together.

⁴⁶⁶ Boris Jakim, introduction to *The Bride of the Lamb*, by Sergei Bulgakov (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), xiii.

⁴⁶⁷ Walters, *The Development...*, 19.

such contradictions are deprived of primacy when the individual orientates himself [sic] towards the Transcendent and assumes what I shall call an 'apocalyptic' attitude towards the phenomena of the world. A Christian who adopts the 'apocalyptic mentality is free from the tyranny of antinomies – free even from the antinomy of immanence and transcendence itself.⁴⁶⁸

This cannot simply mean a departure from the world which would be nothing else but a modern Manichaeian temptation, strongly criticized by Bulgakov himself. At the most it can imply an 'abstaining' from the world which is done not against the world, but exactly *for* it. It is not only human effort which in itself is insufficient, nor divine Providence alone which would deny any real human freedom, but Divine-humanity - the truly effective reality that is able to maintain the two without confusing them. It is an 'apocalyptic' attitude inasmuch as the Apocalypse is understood not as an arbitrary act of the Creator, or as an absolute predestination which would annul the freedom of creation, but as the love of God for his creature, the generosity of the Father Who is not merely waiting for the Prodigal son's return, but runs and puts his arms around him and kisses him⁴⁶⁹.

In my view the idea of pantheosis or simply, theosis - Divine-humanity actualized in creation, is a paradigm that allows the understanding of salvation as a gift, and does not supra-evaluate the human agency in an illusory attempt at auto-deification of humanity. It permits to maintain the unique character of Christ's sacrifice, since "the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world"⁴⁷⁰. Moreover it helps us realize that our good deeds should be performed neither out of a terrifying fear of punishment or Hell⁴⁷¹, nor out of an egoistic desire to achieve sanctity and Heaven in an individualistic way that excludes others⁴⁷², but as our sincere response to God's love, since love means "not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins"⁴⁷³. In its ultimate logic, panentheism or pantheosis means a humble and honest recognition that in the end God is our only source of love, and that if we are also like Him, i.e. being able to love, this is only "because he first loved us"⁴⁷⁴.

We could identify this love with the very primordial act of Creation, when God decided to create human being in His image,⁴⁷⁵ "thus reflecting in himself the divine infinity

⁴⁶⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Luke 15: 20.

⁴⁷⁰ 1 John 4:14.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. 1 John 4:17-18.

⁴⁷² Cf. Sfântul Teofilact Arhiepiscopul Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Luca* (București: Sophia, 2007), 216-217.

⁴⁷³ 1 John 4:10.

⁴⁷⁴ 1 John 4:19.

⁴⁷⁵ See Genesis 1:26

in his capacity of infinite progress”⁴⁷⁶. Nevertheless, this image represents “not merely a ‘resemblance’ or a ‘property,’”⁴⁷⁷ but “an energy of God-likeness and God-likening,”⁴⁷⁸ whose quality “creates an indissoluble connection between it and the Proto-image, whose copy it is”⁴⁷⁹. This makes the human person a special and original creature, different from the rest of creation “in the ontological nature of this connection, uniting divinity and nothing, immersing the ‘energies’ of the divine life in creatureliness”⁴⁸⁰. A direct implication of this statement is “a certain inseparability of God and man”⁴⁸¹ which is not external but essential. It suggests the idea that humans are so deeply united with their Creator that any attempt of separation would lead to tragic existential imbalances and crises in their lives. We could conclude that humans were created as beings designed and destined to love, and that they could never be fully satisfied with anything less than genuine love. It is only in this sense that we can accept a “pre-destination,” in as much as we were ‘programmed’ as loving and lovable beings.

The image of God as the Loving Father persists even in our most corrupted spiritual states⁴⁸². It is a powerful motive that can bear significant impact in our contemporary society’s struggle to understand God’s love amidst so many shocking events and violent wars. This is also one of the images that led to the final conversion of Bulgakov during a visit to a Russian hermitage. He describes the episode as follows

Then suddenly I found myself before the Elder’s cell. I had been led there. I had intended to go in another direction, but absent-mindedly took the wrong turn...A miracle had happened to me. The Elder, seeing the prodigal son approach, ran to meet me. From him I learned that all human sins were like a drop in the ocean of God’s mercy. I left him forgiven and reconciled, trembling and in tears, feeling as if I were carried on wings...⁴⁸³

⁴⁷⁶ Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Seth Cherney (Boston, MA: Leiden, 2010), 263. Bulgakov also speaks about this infinite progress when he states that the “Creaturely sophianicity presupposes the possibility of unlimited sophianization, the approximation of the image to the Proto-image” in Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 203. To understand this correctly it is necessary to know that for Bulgakov “Man’s sophianicity signifies the universal fullness of his being, whereas his creatureliness signifies this fullness only in a state of potentiality” in *Ibid.*, 202, and that sophianization represents “the reception of grace,” or deification, in *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴⁷⁷ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 202.

⁴⁷⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁷⁹ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁸⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁸¹ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁸² I have analyzed these ideas in detail in my paper: R. Iacob, “Imaginea lui Dumnezeu ca Tată iubitor în Parabola fiului risipitor. (Luca 15: 11-32)” [The image of God as a loving Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15: 11-32)] (MA thesis, Universitatea București, 2010).

⁴⁸³ Christopher Bamford, foreword to *Sophia, the wisdom of God: an outline of Sophiology*, by Sergei Bulgakov rev. ed. (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1993), xii.

One of the most important manifestations of the divine love takes place within the Church, understood as “an object of divine love”⁴⁸⁴. It involves a *synergism*, a “union of divine and creaturely principles, their interpenetration without separation and without confusion”⁴⁸⁵. It can be manifested in a visible, sacramental way, but it can never be totally reduced to it⁴⁸⁶. Without this “giving and receiving of divine gifts”⁴⁸⁷, Christ’s words: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”⁴⁸⁸ would seem utopian. This is possible however in the Church, where the human desire and divine action come together⁴⁸⁹. Here the grace “is not only given to creation; it is also received by creation – *humanum capax divini*”⁴⁹⁰ and this makes the Church “the life of grace, ‘gratification,’ deification in process”.⁴⁹¹

In developing his Sophiology Bulgakov did not try to create a new doctrine, but to elucidate the ways in which the dogma of Divine-humanity could be relevant for his time and help Christianity to overcome the serious challenges it faced. Sophiology for him represented more than an original way of expressing the Orthodox dogma bringing it thus into modernity. It also suited

his simultaneous proclivity to welcome and adopt philosophical systems which claim a watertight universality of application and which appeal to him because of the hope they appear to offer of solving all problems of contemporary Russian society⁴⁹².

In this way, he left us a precious inheritance but also a task to continue his quest of continuously unfolding and applying the Chalcedonian dogma to the diverse contexts we live in today. In fact, if we define Political Theology as the study of the relation between the *Polis* and *Theos*, we will realize that these terms stand precisely for what Chalcedon introduced with its definition of the God-human. In this sense Political Theology would be nothing less than the application of the Chalcedonian dogma of Divine humanity, and its actualization within diverse historical contexts. And since at Chalcedon the Divine and the human natures were regarded as united in Christ “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation,”⁴⁹³ we find in Christ the ontological basis for the union between the *Polis* and *Theos* as well as the preeminent model of their relation. We

⁴⁸⁴ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 265.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁸⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 292.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁸⁸ Matt. 5: 48.

⁴⁸⁹ See Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 297.

⁴⁹⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁹¹ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁹² Walters, *The Development...*, 10.

⁴⁹³ Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1973), 544.

could therefore postulate that no true unity between the two realms can be made apart from Christ, for He said that apart from Him we can do nothing⁴⁹⁴. He is the “one mediator between God and humankind,”⁴⁹⁵ and therefore any effective Political Theology should be first of all thoroughly Christological and at the same time thoroughly Pneumatological, thus following “the Dyad of the Word and the Spirit”⁴⁹⁶ who reveal the Father⁴⁹⁷. This follows the path of pantheosis understood as a “pan-Christism” and a “pan-pneumatism”⁴⁹⁸. These actions interpenetrate, with Christ being “*in the process of being enthroned in the world by the Holy Spirit*”⁴⁹⁹ leading to “the Divine-human deification of creation”⁵⁰⁰. Although it begins within history, the full accomplishment of the deification of entire creation through the common work of God and humanity will be achieved in eschatological times, when “God may be all in all”⁵⁰¹.

§ 2. POLITICAL THEOLOGY

B. SOPHIOLOGY AS HISTORIOSOPHY

Bulgakov’s Sophiology was a comprehensive worldview which unsurprisingly also included a speculative philosophy of history. His study is based on an analysis of history, exploring the evolutionary path of humanity and its impact on the natural world. The central goal of his historiosophy was to find the ultimate goal of creation, and to investigate if God and humanity could work together towards its achievement. Bulgakov considered that the main questions of historiosophy were present more than ever in the collective mentality of his epoch,⁵⁰² perhaps also an effect of the atmosphere created at that time by the Two World Wars.

In as much as it includes all the human stances and activities, this aspect of Sophiology is also significantly political. Bulgakov gave a brief account of his philosophy of history in the sixth chapter of his book *The Bride of the Lamb*⁵⁰³. He has an original and

⁴⁹⁴ Cf. John 15:5.

⁴⁹⁵ 1 Timothy 2: 5.

⁴⁹⁶ For more information about the idea of a Divine Dyad see Bulgakov, “The Dyad of the Word and the Spirit,” in *The Comforter*, 177-189.

⁴⁹⁷ See *Id.*, *Sophia...*, 46.

⁴⁹⁸ *Id.*, *The Comforter*, 284.

⁴⁹⁹ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁰⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁰¹ 1 Corinthians 15:28.

⁵⁰² See Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 19. Among these questions Bulgakov indicates those “concerning humanity’s destiny in history and beyond its limits, humanity’s creativity and its responsibility to its own Divine-humanity” in Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 19.

⁵⁰³ Bulgakov analyzes the Russian Church history in his 1922 *U Sten Khersonesa [At the walls of Cherson]*, translated in Italian with an introductory essay by Maria Campatelli - Sergej N. Bulgakov, “*Presso le mura di Chersoneso*”. *Per una teologia della cultura* (Rome: Lipa, 1998), and in his article: Sergius Bulgakov, “The Old and the New: A Study in Russian Religion,” *The Slavonic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Mar., 1924): 487-513.

modern view of the 'evolution' of history which could accommodate more easily different scientific theories and appreciates the role of human agency in the historic process. Bulgakov admits an evolution of history as "the dynamic development of its statics,"⁵⁰⁴ meaning that the fullness of creation "is not yet a fully actualized one but is still only potential"⁵⁰⁵. This view allows for a superior recognition of the role of human creativity in the process of "humanization of the world and of man himself, [and] the manifestation of the fullness of powers implanted in his humanity"⁵⁰⁶. These are ideas already developed by Bulgakov the political economist, in his *Philosophy of Economy*.

For Bulgakov the fullness of creation is twofold. On the one hand he places the primordial fullness conferred to it by God, and on the other the actualization of this fullness in time through a "human self-creative activity in the world"⁵⁰⁷. Although essential for the full development of the potentialities 'implanted' by God in creation, ontologically, the human effort does not introduce anything new in creation. This would contradict the account of creation in Genesis and imply that in fact God's creative act was deficient. The human person acts in the world "not as creator 'out of nothing' of course, but as the accomplisher of God's designs"⁵⁰⁸. This endeavour does not represent only a way of subsistence for the human agent, but contributes to the development and 'maturing' of creation, without which "the universe cannot attain its end and its ultimate transfiguration, the passage to the new state of the future age"⁵⁰⁹. However, although the world is subject to a continuous creation "into the fullness of its being,"⁵¹⁰ ultimately the realization of this fullness will be "a new action of God upon the world, analogous to its creation"⁵¹¹.

Human activity is clearly inevitable in history. Its inescapability may however be perceived as a curse or a blessing. Depending on its goals, it can move towards progress or, on the contrary towards decline and collapse. A series of rhetorical questions naturally occurs

Can human creative activity be accomplished in the name of Christ; can it be the work of Christ's humankind? Does it accomplish God's original and unchanging will concerning humanity, or does it consist in robbery and revolt?...[and finally] Does the human creative activity manifested in history belong to the kingdom of God, and is it destined for future glorification, or is it the domain only of the prince of this world? Is Christ the King to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given? Or does He reign only in heavens, outside and above this sinful world?⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁴ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 315.

⁵⁰⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁵⁰⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁰⁹ *loc. cit.*

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁵¹¹ *loc. cit.*

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 326.

It is said that in some contexts it is harder to ask the right questions than to give the right answer, and I believe that in the context we live in today questions such as the above are more necessary than ever. As an answer to all of these questions, Bulgakov proposes his optimistic perspective. Christ is without question the King of this world, not only as God but also through his human nature⁵¹³. Our Lord has already ‘conquered’ this kingdom through his earthly sacrifice, but the effects of this victory are developing in history and humanity since then⁵¹⁴. Due to this constant process, in the end there will be “nothing human that would not be made divine-human,”⁵¹⁵ since “the kingdom of God is being built in the world on the foundation ‘which is Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 3:11)”⁵¹⁶. However, this is not to be understood as blind determinism or automatism which sanctifies creation through a violation of its laws or its freedom. The great and challenging task of building the kingdom of God in the world was entrusted to the Church, which “acts as a leaven, until all the dough rises”⁵¹⁷. This course is described by Bulgakov as an “ecclesialization”⁵¹⁸ of the world.

Nonetheless, this process is not evolving constantly and by itself, without any external influences. There are forces that do not only affect it but actually fight against it, making its evolution a task which is an ever difficult one to achieve, “for our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”⁵¹⁹.

Bulgakov made a parallel between the apocalyptic figure of the beast rising out of the sea⁵²⁰ “which affirms itself as the supreme and unique principle...*in place* of the spirit, *against* the spirit”⁵²¹ and the absolutist state “that does not recognize any principle superior to itself; it is the ideology of force, which tramples conscience and, as such, is inevitably theomachic in character”⁵²². In historical sequence the first ‘battle’ against the absolutistic Roman state has already been though by the Christians of the first centuries, but we have unfortunately experienced an even crueller battle in the second half of the twentieth century⁵²³; the countries under communist regimes were exposed in varying degrees to the evil represented by their atheistic ideology and violence⁵²⁴.

⁵¹³ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁵¹⁴ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁵¹⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁵¹⁶ *loc. cit.*

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵¹⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁵¹⁹ Eph. 6: 12.

⁵²⁰ See Apoc. 13: 1.

⁵²¹ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 328.

⁵²² *loc. cit.*

⁵²³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 328-329. Bulgakov, the visionary, himself a victim of the Communist regime, was warning here about the danger represented by the absolute state in its materialistic-atheist form.

⁵²⁴ The estimated number of victims in U.S.S.R reaches 20 million deaths, with another 1 million deaths in Eastern Europe, while the total number of victims worldwide rises between 85 million and 100 million. Cf.

As an antidote to such atrocious deviations Bulgakov proposed a visionary plan which involves the active participation of the Church in society, with all its creative and transformative powers. Given the Church's awareness of the negative forces always active in the world, its task "consists not in ascetically deadening the human nature but in manifesting it in the power and fullness of Christian inspiration"⁵²⁵. One would perhaps wonder what this power and fullness of the Church, understood as Christianity in its whole, could be. Without going into unnecessary deductions, it suffices to assume what has always been believed, namely that the power of Christianity lays not in its institutionalized organization, but in its divine institution. We have seen an expression of this institutional frailty caused by its human aspect in the inability to resist different oppressions and to oppose such totalitarian systems as the Nazi and the Communist regimes in Europe. Today we experience yet another form of such an institutional feebleness in the incapacity of Christianity to gather together as a single Christian body. Therefore, if the power cannot be drawn from its human organization, we should assume that it is above where we should seek for it.

The power of the Church is visible in its divine-human aspect, in its capacity to bring the Heaven on Earth and spiritualize humanity and the entire creation through its sanctifying acts and sacraments. However, despite constantly looking above and interceding through its prayers for the divine grace, Christianity should never become "in-human or extrahuman"⁵²⁶. On the contrary, it must be entirely aware of its human component so that it can develop it on its utmost potential. Conscious that its power is not that of itself but that which God entrusted to it, Christianity

cannot be noncreative and passive in history. All passivity is a capitulation before the enemy, who occupies the place left vacant. We observe this in history in the enslavement of Christianity or, more precisely, of 'Moses' seat' (Matt. 23: 2) by the pagan state and the powers of this age, by the rulling classes.⁵²⁷

Bulgakov was a vigorous militant for a dynamic and innovative presence of Christianity in society, even if he understood that a full Christianization of the world would never be accomplished within the boundaries of history⁵²⁸. He nevertheless contends that Christianity must be present and involved in the *polis*, so that its lethargy would not be considered a surrender to the enemy. Here one could make a parallel between Bulgakov's prophetic call and those issued by such theologians of the German Political Theology as Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz or Dorothee Sölle. For example, Moltmann has

Stéphane Courtois *et al.*, eds., *The black book of communism. crimes, terror, repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), x and *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵²⁵ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 331.

⁵²⁶ *loc. cit.*

⁵²⁷ *loc. cit.*

⁵²⁸ See *Ibid.*, 335.

assumed that the inability of the churches to resist the Nazi Leviathan could have been caused by the limitation of the 'Two Kingdom' doctrine proposed by Luther⁵²⁹. As opposed to what Political Theology and Bulgakov put forward, this doctrine

insisted on allotting spheres of influence to Church and State, which resulted in a withdrawal into interiority for the faith, as the political realm was left in the hands of the princes. Coupled with this quietism, Luther's uncompromising refusal of the right of resistance, even against unjust rulers, was of course, a disastrous precedent.⁵³⁰

Bulgakov was fully aware of the danger of privatization of the faith, cautioning that "one should not limit the power of the Church to the inner world of man, just as one should not see its manifestations only in the external action of the ecclesiastical organization"⁵³¹. Solovyov argued before him that while the first tendency was characteristic especially of the Eastern Christianity, the second was more an attribute of the Christian West⁵³². Similarly, Metz made "the critique of the privatised bourgeois Christianity that so spectacularly failed when put to the test in Germany in the 1930s"⁵³³. Both of these attitudes come against Hanna Arendt's claim that "Christianity lacks an *amor mundi*; it promotes an inner withdrawal from the world, and is therefore incompatible with politics"⁵³⁴. In a synthesis of these diverging opinions, Solovyov preserves his optimism while confronted with the religious crisis of his time, showing that

The old, traditional form of religion issues from faith in God...Contemporary extrareligious civilization proceeds from belief in humanity...But when both of these beliefs, the belief in God and the belief in humanity are carried consistently to the end and actualized in full, they meet in the one, complete, integral truth of the *Divine humanity*⁵³⁵

We can find in Solovyov's idea the departing point for the historiosophy further developed by Bulgakov. While he accused the Church of its different historical faults, such as the Inquisition or any other limitation of freedom or "persecution of thought and knowledge,"⁵³⁶ Bulgakov also admitted that "the direct influence of historical ecclesiality on the history of culture can inwardly transform the elements of the world"⁵³⁷. Even if it is not

⁵²⁹ See Kirwan, *Political...*, 114.

⁵³⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁵³¹ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 331.

⁵³² Cf. Sergeev, *Sophiology*, 71

⁵³³ Kirwan, *Political...*, 101

⁵³⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁵³⁵ Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 24.

⁵³⁶ Bulgakov, *The Bride...*, 331.

⁵³⁷ *loc. cit.*

frequently possible to observe it directly, “for it is accomplished inwardly by virtue of an inspiration that deifies creation by the general atmosphere of its thought and life,”⁵³⁸ such a transformation is real and effective. Ultimately the life of the Church, understood as an

ecclesial humanism needs to manifest its potencies by a creative activity that is accomplished by the gifts of the Spirit, of the Pentecost, and that embraces the whole cosmos⁵³⁹

Bulgakov tries to present the antinomies he confronted with in their entirety. While he speaks about deification of creation which is accomplished “by the gifts of the Spirit”, at the same time he cannot accept a human creative activity characterized by a lack of freedom, or by a “mechanical automatism”⁵⁴⁰. Here he balances between and accepts altogether both the necessity of divine grace as well as of human freedom in the realization of personal salvation and spiritualization of creation. Another antinomy emerges here, corresponding to the individual and the collective aspect of creative activity.

Due to its reliance on the human freedom and to the fact that “it is not singular in character but universal,”⁵⁴¹ the sphere of creative activity “is so susceptible to being corrupted by sin”⁵⁴². While on the personal level the sin could be characterized by a refusal of communion with God and his divine grace, on the communitarian one it can be described as “a broad development of creativity ‘in its own name,’ by a deluge of anthropotheism, in the form of a luciferian creative intoxication, and by an immersion in dull sensual paganism,”⁵⁴³ still so present in our society characterized by a secular culture, atheism and sensuality.

Bulgakov warns us that such “developments cannot be overcome by mere rejection; they can be overcome only by the unfolding of a positive Christian doctrine of the world and creative activity, and by manifestation of its power”⁵⁴⁴. This brings us back to the recurring theme of the Chalcedonian dogma “according to which the fullness of the human nature and the entire power of human creative will and energy in Christ are united with the divine nature, are co-manifested with it and are deified by it”⁵⁴⁵. The effects of this initial union in Christ are valid for the entire humanity⁵⁴⁶, making it possible that the very human creative activity can be performed in the name of God, eventually raising the entire cosmos toward deification⁵⁴⁷.

⁵³⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁵³⁹ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴⁰ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴¹ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴² *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁵⁴⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴⁶ See *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴⁷ See *loc. cit.*

For Bulgakov human history is primarily ecclesiastical history, since for him the Church is “not only outer and institutional, in the sense of her destiny in the world, but also inner, as the spiritual force that accomplishes Divine-humanity”⁵⁴⁸. Yet, this complete synergy is not mechanically achieved; within human history, the success of its achievement is not guaranteed in any sense. As Bulgakov puts it,

the fundamental, guiding idea of this historiosophy is that the history of the Church is not a peaceful ‘progress’ that leads to a harmonious resolution within the limits of this time, but a battle and a tragedy that end in a universal-historical catastrophe and a universal fire...And the *whole* of world history consists of the growth in intensity of this spiritual antagonism and combat⁵⁴⁹.

The limitation of the “petty-bourgeoisie,” as Bulgakov calls it, of Marx and the socialists in general was that they could not perceive the complete dimension of this progress, limiting it only to the economic aspects⁵⁵⁰. Although they may appear similar, the main difference between Christian humanism and the “petty-bourgeois” one lays in the fact that while for the former one “eschatological progress is a *condition of the end*,”⁵⁵¹ for the latter “the evolutionary progress is a complete *rejection* of the end, and its replacement by bad infinity, which continues on the same historical plane”⁵⁵². This does not imply that the historical process is without its own intrinsic value. As Bulgakov affirms, “in history all that can be achieved with regard to the earthly contribution to the construction of the City of God must be achieved”⁵⁵³.

In the conclusion of his ideas about the purpose of history Bulgakov urges us to never deny the importance of history “solely because it will pass through fire,”⁵⁵⁴ since between history and eschatology there is a “certain ontological identity...by virtue of the fact that the new creation is based on the original creation”⁵⁵⁵. This gives us great responsibility, as it makes us aware of being part of a grander plan regarding creation and its transfiguration in Eschaton. But at the same time, we are reminded that “nothing earthly should be absolutized,”⁵⁵⁶ and that “all earthly things must be perceived in the light of the coming end, the eschatological culmination”⁵⁵⁷. This ‘eschatological mentality’ is essential, since in fact “it is precisely this that gives to earthly works their exclusive significance,

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁵⁴⁹ *loc. cit.* Italics belong to the author.

⁵⁵⁰ See *loc. cit.*, n. 4.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 344. Italics belong to the author.

⁵⁵² *loc. cit.* Italics belong to the author.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁵⁵⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁶ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁷ *loc. cit.*

placing them in the perspective of eternity”⁵⁵⁸. “Man’s likeness to God is actualized in historical creative activity,”⁵⁵⁹ and history is considered “the *common work* of humankind”⁵⁶⁰. However, “this creative work not only does not exclude the participation of the divine power but even presupposes it”⁵⁶¹.

C. THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

One of the most important ideas of Bulgakov’s ecclesiology, which has significant power to challenge the way we imagine and construct the relations between the Church and the State, is his comprehensive understanding of the Church, recognized as an organism which is universal not only in its potentiality but also in fact. Based on this original view one should be able to make a resourceful and creative contribution to the area of Political Theology. One of the immediate consequences would be the way in which the classic question of Political Theology: “Should the Church be involved in society?” is formulated. If one understands the Church as a global organism (*sobornost*) they are impelled to pose the question the other way around, namely: “should society be involved in the Church?”. Thus being formulated, the question becomes rhetorical or perhaps even nonsensical.

If, like Bulgakov, we could understand the Church as not merely including a part of humanity but ontologically *being* humanity, our question would become an affirmation and a pledge for the continuous and active involvement of society in the Church as an institution. This direct and vigorous participation is not simply a right acquired by the laity at a certain moment in time⁵⁶² but exactly the nature of the Church as it is. The Church essentially needs this participation. Without it, the Church is prejudiced and endangered, like organism breathing with only one lung⁵⁶³. Some of the consequences of clericalism can already be noticed with the emergence of the so-called phenomenon of secularization, especially or initially in the West, but now threatening the East as well. I believe that, besides other causes, this trend was a natural consequence of the reduced level of participation of laity in the life of the Church. And this is a fact which should bring the Church to metanoia, understood not simply as repentance, but literally as a “change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook, of man’s vision of the world and of himself, and a new way of loving others and God”⁵⁶⁴. This is not as much about

⁵⁵⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 343. Italics belong to the author.

⁵⁶¹ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁶² In the West we could associate it with the Vatican II and in the Eastern Christianity with the participation of laity in national and local Church Councils, expressed in the regulations of the Church administration.

⁵⁶³ Using the metaphor employed by Blessed Pope John Paul II when he described the relation between the Catholic and Orthodox Church.

⁵⁶⁴ “Repentance and Confession – Introduction” <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8493> (accessed October 20, 2011). The article continues with a quote from *The Shepherd of Hermas* which can be very relevant for our view: “[metanoia] implies ‘great understanding,’ discernment. It involves, that is, not mere

“particular acts of contrition, but an attitude, a state of mind.”⁵⁶⁵ It requires a process of discernment not only at hierarchical level but also at the lay one. What is needed is a profound analysis of all the possible causes that allowed for such a clear-cut separation between the two, together with a renewed consideration of all of the possible ways to restore the normal “unity in diversity” of the Church. Sergei Bulgakov expressed this need of metanoia of the Church in a clear and insightful way. For him, modern atheism, for example, “is not, as it is frequently claims to be, the *zero* of religion, but a *minus* of Christianity”⁵⁶⁶. Moreover, he considers that

Christianity has followed in the train of life, lagging behind, without assuming any leadership. Furthermore, how can one lead in regard to something which one does not accept, in which one does not believe, towards which one’s attitude is merely that of missionary adaptation, of philanthropy, or of moralism?

Here Bulgakov does not plead for a patronizing ‘acceptance’ of the world as a kind of concession to it caused by the unavoidable contact with it. On the contrary, his argument is in favour of a total assumption of the world, understood as God’s good creation, bearing the same divine stamp as Christianity itself. His plead is for a more active participation of Christians in society, for a full appreciation of both their Christian background and position in the public sphere. Here he comes close to C. S. Lewis’ conception of what the leadership of the Church implies. He agrees as well that the Church, understood as the whole body of believers, needs to give a lead to the people⁵⁶⁷. By this leadership he understands

that some Christians—those who happen to have the right talents—should be economists and statesmen, and that all economists and statesmen should be Christians, and that their whole efforts in politics and economics should be directed to putting ‘Do as you would be done by’ into action.⁵⁶⁸

This would ease, Lewis claims, the finding of “the Christian solution for our own social problems”⁵⁶⁹. But at the same time he is aware that when people ask the Church to give them a lead, “most people mean they want the clergy to put out a political programme”⁵⁷⁰. He finds this second approach to be at least impractical. His argument runs as follows:

regret of past evil but a recognition by man of a darkened vision of his own condition, in which sin, by separating him from God, has reduced him to a divided, autonomous existence, depriving him of both his natural glory and freedom”. To this I would add that even the recognition of one’s sinful state, although essential, cannot be achieved by the human persons alone. In their darkened state only a light from above can be the source of such a regenerated spiritual vision.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, 15.

⁵⁶⁷ See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 83.

⁵⁶⁸ *loc. cit*

⁵⁶⁹ *loc. cit*

⁵⁷⁰ *loc. cit*

The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained and set aside to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live for ever: and we are asking them to do a quite different job for which they have not been trained. The job is really on us, on the laymen. The application of Christian principles, say, to trade unionism or education, must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters: just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists—not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time.⁵⁷¹

One could object that Lewis stands here for the privatization of the Church, which has already been condemned by different theologians and especially those pertaining to the German Political Theology for being one of the causes of the success of totalitarian regimes and the incapacity of the Churches to resist them. But here Lewis does exactly the opposite, and in an original and fascinatingly lucid manner. He does not intend in any way to lift the burden from the shoulders of the Church and transfer it to those of lay people. Like Bulgakov, he does not divide the Church between clergy and lay people, but views it as the unique body of Christ. Rather than looking for the source of evil in institutions and practices, he finds the problem exactly in the human persons themselves⁵⁷².

If the entire society were truly Christian, then the problem of totalitarian leaders would not exist. Nonetheless, this does not absolve the Church of its fault, but the opposite. And here we can find the main responsibility of the Church. Her main task is not to assume political leadership, but to take care of the Christian education of its members. And this includes the formation of the future political leaders. If sometimes the Church found herself in the position to challenge the oppressive practices of the absolutist state, this was precisely because she has not performed her formative mission well.

Rowan Williams presents Bulgakov's critique of the fact that "theology must sail between the Scylla of social utopianism, the Church identifying itself with a confident progressivism, and the Charybdis of clericalism, the Church seeking to control the social process"⁵⁷³. The exit pass from these 'Caudine Forks' is simply for the Church "to be what it is meant to be, a living model of renewed social relationships depending upon renewed relation with God"⁵⁷⁴. Here Williams finds some similarities between Bulgakov's vision and those of Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas and William Stringfellow⁵⁷⁵. In order to be able to transform society and its structures, the Church should first of all inwardly transform herself⁵⁷⁶. Nevertheless, this does not suggest a flight from this world, but only a metanoia,

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁵⁷² See Kathleen Norris, foreword to *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis, (New York: HarperOne, 2001), XVIII.

⁵⁷³ Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov...*, 233.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁵⁷⁵ See *loc. cit.*, n. 13.

⁵⁷⁶ See *loc. cit.*

a radical inner transformation of the Church⁵⁷⁷. The need of Christian activism is not suppressed, since without it “people will be drawn away to the counter-religion of socialism”⁵⁷⁸. Bulgakov is not proposing the abolition of spiritual asceticism or of social activism, but only the correct chronological succession of these moments. Together with Paul Valliere we will conclude that Bulgakov’s project was “to develop a theology of engagement with and involvement in the secular world, to offer a sympathetic theological interpretation of secular experience, and thereby to introduce into Orthodox theology a more positive and affirmative relationship between church and world than can be found in the traditional fathers of the Church”⁵⁷⁹.

Conclusions

Studying Fr. Sergei Bulgakov’s thought and especially his Sophiology one may find pertinent answers to the spiritual crisis of our time, since for him “sophiology is a theology of *crisis*, not of disintegration, but of salvation”⁵⁸⁰. He conceived his theological work in permanent connection with the issues of his time especially Manichaeism and secularization, which still affect our society today. Bulgakov perceived the crisis of his time in all its profound implications. He identified this impasse with a spiritual crisis of humanity which affected in its turn science, culture and politics and all areas of human activity. Since the nature of the crisis was spiritual the responsibility for this difficult situation fell on the Church. As Bulgakov remarked

the secularization of life—only indicates the general spiritual paralysis of modern Christianity, which is, in practice, powerless to direct or to control life. Instead it submits to the existing order of things. Such worship of the status quo shows that it has no answer to the problems of life.⁵⁸¹

This tendency is furthermore aggravated by another one, namely a ‘pious’ Manichaeism which constantly “confronts human with an ‘either, or’—either God or the world”⁵⁸². Finally, when both these attitudes are present in the Church and

“salvation” is interpreted as a flight from the world, and is at the same time associated with a servile attitude toward it, we cannot be surprised that the

⁵⁷⁷ Cf. *loc. cit.*

⁵⁷⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁷⁹ Paul Valliere, “Russian religious thought and the future of Orthodox theology,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* vol. 45 (2001): 232.

⁵⁸⁰ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the wisdom of God: an outline of sophiology*, rev. ed. (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne 1993), 21. The italics belong to the author. From now on I will only signal my own edit in the texts.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁸² *loc. cit.*

world turns away more and more from such Christianity, and come to regard itself and its own life as constituting its own standard of values.⁵⁸³

This enables Bulgakov to see the contemporary atheism not as a lack of spirituality or religion, and precisely not as “the *zero* of religion, but a *minus* o Christianity”⁵⁸⁴. This drama of modernity should cause a *metanoia* of the Church, a reconsideration of its lacks and sins, a true desire to repent, and a concrete action taken in this sense. Sophiology therefore, has considerable significance for us today, and determines Bulgakov to prophetically state that “The future of living Christianity rests with the sophianic interpretation of the world and of its destiny”⁵⁸⁵.

⁵⁸³ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁸⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.