

Bulgakov's Sophiology as a Faithful Expression of Byzantine Tradition

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This paper carefully unpacks Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov's conception of Sophia and contends by way of conclusion that Bulgakov's writings about the figure of divine Wisdom are consistent with the ideas and practices of Byzantine theology. The paper's description of Bulgakov's Sophia is productively situated in relation to several theological traditions and draws on an impressive array of texts, which include (but are not limited to) Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Clement of Alexandria's Exhortation to the Greeks, and the "Novgorod icon" of St. Sophia. Ultimately, the paper presents a lucid and well-contextualized synopsis of Bulgakov's arguments about Sophia, and the paper's conclusion—which claims that "Bulgakov's thought

effectively overcomes the perennial dualisms and disciplinary divisions of the post-Kantian West"—leaves readers eager for more.

Anglican theologian John Milbank suggests, in a recent essay, that "perhaps the most significant theology of the two preceding centuries has been that of the Russian sophiological tradition."¹ This claim is remarkable, as it bears powerful witness to the rapid growth of interest sophiology—the theological study of divine Wisdom—has garnered in recent decades. Despite this growth, however, the question of sophiology's legitimacy remains a profoundly vexed one, particularly in Eastern Orthodox circles. Given the increasing relevance of and controversy surrounding sophiology, this paper will be mainly devoted to introducing the oft-misunderstood sophiology of Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov (d. 1944), with a special focus on the ways it interprets

and relates to earlier Jewish, Byzantine, and Slavonic tradition. Of the Russian sophiologists, Bulgakov is both the most theologically precise and the most verifiably orthodox; indeed, in many ways, his project can be understood as an attempt to give conclusive theological structure to the more ecstatic intuitions one finds in the writings of earlier Orthodox sophiologists (chiefly Vladimir Solovyov and Pavel Florensky). After offering a cursory introduction to Bulgakov's thought, I will close by suggesting that his sophiology represents—in much of its theological content and, more broadly, in the approach of its theologizing—an authentic expression of Byzantine theology in the modern era.

¹ John Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon," in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word*, ed. Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 45.

DIVINE SOPHIA IN JEWISH, BYZANTINE, AND RUSSIAN TRADITION

Sophiology begins, for Bulgakov, with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The books of Proverbs, Baruch, Wisdom, and Sirach all speak of and describe the feminine figure of Sophia, the wisdom of God. For the most part, this Sophia is portrayed in general, qualitative terms, as something like a virtue or key to human happiness (e.g., Prov. 3:18). Curiously, though, in several significant instances she is depicted instead as “a mysterious being in God, created before all time, who works together in the creation and counsels God.”² The Lord is said, in Proverbs 8, to have “created [Sophia] as the beginning of his ways” and “founded [her] in the beginning,” delighting in her as she aided him in “fitting together” created reality (8:22-23, 8:29-30).³ “Before all things,” writes Jesus ben Sirach, the Lord “created [Sophia], and he saw and enumerated her and poured her out upon all his works” (1:4, 1:9). This biblical personification of Sophia reaches its apogee in the Wisdom of Solomon, wherein Sophia is “presented in Her relationship to creation and the cosmos” in striking lucidity, as that “spiritual power which creates, permeates, enlivens, and renews all things.”⁴ She is a “clear effluence from the glory of the Almighty” who, issuing forth from God, “pervades and permeates all things” (7:24-26); “Herself unchanging, she makes all things new” (7:27).⁵

Who, precisely, is this quasi-personal, quasi-

divine Sophia of the Old Testament? This question surfaced only briefly in the thought of the patristic period. Irenaeus of Lyons and Theophilus of Antioch had both, in the 2nd century, identified the Sophia of Proverbs 8 with the Holy Spirit. Theirs quickly became a minority opinion, however, as the vast majority of Christian writers from the 3rd century forward (especially amid the Arian controversy), opted for a strict equation of Sophia with the divine Logos.⁶ This christological equation resulted, for better or worse, in a gradual forgetting of the question of Sophia within Byzantine theology: the Old Testament’s depiction of Sophia was generally remembered only as a distant site of a long-settled christological dispute.

And yet, if the question of Sophia was forgotten within Eastern theology, it nevertheless remained alive within what Bulgakov calls the “liturgical consciousness”⁷ of the Byzantine world. The 6th century dedication of the Hagia Sophia to divine Wisdom, in particular, marks a “definite landmark in the creative activity of the epoch,”⁸ as the first of many Eastern churches to creatively grapple with the mystery of Sophia. “For from that time,” writes Bulgakov, “churches dedicated to Sophia began to be built both in Byzantium and in Slavonic countries, with a wealth of mysterious symbolism.”⁹ There can be no doubt that the design of Hagia Sophia implicitly equates Sophia with the person of Christ, who is depicted in a 9th century mosaic over the church’s main entrance; as Judith Kornblatt notes,

² Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation*, trans. James Morgante (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1998), 12.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations in this paper are taken from the New English Translation of the Septuagint. Following Orthodox tradition, Bulgakov placed a high value on both the Masoretic and the LXX renderings of Proverbs. Although he did not consider ‘apocryphal’ books like Sirach and Wisdom officially canonical, Bulgakov repeatedly stressed that these books, by virtue of their historical reception into the church, held an authority in Christian theology second only to that of inspired scripture.

⁴ Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria*, 12.

⁵ Bulgakov was fond of referring to the Wisdom of Solomon as a ‘metaphysical commentary’ on and ‘ontological interpretation’ of the book of Proverbs. And quite rightly so; Wisdom 7:24-27a is probably the most metaphysically profound and daring sophiological text of the entire Septuagint: πάσης γὰρ κινήσεως κινητικώτερον σοφία, διήκει δὲ καὶ χωρεῖ διὰ πάντων διὰ τὴν καθαρότητα· ἀτμὶς γὰρ ἐστὶ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ δυνάμεως καὶ ἀπόρροια τῆς τοῦ Παντοκράτορος δόξης εἰλικρινής· διὰ τοῦτο οὐδὲν μεμιαμμένον εἰς αὐτὴν παρεμπίπτει. ἀπαύγασμα γὰρ ἐστὶ φωτὸς αἰδίου καὶ ἔσοπτρον ἀκηλίδωτον τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐνεργείας καὶ εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ. μία δὲ οὐσα πάντα δύναται καὶ μένουσα ἐν αὐτῇ τὰ πάντα καινίζει.

⁶ It is worth noting that both parties involved in the Arian controversy accepted this equation. The exegetical disputes between Athanasius and his opponents, for example, centered around how—and not *whether*—Proverbs 8 suitably speaks of the Logos.

⁷ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke, and Xenia Braikveitc (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

“The location of the mosaic over the main entrance suggests it is a depiction of the church’s patron saint, in this case St. Sophia. He/She/It is Christ enthroned.”¹⁰ And yet, this identification of Christ with Sophia need not be understood in reductive or simplistic terms: as Bulgakov puts it, Hagia Sophia is not dedicated *merely* to Christ, but more precisely to “Christ in the aspect of *Sophia*—to Christ-*Sophia*.”¹¹

The dedication of Hagia Sophia to divine Wisdom inspired the construction of numerous sophianic churches in early centuries of Slavonic Christianity, the most notable of which are the 11th century cathedrals of Kiev and Novgorod. Both of these cathedrals differ markedly from Hagia Sophia, however, by commemorating their foundings on feast days associated with the Virgin Mary rather than with Christ. This development clearly suggests, if not an identification, some sort of intimate connection between divine Wisdom and the Virgin.¹² Thus, early in the history of Russian sophiology, “along with the christological emphasis . . . another, mariological, emphasis emerges.”¹³ Far from resolving the ambiguity of Old Testament sophiology, these Byzantine and Russian churches add to it further layers of christological and mariological depth.

The collective ambiguity of biblical, architectural, and liturgical sophiology takes on visual form in the famous ‘Novgorod icon’ of St Sophia, located in the Novgorod cathedral and praised by Florensky as “the most ancient and remarkable”¹⁴ depiction of Sophia in

Orthodox tradition (Fig. 1). According to at least one venerable account, this icon is a replica of an earlier Byzantine image in a Constantinopolitan church.¹⁵ Whatever its provenance, there can be no doubt that the Novgorod icon masterfully recapitulates, in visual form, the collective multivalence of early Byzantine and Slavonic sophiology.¹⁶ When Paul Evdokimov observes (correctly) that “There are no absolutely convincing explanations about the meaning of [the Novgorod icon’s] enigmatic figure,”¹⁷ he effectively expresses the historical consensus of Jewish, Byzantine, and early Slavonic tradition regarding divine Wisdom.

BULGAKOV’S SOPHIOLOGICAL VISION

It is from within this foggy tradition of “hieroglyphic sophiology”¹⁸ that Bulgakov develops his theology. Bulgakov sees, in the elusive figure of divine Sophia, tremendous potential: both to work out various problematic tensions latent within Christian dogma and to respond to certain modern challenges posed by Darwinism and German Idealism.¹⁹ Solovyov and Florensky had already begun this twofold project, but it remained for Bulgakov to articulate their sophiological insights in a sufficiently systematic and orthodox manner.

Bulgakov begins his interpretation of Sophia with a constructive critique of traditional trinitarian dogma. The received dogmatic formula consists in

¹⁰ Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 49.

¹¹ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 2.

¹² For a brief but rich account of the historical relationship between Mariology and the pre-existing pantheistic religion of the Russian world (which may well have been responsible for the mariological emphases of Russian sophiology) see Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia*, 51-55. For a broad, encyclopedic study of the relationship between the Virgin Mary and Sophia in both Eastern and Western thought, see Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria*. For a developed presentation of Bulgakov’s own Mariology (which deals minorly with the relationship between Sophia and the Virgin), see Sergei Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009).

¹³ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 4.

¹⁴ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 268.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 268-269. Following this account, Florensky considers the icon “probably contemporary with the construction of the cathedral” and therefore, “at least in content if not in execution, one of the oldest Russian icons.”

¹⁶ For detailed Orthodox interpretations of the Novgorod icon, see Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 267-272 and Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Fr. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), 345-353.

¹⁷ Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, 345.

¹⁸ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 2.

¹⁹ For an account of the ways Bulgakov’s sophiology interacts with, is influenced by, and responds to these challenges posed by the German Idealist tradition (especially by the thought of Schelling) and Darwinism, see Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy.”

two basic postulates: the tri-unity of Father, Son, and Spirit, on the one hand, and the consubstantiality, or common *ousia*, of these hypostases, on the other. While much attention has been devoted, throughout the church's history, to speaking properly about the tri-unity of God—about the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit— almost none has been devoted to understanding the way in which the three divine hypostases are identical in *ousia*. Instead, and much to Bulgakov's dismay, the term *ousia* has unfortunately tended to function purely as a kind of "philosophical abstraction"²⁰ or verbal placeholder, altogether bereft of theological content. This tendency to speak of *ousia* in abstraction has resulted in an impoverished and incomplete trinitarianism, one which dangerously verges on tritheism by failing to uphold or emphasize the *essential* identity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

But precisely how should we speak of or understand the divine *ousia*, then? Bulgakov insists that the divine *ousia* is not something in any way separable or really distinct from the divine life of the Trinity, such that we could conceive of it 'on its own,' abstracted from what has been revealed of God's economic trinitarian activity. Rather, when we affirm that the Father, Son, and Spirit exist together, from all eternity, in a common *ousia*, what we affirm is that the three trinitarian hypostases eternally share and live a *single common life* with one another.

Bulgakov is convinced, moreover, that scripture offers us a "revealed teaching on [this] life of the triune God."²¹ The triune "life of God in his divinity," he asserts, "is precisely what Scripture calls Sophia, or the Wisdom of God."²² Bulgakov thus identifies the inadequate *ousia* of trinitarian dogma with the ambiguous Sophia of biblical and Orthodox tradition; the figure of Sophia, he argues, is nothing other than a personification of God's triune life. In the language of the Wisdom of Solomon, Sophia is a

perfect effluence of trinitarian light, arising eternally as a "fine mist" from the *perichoresis* of Father, Son, and Spirit. She is, in Bulgakov's expression, the very 'divine world' in which the divine hypostases, attributes, and creative ideas cohere in perfect unity.

It is crucial to note here, however, that Bulgakov does not attribute *personhood* to Sophia; on the contrary, he repeatedly insists that one not conceive of Sophia as a 'fourth hypostasis' alongside the Father, Son, and Spirit. And yet, at the same time, Bulgakov affirms that Sophia is eternally *personified* by God, as that *tripersonal* divinity which unites Father, Son, and Spirit as one God. In their love for one another, one might dare to say, the trinitarian Persons eternally 'bring Sophia to life' and personify her (even as, paradoxically, she is the very 'world' in which their interpersonal love occurs in the first place). "Both affirmations are true," writes Bulgakov: "Sophia is the non-hypostatic essence, which yet can exist *only in connection with* the tri-hypostatic person of God."²³

Thus, Sophia is 'possessed' by the Father, Son, and Spirit as that which eternally unites them, the 'world' of their interpersonal love and creative activity. At the same time, the trinitarian hypostases are truly distinct from one another, and therefore possess Sophia in truly distinct ways. "We should learn," for precisely this reason, "to think of the divine Sophia as at the same time threefold and one."²⁴ The Father possesses Sophia as his eternal "self-revelation" in the Son and Spirit; the Son possesses her as the eternal 'content' of the Father's self-revelation; and the Spirit possesses her as the vitalizing *manifestation* of this eternal content. In sum, therefore, we can say that Sophia is simply "the Father manifesting himself through the Son and the Holy Spirit."²⁵

But if Sophia refers to the Father's self-manifestation in the Son and Spirit, what exactly is the 'content' of this paternal self-manifestation? Phrased otherwise, *what* is contained from all eternity

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ Ibid. Bulgakov repeatedly stresses that all trinitarian speculation is rendered possible solely by the self-revelation of God, apart from which we are utterly unable to "penetrate into the inner life of the Deity itself."

²² Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 107; emphasis added.

²³ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 56; emphasis added.

²⁴ Ibid., 37.

²⁵ Ibid., 51. For a helpful account of the ways Sophia is respectively possessed by each of the trinitarian hypostases in Bulgakov's theology, see Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005), 19-32.

in the divine Sophia? Is the content of Sophia limited to the trinitarian relations, or does it somehow extend 'outwardly' beyond them? Here, again, Bulgakov finds his answer in the Old Testament. The wisdom passages quoted above describe Sophia with constant reference to the created order, as that "intelligent purpose" by which God thinks, considers, plans, and *creates* all things (Sir. 1:4). This intimate connection between Sophia and creation suggests, on Bulgakov's take, that Sophia somehow 'contains' not only the essential relations of Father, Son, and Spirit, but also the pre-existent plans of all *created* beings. As Aidan Nichols puts it, Sophia is "the divine nature as containing ... the content of the life of God. And this means not just all the properties of the divine nature but the archetypes of all created things as well."²⁶

Bulgakov is deriving this interpretation, in large part, from patristic and medieval tradition. Many of the fathers, both Eastern and Western, spoke of the 'divine ideas,' the creative thoughts by which God designs creatures and calls them into being. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, wrote in the 3rd century that "We already existed before this world, because our creation was decided by God long before our actual creation. ... Thanks to Him, we are very ancient in origin, because 'in the beginning was the Word.'"²⁷ The logic behind this doctrine is fairly straightforward (and incontrovertible): if the 'ideas' of all created entities were not in some sense contained eternally within God's own life, the divine act of creation would problematically involve what

Bulgakov calls "ontological novelty for God";²⁸ in the moment of God's creative act, that is, something 'new' would be entering the God's consciousness, something of which God had been formerly unaware.

To avoid this obviously unacceptable conclusion, Bulgakov follows the fathers in affirming the doctrine of divine ideas. He adds new sophiological depth to this doctrine, however, by asserting that these creative ideas "make up the ideal content of the Divine Sophia, the life of God."²⁹ Sophia is not only unity of the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit; she is also the "*all-embracing unity ... of the world of ideas.*"³⁰ Like Florensky before him,³¹ Bulgakov thus finds the doctrine of Sophia nascently present within (and therefore justified by!) patristic tradition: "Although the Fathers themselves do not describe [the divine ideas] by the name of the divine Sophia, nevertheless in essence we have here, quite undoubtedly, the divine world considered as the prototype of the creaturely. Thus the doctrine of Sophia as the prototype of creation finds ample support in the tradition of the Church."³²

If Sophia eternally contains the ideas of creation within herself, what does God's *act* of creating the world involve? This question had been posed with particular acuity by the German Idealism of the 19th century (especially in the thought of Schelling³³), and Bulgakov answers it sophiologically: God creates the world by "submerging" Sophia in nothingness.³⁴ That is, God sends forth and, in a real sense, 'repeats' his own divine world of ideas in the

²⁶ Nichols, *Wisdom from Above*, 24.

²⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 1. For an extensive discussion of the relationship between the Russian Sophia and the patristic doctrine of the divine ideas, see Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 237-253. Florensky argues brilliantly, in this discussion, that the Gnostic doctrine of pre-existence is to be condemned not because it asserts that we 'existed before this world,' but because it understands this pre-existence in *too weak* a fashion. Gnostic pre-existence merely extends our chronological history backwards by some lengthy but nevertheless quantifiable amount of time; authentically Christian pre-existence, by contrast, far more daringly locates us in *God's own timeless eternity*. Thus, the Gnostic doctrine of pre-existence fails to sufficiently dignify us as eternal beings: as Florensky quips, "do years make the holy holy?"

²⁸ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 50.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 69.

³¹ As Florensky writes (in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 237), "Sophia is the Great Root of the whole creation. ... That is, Sophia is all-integral creation and not merely *all* creation. Sophia is the Great Root by which creation goes into the intra-Trinitarian life and through which it receives Life Eternal from the One Source of Life. Sophia is the original nature of creation ... The shaping reason with regard to creation, Sophia is the shaped content of God-Reason, His 'psychic content,' eternally created by the Father through the Son and completed in the Holy Spirit: God thinks *by things*."

³² Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 65.

³³ See note 19 above.

³⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of Bulgakov's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, see Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations*

realm of nonbeing. This does not mean, however, that creation is simply an imperfect replica of God's life; rather, by a mysterious power, God confers *real distinctness* and *individuality* upon his creation—the “capacity to maintain its own distinct existence.”³⁵ God creates out of himself, out of his divine Sophia, but nevertheless bestows upon this creation an irrevocable individuality.³⁶ As the divine Sophia is refracted into the realm of nothingness, moreover, the divine ideas contained unitedly within her are separated and diversified into distinct beings, each of which are granted individual identity by God; in Florensky's words, “One in God, [Sophia] is multiple in creation.”³⁷

“By one and the same eternal divine act,” therefore, “God is both God and the Creator.”³⁸ Creation is “an act that belongs to God's eternity.”³⁹ As Bulgakov memorably puts it, “The fact of God's creation of the world certifies that there is a *place for the world* in the divine life.”⁴⁰ In a sense, sophiology bestows the highest dignity possible upon creation: it locates our world, and even our own selves, within the trinitarian life of God himself. “The creaturely world is united with the divine world in divine Sophia. 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 beings.”⁴¹ There is hence no *natura pura*—no created space in any way devoid or independent of divine presence.⁴² Rather, all things are created, permeated, pervaded, and made new by God *in*

Sophia (Wis. 7:27, Ps. 104:24). Through Sophia, God both creates *ex nihilo* a world distinct from himself and call this world eternally back *into* himself. Sophia, in the vision of Bulgakov, is therefore both the presence of the world in God and the presence of God in the world; she is both heavenly and earthly, both uncreated and created, both divine and human. In Florensky's memorable phrase, she is simply that which “unites all.”

CONCLUSION: BULGAKOV'S RELATION TO EARLIER BYZANTINE TRADITION

How should this ambitious sophiological system of Bulgakov's be understood in relation to Byzantine tradition as a whole? It is worth noting, first, that Bulgakov's sophiology derives a substantial amount of its content directly from Byzantine tradition: from the Septuagint, from Orthodox cathedrals and liturgical practices, from the trinitarian and christological formulae of the Councils, from the fathers' writings, etc. Unsurprisingly, then, his theological vision, for all its sophiological novelty, bears substantial resemblance to that of Byzantine Christianity. Bulgakov—no less than Dionysius and Maximus and Palamas before him—understands creation as a theophany, called into being *ex nihilo*, imbued with divine energy, sustained by divine ideas, and eschatologically oriented toward deifying union with its Creator. Granted, Bulgakov incorporates into this theological vision several distinctively sophiological

and Speculations, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 186-192. On Bulgakov's take, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* expresses negatively what the corresponding doctrine of *creatio ex Deo* expresses affirmatively.

³⁵ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 70.

³⁶ The “world rests in the bosom of God like a child in the mother's womb. It lives its own life, its own particular processes run in it which belong to it and not to the mother, but at the same time it exists in the mother and only by the mother.” Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 183.

³⁷ Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 239.

³⁸ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 51. This claim is precisely what leads Bulgakov to insist upon the ‘necessity’ of God's creative act (and, on a related note, what leads him to deny that divine freedom and divine necessity are distinct in any real sense at all). The necessity of creation arises, however, not because God is subject to any external constraints or demands, but because his own, entirely ‘free’ love requires it of him. See Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 120.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47-48; emphasis added.

⁴¹ Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God*, 17.

⁴² For a recent discussion of some of the aesthetic and ecological implications of this sophiological understanding of creation, see Michael Martin, *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015). Martin argues that sophiology is first and foremost a kind of ‘poetic intuition’ of the presence of divinity in creation, and that its traces can be found turning up at various points within the histories of not only Eastern but also Western Christianity (e.g., in the theology of Bonaventure and the poetry of Hopkins).

claims. But even these claims are not simply ‘novel’: as Bulgakov never tires of insisting, sophiology is little more than an attempt to understand and draw out neglected elements of the Byzantine vision that have, in a real sense, been there all along.

And if Bulgakov’s thought hearkens back to that of the Byzantine world in its content, it does so to an even greater degree in its theological *approach*. In characteristically pre-modern fashion, for instance, Bulgakov submits to ecclesial dogma as a real, binding intellectual authority. This acceptance of authority requires, for Bulgakov, that the best of modernity’s ‘pagan’ wisdom—the wisdom of Boehme, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Darwin (*et cetera*)—be understood *in terms of* Orthodox theology. Bulgakov thus re-elevates theology to its medieval status as ‘queen of the sciences,’ and, by doing so, is able to incorporate into his thought the wisdom of his own day’s philosophy and biology in a spiritually constructive way. More than this, Bulgakov’s theocentric approach is uniquely capable of incorporating insights from oft-neglected, more obscure and ‘non-scientific’ sources (e.g., the iconography and religious experience of Byzantium). Thus, by embracing and operating within the structure of ecclesiastical dogma, Bulgakov’s thought effectively overcomes the perennial dualisms and disciplinary divisions of the post-Kantian West (between cognition and aesthetic judgment, faith and reason, phenomena and noumena, and so on). Bulgakov is an heir, instead, to the unabashedly holistic and all-integrative vision of Eastern Christianity, a vision for which truth, goodness, and beauty are ultimately convertible with one another, and for which all truth finds its perfect fulfillment in trinitarian love. Whether Bulgakov’s sophiology ultimately veracious or not, then, it is certainly—in both content and approach—a faithful expression of Byzantine tradition in the modern era.

Fig. 1: ‘Novgorod’ icon of St Sophia, 16th-century rendition (St George Church in Vologda)

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