

Why Sophia? Bulgakov the Theologian

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When I was studying for my PhD, I remember a priest asking me, in the back of the sanctuary of my father's parish in the Chicagoland area, "What are you studying?" I told him, "contemporary Orthodox theology." He repeated my answer in a sardonic tone, somewhat incredulous that such a thing as contemporary Orthodox theology even existed. The subtext of his response, of course, was that there is no such thing as contemporary Orthodox theology: there are the fathers of the Church, as if all thinking in Orthodoxy stopped in the fifteenth century, and today there are the *gerontes*, who are examples of the living experiential theology of which the fathers speak.

I was not surprised at this priest's response, since it is a common trope among Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike that whatever Orthodox theology is, it is not "contemporary." There is no denial that twentieth-century Orthodox theologians exist, but those theologians most familiar to the Orthodox world—Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky in particular—were endowed with the heroic achievement of having returned Orthodox theology to its patristic roots. The only "contemporary" thing about their thought was the context within which they rearticulated, elaborated, clarified, and amplified patristic thought. It was inconceivable that patristic thought could be extended in faithful continuity, that

anything "new" could be added to it. It was as if the fathers anticipated all the questions that could possibly be posed.

When I first studied theology, well before my PhD years, this was the narrative that was presented to me: "In the twentieth century, we have witnessed a 'neopatristic synthesis,' the emergence of theologians who have returned Orthodox theology and education to an authentic grounding in the patristic tradition after years of Ottoman occupation and a 'Babylonian captivity' of Orthodox theological education to Western models." As part of this story, it was acknowledged that in nineteenth-century Russia, there was a kind of thinking that was indirectly related to Orthodoxy, but not considered proper Orthodox theology. This body of thought was branded as "Russian Religious Thought," and the writings associated with this moniker might have been of interest in and of themselves, so long as they were separated from the authentic form of Orthodox theology, which in the twentieth century was understood as a return to the fathers.

Sergii Bulgakov was a somewhat ambiguous figure in this tale of the relation of Russian religious thought and neopatristic revival. He was not only a priest but also dean of St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, which seems to have shored up his

theological credentials. There was, however, controversy surrounding his theology, which infamously led the ROCOR (the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia) to declare his theology heretical, and led to the appointment of a commission by Metropolitan Evlogy to assess Bulgakov's teachings. He remained dean of St. Sergius until his death, after which his own theology seemed to vanish into oblivion, with the exception of oblique influences on such notable theologians as Paul Evdokimov, Olivier Clément, Dumitru Stăniloae, and even Saint Sophrony of Essex. For later generations, such as my own, he was relegated to the "Russian religious philosophy" camp, to be distinguished from Lossky, Florovsky, and company, even if his book *The Orthodox Church* was often used as an introduction to Orthodoxy.

The story that a group of Orthodox theologians emerged in the mid-twentieth century to rescue Orthodox theology from the speculations of Russian religious philosophy and return it to an authentic patristic theology is "fake news" on multiple counts, however—especially when it comes to Bulgakov. First, the idea that Lossky and Florovsky were the first to engage in a patristic retrieval in order to accomplish a "neopatristic synthesis" is empirically false. A simple perusal of Bulgakov's dogmatic trilogy will reveal that in addition to his command of the scriptural and liturgical resources, he was a careful and well-acquainted reader with the patristic texts. In fact, Bulgakov was probably the first Orthodox theologian to reconstruct a diachronic history of Greek patristic thought. He did so critically, meaning that he made judgments on what he thought were the patristic contributions elucidating dogmatic truths, but he also thought it necessary to

indicate what was left unfinished and to try and finish it. His willingness to engage the fathers critically and to situate his own theological project in continuity with this tradition is what separates him both from his Russian religious philosophical predecessors and from practically every other Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century.

Second, the idea that Lossky and Florovsky offered a clean break with this Russian religious philosophical tradition, including Bulgakov, is misleading. Both Lossky and Florovsky are indebted to Bulgakov, each in his own way. A careful reading of Lossky's theology reveals a subtle borrowing of Bulgakovian concepts, even as he presents them as apophaticized patristic categories. Some of Lossky's most famous concepts and ideas—such as antinomy, kenosis of the Holy Spirit, person-as-freedom and nature-as-necessity—are nowhere to be found in the fathers but everywhere in Bulgakov. Lossky used Bulgakov's categories against him but, in doing so, he became just as much a "contemporary" theologian as Bulgakov was; in other words, his neopatristic synthesis was not so different in kind from Bulgakov's, even if it was different in form. The same could be said for Florovsky, even if he much more explicitly distanced himself from Bulgakovian categories. It seems obvious, however, that his own understanding of theology in terms of the historical and the eschatological was constructed in contradistinction from Bulgakov's speculative idealism, which Florovsky loathed. Whether Florovsky was doing theology as the fathers did it is debatable, as the speculative theology of Maximus the Confessor looks much more like Bulgakov's than Florovsky's.

All this serves to affirm that much as Lossky and Florovsky tried to dismiss Bulgakov, to relegate him to the non-theological Russian religious philosophical sphere, and to present their work as a clean break and an authentic return to patristic theology, Bulgakov defined twentieth-century Orthodox theology. Lossky's and Florovsky's theological projects are not fully understood if not seen as responses to Bulgakov, who provided both the categories for the Losskian apophatic reconstruction of the patristic tradition and the speculative style against which Florovsky identified the "authentic" patristic theology. And as for those who claim an indebtedness to Lossky or Florovsky, or even Stăniloae, the shadow of Bulgakov lurks over their theology too.

Since the beginning of the third millennium, there has been a steady stream of translations of Bulgakov's theology into English, which has allowed for clarification of his place in twentieth-century Orthodox theology, as well as the meaning of many of his admittedly abstruse ideas. Perhaps the one concept that has created the most confusion, that has lent itself the most to misunderstanding and caricature, has been *Sophia*. It is *the* central concept for Bulgakov, and if one can crack the *Sophia* code, then the rest of what Bulgakov says about the Trinity, Christology, theological anthropology, creation, liturgy, ecclesiology, and eschatology falls into place.

Perhaps the first question to ask is: why *Sophia*? Why is it necessary? What work does it do for which other concepts are inadequate? Ironically, it is in answering this question that we see Bulgakov the theologian, not the Russian religious philosopher; we see the dogmatic theologian, the thinker for whom thought begins and ends

with the incarnation of the Logos in Christ (and not with philosophy, as some have caricatured his method).

The incarnation of the Logos in Jesus Christ, which includes his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, is an event of union between the uncreated and the created, the supernatural and the natural, divinity and humanity, God and the not-God. It reveals that God exists eternally so as to *be*, such that the possibility for such a union is eternally who God is. And the revelatory fact that this union occurs through the sending of the Logos by the Father and is actualized by the Holy Spirit is not incidental information. How the union is realized in Jesus Christ reveals to us the God whose being is freedom to be in union with the not-God. It is theology's most basic task to give expression to God's eternal being, and it has done so minimally by declaring God as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In declaring God as Trinity, Christian theology was faced with the task of how to make sense of a God whose being is both three and one, and to grapple with how this Trinitarian God differs from the Greco-Roman polytheism which Christianity vehemently rejected in its self-identification. In early Christian thought, many answers were put forth, but eventually the categories of *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (somewhat untranslatable but usually rendered "person" in English) were concretized as the most adequate for expressing this three-and-one God.

For Bulgakov, these categories constituted a major step forward in the attempt by theological thinking to give adequate expression to the affirmation of faith in the incarnate God, who is simultaneously the triune God. In fact, he would argue

that this distinction proved influential in the history of philosophy, even long after philosophy stopped concerning itself with the Christian God. Bulgakov's theological program should be seen not simply as an extension of patristic thinking, but as an argument that philosophy's appropriation of the *ousia/hypostasis* distinction went off track, and that only a Christian Trinitarian theology can provide the answers to philosophy's questions.

In order to demonstrate this claim, much more needs to be said about God as Trinity, since much more could be said as a result of the revelation itself. For Lossky, it was simply enough to indicate that God's *ousia* was common to all three *hypostases*, with the latter signifying what was irreducible to each. Nothing more needed to be said, since the antinomy in itself between *ousia* and *hypostasis* jars the mind into encountering the apophatic God, the God beyond being, the God who makes possible the antinomic event of union with the not-God. Nothing more needed to be said for ascetical ascent toward this union; in fact, the more that is said, the greater the danger of forgetting that the goal is the union itself.

Bulgakov was not convinced by this logic—more needed to be said and the revelation itself allows that more could be said. Bulgakov believed that theology was under an obligation to give an account of how the very being of God contained the freedom to be in union with the not-God. Again, *ousia* and *hypostasis* were important categories in thinking the oneness-and-threeness of God, but not enough to account for how this oneness-and-threeness translates into a God of communion with the not God. This is where Sophia comes in.

For Bulgakov, it is not sufficient to simply say that God is one and three, or even to account for how God is one and three, either through the monarchy of the Father or the scholastic relations of oppositions. Both are inadequate for expressing how the persons of the Trinity relate to each other, and thus do not further elucidate God's Trinitarian being. Based on the fact of the revelation, we know of the Father-Son relation, which means for Bulgakov that the Father as Absolute Spirit in the act of self-knowledge—which is an act of self-revelation—self-knows in the irreducible otherness that is the Son, who is, thus, the nature-object-content of all that God is. God's self-knowledge, however, cannot simply exist as an otherness vis-à-vis the self-revelation of Absolute Spirit (Father); it is not simply a relation to that which can be known, to the content of what it means to be God (Son). All that God is, which is the self-revelation of God to Godself, is actualized in the eternal being of God, and this actualization is the work of the Holy Spirit, whose relationship to the Son is such that the Holy Spirit actualizes the content that is the Son, and in so doing, brings to completion the self-revelation of Absolute Spirit. This self-revelation of God is neither simply *ousia*, nor is it simply *hypostasis*; it is the very being of the self-revealing God, and, as such, it is Sophia, which includes the simultaneity of *ousia* and *hypostasis*; it is *ousia* hypostatized. As Bulgakov states, "Sophia is Ousia revealed," "the revelation of the Son and the Holy Spirit without separation and without confusion," "God's *exhaustive* self-revelation, the fullness of divinity, and therefore has absolute content."¹ Sophia indicates all that God is in a way that neither *ousia* nor *hypostasis* can, and it does so by including the latter categories. For Bulgakov, understanding the Trinity as Sophia was necessary development for

¹ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, revised ed., trans. Patrick Thomson, O. Fielding Clark, and Xenia Braikevitic (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 54; Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 189; Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 39.

the patristic categories of *hypostasis* and *ousia*, so as to conceptualize the fulfillment of God's relations to the world in time and space, a relation inherent to the self-revelation of God's being from all eternity.

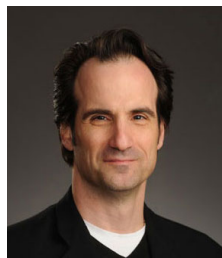
If God as Sophia is all that God is, then all that God is includes God's relation to creation. This does not mean that creation in time is eternal, but it does mean that one cannot think God without thinking God relating to creation from all eternity, even as a possibility. If that is the case, then it is Sophia that is the mediator of God's Trinitarian revelation to God's temporal creation. God's creation in time is a self-repetition of God as Sophia; it is God's self-revealing of all that God is, temporal creation, and all that God is *is* communion with the not-God. That is why for Bulgakov, although he does not posit a co-eternal creation, it is inconceivable that God would not have created, since this would mean that God would not be all that God has self-revealed to be.

Some might counter-argue that *hypostasis* is the (or a) sufficient category, since all are united in the hypostasis of the Logos, and in this unity, we are in relation to the Father by the Holy Spirit. Bulgakov would not deny that our unity with the Trinitarian being of God is in the Logos, and that is why it is the Logos who is the hypostasis of the divine-humanity (*bogochelovechestvo*). To assert, however, that our unity is in the Logos

does not capture how our unity in God's Trinitarian being is one with the eternal dynamism of the self-revealing God, whose self-revelation is inconceivable without thinking of the mutually constitutive relation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

All this sounds complicated, but it really is not. There is actually a simple logic to it: God reveals Godself to Godself, and this self-revelation must include in some sense God's relation to creation, including all that God intends for creation. If this is the case, then creation mirrors this self-revealing divine life in temporal form, and its fulfillment is one of identity with this divine life, without elision. We cannot make sense of any of this without Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, without *ousia* and *hypostasis*, but also without Sophia, which is the internal self-revealing dynamism of all three persons of the Trinity, and which mediates all that God is to that which is not-God.

Debates on Trinitarian theology are endless and, in my opinion, can be very spiritually fruitful, since they show that we care about how to think properly of the God who makes communion with God possible. Bulgakov offers a reasonable but provocative proposal. He may be wrong, but one thing is certain: Bulgakov is a theologian through and through, one of the most important in the history of theology, and one who anticipated much that followed him. It is a good thing he is finally having his say. ✱



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