

Sergii Bulgakov and Wassily Kandinsky: Two Visionaries of the Wisdom of God

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The artist Wassily Kandinsky and the theologian Sergii Bulgakov, two great figures of twentieth-century Russian culture, knew each other well.¹ They became acquainted in the 1890s at Moscow University Law School, where both attended the classes of Alexander Chuprov. Even though Kandinsky was five years older than Bulgakov, they quickly became friends. In 1898, when Bulgakov married Elena Ivanovna Tokmakova, he became a cousin-in-law of Kandinsky. Neither Kandinsky's decision to live in Germany nor the Revolution could separate them. The art historian Peg Weiss cites a letter dated September 1911, from Kandinsky to Franz Marc, in which the painter presents the theologian as his former colleague at Moscow and "one of the most knowledgeable scholars of religious life."² The Russian artist was in Munich preparing his and Marc's collaborative book, the *Blue Rider Almanac*, and wanted to evoke the spiritual renewal of the intelligentsia by incorporating an article by Bulgakov. The project never materialized. Subsequently, however, Kandinsky and Bulgakov found themselves among the Russian emigrants in Paris. Kandinsky moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine in July 1933, after the Nazis closed the Bauhaus design school, where he had taught. Bulgakov, who had been expelled by Lenin in 1922, was already

installed at the Saint Sergius Institute in the Rue de Crimée, near the Parc des Buttes Chaumont. They did not lose sight of one another. Both died in Paris in 1944, several months apart (Bulgakov on July 12 and Kandinsky on December 13).

Their trajectory is marked by remarkable intellectual and spiritual convergences. Both were admirers and friends of Pavel Florensky, the mathematician and theologian whom Vasily Rozanov described as a twentieth-century Russian Pascal. Like Florensky, Kandinsky and Bulgakov both believed that the liturgy was the model par excellence for the synthesis of the arts to which the generation of Alexander Scriabin aspired. In their common desire to reconcile the aesthetic and the ethical, and in the seriousness with which they took Christ's promise that those who purified their hearts would see God, both pointed toward the ecumenical epoch that is now opening out before us.³

This epoch is characterized by three principal traits: personalism, a quest for Wisdom, and a spirit of theurgical creativity. These three aspects of the ecumenical paradigm marked the creativity of both Bulgakov and Kandinsky. They both wanted to give a positive—not just apophatic—answer to the great question which was

¹ Antoine Arjakovsky, "L'arrivée des penseurs en Europe occidentale à la suite de la révolution d'Octobre," *Recherches de science religieuse*, 105.5 (Oct. 2017): 595–610.

² Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 98.

³ Antoine Arjakovsky, *Ecumenical Metaphysics* (New York: Angelico Press, 2021).

tormenting their epoch, that of the possibility of a synthetic representation of Beauty and Goodness.

Kandinsky's Concrete Art and the Artistic and Spiritual Crisis

Kandinsky's philosophy of colors is directly based on the sophiology of Florensky, whom he explicitly references. In many respects, the invention of abstract art can be considered the artistic equivalent of negative theology. The abstract art of Kandinsky presents itself as a visual language conscious of the omnipresence of the Wisdom of God, and as a non-blasphemous form of representation that rejects pietism and naturalism of all kinds. Like Bulgakov, Kandinsky sought to recover humans' vocation as co-creators alongside God by the *via eminentiae*, the "way of eminence," through what I would call the art of participative imagination. Philippe Sers describes his understanding of the image as *philoxenic*. According to Sers, the image can become a space of greeting and metamorphosis, as opposed to an image that excludes and wounds. This renewal owes much to hesychastic spirituality, a method

that consists in purifying one's vision through struggle against the passions and in welcoming the light of the divine energies through a process of "mystical photography," of the luminous impression of Jesus Christ—the *phôteinographêistai*, a word coined by Philotheus the Sinaite.⁴

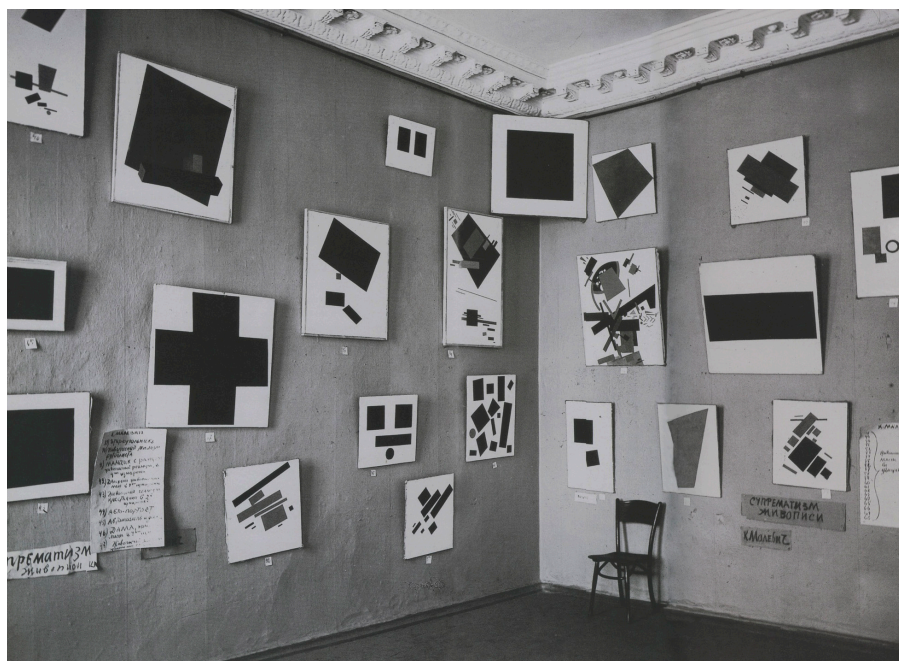
But this spirituality obstinately refused to conceive the encounter of the created and uncreated energies in the world exclusively through the ecclesial experience of the sacred, through a separation of noumena and phenomena, or even through a Palamite disjunction between the divine Essence and the uncreated energies.⁵ Kazimir Malevich wrote that "God is hidden in black." For this painter, the four angles of his *Black Square* corresponded to the four letters of the name of the creator, which it was forbidden to pronounce. But the older Kandinsky and others of his generation rejected this unilateral apophatic refusal to represent God, even as they also distanced themselves from perspectivist anthropocentrism.

In 1916, Nikolai Berdyaev published a book entitled *The Meaning of the Cre-*

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⁴ Philippe Sers, *Kandinsky: Philosophie de l'art abstrait: Peinture, poésie, scénographie* (Paris: Skira, 2003), 77.

⁵ In his book *The Vision of God* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1983), Vladimir Lossky qualified the apophaticism of his earlier theology by recognizing that Christ had promised that the pure in heart would see God, thus affirming the possibility of representing the divine Essence.



The "0.10" exhibition in Petrograd, 1915. Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* hovers in the corner over his other paintings.

ative Act. In it, he states that the Italian Renaissance “did not succeed.”⁶ For Berdyaev, the Renaissance found its initial impulsion in the genius of Dante and the holiness of Francis of Assisi, but it ultimately failed because it ran up against the rigidity of the medieval church. Moreover, according to the Russian philosopher, the pagan Renaissance began to overshadow artists’ Christian inspiration at the end of the fifteenth century, as can be seen in the divided soul of Sandro Botticelli. The history of art in the West was thus marked by a progressive loss of Christian symbolism. It could be said that it reveals a growing *separation* between the signifier and the referent because of the priority given to the abstract universality of the concept during the epoch when scholasticism was dominant. Meanwhile, in the East, a crisis of iconography occurred in the sixteenth century, as the increasingly sacralized icon began to be covered with gold and silver, in a gesture of *identification* between the signifier and the referent.

In both cases, however, the distinct role of the *signified* was lost. Like Berdyaev, Kandinsky realized that artistic creation could find expression neither in the total decomposition of forms which cubism threatened nor in submitting again to the ecclesial institution which, since the Council of Stoglav in 1551, had prohibited any representation of the Father and, by extension, of the divine. The representation of God the Father as an old man was still prohibited a hundred years later by the Council of Moscow in 1667. The decadence of Russian iconography was not due to the disastrous influence of the West, as many Orthodox intellectuals have mechanically repeated following Georges Florovsky and Leonid

Ouspensky, but to losing an understanding of the theurgic mission of the artist. Kandinsky grasped this. His genius is to have reestablished a vital perichoretic link between the referent, the signified, and the signifier, or, to use his own terminology, between the metaphysical, the analogical, and the mimetic image.

On an artistic level, Kandinsky started from a reflection on composition to conceive a relationship of both continuity and discontinuity between the mimetic, the analogical, and the metaphysical. This reflection enables us to go beyond both a secularized or allegorical vision of the world, but also beyond a strictly apophatic (and hence static) vision of the relationship between the human and the divine. Philippe Sers has convincingly shown that Kandinsky’s interest in composition was different from that of Georges Braque or Pablo Picasso. He did not see composition as consisting in a “deboning” or destructuring of reality nor as a mathematization of the real, as did the composers Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, or the poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry. For Kandinsky, composition was comparable to prayer. According to Philippe Sers, “it is giving form to a superior communication, to a dazzling intuition, it traces the road, it makes itself the mistress of Time.”⁷

In Kandinsky’s extensive theoretical writings, he explained how these three types of image corresponded to three levels of consciousness, depending on whether the artist turned himself toward reality, the world, or Being. Kandinsky did not recognize a rupture between the figurative image and the abstract image; rather, he believed that the divine Being has three different degrees of visibility. The *mi-*

⁶ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 217.

⁷ Sers, *Kandinsky*, 29.

metic image incarnates but becomes a form of enactment if the artist succumbs to the illusion that his mission is simply to reproduce nature. At this level of reality-consciousness, if the heart has been purified through its combat with the passions, the image has the vocation to leave a *trace* insofar as it is a waiting, a preparation. The *analogical* image elevates its observer by pointing the signified toward its referent, but it can become a source of fornication and idolatry if the artist manipulates the reality being signified and seeks to appropriate it for himself. At this level of consciousness of the world, if the heart of the artist has arrived at hesychastic silence, the image should become a *sign*, an openness towards Being, a quest of the referent. It is only the *metaphysical* image that enables the artist to accomplish his authentic mission, theurgy, the participation in the divine world and the transfiguration of the created world. At this level of consciousness regarding being, when the intellect of the artist unites itself to the Divine Spirit, the image becomes *manifestation*, an epiphany of the divine, integral union of beauty and goodness. For Kandinsky, the art of China, the Byzantine iconographic tradition, and the concrete art he tried to invent were situated in this metaphysical level of consciousness.

The task of iconography consists, above all, to represent, to create images. But it cannot limit itself to this, any more than art can ever be restricted. For Bulgakov, Berdyaev, and Kandinsky, the artist is called not only to reveal the ideal world and its paradisiacal state, but also, according to Bulgakov, to transfigure it, “to be projectively active, theurgic.”⁸ For Berdyaev, theurgy is the action of a human being conjointly with God, the synthesis of creation through

beauty and goodness, the accession to a new universal life.

Bulgakov’s Sophiological Response

Bulgakov realized that, in the West, creative minds were beginning to rebel against the superficially emotional and heavily rhetorical character of certain tendencies in eighteenth-century Western music and poetry and also against the suffocating aestheticism of the early twentieth century. But Russian intellectuals showed little appreciation for the new architecture of Le Corbusier or for Arnold Schoenberg’s world of dodecaphony. Bulgakov felt himself more akin to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who crudely commented: “How can one say, Mozart has *composed* Don Juan! . . . As if it were a piece of cake or biscuit, which had been stirred together out of eggs, flour, and sugar!”⁹

Like Kandinsky, Bulgakov envisaged art as a possible meeting place with the divine energies, and *composition* as the juncture between interior vision and exterior vision. Like Kandinsky, Bulgakov deconstructed the dominant intellectual currents of his epoch—the repetitive official theology—in order to reconstruct it in a wide-ranging and renewed theological synthesis. Finally, following the example of the Bauhaus professor, Bulgakov delved into the revelation of the Wisdom of God in order to rethink the relations between God, man, and cosmos.

For Bulgakov, theologically, and hence existentially, it was not enough to distinguish between being and consciousness, *ousia* and *hypostasis*—between the divine nature of Christ, which cannot be represented, and his human nature, which can. Bulgakov found this traditional apophatic

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⁸ Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 92.

⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, trans. John Oxenford, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1850), 20 June 1831, 403.



Wassily Kandinsky,
Great Resurrection
(*Grosse Auferstehung*),
from *Klänge* (*Sounds*),
1913.

approach of Orthodox theology to be incomplete, for where does the divine nature begin and the human end? Bulgakov's response to the dual artistic and spiritual crisis of his time, like Kandinsky's, was sophiological, personalist, and theurgic: God reveals himself in Wisdom. In a similar way, human personhood reveals and fulfills itself in a Trinitarian manner as subject, in the encounter with the other, and by the interpenetration of consciousness. The image can accede to the status of icon insofar as it realizes this and invites participation in a divine-human event.

To understand how Bulgakov arrived at such conclusions, we will limit ourselves to a brief presentation of his reflections on the art of the icon in his 1931 book *The Icon and Its Veneration*. In this book he states, in a typically non-conformist fashion, that the Seventh Ec-

umenical Council, which met in Nicea in 787 and considered the veneration of icons, did not actually respond to the question posed by the iconoclasts. To back up his surprising assertion, Father Sergii points out that there is no dogma concerning icons in the council's official acts. All that can be found are canons affirming that only the original image—the prototype—can be *adored*, whereas icons should simply be *venerated*. According to Bulgakov, this distinction is not only unclear but lacks a theological foundation. He goes on to explain that the practice of venerating icons emerged in the history of the Church not for theological reasons, but due to the action of the Holy Spirit and the *sensus fidelium*. Bulgakov states that the principal error of the iconodules as well as of the iconoclasts was that both made the same mistake at the outset, when they asserted, as proposition A of an antinomy, "God is invisible, and

having no form, he cannot be represented.”

To be sure, the iconodules and the iconoclasts diverged in the second part of the antinomy. The iconodules took as proposition B, “God became incarnate, man has an image, and thus God *can* be represented,” while the iconoclasts affirmed as proposition B, “Christ is consubstantial with the Father, and thus he cannot be represented, since this is forbidden in the Decalogue” (Exod. 20:4). But, says Bulgakov, in both cases the antinomy is poorly posed, as if somebody had mixed up liters and meters. Both are instruments of measure, yet they are incommensurable. There is, on the one hand, a *theological* truth that comes from revelation and, on the other, a *cosmological* proposition concerning the relationship between God and the world. The theology of the image has not *one* antinomy but rather *three*. Bulgakov proceeds, as did Kandinsky, to show the existential, scalar link between God and humans, within the Church’s dogmatic understanding of Jesus Christ’s divine-humanity established by the Fourth Ecumenical Council.

The first antinomy, the theological antinomy, is theocentric. On the one hand, God is above and beyond nothingness, and thus nothing can be said about him; on the other, God is Trinity, and is in relationship with what is most intimate in himself. The cosmological antinomy establishes a relation between God and the world. On the one hand, God has no need of the world because God is perfect; on the other hand, God created the world. Finally, the sophiological antinomy, always sought in Scripture and Tradition, affirms both that God, non-world, is in the world, and that the world, non-God, is in God. In cre-

ating the world, God was exterior to it. At the same time, by creating the human being in his image, God has placed his indelible Trinitarian mark in the deepest level of the consciousness of the world. The uncreated Wisdom and the created wisdom of which the book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs speak are like two lovers drawn toward one another. The Apocalypse of John shows the final result of this nuptial tension in the vision of the encounter between the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem.

All this has several essential consequences. The sophiological antinomy allows us to understand that humans, created in the image and likeness of God, carry the divine image of God. This is what enables Saint Paul to affirm that “since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20). How? By the encounter of uncreated Wisdom with created wisdom. Bulgakov can then rephrase the antinomy that is proper to the theology of the icon: A) God cannot be depicted for he is inaccessible to the knowledge of his creatures; B) yet he *can* be represented because he reveals himself to his creatures, tracing his image on them and making his invisible nature visible. “This visibility of the invisible, this portrayability of the unportrayable, is what the icon is,” Bulgakov writes. “The icon of Christ’s humanity is *not just* the icon of his body without relation to divinity but is *in general* his icon, precisely as the image of his divinity in the creaturely nature.”¹⁰ In the same way as humans were created in the image of God, the world has been configured to the Divine Wisdom and God has a human face. God has *traced out* his image on the world and hence

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¹⁰ Bulgakov, *Icons*, 36, 63.

this image can be revealed—not just the human part but the divine part also. It follows that Wisdom, the prototype of the world, is equally consonant with mankind, it is anthropic. In other words, Divine Wisdom is the eternal divine humanity.

Thus, for Bulgakov, Christ has a divine-human image because he has a unique self-consciousness. The icon of Christ does not represent just his humanity. This is why the artist should keep in mind that Christ possesses his image in a twofold manner. Bulgakov writes: “Christ has his image, one and identical, doubly: invisibly for creaturely eyes according to his divinity and visibly according to his humanity. The existence of the *image* does not necessarily signify that it is visible to creaturely eyes.”¹¹ In his divinity, Christ is the image of the Father, at the same time that he is the prototype of everything that exists, including mankind. This image is invisible to the eyes of the creature cut off from God. Christ also possesses his image insofar as he is the accomplishment of created nature. This image has been seen by the eyes of the flesh and the greatest artists have tried to represent it. The highest representations, however, were those that sought to unify the interior experience of the artist in spiritual communion with Christ with their experience of the beauty-truth of the divine-human world.

The cataphatic theology of Bulgakov enables us to put the finishing touches on the thought of Theodore the Studite. We only see according to the measure of our faith. In one of his last books, Jean-Luc Marion calls the attention to what had already been expressed in Psalm 11:7: “The Lord is righteous, he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.” Apophatic theology insists upon only one part of the antinomy: “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18, 1 John 4:12). But the phrase of Saint John should be understood in its entirety: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known [*exegesato*]” (John 1:18). Bulgakov can thus triumphantly proclaim: “In the Word of God we find not an apophatic doctrine of God’s unknowability but an antinomic affirmation of both his invisibility and his visibility.”¹²

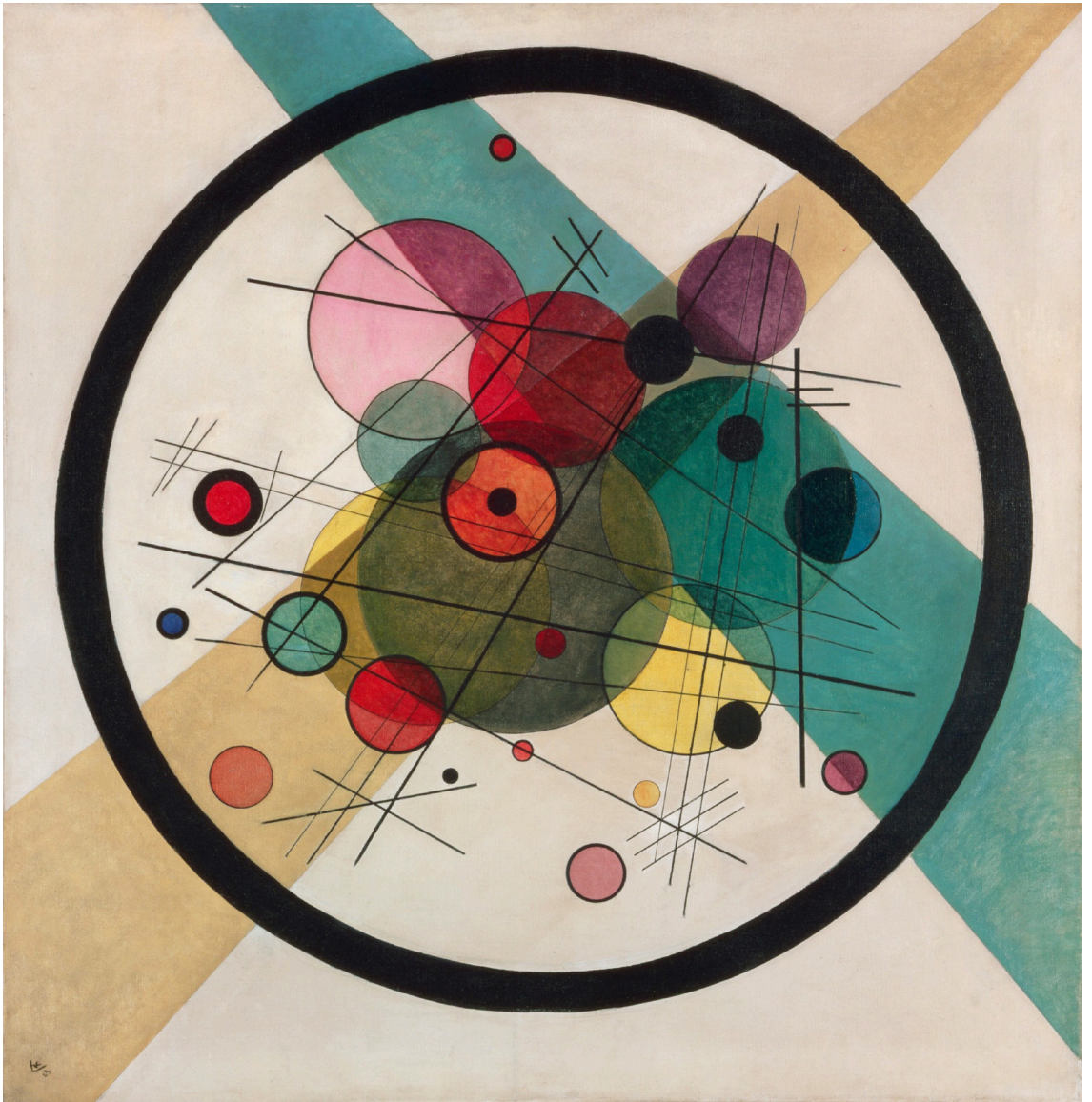
Kandinsky and Bulgakov both belonged to the Silver Age, which tried to recover the profound connection between beauty and truth through a participatory vision of concrete art and sophiology. Just as Moses had to take the sandals off his feet in order to contemplate the burning bush, the artist should invite the spectator to purify his heart. The rediscovered iconic image is something which is seen but cannot be seized, only experienced. Here we pass from a pedagogical vision of art to an initiatory one. ✱

¹¹ Ibid, 63.

¹² Ibid, 38–39. Vladimir Lossky, the champion of apophatic theology, recognized this near the end of his life. In *The Vision of God*, he reconciles Byzantine apophatic thought, such as that of Gregory Palamas, with seventeenth-century French Catholic thought represented, in particular, by Denis Petau. God can be depicted, and the world is configured in his image.



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Wassily Kandinsky,
Circles in a Circle,
1923. Philadelphia
Museum of Art.

Following Page:
Wassily Kandinsky,
Composition VII,
1913. State Tretyakov
Gallery, Moscow

