

Sergii Bulgakov on Science and Theology

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Sergii Bulgakov considered the problem of the relationship between faith and reason, including scientific knowledge, in a number of works, especially in *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* (1912), in *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations* (1917), in his so-called great trilogy—*The Lamb of God* (1933), *The Comforter* (1936), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945)—and above all in his succinct essay “Religion and Science” (1919).

Throughout his work, Bulgakov continued the venerable tradition of apophatic theology. He emphasized the predominance of faith, which is “a path of knowledge without proof, outside of logical achievement, outside of the law of causality and its persuasiveness. Faith is a *hiatus* in logic,” “the anticipation of knowledge, *credo ut intelligam* . . . although for the present it rests on an insufficient foundation, *credo quia absurdum*.”¹ Truth is beyond reason. The only way to attain it is revelation. Like Pavel Florensky, Semyon Frank, and other proponents of apophatic theology, Bulgakov perceived reality as a whole in terms of an antinomy, a propositional structure that

admits the truth of two contradictory, logically incompatible, but ontologically equally necessary assertions. An antinomy



Pavel Florensky (left) walks with Sergei Bulgakov in Mikhail Nesterov, *Philosophers* (1917). State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

testifies to the existence of a mystery beyond which human reason cannot penetrate. This mystery, nevertheless, is actualized and lived in religious experience.²

At the same time, the author of *Philosophy of Economy* continued Vladimir Solovyev’s task of reconciling faith and reason. Bulgakov dubbed his own views “panentheism,” which is exemplified in his concept of sophiology, or teaching about the permanent presence of Divine Wisdom in the world, an idea that was already present in patristic thought. According to him, “there is no God without the world, and there is no world outside of God: the world is in God.”³ Matter constitutes the boundary between God and the world and, at the same time, a tool

¹ Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 27–28.

² Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson, the Rev. O. Fielding Clarke, and Xenia Braikevitch. (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 77.

³ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 399.

⁴ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 221.

⁵ Myroslaw Tataryn, "Building an Orthodox Eco-Theology: Bulgakov's Sophiology," *Sobornost* 35.1–2 (2013): 60.

⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 116.

⁷ Natalia Danilikina, "Immanuel Kant and the Pragmatic Turn of Science Through the Prism of Sergei Bulgakov's Metaphysics," *Studia z Historii Filozofii* 2:11 (2020): 43.

⁸ Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (Yale University Press, 2000), 176, 194.

⁹ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Brightest Lights of the Silver Age: Essays on Russian Religious Thinkers*, trans. Boris Jakim (Kettering, OH: Semantron Press, 2015), 204.

¹⁰ Danilina, "Kant," 42.

¹¹ Sergii Bulgakov, "Религия и наука," *Вестник РСХД* 170 (1994): 26–27.

¹² Robert F. Thompson, *From Glory to Glory: The Sophianic Vision of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov* (Memphis: Perennials Study Group, 2016), 164.

for the Creator's self-revelation. The Bulgakovian concept of Sophia as a "medium" between God and the empirical world had many dimensions. Apart from theological and metaphysical aspects, according to which Sophia is an ontological foundation of all things material, it also had a great cosmological significance: being the soul of the world, it is an ideal aspect of nature as a living, growing organism. The cosmos partakes in the "heavenly" sphere and seeks its transfiguration or *theosis*. The created world is "sophianic," illumined by the world of ideas. In this connection, Bulgakov was concerned about the problem of the justification of the world, or cosmodycy, which he understood as "central for both Platonism and Christian theology."⁴ In Bulgakov's thinking, sophiology provided an ontological justification of the cosmos, on the one hand, while delivering the most profound reasons for ecology, or care for the cosmos, on the other. Sharing the Solovyevian concept of "religious materialism," Bulgakov considered all creation a "manifestation of the divine creation action" and power.⁵

Bulgakov elucidates the origin of language, especially in *The Philosophy of the Name*, by means of the transcendent-immanent divinity: for him, words are a theophany of "the subject of all predicates."⁶ To put it another way, words are nothing more than divine energies (identified with an ideal foundation of the world, or Sophia) manifested in external (phonetic) form. Through words, the cosmos speaks to mankind. This means that both theological language and scientific language are of a real, objective—indeed, divine—and, at the same time, conventional—human—char-

acter. Language expresses some truths about God and reality, although not adequately.

Furthermore, in *Philosophy of Economy*, Bulgakov presents Sophia from an epistemological perspective, as a kind of Kantian transcendental subject of human knowledge that enables the organization and systematization of science. Yet, in his opinion, "the universal ground for scientific research cannot be just formal," but must be a real, universal subject that encompasses all beings.⁷ There is no better way to express this view than in Bulgakov's own words:

There is a Logos of the world that in turn sets up a logic of things, a logic of sciences, a logic of actions: everything exists in an all-penetrating connection. For the world in its positive basis is not Chaos but Sophia. Science is sophic . . . It is removed from Truth, for it is a child of this world, which exists in a state of untruth, but it is also a child of Sophia, the organizing force that leads this world to Truth, and it therefore bears the mark of truthfulness, Truth as a process, as becoming . . . The truthfulness of science is based on its sophic nature; Sophia's organizing power makes it possible. In it Sophia comes to possess the world. . . . The roots of knowledge are in Sophia, in the ideal identity and self-consciousness of the world, in its ideal organism. . . . Scientific reason in its sterility cannot give birth to science; science, like all that is living and creative, is generated and created through extrascientific, suprascientific means, and scientific genius, like any other, is the capacity to

see clearly above or deeper than what is given by reason. But science keeps a precise inventory of the world as it opens itself to suprascientific, creative, sophic consciousness; science is the minutes of the revelation of the world as sophic.⁸

Bulgakov's contemporaries considered his attitude toward science ambiguous and unclear. According to Nikolai Berdyaev, "he does not like science and lacks the pathos of scientific knowledge."⁹ Indeed, on the one hand, Bulgakov maintained—contrary to positivism—that science and rationality itself have an extra-scientific source. On the other hand, Bulgakov accused scientific knowledge of failing to see the Truth. This seeming contradiction is easily resolved if we keep in mind the philosopher's view that science is a secondary sphere of activity and cannot be compared with the suprarational root of cognition, which apprehends reality *sub specie aeternitatis*. Scientific truth is "a process and never a fixed result."¹⁰ By no means did Bulgakov negate scientific knowledge as such. For instance, the laws of nature grounded in Sophia allow a human to recognize God. At the same time, Bulgakov postulated that

science must finally be liberated from the captivity of pseudo-scientific godlessness . . . In other words, between religion and science must be a direct and positive relationship, which, of course, does not touch sincerity and freedom of science. . . . Science . . . should have a certain inner part. Above all special methods, it must have a general spiritual method—humility and reverence.¹¹

Summing up, let us once again emphasize that Bulgakov offered an "attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion, or reason and revelation."¹² He acknowledged that science describes reality—at least to some extent. Hence, science is labor that "pursues two fundamental aims: to broaden experience or accumulate knowledge . . . and to organize them, to generalize them scientifically into concepts or laws"; it is "a sort of condenser of life experience."¹³ Bulgakov argued that the chief deficiencies of modern science, which professes a mechanistic worldview, come from its unjustified denial of the existence of God. "Due to this, science has ceased to be what it ought to be—natural theology, rational comprehension of the miracle of creation."¹⁴ Another of Bulgakov's objections concerning scientific knowledge was that it lost a fundamental sense of wonder about the world, pretending to possess absolute truth, whereas "the picture of the world yielded by science really always exists only in the images yielded by particular sciences: it is always *contingent*."¹⁵ For this very reason, Bulgakov saw science as a branch of philosophical anthropology: "In order to understand science we must understand man."¹⁶ Therefore, we must place science in the broader context of human cultural activity. From his sophianic perspective, Bulgakov criticized positivism for "its dependence on external experience, and hence neglect of the inner self . . . its conversion of science into a faith, and hence reluctance to address real problems of metaphysics and religious belief; its preoccupation with phenomena, resulting in a pluralism and fragmentation of knowledge."¹⁷ In this context, he had some objections to the theory of evolution relat-

¹³ Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 168, 169.

¹⁴ Bulgakov, "Религия и наука," 26.

¹⁵ Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 161–62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁷ Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 165.

¹⁸ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 38.

¹⁹ Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 53.

²⁰ Gayle Woloschak, "Ecology, Evolution, and Bulgakov," in *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church*, ed. Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 60; Paul Gavrilyuk, "Bulgakov's Account of Creation: Neglected Aspects, Critics and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17.4 (2015): 456.

²¹ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 175.

²² *Ibid.*, 56.

²³ Walter Sisto, "The Russian Sophiological Synthesis: Sergius Bulgakov and the Dialectic of Faith and Science on Death and Evolution," in *Faith and Reason in Russian Thought*, ed. Teresa Obolevitch and Paweł Rojek (Krakow: Copernicus Center Press, 2015), 181.

²⁴ Myroslaw Tataryn, "Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944): Time for a New Look," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42.3/4 (1998): 326.

²⁵ Vasilii V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2, trans. George L. Kline (London: Routledge, 2006), 916.

ed to its positivistic, naturalistic dimension, but not to the fundamental idea of an evolutionary dynamic. As he wrote:

Evolution leads not to a superhuman being but away from the human and beyond the human. This evolution has no end or limit; the absolute exists for this radical evolutionism only as a possibility of limitless movement.¹⁸

Bulgakov was convinced that "life in nature acquires consciousness by a long and roundabout path, not immediately."¹⁹ He regarded creation as "an ongoing process that has not ended and will not end" and the material world as "Sophia in the making."²⁰ Nevertheless, Bulgakov insisted that "man's humanity (and, in man, the humanization of the animal world) is attained not as one of the stages of the evolutionary process but as something completely new, a *transcensus*, and even, as a sense, an ontological catastrophe."²¹ Thus Bulgakov successfully combined the truth about *creatio ex nihilo* with the theory of evolution by means of Sophia which participates in God and

in the empirical world. "God's life, by a single eternal act, exists in the heavens, in Sophia, but it is manifested and, in this sense, created in time."²²

In Bulgakov's opinion, science and theology "are two very different fields of study that must coexist and complement one another."²³ The philosopher described his mode of philosophizing as "a sort of *syzygy*, an organic whole, a symphonic interconnection," rather than a system, which would have represented "a dominance of philosophical presuppositions over the primacy of revelation."²⁴ *Symphony* presupposes the unity of God and creation, symbolized by Sophia. As V. V. Zenkovsky comments, Bulgakovian metaphysics "is a very close approach to the desired synthesis" of philosophy, theology and religion.²⁵ Although some thinkers, such as the proponents of the neo-patristic synthesis, treated Bulgakov's sophiology as heretical, he managed to keep a delicate balance between God and the world, theology and cosmology. The Bulgakovian vision of science is a kind of religious materialism of the kind initiated by Vladimir Solovyev. ✱



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