

The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov and the Living Tradition

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The first place, I think, where Fr. Sergius Bulgakov talks about Sophia is in his work, *Philosophy of Economy*, published in 1912. By this time, Fr. Sergius had already returned to his ancestral faith, though he was still searching, and indeed continued to search. *Philosophy of Economy* is a final repudiation of Marxist economics, and is indeed, as Rowan Williams has said, “emphatically not an essay in orthodox economics.”¹ Nevertheless it still engages with economics. The Russian word for economics, *khoziaistvo*, as the English translator remarks somewhere, is very directly related to words that suggest being a proprietor (*khoziain*, in fact derived from the German *Hausherr*, which is probably why this group of words seems rather isolated in Russian), or engaged in managing a household (*khoziainichat*), and so suggests an activity, a process, even more than the Greek word on which it, and our word, economics, is based—*oikonomia*—which is derived from words for house and law. It is this aspect of home-making, or making oneself at home, in a potentially inhospitable world, that leads Bulgakov to think in terms of Sophia, the Divine Wis-



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¹ Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 23, n. 1.

dom. Although in the chapter on the “Sophic Economy,” he rehearses all the more usual antecedents of sophiology—Western esoteric mysticism (he quotes Angelus Silesius a couple of times), Friedrich Schelling, Vladimir Solov’ev (specifically mentioning his *Tri svidaniia*)—what is important, it seems to me, is what way in which Sophia is involved in the process that follows on from, or rather complements, creation: the shaping or molding of creation, the

making of creation a world to live in. He remarks:

The purpose of economic activity is to defend and to spread the seeds of life, to resurrect nature. This is the action of Sophia on the universe in an effort to restore it to being in Truth. Sophia acts through the medium of historical humanity, and it is Sophia that determines the teleology of the historical process. The world as Sophia, though it has fallen into a false and hence mortal condition, must regain being in Truth through labor, or through the economic process. If selfness in man could only be vanquished through self-improvement or religious dedication, selfness in nature is vanquished through labor and in the historical process. Economic activity overcomes the divisions in nature, and its ultimate goal—outside of economics proper—is to return the world to life in Sophia.²

The roots of this notion of Sophia are ultimately biblical:

The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways, for the sake of his works... Before the present age he founded me, in the beginning. Before he made the earth and before he made the depths ... When he prepared the sky, I was present to him ... I was beside him, fitting together, it is I who was the one in whom he took delight. And each day I was glad in his presence at every moment, When he rejoiced after he had completed the world, and rejoiced among the sons of men.³

Wisdom, Sophia, is God's companion in the work of creation, fitting it together, completing it, and so the human task of making men at home

in the world is the work of Sophia. The realm of Sophia is therefore the realm of arts and crafts, from basic activities such as cooking and making clothes, building houses and towns, to more developed forms of art—poetry, music-making, painting, sculpting. It is doing something with something; it is not creative in the way that God is creative, when he calls beings into existence from nothing; but it is a kind of creation or fashioning. It re-creates the created order, making it a home for man: it is, as Bulgakov puts it, a “re-creative” activity.

There is, however, a danger here, for this refashioning of creation, making it something in which we human beings are at home, could disguise creation, make it all too much an “environment” for men; it can also exploit the natural order, as we have become very well aware today.

Bulgakov had felt this danger, and it was his sense of this danger that gradually led him from the Marxism he had espoused as a young man back to the faith of his fathers. Marxist economics could not see nature as God's creation, and tended to regard nature as material for human consumption and use. Bulgakov's sense of the fundamental wrongness of such an attitude to nature came to him as an experience about which he wrote in his *Autobiographical Sketches*, passages from which he—significantly, I think—included in the early pages of *Unfading Light*. Let me quote a few passages:

Evening was falling. We were traveling along the southern steppe, covered with the fragrance of honey-coloured

² Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 153.

³ Proverbs 8: 22–4, 27, 30–1.

*grass and hay, gilded with the crimson of a sublime sunset. In the distance the fast-approaching Caucasus Mountains appeared blue. I was seeing them for the first time ... My soul had become accustomed long ago to see with a dull silent pain only a dead wasteland in nature beneath the veil of beauty, as under a deceptive mask; without being aware of it, my soul was not reconciled with a nature without God. And suddenly in that hour my soul became agitated, started to rejoice and began to shiver: but what if ... if it is not wasteland, not a lie, not a mask, not death but him, the blessed and loving Father, his raiment, his love? ... God was knocking quietly in my heart and it heard that knocking, it wavered but did not open ... And God departed.*⁴

But it didn't end there. Bulgakov goes on to speak of renewed experiences:

*[B]efore me the first day of creation blazed. All was clear, all became reconciled, replete with ringing joy ... And that moment of meeting did not die in my soul; this was her apocalypse, her wedding feast, the first encounter with Sophia ...*⁵

In the light of these experiences, Bulgakov's soul could not be reconciled with "nature without God." The revelation of Sophia led him to belief in God and thereby enabled him to accept the transcendent beauty of nature, rather than seeing it as a utilitarian wasteland. There is, it seems to me, something parallel to the way in which Bulgakov comes to grasp the significance of nature in the distinction Heidegger makes, for instance in his essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," between *Welt* and *Erde*, "world" and "earth."⁶ The world is what man has made of his environment, and it is the purpose of

art to recall to man that this world is made from the earth, that it is not simply to be reduced to a human environment. Heidegger's fear was that technology has enabled men to fashion a *hergestellte Welt*, a world confected for human purposes; the way the earth erupted into the world through the work of art was to prevent man from being deceived by his technological power.⁷

I am suggesting that Bulgakov's sophiology, whatever its intellectual antecedents, grew out of his pondering on what man achieves through his re-creative activity, and his realization that he could only make sense of his experience of the beauty of nature by accepting its sophianic foundation, which entailed accepting the reality of God.

From this realization, we can, I think, begin to understand the fundamental role of sophiology in Bulgakov's theology. It is, and this is not incidental, related to the way his theology is rooted in the Liturgy. This was something that Fr. Alexander Schmemmann saw, even though he was somewhat averse to Bulgakov's theology. In an article called "Trois Images," he speaks of Bulgakov celebrating the Divine Liturgy:

My third memory of Fr. Sergius, the third image, is ... of Fr. Sergius before the altar, celebrating the liturgy ... He was not accomplishing a well-established rite, traditional in all its details. He delved down to the very depths, and one had the impression that the Liturgy was being celebrated for the first time, that it had fallen down from heaven and been set up on the earth at the dawn of time. The bread and the chalice on the altar, the flame of the candles, the smoke of the incense, the hands

⁴ *Unfading Light*, trans. Thomas Allen Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 8.

⁵ *Unfading Light*, 9

⁶ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 15–86. See original in Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), 7–68.

⁷ There is a wonderful evocation of Heidegger's notion of *Erde* in Michel Haar, *Le chant de la terre* (Paris: L'Herne, 1985).

raised to the heavens: all this was not simply an “office.” There was accomplished here something involving the whole created world, something of the preeternal, the cosmic—the “terrible and the glorious” [strashnoe i slavnoe], in the sense these liturgical words have in Slavonic. It seemed to me that it is not by chance that the writings of Fr. Sergius are very often laden—so it seems—with liturgical Slavisms, that they themselves so often resonate with liturgical praise. It is not just a matter of style. For the theology of Fr. Sergius, at its most profound, is precisely and above all liturgical.⁸

⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, “Trois Images”, *Le Messager Orthodoxe* 57 (1972), 13–14.

The Liturgy, like Sophia, negotiates an “in-between,” relating man to God.

The fundamental intuition of sophiology is relatively easy to enunciate; it is that the gulf between the uncreated God and creation, brought into being out of nothing, does not put creation in opposition to God, rather Wisdom constitutes a kind of μετὰξύ, “between,” between God and man/creation, for Wisdom is that through which God created the universe, and it is equally through wisdom that the human quest for God finds fulfillment.⁹ Wisdom, one might say, is the face that God turns toward his creation, and the face that creation, in humankind, turns toward God. Creation is not abandoned by God, it is not godless, for apart from God it would not be at all; it is not deprived of grace, for it owes its existence to grace. Rather creation is graced, it is holy; in creation God may be encountered. Bulgakov’s account of the events that led to his own conversion, which we have already mentioned, and his magnificent account of standing beneath the dome of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in January 1923, make clear

⁹ For a longer account of my approach to Bulgakov’s doctrine of Sophia, see “Wisdom and the Russians: The Sophiology of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov,” in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 169–81.

¹⁰ See my “Pagans and Christians on Providence,” in *Texts and Culture in Late Antiquity: Inheritance, Authority, and Change*, ed. J.H.D. Scourfield (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 279–97.

how important this intuition was to him. It also lay at the heart of what he perceived to be wrong with the Roman Catholicism he encountered in the West as an exile: the idea of an ungraced “pure nature” seemed to him fundamentally false (as it was soon to seem to Henri de Lubac). Moreover, the relationship between God and the world, constituted by Wisdom, cannot be an arbitrary relationship, nor can it be a necessary one. Uncreated Wisdom and created Wisdom differ only in their being uncreated or created. Why? Because if they differed in any other way, then God would be severed from creation and creation from God. This line of thought indicates a further step involved in sophiology, which raises the issue: what must creation be, if this is true? What is creation like, if God indeed created it (through Wisdom)? As we ask these questions, we find ourselves asking questions that have exercised Christians for centuries, and perhaps most acutely at the beginning, when, in the second century, Christianity faced the manifold challenges of Greek philosophy and Gnosticism. Christianity was not consonant with just any view of the universe. Christians agreed with the Platonists over the existence of a transcendent divine, divine providence and human free will, and adopted Platonist arguments against other Greek philosophers—Aristotelians, Stoics and Epicureans—who rejected one or other of these positions.¹⁰ They completely rejected the view, held by most of those whom scholars now call Gnostics, that the universe was the product of a god or gods who were either malevolent or negligent. At one point Irenaeus defends the Christian view of a universe, created out of nothing

by a good God who rules it through his providence, by appealing to the Christian Liturgy:

*How ... can they say that flesh is destined for corruption, the flesh that has been nourished by the body and blood of the Lord? Either they must change their opinion, or cease to offer him what they have said they do. Our opinion is consonant with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist confirms our faith. We offer him what belongs to him, harmoniously proclaiming the communion and union of flesh and spirit. For taking from the earth bread, after the invocation of the Lord it is no longer common bread, but Eucharist, joining together two realities, the earthly and the heavenly, so that our bodies, receiving the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but possess the hope of eternal resurrection. We make an offering to him, not because he needs anything, but to give thanks for his gifts and to sanctify the creation.*¹¹

For Irenaeus, to take bread and wine, to offer them to God and in-

voke the Holy Spirit to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ, entails a certain view of creation: that it is good, that the one to whom we offer the Eucharist is the Creator. In the same way, for Bulgakov, to celebrate the Eucharist entails that creation belongs to God, that it is not alien to him, that to be a creature is already to be graced, something that Fr. Schmemmann's "third image" seems to suggest: Bulgakov's celebration of the Divine Mysteries seemed to him something autochthonous, something rooted in the very being of creation. It is this intuition that lay at the heart of his sophiology.

It is as we pursue such reflections as these that we find ourselves entering into the arcanum of Bulgakov's theology. It is a theology that invites the human spirit on a fascinating quest after the nature of things, but it is rooted in the simple turning of the creature toward God in joy and gratitude. ✱

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV:18, 5–6.



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