

Divine Wisdom on Trial: The Sophia Affair and Theological Freedom

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The classic case of intellectual freedom in modern Orthodox theology is the mid-1930s controversy provoked by Father Sergii Bulgakov's theology of Sophia or Divine Wisdom (sophiology). Bulgakov's sophiology was put "on trial" by three instances of the Russian Orthodox Church; two denounced it, and the third determined that Bulgakov should not teach the doctrine at the Saint Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris.

In the late 1920s, Bulgakov was the leading representative of the Russian Religious Renaissance, widely respected in the Russian exile community and among non-Christian theologians and church leaders. Bulgakov developed the theology of Divine Wisdom into an integrated but complex theology, seeking to elucidate how God relates to creation. His sophiology raised numerous questions and protests (and still does), culminating in the great sophiological controversy of 1935–36. Bulgakov's teachings on Sophia were condemned by two different and mutually hostile factions of the Russian Orthodox Church: Metropolitan Sergii (Stragorodsky), the self-appointed "guardian of the patriarchal throne" of the Patriarchate of Moscow; and the Yugoslav-based "Karlovtsy Synod" of Russian bishops abroad (which became the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia, ROCOR). Hierarchs of the Karlovtsy

Synod criticized Bulgakov's theology as early as 1924, but the 1930s phase of the dispute was set in motion by a report on Bulgakov's sophiology prepared at the request of the Moscow Patriarchate by two hostile commentators, the young theologian Vladimir Lossky, firmly attached to the Moscow Patriarchate, and Alexis Stavrovsky, who had dropped out of the Saint Sergius Institute, of which Bulgakov was then dean. It is likely that Metropolitan Sergii did not actually read Bulgakov's works himself, but instead relied on summaries and commentaries provided by Lossky and Stavrovsky.

The Lossky-Stavrovsky report concluded that Bulgakov's teaching on Sophia, as expounded notably in Bulgakov's book *The Lamb of God* (1933), was pantheist, removing distinctions between God and creation. In response, Metropolitan Sergii issued a decree (*ukaz*) on August 24, 1935, which describes Bulgakov's teaching as "an eccentric and arbitrary Sophianic interpretation, frequently perverting the dogmas of the Orthodox faith," affirming that some of its possible conclusions may be "even dangerous for spiritual life" and that the teaching is "foreign" to the Orthodox Church. But the *ukaz* stops short of describing Bulgakov's doctrines as heretical.¹ The ROCOR bishops had no such qualms and in

¹ Paul Anderson, "Memorandum on Ukaz Concerning the Rev. Sergius Bulgakov" (Paris, October 30, 1935), Archives of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, <https://fsass.org/publications/archives>.

October 1935, they flatly condemned Bulgakov's teachings on Sophia as heretical.²

Bulgakov replied to both sets of critics. In 1936, Vladimir Lossky expanded his critique of Bulgakov's teachings in a book called *The Dispute over Sophia (Spor o sofii)*.³ The book sets out Lossky's theological objections to sophiology, and goes on to attack other aspects of Bulgakov's theology: his Trinitarian theology, his Christology, his use of gender analogies in theology, his concept of tradition and pan-human ecclesiology, the idea of Godmanhood, the use of historical analogies, and the importance of dogma in the church.

The canonical status of both condemnations is questionable. Metropolitan Sergii had no mandate either from the deceased Patriarch Tikhon or from a council or the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church to act as de facto head of the Moscow Patriarchate. It was not possible for the Russian Church to elect a successor after the death of Patriarch Tikhon in 1925 and Sergii simply stepped in to fill the breach created in the absence of any decision-making organ in the Russian Church. In condemning Bulgakov's teachings, he acted in his own name. ROCOR, representing the more traditional, conservative side of Russian Orthodoxy, had broken with the Church of Russia in 1922 and was technically in schism.

Ecclesiastical politics played a major and even determining role in the condemnation of Bulgakov's teaching on Sophia. Bulgakov and the Saint Sergius Institute belonged to the third Russian jurisdiction, headed by Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky), who had been appointed by Patriarch Tikhon in 1922 to head the Russian Church in Western

Europe. Evlogy, based in Paris on the *rue Daru*, represented the more liberal wing of the Russian Church in exile. He faced an impossible situation. He tried to be faithful to the suffering church in Russia by remaining within the Moscow Patriarchate, but the compromises of Metropolitan Sergii with the Bolsheviks, especially in 1927, made this increasingly difficult: the Moscow Patriarchate could not even recognize its own martyrs to the communist yoke. ROCOR, for its part, denounced the "Red Church" as captured by the communists. Evlogy was caught in the crossfire and his position in the Moscow Patriarchate became increasingly untenable. In 1930, Sergii attempted to remove Evlogy for having participated in ecumenical prayer services for the suffering church in Russia, and in 1931 Evlogy placed himself and his jurisdiction under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The condemnations of Bulgakov's theology in the mid-1930s were thus a convenient way for the other two Russian jurisdictions to embarrass and humiliate Evlogy by attacking his protégé, Father Sergii Bulgakov.

Although Evlogy defended Bulgakov, he felt obliged to appoint a commission to examine Bulgakov's controversial teachings. The commission basically found that Bulgakov's teachings were not heretical, but required clarification on a number of points.⁴ One of those appointed to the commission, composed mostly of professors of the Saint Sergius Institute, was Father Georges Florovsky, much against his will. For Florovsky, sophiology marked the dividing line between the inheritors of Vladimir Solovyev's philosophy and theology and the nascent alternative approach to theology, which he later referred to as the "neopatristic synthesis." Although

² "A Decision of the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad of 17/30 October 1935 Concerning the New Teaching of Archpriest Sergei Bulgakov on Sophia, the Wisdom of God," cited in Ludmila Perepiolkina, *Ecumenism: A Path to Perdition* (St. Petersburg, 1999).

³ Vladimir Lossky, *Споръ о Софiи: "Докладная записка" н рот. С. Булгакова и смыслъ Указа Московской патриархии* (Paris, 1936; Moscow, 1996).

⁴ Bryn Geffert, "The Charges of Heresy against Sergii Bulgakov: The Majority and Minority Reports of Evlogii's Commission and the Final Report of the Bishops' Conference," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 49.1-2 (2005): 47-66.

Florovsky was highly critical of Bulgakov's sophiology in private, he was unwilling to join in a public campaign against Bulgakov and limited his involvement in the commission as best he could.⁵

In the end, Bulgakov retained his chair of dogmatic theology at Saint Sergius, with the undertaking not to teach the Sophia doctrine in his classes (although it is not clear to what extent he actually refrained from teaching sophiology). There was no publication ban and Bulgakov continued to write about sophiology. His book on Sophia appeared in English in 1937,⁶ and several of his major theological writings, which continued to espouse sophiology, were published after the 1935–36 quarrel.

In his memoirs, Metropolitan Evlogy praises Bulgakov for his piety and his devotion to the church and as priest and pastor, without actually endorsing Bulgakov's sophiology: "[He] devoted himself to the service of the church with all the zeal of his soul purified by suffering. He became a man of prayer, a very good preacher and confessor, a priest who celebrated the Eucharist with great fervour." And Evlogy strongly protests against the harassment of Bulgakov:

What about the attacks on Fr. Sergii Bulgakov? The Karlovcians [ROCOR] couldn't come up with one kind word about him—all they do is condemn him, saying, "He's arrogant! He's a heretic! Censure him! Shut him up!" Is such a merciless, cruel, and pharisaic attitude true Christianity, is it a church-like approach to a person? It's not out of a passion for contradiction, nor out of a wish to win popularity that I'm defending Fr. Sergii but because I know the most treasured

qualities of this gifted and highly spiritual pastor.⁷

The ever-impetuous Nikolai Berdyaev also flew to Bulgakov's defense. Berdyaev's thought is largely dominated by the notion of the human being as person and its essential corollaries, freedom and creativity; Berdyaev concurs with the description of him as "the philosopher of freedom."⁸ Like Evlogy, Berdyaev defended Bulgakov without endorsing sophiology. Berdyaev was not a fan of sophiology and publicly distanced himself from it, but he went to the barricades to defend Bulgakov's right to express his thinking within the church. Berdyaev published a sharply-worded criticism of Metropolitan Sergii's *ukaz* in which Berdyaev compares Sergii to the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁹

Georges Florovsky was aware of the anti-freedom tendency evident in the official structures of the Russian Church under the tsars, as is made clear in his chapter in *The Ways of Russian Theology* (1937) on Konstantin Pobedonostev. Pobedonostev, considered the embodiment of conservative autocracy, managed the Russian Orthodox Church with an iron fist from 1880 to 1905 as Ober-Procurator or secretary of the Holy Synod. Florovsky is very critical of Pobedonostev, referring to him as "the new reactionary in politics" and "the chief retrograde" who "feared the introduction of thought into the construction of institutions."¹⁰ But Florovsky did not articulate a coherent theology of freedom, as had his theological opponents Berdyaev and Bulgakov. Yet Florovsky, for all his disagreement with Bulgakov on theological issues, remained on good personal terms with the elder theologian and disapproved of the harassment of Bulgakov in the mid-1930s.¹¹

⁵ Paul Ladouceur, "Georges Florovsky and Sergius Bulgakov: 'In Peace Let Us Love One Another,'" in *The Living Christ: The Theological Legacy of Georges Florovsky*, eds. John Chryssavgis and Brandon Gallaher (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 91–111.

⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God: A Brief Summary of Sophiology* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1937).

⁷ Metropolitan Evlogy, *My Life's Journey: The Memoirs of Metropolitan Evlogy*, vol. 2 (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2014), 745.

⁸ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 242.

⁹ Nikolai Berdyaev, "Дух Великого Инквизитора. (По поводу указа митрополита Сергия, осуждающего богословские взгляды о. С. Булгакова)," *Путь* 49 (1935), 72–82. See the English translation in the present issue of *The Wheel*.

¹⁰ Georges Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology*, in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 6 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1979), 184; 185.



Freedom was a key theme in the Russian Religious Renaissance of the late imperial period, arising from the theology of the human person, the infinite value of human personhood in the image of the persons of the Holy Trinity, with freedom and creativity as key characteristics of both divine and human personhood. The emphasis on freedom in the Russian Religious Renaissance was a counterpoint to the heavy-handed imperial regime and to non-Christian philosophies popular among the Russian intelligentsia—especially Marxism, which instrumentalized individual human existence as subservient to ideas such as social class and economic relations.

The notion of freedom is founded on the biblical account of the creation of man, the Garden of Eden, and the fall and exile of humanity: humans have the freedom to choose either to associate with God or to turn from him. The Russian thinkers added to this Biblical foundation a revolt against all forms of determinism, especially those originating from the West—whether theological, as in Calvinist predestination, or philosophical, as in Marxism. God is not determined by any contingency and has granted a measure of divine freedom to his creatures endowed with consciousness and personhood.

The Russian spirit oscillates between a fatalistic submission to authority and *volnitsa*, a spirit of revolt against authority, often reflected on a personal level as licentiousness. Against a long history of authoritarian rule to contain this spirit of revolt, Russian religious thought affirms the importance of personal freedom as an aspect of the divine image in humans. The novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky was the prophet of freedom and inspired the religious philosophers and theologians. The fate of the main personalities in *The Brothers Karamazov*, for instance, and the tale of the Grand Inquisitor point to the risks and the limits of freedom. A real-life example is the sad fate of the mid-nineteenth century theologian Alexander Bukharev, who felt obliged to leave his monastic and clerical status to continue his advocacy of church engagement and dialogue with modernity, in the face of severe restrictions imposed on him by the Russian Church.¹²

In his presentation of Anton Kartashev's essay "The Freedom of Scientific-Theological Research and Church Authority" (1937), Paul Valliere raises the question of the relative capacity of religious philosophy and of neopatristic theology to deal with intellectual freedom in theology. Because of the constant appeal to

Nicholai Berdyaev, Fr. Sergii Bulgakov, and Met. Evlogy (Georgievsky) with participants of the Congress of the Russian Student Christian Movement, Argeronne, 1924.

¹¹ See Ladouceur, "Georges Florovsky and Sergius Bulgakov," 110–11.

¹² Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 19–106.

Fr. Sergii Bulgakov's seminar at the Zanders', December 21, 1933. Standing (L to R): Vladimir Weidlé, Georges Fedotov, Boris Sove. Seated: Fr. Sergii Bulgakov, Mother Maria (St. Maria of Paris), Julia Reitlinger (future Sister Joanna), Vasily Zenkovsky, Vladimir Nikolayevich Ilyin, Boris Vysheslavtsev, Nicolas Afanasiev, Leon Zander. On the floor: Valentine Zander, Mother Eudoxia (Mechteriakova), Alexandra Obolensky (future Mother Blandina). Note the absence of Fr. Georges Florovsky.



tradition in Orthodoxy, the restriction of intellectual freedom in the name of “tradition” is always a temptation, a temptation which Orthodox have difficulty resisting. Valliere asks: “Which of the two schools had the clearer understanding of the concept of intellectual freedom and its implications for the life of the church?” He argues that the Sophia affair of the 1930s must weigh in the balance: “Whatever one thinks of Bulgakov’s sophiology, no one who values intellectual freedom will find it easy to admire the procedures employed by his opponents to attack it.” He goes on to enumerate the various infringements of “due process” in the condemnation of Bulgakov’s teachings.¹³

Valliere’s invocation of the “trial of sophiology” in the 1930s is not entirely to the point, since sophiology fell prey not only to theological considerations, but more to ecclesial politics among the Russian jurisdictions; it was not a victim of neopatristic theology as such. One would be hard put to find later Orthodox theologians who approve of the treatment that Bulgakov received in the 1930s, even if Orthodoxy has not received sophiology. While the Sophia affair may not be entirely relevant to a comparison with

neopatristic theology, it is nonetheless difficult to escape Valliere’s implied conclusion to his comments on Kartashev’s 1937 article: that religious philosophy was inherently more open to intellectual freedom than neopatristic theology.

The question of intellectual freedom in theology and the Church takes on a heightened importance depending on views concerning the relationship between dogma and tradition: the more one “dogmatizes” the content of tradition, the less room there is for intellectual freedom. Orthodoxy has always had a tradition of *theologumena*, “theological opinions,” which may be “doctrines,” in the sense of teachings of individual theologians which do not represent the dogmatic teaching of the Church, even if advanced by a church father. Clearly, if everything is dogma, then *theologumena* are squeezed out of the picture. It is only a short step to the condemnation of any new idea, any innovation, as heretical—the Sophia affair being a case in point—and the use of heavy-handed procedures to suppress upstart ideas and their promoters. Examples in Christian history are numerous (the Inquisition being one extreme), but the case still fresh in the memories

¹³ Ibid., 395.

¹⁴ Paul Ladouceur, “Onomatodoxy: The Name-of-God Conflict,” in *Modern Orthodox Theology: “Behold I Make All Things New”* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

¹⁵ Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 385

¹⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (1936; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 313.

of Russian exiles in the 1930s was the suppression of the “veneration of the Name of God” doctrine (onomatodoxy/*imiastlavie*) just prior to World War I. Leading figures of the Russian Religious Renaissance defended the advocates of the veneration of the Name of God against attacks from the Russian Orthodox Church and academic theologians.¹⁴

Related to the question of freedom in the Church is that of theological creativity. Freedom is a basic requirement for creativity to flower. Valliere astutely points out that “there cannot be a canon of creativity because creativity is not a *traditum*,” something handed down.¹⁵ Bulgakov links creativity with prophecy: “Creative inspiration represents a manifestation of the prophetic spirit, the absence of rules and the newness of the path correspond to the very spirit of prophecy, which is directed toward the new and the unknown. There cannot be a *Philokalia* of creativity, for the latter is outside of law and regularity.”¹⁶ Russian religious philosophy had no monopoly on theological creativity, but then neither does neopatristic theology; both were remarkably creative in very different ways, as Valliere recognizes: “The neopatristic turn sparked a remarkable outburst of creativity in Orthodox theology. . . . both the Russian and the neopatristic schools were creative in their time.”¹⁷

There is nonetheless a tendency in neopatristic theology to have a limited view of creativity in theology, to limit creativity to the contemporary application of a notion already contained in tradition. While this interpretation of creativity has some merit, it can all too easily act as a constraint on intellectual freedom: if a new idea cannot somehow be “justified” in terms of tradition—especially in terms of

Greek-Byzantine thought—it is at best questionable and should probably be abandoned. This line of thinking makes it difficult to deal with the



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theological implications of modern scientific discoveries and technology and with changes in modern societies. It is not insurmountable, as many neopatristic scholars have shown, but it represents a hurdle to overcome.

What lessons can be learned from the Sophia affair?

The Sophia controversy underscored the crucial importance of carefully distinguishing the status of different elements in Orthodox tradition and teaching. A fourfold categorization is perhaps most pertinent here: *dogma*, teachings defined by ecumenical councils and received by the Church as a whole, in practice largely limited to major teachings such as the Trinity and the two natures of Christ; *doctrines*, teachings widely accepted in the Church, but not formally defined by Church-in-council; *theologoumena*, teachings or personal opinions advanced by theologians for consideration in the Church, but not widely accepted; and *heresies*, teachings formally condemned by the Church-in-council.

¹⁷ Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 385.

¹⁸ The first three categories are based on Sergius Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology” (1937), in *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time*, ed. Michael Plekon (Lanham, MA: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003).

Bulgakov's sophiology belongs to the *theologoumena* category.¹⁸ Only the historical heresies of the early centuries may properly be termed "heresies."

The Sophia affair highlights the possibility of defending the principle of theological freedom in the Church without actually endorsing specific controversial teachings. This was the basic attitude of Metropolitan Evlogy and Nikolai Berdyaev in the 1930s, and continues to be an appropriate position in the face of theological and ethical controversy. The history of the Church amply demonstrates that teachings not widely accepted in the Church wither away and fall into the domain of historical theology, rather than becoming living doctrines. The motivations of the actors in the



Met. Evlogy

Sophia drama were mixed. While undoubtedly both Metropolitan Sergii and the Karlovtsy hierarchs were no doubt concerned about the orthodoxy of sophiology, they also realized that Bulgakov's teachings presented an easy opportunity not only to attack Bulgakov, but also to raise doubts about

the legitimacy of the *rue Daru* jurisdiction—especially now that it was under the Ecumenical Patriarchate—and to humiliate Metropolitan Evlogy as Bulgakov's protector. Church politics was at least as strong a motivating factor as concern for theological correctness.

In some accounts of the Sophia affair, the role of proper ecclesial authority is too easily overlooked, as though Sergii and ROCOR were fully legitimate ecclesial authorities, which they were not. Accusations of "heresy" can be flung about easily but erroneously, especially in a digital era, by individuals, be they lay or clerical, without proper canonical authority.

The Sophia controversy also pointed to the risk that theological freedom can become caught up in other issues not directly relevant to the problem at hand. Personal and institutional rivalry among the three Russian jurisdictions was the major triggering factor in Bulgakov's case. The hapless Bulgakov and Metropolitan Evlogy, his chief protector, were caught in the cross-fire between the embattled "Sergian" church in Moscow and decidedly conservative, even reactionary "synodal" church based in Yugoslavia.

In his memoirs, Metropolitan Evlogy writes: "Outside the church's freedom there is neither any living church life, nor any good shepherding. . . . Spiritual freedom is a great holy treasure of the church."¹⁹✱

¹⁹ Evlogy, *My Life's Journey*, 746.



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