
THE DEBATE ABOUT SOPHIOLOGY YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to present as objectively as possible various approaches and positions on the problem of religious philosophy, such as the problem of sophiology. Taking into consideration its already long history, an attempt has been made to make some generalizations about this dispute. The authors of the study concluded that the desire not to establish the essential gap between the Creator and the Created world, but to find as many connecting threads as possible between God and man, the emphasis in the character of 'similarity' is not on otherness, but on coincidence, forms intellectual schemes of speculative syntheses and harmonic systems from the structures of the heavenly and earthly in Russian religious thinkers. The modern attitude to the analysis of the nature of the dispute is as follows: 1) from a sharp demarcation, there has been a steady tendency to a more balanced and cautious position regarding estimates; 2) more sources are being put into circulation; 3) the historical and creative contexts of the emergence of sophiology are being clarified. The authors of the study identify and analyse two interrelated themes that underlie the dispute about Sophia and largely determine the nature of its development. These are topics that focus on the concept of theology and the real innovation of theology of the Father S. Bulgakov, which, in its turn, 'pulls' the theme of the originality of Russian religious philosophy in a specific way, which originates in the concept of *vseedinstva* (all-unity) of V. Solovyov. The authors do not come to any final conclusions, but agree with the idea that the Church should be the only judge in this matter.

Keywords: doctrine, Sophia, Solovyov, theologoumenon, gnosticism

1. Introduction

There is one significant topic in the history of the Russian religious philosophy of the Silver Age, which gives an occasion to clarify the true relationship of this movement in Russian philosophy to Orthodoxy and to reveal its true philosophical origins: the theme of Sophia, the Wisdom of God.

The emergence of the theme of Sophia and its promotion to the forefront of Russian religious philosophers is directly related to the presence of such main motives of this philosophy as the motive of unity and anthropodicy. Russian religious thinkers desire not to establish the essential gap between the Creator and

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the created world, but desire to find as many connecting threads as possible between God and man. In the nature of 'similarity' the emphasis is not on otherness, but on coincidence. This striving finds its embodiment in the intellectual schemes of speculative syntheses and harmonic systems from the structures of the heavenly and earthly.

To offer one's own assessments of the religious, philosophical and theological concept of Sophia is a thankless work, therefore the aim of this study will be to maximize the objective presentation of the debate about sophiology. Taking into consideration its already long history - it began in the mid-30s of the last century - you can try to make some generalizations regarding this debate.

We should recall that the dispute arose over the doctrine of Father Sergius (Bulgakov) about Sophia and then involved in its orbit the analysis of the position of other Russian religious philosophers, such as V. Solovyov [1, 2], S. Trubetsky [3], Father Pavel (Florensky) [4], L. Karsavin [5]. This logic of the development of the dispute is not accidental at all. None of the researchers has any doubts about the fact that the sophiology of Father Sergius is the most detailed and complete version of the doctrine of Sophia, the Wisdom of God. Both his philosophy and theology, Father Sergius built on the basis of this teaching, without the assessment of which it is impossible to proceed to the analysis of his work.

If we talk about the development of Father Sergius' views on Sophia, we should state its defining role at all stages of his creative evolution: political, economic, philosophical and theological. Actually, the sophiology of V. Solovyov and Father Pavel (Florensky) became the object of detailed discussion for the first time in connection with the sophiology of Father Sergius. He always revered V. Solovyov for the original philosophical systematics, Father Pavel - for a rich and deep spiritual experience.

Although the sophiology of both Solovyov and Florensky has interesting specific features, it is justifiable to consider it on the basis of the sophiology of Father Sergius. It is difficult to agree with the opinion of one of the authoritative researchers of this topic who is, on the whole, correctly assessing its presence in the works of Russian religious philosophers P. Saprionov. He claims, in particular, that "an attempt to find some Bulgakov's independent theological or philosophical moves, something peculiar in the way of building sophiology or examining Sophia. Here, all paths are marked and traversed by predecessors or predetermined by the presence of their thoughts in myth" [6].

To finish with the presentation of the position of a modern Russian researcher, we point out his desire to bring together sophiological and mythological discourses. While most researchers of sophiology single out gnosticism and/or Hellenic philosophy as its initial intentions, Saprionov prefers to talk about the Sophia mythologeme, which arises as a result of the underdevelopment of the philosophical logos of Russian philosophers. Without claiming to be a versatile and deep characterization of Saprionov's position, we will only make the most superficial judgment, which rests, one might say, on a visual review of the sources used by him for his conclusions. Even the analysis of

Bulgakov's sophiology does not include an analysis of his theological works. This gives reason to say that there is at least a lack of elaboration of the theological aspect of Russian sophiology.

2. The origins of sophiology of Russian philosophers

We would like to make some preliminary remarks regarding the debate about sophiology. First of all, this concerns the nature of the dispute: from a sharp demarcation, there has been a steady tendency to a more balanced and cautious position regarding estimates. A greater number of sources are introduced into circulation; the historical and creative contexts of the emergence of sophiology are clarified.

Here, one should agree with the opinion of A. Kozyrev: "We must finally relate to the study of our thinkers as it is accepted in the world academic practice - not to rush to make far-reaching conclusions of a Westernistic, Slavophilic or some other character from each article read, but to painstakingly collect and publish everything - up to fragmentary sketches and notes. Then from this mosaic, we may be able to see a different image of the philosopher and his philosophy, which is not quite familiar to us." [7]

This appeal Kozyrev draws, first of all, to himself and strives to clarify the origins of Russian sophiology on the basis of a large and versatile material of sources. He rightly points to the ambiguity of gnosticism, its complex differentiation and evolution, and the complex history of interaction with both Hellenism and Christianity. The main feature of gnosticism, the Russian philosopher, after H. Jonas, calls it the dualistic perception of man and the world, the world and God. Comparing the position of Bulgakov and gnosticism allows Kozyrev to make the following conclusion: "By the main intention of his work, Bulgakov, of course, is not a Gnostic, but a Platonist ... The feeling of the unity of God and the creature, the belief that God is not something absolutely transcendent to the world, and the world is not an outsider to God, is not fundamentally Gnostic. According to Father Sergius Bulgakov, the world is a mirror in which God looks; man is initially divine-human, and the substance of the Divine in the form of Sophia is already contained in man and in nature. Of course, this can be disputed from the Orthodox point of view, but there is no trace of Gnosticism in this. The justification of nature, creature, matter and the enlightened cosmism of the 'Sophia works' of Father Sergius Bulgakov contrasts sharply with the spirit of Gnosticism." [7, p. 207] Bulgakov himself insists on the difference between his theological system and the gnostic one, also believing that the essence of this difference lies in the absence of dualism in his system, which, in his opinion, is decisive for all gnostic teachings.

However, Yulia Danzas does not agree with the assessment of the characteristic specificity of the gnosticism of Father Sergius Bulgakov and Alexey Kozyrev [8]. In contrast, she believes that gnostic systems are strictly monistic, while dualism arises already in the course of gradual evolution, originating from a single Primary Cause. Therefore, the reference to the difference between

sophianism and gnosticism on the basis of the difference between monism and dualism, in her opinion, is devoid of real ground.

In addition, Kozyrev suggests that the analysis of Bulgakov's sophiology should take into account the creative evolution of the Russian philosopher and theologian: "Bulgakov's Orthodoxy - he notes - is the result of long intellectual searches, a serious and responsible path in culture, politics, and economics. This should be taken into account by those who now, as before, undertake to incriminate Bulgakov in gnosticism and another intellectual (and not only) heresies." [7, p. 390]

Another modern Russian researcher V. Kravchenko denies not only Bulgakov's belonging to gnosticism, as a kind of Christian heresy but also Solovyov's. To separate gnosticism, which is opposed to Christianity and is based on ancient pagan cults, from gnosticism, which is 'not sharply opposed' to Christianity, she, referring to another researcher A. Khosroev, separates the concepts of 'gnostic' and 'gnosticist'. It looks like multiplying entities unnecessarily. According to this scheme, Solovyov is "a gnosticist, i.e. a free Christian thinker who tends to gnosis" [9]. The author undertakes such philological research in order to justify the Christian position of the founder of the 'philosophy of unity'. "But there is no doubt", says Kravchenko, "about the purity of Solovyov's religious aspirations and his steadfast Christian position. Another thing is that the very concept of true Christianity in its worldview was associated with the idea of future reunification of the Churches." [9, p. 155]

Russian philosopher N. Bonetskaya denies that the sophiology of Russian philosophers belongs to gnosticism on other grounds: "Russian sophiology is not a gnosis: for this purpose, it lacks system, concreteness of spiritual knowledge, elaboration of the way to it, but it can be described as a passionate impulse to gnosis" [10, p. 83].

Confirming Solovyov's incorrect attitude to mysticism as sensory perception, not a spiritual activity, V. Kravchenko seeks to justify all the ambivalence of the Russian philosopher by the extraordinary nature of his philosophical task and the inexpressiveness of his personal mystical visions. This is where the mythologeme of Sophia came in handy. "It seems that Solovyov overcame not only Western but also Eastern, including Orthodox Christian limitations. Understanding 'all-unity' not only as integrity but also as a single organic movement and existence, the Solovyov's myth naturally assumes a constant renewal, regularity, and lawfulness of this incomprehensible living cosmos. Moreover, this global incomprehensibility necessarily generates some visible forms. Sophia is one of the most generalized, most meaningful and real forms of incomprehensibility. Sophia is a symbol of the future renewal of the world, its powerful eschatological stimulus." [9, p. 360]

Another important point in the dependence of all subsequent versions of sophiology on Solovyov's one lies in the fact that the theme of Sophia is taken out of the mystical sphere, in which it resides in Gnostic works, into the sphere of philosophically articulated, rationalistic. All-unity of V. Solovyov could not have taken place as an original religious and philosophical concept if the topic of

Sophia had not been involved, which received in this concept the character of an intellectual prototype of the created world. The connection of Philosophy and all-unity, says S. Khoruzhiy, “is a happy find, the discovery of Solovyov, which became the key to the emergence of the only original direction in Russian philosophy” [11]. However, this find turned out to be fatal, according to the same S. Khoruzhiy, for the development of Russian philosophy, leading it away from real themes and problems into mythical problems and themes, in view of the fact that “sophiology affirmed ‘ideal prototypes’ and ‘roots in God’ for to everyone in the world, regardless of any sobriety and effort and it is not surprising that its constant companions in Russia were illusion and magnanimity, manilism, wishful thinking” [11, p. 166].

3. Arguments for and against Father S. Bulgakov’s sophiology

It’s time to talk about the main arguments that are most often given by both defenders of sophiology and its opponents. It should be noted right away that despite his great pedagogical, spiritual and mentoring authority of Father Sergius (Bulgakov), there was no theological school or even successors of the work of all his life. We can, of course, refer to other examples of great thinkers who remained alone but changed the views of many subsequent generations. The most famous example of philosophy is I. Kant; of those closest to us in time, M. Heidegger. Moreover, the latter stated that the incomprehensibility of his philosophy is temporary, and the intellectual progress of man is necessary in order to make the truth of his philosophical position obvious. Something similar, but in relation to Theology, we meet in the work of Father Sergius. Therefore, if we try to briefly grasp the main motives of the defenders of sophiology, they can be expressed in two theses.

Bulgakov did not express a dogma, but a theologoumena, that is, a private theological opinion “My doctrine”, he writes, “refers not to dogmas, but to theological opinions, to doctrine. In relation to such, Orthodoxy, in its spirit and dogmatic grounds, represents the corresponding freedom of thought, the violation or derogation of which threatens the life of the Orthodox Church and affects the vital interests of all theologians, regardless of the difference in their theological opinions.” (quoted from [12]) Therefore, the harshness and one-sidedness of the condemnation is inappropriate here, and as we would say now, the painstaking work of a collective Orthodox theological mind is necessary.

The project of Father Sergius outlines a reference point for the further development of modern theology and can be correctly understood and evaluated based not on past experience (although the patristic experience, of course, is not excluded), but on the experience of the future unity of the churches. He insists that, as Father Sergius writes in the famous article ‘On the paths of dogma’, the time has come to change the negative definition of ‘non-monolithic, inseparable...’ to a positive definition of the relation of the God-Trinity to the world. Father Sergius replaces the pantheistic picture of the justification of Nature through God with the panentheistic one, clarifying the concept of the nature of

God or ousia through His Wisdom. He also calls it the Glory of God, the Kingdom of God or Sophia, the Divine World, the Bride of God, the Church, the Mother of God. Applying the Palamite formula regarding the Divine essence and Divine energies to the characteristic of the interaction of Sophia and God, Bulgakov proposes the following solution: God is Wisdom. But Wisdom is not God as a Person. It is God in His self-revelation.

The first to condemn Father Sergius Bulgakov, the Church hierarchs of the Orthodox Church responded to his old friend and opponent N. Berdyaev, who published the article 'The Spirit of the Great Inquisitor' in December 1935 in the 'Path' magazine. In it, he equates the religious policy of Metropolitan Sergius with the Inquisitorial. An example of Bulgakov's sophiology assessment by the Moscow Patriarchate gives Berdyaev reason to name the position of the reactionary hierarchy stifling any manifestation of creativity. Not understanding the intricacies of the theological polemics surrounding the theme of Sophia, Berdyaev uses the very fact of administrative conclusions as a violation of the right of any person, including the believer, to any independent opinions, even if they do not coincide with the official point of view of the Church.

Also, less theological and more psychological arguments and arguments of common sense are imbued with the thoughts of the famous Russian researcher S. S. Averintsev to justify the productivity of the sophiological theme [13]. First of all, he proceeds from the widespread characteristic of the modern era, as a secular and hedonistic era, forgetting about the 'fear of God', which signalled the proximity of God to the world. Seeking to rationally clarify the relationship between God and the world, Averintsev considers it quite natural to think about the mutual discovery of the idea of Sophia in the death of Christ, as his kenotic alienation from the Divine nature, and in the superhuman image of the Virgin Mary, giving birth to the God-man.

On the occasion of the centenary of the birth of its former dean, Father Sergius Bulgakov, the Saint Sergius Theological Academy in Paris responded with a collection of articles [14], in which the authors understood that to ignore the topic of sophiology means to ignore most of the creative heritage of the Russian religious thinker. The core of the theology of Father Sergius is determined by the fact of God's incarnation and the dogmatic formula of the Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon (year of 451) about the Union of two natures in the single person of Christ. In his work, the Russian thinker insists on the necessary internal development and theological refinement of this Christological dogma.

The authors of the introductory article [14, p. I-VII], without justifying the sophiological extremes of the position of their teacher, Father Sergius Bulgakov, supported his desire to update the topic of the connection between God and the world, the topic of deification and salvation in a new way. Recognizing the weak theological elaboration of these topics, they confirmed the possibility of its theological interpretation as well as the theological conclusions on this subject proposed as theologoumenons.

As it may seem strange, one of the most active and persistent opponents of sophiology, a teacher of the Orthodox Theological Institute, Father Sergius Chetverikov, gave a balanced assessment of the condemnation of Father Sergius Bulgakov's sophiological views. For him, "the untruth of Metropolitan Sergius is not that he raised his voice in defense of the truth, but that he spoke about a subject that he had not previously read. This is the first. And the second, its untruth, as well as the untruth of the Karlovac Cathedral, is that they rushed to their conclusions. They pronounced a judicial verdict, when in fact it was necessary to make a preliminary comprehensive and benevolent consideration of the disputed issue. After all, the author of the disputed theological opinions does not persist in their infallibility and is ready to listen to their criticism. What was the need to put him in the position of a defendant and demand from him the consciousness of his guilt and remorse?" [15]

The pathos of the sophiological solution of the connection between God and man is permeated by the position of Archpriest John Sviridov. In his opinion, sophiology should become the theological platform of a single Ecumenical Church [16]. The opposition to sophiology in emigration was formed not only on theological grounds. There were more prosaic reasons. The novelty of the concept 'scared' the part of the Russian emigration that was in exile to protect their faith. In general, there are many more opponents of sophiology and their arguments are more diverse. Taking into account the conservatism of the Church, especially with regard to dogmatic teaching, it should be accepted as an undoubted fact that the party of caution and conservatism without anachronistic extremes eventually causes more confidence and enjoys greater authority, and supporters of the purity and stability of the dogma formulations receive more bonuses from the Church and Church-based public. In fact, we know only one case of serious successful intervention in dogmatic constructions on the part of an individual - the doctrine of the Divine essence and Divine energies of G. Palama. It is no coincidence that all subsequent attempts tend to rely on this experience.

If we try to summarize the main religious and philosophical claims to the sophiological concept of Father Sergius Bulgakov yesterday and today, we can distinguish the following two provisions.

Sources of sophiology are non-Christian and/or anti-Orthodox: gnosticism, Catholicism, Protestantism, German idealism, Freemasonry, etc. In particular, Father Ivan Meyendorff finds many features of the Sophia ontology of the creature in the Protestant and Catholic theology of K. Barth, P. Tillich, and Teyar de Chardin. "The parallel with Russian sophiology", he says about the comparison of Protestant theology and the Sophia concepts of Bulgakov and Florensky, "as well as the common Foundation of both schools in German idealism, is quite obvious..." [17].

Modern Russian researcher N. Bonetskaya, criticizing Bulgakov's desire to embed the Sophia dogma in Orthodox theology, sees two main sources that have undoubtedly influenced the deification of the creature and the sophologization of God in the theological constructions of Father Sergius and Father Pavel: gnosticism and Catholicism. Regarding the latter, she points out that the "original

‘Sophia’ impulse, perceived by Russian thought through Solovyov, had a distinct Mariological colour, connected, one must think, with the accentuation of the Mariological problem in the Catholic theology of the XIX century. In both Florensky and Bulgakov, the theme of Sophia is inseparable from that of Mary; if there is gnosis here, it is mediated by the ideas of modern Catholicism.” [10, p. 95]

Another modern Russian researcher N. Gavryushin advises looking for the roots of sophiology in the Western Christian tradition, not in the XIX century, but much earlier. In his opinion, the medieval scholastics of Boethius and the Chartres school provide enough material to draw a conclusion about the Sophia intentions of their theological constructions. A domestic researcher believes that sophiological logic as a whole is the ‘native’ soil of new European thought. “In general”, he emphasizes, “the desire to represent the creation of the world not as a direct free act of God, but as an indirect instrumental act in which Sophia, the Drawing Wisdom, etc. acts as an instrument and executor of the Divine purpose, must be brought into line with pathos of instrumental knowledge and the subjugation of nature in the new European culture, where the instrumental attitude is (unlike a number of oriental traditions) the only way of acting and understanding. Hypostasis of Platonic ideas, Sophia and instrumental natural science concepts - one root.” [18]

There are also attempts to ‘improve’ the theological version of the sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov by overcoming his ‘errors’. Thus, one of the authors, V. Kapitanchuk, proposes to separate the concepts of nature and image in the problem of the correlation of the created world and God [19]. This separation will, in his opinion, preserve the transcendental distinction between the creature and the Creator, and at the same time not turn this distinction into an insurmountable abyss. According to this ‘perfector’ of sophiology, the affirmation of the conformity of the world to God and not the concordance to reconcile the positions of the Sophians and their opponents, will embed sophiology in the Orthodox creed and save it from relapses of pantheism.

The proposal of another intermediary between God and the world inevitably introduces anthropomorphic features into the nature of the relationship between God and the world, does not clarify the nature of the creation of the world, the fall of man and the Divine Incarnation, but clearly introduces an imbalance between mystical experience and theological thought in Orthodoxy. Y. Danzas notes the following on this occasion: “The fundamental provisions that should be noted first of all are anthropocentrism, which represents man as the image of God in a much more concrete sense than the Church allows; secondly, the insistent desire to place between the Creator and the creation a kind of intermediary being endowed with divine attributes, such as Sophia, personified until the loss of its metaphysical aspect of a pure idea and, by stringing vague pantheistic concepts, identified with the material world” [8, p. 132-133].

It is also worth stressing that sophology has been the subject of research by many Western authors: the Anglican theologian Rowan Williams, the Catholic thinkers Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bernard Schultz, Louis Bouyer [20] and many

others. Antoine Arjakovsky, for example, points to striking coincidences between Bulgakov's sophology and Urs von Balthasar's dogmatic and ecclesiological reasoning [21]. Polish researcher of Russian philosophy Nun Teresa (Obolevitch) gives numerous evidences of a profound influence of the Russian philosopher and theologian's sophiology on the Catholic monk Thomas Merton ('Father Louis' after he was ordained to the priesthood) [22].

4. Conclusions

Thus, we can conditionally distinguish two interrelated themes that underlie the dispute about Sophia and largely determine the nature of its development. First of all, this is a topic that focuses on the concept of Theology and the real innovation of theology of Father S. Bulgakov. Another, connected with the first, is the theme of the originality of Russian religious philosophy, which originates in the concept of vseedinsrva (all-unity) of V. Solovyov.

Although Solovyov and Bulgakov believed that their sophiological intentions could be claimed only in the future united Church, the real Churches took this idea as a whole negatively: Orthodox in view of the fact that sophiological theological intentions did not rely on the mystical experience of the church fathers, but had mystical erotic (in Solovyov's) character of origin and confirmation, Catholic - because of the reference to G. Palama. It is characteristic that, without having the monastic experience of G. Palama, that is, without having his personal experience, both Sophians and name worshipers (namely theorists, theologians and philosophers), appealed to his theological conclusions from this personal experience.

As stated at the beginning of the work, it is not evaluative or recommendatory in nature, is not aimed at drawing any conclusions, but still, we would like to cite one more thought expressed by Y. Danzas in conclusion, fully agreeing with her: "The future will show whether the ideas expressed by Russian theologians-innovators will be studied in order to harmonize them with the dogmatic teachings of the Church. But in order for such work to be productive and not lead to new unfortunate divisions, it is first necessary that brave innovators recognize the inalienable right of the Church to be the sole judge in these matters." [3, p. 148]

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