

RUSSIAN SOPHIOLOGY¹

(I)

RUSSIAN religious thought is experiencing an acute crisis. The mysticism which, in pre-revolutionary days, greatly interested certain Russian intellectual circles has now reached its full development among thinkers grouped around the Russian Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris; a "new school of theology"² is even being spoken of. Occasionally this group has used the term *neo-gnosis*, or *orthodox gnosis*, to describe their particular mystical tendencies. There is no question of a rupture with the Orthodox Church, but of a broadening of her doctrinal teaching, by the introduction of conceptions purported to belong to her traditions, though discarded by the official Church. So, in the name of these traditions, Fr. Bulgakov, head of the Institute, expounds a so-called *sophiological* doctrine based upon the conception of a hypostatized divine Wisdom, idea (in the Platonic sense) of the creation co-eternal with the Creator.

This doctrine is taught in several important works of which *The Light Undimmed* was written before the author's ordination. Fr. Bulgakov has subsequently developed his thought in a number of books, mostly published in Paris: *The Burning Bush*, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, *The Ladder of Jacob*, *Icons and their Veneration*, and especially *The Lamb of God*, which forms the first part of a work upon theandristm intended to epitomize the writer's sophiological teaching. We must add an essay on *Hypostasis and Hypostatisation* published in Prague, also a series of articles in *Putj*, Russian philosophical periodical issued in Paris, some of which are noteworthy as they explain the writer's intellectual evolution. In a French work *l'Orthodoxie*³ the

¹ Attention was recently called in BLACKFRIARS (June, pp. 379-380) to the importance of the "neo-gnostic" movement in the Orthodox Church which has already impressed English thinkers. We publish this authoritative article from the pen of a Dominican tertiary by courtesy of *La Revue des Sciences Théologiques et Philosophiques*. The present translation is by Olga Bennigsen.—Ed.

² See address of Fr. Serge Bulgakov at the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Institute (*Putj*, No. 47).

³ Translated into English as *The Orthodox Church*.

allusion to the sophiological doctrine is so cautious that the reader may fail to grasp its significance for the writer and the violent polemic it has provoked.

Indeed, in 1927 the late Metropolitan Antonius protested against Bulgakov's sophiological teaching, demanding its condemnation by Metropolitan Eulogius, his immediate superior. Fr. Bulgakov presented his justification to the latter, and the question of condemnation was shelved as it led to more dissensions between the divided jurisdictions of the Russian Church. But on September 7th, 1935, Metropolitan Sergius of Moscow formally condemned Fr. Bulgakov, accusing him of a revival of gnostic heresies. Again Bulgakov defended himself before Metropolitan Eulogius on the plea that he merely propounded *theologoumena* subject to further discussion and conforming to the traditions of the Eastern Church; he derided the accusation of gnosticism, observing that his doctrine was free of the dualism inherent to gnosticism, therefore did not derive from any gnostic system condemned by the Church. This sophiological interpretation of the doctrines of the Creation and Redemption, he said, only formulated conceptions latent in the teaching of the Eastern Church, and which pertain to her spiritual heritage. By a new decree (December 27th, 1935) the Metropolitan of Moscow confirmed his previous condemnation, whilst some time earlier, on October 30th, 1935, the Synod of Russian bishops in Karlovtzy also severely condemned Bulgakov's teaching. Moreover Archbishop Seraphim, residing in Bulgaria, published a long treatise, *A new doctrine of the Sophia, the Divine Wisdom*, wherein Bulgakov's system is denounced as recalling that of Valentinus. This condemnation includes Fr. Florensky and Vladimir Soloviev, who were in a way Bulgakov's precursors.

Thus in the persons of her foremost theologians the Russian Church opposes the sophiological doctrine, but it has fervent adherents to defend it, thus Professors Berdyaev and Ilyin voiced their indignant protests in *Putj* (No. 49) and *Vezroezhdenie* (December 7th, 1935) against Bulgakov's condemnation. In order to understand the reason for this

accusation and realize how far Bulgakov's ideas (shared by a group called "The Sophianic Brotherhood") recall the philosophic speculations of the early years of Eastern Christianity it is necessary to examine this doctrine from its introduction into Russian religious philosophy by Soloviev.

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In Soloviev's thought *Sophia* is the "universal substance, the *whole in the unity*."

In possessing her, God possesses all in her: it is the plenitude or absolute totality of the being, anterior and superior to all partial existence. This universal substance, this unity of all, is the essential wisdom of God (*Khocmah*, *Σοφία*). Possessing in herself the hidden power of everything, she herself is possessed by God, and this in a threefold mode. She says so herself: . . . He possesses me in His everlasting being . . . in the absolute action . . . , in the pure and perfect enjoyment . . . ⁴

. . . God is all. In His love He wills that *all should be God*. He wills that there should be outside Himself another nature becoming progressively what He is from all eternity—the absolute whole. In order to attain divine totality, free and reciprocal relations with God, this nature must necessarily be both separated from God and united to Him . . . ⁵

. . . We must admit, as the principle of creation properly speaking, a distinct subject, a world-soul. As creature it does not exist eternally within itself, but it does exist from all eternity in God in a state of pure potentiality as the hidden foundation of eternal wisdom. This potential and future Mother of the extra-divine world corresponds, as an ideal complement, to the eternally actual Father of the Divinity . . . ⁶

. . . In chapter VIIIth of Solomon's *Proverbs* . . . the substantial Wisdom, the *Khocma* says (v. 22) *Jahveh ganani reshith darco, Jahveh possessed me as principle (female) of his voice*. Thus the eternal Wisdom is the *reshith*, the principle or female head of all being as Jahveh Elohim, the triune God, is its *rosh*, the principle or active head. Now, according to *Genesis* God created heaven and earth in this *reshith*, in his essential Wisdom. That means that this divine Wisdom represents not only the essential and actual unity and totality of the absolute being or the substance of God, but that it also contains in itself the unifying power of the divided and fractioned being of the world. Being the accomplished unity of all in God, she thus becomes

⁴ *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle*, chap. III, p. 223.

⁵ *Ibid.* chap IV, p. 230.

⁶ *Ibid.* chap. IV, p. 235.

also the unity of God and of the extra-divine existence. She is also the true reason of the being and the object of creation—the principle in which God created heaven and earth. If she is in God substantially and from all eternity, she effectively manifests herself in the world, becoming successively incarnate in it and drawing it into an ever more perfect unity . . . ⁷

This passage alone suffices to show why Soloviev may be considered the originator of this modern sophiological doctrine. He was greatly influenced by Jacob Boehme and his conceptions of man's androgynous nature and original sin which was but the rupture between the heavenly *Sophia* and the earthly Eve, and of the mystical meaning of love which is only a longing to recover man's former androgynous image. Professor Berdyaev observes that this idea inspired Soloviev's renowned article upon the *Meaning of Love* with its famous passage:

The other aspect of God, *i.e.*, the universe, is from all eternity the image of the perfect feminine, but God wills that this image should not exist for Him alone, that it be fulfilled and incarnate in every individual being capable of a union with her. Towards this fulfilment, this incarnation the everlasting Feminine tends, she is not a mere image in God's mind, but a living spiritual being, possessing the fulness of power and action. The entire historical universal process is but that of her realization and incarnation in the infinite multiplicity of forms.⁸

Yet despite his admiration for Boehme and Pordage,⁹ whose influence he perceived in Saint-Martin and his school, Soloviev's scholarship was too deep and sound not to induce him to investigate their sources. Thus beyond the occult and kabbalistic teachings of some Western mediævalists he discovered Neo-Platonism and gnosticism. But he never wrote the book upon gnostic systems he had planned, so the first Russian researches upon gnosticism were published after his death.¹⁰ Soloviev inaugurated a sophiological doctrine of gnostic origin, whose hazy formulæ acted as a leaven in the evolution of Russian thought. This influence

⁷ *Ibid.* chap. V, p. 241.

⁸ Russian edition of his *Works*, v. VI, pp. 364-418.

⁹ Whose *Sophia* was published in 1699.

¹⁰ The most important of these things being the research by the writer of this article (nom-de-plume Yury Nikolaev) *The God-Seekers; Essay on the history of gnosticism*. St. Petersburg, 1913 (Tr).

manifested itself in various ways: Soloviev's Sophia was fused with Plato's cosmic Eros, this erotic aspect of his teaching strongly imbued certain Russian literary currents. In his *Studies of Boehme* Professor Berdyaev writes:

The sophiological current in Russian religious philosophy and theology owes its origin to Soloviev . . . But comparing Boehme's sophianism with Soloviev's we prefer the former. Boehme's teaching is . . . marked by a great purity . . . ethical clarity—has nothing ambiguous . . . Unfortunately Soloviev's doctrine of the Sophia is neither pure nor detached. There are many doubtful elements in his sophianic mentality, as his poems show . . . Obviously theological sophianism widely differs from its poetical counterpart. In his latest works Fr. Bulgakov strives to evolve a purified theological doctrine of the *Sophia*. He has journeyed far from Soloviev's sophianism and Boehme's is alien to him because he wants to be a theologian and not a theosophist, therein lies the difficulty of his position.¹¹

This summarizes the problem of Russian post-Soloviev thought. The "impure current" influenced certain philosophical tendencies; thus Professor Karsavin, in a pamphlet entitled *Noctes Petropolitanae*, insists upon the conception of a female cosmic principle inseparable from the virile divine principle and which ought to be, in his view, introduced into the dogmatic formula of the Trinity to complete it.

Another line of thinkers expurgated the conception of *Sophia*, bringing it nearer to Christian idealistic Platonism and ecclesiastical tradition. Prince Serge Troubetzkoy, after Soloviev the most Hellenic of Russian philosophers, also planned, but never wrote, an important work upon *Sophia*. The first serious treatise on the subject is Fr. Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. Its publication in 1914 marked the beginning of contemporary sophiology, denounced in the person of Fr. Bulgakov. Though these two writers are united in a comprehensive condemnation for striving to reconcile their sophiological speculations with the dogmatic teaching of the Orthodox Church on the strength of quotations from the Fathers and

¹¹ *Putj*, No. 21.

the Liturgy, there is, however, a considerable difference between Bulgakov and his teacher Florensky.

The latter, though cleansing his doctrine from all "impure elements," *i.e.*, Soloviev's erotic interpretation of divine Femininity, retained however the occult and kabbalistic elements which he curiously combines with Christian texts. If, according to Berdyaev, Bulgakov intends to be more theologian than theosophist, certainly Florensky is more of a theosophist than a theologian. His strange bulky work is interwoven with lyrical outbursts and padded with quotations culled from ancient and modern mystical writings, often of very questionable value, Papus and Sâr Peladan, for instance. From Speransky, a Russian Martinist, Florensky borrows the following:

In relation to the Father she (*Sophia*) is his daughter, since she is part of his Son. In relation to the Son she is his sister by the law of paternal love and his spouse by the law of reproduction . . . To His spouse the Son has entrusted the establishment of the law of life leaving for Himself the law of love.

Though Florensky considered this formula somewhat pantheistic, he thought that its "fundamental idea" was "opposed neither to biblical teaching nor to its patristic interpretation." Florensky supported his thesis chiefly by his own interpretations of passages from St. Athanasius, though he readily amplified them with various apocrypha, *The Shepherd of Hermas* especially, and whenever he tried to express independent sophiological formulae he wavered between pantheism and modalism, whereby *Sophia* becomes a complement of the Trinity. Sometimes she is a "monad, *i.e.*, a real unity," "the great Root of the entire creation," "the plenitude of creation through which the created world penetrates the trinitarian life, receiving life eternal at its very source." *Sophia* is also "the Guardian Angel of the created world, its ideal personality . . . the contents of the divine *NOUS*, its psychic contents. Permeated by trinitarian love *Sophia* is identified in a religious, but not rational sense, with the Word and with the Spirit and the Father, as well as with Wisdom, with the Kingdom and the divine Fatherhood." The writer cites the *Shepherd of*

Hermas when saying that *Sophia* is the "pre-existing aeon of the world." In another passage he calls her outright "The Fourth Person" for "she participates in the life of the Trinity, penetrates it and is in communion with divine Charity. But being the fourth Person created, hence non-consubstantial, she is not of the unity, is not herself Love, but through the inconceivable, ineffable divine humility is allowed to penetrate the communion of love . . . " *Sophia* has several aspects, for "she is primarily the body of Christ, i.e., created nature wherein the Word is incarnate." She is "created substance cleansed by Christ, i.e., the Church under her heavenly aspect." She is also "The Church under her earthly aspect, or the aggregate of persons empirically united to Christ's body." She is "The Spirit in so far as he divinizes creation." However, "the Holy Ghost manifests himself in the creature through virginity . . . in this sense *Sophia* is Virginity . . . she is Mary." Alone "*Sophia* is the essential Beauty of creation."

These various definitions are contradictory, and the writer's fundamental thought is not clear: this is due to the varied sources of his inspiration—he is often closer to the Kabbala than to Christian teaching. Fr. Florensky is very insistent upon an argument he considers final: that the Eastern Church had always known the cult of *Sophia*, Russia, imitating Constantinople, consecrated churches to the Divine Wisdom. Though Florensky was aware that in Constantinople Divine Wisdom was identified with the Word and in Russia there is liturgical evidence for such an identification, yet he emphasized the fact that in the Russian religious practice the cult of Wisdom became that of the Theotokos, wherein he saw a proof of the profound meaning the Russian soul attached to a metaphysical conception embodying the ideal of a divinized Femininity.

To-day *Sophia* is for some the Word, the Trinity even; for others the Theotokos, for others the image of Virginity or the Church or mankind as a whole, Auguste Comte's *Great Being*. Are these interpretations irreconcilable? Certainly, in so far as *rational notions* they are, but if considered as corresponding *ideas*, the difficulty disappears.

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Florensky perceived this idea of the Great Whole in the iconography of Wisdom, such as may be seen in some post-sixteenth century Russian churches: a woman with fiery wings seated on a throne—sometimes the Virgin stands by, a proof that the mysterious figure does not symbolize her. Florensky expounds an idea evolved by Soloviev and other originators of modern sophiology that the Russian people were trustees of a sophiological tradition, hence the messianic part Russian religious thought was to play. It would reveal the *Sophia* to the world for the final development and completion of Christian doctrine. This conception of "Sophianic Messianism" has nowadays a champion in Fr. Bulgakov: it permeates his entire *opus*, and with a knowledge of its origin and development his thought is easier to follow.

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As Florensky endeavoured to expurgate the sophianic ideal from Soloviev's erotic obsession, so Bulgakov in his turn strives to cleanse it from all dubious kabbalistic elements, to establish it firmly upon Greek patristics and the traditions of the Russian Church. All his efforts tend to prove sophiology inseparable from Christian dogma, its very essence. He is not concerned in formulating any esoteric teaching for the initiated only, but to explain Christian doctrine in the light of sophiology. He develops the idea of *Sophia* so that it should become the foundation of the whole soteriological teaching: the mystery of the Redemption is displayed on the metaphysical plane, the entire mankind participating in it through its pre-existence in the divine *Sophia*. It is not the fall which conditioned the Incarnation; from all eternity it entered into the divine plan of creation, its object being the revelation to man of his divine nature which participates in the Godhead, not only in the spirit, but in the glorified body. The whole nature is but the material realization of *Sophia*, it shares in the glory of the heavenly *Sophia*. Man is the centre of creation precisely because he belongs simultaneously to the higher nature and to the material world: thereby he enjoys a certain superiority over the angels, since these pure spirits

are limited by the absence of the body which, in man, reflects the fulness of *Sophia*.

Bulgakov's teaching cannot be summarized in a few words; its fundamental points are primarily an anthropocentrism whereby man becomes the image of God in a far more concrete sense than the Church admits; secondly, an insistence upon *Sophia*, a kind of intermediary invested with divine attributes, between the Creator and creation. *Sophia* is personified so as to shed the metaphysical aspect of an abstract idea, and identified with the material universe in a sequence of vaguely pantheistic conceptions. It is a kind of synthesis of pantheism and dualism, the latter being defeated by the glorification of carnal man (hence the insistence upon the *deification* of man through the Incarnation), whilst pantheism is transcended by an hypostatized *Sophia* co-eternal with the divine Absolute beyond any material manifestation. Though it is interesting to follow the development of Bulgakov's idea, his writings abound in so many contradictions that it is scarcely possible to grasp his actual definition of *Sophia*. However, the following passages seem to contain his ultimate conclusions:

Sophia as the object of God's love, His glory or revelation, is necessarily a living and reasoning being, for God could not love an abstract shadow and everything which is concrete, living, worthy of love, possesses the power of life by receiving the quickening Spirit. But in so far as *Sophia* is the love of the Holy Trinity, being its auto-revelation, should she be an object of love without loving too?

Sophia who is not an hypostasis, but the revelation of the three trinitarian hypostases has the faculty to become an hypostasis, belong to the hypostasis, be its manifestation, surrender herself to it. It is a particular hypostatic state, not by her own hypostasis but by another's. It is the power to become an hypostasis through self-surrender, the power of love, passive, feminine, the gift of self in the acceptance of love without the faculty of becoming its active centre.¹² Then also:

Sophia is divine life in its pre-eternal contents, . . . *Deus revelatus* in relation to *Deus absconditus*. She is undistinguishable from the unsubstantial nature of God, she is that nature itself—not as act only but as the eternal divine fact—not only

¹² *Hypostasis and hypostasation*, p. 58.

as a power but as its action . . . The world is created by *Sophia* or in *Sophia* for there is not, and cannot be, any other principle of being.

Sophia is also the "body of God."¹³

Human *sophianism* is revealed and fulfilled by divine Incarnation, the reunion of *Sophia*-creature with *Sophia*-divine. The divine Word come on earth is not in his pre-eternity an incorporeal God, on the contrary, he possesses that corporeality in the divine *Sophia*, in the divine World. This is the glory which is concealed by the material, human corporeality, and this divine corporeality or glory is manifested in the Transfiguration.¹⁴

It is man who is the "creature-*Sophia*," image of the divine *Sophia*.¹⁵

The Holy Trinity has a nature, *ousia*, which is not only the unfathomable plenitude of life but also the Godhead's auto-revelation, in this sense the *ousia* is also the *Sophia*. *Sophia* is pan-unity, the plenitude of the ideal images of the Logos, which also possess reality as Beauty in the Holy Ghost. She (*Sophia*) is the plenitude of divine life in which sense she is the divine world . . . The hypostasis immediately converging in *Sophia* is that of the Logos. The ideal whole of the Logos is fulfilled, therefore hypostatized, by the Holy Ghost, both these hypostases revealing the Father. Thus it is in the *ousia*, which is *Sophia*, that the consubstantial and indivisible life of the Holy Trinity is revealed. *Sophia* is the *ens realissimum* being the divine world possessing the divine eternity. She is the glory of God being the divine Beatitude in the tri-hypostatic love of God for his own Godhead. Simultaneously she is pre-eternal mankind, primordial Image, to the likeness of which man was created; in this sense Logos is the Heavenly Man outside his Incarnation. Divine Wisdom, being the eternal primordial Image of the world created in God, appears as the essential basis and matter of Creation, being immersed in the becoming. The divine and created worlds are in the same mutual relations as the eternal *Sophia* and *Sophia*-creature. Substantially identical they differ by their mode of existence. The former existing eternally in God, the latter created *ex nihilo* is in the becoming, but for it too *Sophia* is the foundation, final cause, ultimate goal. Man is the centre of the world created to the image of the Divine Logos. Man's spirit is not created but emanates from God, is called by him to an hypostatic existence; he has a nature, in the organism of soul and body, which is also the world is so far as (the world) is the creature-*Sophia*. *Sophia* in the Creator and creation is the bridge

¹³ *Icons and their Veneration*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *The Eucharistic Dogma*, in *Putj*, No. 21.

¹⁵ *The Burning Bush*, p. 64.

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uniting God to man: in this unity is the affirmation, foreshadowed by the dogma of Chalcedon, the foundation of the Incarnation. Logos, the Second Hypostasis, is present in Christ as an hypostatic non-created spirit, its two natures becoming the divine *Sophia* and the creature-*Sophia*, divine and earthly humanity, the same principle in two images—that of the divine plenitude and the material becoming.¹⁶

Bulgakov has incurred the accusation of reviving the system of Valentinus, but though perceiving gnostic tendencies in Soloviev's writings he denied them in his own, insisting upon the conformity of his teaching with the traditions of the Eastern Church. Yet Florensky, expounding his sophiology, queried: "In what does this *Orthodox* idea of pre-existence differ from gnostic conceptions?" to which he answers that gnostic notions upon a metaphysical pre-existence of creation were not detached from the conception of Time: gnostics and Origenists, condemned by the Church, spoke of an existence anterior to material creation though still in Time, whereas according to Florensky, Orthodox sophiology views the pre-existence of the Church, of mankind, as a fulness of reality transcending temporary limitations: the Church and the Image of God have a full and total reality in Eternity. Moreover the mysticism of heretical gnosticism led to immorality, whereas sophianic spirituality is based upon purity. This last argument is feeble, for the idea of an androgynous *Sophia* may easily lead to strange conclusions; also a sweeping accusation of immorality against gnostic sects is unproven.

On the other hand, Fr. Bulgakov, denying any analogy between his own teaching and gnosticism, asserts his detachment from any dualism which he considers to be the foundation of the gnostic system.

(*To be concluded*)

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¹⁶ Review of *The Lamb of God* in *Putj*, No. 41.