

8-2000

# Divine Wisdom and the Trinity: A 20th Century Controversy in Orthodox Theology

Mikhail Sergeev

*University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Sergeev, Mikhail (2000) "Divine Wisdom and the Trinity: A 20th Century Controversy in Orthodox Theology," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol20/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

# DIVINE WISDOM AND THE TRINITY: A 20TH CENTURY CONTROVERSY IN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

by Mikhail Sergeev

*Mikhail Sergeev, a regular contributor to REE has a doctorate in Russian religious philosophy from Temple University and now teaches history of religions plus modern art and literature at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.*

## **Introductory Remarks**

This paper aims at revisiting one of the most controversial theological projects of 20th century Orthodox Christian thought known as Trinitarian sophiology. The goal of Trinitarian sophiology consisted of radical rethinking of traditional Orthodox doctrines about the Holy Trinity. Developed mainly by a Russian theologian, Fr. Sergii Bulgakov (1871-1944), it was also part of a broader religious philosophical movement initiated in the 19th century by a Russian religious thinker and poet Vladimir Solov'ev (1854-1900).

The significance of Solov'ev's religious philosophy was in its mediating role between the two opposing ideological poles in 19th century Russia: the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. He sided with the Westernizers in their critique of traditional religion and appeal to advance the ideas of the European Enlightenment. With the Slavophiles, Solov'ev still defended Orthodox Christian faith which, in his view, should have been rethought in light of modern scientific developments brought about by the Protestant civilization.

---

<sup>1</sup>This is a revised version of the paper delivered at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston, August 1998.

One should note that the rise of Protestantism in Europe as an offshoot of the Catholic Church created disturbance for the Russian Orthodoxy. At first Orthodox Christians felt sympathy with the Reformers for their attempts to come back to the original teaching of Christ and because of their common opponent, the Catholics. This temporary alliance, however, soon turned to a competition--now between "Orthodox Russia" and the "schismatic West" (both Catholic and Protestant).

In fact, it seemed that Protestantism was dramatically opposed to the spirit of Orthodox Christianity. The heart of Orthodox faith is the sacred tradition (*Sviashchennoe Predanie*) as an organic part of the sacred scripture (*Sviashchennoe Pisanie*). This very tradition and its untouchability is exactly what Protestantism rejected when trying to come to the origin of Christian revelation which purified the authority of previous interpretations. It is not surprising, therefore, that beginning in the 19th and continuing into the 20th century the creative thought of modern Russia found itself in a perpetual struggle with the fruits of West European philosophy rooted in Protestant Christianity and matured in the German idealist movement.

In its extreme the position taken by Russian thinkers was twofold. Some, like Solov'ev himself or Fr. Bulgakov, were trying to rethink the tradition of Eastern Christianity in light of modern intellectual developments. Fr. Bulgakov went so far as to propose his new understanding of the Trinitarian dogmas. Others, like Fr. Georgii Florovskii (1893-1979), on the contrary, insisted that the interpretations of the Church Fathers should still remain unsurpassed while modern philosophy is nothing but a return to paganism of the ancient Greek thought. These two different approaches are vividly manifested in the polemics between Fr. Bulgakov and Fr. Florovskii which centered around a more specific but still controversial problem of Trinitarian sophiology.

### **Bulgakov's Trinitarian Sophiology**

Fr. Sergii Bulgakov, like many of the Russian thinkers of his generation, went through a long and complex religious philosophical evolution<sup>2</sup>. **Having been born**

---

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed account of Bulgakov's life and work see a recently published book by Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997.

into a family of Orthodox priests Bulgakov lost the faith of his fathers and became a Marxist theorist. Later he rejected Marxism for the idealist philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ev and eventually came back to Orthodox theology and the priesthood.

Bulgakov's return to a traditional Orthodox worldview, however, did not happen at the price of renouncing the philosophical masters of his youth. He especially remained faithful to the critical method of the founder of German idealism, Immanuel Kant. As Bulgakov wrote in the foreword to one of his turning-point books, *From Marxism To Idealism*, "Kant always seemed more indubitable to me than Marx; I felt it necessary to check Marx against Kant, and not vice versa."<sup>3</sup> In his mature work, the *The Unfading Light*, written in 1917 Bulgakov begins his analysis of religious experience with a typically Kantian question: how is religion possible? He answers the question by arguing that personal experience of the divine is the only source of the autonomy of religion. Individual religious claim, he writes, is not analytical, but is "religious synthetic judgment *a priori*."<sup>4</sup> To support this thesis Bulgakov uses Kantian teaching about the antinomic nature of transcendental reason. "Antinomian thinking," he says, "possesses its object, makes it immanent in itself only in part, only to a certain limit which is disclosed in an antinomy."<sup>5</sup> Religious experience also manifests itself in the form of an antinomy. Thus, the main antinomy of religious consciousness is the transcendence and, at the same time, the immanence of the Deity.

The concept of divine wisdom or Sophia comes into play in Bulgakov's writings when he discusses the relationship of the Deity to the world of creatures. The creation of the world leads to the positioning of a borderline between God

---

<sup>3</sup>Sergei Bulgakov. *Ot Marksizma k idealizmu [From Marxism to Idealism]*. St. Petersburg, 1903, p. xi. Quoted in Vasilii Zenkovsky, *A history of Russian Philosophy*, 2 vols., (authorized translation by George L. Kline), New York: Columbia University Press, 1953, p. 894.

<sup>4</sup>Sergei Bulgakov. *Svet nevechernii. Sozertsaniia i umozreniia. [The Unfading Light. Contemplations and Speculations]*, Moscow: Respublika, 1994, p. 19. All translations from the Russian, unless otherwise noted, are made by the author of the paper.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

**and His creation. This imaginary link being itself neither the one nor the other but something completely peculiar, simultaneously connecting and separating the one and the other,<sup>6</sup> is called Sophia.**

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

However, if Sophia belongs neither to the Godhead nor to the realm of creation, what is the root of its own peculiar nature? In the course of his theological career Bulgakov himself seemed to have given different answers to this puzzling question. His ultimate explanation is connected with a particularly Bulgakovian understanding of the term "substance" or "nature".

Bulgakov argues that this category, taken from ancient Greek philosophy and applied by the early Christian theologians to the concept of the Trinity, was not fully developed in the Trinitarian doctrine. As he writes, for example, in his book *The Wisdom of God*, in the process of theological creativity "the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Holy Trinity, as well as the actual conception of substance or nature, has been... apparently, almost overlooked."<sup>7</sup>

In particular, the concept of substance was well established in respect to the Divinity itself as the three persons united in one essence. This same concept, however, was neglected in respect to the Creator as related to creation. In other words, while remaining one and the same, the Divine nature in the aspect of God-for-Himself has to be understood also as the nature of God-for-Others. In Bulgakov's terminology, the Divine nature can be analyzed in two aspects, namely, as *ousia* and Sophia.

Bulgakov further argues that Sophia cannot be understood in terms of *ousia*, because without God-in-Himself there is no God-for-Others. *Ousia* is necessarily more than Sophia, because God never completely reveals Himself. Nonetheless, both represent the same nature of God in relation to the Creator Himself (*ousia*) or the creature (Sophia).

---

<sup>7</sup>Sergius Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God. A Brief Summary of Sophiology*, New York - London: The Paisley Press - Williams and Norgate, 1937, p. 44.

Accepting this novel understanding of wisdom as the nature of God revealed to creation, Bulgakov unfolds his new interpretation of the Trinity as well. Sophia, or God's nature, while remaining the same, in Bulgakov's view, discloses its different aspects in every person of the Holy Trinity. He emphasizes that, without being a hypostasis itself, Sophia, is nevertheless always hypostatized and cannot be separated from each of the hypostases as, for example, from the person of the Son or Logos. Instead, as Bulgakov points out,

The Divine Sophia is not just the Son... nor only the Holy Spirit either, but a di-unity of the Son and the Holy Spirit as the one self-revelation of the Father.

As he puts it another place, "both hypostases are connected through the self-revelation of the Father in the Divine Sophia inseparably and unbindingly."<sup>8</sup> One could say, therefore, that in their revelation the Logos and the Holy Spirit are the divine Sophia, but it is impossible to say, on the contrary, that the divine Sophia is both the Logos and the Holy Spirit.

The second hypostasis, or the person of the Son, manifests Sophia or God's wisdom in the aspect of Logos, or the Word. As for the third person of the Holy Spirit, it discloses the same wisdom in the aspect of the Glory or Beauty. As Bulgakov puts it:

if Sophia, as the Wisdom of the Word, as Logos, is the self-revelation of God in the Second Hypostasis, then the Glory is the Self-revelation of God in the Third Hypostasis. In other words, *Sophia as the Glory belongs to the Holy Spirit.*<sup>9</sup>

On the ground of his Trinitarian sophiology Bulgakov also develops his position with regard to the problem of creation. Here, as elsewhere in his theological system, the most important role is played by Sophia. Sophia still remains one insofar as God and His creation are considered one in essence:

*Everything* in the Divine and created world, in the Divine and the created Sophia, is one and identical in content (although not in

---

<sup>8</sup>S. Bulgakov. *Utshitel'. O Bogochelovechestve* [The Comforter. On the Divine Humanity]. Part II. Paris: YMCA Press, 1936, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup>S. Bulgakov. *Nevesta Agntsa. O Bogochelovechestve* [The Bride of the Lamb. On the Divine Humanity]. Part III. Paris: YMCA Press, 1945, p. 133.

being). *'A single' Sophia is disclosed both in God and in the creation.*<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

However, insofar as God differs from the creatures Sophia has two distinct aspects or centers, the divine and the creaturely, which correlate with the divine and created principles respectively. As Bulgakov points out, the doctrine of “creation *ex nihilo*” means nothing but the appearance of these two aspects in Sophia. The nothing (*nihilo*) as an *ouk on*--chaos or the absence (non-fullness) of being --in the process of creation is changed into a *meon*, or the potentiality of being. The appearance of the *meon* out of the *ouk on* is manifested in the split of the eternal Sophia and the origination of its temporal, created twin. Moreover, as Bulgakov explains, the created part of Sophia as

[t]he world in process of becoming must in its becoming traverse a long path of cosmic existence in order to reflect in itself the countenance of the Divine Sophia. The latter, while it is the *foundation* of cosmic existence, its entelechy, exists only in a *potentiality* which the world must actualize in itself.<sup>11</sup>

The proper and eternal balance between the created and divine aspects of Sophia, that balance which has been broken because of human wickedness and the embracing of temptation in Adam’s fall, should be restored within humanity itself. The beginning of such a restoration occurred in the incarnation of the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity in the human person of Jesus Christ. As the incarnation of God-man, Christ redeemed the original sin of humanity, as Bulgakov says, "through the connection of two natures, the created and Divine Sophia, the human and Divine"<sup>12</sup> in one Divine-human spirit. From now on the God-man as the head of the renewed creation leads humanity forward to achieve its Divine-human status which has been temporarily shaken, but nevertheless, preserved in eternity.

### Florovskii’s Critique of Sophiology

---

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>12</sup>Bulgakov, *Utshitel'*, p. 249.

The Orthodox community responded with suspicion to Bulgakov's Trinitarian sophiology as apparently incompatible with traditional Orthodox teachings. Bulgakov was criticized by many of his colleagues--Orthodox theologians, and philosophers. One of the strongest theological critiques came from a prominent Russian thinker, Fr. Georgii Florovskii.

His response to the "sophiological temptation" focuses on the defense of the original Orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity. And the arguments for the true Trinitarian theology are necessarily bound up in Florovskii's mind with the rediscovery of classical Patristic Trinitarianism.

In fact, many Russian sophiologists, including Bulgakov as well, developed their theories not only by ingenious speculation but also by appealing to the authority of the Eastern Fathers of the Church. These thinkers found in those works textual support for their sophiological views. Bulgakov, for instance, in his book, *The Wisdom of God*, draws the attention of the readers to the "line of thought in the teaching of some of the Fathers of the Church" in which

God contained within Himself before the creation of the world the divine prototypes... so that the world bears within it the image and, as it were, the reflection of the divine Prototype.<sup>13</sup>

As Bulgakov recognizes later, these prototypes are not described explicitly by the Fathers as the divine Sophia. Nevertheless, he is convinced that, overall, the "doctrine of Sophia as the prototype of creation finds ample support in the tradition of the Church."<sup>14</sup>

To Bulgakov's insistence on the compatibility of modern Russian sophiology with Patristic thought, Florovskii argued just the opposite. Florovskii makes a case that Patristic thought preserves pure Christianity, while Russian sophiology is in reality based on German idealism which represents a revival of pagan Greek philosophy. This argument, which to a certain extent reflects traditional Orthodox resistance to the Protestant Reformation--now hidden

---

<sup>13</sup>Bulgakov, *Wisdom of God*, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

under the mask of modern German philosophy--was systematically developed by Florovskii in his essay "*The Crisis of German Idealism.*"

In the beginning one reads here that "Idealism was long the acknowledged philosophy of Protestantism"<sup>15</sup> and in the course of the development of idealistic thought "the *incompatibility* of these two ideologies, the Idealistic and the Christian, showed itself."<sup>16</sup> Later Florovskii emphasizes again that idealistic philosophy was not a "renunciation of the Reformation," but "its inevitable consequences": idealism "was only possible after and on the basis of the Reformation."<sup>17</sup>

Florovskii himself proposes to go back to the Patristic sources, to create a neo-Patristic synthesis as a form of "an intellectual return to the Church" leading "into the future... from the tradition of the forefathers."<sup>18</sup> A "creative return" to the Fathers might help, he argues, to overcome the contemporary idealistic challenge which has ultimately led to materialism and atheism. The theological works of Florovskii himself serve as an impressive and influential example of such a neo-patristic system.

From the variety of themes which have been touched upon in his thought of special interest for our purposes is the problem of sophiology tightly linked, in its turn, to the concept of creation. In his book, *Creation and Redemption*, Florovskii writes in this respect:

There is an infinite distance between God and creation, and this is a distance of natures... And this distance is never removed, but is only, as it were, overlapped by immeasurable Divine love.<sup>19</sup>

He adds later:

---

<sup>15</sup>Georges Florovsky. "The Crisis of German Idealism I: The 'Hellenism' of German Idealism." (Trans. from the German Claudia Witte). *The Collected Works*, 14 vols. Edited by Richard S. Haugh. Vaduz, Europa: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1989. Vol. XII, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 20, 40.

<sup>19</sup>Georges Florovsky. *Creation and Redemption. The Collected Works*. Vol. III. Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing, 1976, p. 46.

Any trans-substantiation of creaturely nature into the Divine is as impossible as the changing of God into creation... In the one and only hypostasis and person of Christ--the God-Man--in spite of the completeness of the mutual interpenetration... of the two natures, the two natures remain with their unchanged, immutable difference.<sup>20</sup>

Taking into consideration the assumed difference between the two, creation cannot be understood as rooted in the nature of the Creator. God created the world not from His nature, but from His will. Florovskii supports this thesis by the Patristic interpretation of the difference between the concepts of generation and creation as the origination from nature and will, respectively. He quotes, for example, St. Athanasius the Great:

Creating is *an act of will*... and therefore is sharply distinguished from the Divine generation, which is *an act of nature*.<sup>21</sup>

Florovskii also cites St. John of Damascus' definitions:

Begetting means producing from the substance of the begetter an offspring similar in substance to the begetter. Creation or making, on the other hand, is the bringing into being, from outside and not from the substance of the creator... Generation is accomplished 'by a natural power of begetting'... and creating is an act of volition and will.<sup>22</sup>

The distinction between generation and creation allows Florovskii to reconsider Bulgakov's sophiology, namely, the claim that the divine Sophia as God's idea of creation belongs to God's essence, *ousia*. Instead, as Florovskii argues, the divine plan for creation, although eternal, is related not to God's eternal nature, but again to God's will. As he puts it,

The idea of the world, God's design and will concerning the world, is obviously *eternal*, but in some sense, *not co-eternal*, and *not conjointly everlasting* with Him, because distinct and separated, as it were, from His 'essence' by His *volition*.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>21</sup>St. Athanasius. C. *arian*. Or. 3, nfl. 60ss. c. 448 squ. Quoted in Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Vol. III, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup>St. John Damascene. *De fide orth*. I, 8, PG xciv, c. 812-813. Quoted in Florovsky, Vol. III, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup>Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, p. 56.

Further exploring his sophiological theory, Florovskii clarifies the relations among the persons of the Holy Trinity to the divine will and Sophia accordingly. He writes, for instance, that

the Trinitarian structure is antecedent to the will and thought of God, because the Divine will is the common and undivided will of the All-Holy Trinity, as it is also antecedent to all the Divine acts and 'energies'.

As for the relation of the divine will as the source of the *idea* of creation to creation itself, Florovskii emphasizes that "the idea of the world and the world of ideas are totally in God ... and in God there is not, and there cannot be, anything of the created."<sup>24</sup> He writes, for example, in response to Bulgakov:

The Divine Idea of creation is not creation itself; it is not the substance of creation, it is not a bearer of the cosmic-process... not a process within the Divine Idea... but the appearance, formation, and the realization of another *substratum*, of a multiplicity of created subjects... [and it] remains always outside the created world, transcending it.<sup>25</sup>

As always, Florovskii supports this conclusion by quoting the Church Fathers, especially Maximus the Confessor. He also points out that, according to their teaching, the "divine idea" of a thing is dissociated from its "created nucleus," and is, therefore, neither its "substance" or "hypostasis," nor the "vehicle of their qualities and conditions" but rather "the *truth of a thing, its transcendental entelechy*."<sup>26</sup>

The heterogeneity in principle between Creator and the creatures, which has been established through the distinction of God's nature and will, brought several other advantages to Florovskii's religious philosophy. In the first place, God, being substantially different from creation is, therefore, free from its imperfections as well. Next, the created world, also as substantially different

---

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

**from God, acquires a relative independence and corresponding freedom in determining the paths of its evolution.**

The creaturely freedom is limited, however, in one crucial point, Florovskii argues. Although the creatures are able to turn away from God and, therefore, to originate evil, they can never commit "metaphysical suicide"--totally annihilate their pre-existent essence or be in absolute opposition to Divinity. In other words, however far the world has fallen, it is always possible for the creatures to become saved, because the divine idea of creation, this wisdom of God or Sophia rooted in God's will, is eternal and unchangeable, and serves as a guarantee for the ultimate goodness of every creature.

### Conclusion

The sophiological controversy by itself was a significant episode in 20th century Orthodox theology. Its importance, however, becomes even more evident when put in a broader context of modern thought. A theological debate about the nature of divine wisdom reflected a wider issue of the compatibility of traditional Orthodoxy and modern civilization.

In this respect it is remarkable that Fr. Bulgakov after accepting modernity came to a revision of the Trinitarian dogmas. His opponent Fr. Florovskii, on the contrary, defended Orthodox teaching at the price of renouncing the modern worldview. Was it simply a coincidence? Or is this rather a tendency which discloses an intrinsic conflict between the two traditions? Will post-Soviet Russia overcome its resistance to Protestantism and produce some Orthodox thought which will adjust itself to the spirit of modernity without undermining its own identity? The questions still remain unanswered, and only time may tell what course modern Orthodox theology will take in the coming century.