

Wisdom from Above? The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov*

Aidan Nichols OP

An Epigram and an economist

Die Rose, welche hier dein äuss'res Auge sieht,
Sie hat von Ewigkeit in Gott also geblüht.¹
[The rose which your outer eye now sees
Has bloomed in God for all eternity.]

These words of Johannes Scheffler (1624–1677), the Baroque poet who on becoming a Catholic at the age of 29 took the name, to general derision, “the Silesian angel”, Angelus Silesius, are one of his typical epigrams, fusing the mystical and the conceptual, *visio* and *ratio*. One would not expect to find that epigram quoted in a work of economic theory, written in Russian by a recently ex-Marxist just five years before the Revolutionary upheavals of 1917. But it was, in Sergei Bulgakov’s *Filosofīia khozyaistva*, “The Philosophy of Economic Activity”.² That is probably the first occasion on which this Russian layman, recently reconverted from atheism to Orthodoxy, introduced into his own writing the term that will be the focus of my lecture, “Sophiology”, from the Greek: the study of wisdom, the Wisdom of God.³ Angelus had been suspected of pantheism which is why, about the time Bulgakov was discovering him, he was being taken up so enthusiastically by the greatest of all modern German poets Rainer Maria Rilke. But Rilke should have thought again. At the height of the Counter-Reformation reaction in Austria, when in 1657 the request came to censor the doctrine of the mystical Silesian’s epigrams and songs, the Jesuit Dean of the Vienna theology faculty

* This is the text of the lecture given at Blackfriars, Oxford, on 11 December 2003, when the author received the degree of Master of Sacred Theology in the Order of Preachers.

¹ H. Brunnhofer (ed.), *Angelus Silesius, Cherubinische Wandersmann. Ein Auswahl* (Berne 1910), p. 11.

² *Filosofīia khozyaistva* (Moscow 1912; 1990), p. 104. There is now an English translation: *Philosophy of Economy. The World as Household* (New Haven, CN, and London, c. 2000). As that sub-title indicates, this is by no means a standard work of economic theory!

³ He had already had occasion to use it when expounding the religious thought of Vladimir Soloviev: ‘Priroda v filosofii Vl. Solovieva’, in *O. Vladimire Solovieve* (Moscow 1912), pp. 1–31.

had no doubt that Angelus was orthodox (with a lower case “o”).⁴ Having spent most of last term expounding the dogmatics of Bulgakov to Ethiopians, I too have little doubt that, equally, *on his major themes*, Bulgakov is an orthodox Orthodox with both lower and upper case “o” — despite the anxieties on this score of two out of the three Russian Church-jurisdictions in his lifetime. And this endears him to me, because I date my own discovery of the Incarnation to a chance visit to the Russian church in Geneva in 1959.⁵

So who was Sergei Bulgakov? He was born in 1871 in a provincial town in central-southern Russia, the son of an Orthodox priest (married, of course: in fact, he came from a long line of priest-ancestors).⁶ As a boy he was sent for his education to a kind of minor seminary — common in the Russia of the period — in the province’s chief town.⁷ These schools provided a good basic education but they were infamous for the strictness of their discipline. Bulgakov hated it, and it was in this context that as a teenager he came to reject his family religion. In 1884, a precocious thirteen year old, he began to undergo a crisis of faith which endured till 1888 when he declared himself an unbeliever and was transferred to an ordinary civil school for the completion of his secondary education. In 1890 he enrolled at the University of Moscow. Almost at once he began to take an interest in Marxism.⁸

In the 1890s, Marxism did not imply membership of a particular political party or even commitment to an actively revolutionary programme. What it implied was, rather, belief that economics was the single most important field of study if one wished to understand humanity — and also that man, the human being, was essentially material, albeit an expression of the nobility and complexity matter could attain. There certainly *were* Marxian revolutionaries among the Russian intelligentsia. But when in 1897 Bulgakov published his first work — on markets in the capitalist system of production — it became evident that he was, rather, a “legal Marxist”, one who sought to bring about the goals Marxist economic analysis might suggest

⁴ S. A. Schulz, ‘Angelus Silesius’, *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* I (Washington DC, 1967), pp. 520–521. See also J. L. Sammons, *Angelus Silesius* (New York, 1967).

⁵ I have told the story in A. Nichols, O. P., *Scribe of the Kingdom. Essays on Theology and Culture* (London 1994), pp. 1–2.

⁶ For his life, his own posthumously published autobiographical notebook remains untranslated: *Avtobiograficheskie zametki* (Autobiographical Fragments, Paris 1946; 1991). The fullest secondary account is also in Russian, in L. A. Zander, *Bog i mir. Mirosozervanie Otsa S. Bulgakova* (God and the World. The World-View of Father S. Bulgakov, Paris 1948), I., pp. 27–61.

⁷ G. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth Century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), pp. 102–139. For the wider context, see R. L. Nichols and T. G. Stavrou (eds.), *Russian Orthodoxy under the Old Regime* (Minneapolis 1978).

⁸ On the ideological background, see the essays in C. E. Timberlake (ed.), *Religious and Secular Forces in Late Tsarist Russia. Essays in Honour of Donald W. Treadgold* (Seattle and London, 1992).

within a framework of legality, of the development of the *laws* of Russia, in a peaceful, orderly way.⁹

By this date, he had also registered the first of a trio of experiences which were to bring him back both to religion and indeed to Christianity in its Orthodox form. This was in 1894 when holidaying in the Caucasus mountains on the border between present day Georgia and the Russian Federation. It was an experience of the beauty of the mountains as somehow more than material – a pointer to a beauty that transcends matter, *going beyond* it (which is what the word “transcendent” means). A few years later, in the period 1898 to 1900 while he was studying abroad (by this point, incidentally, he had married), he underwent the second experience which led to his re-conversion to the faith. And this was by way of response to the spiritual purity he glimpsed in a painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. Known as the “Sistine Madonna”, he saw it displayed in Saxony, in the City of Dresden art gallery.

On his return from Germany to Russia, his Marxism was definitely shaken, and his master’s thesis on capitalism and agriculture, which he presented at this time, is generally regarded as the work of someone already leaving a distinctively Marxian viewpoint behind.¹⁰ The thesis enabled him to gain a teaching post at the University of Kiev and to become professor of political economy at an institute there at the early age of 30.

So his career took off. He combined teaching economic and political theory, writing and editing (especially on issues of philosophy and culture), and practical politics. In 1905, after defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, the tsar was forced by public opinion to allow the setting up of a Parliament with limited powers, the *Duma*. The following year, Bulgakov founded a political newspaper and tried to start up a new political party on more or less Christian Socialist lines.¹¹ In 1907, he was elected a deputy to the Second *Duma*. But if by degrees he had become disillusioned with the Marxist view of man as “economic man” – man for whom economic and social forms always come first, he was also losing confidence in the idea that constitutional reforms, such as Russia had just introduced, could of themselves change people’s lives.

These shifts in his outlook coincided with a change of direction in the aspirations of the Russian intelligentsia generally. They become more interested in the creative powers of the human mind – an

⁹ *O rynkakh pri kapitalisticheskoy proizvodstve* (On Markets in the Capitalist System of Production, Moscow 1897).

¹⁰ *Kapitalizm i zemledelie* (Capitalism and Agriculture, St Petersburg 1900).

¹¹ *Khristianstvo i sotsializm* (Christianity and Socialism, Moscow 1917). There are also the essays collected as *Khristianskii sotsializm* (Christian Socialism, Novosibirsk 1991). As the title indicates, (Archbishop) Rowan Williams’ anthology, *Sergi Bulgakov. Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh 1999) has much that is to the point.

interest which, in philosophy, is often connected with the school of thought called “Idealism”. They also began to look more sympathetically at religion and especially at the Russian heritage of Orthodox Christianity. Such intellectuals hoped for a reform and renewal of the Church. That was partly because they expected so deeply rooted an institution to have some effect in transforming the rest of society.

Bulgakov’s own personal development mirrors these trends.¹² He moved from Marxism to Idealism, without, however, denying his earlier interest in the economy and the potential of matter. And then he moved from Idealism to a rediscovered Orthodoxy, without, however, denying his earlier conviction of the importance of human creativity, the uniqueness of the human subject, the person who says “I”. This happened at an exciting time in Russian cultural and intellectual life, a time historians have dubbed Russia’s “silver age”. Of course, we know with hindsight it was not to last. It would be swept away by the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917.

Bulgakov made a contribution to the Silver Age while it lasted. He played a part in re-awakening interest in the most passionately religious of the nineteenth century Russian novelists, Fyodor Dostoevsky, with a lecture on *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky’s novel on Orthodoxy and atheism.¹³ As it happened, just at the time when Bulgakov was giving this lecture in Kiev, the influential literary critic Dmitri Merezhkovsky was

Gaining new prominence for Dostoevsky in the literary salons of St Petersburg.¹⁴ Dostoevsky formed the climax of Merezhkovsky’s argument that Russian literature could show the world how the principle that ought to animate human culture universally is religious. It was what Merezhkovsky called, following Dostoevsky and the philosopher of religion Vladimir Soloviev, “Godmanhood”. The West – so the argument ran — now stood for a false principle of culture, the self-glorification of man, man’s erroneous belief in his own divinity, “mangodhood”, whereas Russian literature, culminating in Dostoevsky, pointed to a different principle, the principle of grace – God raising up humanity into union with himself, “Godmanhood”. At the same time, Russians were also Europeans, heirs to European culture, and thus had a special vocation to show the West how Godmanhood could replace mangodhood as the principle of a new and better humanism, a humanism of grace.¹⁵

¹² *Ot marksizma k idealizmu* (From Marxism to Idealism, St Petersburg 1903)

¹³ *Ivan Karamazov kak filosofskii tip* (Ivan Karamazov as a Philosophical Type, Moscow 1902).

¹⁴ C. Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle. Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890–1920* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1997), p. 53. See also J. Scherrer, *Die Petersburger religiös-philosophischen Vereinigungen. Die Entwicklung des religiösen Selbstverständnisses ihrer Intelligencija-Mitglieder, 1901–1917* (Berlin 1973).

¹⁵ D. Merezhkovskii, *Tolstoi i Dostoevskii* (Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, St Petersburg 1906). For this critic, see J. Chézeville, *Dmitri Merejkowsky* (Paris 1922).

For his part, Bulgakov emphasised the mission to culture of a Christianity to which he was gradually returning. In his essay “Tserkov i kultura”, he wrote:

There must be nothing that is in principle “secular”, there must be no neutral zone that would be religiously indifferent. . .¹⁶

To say as much was to challenge the Church quite as much as civil society, for the Church had in effect abandoned its task of being yeast to the leaven of the rest of culture and withdrawn into the ghetto of its own rituals.

To create a truly Christian ecclesiastical culture and to stimulate life within the gates of the Church, to overcome from within the opposition of ecclesiastical and worldly – such is the historic task set for the spiritual creativity of the contemporary Church and contemporary humanity.¹⁷

In March 1909, a number of Silver Age intellectuals produced a manifesto, the essay-collection *Vekhi* (“Signposts”), criticising their predecessors for placing too much confidence in social and political changes *as such*.¹⁸ To give absolute primacy to social forms goes against the grain of the human spirit and does not lead to that authentic liberation of the people for which the anti-religious revolutionary element hitherto predominant in the Russian intelligentsia had hoped. It was right to look for a transformation of society, but this should be done by including religious conversion – the conversion of the soul – not by treating the latter as unimportant, much less by attacking religion and destroying religious values in people’s lives.

In the summer of 1909 there took place the third of the experiences which brought Bulgakov back to the Church. This was the death of his younger son at the age of four. At the child’s funeral, Bulgakov had an experience he interpreted as awareness his child still lived in the life of the Resurrection.¹⁹ This sent him back to re-read Soloviev’s writings and to pick out for the first time the importance for Soloviev’s world-view of the theme of “wisdom”: the divine Wisdom that is the true soul of the world. Bulgakov would begin to make use of this idea of the Wisdom of God as the foundation and goal of all earthly reality in the writings on economics and philosophy he produced before the two Revolutions of the year 1917, and notably the 1912 work, *Filosofiiia khozyaistva*, that study of “The Philosophy of Economy” where he cites Angelus Silesius. In this book, Bulgakov argues that, despite the hardships of human labour, the economic

¹⁶ Republished in S. Bulgakov, *Dva grada* (Two Cities, Moscow 1911), p. 309.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

¹⁸ N. A. Berdiaev et al., *Vekhi: sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* (Signposts. A Collection of Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia, Moscow 1909).

¹⁹ C. Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle*, op.cit., pp. 133–137.

process “has meaning because it partakes of the divine Wisdom, *Sophia*, which was present with God at the creation”,²⁰ a reference to the eighth chapter of the Book of Proverbs:

When he marked out the foundations
of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a
master workman;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the sons of men. (vv. 30–31).

The struggle with nature will have joy and beauty and not just pain if we realise that as followers of Christ human beings have a

hidden potential for perfection [and so must] work to resurrect nature, to endow it once again with the life and meaning it had in Eden.²¹

The most humdrum activities of daily life can be redeemed, Bulgakov claims, by the Christian message of the fall and resurrection of man and, with man, nature. We have a common task and it is universal resurrection out of fall, bringing the resurrection-life into everything.

By the time of the two Revolutions of 1917, Bulgakov was one of the best known Orthodox intellectuals in Russia. Not surprisingly, then, he was elected a member of the Russian Church Council which met after the February Revolution in the aftermath of the overthrow of the monarchy and the introduction of a constitutional regime of a liberal kind.²² This Council not only restored the office of patriarch, defunct since the early eighteenth century Tsardom introduced a form of State-directed synodalism on the model of the established Lutheran churches in Germany. It also prepared a number of measures designed to enhance the Church’s life in its new-found freedom, measures to be rendered inoperative, however, by the October Revolution which brought the Bolsheviks to power and within a short time unleashed a major persecution of Orthodoxy in those areas of Russia where the Red forces had effective control.²³ During the Church Council, Bulgakov was principally taken up with helping to formulate a response to the theological doctrine of certain Russian monks on Mount Athos who had been arguing – in a way vigorously

²⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See J. S. Curtiss, *Church and State in Russia: The Last Years of the Empire, 1900–1917* (New York 1940); A. A. Bogolepov, ‘Church Reform in Russia, 1905–1918’, *Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 10 (1966), pp. 12–66.

²³ D. Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime, 1917–1982*, I (Crestwood, NY, 1984).

rejected by others – that when the most holy Name of Jesus is venerated, the person of Christ is substantially present.²⁴ In the course of the next year, 1918, Bulgakov was ordained priest and fled Moscow in danger of imminent arrest.

At first he took refuge in the Crimea, a part of southern Russia which, jutting out into the Black Sea, is surrounded on three sides by water. Here the Red Army had not yet penetrated, and its monarchist opponent, the White Army, was in command. Faced with the collapse of a Christian Russia – “holy Russia” – and the seeming disintegration of the Russian church (the Bolsheviks were encouraging the schismatic movement called the “Living Church”), Bulgakov was tempted to become a Catholic, and for some while secretly added the name of the Pope when he was celebrating the Liturgy.²⁵ At the end of 1922, the Communists arrived in the Crimea, and Bulgakov was expelled as an unreconstructedly anti-Bolshevik intellectual. He made his way through Constantinople to Prague and from there to Paris. This was the route followed by many émigrés escaping from Russia in the aftermath of the October Revolution and the Civil War.

Bulgakov lived in Paris for the rest of his life, from 1925 until his death in 1944. His life there was inextricably bound up with the Russian theological institute, Saint-Serge, of which he was a founder member and where subsequently he worked as professor, rector and dean. It was in these years that he became — as many would say — the foremost Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century. Although he had rejected the temptation to become a Catholic and recovered his deep roots in Russian Orthodoxy, he remained very ecumenically minded. The Catholic Church was not yet involved in the twentieth century ecumenical movement, so Bulgakov’s participation in ecumenism was chiefly with Anglicans and (other) Protestants. In 1927 he helped found – in England — the Anglican-Orthodox Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, and in the years 1933 to 1935 published some remarkable articles in English in the journal of that Fellowship, arguing that Orthodoxy remained in what he called an “invisible, mysterious communion with Catholicism”.²⁶

By 1935 when the last of these ecumenical essays was penned, Bulgakov was well known among his fellow Russian Orthodox as a dogmatic theologian. This was thanks to the publication at Paris of the “Little Trilogy”: *Drug zhenikha* (“The Friend of the Bridegroom”)

²⁴ His defence of these monks was published posthumously under the title *Filosofiya imenii*, (The Philosophy of the Name, Paris 1953).

²⁵ A lengthy manuscript from this period, setting out the reasons for becoming a Catholic in dialogue – actually, polylogue – form was included in the second volume of Bulgakov’s collected writings on social and theological issues, *Trudy po sotsiologii i teologii* (Works on Sociology and Theology, Moscow 1997), and separately published in French translation as *Sous les remparts de Chersonèse* (Geneva 1999).

²⁶ ‘By Jacob’s Well’, *Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* 22 (1933), reprinted in *Father Sergius Bulgakov, 1871–1944* (London 1969), p. 9.

and *Kupina neopalimaya* (“The Burning Bush”) in 1927, and in 1929, *Lestnitsa Yakovla* (“Jacob’s Ladder”). In these he used a theology of the divine Wisdom to throw light on the figures of, respectively, St John the Baptist, our Lady and the Angels. The second in particular, with its appendices, offered a foretaste of the wider dogmatics to come. But there was also controversy. It was in 1935 that two of the Russian jurisdictions, the Church in Exile based in Yugoslavia and the Moscow Patriarchate, charged him with heresy – for teaching something he strenuously denied, namely that *Sophia*, the Wisdom of God, is in effect a fourth person of the Holy Trinity (which thereby becomes a Holy Quaternity). Bulgakov remained a theologian in good standing, though, with the third of the Russian jurisdictions, his own, the Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarch for Western Europe.

In the years before and during the Second World War, Bulgakov went on to write his “Great Trilogy”: *Agnets Bozhii*, (“The Lamb of God”) in 1933, *Uteshitel’* (“The Paraclete”) in 1936, and *Nevesta agntsa* (“The Bride of the Lamb”) issued posthumously in 1945. All were published in Paris under the general title of “On Godmanhood” – the term we have already come across in the context of Merezhkovsky’s literary criticism.

In 1939 he fell ill with cancer of the throat, and struggled with this disease during the War and the German occupation of Paris. In 1944 he managed to complete a final work, *Apokalipsis Ioanna*, “The Apocalypse of John”.²⁷ Bulgakov died on 12 July 1944 and is buried outside Paris in the Russian cemetery of Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, where his tomb was surmounted by a wonderful sculpted crucifix, a work of the noted iconographer Leonid Ouspensky, in the course of 1945–6.²⁸

Bulgakov is a theologian of *Wisdom*. The Old Testament has a number of “Wisdom texts” which speak of wisdom as a divine power that is active in the world. (It also has many texts which speak of wisdom as a human virtue, whether acquired by effort or infused by God, but these are not immediately at issue here.) The most important ones are to be found in the Book of Proverbs (1:1–9:18), the Book of Wisdom (6:22–11:1), the Book of Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach, 24:1–34), the Book of Baruch (3:9–4:4) and the Book of Job (28:1–28). Sometimes these texts give the impression that wisdom is essentially divine, that it is on God’s side of the distinction between God and the world, the Uncreated and the created. On other occasions, however, these texts

²⁷ *Apokalipsis Ioanna* (Paris 1947). There is a useful overview of Bulgakov’s writings in L. A. Zander, *Bog i mir*, op. cit., I, pp. 62–77. For a full list of his writings, see K. Naumov, *Bibliographie des oeuvres de S. Boulgakov* (Paris 1984).

²⁸ Reproduced in S. Doolan, *La redécouverte de l’Icône. La vie et l’oeuvre de Léonide Ouspensky* (Paris 2001), p. 66. For the artist, see A. Nichols, O. P., ‘Leonid Ouspensky and the Love of Sacred Beauty’, in idem., *A Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century* (Huntington, IN, 2003), pp. 113–130.

give the contrary impression: that wisdom is a created reality, on the world's side of the distinction between finite reality and God, very much an aspect of the creation rather than the Creator. Because it is not entirely clear from Scripture what these texts are speaking about, biblical scholars find it hard to give a theological account of them.²⁹ Bulgakov believed he had come up with a solution, and one that could be usefully included within a vision of Christian dogmatics as a whole. In the version that can be offered in the time available, it falls into two parts: a theology of the divine nature, and a theology of creation.

A theology of the divine nature

Sometimes, Bulgakov says, people who want to be as Trinitarian as they possibly can be, who want to say that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and nothing but that, think they are doing the Holy Trinity a good turn by denying that there is such a thing as the divine nature in itself. He agrees that the divine nature is thoroughly hypostatised, comprehensively taken up into the personal life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But to deny there is a divine nature, and restrict God to the interplay of the hypostases, is not to do the Trinity a favour at all. On the contrary, it is to minimise the divine being, and reduce the being of God to what he calls “an *abstract* consciousness of self”.³⁰ But the Holy Trinity does not only exist “for itself”, in the wondrous awareness that is the relations of communion of the three divine persons. It also exists “by [or through] itself”, that is to say, by reference to the divine nature, the divine *ousia*. Nor is the divine nature just the power of the divine life of Father, Son and Spirit. More than this, it is its content – or, as Bulgakov puts it, the divine nature is the “absolute content of the... [divine] life, with all its properties”.³¹

But Bulgakov has an objection to how all this has usually been discussed. As he says, in the Church's tradition, discussion of the divine nature – as distinct from the divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – has largely been conducted in philosophical terms which perhaps *become* theological in the contexts where they are used but are certainly innocent of much in the way of biblical input. He writes:

Substance both in the East and in the West is interpreted purely as a philosophical abstraction, and utilized to achieve a logical solution of the trinitarian dogma. . . Such a conception cannot embrace the divine revelation in regard to the one common life of the Holy Trinity, of God in three persons. The dogma of consubstantiality which safeguards the unity of the Holy Trinity, thus remains a sealed book so far as we are concerned – for in a religious sense it

²⁹ One might start from D. Bergant, C. S. A., *What are They saying about Wisdom Literature?* (New York and Ramsey, NJ, 1984).

³⁰ *Agnets Bozhii* (The Lamb of God, Paris 1933), p. 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 124–125.

has been neither properly adopted nor developed. The Bible, however, though it never alludes to the abstract concept of substance, does give us revealed teaching on the life of the triune God.³²

Now at one level, Bulgakov himself continues the practice of speaking philosophically about the nature of God. It is just that his tools sometimes come not from the ancient Greek philosophical tradition on which Christian Scholasticism drew from the later patristic period onwards but from the classical German philosophers of the nineteenth century. We can see their influence when Bulgakov tells us that it is proper to the content of the divine life that in God *everything is understood*, understood not just as an infinite number of different aspects of the divine mind but precisely as the “interior organic integrity” of all those aspects.³³ In the world of God – in the divine nature – there is, he says, an “all-unity”, a unity of everything as the divine mind knows it. But if these remarks reflect the concerns of the German philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it should be noted that those philosophers were themselves indebted an older Platonist tradition. For a Christian Platonist like Origen, for example, the intelligible realities, *logoi*, which are the models of beings, constitute an intelligible world, a spiritual cosmos that is coherent and unified, in the *Logos*, the Word – and for Origen, as for Bulgakov, that is in an important sense an eternal creation taking place when the Son is begotten by the Father.

But philosophy is not Bulgakov’s main emphasis, which is to unite with these reflections what the Bible has to say about the nature and life of the triune God, and indeed, to give the biblical data priority over the philosophical. The biblical texts on these matters have not, he remarks:

been utilized in trinitarian theology, in particular as regards the application to the doctrine of the substance of God of the biblical revelation of Wisdom or Sophia, and of the Glory of God.³⁴

And he goes on to say that

In this particular respect the liturgical consciousness of the Church is superior to the dogmatic, for the earliest liturgical texts have included such revelation in the text of hymns, lessons, and doxologies. The *lex orandi* bore witness in itself to the *lex credendi*. This witness, however, was disregarded by theology until the middle of the nineteenth century in Russia, when there were fresh stirrings of sophiological thought.³⁵

This is of course a covert reference to Soloviev.

³² *The Wisdom of God. A Brief Summary of Sophiology* (New York and London, 1937), p. 46.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

And this provides him with the transition he needs to the theme of divine wisdom. When Scripture speaks of the Wisdom of God, it means not just one divine property among many, as for example the justice of God or the mercy of God. The Wisdom of God is the foundation of all the divine properties. It is the divine nature as containing that all-unity which is the content of the life of God. And this means not just all the properties of the divine nature but the archetypes of all created things as well. It means not just the divine attributes but what many of the Fathers and later St Thomas Aquinas called the “divine ideas”, God’s creative idea of everything that exists from plants – *pace* Angelus Silesius – and animals to stars and planets.³⁶ All this is contained and coherent inter-related in the “all-unity” of divine Wisdom. There is an “interior organic unity” to all the divine properties and ideas.

The divine Wisdom is God’s own nature, as known first of all to himself, to Father, Son and Spirit. It is the divine “world” where God lives as the Holy Trinity. It is the divine life. But it is also the first principle of all created life before it has yet come forth from God as the cosmos, the created order.

Bulgakov has already described the Wisdom of God as the “interior organic unity” of the divine ideas. Now he adds that this “universal and cosmic assembly” of the divine world is best explained by the *love* of God. It is God’s love that assures the coherence of the world of the divine ideas; and it is God’s love that binds this “world” of divine Wisdom to the hypostases of Father, Son and Spirit. The persons of the Trinity love the divine Wisdom with the personal love that is appropriate to them. But there is also a sense, Bulgakov thinks, in which the divine Wisdom can itself be said to “love” the tri-hypostatic God. How is that?

When something impersonal, such as the divine nature, is the subject of the verb [to] “love”, that verb – plainly — is not being used in the same sense as when its subject is a someone, someone personal, as, for example Father, Son or Holy Spirit. Bulgakov quite agrees. Love in the strict sense is always between persons and thus, in the Holy Trinity, between the hypostases. However, there may also be love in a non strict sense. He speaks of divine Wisdom as typified by love in two ways. Not only is the internal order of God’s Wisdom marked by love, because the divine ideas fit harmoniously with each other in perfect unity. (Harmony is a sign of love.) More than this, the divine Wisdom exists through *belonging* to the hypostatic Trinity — through *giving* itself to the divine persons, *yielding* itself up to be drawn into their personal life. Belonging, giving, yielding: these are terms of love. And more especially, these words suggest that the Wisdom of God may best be spoken of by feminine metaphors,

³⁶ For Aquinas’s presentation, and a wealth of material about the preceding philosophical and theological tradition, see V. Boland, O. P., *Ideas in God according to Saint Thomas Aquinas. Sources and Synthesis* (Leiden, 1996).

since in the deepest and most abiding love we know, the married love of human beings, they are words that suggest the attitude of the bride more than the bridegroom. This for Bulgakov is the love that is “in” the divine nature, what Thomas would call *amor naturalis Dei*. And this as it were bridal or feminine love is what we find in Scripture which personifies the Wisdom of God as *Lady Wisdom*. When the Old Testament thinks of Wisdom as an aspect of the divine, its writers speak of Wisdom very much as “she”.

So can we sum up so far? The Wisdom of God is the divinity of God – not the personal existence of Father, Son and Spirit, but the living reality of the divine nature they share – the divine nature as a “world” that is wonderfully coherent in itself (all the divine attributes and ideas fitting perfectly with each other), and a world that is at the loving disposal of the divine hypostases, on which they can draw, with which, in which and from which they can act. This is the “something real about God” that corresponds to the “Lady Wisdom” of the Bible.

A theology of creation

As Bulgakov sees things, what he has done by now is to point us to the “sufficient basis” of the creation. The Wisdom of God is that sufficient foundation, and the creation which eventually issues from the triune Creator – in and with the beginning of time – is consequently marked by “sophianity”.³⁷ It is, or was meant to be, a *sophianic* creation, a creation filled with the wisdom of God.

Bulgakov introduces his account of creation by pointing out that the God who creates from nothing does not do so because he needs the world – meaning by that, through some hypostatic or natural necessity to complete himself in so doing. God does not need the world in order to be the Trinity. Nor does he need the world in order to be divine. He is already the fulness of personhood by being the tri-hypostatic God who in his existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit exhausts all the modes of personhood there are – I, thou, he, we, you. And in his divine nature he is already plenitude, than which nothing greater is possible. Rather, the world issues from God’s creative freedom.

This said, however, Bulgakov is very keen to emphasise that the world’s creation was in no sense an arbitrary act, the result of a vast divine caprice. The creation is not just a manifestation of God’s power. Bulgakov calls such an idea blasphemous, an impiety. And the reason is that the God who in no ordinary sense needed the world still in his love longed for it, desired to bring it about from nothing. Here the love of God is once again the key. Love is not only the main feature of the interpersonal life of the trinitarian persons, it is also

³⁷ *Agnets Bozhii*, op. cit., p. 140.

“in” the divine nature where the Wisdom of God is lovingly disposed to be taken up and used by Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God is love and it is the property of love to love and to enlarge oneself by love. It is proper to the divine love not only to realise itself within the limits of divinity but to overflow those limits. . . It is proper to the ocean of divine love to spread beyond its shores. . .³⁸

Granted the possibility of creation, the divine love by its own inner character must take up that possibility. God’s “insatiable” love moves him to go out of himself, to love elsewhere than himself, to love beyond himself, in the world. So there is a sense in which God “had to” create, after all. But this is an altogether *sui generis* kind of necessity. The “necessity” of love is really, writes Bulgakov, a “fusion of necessity and freedom”.³⁹ The Absolute need have no relations. But in fact, as we know from revelation, the Absolute is God. And God can only be understood not in himself alone, but in his relation with the world as well. If God were simply the Absolute all our theology would be negative theology, saying what God is not. But God is not just the Absolute. He is *God*, related by his love to the world. And so our theology can be affirmative theology, saying what God is.⁴⁰ God is the Absolute who is also the relative or relational, and this makes him a mystery of whom we can only speak in apparent contradictions, statements with two sides either of which, if pressed to a conclusion, would tend to contradict the other. For Bulgakov the most important of these “antinomies” or seeming contradictions is found in the very statement of what the word “God” means. It means “the Absolute existing for another: existing for the world”.⁴¹

Bulgakov insists that the “frontier between the Creator and the creature must be unfailingly preserved”.⁴² And yet he can see an acceptable meaning in “panentheism”, the philosophy which states that though God is not all things (which would be pantheism) all things are “in” God. To make the link between God and the world just something contingent, with no implications for God’s own reality, looks like magnifying God but it is really reducing him, because it is downplaying the fact that God loves the world with the same love as that whereby he loves himself.

Bulgakov does not think that belief in creation – belief in our own createdness — requires a prior grasp of divine revelation. It is grounded, he thinks, in a “metaphysical fact” open to everyone to

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ This is the burden of Bulgakov’s reference here to the chapter on apophatic and cataphatic theology in his earlier work, *Svet nevechernii* (The Unfading Light, Moscow 1917).

⁴¹ *Agnets Bozhii*, op. cit., p. 143.

⁴² *Ibid.*

register. In what way? He replies, while we do in a sense put in place our own personal existence (we decide to be, more or less, the kind of personality we are), we certainly do not put in place our own being as such. When we advert to this, a conviction of our own limits steals over us and, along with it, a sense that beyond those limits our state is given or created. In this common experience we enjoy what Bulgakov calls a “metaphysical memory” of our own creation. However, from this “memory” we cannot move back by further reflection directly to confront or analyse the act of creation itself. The act of creation is a “limit concept” (he uses the German term *Grenzbegriff*) which sets a boundary to thinking but not, however, to faith. Here Bulgakov cites the Letter to the Hebrews: “By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what was seen was made out of things which do not appear” (Hebrews 11:3). The ultimate origin of the world is not one of those things than can be known by rational thought. It can, however, be known through the revelation of the Holy Scriptures, in their testimony to creation by the Word in Wisdom.

Still, we do have from our ordinary resources one clue to the wondrous act of creation and that is the human experience of creativity, of the origination of the novel, the new. By his creativity man bears the seal of his divine Prototype. But of course this is a created creativity: it is only the sub-creative action of the creature within the creation. Unlike such creativity as we embody, God’s creativity is an absolute creativity that has to meet no conditions beyond God himself. That is why we say, the world was created “from nothing” – a statement made in Scripture itself in the Second Book of Maccabees (7:28).

God made the world through Wisdom. Bulgakov uses a translation of the Book of Proverbs which at Chapter 8, verse 22 reads not – as in the most commonly used English Bible, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old” (RSV), but rather “The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his ways, before his works of old”. Here the Russian Bible reflects the translations of the Hebrew *gina* to be found in the non-Septuagintal Greek Old Testaments of antiquity. But a few verses later, at verse 30, Bulgakov’s Bible is not so different from our own when it tells us that Wisdom “was at work with [the Lord]”, which in the English Bible, in a translation already cited, appears as: “I [wisdom] was beside him, like a master workman”. Bulgakov uses the Book of Proverbs to make the point that we cannot suppose God to have improvised the world on day one of the creation. The creation belongs with the eternal counsels of God, as the Fathers of the Church recognised when they spoke of the eternal prototypes of created things in the divine mind. The creation of the world does not mean that God decides at the beginning of time what he proposes to do. It means that the pre-existent content of divine Wisdom begins to exist outside God, in time, as well as within him, in eternity. As Bulgakov writes:

Metaphysically speaking, the world's creation consists in the fact that God has put forward his own divine world not now as a world existing eternally but as a world *in becoming*.⁴³

Divine Wisdom (with an upper case “W”) has thus become creaturely wisdom (with a lower case “w”) without for all that ceasing to be itself. God has so to speak “repeated himself in creation”: he has “reflected himself in [the realm of] non-being”.⁴⁴ What in the divine *ousia*, in uncreated Wisdom, was an “all-unity” now becomes in created wisdom an “all-multiplicity” in the manifold forms of differentiated being. And so we have the world around us, a world composed of “all creatures great and small” as Mrs Alexander’s Evangelical children’s hymn puts it. Bulgakov emphasises that we are dealing here with only one wisdom, one wisdom in two modalities, Uncreated and created. Between the eternal ideas in the mind of God and the temporal realisations of those ideas there is the infinite difference which separates the divine from the worldly. And yet the content of both wisdoms is the same.

In the beginning, on day one of the world, in the unique singularity of the first moment of space-time, a hypothetical observer could not of course experience the cosmos in all its wonder. The world was only at the beginning of its development or evolution. As the Fathers of the Church (again) say, the “seeds” of all things were planted within the creation but they needed time to germinate and grow. This is something of which modern science makes us more aware, but for the Church’s theological tradition, it is not exactly news. In founding the world the Wisdom of God is not at first fully actualised there. The Wisdom of God is to begin with only present in the world’s potential. Using Aristotle’s terminology Bulgakov speaks of the fulness of created wisdom – and thus what would be a perfect reflection of the uncreated Wisdom — as the world’s “entelechy”, the final state to which creation is purposefully moving. But that is the final state – as it were the oak tree, whereas at the beginning all we have is the original potential – as it were the acorn. The Book of Genesis calls the world at this initial stage “earth”, and says of it, “the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2). But the eternal divine plan for the completion of the creation, notably in the emergence of personal – hypostatic – beings on earth (namely, ourselves) was already communicated to that other aspect of the creation which Genesis calls “the heavens” and which Bulgakov, like the Fathers generally, identifies with the holy angels. The angels have known, from the first moment of creation, what course its development was to take.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 149.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

Doubtless there is much in this theology of God the Creator which could be found in Dr I. P. Sheldon-Williams' entry in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy* entitled, "The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena".⁴⁵ Even if "much" there does not mean "everything", is it not true that the shade of Christian Platonism haunts Bulgakov's vision? Indeed it does, and a very good shade it is. I believe there is now a course in the English Dominican Studium entitled "Plato for Theologians". Perhaps it could add to its reading matter the text that contains the following words:

Ah, . . . when will people understand that one of the deepest and wisest speeches which can come out of a human mouth is that – "It is so beautiful that it must be true?" Not till they give up believing that Mr John Locke (good and honest though he was) was the wisest man that ever lived on earth: and recollect that a wiser man than he lived long before him; and that his name was Plato the son of Ariston.⁴⁶

Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies*.

*Rev Aidan Nichols OP,
Blackfriars,
Buckingham Road,
Cambridge CB3 0DD*

⁴⁵ I. P. Sheldon-Williams, 'The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriuegna', in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy* (Cambridge 1967), pp. 425–533.

⁴⁶ C. Kingsley, *The Water Babies* (London 1863), p. 155. Cited A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London 2002), pp. 298–299.