

WHAT IS SOPHIA?

BULGAKOV, OR THE BIBLICAL TRINITY BETWEEN KANT AND HEGEL

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This paper aims at showing how strong is Hegel's influence upon the very formation of Bulgakov's Trinitarian metaphysics, serving as a correction to Kant's metaphysical closedness, as the Russian theologian understands the latter. It focuses upon the Hegelian coordinates of Bulgakov's understanding of Divine subjectivity, dealing especially with his concept of Revelation. Finally, it tries positively to apply other possible terms in order to move Sophiology beyond the limits of German Idealism.

I

It is more than possible that if you put the above question even to some of the most fervent exponents of Bulgakov's theology, you will receive more than one answer. Most of the scholars who dealt with this confined themselves to gathering the nuances and differentiations of this concept dispersed in the eminent Russian theologian's writings, without being able to give a final comprehensive definition. It is also possible that even Bulgakov himself would not be able to make a clear-cut statement concerning the essence of his beloved term, which he inherited from his Russian mentor Pavel Florenski (who had taken it from Soloviev).

It must be admitted that, in modern times, Sophia has been a sort of idiosyncratic Russian theological concept; it is a concept with deep *cultural roots* both in Russian thought and art, and also in a specific Russian paganism.¹ Of course, a certain ancient Sophiological doctrine exists already in Augustine, in the Thirteenth Book of his *Confessions*. Sophia here is eternal but not uncreated, she is a superior spiritual creature, created before all the other creatures, before even the beginning of time; she is not the uncreated divine Sophia, identical with God's essence, through which the earth and heaven were made, but she is the 'created Sophia', which 'contemplates the divine light', and thus remains unalterable, through God's love for her.

¹ The magic and pagan elements in Soloviev's thought, along with his *erotic utopia*, his estheticism, and his theurgic devotion, have been well described, between others, by B. Zenkovsky, in his *Histoire de la philosophie russe*, Tome II (Paris: Gallimard 1955), 57–71.

That Sophia, which strongly reminds us of the Plotinian *nous*, stays decisively out of the divine essence, as she is an eternal spiritual being, albeit of a second rank. However, the Russian concept of Sophia, as it is widely known, was more complicated. In a recent book of mine, I ventured to show the Plotinian roots of the concept of Sophia, as they are elaborated mainly through Schelling,² as a common ground of all the Sophiological movement (though in slightly different personal approaches within it). Thus, the world-soul as the common mode of existence of the One and of Beings in Plotinus, is transformed into Christian pantheistic (or, alternatively, panentheistic) pan-unity, expressed as Sophiology, through Schelling's alteration of the world soul teaching into a Christian Trinitarian pantheism of the total unity of the *Hen and Pan*. In the present essay, I will limit myself to showing some other philosophical parameters, which played an absolutely decisive role in the very formation of the concept of Sophia, specifically in the Trinitarian theology of Sergius Bulgakov—and especially the catalytic role of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in his thought.

II

Bulgakov's respect for Kant did not pass unnoticed by his readers. As he notes in the preface of his *From Marxism to Idealism*, Kant was for him even more undeniable than Marx. However, in his search for a theoretical foundation of an active social attitude, he soon realized that this has to be metaphysical and religious. Thus, he was gradually cut off from the main part of his Kantian persuasions, though he kept his respect for the tradition of philosophical criticism for a long time. Concerning the essential core of Kantian metaphysics, he even tries a direct theological 'correction' of it, in his chapter on *The Father*, included in his book *The Comforter*, a chapter that Bulgakov considered to be the introduction to all of his Trinitarian theology. As he writes³:

Kant's *Ding an sich*, mute in the capacity of a 'limit concept' (*Grenzbegriff*), does not remain concealed behind phenomena in the capacity of the unknowable, but is revealed in them, although not adequately; and it is only for this reason that it becomes knowable. Therefore, the empirical is the *revelation* of the noumenal, which in this context corresponds to the Absolute or Transcendent (characteristically, the category of revelation is absent in Kant's 'cubistic' philosophy). Revelation of the noumenon in phenomena presupposes a subject, a predicate, and the copula between them. It presupposes

² See my *Church in the Making: an Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality* (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 2016), 179–88.

³ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 360.

that which is revealed, that which reveals, and a certain unity or identity of the two: a mystery and its revelation.

As we are going to see, this ‘unity or identity’ of ‘the subject and the predicate’, along with the whole of this theological ‘mobilization’ of the mute *Ding an sich* through revelation, were depicted mainly on the canvas of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. But let us first look at things in some order: God is, for Bulgakov, a ‘tri-hypostatic hypostasis’ (p. 361—all references to *The Comforter*, a book dedicated to the Holy Spirit, but forming at the same time an excellent overview of the mature Trinitarian theology of its author, are incorporated in the text), comprising Divine Sophia, which is hypostasizedness, not hypostasis (366), the ‘image of the Holy Trinity in its proper depths, the Divine World, Divine-humanity’, and, in this sense, ‘the Father is Sophia (but, of course, not vice versa). This equality expresses the idea that, insofar as Sophia is objective, divine self-revelation, she reveals and expresses the hidden essence of the Father, she is his genuine predicate, whose true Subject he is. Sophia, as Divine-humanity, *belongs* to the Father; she is his revelation’ (*op. cit.*). The ‘Revealing Hypostases’ of the Father are the Son, manifesting himself in the God-man, and the Spirit, manifesting himself in the Mother of God (367)—thus God is ‘Fatherhood revealed as Sonhood, and Mother-daughterhood’ (367). We shall examine this identification of the Divine World, the Father as Sophia, with the Divine-humanity, in some detail later on in this paper.

Bulgakov thinks of God-Father, (thus repeating Origen, though without acknowledging it), as ‘*God par excellence, autotheos*, or simply, *Ho Theos*’ (377), while the divine hierarchy in the Trinity, comes from ‘the praying worship in the Trinity’ (380). The latter statement means that the Son is eternally praying to the Father, not only when he becomes Man, but ‘His Prayer is included in the Son’s eternal hypostatic being’—between Father and Son there exists ‘not temporary, but eternal relation of prayer’ (372). Finally, he assures us that ‘both the Son and the Holy Spirit *pray* to the Father, as Their Father, and Their God’ (375), unaware of the fact that he thus introduces three wills in God—how can one pray to an other, without using one’s own will, praying to the other, who also has his own will, being thus able to consent or to deny one’s prayer—and, in this way he introduces, according to Maximus the Confessor, three divine natures (as will belongs to nature, and derives from it), and, consequently, ‘three Gods’.⁴ Brandon Gallaher remarks that Bulgakov explicitly criticizes Maximus here, by attributing, against him, and in agreement with his opponent Pyrrhus, the divine will(s) to the Trinitarian Persons, uniting them *a posteriori*, due to their common essence.⁵ However, that would mean that God’s unity is, somehow, a result of a process of unification, rather than pre-eternally existing. In this line

⁴ PG 91:3I3CD.

⁵ B. Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 102.

of thought, either God's unity is realized as a free communion of love and prayer between separately willing Persons, and the unifying common essence is something, in a sense, achieved precisely in this way, as the result of this love/prayer, or the common essence absolutely determines the divine unity from the beginning, and thus the willing association of the three persons is necessitated by the former, and, consequently, has nothing to do with truly free love or prayer. The Russian theologian seems to give little countenance to the concept *homoousion* in the Patristic Trinitarian thought, a concept which answers precisely to the question of how God's Trinitarian love and freedom is expressed precisely through his very essence, which is then not just a 'common essence', but an *inter-given essence*.⁶ Furthermore, there exists perhaps a serious contradiction here, since Bulgakov seems to imply, as we are going to see later on, that God is fundamentally only one Person!

Bulgakov's sympathies are not with the Patristic Trinitarian theology, East and West. Thus, Athanasius confuses, according to him, the divine Logos with Sophia (25), while he omits to deal with the relation between the Father and the Spirit (26), dealing exclusively with the latter's charismatic/sanctifying grace, instead of his cosmological and creative action (27). The Cappadocians are...Tri-theists, and Homoiousians (and...subordinationists, 46), since, due to their Aristotelianism, they are unable to understand God's triunity—i.e., to realize that God is a 'tri-hypostatic I' (31–32), or, even better, that there exists a 'trinitarity of hypostases in the Divine Person' (54). Thus, on the one hand, God remains impersonal in the Cappadocians (31), as well as in Augustine (44), along with John Damascene (43–44), and, of course, in Aquinas, and the Western theology *in toto* (44). On the other hand, there exists no Dogma of the Holy Spirit in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed (40). The main problem of the above authors is, according to the Russian theologian, that they are mostly partisans of the Aristotelean doctrine of hypostasis as individual qualification by a special property, which in itself is by no means personal (43). Thus, they are unable to fathom God, who 'as the Absolute Person, is thereby also the tri-hypostatic Person, truly One-in-Three and Three-in-One. He is not Three-in-one (*sic*), but the Tri-unity of the Divine person and his life' (44). This tri-hypostatic Absolute Person, 'in its initial position so to speak, does not yet contain hypostatic distinctions (*gnōrismata hypostatika*), but is defined solely by the trine self-positing of I as I-I-I, or as I-We-You' (45).

It is of course strange that Bulgakov seems to ignore that the identification of the hypostasis with the person, as it started in the West, and reached its theological maturity in the East, in the writings of the Cappadocians, and, most of all, Gregory Nazianzen, was meant precisely to give an ontological content to the concept of person; and that the *hypostatic attributes* of the divine Hypostases-Persons are not impersonal, but, as Gregory Nazianzen insisted against Eunomius, personal *onomata*

⁶ See N. Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self. Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 161–87.

scheseōn (names of relations) between the Father and the Son, implied by their very names (the Father is the γεγεννηκώς and the Son is ὁ γεγεννημένος), and not (impersonal) attributes of the Divine Nature, or of its energies.⁷

Furthermore, as the Russian theologian avers, it is the Father, and only him, that is revealed, through the two other Persons (137). Thus, the first hypostasis [i.e., the Father] is the One that is Revealed, while in relation to this hypostasis the other two are its bihypostatic Revelation' (149). That means that in this Trinitarian mode of love, according to its meaning, there is only one *subject*, the *center of revelation*, and this constitutes the "monarchy" of the Father' (149, author's italics), the Son and the Holy Spirit being the 'hypostases of revelation' of the Father (*op.cit.*). It seems that, while he accused the Cappadocians of Subordinationism, Bulgakov proposes a much stronger one!,⁸ as it is obvious that the Father's identity does not depend on any sort of ontological reciprocity between the Divine Persons, as, on the contrary, this is clear for the Cappadocians.⁹ Thus, the Father dictates his *subjectivity* upon the two Others, Who give nothing to him in return, save a passive echo of his supreme Person. The Father reveals only himself—he reveals no Sonhood and no Spirithood, while Son and Spirit reveal his Fatherhood: this is a sort of supreme and divine narcissism. Hence the need for speaking of 'sacrificial suffering precisely in the Absolute God, as an aspect of the intra-trinitarian divine life' (66). Thus, there exists a 'sacrificial self-humiliation of the Son', and his self-renouncing, along with a sacrificial 'self-dying' of the Spirit (67) before the Father, Who, strangely enough, also renounces himself for the sake of the Son (65). What seems contradictory here is that, on the one hand, the Father needs and 'uses' the two Others, in order to reveal himself, but, on the other hand, he needs to... renounce himself, in order for this 'usage' to take place. And the general context of this Fatherly revelation is, of course, Sophia, as eternal Divine-humanity, which means that this 'sophianic' revelation is absolutely and unavoidably connected with Creation and Incarnation: 'the Divine Sophia is the eternal Humanity, the heavenly proto-image of creaturely humanity', and the male and female principles are the image of the divine Sophia, depicting the latter's differentiation and unity of the Logos/Son and the Holy Spirit (186). In the Incarnation, these 'male and female principles' are finally manifested in Christ and the Ever-Virgin-Mary, respectively (187), thus forming the creaturely Sophia, which is organically bound with the heavenly one, in a 'pious pantheism', as Bulgakov calls

⁷ *Or.Theol.* 3, 16.

⁸ See also, for example, p.195: 'Three hypostatic flames are lit in a row, one behind the other; and therefore they are seen as a single flame; and this single flame is the I of the Father. It overshadows, as it were, the divine I's of the Second and Third hypostases, which are kenotically concealed in Him. And which are *not* actualized hypostatically in creation.' It is, I think, crystal clear in both the New Testament and the Patristic theology, East and West, that *both* the 'Second and the Third Hypostases' are absolutely active in creation, and that the fact that they are revealing the Father, does not need to conceal their personal hypostases.

⁹ See N. Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 282–6.

it, and he finally chooses the name *panentheism* (a term invented by Krause) for this 'school' of theological thinking (200).

III

It has become evident, I think, that this Trinitarian metaphysics is impossible without reference to Hegel support. What is perhaps most helpful, in order to better approach the relevant aspects of Hegel's thought is Heidegger's *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes*.¹⁰ What is interesting here is to study the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness, as Heidegger suggests, through the Hegelian concept of *force*, which describes the way being-for-itself and being-for-another are connected, the latter being the way for the former, in a movement of reciprocal transition:¹¹ 'Force is just that in which the being-for-itself of what is driven back into itself and the being-for-another (the being of the other itself as such) have their subsistence at the same time. *Force* is the *relation*, identical with itself in its externalization.' 'Force is being-for-itself and being-for-another'.¹² If we replace the Hegelian concept of 'force' with the Bulgakovian concept of 'revelation', which is always the revelation of the Father, we realize that the latter is precisely, in a manner similar to the former, an 'unfolding while remaining a unity, in order to return at once from the unfolding back to a unity'¹³—i.e., the Father. Since 'consciousness as such must become another'¹⁴ in order to become self-consciousness, the Father, as the only Subject of the Trinity, must reveal himself-as-another, in order to fulfil his self-realization as the Father, and become apparent as such. But if this is true as far as it concerns the Son, what becomes of the Spirit? Hegel is still helpful here. As Heidegger writes: 'The *to-itself* [*Zu-sich*] which belongs to the being-in-itself of the self—the return into itself as truth—is grasped as *desire*, as the passion of the self for itself'.¹⁵ Bulgakov praises Augustine for having made the discovery that the Trinity, and especially the Spirit is love (*amor, dilectio*).¹⁶ Thus, the Father's revelation, as-being-for-itself,¹⁷ consists, 'first', in the unfolding/birth of the Son as being-for-another (together with the mutual pain that this provokes), and then in the return to himself as truth, as comforting desire in the Spirit—Bulgakov used to speak of the Spirit as 'joy and bliss' in the Trinity, which *comforts* the two other Persons for their painful mutual self-renunciation.¹⁸

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹² *Ibid.*, 115.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁶ *The Comforter*, 42.

¹⁷ *Op.cit.*, 137; 'there is only One Who Reveals Himself—the Father'.

¹⁸ *Op.cit.* 66.

The second way Bulgakov approaches Hegel, is his deep and essential Sophianic connection of God's nature with man and Creation, in a way that both Creation and Incarnation seem to be a necessary, rather than free, unfolding of God's Sophia, as Divine-humanity, as we have seen. B. Gallaher in his aforementioned work, tries to save Bulgakov from Hegelianism by claiming that in the former's thought, 'God as Absolute is certainly capable of creating the world with a freedom which is one with necessity'¹⁹—by way of a loving 'synthesis of freedom and necessity'. This necessity, according to Gallaher is due to the fact that 'the expression of himself [i.e., God] as love in creation necessarily but freely belongs to the fullness of his revelation so that he *needs* creation because, as love, he cannot leave unactualized even a single possibility of love'.²⁰ The same author speaks, in the same line of thought, of a 'gracious necessity' that aims at bridging the gap between freedom and necessity, in God's creative activity.²¹

However, if God is free, he does not need to prove anything to anyone. And if his love is truly free, God does not need to prove that it is free. And if he needs to prove to anyone, or even to himself, that his is the absolutely perfect love, comprising all sorts of love, this would be a perfect narcissism, rather than perfect love. Free love has to be contingent upon one's free will. The fact that God is love *by nature* means, according to the Greek Patristic Triadology, that this love is manifested as the personal and ousianic *inter-giveness* that forms consubstantiality.²² The fact that he wants to spread this loving, consubstantial mode of existence upon nothingness²³ has nothing to do with a possibly unaccomplished consubstantiality in him, which would need to be achieved also outside him, in order to be perfect. Any sort of necessity, connected with God's love, would mean precisely that the latter is incomplete *per se*, and needs an external complement in order to heal its incompleteness.

IV

In my aforementioned *Church in the Making*, and speaking mainly of Bulgakov's Christology, I ventured to show how can we perhaps understand his notion of the creaturely Sophia, as applying to the consubstantial unification of creation in Christ, in the Spirit. Is there any possible way to understand his Trinitarian theology beyond its obvious Hegelian coordinates?

¹⁹ Gallaher, *op.cit.*, 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²² N. Loudovikos, 'Consubstantiality beyond Perichoresis: Personal Threeness, Intra-divine Relations, and Personal Conubstantiality, in Augustine's, Thomas Aquinas', and Maximus the Confessor's Trinitarian Theologies', in *Studia Patristica* 89 (2015): 33–46, *passim*.

²³ N. Loudovikos, *Church in the Making: an Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 231.

I believe it impossible to set Bulgakov completely free from his almost idiosyncratic Hegelianism. However, in this way, an essential part of Sophiology places itself, unconsciously, in the tradition of the Western transcendental subjectivism, something that reduces the possibility of a fertile assimilation of some Biblical aspects of the Trinitarian theology, such as consubstantiality. There were also some objections on the part of some Patristic theologians. The Russian thinker tried to defend himself in his *The Burning Bush*, by identifying Sophia with the Maximian *logoi*, or the Palamite uncreated energies, but it is true that it is impossible to discern any sort of internal divine necessity in the two above notions.

Perhaps, what Sophia wants to convey relates to God's infinite *availability and self-offering to creation*, something that in my *Eucharistic Ontology* I termed *theopoiia*—i.e., the other side of theo-humanity, the absolute primordial givenness of God to creation, before and after the Fall.²⁴ But this is a totally free, unexpected gift of divine life. This is precisely, perhaps, the glowing beauty of Sophia: an infinite divine givenness to creation without limits, an oceanic inexplicable love, an unconditioned unending condescension, the unfathomable joyful and blissful *yes* of God to his creature, which unifies all creatures in the image of his absolute, consubstantial, and consubstantializing love.

²⁴ In the sixth chapter of the book.