

# FAITH AND REASON IN RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT: SERGEI BULGAKOV, PAVEL FLORENSKY AND THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ABOUT ONTO-THEOLOGY AND FIDEISM

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This study investigates the relationship between faith and reason in two of the major works of Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov: *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914) and *Unfading Light* (1917). The essay relates Florensky's and Bulgakov's philosophical theologies to the ongoing debate about onto-theology and fideism in Western philosophy and theology. The transition from onto-theology to fideism has been characterized by the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux as a gradual de-absolutization of the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason. This theory is exemplified with reference to the work of Leibniz, Kant, and Heidegger. It is then explored whether Florensky's and Bulgakov's theological contributions can enable us to envisage a 'third way' that overcomes the dilemma between religious rationalism and religious irrationalism. Both thinkers argue—though in different ways—that faith and reason are interdependent, and that the experiential and intuitive character of faith is incomplete without the rational scrutiny of Christian philosophy.

In this essay I explore what Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov have to contribute to the contemporary debate about faith and reason.<sup>1</sup> I will mainly look at *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* and *Unfading Light*.<sup>2</sup> *The Pillar* was published in 1914, and *Unfading Light* just three years later, and there is in some respects a close connection between these two works of Orthodox theology and philosophy. Before I turn to Bulgakov and Florensky, I will give a brief overview of the two most radical positions regarding the relationship between faith and reason: religious rationalism—or onto-theology, to use Heidegger's famous term, and fideism—the belief that faith is independent of, or even adversarial to reason.<sup>3</sup> Forms of religious rationalism were

<sup>1</sup> I am reusing material from Christoph Schneider, 'Au-delà des limites de la raison: réflexions sur l'ouvrage de Paul Florensky *La Colonne et le Fondement de la Vérité* (1914)', *Contacts. Revue orthodoxe de théologie et de spiritualité* 65.1 (2013): 89–100.

<sup>2</sup> Павел А. Флоренский, *Столп и утверждение истины* (Москва: Правда, 1990); Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth. An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1997); Сергей Булгаков, *Свет невечерний. Созерцания и умозрения* (Москва: Республика, 1994); Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012). The first page number always refers to the Russian original, followed by the English translation after the slash.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik', in *Identität und Differenz*

dominant in Enlightenment theism, whereas fideism is generally characteristic of the post-modern reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. But both theological orientations have premodern precursors. The transition from onto-theology to post-metaphysical philosophy and fideistic religion has been described by the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux in terms of a *gradual de-absolutization of the two basic principles of rationality*: the law of identity/contradiction and the law of sufficient reason.<sup>4</sup>

Onto-theological thought tends to absolutize the validity of these principles and regards them as normative, irrespective of whether we talk about immanent or transcendent being. Leibniz's argument *ex contingentia mundi* is often considered to epitomize Enlightenment rationalism and onto-theology. According to Leibniz, the law of identity excludes everything that is self-contradictory and thus impossible, and leaves us with two kinds of truths: necessary truths (i.e., truths which cannot not be), and contingent truths (i.e., truths which may or may not be).<sup>5</sup> The law of sufficient reason states that for every contingent truth there must be a sufficient reason which explains *that* it is and *why* it is thus and not otherwise. But neither an individual contingent thing nor a whole series of contingent things can provide a sufficient reason for why there is anything at all and why things are as they are—no matter how far back we go to earlier states of affairs. Leibniz argues that the reason for the existence of the world must thus lie in something extramundane, which has absolute metaphysical necessity. There must be a necessary being which provides a sufficient reason for everything, but which is itself not conditioned by any other being. This highest being is identified with God, who is thought of as the ultimate ground of everything contingent (*ultima ratio rerum*), as the sole cause of itself (*causa sui*), and as a necessary being (*ens necessarium*), that is, as a being that cannot not be.

In Kant's critical philosophy, the law of sufficient reason is de-absolutized and only the law of identity remains unconditionally valid. Kant does not deny any relation between thought and the absolute. First, he maintains that the thing-in-itself (i.e., the world as it is in itself) exists, for otherwise there would be appearances without anything that appears, which is inconceivable for him.<sup>6</sup> Second, he holds the view that the thing-in-itself is non-contradictory. We can know *a priori* that logical

(Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 51–79; Thomas D. Carroll, 'The traditions of fideism', *Religious Studies* 44.1 (2008): 1–22. It goes without saying that there is a wide range of positions between these two extreme poles. Moreover, both onto-theology and fideism are umbrella terms that denote theological and philosophical *tendencies*, rather than clearly defined approaches.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude. Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), ch. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 'Die Vernunftprinzipien der Natur und der Gnade', in *Hauptschriften zur Grundlegung der Philosophie*, trans. Artur Buchenau, ed. Ernst Cassirer (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1924), 423–34.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, ed. Jens Timmerman (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), XXVI–XXVII.

contradiction is absolutely impossible, which means that logicity pertains to the phenomenal and the noumenal realm. The thing-in-itself is intelligible and thus also thinkable, but we cannot know anything about it. What Kant famously rejects, however, is the possibility of applying the law of sufficient reason beyond the phenomenal realm, as in the cosmological proof of the existence of God. This leads to a de-absolutization of the law of sufficient reason; its range of applicability is now limited to appearances.

Martin Heidegger continued the project of a critique of pure reason by restricting even logicity to the world of appearances. In Meillassoux's words, it is now believed that the principle of non-contradiction is itself devoid of reason, that is, '*it is unthinkable that the unthinkable be impossible*'.<sup>7</sup> As logicity is metaphysically groundless and thus lacks absolute necessity, it can only serve as a criterion for that which is thinkable *for us*, but not for that which is possible in the absolute sense. The result is a more extreme version of finitism than Kant's critical philosophy, because the law of identity is now de-absolutized, too. Meillassoux argues that, in the wake of Heidegger, it is now legitimate to believe that the nature of the absolute might be self-contradictory—even if it is impossible to know whether or not this is really the case. On this interpretation, Heidegger paved the way for an intellectual justification of irrationalism. Heidegger explicitly states that the origin of the basic principles of thought—of the law of identity, the law of contradiction, and the law of excluded middle—remains unknown to human thinking. We may take these laws to be pre-suppositions for our thinking, but they lack any metaphysical foundation. We do not know whether they are derived from thinking itself, or from the objects of our thinking, or from neither of these sources.<sup>8</sup>

According to Meillassoux, the finitism advocated by Heidegger and other twentieth-century thinkers inevitably generates the quasi-religious idea of the 'wholly-other'. That is, the notion of the 'wholly-other' is the inevitable obverse of this finitism. It is the outcome of reason's discovery of its own ability to access the absolute: *the stricter the finitism, the stronger the agnosticism about the absolute*. It therefore becomes rationally illegitimate to criticize or discard irrational discourse about the absolute for its irrationality.<sup>9</sup>

All discourses that claim to have access to the absolute are tolerated, *with the one caveat that no attempt is made to support the validity of these discourses with rational argument*. This radical self-restriction of human reason rightly undermines onto-theological conceptions of religion. But it at the same time opens the door for an uncontrollable return of the religious, which may assume forms devoid of any rationality. The destruction of onto-theology has thus resulted in a *plurality of fideisms*.

<sup>7</sup> Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Grundsätze des Denkens', in *Identität und Differenz*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 125–40; at 138.

<sup>9</sup> Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, 68.

The absolute can now accommodate an unlimited range of contradicting beliefs, none of which is preferable to the other from the viewpoint of rational argument. Accordingly, contemporary fanaticism and fundamentalism have not arisen because of a radical opposition to the standards of Western rationality. Quite the reverse: *it is the very critique of ideology and dogmatism that has brought about the rise of blind faith.*<sup>10</sup>

### 1. Rationalism and Onto-theology

Both Florensky and Bulgakov reject onto-theological thought models and religious rationalism, and de-absolutize the law of sufficient reason and causality. Florensky points out that discursion and the law of sufficient reason can only provide certainty by generating a series of reasons.<sup>11</sup> The first reason adduced to explain a thing or state of affairs is not self-evidently true, but has its ground in another reason. Yet the explanatory reason must again be justified by another reason, which in turn needs to be justified as well and so on *ad infinitum*. The tradition sought to terminate this infinite series of explanatory links by positing a highest being that grounds the whole series of explanations as uncaused cause. This leads back to Leibniz's *argument ex contingentia mundi*. Yet according to Florensky, 'so-called "rational faith", faith with rational proofs ... is a slander against God, a monstrous product of human egotism, which desires to subordinate even God to itself. There are many kinds of atheism, but the worst is the so-called rational faith ... it is hypocritical, accepts God but rejects His very essence, His "invisibility", i.e. His supra-rationality'.<sup>12</sup>

Bulgakov, too, rejects the idea of God as *unmoved mover* and *uncaused cause*, and de-absolutizes the law of sufficient reason. *Philosophically*, he argues, the 'causal series is infinite with a bad infinity; it cannot be interrupted or stopped anywhere. In general, both causality and motion ... belong to the world of discursive being and are incapable of leading beyond it except at the cost of self-negation and contradiction'.<sup>13</sup> *Theologically*, the concept of a *first cause* is not suitable to conceive the relation between God and the world, as this would reduce God to an immanent being within the world and violate his transcendence. For Bulgakov, a cause, or a mover, is always something mechanical, something that is subordinate 'to the mechanical law of the conversation of energy'.<sup>14</sup> But God is above the causal chain. Thus, the relation between Creator and creation cannot be envisaged in terms of cause and effect. Rather, createdness must be seen as the result of a *personal* and

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 73–80.

<sup>11</sup> Флоренский, Столп, 24, 30–32/21, 25–26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 64/48.

<sup>13</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: W.B. Eerdmans; T&T Clark, 2002), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36.

*creative act*—in analogy to human creativity.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, proofs of the existence of God that are based on the law of causality and the principle of sufficient reason must be rejected.<sup>16</sup>

Bulgakov also de-absolutizes the law of identity/contradiction. Yet he draws a distinction between ‘logical contradiction’ (*противоречие логическое*), which results from an arbitrary violation of the laws of logic, and ‘antimony’ (*антиномия*). The latter ‘is generated by the recognized inadequacy of thinking to its subject or its tasks’.<sup>17</sup> Faced with the plenitude of the infinite, transcendent source, the power of human reason must acknowledge its limitedness.

## 2. Fideism and Irrationalism

According to Florensky, the absolutization of the most fundamental law of logic, the law of identity, which he discusses together with intuition, paradoxically leads to fideism. As William Desmond explains, the law of identity states that for something to be, and for something to be intelligible, it must be a determinate being. Likewise, for the human mind to think intelligibly, it must think something determinate, otherwise it is not thinking at all.<sup>18</sup> However, as Florensky observes, the severe epistemic restrictions that this law imposes on intelligibility, which excludes everything that is not absolutely determinate as unintelligible, backfire and open the door to subjectivism and irrationalism. For the perception of a being in intuition does not provide the human mind with reasons why it should accept this intuition as an experience of the truth. If ‘present givenness’ is the criterion for the truth, he argues, then everything given in intuition must be regarded as true.<sup>19</sup>

Bulgakov, too, distances himself from fideism and religious irrationalism. For him, it is for instance Schleiermacher’s *Gefühlstheologie* (theology of feeling) that represents religious irrationalism. According to Bulgakov, in Schleiermacher, feeling, which has an explicitly religious character, is opposed to cognition and activity: ‘*true religion is the feeling and taste for the infinite*’, or the ‘feeling of exceptional dependence’ (*das schlechthinige Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).<sup>20</sup> Religion is characterized by a strong tendency to adogmatism, anti-intellectualism, and antilogism. For religious experience to be authentic, it must remain *immediate*, that is, *unmediated* by language and reason. On the other hand, Schleiermacher nonetheless talks about the *comprehension* of God through feeling and ascribes to it an *epistemological* function.<sup>21</sup> The resulting vagueness as to the ontological status of religion is harshly

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>16</sup> Булгаков, Свет невечерний, 20, 28/17–18, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 89–90/105.

<sup>18</sup> William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>19</sup> Флоренский, Столп, 24–30/21–25.

<sup>20</sup> Булгаков, Свет невечерний, 39, 41/40, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 41/42.

criticized by Bulgakov. He calls Schleiermacher's *Gefühlstheologie* an 'unrealizable utopia' that ultimately amounts to an agnostic and areligious position, to a 'mystical anarchism'.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Beyond Onto-theology and Fideism

How far do Florensky and Bulgakov manage to set out a 'third way' that avoids the impasse of both religious rationalism and irrationalism, onto-theology and fideism? Both thinkers propose a *metaxological* approach that seeks to do justice to the asymmetrical but non-dichotomous relationship between nature and grace, immanence and transcendence.<sup>23</sup> Although they agree about the most fundamental aspects of how faith and reason are related, there are also some important differences between their approaches. Florensky and Bulgakov are both convinced that there is an interdependence and interpenetration between faith and reason, and theology and philosophy. How do they conceive this relationship?

In *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Florensky defines the Truth (*Истина*) as *Intuition-Discursion*, which he understands in terms of a perichoretic reconfiguration of the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason.<sup>24</sup> As shown above, intuition and the law of identity cannot give us metaphysical certainty because they do not provide the human mind with reasons why that which is intuited is metaphysically reliable (fideism). The law of sufficient reason and discursion cannot establish metaphysical certainty because they either lead to an infinite regress or to the concept of an idolatrous 'God of the gap' that terminates the otherwise infinite concatenations of explanatory links (onto-theology). In Florensky's reconfiguration of intuition and discursion, intuition stands for the *reality* and *self-revelatory* character of the Truth, and discursion safeguards the *reasonableness* of the Truth.

Florensky states that the Truth, the synthesis of intuition and discursion, can only be apprehended by going beyond the 'boundaries of rationality'.<sup>25</sup> The term 'rationality'<sup>26</sup> (*рассудок*) here stands for a rationality that is determined by the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason. But what does it mean to go beyond the boundaries of rationality? Some commentators have argued that Florensky's notion of Truth as Intuition-Discursion constitutes a new form of fideism<sup>27</sup>—despite his critical remarks about the epistemic unreliability of intuition. But Florensky rather

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41/43.

<sup>23</sup> Pavel Florensky, 'The Empyrean and the Empirical: A Dialogue', in *Early Religious Writings. 1903–1909*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 25–70; at 35, 53, 55; Павел Флоренский, 'Эмпирей и эмпирия. Беседа', in *Сочинения в четырех томах*, ed. игумен Андроник Трубачев, П.В. Флоренский, and М.С. Трубачева (Москва: Мысль, 1994), 146–95; see 155, 75, 77; Bulgakov, *Bride*, 201.

<sup>24</sup> Флоренский, Столп, 43/33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 58–59/44–45.

<sup>26</sup> In *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* the Russian noun *рассудок* is normally translated as 'rationality', but depending on context, it can also have the meaning of 'rational mind'.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. С.С. Хоружий, *Мирозерцание Флоренского* (Томск: Водолей, 1999), 70–96.



seeks to envisage a higher, richer, more complex form of rationality that he calls 'reason' (*разум*), which is rooted in the dynamic, perichoretic movement among the three divine hypostases.<sup>28</sup> That Florensky's aim is to avoid both religious rationalism and irrationalism becomes clear when one analyses his distinction between three different stages of faith, which he regards as relevant for both phylogeny and ontogeny.<sup>29</sup>

i) The first stage is characterized by a radical clash between human truth and the divine Truth. Florensky vividly describes the rapture experience the truth seeker inevitably undergoes in his quest for the Truth. The challenging and audacious leap of faith from rationality (*рассудок*) to reason (*разум*) is captured by the Tertullian formula *credo quia absurdum est* ('I believe because it is absurd').

ii) Yet despite Florensky's emphasis on the discontinuity between the divine Truth and human truth, there is no dichotomy between faith and reason. Rather, Florensky argues, it is possible to reach the Anselmian stage of *credo ut intelligam* ('I believe so that I may understand'). This means that the encounter with the divine Truth does not take place in a sphere completely beyond reason in the fideistic sense. Rather, faith becomes the 'source of higher understanding' (*источник высшего разума*).<sup>30</sup>

iii) Finally, Florensky uses the formula *intelligo ut credam* ('I understand so that I may believe') to characterize a third stage, in which the 'boundaries of knowledge and belief merge'.<sup>31</sup> His intention is not to elevate knowledge above faith, but rather to articulate the eschatological hope for a complete *interpenetration* of faith and reason.

Although Florensky is neither a religious rationalist nor a fideist, there is nonetheless a dichotomy between the 'rational mind' (*рассудок*) and 'reason' (*разум*). As he points out, the perichoretic synthesis of the two basic laws of rationality constitutes 'the domain where rationality with all its norms is rooted'.<sup>32</sup> Florensky is trying to think of the transcendent ground of (univocal) intelligibility and distinguishes between a 'lower' and a 'higher' form of rationality. But he has a peculiar understanding of the 'rootedness' of the lower in the higher rationality. The law of identity and the law of sufficient reason are only discussed with respect to their *incapacity* to provide metaphysical certitude. Particularly the law of identity is always associated with the sinful rational mind, with the self-enclosure of the self, with godless pride and spiritual death. But what about the positive function these two principles fulfil? It is one thing to criticize the absolutization of univocal logic, quite another to view

<sup>28</sup> Флоренский, Столп, 48–49/37.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 61–62/46–47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 62/47.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 58/44.

univocal logic as *intrinsically* sinful; it is one thing to point out that the transcendent ground of intelligibility cannot itself be envisaged by means of the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason, quite another to deny that these principles have *any* positive epistemic function whatsoever. Florensky neither subordinates faith to immanent standards of rationality nor does he believe that faith lacks intelligibility, or is even adversarial to reason. Rather, the problem is that only the divine Truth, the perichoretic synthesis of the two basic laws of thought, is properly intelligible (despite the difficulty for human beings to grasp this Truth), whereas all other, 'lower' forms of intelligibility strictly speaking belong to the 'fallen world'.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar line of thought, Bulgakov explains that myth is the hermeneutically most basic category of religious discourse and precedes theological and philosophical reflection. Using Kantian terminology, he calls myth '*a synthetic religious judgement a priori*'.<sup>34</sup> In cult, myth and the symbolic expressions of its content are inculcated, affect all human faculties, and can become 'the subject of thought, of scientific study and artistic reproduction'.<sup>35</sup> *Epistemologically*, myth has an experiential-intuitive origin and, by virtue of its intrinsic, self-revelatory power and persuasiveness, is experienced as self-evident truth. *Ontologically*, myth, understood in the Christian sense, is based on a realist symbolism.<sup>36</sup> *Hermeneutically*, myth is not opposed to history. In Holy Scripture, in the New and the Old Testament, 'history and myth coincide'.<sup>37</sup> *Theologically*, myth results from the encounter of the immanent world with the divine, transcendent world.

Bulgakov rejects the Enlightenment ideal of pure, universal and atemporal reason. Consequently, he points out that every philosophy, or philosophical tradition, has a supraphilosophical origin and is based on extra-philosophical premises. There is always a philosophical myth underlying philosophy.<sup>38</sup> For philosophy 'God is a problem', like all other objects one can philosophize about. Philosophy's intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*) is realized by philosophical investigation, doubt, and reflection on a postulated, abstract absolute. Philosophy has access only to verity, to 'theoretical participation in supertheoretical Truth', but Truth itself always

<sup>33</sup> Since Florensky had a background in mathematics and physics, it would of course not be plausible to believe that he was not aware of the significance of these two basic principles of rationality. But precisely for this reason he was acutely aware of the danger of scientism and reductionism. Yet, paradoxically, it was precisely the *scientific* paradigm changes at the beginning of the twentieth century that enabled and inspired Florensky to develop his Christian metaphysics ('concrete metaphysics') and his reconfigured notion of rationality. See Frank Haney, 'Religious Thought and Natural Science in Vladimir Solov'ev and Pavel Florenskij. A Comparative Study of their Conceptions of Rationality', in *Vladimir Solov'ev: Reconciler and Polemicist*, ed. Wil van den Bercken, Manon de Courten, and Evert van der Zweerde (Leuven et al.: Peeters, 2000), 267–86.

<sup>34</sup> Булгаков, Свет невечерний, 57/64. Italics in original text. See Florensky's similar reflections on myth and legend in Флоренский, 'Эмпирия и эмпирия. Беседа', 194/69.

<sup>35</sup> Булгаков, Свет невечерний, 61/69.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 62/70.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 70–71/82–83.



remains transcendent to it.<sup>39</sup> Philosophical searching is immanent and human, but at the same time directed towards the transcendent. Philosophy constantly strives to overcome the restriction of its activity to the immanent.

Because a pure, independent philosophy does not exist, and since religious experience and Christian faith always have a cognitive character and a linguistically articulated dogmatic content, a 'Christian philosophy'<sup>40</sup> is possible. Similar to Florensky, Bulgakov proposes a 'third way' that avoids both the impasse of religious rationalism (onto-theology) and religious irrationalism (fideism). Living religious experience is considered the only way to comprehend God, and (onto-theological) proofs of the existence of God are viewed as a theological misunderstanding. But a fully incarnational theology nonetheless requires a religious philosophy that rationally scrutinizes the dogmatic content of religion. And it is dogma that mediates between myth and Christian philosophy. But, as Bulgakov explains, '*a single, absolute philosophical system that would accommodate absolute truth generally speaking does not exist*'.<sup>41</sup> The tendency in Roman Catholic theology to regard Thomism as the absolutely normative Christian philosophy is viewed by Bulgakov as problematic.

Theology and philosophy are interrelated, but no Christian philosophy can be assigned a monolithic and unchangeable status. On the one hand, because any philosophy is informed by (religious) beliefs and metaphysical premises, it is possible to expound the history of philosophy as 'the history of religious self-consciousness'.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Bulgakov argues that Christian philosophy can and must (re)interpret Christian dogma within different, historically changing philosophical frameworks, and by means of different conceptual schemes. There is a certain tension between these two statements, even if they do not necessarily contradict each other. In the former case, the focus is on the process of conceptual crystallization, triggered by religious dogmas and beliefs, which results in particular philosophical models of thought; in the latter case, it is presumed that philosophical frameworks are to some extent 'given' and thus bear on how religious dogmas are philosophically explicated. If one follows this second paradigm, it cannot be denied that Christian philosophy stands in danger of accommodating itself to non-Christian thought.

But Bulgakov is not at all saying that Christian dogma can be philosophically explicated within *any* philosophical framework. He is not advocating the view that, for instance, Kantianism, Hegelianism, or Positivism as such provide appropriate conceptual tools to spell out the philosophical significance of Christian dogma. But as Bulgakov's sophiologal project reveals, there are always untapped philosophical resources slumbering in Christian doctrines that require actualization. And the critical and creative engagement with new philosophical paradigms and concepts

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 71/82.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 78/91.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 79/93.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 78/91.

(that are at times implicitly informed by Christian thought, even in a ‘post-Christian’ era) is often an exploratory attempt to unearth new layers of meaning that have hitherto remained latent. Bulgakov’s sophiological integration of human creativity, or Florensky’s appropriation of Georg Cantor’s idea of ‘actual infinity’, are cases in point.

There is a second tension in Bulgakov’s account of the relationship between faith and reason. He writes: ‘That in which one can believe (*верить*) is impossible to know (*знать*) ... and that which one knows is impossible to believe in’;<sup>43</sup> ‘that which constitutes the proper object of faith, in keeping with its own nature ... cannot become knowledge (*знание*)’.<sup>44</sup> But in what way are faith and reason ‘opposed’ to each other? The theologically most convincing interpretation is to say that faith in God and knowledge of finite beings are qualitatively different acts, so that they cannot be played off against each other. Faith, as Bulgakov argues, ‘is a function not of some individual aspect of the spirit (*дух*) but of the whole human person in its entirety, in the indivisible totality of all the powers of the spirit’.<sup>45</sup> Thus faith is that which directs all human powers—reason, desire and will—towards their ultimate *telos*, which is God. This means that faith and knowledge are not mutually exclusive in the sense that faith is epistemically deficient compared to knowledge.<sup>46</sup> There is neither an epistemic hierarchy nor an opposition between (‘proper’) knowledge and (‘mere’) faith.

It is precisely this questionable dichotomy that both the religious rationalist and religious irrationalist uncritically accept. The rationalist considers faith/belief epistemically deficient: I believe when I do not know; I believe when there is insufficient knowledge. Accordingly, ‘to believe is to project beyond ignorance, and to claim unwarranted knowing beyond the evidences’.<sup>47</sup> Yet the religious rationalist is convinced that we can know God, so that epistemically vague and indeterminate faith or belief can be overcome. The fideist, too, accepts the opposition between faith/belief and knowledge, but insists that for faith to be genuine faith, it has to preserve its opposition to knowledge. For the fideist, what is required is precisely a purely existential trust in God that completely dispenses with empirical evidence, rational necessity, or any other form of rational justification.

In fact, human reason is opposed to faith only insofar as reason is misdirected, insofar as it operates under the conditions of the fall. The opposite of faith is not knowledge, but *lack of faith* and *unbelief*.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, it would be misleading

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 28/27.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 30/29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 30/30.

<sup>46</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Transzendenz und säkulare Welt. Lebensorientierung an letzter Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 129–77.

<sup>47</sup> William Desmond, ‘The Confidence of Thought. Between Belief and Metaphysics’, in *The Intimate Strangeness of Being. Metaphysics after Dialectic* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 202–30; at 209.

<sup>48</sup> Dalferth, *Transzendenz und säkulare Welt*, 129.

to believe that faith constitutes 'an infantile state of religious consciousness' that eventually needs to be replaced by (superior) knowledge.<sup>49</sup> And if 'knowledge' is understood in the eschatological sense, if it expresses the intimate but dynamic union between human beings/creation and God, then it must be viewed as the *fulfilment* of faith, rather than as its replacement. Although Bulgakov does not state that faith must be superseded by knowledge, he at times seems to embrace the idea of an 'eschatological verification' of the content of faith. He writes that, at present, faith has an insufficient rational foundation, but 'it is animated *by the hope* of becoming knowledge (*знание*), of finding for itself sufficient grounds'.<sup>50</sup> He even goes so far as to suggest that faith 'will become something obvious (*очевидность*), similar to natural necessity (*природная необходимость*)'.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of an 'eschatological verification' has been discussed in the analytic tradition. In response to logical positivism, attempts were made to show that the Christian faith makes genuine truth claims, for example, that the fundamental beliefs held by Christians are either true or false.<sup>52</sup> The logical positivists argued that a sentence is only literally significant if it is verifiable (in principle), if we know what observations would lead us to accept the proposition that expresses the sentence as being true, or reject it as being false.<sup>53</sup> They argued that metaphysical and theological statements do not meet this criterion and therefore cannot be literally significant. For if a religious experience is reduced to the experience of something *empirical*, it becomes empirically verifiable, but it is not an experience of a transcendent God and therefore theologically meaningless. If a religious experience has the character of a *mystical intuition*, but does not generate verifiable propositions, it may be theologically relevant, but it cannot be literally significant.<sup>54</sup>

Despite his remarks about the hope for an 'eschatological verification' of faith, Bulgakov does not fall into this trap. In fact, this aporetic dichotomy is just a variant of the dilemma between rationalism and irrationalism. To be sure, the eschatological fulfilment of creation does increase the certainty of faith. St Paul writes that we will be able to see God 'face to face' (*πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον*), and that 'at present I know (*γινώσκω*) only in part, but then I shall know fully (*ἐπιγνώσομαι*) even as I have been fully known (*ἐπεγνώσθην*) [by God]' (1 Cor 13:12; cf. LXX Gen 32:31; Deut 34:10). The idea of 'knowing' and 'being known' is perhaps inspired by the Hellenic Mystery Religions, and is associated with deification.<sup>55</sup> For Maximus the Confessor, too, 'eschatological knowledge' is tantamount to deification: the known

<sup>49</sup> Булгаков, Свет невечерний, 32/32.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 29/28.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 31/30.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (London; Melbourne: Macmillan, 1967), 169–99, esp. 95.

<sup>53</sup> Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: V. Gollancz, 1946), 35.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 114–20.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 500.

object is perceived through *participation* by grace; eschatological knowledge is *participative knowledge*.<sup>56</sup>

To avoid a reductionist understanding of 'eschatological knowledge', three things need to be kept in mind: first, in the *parousia*, divine grace fulfils all human powers and God is revealed as 'triumphant *truth*, all-conquering *love*' and as 'irresistibly attractive and salvific *beauty*'.<sup>57</sup> For this reason a one-sided emphasis on reason and truth (while neglecting divine goodness and beauty) is problematic. Second, as Bulgakov himself points out, despite the triumphant, all-conquering and irresistible character of the divine intervention, God defeats human beings by *persuasion*, and not by coercion. Human freedom and divine-human synergism are not abandoned.<sup>58</sup> His earlier, above-cited statement from *Unfading Light* that faith will become 'something obvious (*очевидность*), similar to natural necessity (*природная необходимость*)',<sup>59</sup> is therefore at least highly ambiguous. Third, due to the infinite divine plenitude, eschatological existence must be envisaged in terms of an 'ever-moving repose', to use Maximus' paradoxical concept. The heightened, existential certainty of 'eschatological knowledge' cannot be interpreted as a divinely granted insight that fundamental Christian propositions really 'correspond' to (metaphysical) states of affairs. Rather, the task is to envision a dynamic process, in which all our ecclesially mediated symbolizations of God unambiguously fulfil their mystical function while excluding the possibility of an idolatrous satiety and ennui.

<sup>56</sup> Maximus the Confessor, Ad Thalassium 60, in *Quaestiones ad Thalassium. II. Quaestiones LVI–LXV* (CCSG 22), ed. Carl Laga and Carlos Steel (Turnhout: Brepols; Leuven University Press, 1990), 77–78.

<sup>57</sup> Bulgakov, *Bride*, 491. Italics added.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 492.

<sup>59</sup> Булгаков, *Свет не вечерний*, 31/30.