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Sophiology as a Theological Discipline according to Solovyov, Bulgakov and Florensky

Abstract: The article presents one of the themes of theological disputes in the 20th century, specifically the return of the Sophiology into theological considerations. God's Wisdom (Divine Sophia) was particularly topical in the Russian Orthodox theology in 19th and 20th centuries; however, it overlapped with Catholic theology. The text is based on Vladimir Solovyov's, Sergei Bulgakov's, and Pavel Florensky's experience with the revelation of God's Wisdom. Since their experience is the experience with revelation, the Sophiology can be integrated into the subjects of spiritual theology. The fundamental doctrinal dispute dealt primarily with the concept of Wisdom in relation to the Holy Trinity. As the mystical encounter with Sophia was described as experience with the female aspect of Divinity, it was also important to search the relationship between Sophia and Virgin Mary. The author thus concludes that sophiology is an essential part of systematic theology.

Key words: Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, Russian theology, sophiology, dogmatic theology, Mariology

***Povzetek:* Sofiologija kot teološka disciplina po Solovjovu, Bulgakovu in Florenskem**

Članek predstavlja eno izmed tem teoloških sporov 20. stoletja, in sicer vrnitev sofiologije v teološke razprave. Božja Modrost (Božja Sofija) je bila še posebej obravnavana v ruski pravoslavni teologiji 19. in 20. stoletja. Kljub temu se je prekrivala s katoliško teologijo. Besedilo članka temelji na izkušnji Vladimirja Solovjova, Sergeja Bulgakova in Pavla Florenskega z razodetjem Božje Modrosti. Ker njihova izkušnja pomeni izkušnjo z razodetjem, je sofiologijo mogoče uvrstiti med predmete duhovne teologije. Temeljni doktrinarni spor je zadeval predvsem koncept Modrosti v odnosu do Svete Trojice. Ker je bilo mistično srečanje s Sofijo predstavljeno kot izkušnja z ženskim vidikom Božanstva, je bilo pomembno iskati odnose med Sofijo in Devico Marijo. Avtor članka zato zaključuje, da je sofiologija bistveni del sistematične teologije.

Ključne besede: Vladimir Solovjov, Sergej Bulgakov, Pavel Florenski, ruska teologija, sofiologija, dogmatična/sistematična teologija, mariologija

1. Introduction

The importance of Sophiology as a theological discipline is one of classical disputes in the theological research of the 20th century. It was mainly Slavic theologians who developed Sophiology as the doctrine of God's Wisdom: it is a part of the long tradition of the Eastern Christianity from the very beginning of the Christianization. The missionary-to-be, Constantine, had a dream (as it was a common pattern in old Byzantine legends), in which he was presented with various beautiful women, and he had to choose the one he wanted to live with. Among all the women, he chose but one: Wisdom – Sophia. (Bagin 1984; Grivec 1927; Mareš 2000) In Thessaloniki of Constantine's time, there was a temple dedicated to the God's Wisdom – Holy Sophia (it was Constantine's parish church for a short time) and we might speculate that this – admittedly strongly Marian – spirit affected him. Sophiology as the doctrine of wisdom, however, had been a subject of scientific research long before; its roots are in biblical and patristic theological tradition. (Sládek 2010, 62–78) For example, a passage from sapiential Book of Proverbs (8, 22–33) reflects on the pre-existence of Wisdom-Sophia before all creation and its contribution to the creation of the world (Rizzi 1999; Rad 1975; Rendtorff 1990). The doctrine of Sophia was adopted by scholars of the Alexandrian school, and later by Cappadocia Fathers (Špidlík 2001, 10–17). The Trinitarian doctrine of God and the role of the Word-Logos and Wisdom-Sophia at the creation of the world were further developed (Kelly 1998). The Sapiential biblical and patristic tradition is also reflected in artistic depiction of Wisdom of God on frescoes and icons.

In the Eastern tradition, Sophiology was prominent among Russian philosophers and theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries; among them, the most notable are Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky. In the following text, we are primary concerned with the connection Sophiology had to other theological disciplines. In particular, we concentrate on the link to spiritual theology, dogmatic theology and Mariology. We necessarily have to highlight the problematic aspect of Sophiological research, since it started critical disputes within the theological community.

2. The Revelation of Wisdom as a part of spiritual theology

Spiritual theology is interested in a spiritual personality development based on God's revelation and in Christianity based experience. In a meeting with the Revelation, a man detects new life context and this often leads to changes in his thinking and attitudes. He finds wisdom in this new experience. The experience transforms him, so that in the end, he resembles the revealed Wisdom. An example we present here is the changing encounter Vladimir Solovyov had with the Wisdom of God.

Vladimir Solovyov is one of the most prominent Russian thinkers of the second half of the 19th century. Solovyov had his first mystic vision at an early age of ten

years; the vision was, moreover, twice repeated later. When he was rejected by his first love, he went to a church. Filled with jealousy, he nevertheless participated in the liturgy celebration. He delved into cherubic singing, and suddenly, his mind was empty, everything disappeared from his consciousness. (Sládek 2009) Shortly before his death, September 26–29, 1898, he described his mystical experience in poem *Three meetings*: meetings with the Divine Sophia in Moscow, London and Egypt. The second vision of Sophia Solovyov experienced in London, after a brief period of turning away from faith. At that time, he studied medieval philosophy, gnosis and Kabbalah, Indian and oriental religions in London. However, Divine Sophia sent him to Egypt. Finally, the third revelation happened in Egypt in the desert, after Bedouins robbed him and he was lying on the ground listening to jackals howling at night. Suddenly, he saw the universe as a single living being, as he says in the aforementioned poem: »I saw all, and all was one – A single image of womanly beauty /... /...« (Bojkov 2000, 73–75) Solovyov thus saw the long-sought Wisdom of God in her entirety. She revealed to him the organic principle that is the meaning of all things: omni-unity. All his later teaching relied on this mystical experience, although his later reinterpretation of Sophia had its intellectual and spiritual development.

In the early writings from Cairo, Solovyov revealed the dialogue he had with Sofia. It is indeed a dialogue: Sophia and Solovyov ask each other questions, as a rule, Sophia explains, »examines« Solovyov's answers and answers Solovyov's questions. There are three dialogues that Solovyov (referred to as a Philosopher) leads with Sophia at the banks of the Nile. In the first of the dialogues, the Philosopher asks Sophia-Wisdom – as the Eternal Feminine – questions concerning the meaning of Christianity, the significance of other religions, the absolute principle, cosmic and historical processes and so on. When asked – somewhat provocatively – whether he knew her only from the outside, Philosopher responded using somewhat poetically: »I know your thoughts and feelings, and through your thoughts and feelings, I know your inner being.« (Solovjov 1997, 23) In the conclusion, Solovyov highlights the sensitivity of a rather specific Russian devotion to this truth and the role it played in the proclamation of the Universal Church: »In addition to individual human image of Divinity – in addition to the Mother of God and the Son of God – the Russian people knew and loved a social incarnation of Divinity in the Universal Church, as St Sophia.« (Soloviev 1889, 263)

The Wisdom of God in this mystical experience conveys knowledge that a person reaches from an insight, by identifying with the content of the personal revelation; however, the revelation is not accepted only passively, but through an inner dialogue, prayer that clarifies all unclear. Solovyov then opens a new topic: the relationship between the Wisdom of God to the Trinity and the created world. His experience can certainly be described as an encounter with the dual face of Wisdom. In Cairo, as the »Philosopher«, Solovyov met the first type of Sophia, the cosmic Unifier that led him to search for universal principles. Gradually, he got to know the second Sophia: her role in the redemption of Jesus Christ, the establishment of the Church and the history of Christianity. The relationship to the Trinity

and the world had to be clarified, so the dogmatic teachings of the Church were not contradicted.

3. The dispute over Sophiology as a part of dogmatic theology

Dogmatic theology systematically reflects the truths of faith. Especially for the doctrine of Creation (theology of creation) and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (Trinitarian theology), it was necessary to specify the position of the Wisdom of God to avoid misinterpretation. These issues got arise to a major controversy over the position of Sophiology: is it a proper part of theology – or is it a controversial discipline bordering with heresy?

An important center of theological education of Orthodox emigrants became Paris, especially St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute founded by the Russian emigrants. The Dean – and a charismatic leader – from the very beginnings of the Institute (from 1925) was Sergei Bulgakov. His tireless activity has resulted in countless theological publications, of which let us mention at least his significant trilogy *The Lamb of God*, *The Comforter* and *The Bride of the Lamb*. In 1935, a dispute concerning some Bulgakov's theological theses culminated. Many of Bulgakov's friends participated – supporting him or not – in the dispute. (Losskij 1968, 266–274) Moscow Patriarchate – apparently without a deeper study of his *The Lamb of God* and based on the letters from *Fraternity of St. Photius* – refused Bulgakov's theses, thesis on Sophia in particular. This caused almost a schismatic conflict within the Orthodoxy, as many scholars demanded a public theological disputation that would clarify the questionable theological formulations. In particular, they objected the direct condemnation without Bulgakov's possibility to defend his research. The Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate accepted the criticism put forward by the Moscow Metropolitan Sergey. Sergey interpreted Sophia in Bulgakov's Sophiology as a »fourth hypostasis in God«. Bulgakov's doctrine of Sophia and »kenosis« of Christ has been labeled as »foreign to Holy Orthodox Church of Christ«. (1991)

However, the dispute was not exclusively scientific; there were indirect political and juridical questions at play. Hence, Parisian committee of Exarchate in Western Europe under the leadership of the Metropolitan Eulogius was formed and the committee rejected the accusations and called for reconsideration. The »dispute over Sophia« was difficult to take for Sergei Bulgakov; in a way, it was his cross. *The Comforter* is a witness to the argumentative atmosphere – and its escalation.

How can we briefly characterize Bulgakov's theological theses that caused so much controversy? In the trilogy *The Lamb of the God*, *The Comforter* and *The Bride of the Lamb* Bulgakov developed the doctrine of dual Sophia: Creaturely and Divine. This division made the Russian Orthodox Church to accuse him of Gnosticism. (Evlampiev 2003) His book *The Bride of the Lamb* begins with contempla-

tions of the world's creation »out of nothing« and Bulgakov then discusses the Sophianic nature of the world, as viewed by philosophers and theologians. In his speculations, Bulgakov included the *Soul of the World*, a concept from an early work by Vladimir Solovyov. Next to the thesis of auto-evolution of the universe without the Creator (present in pantheism, stoicism, neo-Platonism, Buddhism and theosophy, among others) and the metaphysical dualism of contradictory dualistic divinity (typically, one God is enclosed in himself, the other God is turned to the world, as in the mythologies of mother-materia or the Iranian religion and – rather covertly – in atheism) Bulgakov places the Sophianic nature of the world as a solution to the problematic conclusions of these two views. (2004, 29–134) The Divine Sophia is the mediator between the Creator and the creature; this, then, makes it possible to contemplate this mysterious Wisdom in the created world. The idea of creation by the Creator is not only a message taken-upon from the Bible; it is also present in Plato's intuition of the true world of ideas built upon the empirical world. Bulgakov's interpretation of the empirical world draws a world as it is: »Sophia's photosphere upon the world, the eternal Divine Sophia, Divinity without God.« (35) To be more precise, such a world mimics these ideas (Creaturally Sophia). Here, we can already feel Bulgakov's intention: to prepare the reader for the adoption of a dual existence of Sophia: Divine and Creaturally.

Bulgakov claims that the imperfections of the ancient philosophical thought system were solved by the Christian concept of creation in the context of teaching about Sophia. Initial Sophiological research by early Christian theologians has blurred contours (it equates the Logos and Sophia), Bulgakov took it as a challenge. In his work, he tried to logically complete a perfect synthesis of implied thesis on Sophia by Patristic scholars and various hints in ancient philosophy and scholasticism.

Bulgakov had to deal with the concept of eternal Wisdom of God from the theological perspective. Above all, it was necessary to clearly define the relationship of Divine Sophia to three persons (Hypostasis) of the Holy Trinity. Should Sophia be a living creature in God, as everything conceivable – then one has to establish the relation to the Hypostases of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit – or what is Sophia's existence in the Trinity. Bulgakov solved the problem by distinguishing between »hypostasis« on the one hand and »hypostaticity« on the other. Hence, for Bulgakov, Divine Sophia is not »hypostasis, but hypostaticity: it is included in the personal life of hypostasis and thanks to that, it itself is a living being«. (71) The Divine Sophia is self-manifestation of divinity of the life of the Holy Trinity and as such, it is both pre-eternal and it is created; it is a Trinitarian act of self-realization (75).

What about the Creaturally Sophia, then? To answer this question, Bulgakov claims that Sophia comes already from the act of the creation of the world. The basic principle of understanding the act of creation is to accept the fact that God created the world out of nothing and that »the fundamentals of the creation of the world are present in God's eternity«. (76) The creation of the world is an act of self-realization of the Trinity related to Its Sophia's self-manifestation in otherness.

If the created world has its foundation in eternity (i.e., in non-creation), this is only possible through the relationship between the eternal Sophia and the Creaturely Sophia that is immersed in time and space. For Bulgakov, the Creaturely Sophia is not created specifically as another Sophia, but it is created via self-emptying (kenosis) of the Wisdom of God. (92)

Sofia is the extra-hypostasis of the »world Soul«, it is an organic omni-unity that unites the world. Man created as »an image of God« has the Creaturely Sophia in his nature. However, not only a man as an individual, but also the whole mankind is a part of the creative act of the Trinity. Bulgakov takes this to imply that there is an archetypal of mankind present in God as »heavenly man«, as the Wisdom of God. Through Creaturely Sophia then uncreated powers and energies immersed in »nothingness« of the creation created a creature gaining relative to God. In this concept, Bulgakov updates the doctrine of Gregory Palamas on uncreated energies and he seeks to explain the action of creation through the uncreated divine energy.

How did Bulgakov think about Sophianic nature of the Church? Bulgakov relates the Church both to the Divine and Creaturely Sophia. Church as enlightenment, exaltation, deification of creation and salvation is for Bulgakov both Divine and Creaturely Sophia hand in hand – she is eternal, but she also concretizes in history. If the Church is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, then – from the perspective of Sophiology that focuses on the feminine dimension of the relationship – Sophia is both the Bride of Christ and the Wife of the Lamb. (307–308)

Pavel Florensky, Russian theologian and martyr, contributed to the Trinitarian reflections on the relationship between Sophia and the Holy Trinity. In his pivotal work *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, briefly discussed the existence of Wisdom before the creation of the world. Florensky does not doubt the pre-existence of Sophia. (2003, 272) According to him, Sophia also participates in the inner life of the Trinity, but not as Hypostasis, but as an eternal creature: she is allowed to enter into the relationships of love in Trinity »based on the ineffable, intangible and incomprehensible humbleness of God« (284). For Bulgakov, Sophia is hypostaticity, for Florensky, she is eternal creation non-existent before the creation of the world.

4. Sophiology as a part of Mariology?

Mariology is a part of dogmatic theology dedicated to the study of Mary, the Mother of God, in relation to the history of salvation, redemptive role of Jesus Christ and the sacramental life of the Church. Importantly, it also represents the feminine dimension of spirituality in the relation to the Holy Trinity: hence the internal link between the Divine Sophia and the Virgin Mary.

For Solovyov, Bulgakov and Florensky, one of the key issues was to define the relation of Sophia to Mary. For Vladimir Solovyov, the image of revealed (female)

Wisdom gains increasingly clear contours of the Virgin Mary. At the onset of Solovyov's work, Sophia bears features of Gnostic Wisdom, later, however, Marian devotion is more and more prominent. Bulgakov also described Sophia in relation to Virgin Mary: in *The Burning Bush*, the Most Pure Mary was – as a person – protected by divine grace, and, therefore, did not commit any sin. Temptations could touch her only as a test, but she overcame them thanks being to the grace. (Bulgakov 1998, 77)

In the already cited work *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* Pavel Florensky analyzed three icons of Wisdom of God. In the first icon, Florensky viewed Sophia in an angelic (mediating) image, in the second, he draw attention to her ecclesial dimension. Finally, the third type – a variation of the previous two types – is genuinely Marian. On this icon found in Kiev, Sophia is depicted as winged Mother of God with a child, and two angels hold a crown above her head. For Florensky, such a depiction of Sophia is a synthesis of crowned Mother of God and Apocalyptic Women from the Book of Revelation (who, incidentally, was a prominent figure in Solovyov's visions of the end of history). The connection between ecclesiastical and Mariological depiction of Sophia points towards the symbolic-archetypal concept of the Church as the Wisdom of God in the form of the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God; this brings Florensky back to his favorite theme: Sophia is the Virgin Soul of the Mother of God. (2003, 314–315) The Mother of God is thus a perfect expression of Creaturely Sophia.

5. Conclusion

Sophiology as a discipline dealing with the Wisdom of God became a part of theological research. It is an old discipline – and a new one as well: it is still accepted with unease given its unclear relation to the other theological disciplines, the dogmatic truths of the faith in particular. In the text, we attempted to explain the intersections between Sophiology and spiritual theology, Sophiology and dogmatic theology, and, finally, between Sophiology and Mariology. On the basis of mystical experience and rational reflections of three Russian thinkers – Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky –, it became rather obvious that the revelations of female characters and personal traits bring in a new level of knowledge of the truth about the world and the Church. We are not dealing with exclusively rational speculation: it is the mystical experience that reveals the truth that precedes the creation of the world, truth enlightening the life of the Trinity, in which also the Wisdom is transcended and the perfect revelation of this transcendence is the creation of The Virgin Mary. Hence, we conclude that Sophiology should become a discipline of systematic theology.

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