

# SERGEY BULGAKOV AND GEORGES FLOROVSKY: *The Task of Relating God and Creation*

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Although Sergey Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky belong to the same Eastern Orthodox tradition and often use the same terminology in their works, they speak two different languages and have vastly different theologies. In this article, I will seek to show that the way these two thinkers responded to the challenges of their time and appropriated their theological and philosophical sources led them to two different conceptions of God and creation. To narrow down my focus, I will concentrate specifically on several sophiological works of Bulgakov and Florovsky's writings on God and creation. Based on my discussion of these authors, I will conclude with a few suggestions for the Evangelical audience, encouraging us in further reflection on the issues of relating God and creation and appropriating the sources of our theology as we seek to make our message relevant today.

## The Substantive and Formalist Approaches to Appropriating Christian Thought

The manifest difference between Bulgakov and Florovsky has led some scholars to suggest that we can perceive them as representatives of two different approaches to appropriating Christian thought for modern times. In his article "Russian Religious Thought and the Future of Orthodox Theology," Paul Valliere<sup>[1]</sup> draws a distinction between two kinds of approaches to theology in Russian religious thought: the substantive and the formalist. Speaking of the first approach, he singles out a stream of Russian thinkers who belong to the philosophical tradition of Vladimir Soloviev

<sup>[1]</sup> Paul Valliere, "Russian Religious Thought and the Future of Orthodox Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 45:3 (2001): 227-41.



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(1853–1900). The list includes such names as Sergey Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Florensky, Lev Karsavin, and others. They endeavored to integrate philosophy and theology in the twentieth century “going beyond the fathers,” being devoted to “reconstructing Orthodox theology with the help of Western philosophy.”<sup>[2]</sup> This stream of thinkers sought a substantive revision of the theological tradition. They were convinced that the content of Christian theology somehow develops over time and that modern Orthodox theologians have the right to say what the fathers did not say. This approach was strongly criticized for such revisionism and “accused of trading the verities of holy tradition for winds of doctrine wafting from Western philosophy or Romantic poetry or godless pantheism or some other alien source.”<sup>[3]</sup> The two most famous representatives of such criticism are Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky whose approach can be characterized as formalist. This stream of thinkers rejected “the proposition that Orthodox theologians should aspire to go beyond the fathers in any substantive sense.”<sup>[4]</sup> Instead, they sought to return to the classical sources of Christian thought and used the phrase “neo-patristic synthesis” to describe their methodology. Valliere summarizes his point by describing the difference between the substantive and formalist approaches to theology in terms of two tasks:

For more than half a century now, the most creative Orthodox theology has been done not in Russia or the East European countries that bore the Communist yoke but in the West: in Paris, in Oxford, in Crestwood (and, of course, in Athens and Thessaloniki and Bucharest). The theoretical assumptions of most of this activity were and continue to be Neopatristic. That is to say, the business of theology is viewed as the recovery of patristic sources and the articulation of the meaning of those sources in a modern idiom. This involves updating the fathers as opposed to just mechanically repeating their words. But it would be wrong to describe such updating as going “beyond the fathers” in substantive terms.

The Russian school [i.e. the substantive approach] had a different mission. Here the project was to develop a theology of engagement with and involvement in the secular world, to offer a sympathetic theological interpretation of secular experience, and thereby to introduce into Orthodox theology a more positive and affirmative relationship between church and world than can be found in the traditional fathers of the Church.... The task was made urgent by the emergence of a dynamic secularism in modern times.<sup>[5]</sup>

In line with this distinction, I would like to examine Bulgakov and Florovsky taking into consideration both their theological differences and the differences of their background and vision for constructing modern theology. Bulgakov and Florovsky were contemporaries and colleagues and both attempted to develop the foundations for Eastern Orthodoxy in exile after the Russian revolution. In his search for a close link between Creator and creation Bulgakov constructed his theological system with reference to the concept of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, whom he locates somehow in close connection to the Trinitarian hypostases. Florovsky, on the other hand, perceived the sophiological views of Bulgakov as alien to patristic thought and wanted

<sup>[2]</sup> Valliere, “Russian Religious Thought,” 228.

<sup>[4]</sup> Valliere, “Russian Religious Thought,” 230.

<sup>[3]</sup> Valliere, “Russian Religious Thought,” 230.

<sup>[5]</sup> Valliere, “Russian Religious Thought,” 232.

to keep an absolute distance between Creator and creation. The two theologians highly respected each other and were involved in indirect debate that proved that different ways of relating God and creation were a disputable issue of the time.

### Sophiology, God, and Creation in Sergey Bulgakov

Sergey Bulgakov (1871–1944) is considered “the twentieth century’s most profound Orthodox systematic theologian.”<sup>[6]</sup> An economist by training, he made a spiritual journey from Marxism through Idealism and to Orthodoxy. His conversion is characteristic for an entire generation of Russian intelligentsia of the so-called Silver Age. During this period of Russian religious renaissance there were many secular Russian philosophers who returned to the Orthodox Church after being frustrated with Western rationalism. Being one of these people, Bulgakov found an alternative to his former worldview in the sophiological metaphysics of Soloviev and devoted the rest of his life to the re-interpretation of the Christian legacy, seeking ways to integrate secular thought with Christianity. Soloviev’s teaching of Sophia, the divine Wisdom, was at the heart of Russian religious philosophy that described it as the divine total-unity and understood the world as the self-manifestation of the Absolute. For Soloviev “the natural world, having fallen away from the divine unity, appears as a chaos of separate elements.”<sup>[7]</sup> Accordingly, the task of Sophia in the world is to unite these isolated parts into one organic whole. Once enlightened and inspired by Sophia, human beings can fulfill their vocation by becoming the organizers of the gradual realization of the total-unity in the world by seeking common ground among various fields of study and penetrating into the very core of reality.<sup>[8]</sup>

While Soloviev had a multiplicity of descriptions of Sophia, his successors tried to give it one definite meaning. Bulgakov understood Sophia primarily as the unfolding of God’s being and often described it as the hypostasized mediation between God and the world. At the same time, he had a plurality of somewhat different conceptions which seem to emerge gradually as he sought to formulate a religious philosophical worldview. In doing so, he was constantly pressured to concentrate on the topics of God and creation and their relation to each other. The first time Bulgakov employed the concept of Sophia was as early as 1905.<sup>[9]</sup> Afterwards, he applied it to his doctoral dissertation, *The Philosophy of Economy*<sup>[10]</sup> in 1912, and several years later he provided a philosophical and historical rationale for sophiological vision in his major writing *The Unfading Light* published in 1917.<sup>[11]</sup> Looking for connections between Christianity and other worldviews, Bulgakov concluded that “there was a religious truth in pagan worship of the Great Mother, and that this feminine *hypostasis* of God was a mystery seldom considered by Christianity. Sophia was the Great Mother worshipped of old; she was Demeter, Isis, Cybele, and Ishtar,

<sup>[6]</sup> Boris Jakim, *Introduction to The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), ix.

<sup>[7]</sup> Vladimir Solovyev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Collected Works, vol. 8 (Brussels, 1966), 121.

<sup>[8]</sup> Solovyev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 10, 144.

<sup>[9]</sup> Sergey Bulgakov, “Neskol’ko zamechanii po povodu stat’i G. I. Chulkov o poezii Vl. Solov’eva,”

*Voprosy zhizni* 6 (1905): 293-303.

<sup>[10]</sup> Sergey Bulgakov, *Filosofia khoziastva* (Moscow: Put’, 1912; repr. Westmead, Eng.: Gregg, 1971; Moscow: Nauka, 1990).

<sup>[11]</sup> Sergey Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii* (Moscow: Put’, 1917; repr. Westmead, Eng.: Gregg, 1971).

and he perceived her in the hierarchies and pantheons of other religions.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Bulgakov grounded his exposition of Sophia in Trinitarian theology. Papanikolaou suggests that Bulgakov’s Trinitarian thought can be summarized in two key points: first, his “formal acceptance of the categories of *hypostasis* and *ousia* that were hammered out during the Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century,” and second, his adoption of “an Augustinian-inspired interpretation of the Trinity as the Father’s self-revelation in the Son, with the Holy Spirit being the love that unites the Father and the Son, and, as such, completes the self-revelation of the Father in the Son.”<sup>[13]</sup> Bulgakov considers the Augustinian model as an advancement over Cappadocian Trinitarian theology, while arguing that neither of them did “elaborate on the doctrine of the Trinity in such a way as to make sense of how God can be in communion with what is not God.”<sup>[14]</sup> He criticizes the fathers for being too dependant on the notions of substance or nature in ancient Greek philosophy and entirely neglecting the link between the Creator and creation. Some of his theological reflections exhibit a clear frustration with what he perceives as the under-developed Sophiology of the Church fathers.

In his desire to reconstruct the fathers’ Sophiology and suggest a stronger bridge between God and the world, he re-interprets the idea of God’s self-revelation in Christ and Holy Spirit as the sophianic model. He writes: “Sophia is Ousia as revealed.... Sophia is the revelation of the Son and the Holy Spirit, without separation and without confusion.... Divine Sophia is God’s *exhaustive* self-revelation, the fullness of divinity, and therefore has absolute content.”<sup>[15]</sup> In connection with the idea of the self-manifestation of God, Bulgakov distinguishes between two modes of Sophia: divine and creaturely.<sup>[16]</sup> In his *Unfading Light* he calls the former the fourth *hypostasis*<sup>[17]</sup> and identifies the latter with the existence of the world. In this relation, Papanikolaou suggests that Bulgakov “saw that the categories of *ousia* and *hypostasis* could not by themselves do the work of conceptualizing God’s being as one of communion with the not-God,” and Sophia “emerges from the insight that a third term is needed in order to account for God’s communion with the world.”<sup>[18]</sup> Bulgakov’s attempt to use Sophia as a link between God and creation leads him to the emphases in which he is sometimes perceived as affirming that creation is neither free nor heterogeneous from God. To consider this point more closely it would be helpful to re-

<sup>[12]</sup> Kristi Groberg, “The Feminine Occult Sophia in the Russian Religious Renaissance: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 26, nos. 1-4 (1992): 197-240.

<sup>[13]</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, “*Sophia! Orthoi!* The Trinitarian Theology of Sergei Bulgakov,” 4, in Stoyan Tanev, “ENERGEIA vs SOFIA,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 2:1 (2011): 31-32.

<sup>[14]</sup> Papanikolaou, “*Sophia! Orthoi!*” 4.

<sup>[15]</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God. A Brief Summary of Sophiology* (New York-London: The Paisley Press: Williams and Norgate, 1937).

<sup>[16]</sup> There is a growing interest among scholars to relate Bulgakov’s teaching of double Sophia to the

Palamite distinction between essence and energies in God in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century controversy on the so-called onomadoxy. For an excellent discussion on this point, see Tanev, “ENERGEIA vs SOFIA,” 15-71. Also, see Antoine Arjakovsky, “The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov and Contemporary Western Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 1-2, 2005; John Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy: the New Theological Horizon,” available at [http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers/Milbank\\_SophiologyTheurgy.pdf](http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers/Milbank_SophiologyTheurgy.pdf);

<sup>[17]</sup> To avoid the charge against heresy Bulgakov retracted this claim in his later writings.

<sup>[18]</sup> Papanikolaou, “*Sophia! Orthoi!*” 15.

fer to a number of texts from Bulgakov's *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*<sup>[19]</sup> that represent "the clearest statements of his mature position."<sup>[20]</sup> Thus, in his discussion of what it means for the world to be created out of nothing Bulgakov writes:

Alongside the divine and eternal world exists the world of creaturely being established by God in time. And God created it from 'nothing'.... There can be no source of the world but God. This is as much to say that the world has been established in its being by God, that it has been created by God by his own power and *out of himself*. Therefore *the creature is distinct from the deity itself not in respect of the source of its being, but only in respect of the particular mode of its reception of that being.*<sup>[21]</sup>

In his attempt to establish the ontological link between God and creation Bulgakov underscores the divine origin of the world by bringing it into the very being of God. In several other passages he states that, "God creates the world, as it were, *out of himself*, out of the abundance of his own resources"<sup>[22]</sup> and that "[c]reatureliness as such consists in this fusion of being and nothingness, or of being and non-being.... *This is the manifestation outside God of the wealth of divine being, now enshrined in creation* and existing in dependence upon divine being."<sup>[23]</sup> In response to such a vision of the relation between God and world, Bulgakov's critics point out that he risks obliterating the distinction between God and creation. Furthermore, they argue that "if the existence of the world is required for the full expression of the divine life, creation must be necessary."<sup>[24]</sup>

The idea of the necessity of creation in Bulgakov emerges especially when he discusses the theme of divine freedom in relation to the world. In the language of sophiological metaphors, he provides an explanation which others have perceived as a form of determinism:

Nevertheless the divine freedom which has manifested itself in the creation of the world is *not something haphazard, nor some casual whim of such a kind that the world might equally well have been created or not*. The reason for its creation is to be found in a quite different, *free 'necessity'—the force of God's love overflowing beyond the limits of its own being to found being other than his own.*<sup>[25]</sup>

Similarly, when describing creaturely freedom in relation to God, Bulgakov connects it directly with his conception of Sophia as he writes:

*The liberty of the creature cannot stand up to the end against the compelling attraction of Wisdom*, and its evident efficacy. This forms, so to speak, an 'ontological argument' for the existence of Sophia.... The acceptance of this principle of sophianic determination by no means involves the denial of those torments 'prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matt. 25) or of the freedom unto evil of those

<sup>[19]</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God* (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993). This book is a revised edition of *The Wisdom of God: A Brief Summary of Sophiology*, trans. by Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke and Xenia Braikevtic (NY: Paisly Press, and London: Williams and Norgate, 1937).

<sup>[20]</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, xx, quoted from the forward by Christopher Bamford.

<sup>[21]</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 61; italics mine.

<sup>[22]</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 63; italics mine.

<sup>[23]</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 62; italics mine.

<sup>[24]</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 10 (NY: Continuum, 1986, repr. 2003).

<sup>[25]</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 73; italics mine.

who will still persist in self-assertion. *But freedom unto evil has no substantive foundation, no resource to endure to eternity*, and sooner must inevitably wither before the radiance of Wisdom.<sup>[26]</sup>

Being faithful to his conviction that Sophiology is superior to the thought of classical Christianity, Bulgakov states: “patristics affirmed only the general notion of the creation of the world by God’s free will, in contradistinction to the necessity that reigns in divinity’s internal self-determination.”<sup>[27]</sup> All of these quotations show the full strength of Bulgakov’s desire to re-think the theological task as one of making sense of Christianity to the world. Towards this goal, he reinterprets the concept of God with an emphasis on the divine self-determinate act towards creation and connects God and the world through Sophia. To help theology overcome the distance between God and the world imposed by the patristic concept of *ex nihilo*, Bulgakov raises the status of the world to the divine level. According to this understanding, “it [creation] is eternal with all of God’s eternity, as eternal as the Holy Trinity and its self-revelation in the Divine Sophia, as eternal as God’s life.”<sup>[28]</sup> It is precisely these specific ontological commitments of Sophiology that made Bulgakov’s thought suspicious to mainstream Orthodox theology. In traditional Orthodox circles it was met with harsh criticism resulting in a full-blown controversy by 1930. His views were denounced as heretical in 1935 by the Moscow Patriarchate under Metropolitan Sergii, and by the Holy Synod of the Emigre Russian Church at Karlovac, Yugoslavia. While being supported by some,<sup>[29]</sup> Bulgakov was criticized by most of his fellow emigres. One of his most vigorous opponents was Georges Florovsky, also known for his program of neo-patristic synthesis. I will consider him next.

### Neo-patristic Synthesis, God, and Creation in Georges Florovsky

Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) was an Eastern Orthodox theologian, historian and priest. He was born in what was then the Russian Empire, but spent his adult life working as a Patristics professor at the St. Serge Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris (1920–49) and later as Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York (1949–79). In Florovsky’s time the secularist worldview abounded both in society and the Church as a result of Western influences. Being opposed to such influences on the Russian Orthodox Church, Florovsky described his time by using the term “pseudomorphosis” or “a fissure in the soul of the East,” and traced the reorientation of Russia toward Western culture (which, according to him, pushed Russians into scholasticism, pietism, and idealism) to the seventeenth century.<sup>[30]</sup> “For Florovsky, it was the Western concepts in Russian religious philosophy, specifically demonstrated in Bulgakov’s Sophiology, that he believed to be the secular conscious-

<sup>[26]</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 147; italics mine.

<sup>[27]</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Eerdmans, 2002), 29.

<sup>[28]</sup> Bulgakov, *The Bride*, 46.

<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, for example, V.V. Zenkovsky saw Bulgakov’s teaching of Sophia as one that could satisfactorily overcome Platonism; see V. V.

Zenkovskii, “Preodolenie platonizma i problema sofinosti mira,” *Put’* 24 (1930): 3-40. Bulgakov also enjoyed the full support of Metropolitan Evlogii who insisted on the former’s right to interpret Orthodox theology.

<sup>[30]</sup> Florovsky, “Etos Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi” in Florovsky (2001): 269.

ness within the Church, and it was this Westernization, which he called the ‘Babylonian captivity’, that needed to be eradicated.”<sup>[31]</sup> Florovsky’s opposition to the secular consciousness compelled his thought to develop in two major directions. First, he rejected religious philosophy (especially as related to the Sophiology of Bulgakov) and second, he called for the return to the Church fathers inaugurating what he called the neo-patristic synthesis<sup>[32]</sup> in response to the speculative thought manifested in Russian religious philosophy. For this purpose, Florovsky used the historical method as a tool for reconstructing Orthodoxy in the context of the Russian diaspora and focused on the topic of God and creation in rebuttal against what he considered Western influences of Sophiology.<sup>[33]</sup> In this section, I would like to examine Florovsky’s doctrine of creation and the way he related it to God by using the language of the Church fathers as the principal source and content for theology.

Given Florovsky’s passion to refute Sophiology, we would expect him to have thorough discussions of Sophia and multiple references to Bulgakov. However, he rarely talks about Sophia or mentions Bulgakov by name. In fact, there is almost no explicit attack on Sophiology in all his writings. Nevertheless, we do see what may be qualified as an indirect criticism of Sophiology aimed “to expose weaknesses in the theoretical or historical underpinnings of the sophiological edifice, doing so, however, without referring to the sophiological teaching by name.”<sup>[34]</sup> One of the few places where Florovsky does speak of Sophia in explicit terms is his letter<sup>[35]</sup> written to Bulgakov in 1926, where he distinguishes between two different notions of Sophia:

As I have been saying for a long time, there are *two* teachings about Sophia and even *two* Sophias, or more accurately, *two images* of Sophia: the true and real and the imaginary one. Holy churches were built in Byzantium and in Rus’ in the name of the former. The latter inspired Soloviev and his Masonic and Western teachers—and goes right back to the Gnostics and Philo. Soloviev did not at all know the *Church Sophia*: he knew Sophia from Boehme and the Behmenists, from Valentinus and Kabbalah. And *this* Sophiology is heretical and renounced. That which you find in Athanasius relates to the other Sophia. And one may find even more about Her in Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa...

<sup>[31]</sup> Joseph Ross Sauve, *Georges V. Florovsky and Vladimir N. Lossky: An Exploration, Comparison and Demonstration of their Unique Approaches to the Neopatristic Synthesis*, Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 8. Available at E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/591/>

<sup>[32]</sup> “In 1936, at the First Congress of Orthodox theologians in Athens, Greece, Florovsky’s ideas of ‘neopatristic synthesis’ and ‘Christian Hellenism’ started to gain serious attention in the pan-Orthodox world. His insistence on responding to modern challenges by returning to the Fathers and a renewed commitment to the Hellenization of Orthodoxy (that is, a commitment fully based on the language and mind of the original Greek Fathers; incorporation and transfiguration of Hellenized thought into Christianity) made a powerful and lasting impression and contributed to the spread of his theological influence,” Sauve,

*Georges V. Florovsky and Vladimir N. Lossky*, 20.

<sup>[33]</sup> Florovsky’s most comprehensive response to the westernization of Russian Orthodox Church was compiled in his work *The Ways of Russian Theology, Part I* (Belmont: Norland, 1979), CW, vol. 5, *Part II* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Buchvertriebsanstalt, 1987).

<sup>[34]</sup> Alexis Klimoff, “Georges Florovsky and the Sophiological Controversy,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1-2 (2005): 76.

<sup>[35]</sup> See the text of the letter published in Russian in А.М. Пентковски, “Письма Г. Флоровского С. Булгакову и С. Тышкевичу,” *Символ—Журнал христианской культуры при Славянской библиотеке в Париже*, т. 29 (1993): 205. The English translation of the letter is available at <http://ishmaelite.blogspot.com/2009/05/palamas-florovsky-bulgakov-and.html>

Slightly afterwards, he clarifies his point by emphasizing the negative statements of what Sophia is not:

Sophia never is world. The world is *other*, both in relation to grace and in relation to the “original image....” Sophia is *not* a created subject; it is not a substance or substrata of created coming-into-being [*stanovleniia*]. This is *gratia* and not *natura*. And *natura* = *creatura*. Sophia is not *creatura*. Along with this, it is *not hypostasis*, but *thrice-radiant glory*.

Several points can be highlighted from these texts. While Bulgakov affirmed the sophiological metaphysics of Soloviev, Florovsky rejects it as the alien legacy of Russian religious philosophy. Further, Florovsky clearly affirms the patristic teaching about Sophia as the true and real one which goes together with his desire to hold to the Church fathers as “witnesses of the true faith, *testes veritatis*.”<sup>[36]</sup> In opposition to Bulgakov, he speaks of the wrong conceptions of Sophia by naming some of the key aspects of how Bulgakov described it. Most importantly, he refuses to identify it with the divine *hypostasis* or nature and locates it on the plane of grace. Just what this means for the right interpretation of Sophia and the construction of sound theology can be found in Florovsky’s two articles—“Creation and Creaturehood”<sup>[37]</sup> and “The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy”—where he summarizes his understanding of the Christian teaching on creation *ex nihilo* and its relation to God. I will discuss them below.

Florovsky considered the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as “a striking Christian innovation in philosophy” which is “still a stumbling-block for philosophers who, up to the present day, are still thinking in Greek categories.”<sup>[38]</sup> In opposition to the ancient concept of creation in which the material cosmos was necessary and cyclically eternal, Florovsky makes every effort to emphasize the infinite distance between the Creator and creation. In particular he states:

The world exists. But it began to exist. And that means the world could have not existed. There is no necessity whatsoever for the existence of the world. Creaturely existence is not self-sufficient and is not independent. In the created world itself there is no foundation, no basis for genesis and being.... By its very existence creation points beyond its own limits. The cause and foundation of the world is outside the world. The world’s being is possible only through the supra-mundane will of the merciful and almighty God, “*Who calls the things that be not, to be*” (Rom. 4:17). But, unexpectedly it is precisely in its creaturehood and createdness that the stability and substantiality of the world is rooted. Because the origin from out of nothing determines the otherness, the “non-consubstantiality” of the world and of God. It is insufficient and inexact to say that things are created and placed *outside of God*. The “*outside*” itself is posited only in creation, and creation “from out of nothing” is precisely such a positing of the “*outside*,” the positing of an “*other*” side by side with God.

<sup>[36]</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, The Collected Works, vol. 1 (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 107.

<sup>[37]</sup> Georges Florovsky, “Creation and Creaturehood,” Chapter III of *The Collected Works of*

*Georges Florovsky, Creation and Redemption*, vol. 3 (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976); “The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy,”

*Eastern Churches Quarterly*, vol. 8 (1949).

<sup>[38]</sup> Tanev, “ENERGEIA vs SOFIA,” 55.



Florovsky's use of such phrases as "otherness," "out of nothing," "outside of God," and "non-consubstantiality" in his description of the world's relation to God shows that his primary concern was to safeguard Christian theology from the categories of necessity in God as opposed to the position of Bulgakov's determinism. To this end, Florovsky refers to the distinction between two patristic ways of describing God's relation: in himself and out of himself. Speaking of the first type of divine relations, he explains it with the help of the words "nature" and "essence" which are proper only for the descriptions of the Trinitarian life of God *in himself*. Explaining the second type of relations, Florovsky employs the terminology of "will" and "volition" and applies it to the depiction of God's relation *out of himself* to the world. In this understanding "all is distant from God, and is remote from Him not by place but by nature."<sup>[39]</sup> Therefore, "creating is an act of will, and therefore is sharply distinguished from the Divine generation, which is an act of nature."<sup>[40]</sup> Referring to Origen (but clearly implying the issue of Bulgakov's determinism), he argues that for him creation was necessarily inherent in God's being: "God creates out of necessity, for the sake of the completeness of His Being, then the world must exist; then it is not possible that the world might not have existed."<sup>[41]</sup> In opposition the view of the necessity of creation, Florovsky suggests a double contingency: "on the side of the Cosmos—which could 'not have existed at all,' and on the side of the Creator—who could 'not have created' anything at all."<sup>[42]</sup>

In the context of Florovsky's desire to emphasize the utter difference between Creator and the world in order to avoid the problems of monism and determinism one may wonder in what way, according to him, creatures are able to know God and experience salvation. To answer this question, Florovsky develops an important theological postulate on God's operations, or his work *ad extra* (towards the world). Explaining this idea, he refers to John Damascene and states what he thinks is "the basic and constant assumption of all Eastern theology: God's essence is unattainable; only the powers and operations of God are accessible to knowledge."<sup>[43]</sup> He clarifies that in the early Church the idea of the unknowability of God was assigned primarily to the person of the Father as the unrevealed being. The theology of the ante-Nicene fathers provided the model of God's revelation in which the Logos issues forth as the spoken word and creative power. However, the ante-Nicene tendency to subordinate the Logos to the Father was still to be corrected by later theologians who were finally able to "obtain the adequate formulation of God's relation to the world" in the fourth century by affirming that "the whole entire and undivided 'operation' of the consubstantial Trinity is revealed in God's acts and deeds."<sup>[44]</sup>

Finally, it was the fourteenth century Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas who helped to articulate the patristic doctrine of God and His manifestation to the world more clearly by drawing a distinction between the essence and energies in God. These two key terms represent two modes or levels of God's existence. In the energies God goes forth from himself towards the world, while in his essence he remains ineffable.

<sup>[39]</sup> Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," 47.

<sup>[40]</sup> Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," 50.

<sup>[41]</sup> Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," 55.

<sup>[42]</sup> Florovsky, "The Idea of Creation," sec. II.

<sup>[43]</sup> Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," 64.

<sup>[44]</sup> Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," 65.

The former defines the divine presence in the world, while the latter emphasizes the fact that God is entirely beyond it. For Florovsky the Palamite distinction between the inaccessible essence and communicable energies also becomes the basis for explaining the idea of salvation as participation in God or *theosis*. Explaining the meaning of patristic teaching on the deification of man with the help of the Palamite distinction, he states: “The creatures have access to and communicate with the Divine Energies only. But with this participation they enter into a genuine and perfect communion and union with God; they receive “deification.”<sup>[45]</sup> For Florovsky it is only through deification that men are able to experience the fundamental renewal of their created identity as they become linked to God. He states: “His [man’s] goal is exactly to surpass himself and to rise towards God, and even more than that – to partake in the Divine Life. It is only by this participation that man becomes fully himself, as it were, creates himself.”<sup>[46]</sup>

### Conclusion: Stimulating Further Reflections

No quick analysis would do justice to the grand thought of Bulgakov and Florovsky who wrote many volumes of fundamental scholarship in a number of European languages. To return to the distinction I made earlier between the substantive and formalist approaches to appropriating Christian classical thought for modern times, we could make a fair conclusion that Bulgakov and Florovsky fit into this distinction as representatives of two quite diverse theological models. In the final analysis, Bulgakov’s works are a reformulation of Soloviev’s task to create a theologically relevant response to the questions of his time. He is more concerned to reinterpret Christian classical sources in light of his sophiological agenda than to draw from the sources themselves. Florovsky’s works, on the other hand, are to a large degree a reintroduction of patristic legacy. He is more concerned to reiterate the fathers as a way of correcting Russian religious philosophy than to interact with this philosophy as such.

As the successor of Soloviev’s thought, Bulgakov finds himself in the stream of religious thinkers who sought to overcome the ontological distance between Creator and creation by bringing the two into ontological union. It would take a separate study to analyze how effective he is in avoiding the impression that creation is neither free nor heterogeneous from God. There are places where Bulgakov runs the risk of affirming these points quite explicitly, but there are also places where he shows a more nuanced approach by using the language of paradox: the world is simultaneously divine and other than God, it is rooted in Sophia and at the same time not identical to it.<sup>[47]</sup> Be that as it may, what I see rarely noted in this regard is that Bulgakov’s notion of Sophia may potentially obscure the personal nature of the God-man relationship. To say it more specifically, if the individual manifestations of the Trinity are reduced to Sophia as a divine generic entity, then it is not clear in what way our encounter with God is truly personal. Moreover, since God’s action is mediated through Sophia

<sup>[45]</sup> Florovsky, “Creation and Creaturehood,” 68–69.

<sup>[46]</sup> Florovsky, “The Idea of Creation,” sec. XII.

<sup>[47]</sup> e.g. Bulgakov, *Filosofii khoziastva* (Moscow: Put’, 1912; repr. Westmead, Eng.: Gregg, 1971;

Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 196–7; Bulgakov, *Svet nevecherniy. Sozertsaniya i umozreniya* (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 269, 285–286.

as a fourth entity, it is hard to know what kind of God we are actually dealing with. It is not surprising that Bulgakov's book on Sophia is sometimes charged as being largely Christ-less; the place of the second person of the Trinity is occupied with a rather abstract concept of Sophia.

In much the same way as Bulgakov, Florovsky seeks to establish the proper relation between God and the world. He considers himself primarily as the expositor of the fathers. His refutation of Bulgakov's Sophiology leads him to stress the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and establish the relation between God and the world by using the patristic distinction between that which is by nature and that which is by will as well as the Palamite distinction between essence and energies in God. He uses these distinctions to combat Bulgakov's determinism and relate God and creation in such a way that would make sense of human freedom and the need for salvation. However, as with Bulgakov's notion of Sophia, Florovsky's emphasis on the divine energies as the manifestation of God's relation to the world tends to minimize the significance of personal relationship with God who remains hidden in His inaccessible essence. This is not to say that Florovsky fails to stress a more personal aspect of his theology in other ways. In fact, he is often said to be one of the most Christocentric theologians among the twentieth century Russian emigres. And generally he does a good job tying his language to the second person of the Trinity as well as emphasizing the personal dimension of salvation and deification. Surprisingly, however, he does not do this in his two specific works on creation which I have considered in this article. As a result, the impression it creates is that the primary link between God and man is not the persons of the Trinity, but the energies, which though being en-hypostasized (the term Florovsky uses to explain how God abides in His energies), seem to be personal only in the secondary sense.

It would require much more space and analysis to state these points more explicitly. By posing them in a rather cursory way here, I would like to encourage the evangelical audience to reflect further on several questions. First, what do we consider to be the link between God and the world? Or, to put the same question in a different guise, what is the relation between religion and culture, transcendent and immanent orders of reality? Today Bulgakov and Florovsky can remind us that such questions require a responsible philosophical and theological reflection in the context of our own challenges. We may not agree with Bulgakov's notion of Sophia or Florovsky's concept of energies, but we can draw from the insights of these thinkers and formulate a distinctly personal way for God-creation/man/culture/ relationship by focusing on the persons of the Trinity and God's mission through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the personal as well as the global scope. Second, how do we appropriate the sources at our disposal in order to articulate our reflections? Bulgakov and Florovsky had different approaches to this question even though both of them considered themselves to be spokesmen of the same tradition. In this context, it would be important to ask how we can make a good use of historical theology (such as patristic, medieval and contemporary writings) and philosophy. How can we appropriate the extra-biblical sources in such a way that our message would be relevant today? Hopefully, this article will provide some substance to stimulate such questions and our further reflection on them.

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