



Marcus Plested, *Wisdom in Christian Tradition: The Patristic Roots of Modern Russian Sophiology*

(Oxford: OUP, 2022), pp. xiv + 274. £75.00/\$100.00.[†]

Demetrios Bathrellos

Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, UK (frdemba@gmail.com)

Marcus Plested has written a book of immense erudition. As there has been no comprehensive account – at least from an Orthodox point of view – of the concept of wisdom in the Christian tradition, this book fills a yawning gap. The subtitle of the book is a little misleading, as it seems to assume that modern Russian sophiology has patristic roots. The author, however, explains in the introduction that the subtitle is no more than a guiding question.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 presents modern Russian sophiology (as developed by Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky and, above all, Sergius Bulgakov) and its defenders and detractors. The author avers that the ‘Orthodox tradition – whether mystical, ecclesiastical, iconographic, or patristic – is not its [sophiology’s] *immediate* source and origin’ (p. 15). Plested mentions Philo, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, esotericism, Jakob Boehme, medieval and modern western mysticism, German Idealism, and the Kabbalah as ‘the principal matrices of Russian Sophiology’ (p. 21). This is an extremely helpful chapter, not only because it uncovers the origins of Russian sophiology but also because it helps the reader to make better sense of what Bulgakov meant by the elusive and confusing concept of Sophia.

The bulk of the book, covering chapters 2–6, is devoted to the exploration of the biblical, classical, patristic and medieval treatments of wisdom. This exploration is greatly facilitated by Plested’s triple distinction between what he designates, respectively, as ‘S1’, which stands for wisdom as largely practical *paideia*; ‘S2’, which refers to wisdom as a divine gift; and ‘S3’, which is ‘wisdom as a manifestation, attribute, quality, or appellation of God’ (p. 3). In chapter 2 the author explores the Old Testament, the classical tradition, and the New Testament. In chapter 3, he moves on to the Apostolic Fathers, the Apologists, Irenaeus and other authors of this era, and concludes that ‘modern Russian Sophiology has almost completely overlooked this period’ (p. 118). Chapter 4 focuses on ‘the golden age of patristic Sophiology’, which includes Philo – from whom Russian sophiology took over a ‘non-Trinitarian and somehow feminine construal of wisdom’ (p. 120) – Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians and Augustine. The two remaining chapters discuss developments in the East and the West up to Gregory Palamas and Thomas Aquinas, respectively. An additional section on hymnography would be desirable.

Three significant conclusions can be drawn from Plested’s exploration: first, although the church fathers occasionally dealt with different aspects of wisdom, they did not furnish a sophiological theory comparable to that of Solovyov, Florensky and Bulgakov. The first to have produced such a theory was probably Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century. Second, modern Russian sophiology ignores a substantial

[†]The online version of this article has been updated since original publication. A notice detailing the change has been published at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000625>.

part of the patristic legacy, especially with reference to Plested's S1 and S2 categories. Third, if Plested is correct, the doctrine of divine simplicity, as understood by Augustine and received by western theology, precluded any significant development of S3 in the West. By contrast, the Cappadocians, Dionysius, Maximus and Gregory Palamas in the East, by distinguishing between God's essence on the one hand and the 'glories', 'processions', *'logoi'* or 'energies' of God on the other, allowed for the emergence of a sophiological theory, which was eventually formulated by the Russian sophiologists.

This brings us to our final questions. Is modern Russian sophiology a healthy or a cancerous development of the eastern patristic tradition? And what is the way forward? Plested deals with these questions throughout the book and especially in chapter 7. He claims that modern Russian sophiology is associated with errors of both omission and commission. It says very little about S1 and S2, and most of what it says about S3 is not grounded in the patristic tradition. Plested, however, wishes to be fair and balanced, and to contribute to a 'qualified rehabilitation of Bulgakov' (p. 11). So, he tempers his criticisms of Russian sophiology with statements such as the following: 'Modern Russian Sophiology [...] is arguably [...] the most creative, constructive, and compelling theological movement, bar none, to have arisen since the Enlightenment' (pp. 3–4), and it 'has an enormous amount to offer Orthodox theology, and the world at large' (p. 11). However, much as Plested's open-mindedness is to be praised, I am afraid that these statements cannot be sustained by the content of the book. Plested comes close to claiming that the best way forward might be by dispensing with the rather too many 'fatal doctrinal ambiguit[ies]' of Bulgakov's sophiology (p. 242) and even with the modern Russian concept of Sophia itself. This may well be the best way to promote a sophiology of the Sophia of the church – instead of what Georges Florovsky has called a 'heretical and uncanonical' Sophia (p. 68), which appeared in Solovyov and received its fullest treatment in Bulgakov.

Plested finishes his book by suggesting a constructive reconfiguration of what a reoriented sophiology might look like. Although his proposal is largely based on sound patristic and doctrinal foundations, some of its components are questionable. First, Plested refers to divine humanity. Although I am not entirely sure what exactly *he* means by this, it is a problematic concept of Russian sophiology, which smacks of pantheism. Second, Plested proposes further use of feminine expressions about God and refers to 'the feminine dimension of wisdom' (p. 243). This brings to mind Solovyov's visions of 'eternal womanhood', identified by Solovyov with 'Sophia' – which must be seen with great suspicion, to say the least. Third, Plested suggests that 'the Mother of God is also to be identified with the Church as the body of wisdom incarnate' (p. 242). The wisdom incarnate, however, is Christ, and the church is his – not his mother's – body.

In all, I think that this is an immensely learned book of impeccable scholarship. It reliably informs us about the patristic teaching on wisdom and helps us to make better sense of modern Russian sophiology's intricacies. Last but not least, and perhaps contrary to the author's intentions, it enables us to say with more confidence than before that what Christian theology needs is not the sophiology of Bulgakov but the sophiology of the church.

doi:10.1017/S0036930623000558