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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between God and the world: a critical appraisal of the sophiology of Sergius Bulgakov

Richard May*

Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK
*Corresponding author. Email: rlm21can@gmail.com

Abstract

The sophiology of Sergius Bulgakov has exerted a significant amount of influence over Anglophone theology over the last decade. Theological figures as significant as Rowan Williams, John Milbank and Paul Fiddes, to name but a few, have positively engaged with and utilised Bulgakov's sophiology within their own theological contributions. Thus, for many, Bulgakov's sophiology has proven to be a fecund source of theological inspiration, especially when articulating the relationship between God and the world. However, historically, Bulgakov's sophiology has been criticised by many Orthodox theologians, who argue that Bulgakov's proposals are theologically flawed and challenge traditional orthodox readings of Christian doctrine. Despite the controversy surrounding Bulgakov's use of Sophia, very few comprehensive, critical studies of Bulgakov's sophiology, spanning its historical development, exist. This article seeks to fill this void at a time when Bulgakov's sophiology is enthusiastically adopted by many without an accompanying critical lens.

Keywords: Bulgakov; cosmic christology; Russian theology; sophiology; wisdom

The theologically controversial and multifarious sophiology of Sergius Bulgakov has attracted a significant amount of attention and generated a vast array of different discussions within Anglophone theology over the last decade.[1] Figures as theologically significant as Donald MacKinnon (1913–94) and Rowan Williams have positively encouraged scholarly investigations into Bulgakov's theology with a significant amount of success.[2] Additionally, John Milbank, for whom Bulgakov's sophiology has had a

[1]This project has been greatly aided by the fantastic translations of Bulgakov's dogmatic works, commenced at the beginning of this century by Boris Jakim.

[2]See Donald Mackinnon, *Explorations in Theology* (London, SCM, 1979), p. 26; and Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 63–79; Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology/Une marge de silence: L'Esprit Saint dans la theologie orthodoxe russe* (Québec: Editions du Lys Vert, 2008); cf. Williams (ed.), *Sergei Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999). See also Andrew Louth, 'Sergei Bulgakov and the Task of Theology', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74/3 (2009), pp. 243–57; David Bentley Hart, *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), p. 123; Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001); see also Randall Poole's, Paul Valliere's, and Steven Cassedy's

profound influence, lucidly expands the work of Bulgakov, incorporating the latter's positions within his own theology and philosophy and the larger task of Radical Orthodoxy more generally, highlighting the importance of sophiology as a theological theme both for his own work and for the wider theological community.[3] He states, for instance, that sophiology must be considered a 'new theological horizon' and even claims that it is '*the most significant theology of the two preceding centuries*'.[4] Although Milbank may be considered one of the most notable theologians to advocate Bulgakov's sophiology, as David Dunn has noted, he is not its only advocate.[5] Adrian Pabst has recently outlined the significance of sophiology for other Radical Orthodox theologians.[6] Also, William Desmond, the renowned Hegel scholar and philosopher, has drawn comparisons between his 'metaxological philosophy' and sophiology.[7] Willis Jenkins has sought to utilise sophiology in an ecological/green theology that emphasises God's relationship to nature.[8] Paul M. Collins has been influenced by sophiology in his understanding of deification.[9] And Angel F. Mendez Montoya has even adopted sophiology in her understanding of the presence of God in the act of eating.[10] Moreover, Michael Martin has developed a sophiology based on the insights of Bulgakov and Milbank in order to propose an imaginative synthesis between science and theology that upholds a unity between the rational and the mystical.[11] Bulgakov's sophiology has also made a noticeable impact on Protestant evangelical theology. In a truly monumental work engaging the theme of Wisdom, Paul Fiddes engages with the biblical Wisdom texts and modern theologies constructed out of them (including Bulgakov's), and attempts to put them into conversation with contemporary philosophical, cultural and scientific discourses to the end of constructing a theology that offers a fresh perspective on the modern experience of the self and the world.[12] Thus, even a cursory glance at relatively recent Anglophone theological

essays in G. M. Hamburg and Randall Poole (eds), *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defence of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

[3]John Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon', in Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (eds), *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*: *Transfiguring the World through the Word* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2009), pp. 45–85.

[4]Ibid., p. 45.

[5]David Dunn, 'Radical Sophiology: Father Sergej Bulgakov and John Milbank on Augustine', *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 64/3–4 (Nov. 2012), p. 228.

[6]Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), p. 390.

[7]See William Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought: Between Religion and Philosophy*, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 18.

[8]See Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*, (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 112.

[9]See Paul M. Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature: Deification and Communion* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2010), p. 79.

[10]See Angel F. Mendez Montoya, *The Theology of Food: The Eucharist and Eating* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), ch. 3.

[11]See Michael Martin, *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015).

[12]Paul Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). I owe a debt of gratitude to Oliver Davies for drawing my attention to this work and the significant role it could play within my argument.

literature demonstrates a rise in the significance and influence that Bulgakov's sophiology has had in the Anglophone theological world.[13]

Importantly, however, *all* of the works cited above, although authored from within a variety of different ecclesiastical traditions with diverse concerns, are closely tied in respect of their *positive* reception of Bulgakov's sophiology. In nearly all of these texts, there is an attempt to *apply* Bulgakov's wisdom theology in a fresh theological context with little if any critical discussion of Bulgakov's ideas. This enthusiasm in the contemporary Anglophone theological reception of Bulgakov has an acute significance, given the negative Orthodox assessment of Bulgakov's wisdom theology when it was first proposed. Bulgakov's sophiology was accused of heresy in 1935 in the synod of Karlsbad by Metropolitan (later Patriarch) Sergius of Moscow. The accusations prompted (albeit rather reluctantly given his fondness for the theologian) Bulgakov's bishop, Evlogii, to investigate the charges. The investigation was taken up by a group which included several of Bulgakov's closest students, including Vladimir Lossky (1903–58) and Georges Florovsky (1893–1979), both of whom felt that Bulgakov's theology was too deeply influenced by German philosophy and thus betrayed the 'Neo-patristic synthesis' which was driving their investigations at the time. They believed that they were combating pantheism when rejecting Bulgakov's sophiological speculation.[14] Their criticism led to the Russian Orthodox Church's rejection of Bulgakov's sophiology in the same year.[15] Andrew Louth summarises the attitude of Orthodox circles when, after describing sophiology, he comments that 'it is still the case that in … Orthodox circles, sophiology is largely rejected'.[16] Elizabeth Theokritoff further substantiates this claim:

> For many Orthodox theologians, the suspicion remains that Sophiological thought is in many ways closer to Gnosticism … than to Orthodox Christianity. It does not seem truly to take seriously the reality of a universe created out of nothing, a wholly new existence radically 'other' than God.[17]

These concerns have also been recently shared by Cyril O'Regan, Mikhail Sergeev and Regula Zwahlen, amongst others.[18]

[13]In addition to the works already cited, see Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Ware: Gracewing, 2005).

[14]See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), p. 112; see also Lossky, *Spor o Sofii: 'Dokladnaia Zapiska' prot. S. Bulgakova i smysl ukaza Moskovskoj Patriarkhii* (Paris: Brotherhood of St Photius, 1936); Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part 2* (Vaduz: Vaduz Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 251. Cf. Williams, *Sergei Bulgakov*, p. 173; and Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, p. 488.

[15]For a detailed account of these events see the collection of essays in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49/1–2 (2005).

[16]Louth, 'Sergei Bulgakov and the Task of Theology', p. 245.

[17]Elizabeth Theokritoff, 'Creator and Creation', in Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge, CUP, 2008), p. 68.

[18]Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), esp. p. 36; Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2006); Regula Zwahlen, *Das Revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes: Anthropologien der Menschenwürde bei Nikolas Berdjaev und Sergej Bulgakov* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010), esp. p. 275. See also Aron Dunlap, 'Counting Four: Assessing the Quaternity of C. G. Jung in the Light of Lacan and Sophiology', Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 2008, pp. 193–233.

However, despite Orthodox condemnations of Bulgakov's sophiology being commonplace, there is very little in the way of critical studies of his thought assessing these negative claims about his wisdom theology in contemporary Anglophone theology. This article proposes to offer such critical appraisal of Bulgakov's thought, acknowledging (and indeed further investigating) some of the Orthodox reservations about his sophiology, whilst also considering the attraction of his proposals for theologians working in contemporary systematic theology. I will follow a roughly chronological and systematic approach, utilising English translations of Bulgakov's major works where possible to ensure that readers can have easy access to his texts.

Sophiology in the Philosophy of Economy

Bulgakov first began to seriously engage with the biblical figure of Wisdom by way of Vladimir Solovyov's sophiology, which he presents in what is generally considered to be his first sophiological work, *The Philosophy of Economy* (1912).[19] In essence, the *Philosophy of Economy* is a critique of Neo-Kantianism and dogmatic Marxist materialism, two popular trends of thought in early twentieth-century Russia. Bulgakov attempts to offer an alternative to these philosophical positions by providing an 'ontological foundation for social economy' patterned on Schelling's philosophy of nature and Solovyov's conception of Sophia. For the purposes of this essay, we focus on Bulgakov's use of the figure of Sophia.

Bulgakov's initial motives for adopting the figure of Sophia are born out of his idealist critiques of Kantian thought and his commitment to Schelling's conception of the 'world-soul', which he synonymises with Solovyov's Sophia in an attempt to supplement Kant.[20] For, according to Bulgakov's interpretation, in order for human social economy to be possible, we must be able to posit a 'single true transcendental subject of economic activity', which must be humanity as a whole.[21] However, in the wake of Kant, how can such a noumenal entity be affirmed? According to Bulgakov, Kant's epistemological theory of human cognition suffers from some major defects that arguably undermine his entire philosophical enterprise. Offering a slightly modified version of Jacobi's critique of Kant, Bulgakov contends that the cognitive process that Kant's thought is built upon must belong to a human subject; however, this could hardly be a particular individual subject, as Kant would be unable to elevate this one empirical instance of human cognition to a universal theory; neither could he appeal to a 'transcendental ego' which, if known, would already undermine Kant's epistemology in so far as an 'in itself' would have been comprehended. These observations lead Bulgakov to the conclusion that Kant's 'subject', which is the foundation of his philosophy, is a 'methodological fiction', which, if used to found a theory of knowledge, would be akin to 'hammering a nail into thin air'.[22] Bulgakov attempts to remedy these lacunae in Kant by suggesting that in order for his thought to work, we must affirm a 'general transcendental subject'.[23] The significance

[19]But see also Bulgakov's 1910 essay, 'Priroda v filosofii VI. Solov'eva', *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* 105 (1910), pp. 661–96, where he engages with the notion of Sophia as a 'world soul' that is inherent within the 'historical process' of the world.

[20]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 93.

[21]Ibid., p. 126.

[22]Ibid., p. 128.

[23]'A general theory of knowledge is impossible unless we make the leap toward acknowledging the existence of a general transcendental subject.' Ibid.

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of this realisation is that Kant's epistemology requires an accompanying ontology, which his theory seems unable to provide. Thus, there seems to be a natural return to the metaphysics that Kant thought he had dispelled.[24] Philosophy requires an ideal humanity that is realised in individual human subjects, and Bulgakov believes that Schelling and Solovyov's monism is the only way forward: 'only one knows, but many engage in the process of cognition. This one, this transcendental subject of knowledge, is not the human individual but humanity as a whole.'[25] This monistic, ideal, pan-humanity is quickly identified with Schelling's 'world-soul' and Solovyov's Sophia, such that 'Man can attain knowledge in his capacity as the eye of the world soul insofar as he carries within himself the rays of the Pleroma of the divine Sophia.'[26] Furthermore, 'this original, metaphysical unity of humanity is a positive spiritual force acting in the world as a unifying principle'.[27]

Theologians such as Montoya have adopted Bulgakov's category of Sophia as developed in *Philosophy of Economy* to further elucidate their own theological proposals, finding Bulgakov's conception of divine Wisdom as a universal, perfect humanity a useful theological tool, which perhaps modernises and extrapolates themes implicit in patristic Logos christologies. Specifically, Montoya attempts to utilise Bulgakov's conception of Sophia as a universal, primordial 'humanity' to further elucidate the nature of divine mediation and salvation in the figure of Christ, who, Montoya argues, assumes this universal humanity within his incarnation and recovers the primal human unity that existed 'before' the fall. Montoya extends this notion to include divine mediation within the eucharist, where, she states, God becomes food and drink physically and quite literally, uniting individual humans into a shared 'divine-humanity' or 'Sophianic' humanity.[28] While this appropriation of Bulgakov's thought clearly offers a fecund spiritual reading of the theological significance of the role of food and its communal consumption, these early sophiological reflections are quickly superseded within Bulgakov's development, where more controversial and daring theological roles are assigned to the figure of Wisdom, which we shall now explore in Bulgakov's further adaptations of this narrative in his second major sophiological work, *Unfading Light* (1917).

Sophia as a personified antinomy

Unfading Light marks Bulgakov's first attempt to refine his early sapiential speculations, largely by consciously moving away from the sources that underpinned the *Philosophy of Economy* (namely, Schelling and Solovyov). Thus, we begin to encounter a very different emphasis in Bulgakov's theology, which is seemingly committed to apophaticism. For instance: 'faith presupposes mystery as its object and at the same time its source'.[29] This turn further inspires sharp critiques and dismissals of individuals, such as Hegel, Schelling and Solovyov, who were pivotal to Bulgakov's earlier thinking. However, despite these criticisms, his dependency on these thinkers remains strong throughout his entire theological career.

[24]Ibid.
[25]Ibid., pp. 130, 132, 139.
[26]Ibid., p. 131.
[27]Ibid., p. 140.
[28]Montoya, *Theology of Food*, pp. 102–3.
[29]Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012 [1917]), p. 31.

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Having distanced himself from his earlier endeavours, Bulgakov briefly outlines his 'new' theological methodology that inspired this shift in his thought, and which is fundamental to his sophiology from this point on. He claims that at the heart of the religious consciousness is the antinomy between God as transcendent mystery and God who is relative and immanent to creation: 'if we translate this fundamental and elementary fact of religious consciousness into the language of religious philosophy, we will see immediately that before us is a clearly contradictory combination of concepts, leading to antinomy'.[30] Bulgakov is quick to distinguish a theological antinomy from a simple logical contradiction (i.e. a mistake), as well as from a dialectical contradiction that is to be surpassed by synthesis.[31] In contrast to these two possibilities, he maintains that 'antinomy is completely different. It is generated by the recognized inadequacy of thinking to its subject or its tasks; it reveals the insufficiency of the powers of human reason which is compelled to stop at a certain point.'[32] He later expands on this definition claiming that

> An antinomy simultaneously admits the truth of two contradictory, logically incompatible, but ontologically equally necessary assertions. An antinomy testifies to the existence of a mystery beyond which the human reason cannot penetrate. This mystery, nevertheless, is actualized and realized in religious experience.[33]

There is much to unpack and clarify in these statements on Bulgakov's theological method, which appears to be informed by his close friend and mentor Pavel Florensky (1882–1937).[34]

First, at the heart of antinomical thinking is a primordial distinction within God himself: God as Absolute and God as Absolute-relative. This basic antinomy within God, which Bulgakov calls the 'self-bifurcation of the Absolute',[35] reflexively generates two others, which he conveniently outlines in a table in his 1931 text, *Icons and the Name of God*:

> *I. Theological Antinomy (God in Himself)*
>
> THESIS: God is the Absolute and, consequently the pure NOT, the Divine Nothing (Apophatic Theology).
> ANTITHESIS: God is the Absolute-in-itself self-relation, the Holy Trinity (Kataphatic theology).

[30]Ibid., p. 104.

[31]Ibid., p. 105; on this distinction see also Sergius Bulgakov, *Sophia*, p. 77.

[32]Bulgakov, *Unfading Light,* p. 105.

[33]Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), p. 77. This volume is a revised edn of Sergei Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God: A Brief Summary of Sophiology,* trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke and Xenia Braikevitc (New York: Paisley Press, 1937).

[34]E.g., 'philosophical antinomism' is an epistemological theory of Florensky's that he first outlined (albeit briefly) in the letter on 'contradiction' in his *magnum opus*, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1914]).

[35]Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, p. 184.

II. Cosmological Antinomy (God in Himself and in Creation)

THESIS: God in the Holy Trinity has all fullness and all bliss; he is self-existent, unchanging, eternal, and therefore absolute (God in Himself).
ANTITHESIS: God creates the world out of love for creation, with its temporal, relative, becoming being, and becomes for it God, correlates Himself with it (God in creation).

III. Sophiological Antinomy (Divine Wisdom in God and in the world)

THESIS: God, unisubstantial in the Holy Trinity, reveals Himself in His Wisdom, which is His Divine life and the Divine world in eternity, fullness and perfection (non-creaturely-Sophia – Divinity in God)
ANTITHESIS: God creates the world by His Wisdom, and this Wisdom, constituting the divine foundation of the world, abides in temporal spatial becoming, submerged in non-being (creaturely Sophia – Divinity outside of God, in the world).[36]

All three antinomies are aspects of the same fundamental antinomy of God as transcendent and God as immanent. The antinomical method is essentially a further attempt, following Schelling, to do theology after and independently of Hegel. Specifically, Bulgakov attempts, seemingly on the basis of his reading of Chalcedonian christology, to uphold difference within unity.

According to Bulgakov, God 'steps out of his transcendence and absoluteness into immanence'.[37] However, given that there is no ontological 'outside' of God for Bulgakov, creation must therefore relate to God within God, or be part of God's own self-relation.[38] The creation of the world therefore begins to look (as in Hegel) like a form of self-determination that Bulgakov characteristically describes in terms of kenosis:

> Alongside the Absolute which is super-essentially, being appears in which the Absolute discloses itself as creator, is revealed in it, is realized in it, and participates in being, and in this sense the world is God in process … in creating the world God thereby flings himself into creation.[39]

Hence, the antinomy is clear:

> God is an unchanging entity, wholly satisfied and wholly blessed, and the world process neither adds anything to him nor subtracts anything from him. But at the same time God is also creator of the world. He lives and acts in the world … consequently God himself becomes in the world and through the world, he is subject to the process, and one can thus say that God is not complete insofar as the world is not complete.[40]

[36]Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012 [1931]), pp. 35–6.
[37]Ibid.
[38]Ibid., p. 154.
[39]Bulgakov, *Unfading Light,* p. 196.
[40]Ibid.

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When faced with an antinomy, the task of theology, according to Bulgakov, is neither to reject nor to solve it, but to 'lay it bare'. This is precisely where the figure of Sophia comes in. No longer will she be used as she was in the *Philosophy of Economy*, but now as a personification of the antinomy between God as Absolute and Absolute-relative and God and the world – in essence, to mediate the antinomy by expressing its difference in unity.

According to Bulgakov, the self-bifurcation of God generates two related, yet distinct aspects within God himself:

> In setting alongside itself the extra-divine world, the divinity thereby places between itself and the world a certain border and this border, which according to the concept itself is found between God and the world, the creator and the creature, is itself neither the one nor the other but something completely particular, simultaneously uniting the one and the other.[41]

Thus, in the production of the world, a *metaxu* (or 'in-betweenness') is posited in relation to God and the world: a boundary where the world meets God and is united with him, yet is simultaneously distinguished from him; something akin to an ontological 'cross-over point'. Bulgakov hypostasises and personifies this *metaxu* as Sophia: 'occupying the place between God and the world, Sophia abides between being and super-being; she is neither the one nor the other, or appears as both at once'.[42] At this stage, most likely under the influence of Florensky, Sophia is given a hypostatic quality that comes close to 'quaternitizing' the Trinity, which Bulgakov is forced to qualify after the publication of *Unfading Light*.[43]

In essence, the divine life of the Trinity condescends to include within itself Sophia as the world-soul, ideal creation, ideal humanity or all-unity as a feminine 'receptive' principle existing within God himself. And while it is important to note that whilst Bulgakov's sophiological positions in *Unfading Light* are not his final, mature articulations on the topic (further developments are discussed below), they do nevertheless introduce the central problematic aspects of his sophiology that, as shall be argued, manifest in his mature trilogy.

We have noted the transition that affects Bulgakov's sophiology in *Unfading Light* and its distinction from his earlier conceptions of Sophia. Here Sophia becomes the hypostasized *metaxu* existing *between* God and the world, which is grounded in the theological methodology of *antinomism*. This shift in Bulgakov's approach to theology is remarkably difficult to identify, despite its centrality to Bulgakov's entire theological output.[44] *On the surface*, the antinomical method allows Bulgakov to simultaneously affirm God as transcendent Absolute *whilst* acknowledging God as relative to creation. With this – like knocking down the first domino in a long chain – he is then able to affirm all of the other antinomies that follow, but principally, God and the world,

[41]Ibid., p. 217.

[42]Ibid., p. 219.

[43]He does this in a short treatise from 1925, '*Ipostas*' *i Ipostasnost*': Scholia *k Svetu Nevechernemu*. Brandon Gallaher, 'Protopresbyter Sergii Bulgakov: Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49/1–2 (2005), pp. 5–46. Bulgakov did not help matters by adopting Florensky's controversial phrase 'fourth hypostasis' to characterise Sophia in *Unfading Light*, p. 217. For Florensky's notion of Sophia see *The Pillar*, pp. 231–84.

[44]Bulgakov never provides a detailed account and acknowledgement of his methodology: there are only scattered references and its constant presence in the background of his theology.

and the two distinguished Sophias: creaturely Sophia or (Sophia in potential) and the divine Sophia (Sophia as entelchy). Bulgakov is quite clear that this is inspired by his commitment to Chalcedonian christology, which confirms the unity and distinction of divinity within humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.[45] Bulgakov essentially develops Chalcedonian christology into a general metaphysical ontology that encompasses God and the world, which for him is necessary insofar as a 'foundation' is needed to conceive the possibility of such a union in Christ, as he makes clear in later writings.[46]

At first glance, the antinomical method in Bulgakov's writings appears to be a rejection of his earlier dependency on idealist dialectic in favour of something broadly resembling Kantianism. Theological truths have a tendency to produce what Bulgakov perceives as antinomies for theoretical reasons (e.g. God is both one and three, Jesus is both divine and human, and so forth). There is no attempt to overcome them or avoid them (as in Hegel, or even in Kant to some extent); they are rather to be embraced. These 'tensions' cease to be problematic within the worshipping life of the church, they are 'resolved' within church practice, just as Kant attempts to address his antinomies through the practical reason. In this reading, Bulgakov appears to be advocating an apophatic theology that embraces mystery, albeit via Kant. However – and rather unexpectedly, given his earlier perceptive critiques of Kantian philosophy in the *Philosophy of Economy* – Bulgakov appears to fall victim to the inherent tensions existing between ontology and epistemology within Kant's philosophy, which were outlined by Jacobi. Following Kant, Bulgakov appears to prioritise epistemology over ontology insofar as 'to be' is necessarily equated with 'to be known'; it therefore syllogistically follows that if being is not known, then there is simply no being. This problematic first arises in Bulgakov's antinomy between God as Absolute and God as Absolute-relative. Following this logic, strictly speaking, there can be no transcendent Absolute as distinct or more than the God who reveals himself to the world, principally because such an Absolute could not *be known* and thus it could not *be* in any sense of the word, it would 'be' a mere emptiness, an absence, *nothing*.[47] However, this is not the divine nothing of a Pseudo-Dionysius (namely, the God who is both beyond being and non-being), but the nothing rendered as such by Kantian epistemology. Thus, in order for God *to be*, God must be known; and in order for God to be known, there must be a comprehending other; this must therefore imply that God is only God insofar as he is bound to this knowing other. However, since there could be no point in which God was not God (otherwise he would not be God or the Absolute at all), this comprehending other must therefore be ontologically as necessary to God as he is to himself. Hence, this comprehending other seemingly must logically be either God relating to himself or God relating to the world; but both seem to amount to the same option given that, if creation were to perform this role, it would be co-eternal with God himself and ontologically indistinguishable from God and therefore not a 'creation' in any sense of that word. Bulgakov implies this on numerous occasions. 'In order that God *may be*,'

[45]For instance: 'The dogma of divine-humanity is precisely the main theme of sophiology, which in fact represents nothing but its full dogmatic elucidation' (Bulgakov, *Sophia*, p. 17).

[46]See Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, 'Protopresbyter Sergii Bulgakov: Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49/1–2 (2005), p. 17; see also p. 32.

[47]Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, pp. 107–9. See also Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 360.

he writes, 'the world *must exist*, and it likewise becomes the *condition* for the being of God.'[48] Similarly, 'one must include the world's creation in God's own life, co-posit the creation with God's life, correlate God's world-creating act with the act of His self-determination.'[49] Of course, Bulgakov means 'God' in the sense of the relative Absolute, but this is precisely the problem: there can be no God other than a God who reveals himself. Even if the terms of the antinomy imply a sense of (pseudo-)transcendence, there is simply 'no room' for such transcendence, unless Bulgakov is to draw an ontological distinction within God himself (something akin to some interpretations of Gregory Palamas' theology for instance); but this is an option that Bulgakov could not appeal to, given the strictures of his epistemology. Therefore, it seems that he must logically collapse the Absolute into the Absolute-relative: 'God, as the absolute relation in himself, is the Holy Trinity … Negative or nonrelative Absoluteness is just as unconditional and primordial in Divinity as the absolute relation.'[50] And similarly:

> The absolute relation in God, i.e., the Holy Trinity, does not arise in God as his secondary self-definition; it is just as primordial and absolute in God as its absoluteness. One can say that *Ur-Gottheit* and *Gott* are equally primordial and pre-eternal, that they are interpenetrating and *identical*.[51]

Furthermore, 'God is a relative concept that already includes a relation to the world.'[52] And 'the creation of the world exists for God in his eternity, and in this sense it is equi-eternal with God'.[53] Moreover, 'God's going outside himself into extra-divinity is precisely the creation as God's pre-eternal creative act'.[54]

Thus, in a rather ironic twist, Bulgakov appears to embody within his own theological methodology the move from Kant, whom he had used precisely to move away from idealist dialectic, directly back to the 'absolute idealists' (Schelling and Hegel) which he thought he had left behind. For since there can be no authentic transcendence within the antinomical method, the antinomies are transformed into dialectical contradictions. So now, if we return to the three central antinomies that Bulgakov outlined above, we will need to read them differently. First, God as Absolute and God as Absolute-relative must be reformulated to simply 'God as relative', for there can be no beyond this relative God. Secondly, God and the world turn out to be indistinguishable, insofar as both are ontologically bound together.[55] Third and finally, this implies that the creaturely Sophia and the divine Sophia are simply one and the same Sophia. Therefore, there are no real antinomies to be engaged with here, for in true idealist style,

[48]Bulgakov, *Unfading Light,* p. 110 (emphasis added). Bulgakov affirms this contention even more explicitly in his later work. See, for instance, Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p. 120.

[49]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 44.

[50]Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, p. 29.

[51]Ibid., p. 30.

[52]Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, p. 121.

[53]Ibid., p. 123.

[54]Ibid., p. 122. See also Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb,* p. 31.

[55]For instance: 'since there is nothing, and can be nothing, that could have a relation to God and be not-God, this relative being of the world, too, is a divine being' (Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, p. 30).

Bulgakov merely demonstrates that what appears to be dialectically opposed is in fact one and the same thing. We are therefore left with an Absolute becoming itself in an other that in the end is revealed to be no other at all. And, just as all of Bulgakov's antinomies are bound to the initial 'antinomy' between God as Absolute and God as Absolute-relative, its revelation to be one and the same thing threatens to reveal the same fate for all of the other antinomies, thus leading to pantheism, monophysitism and a collapse between the economic and immanent Trinity; even Bulgakov's kenotic thought would become less convincing, insofar as sacrifice and kenosis would be a veiled form of self-relating. In essence, the suggested antinomies in Bulgakov's thought can be read, borrowing the phrase from William Desmond, as 'counterfeit doubles'. Brandon Gallaher makes this point excellently when he states that 'the central difficulty in Bulgakov's system is not that it is antinomic … but that he is not antinomic enough insofar as his cosmological and Sophiological antinomies are false antinomies as the same … is simply stated twice but in a different form'.[56]

Is there a way out of this total monistic immanence? Can one rescue transcendence for the antinomical method? Perhaps, if one were to abandon its idealist heritage. However, in doing so one would only seem to generate further problems. An antinomy is, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from a logical contradiction; the only significant difference is that the church endorses it (as Florensky noted). At worst, then, the antinomical method is a form of ecclesiastical totalitarianism that simply cannot be questioned but only accepted on the basis of the authority that has legitimised its use. Or, alternatively, if antinomism is legitimate and truthful, and it is simply a more primordial form of reasoning revealed to humanity, then how could one legitimately make use of accepted methods of identifying truth? If the principle of non-contradiction could be wrong at its very foundation or even just in certain cases (namely, those which the church endorses), how could it be used effectively at any other point? However, perhaps the biggest flaw of the antinomical method is simply that it remains too close to oppositional and dialectical thinking. For orthodox Christian theology, God and the world are not ontological conundrums or problematic relationships. Put simply, God's transcendence is not purchased at the expense of his immanence; it is precisely because God is transcendent that one can equally affirm a unique form of divine immanence. And so it follows that, in affirming God, one does not detract from the world; in upholding God's omnipotence, one does not negate human freedom; and so forth. The antinomical method already presupposes ontological incompatibility between God and the world, because the ontological is not distinguished from epistemological. The result is a 'clashing of opposites'; but God can only collide with the world if he is too much like the world in the first place – another 'thing' alongside the world. Once God's transcendence is truly upheld then such tensions immediately dissolve, as does the sense of the antinomical method.

Renowned Orthodox theologian Paul Gavrilyuk has recently offered a charitable reading of Bulgakov's sophiological metaphysics of mediation as found in *Unfading Light*, arguing that Bulgakov avoids the pantheistic blending of God and the world and instead should be read as advocating a form of panentheism.[57] Gavrilyuk states:

[56]Brandon Gallaher, 'There is Freedom: The Dialectic of Freedom and Necessity in the Trinitarian Theologies of Sergii Bulgakov, Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar', Ph.D. diss., Regent's Park College, Oxford, 2011, p. 107.

[57]See Paul Gavrilyuk, 'Bulgakov's Account of Creation: Neglected Aspects, Critics and Contemporary Relevance', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17/4 (2015), pp. 450–63.

'Sophia is the ultimate middle term, the intermediary between God and creation, the boundary distinguishing and uniting God and the world. Sophia is that which makes the God-world relationship possible.'[58] Whilst Gavrilyuk's reading successfully challenges some of the more brusque and acerbic dismissals of Bulgakov's sophiological speculation found in some Orthodox circles, it does not appear to convincingly demonstrate that Bulgakov was a panentheist, largely for the reasons highlighted above. For although Bulgakov undoubtedly interpreted his own positions as a form of panenthism, it would seem that it can still be argued that Sophia irrevocably blends both God and the world, and in fact needs to do so in order to answer the largely German idealist problematic of relating the Absolute to the relative. The theological and philosophical first principle that motivates the need for an 'intermediary figure' to unite two 'opposing notions' already undermines the Christian doctrine of creation and the ontological relationship that it establishes between God and the world. Put simply, God cannot be opposed to the world in the manner that Bulgakov assumes, unless God and the world are inhabiting common ontological ground. In other words, in Bulgakov's scheme God is being subsumed under the same mode of being as other created beings. This point was excellently drawn out by one of Bulgakov's earliest critics: N. O. Lossky (father of Vladimir Lossky).[59] In a similar vein, whilst responding to Bulgakov's doctrine of creation, Georges Florovsky states: 'That which was not, comes into being and becomes; creation produces a *totally new,* non-divine *reality*. In the great, ineffable wonder of creation something "other" comes into being.' When God's transcendence is upheld, an ontological intermediary figure uniting two opposing beings is no longer needed, for here (as the great Anglican theologian Austin Farrer once put it) 'God does not have to escape from being divine' to relate to his creatures.[60] It is precisely because of God's transcendence that God can relate to us as not another ontologically competing entity. Herbert McCabe defends a similar position when arguing against the view that God and the world can be seen as two opposing notions.[61]

Despite the theological aporias suggested here, theologians have attempted to adopt Bulgakov's notion of antinomy, as he presents it within his sophiology, for a variety of different theological reasons. Perhaps the most notable is John Milbank, who adopts sophiology to express the central theme of *ontological participation* within his theological enterprise. Milbank openly concedes that his understanding of participation metaphysics generates philosophical aporias which result in paradox (e.g. how can God be ontologically ubiquitous if something other than God exists?). Milbank attempts to use sophiology to provide a theological foundation for the existence of this ontological paradox, which he names 'impossible mediation' and argues that it originates within the divine Trinity itself:

> One can take sophiology as the attempt to think through the place of mediation … where, it would seem, there cannot possibly *be* any mediation and yet, without it, everything threatens to fall apart … One could say that Sophia names a *metaxu* which does not lie between two poles but rather remains simultaneously at both poles at once.[62]

[58]Ibid., p. 456.

[59]See N. O. Lossky, 'On the Creation of the World', *O tvorenii mira Bogom' Put* 54 (1937), pp. 3–22.

[60]Austin Farrer, *A Science of God?* (London, SPCK, 2009 [1966]), p. 80.

[61]Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London, Continuum, 2005), p. 58.

[62]Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy', p. 50. This is almost identical to Bulgakov's own sophiological project.

Milbank provides a complex account of the theological richness that sophiology offers and the 'logical' sense of embracing the antinomical/paradoxical notion of ontological participation (as Milbank understands this) within his seminal essay 'Sophiology and Theurgy'. However, whilst Bulgakov's antinomical philosophy, inherent within his sophiology, has undoubtedly proven a fecund source of theological speculation from which to draw from for some, the extent to which Milbank successfully avoids the same theological, philosophical and political difficulties discussed above remains questionable.[63]

The development of Wisdom in the first 'trilogy' (1927–1929)

As already mentioned, Bulgakov received some criticisms for the manner in which he presented his sophiology in *Unfading Light* and subsequently went on to make further theological adjustments to his ideas, where he attempts to account for the reality of sin in the world and offers a highly creative sophiological soteriology. The exploration of Bulgakov's later work begins with his first trilogy (also known as the 'smaller trilogy'), which is comprised of books on mariology (*The Burning Bush*), John the Baptist (*The Friend of the Bridegroom)* and angels (*Jacob's Ladder)*. Bulgakov conceived it as a theological explication of the Deisis icon, and it demonstrates the authoritative significance of iconography and liturgy for Bulgakov's theology. The figure of Wisdom plays a prominent role within the smaller trilogy, the development of which shall now be discussed.

According to Bulgakov, 'the primordial human being was created pure and unblemished. Therefore, he was a personal bearer of Divine Wisdom, of Creaturely Sophia.'[64] Thus, analogously to Henri de Lubac, Bulgakov rejects any sharp distinction between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural' (indeed, for Bulgakov, these seem practically indistinguishable).[65] In fact, such a distinction is the result of the fall: 'that distinction in the human as a creaturely being that was disclosed only after the fall, namely, between that which belongs to the human as a creature, and that which is given to him only in virtue of an extraordinary gift of grace but which itself does not belong to him'.[66] The significance of this position is that 'creatureliness' in its current state is not the norm of its being, such that the duplicity of Sophia is itself a product of the fall that ought not to be. This observation is somewhat confirmed by Bulgakov's insistence that the fall is a pre-temporal event that takes place within ideal humanity or the creaturely Sophia itself (something akin to the Kabbalistic *Adam-Kadmon*): 'in him [pan-humanity/Adam] this entire race existed: the whole of humanity was present as a single, all-encompassing nature and essence'.[67] This ideal humanity was not an 'individual' hypostasis, but a pan-human hypostasis whose fall resulted in 'the falling away of humankind from God, and in it, of the whole world, the disruption of the internal

[63]For an account of Milbank's use of Bulgakov within his own sophiology, see: Richard May, 'The Wisdom of John Milbank: A Critical Appraisal of Milbank's Sophiology', *Scottish Journal of Theology,* 73/1 (Feb. 2020), pp. 55–71.

[64]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), 2009, p. 15.

[65]See Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998 [1965]).

[66]Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, p. 15.

[67]Ibid., p. 20.

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norm of humanity's being'.[68] However, as we have already noted, the ideal humanity is synonymous with Sophia in its creaturely guise, which is also ontologically bound to the divine Sophia. Hence any fall of ideal humanity must reflexively be a fall of God from God. And although Bulgakov consistently critiques Origen's cosmology and attempts to align himself with the tradition which espouses the theory of 'divine ideas',[69] it is difficult to comprehend how an idea could have the capacity to will and rebel before it has come into *its own* proper existence. Bulgakov attempts to equate his thought with that of Maximus the Confessor.[70] Theologians of the stature of Hans Urs von Balthasar have appeared to share Bulgakov's observation when he notes the close similarities between Gnosticism, Maximus' cosmology and 'Russian Sophia mysticism'.[71] However, at least in Maximus' most comprehensive outline of his critical reformulation of Origen's cosmology in *Ambigua* 7, the divine ideas do not function as an attempt to affirm some pre-existent anthropological, quasi hypostatic principle existing in God. Although, the divine ideas undoubtedly have anthropological and christological implications, they merely follow from a creation theology that makes certain claims about the world in light of a particular understanding of God. Therefore, if God is eternal, and creation does not mark a change in God, then the 'idea' of creation must be 'contained' within God as a certain exemplar for the world that will come to be for itself out of nothing. This appears to be how Aquinas utilises this principle. Although Bulgakov's approach is not entirely unrelated to the above thinkers, it is quite clear that for him the anthropological 'idea' existing eternally in God is more than an intellectual 'blueprint' for creation, but a hypostatic entity that is very much in being for itself and capable of willing and rebelling against God.

Therefore, if the metaphysical fall is a falling away of God from God, or the duplicating of Sophia, as it appears to be, Bulgakov will need to resolve this tension with a restoration narrative that negates Sophia's duplicity.[72] He anticipates such a response by suggesting that the world is a historical process teleologically driven by the 'fallen Sophia' to regain her lost identity with her heavenly counterpart (Bulgakov's version of Hegel's *List der Vernunft*).[73] This process generates various progressive stages in history that culminate in the figures of Mary and John the Baptist. The arrival of these two figures on the world stage marks the possibility of the divine descent, the incarnation and the 'reunion' of the duplicated Sophias. There is a simultaneous 'bottom-to-top' and 'top-to-bottom' movement that ends with their mutual reconciliation and identity. This is precisely why for Bulgakov the 'divine Incarnation is inseparably connected with the divine motherhood, the one implies the other'.[74] Hence 'the Mother of God is Sophianic in the utmost degree. She is the fullness of Sophia in creation and in this sense is creaturely Sophia.'[75]

[68]Ibid., p. 27.

[69]Ibid., p. 30; cf. p. 58 and Sergius Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 31, 42, 66, 67, 82, 87.

[70]Bulgakov, *Sophia*, p. 42.

[71]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 192, 382.

[72]It is important to note that this metaphysical fall is not something akin to the 'angelic fall'. It is clear in Bulgakov's angelology that it is Sophia or the ideal creation that falls; the angels and humanity simply make up two modes of existence for the one Sophia. See Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 28.

[73]'God's providence in the natural world is the Divine Sophia herself, acting in the natural world as a force of internal movement' (Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, p. 201).

[74]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, p. 107.

[75]Ibid., p. 105.

Bulgakov draws a similar conclusion about the significance of John the 'Forerunner': he 'came as a living representative of all human kind. In his person was accomplished the meeting of the God-man with humanity'.[76] Therefore, John naturally has the same significance for the incarnation as Mary does: 'if not for John, Christ the savior could not have come into the world … the place he occupies in relation to Christ is correlative to that of the Mother of God'.[77] Both figures thus represent the fallen Sophia in her highest potential, having grown into these individual representatives of the world that are ready to receive God:

> In them, humanity experiences self-restoration and self-salvation in the measure that such experience is given to and therefore required of humanity. The fallen human essence [Sophia] is raised to the highest level that is accessible to it … The Old Testament is accomplished, and therefore overcome.[78]

Therefore, it would appear that Bulgakov proposes a metaphysical fall narrative in his smaller trilogy in order to account for the existential disparity between the divine and creaturely Sophias, which he suggests is being overcome by a historical process of improvement, which culminates in fallen Sophia's receptiveness for the divine descent in the incarnation. Thus, in *Unfading* Light Bulgakov suggested that the figure of Sophia was a mediatory principle between God and creation – both divine and creaturely in its ideal state. In the smaller trilogy, however, Bulgakov attempts to account for the reality of sin and to 'explain' how this defect was introduced into the world. The explanation that he offers is a highly speculative metaphysical fall narrative that, although defended as in the spirit of Maximus' cosmic christology, is far more characteristic of Bulgakov's own speculative tendencies. The orthodox nature of this type of speculation is undoubtedly questionable (Balthasar himself draws similarities between it and Gnosticism); but perhaps the most significant issue is that Bulgakov simply seems to *know too much* about the dramatic interplay of the divine life 'prior' to the creation of the cosmos.

Sophia in the mature trilogy (1933–1945) and beyond

Bulgakov's 'mature trilogy' is his major contribution to systematic theology, where he develops and elaborates his earlier sophiology through works on christology (*The Lamb of God*), pneumatology (*The Comforter*), eschatology and ecclesiology (*The Bride of the Lamb*). In Bulgakov's dogmatic work on christology, he attempts to articulate his conception of the distinction between the divine Sophia and the creaturely Sophia. According to Bulgakov, *personal spirit* is univocally shared by *all* intellectual beings, divine or human, and must include 'a personal consciousness of self'.[79] Personal spirit must therefore be comprised of hypostasis/subject and nature/object: 'the personal thus has in itself its own nature, in which it lives ceaselessly realizing itself for itself through this nature, defining itself and revealing itself to itself'.[80] Furthermore, this intercommunicative dynamic is the 'indissoluble unity of the personal self-

[76]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 12–13.
[77]Ibid., p. 5.
[78]Ibid., p. 4.
[79]Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God,* p. 89.
[80]Ibid.

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consciousness'.[81] Bulgakov further elucidates his understanding of 'nature' by defining it as the 'world' or 'content' of the hypostasis, which is both given and determining in respect to the hypostasis, as well as simultaneously being shaped and defined by it.[82] Although Bulgakov maintains that the hypostasis/nature dynamic is essentially the same for all intellectual beings, there is one crucial distinction to be made: 'In relation to the hypostasis of God as the Absolute subject, there is the trihypostatic personality … Whereas a unihypostatic personality has all these modes except I outside itself.'[83]

Despite the unity of the hypostatic and the natural within God, where they constitute one divine existence, Bulgakov is keen to uphold the distinction between hypostasis and nature: 'the nature is eternally hypostasized in God as the adequate life of the hypostases, whereas the hypostases are eternally connected in their life with the nature, while remaining distinct from it'.[84] According to Bulgakov, the divine nature, although eternally related to the hypostases, exists also 'by itself' which is characterised as the divine Sophia: 'the Divine Sophia is nothing other than God's nature, His *ousia* … *ousia* and Sophia are identical.'[85] Although, as we have already noted, Bulgakov rejects the idea of the divine Sophia being a fourth hypostasis, he nevertheless insists that there is something 'hypostatic' about her. Her ability to be compatible with the hypostases implies that she has 'hypostaticity', hence: 'the nature must therefore be considered not only as something existent in God, as *ousia*-Sophia, but also as something independent, as Divinity or the Divine world in itself'.[86] And, even though she is not a hypostasis, he contends that Sophia still 'answers' the three hypostases and responds to them with a form of love (however passive this form may be); she is a 'living entity'.[87]

Having outlined what he considers to be unique to the divine Sophia, Bulgakov then goes on to define the relationship of the divine Sophia to creation. According to Bulgakov, the creation of humanity in the 'image of God' suggests an ontological correlation between God and humanity that 'builds a bridge of *ontological identification* between the Creator and creation'.[88] This 'bridge of ontological identification' implies a certain inseparability between theology and anthropology: 'this identity signifies not only the divinity of man but also a certain humanity of God'.[89] As we have already noted, this *metaxu*, or 'ontological cross-over point' between God and creation, is given positive expression in Bulgakov's sophiology: 'there is something in Man that must be *directly correlated* with God's being', and this is none other than Sophia herself.[90] Bulgakov's further attempts at clarifying these points do little but intensify reservations; for despite attempting to soften his suggestions by appealing to their analogical nature, he seems to immediately sublate this disclaimer by withdrawing his appeal to analogy:

> The definition of divine nature as pre-eternal Humanity or Divine-Humanity … is conceived as a reflection from the creaturely world, from creaturely humanity.

[81]Ibid.
[82]Ibid., p. 90.
[83]Ibid., p. 94.
[84]Ibid., p. 97.
[85]Ibid., p. 101.
[86]Ibid., p. 103.
[87]Ibid., p. 105.
[88]Ibid, p. 112 (emphasis added).
[89]Ibid.
[90]Ibid., p. 114.

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> In this sense this definition is only an analogy, but one that is understood *realistically*: that is, not only are all the distinctions of state preserved, but *the identity of being* is also preserved.[91]

This radical ontological and dialectical identification between God and the world seemingly forces Bulgakov to reject any proper notion of a *creatio ex nihilo* and affirm, what appears to be a *creatio ex Deo*:

> The All in the Divine world, in the Divine Sophia, and the All in the creaturely world, in the creaturely Sophia, *are one and identical in content* (although not in being). *One and the same Sophia is revealed in God and in creation*. Therefore, if the negative definition 'God created the world out of nothing' eliminates the idea of any non-divine or extra-divine principle of creation, its positive content can only be such that *God created the world out of Himself, out of his essence*.[92]

As we have already shown, Bulgakov's antinomical reasoning can fashion no 'space' for a transcendent God who exceeds his own relativity; however, he is still conscious to avoid lapsing into a crude pantheism.[93] He attempts to avoid this by upholding a modal distinction between the divine Sophia and the creaturely Sophia, such that although one is ontologically identical to the other, in their current modes of existence (actuality and potentiality) they are distinguished. Nonetheless, it seems incredibly difficult to accept that this proviso is able to avoid the obvious implication of pantheism. A modal distinction is simply not a radical enough distinction.

At the heart of Bulgakov's metaphysical and ontological speculations is his desire to account for the ontological possibility of the incarnation. He contends that 'by his initial essence Man must already be divine-human in this sense; he must bear hypostatic divine-humanity within himself and represent, in this capacity, an ontological "site" for the hypostasis of the Logos'.[94] Therefore, Bulgakov's basic anthropology includes an uncreated divine spirit that directly correlates to the divine essence, a created soul, a mind and a fleshly body. Thus, in the incarnation the hypostasis of the Logos merely replaces the would-be divine spark in the human being, thus doing no violence to his general anthropology, given that this aspect of humanity was *already* divine: 'the human spirit in Man, which originates from God, is in Christ the Pre-eternal Logos'.[95] With the descent of the Logos, humanity is 'deified here to such an extreme degree that it is capable of becoming an inseparable part of the divine life of the God-man and, in Him, an inseparable part of the life of the Holy Trinity'.[96] The reunion of the duplicated Sophias, inaugurated in the fall, is complete: 'In Christ, in His Divine-Humanity, the total Sophianization of creation, and, in this sense, the identification of the creaturely Sophia and the non-creaturely Sophia are attained.'[97] The incarnation therefore

[91]Ibid., p. 116 (emphasis added).
[92]Ibid., p. 126 (emphasis added).
[93]Bulgakov does later acknowledge that his system is akin to a certain 'pious' form of pantheism which he believes amounts to panentheism. See Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, p. 199.
[94]Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, p. 186.
[95]Ibid., p. 188.
[96]Ibid., p. 381.
[97]Ibid., p. 396.

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completes, and yet in another sense initiates, the process of reunion and gives birth to the church (the community of Spirit), which remains bound to Christ, both personally and ontologically, through his ascension and the inauguration of the sacramental life of the church, which is moving towards the complete realization of the kingdom of heaven 'where there will no longer be a boundary between God and the world that has fallen away from him and opposes him'.[98]

Concluding remarks

Despite Bulgakov's hugely imaginative and creative adaptation of the biblical Wisdom figure, which he employs, as we have seen, fundamentally as a form of mediation between God and the world in a variety of theological guises, it would seem fair to conclude that any theology that attempts to think and define the 'boundary between' God and creation is destined to lapse into some form of dialectical thinking, which questionably considers God and the world under the same umbrella of being, where they are able to clash antinomically or paradoxically. Whilst there are undoubtedly imaginative and original metaphysical contributions offered by Bulgakov, which have proven to be a fertile source of theological inspiration for many theologians, the fact appears to remain that many aspects of Bulgakov's sophiology are theologically problematic and questionable. It is hoped that the interpretation that this essay has offered of the development of sophiology in Bulgakov's theology will offer an alternative to the current trend in Anglophone theology to embrace Bulgakov with unbounded and uncritical passion.

[98]Ibid., p. 420.

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