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J. van Rossum, Dr. of Theology, Professor (Theological Institute in Paris, France)

## CHURCH OR SOPHIA?: THE TRAGEDY OF FATHER SERGIUS BULGAKOV

*У статті розглядаються особливості софіології о. Сергія Булгакова як філософської системи, яка суперечить апофатичному характеру богослов'я св. отців.*

*Ключові слова: богослов'я, пантеїзм, панентеїзм, Божественна Софія, тварна Софія, софіологія, філософія, філософська система, Церква.*

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*The article researches the features of Father Sergius Bulgakov's sophiology as a philosophical system, that is contrary to the apophatical character of patristic theology.*

*Keywords: theology, pantheism, panentheism, the Divine Sophia, the Created Sophia, sophiology, philosophy, philosophical system, the Church.*

In his book *Die Tragödie der Philosophie* Father Sergius Bulgakov writes: "The history of philosophy is a tragedy. It is the story of the inevitability of the falling down of Icaros, and his incessant new attempts to fly upwards...Flying upwards is in the nature of the philosopher, he feels compelled to fly upwards to the sky. But it is unavoidable that his wings will melt in the rays of the sun, and that he is smashed on the ground. Still, he has contemplated something when he was in the air, and he speaks about it in his philosophy. The true philosopher, like the true poet – which is, in fact, the same thing – , does not ly or deceive. He is always completely honest and sincere. Nevertheless it is his fate to fall down, for he has the desire to create a system..." [8, p. 14].

In this beautiful text, which reminds of the mythical language of Plato, Father Sergius prophesies, against his own will, the intellectual path he himself would go, in particular in his work as a theologian. For he, too, had the desire to transform a profound experience and intuition into a philosophical system. At another occasion I had already the chance to speak here in Kiev about the sophiology of Fr Bulgakov, and the theological problems which are involved in this philosophical and theological system [5]. Today I want to speak more about the experience and intuition which lies at the bottom of it, and how this intuition was to be dominated by the theological and philosophical system which he wanted to create, and to which he gave the name "sophiology".

In his *Autobiographical Notes* Fr Sergius describes the religious crisis he went through as a young man. He lost his faith during his first years as a student at the Seminary in Orël, and, as he says, "from the age of fourteen to about thirty the prodigal son withdrew into a far country..." [1, p. 34]. The teaching and the stifling atmosphere of the clerical world at the Seminary could not satisfy his spiritual and intellectual needs. The first sign of a spiritual awakening, and of the return to the religious faith of his childhood, happened when he was twenty-four years old. During a trip across the southern steppes of Russia he was impressed by the mysterious beauty of nature. "I sucked up the light and the air of the steppes. I listened to the revelation of nature". Until that moment nature had been for him something lifeless, and if he experienced its beauty, he regarded that as a "deceptive mask". But, he writes, "suddenly my soul was joyfully stirred", and he received a feeling that nature was the "vesture of the love and glory of a loving Father..." [1, p. 61]. What Fr Sergius describes here is very revealing, for his sophiology is exactly that: an

attempt to express the cosmic dimension of salvation. The created world, the cosmos, which was called "good" by its Creator, but has taken part in the fall of man, is not to be seen as "neutral", but is to be sanctified. Indeed, Fr Sergius describes this experience as his "first encounter with Sophia" [1, p. 63].

Three years later after this event, Fr Sergius had a similar spiritual experience, an experience of a beauty which was more than just an aesthetic emotion. When he was in Dresden at the Zwinger Museum, he saw Raphael's "Sistine Madonna". And he writes: "The eyes of the Heavenly Queen, the Mother who holds in her arms the Eternal Child, pierced my soul. In them there was an immense power of purity and the knowledge of suffering.... I cried joyful and yet bitter tears, and with them the ice melted from my soul...This was not an aesthetic emotion, but it was an encounter, a new knowledge, it was a miracle. ...I ran there every day to pray and weep in front of the Virgin, and few experiences in my life were more blessed than those unexpected tears" [1, p. 63, 104]. Here the dominant feature is that of a "Feminine Being", a "Feminine Presence", an experience of what Goethe has defined as the "Eternal Feminine", *das Ewig Weibliche*. These feelings would be fed by his reading and knowledge of such great authors and thinkers as Jacob Boehme, Vladimir Soloviev and Fjodr Dostoevsky (I think in particular at the passage in his novel *Demons, Besy*, where the earth is described as the "Great Mother", and, indeed, is identified with the Mother of God). Combined with his knowledge of philosophy, in particular the great philosophers of German Idealism, Schelling and Hegel, Bulgakov developed his "sophiology". It is evident that his philosophical mind needed a *system*, and that was his "tragedy".

I want to put forward the thesis that the experiences which Fr Sergius describes in his *Autobiographical Notes* were an experience, still unconscious, of the *Church*, that is, the *liturgical* dimension of the Church. Fr Sergius himself liked to say: "One should imbibe theology from the bottom of the Eucharistic chalice". In his book *The Orthodox Church* Fr Sergius writes: "One aspect of the Orthodox liturgy must be noted particularly – that is its cosmic quality. It is addressed not only to the human soul but to all creation, and it sanctifies the latter. This sanctification of the elements of nature and of different objects expresses the idea that the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit is extended by the Church over all nature. The destiny of nature is allied to that of man: corrupted because of man, she awaits with him her healing" [3, p. 292]. In my

opinion, this is exactly what the "sophiology" of Fr Boulgakov is all about.

Fr Sergius' experience when contemplating the Sistine Madonna can be understood as a rediscovery of the mystery of the Church. The attributes given to the Mother of God in patristic texts and in liturgical hymnology can also be applied to the Church, such as "Mother", "Bride of Christ", "Mystical Paradise". It seems, indeed, that at the moment of contemplation before this painting of Raphael, Fr Sergius was struck by the image of "Motherhood", and in particular that of the "Heavenly Mother". Mary is Mother of God, because she gave birth to the eternal Son of God, the second Person in the Holy Trinity. But her motherhood is also extended to the faithful of the Church, when she is exalted as the Mother who consoles her children: an icon of her bears the title the "Joy of the afflicted", and in the Akathist Hymn she is praised as the "deliverance from the tears of Eve". That is not to say that she is "above" the Church. One cannot say that Mary is the "Mother of the Church", as has been said by some Roman Catholic theologians, for in that case she would be separated from all the faithful and become equal to Christ. On the contrary, she is member of the Church, as we are, for Christ died also for her. Like all the Saints she reveals what the Church is: the deified mankind and the sanctified creation. But she is among all the Saints and all the faithful the one who is most close to Christ, being His Mother. Therefore we pray to her "save us", instead of "pray for us". Thus when Mary is praised as the "mystical paradise" in the Liturgy of St Basil, these words refer to her, but they can also be applied to the Church, that is, the Church in her mystical and liturgical dimension. The Church, indeed, reveals the restored paradise – that is, the sanctified cosmos- and the eternal joy of the Kingdom of God. The Church is, indeed, the "joy of all creation", and "the joy of all the afflicted". In the celebration of the Paschal Night the Church reveals her deepest nature, that is "endless joy".

These deep intuitions were later on to be dominated by Fr Sergius' philosophical system. Sophiology is to be seen as an attempt to express the cosmic dimension of salvation, and to give this expression form in a feminine image, that of "Sophia". If Fr Sergius had been satisfied with saying that the Church, in its liturgical dimension, is the revelation of the sanctified cosmos and the redeemed mankind, he would have stayed within the limits of what we can say about this experience. However, his tragedy was that he felt it necessary to create a metaphysical system concerning the world and its creation. In developing this system, Bulgakov could not avoid a pantheistic tendency. Because, for Fr Sergius the apophatic nature of patristic theology was not sufficient. It was for him a theology that needed to be completed. The essence or nature of God is for him not the Unknowable Mystery, as patristic Tradition has said, but it is "Sophia"; and its reflection in the created cosmos, the "Sophia of creation" – *tvarnaia Sophia* – is ontologically identical with the Divine Sophia, that is, the Essence or Nature of God [4, p.69]. Of course, Fr Sergius could not accept the notion of "pantheism", and therefore he used the term "panentheism" (*pan-en-teizm*), in order to justify his thesis that the world is both "created" and "uncreated" [2, p. 144; 4, p. 69]. The intuition of Fr Sergius was right: the creation is not an accident, but it is anchored in God. However, the problem is that he confused the "eternal plan" of God with the actual creation of the world, and draw the conclusion that, in fact, the world exists eternally.... Fr Georges Florovsky was right in drawing attention to the fact that the Church Fathers had corrected Origen on this point, and had emphasized that the created world, though already existing eternally in God's mind, as a plan or idea, is ontologically different from God [9, 10].

Sophiology is not simply limited to one particular chapter in Fr Sergius' writings, but it permeates his theological thinking as a whole. In other words, he became the victim of his own system, arriving at conclusions which go against the theological Tradition of the Church. This becomes especially clear when we look at his christology. The well-known christological formula of the Council of Chalcedon has defined the relation between the two natures of Christ in negative terms: the two natures of Christ are united together in the divine Hypostasis "without separation and division, and without confusion and change". The first two adjectives reject the consequences which are implied in the heresy of Nestorius, and the latter reject the heresy of Eutyches, that is, extreme Monophysitism. It is evident that the Fathers of the Council, in using these negative adjectives, wanted to stress the fact that the union of the two natures of Christ remains a mystery, and cannot be explained in a rational manner. The Chalcedonian formula is an example of apophatic theology. Fr Sergius, however, wonders why the Council was silent about the *positive* relation between the two natures. And he considers the definition of Chalcedon as being incomplete. Fr Sergius finds the answer to this problem in Sophiology, which has at its point of departure the ontological unity of the *divine Sophia* and the *tvarnaia Sophia*. Fr Bulgakov argues that the divine Sophia is identical with the Divine Nature, and, therefore, with the Divine Logos. As a result, the Divine Logos is, from all eternity, united with human nature, for there is no ontological difference between the Divine Sophia and the *tvarnaia Sophia*. Christ, or rather, the Logos, is the "Eternal God-man", *predvetchny Bogotche lovek*. Following Soloviev, Bulgakov defines Sophia as the "Eternal God-Manhood", *predvetchnoe Bogo-tche lovechestvo* [2, p.210]. We notice, that, according to this system, the incarnation of the Logos is no longer seen as a descending of God into the time and space of His creation, but is moved into eternity. But that means, in fact, that there is no longer a clear distinction between the eternal existence of God (what the Fathers called "theology") and the "economy" or His acts in the world. Fr Sergius was right in saying that the incarnation of the Logos was not something that happened accidentally. According to biblical and patristic teaching, there was an eternal "plan" in God of creation, and of salvation. But that is not the same as saying, as Bulgakov does, that the "Hypostasis of the Logos, the heavenly God-man, is human from all eternity" (*Ypostas Logosa, Nebesnago Bogotche loveka, izvetchno tche lovechna*) [2, p. 211]. This attempt to explain the relation between the two natures in a rational manner leads Bulgakov to the conclusion that the Divine Nature, in a mysterious way, took part in Christ's suffering on the Cross. Bulgakov, of course, understands the difficulty of this statement, for it is a theological axiom that suffering belongs to created nature only and not to the Divine Nature. Therefore, Fr Sergius writes that this suffering of the Divine Nature did not happen in the same manner as the suffering of the flesh of Christ, but it happened in a "spiritual manner" (*Bozhestvo Gospoda dukhovno sostrazhdet plotskoi strasti*) [2, p. 289]. Thus, in making this statement, Fr Sergius is forced to contradict all patristic tradition on this point, that is, the distinction which patristic theology has made between Hypostasis and Nature. It is true that the Church teaches that "God suffered in the flesh". However, that means that the subject of this human act of Christ is His Person or Hypostasis, which is, indeed, Divine. The Divine Logos became incarnate, and suffered on the Cross, but that does not mean that the Divine Nature suffered and died. The Divine Hypostasis of the Logos went through the utmost human experiences of suffering, and, indeed, death, that is, the experience of dying. For suffering and

dying is a personal act. The tragedy of Fr Sergius is, that he was thinking that his sophiology would shed a new light on patristic theology, but, instead, it leads to theological distortions. He clearly has not grasped the essential point of the Council of Chalcedon and its theological contribution to christology: the distinction between Hypostasis and Nature, which would be emphasized again in the following centuries, during the theological controversies on Monotheletism and Iconoclasm. And this distinction has to be seen as a mystery, for it goes beyond human and logical reasoning. It is a distinction without separation; it can be compared with the distinction, without separation, between the three Divine Persons of the Trinity, or, to give another example, with the distinction between the Divine Nature and the Divine Energies. In other words, it is a distinction which exclusively belongs to the mystery of God alone. We notice again that sophiology, as a philosophical system, does not fit in the apophatic character of patristic theology.

With this example I want to illustrate how Fr Sergius resembles the philosopher whom he talks about in his book *Die Tragödie der Philosophie*. In reading his works, one feels that he was moved by a divine force, and an inner fire. But when he came so close to the sun, he risked to get burned and to fall down. Fr Alexander Schmemmann formulated Bulgakov's sophiology indeed as a "fall", *padenie*. In a most beautiful article devoted to Fr Sergius Bulgakov, Fr Alexander wrote: "It is exactly on this point: his desire for a *system*, that I see a sort of *fall*. It seems to me that Fr Sergius has given in to a temptation" [7, p. 20]. In his *Journal*, *Dnevnik*, Fr Alexander is even more severe: "In the theology of Bulgakov there is no humility. Whatever subject he takes, he immediately has to modify it, reshape it and explain it in his own manner. He never 'melts together' with the Church (*slivaetcha s tserkov'iou*). He thinks that he has to explain to the Church what she is, what she needs..." [6, p. 527].

It is true that Orthodox theology should not be a mere repetition of what the Fathers have said. True Tradition is a living Tradition, and it is the task of a theologian to express in his own way the faith of the Church, especially when he has to deal with certain issues which have not been discussed yet by the Fathers of the Church. But he should

never tear himself away from the spirit and vision of patristic theology. And that is the problem of Bulgakov's sophiology, for instance when it does away with the apophatic character of patristic theology, as we have seen in the just given examples. It is the tragedy of Fr Bulgakov that he did not humbly stop before the unknowable mystery of God, but replaced the unknowable and inexpressible Divine Nature by his concept of "Sophia". I think that Fr Alexander is right in his judgment and that in this case humility is replaced by the pride (may Fr Sergius forgive me for using this word) of a philosopher who thinks that his system will be the end of all other systems...

Nevertheless, Fr Sergius Bulgakov had also this other side in him, which is described so impressively by Fr Schmemmann in the article I have quoted, that of the Churchman, the priest who stands in fear of God before the altar, and who realized that the Kingdom of God is about to come. In a personal talk to me, Fr Alexander once said that Fr Sergius' theology and sophiology is "nothing but the experience of the Kingdom of God". In the just quoted article Fr Alexander writes that it is not accidental that each of the books of his last trilogy ends with the words "Come, Lord Jesus", the prayer of the early Christians [1, p. 34]. It is no doubt that the experience of the presence and expectation of the Kingdom to come was given to Fr Sergius in the liturgical celebrations of the Church. And therefore, as Fr Alexander justly remarks, "the best pages of Fr Sergius are not those in which he tries to define his Sophia...-, but those which reflect the light and the joy of his liturgical experience and vision" [1, p. 34].

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Т. Гайдай, канд. екон. наук, доц. (КНУ імені Тараса Шевченка)

## ТЕОРЕТИКО-МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНА СПОРІДНЕНІСТЬ ЕКОНОМІЧНИХ ПОГЛЯДІВ С.М. БУЛГАКОВА З ІСТОРИКО-СОЦІАЛЬНИМ НАПРЯМОМ: ДОСЛІД ІСТОРИКО-ЕКОНОМІЧНОГО АНАЛІЗУ

У статті здійснено історико-економічний аналіз ознак методологічної спорідненості економічних поглядів С.М. Булгакова з економічною гетеродоксією кінця XIX – початку XX ст. – історико-соціальним напрямом в економічній думці Німеччини. Досліджено роль ученого у започаткуванні інтердисциплінарних напрямів економічних досліджень – соціально-етичної течії та інституційно-орієнтованої економічної думки початку XX ст.

Ключові слова: економічна гетеродоксія, історико-соціальний напрям, етико-правова течія, інституційно-орієнтована економічна теорія.

В статье осуществлен историко-экономический анализ признаков методологического родства экономических взглядов С.Н. Булгакова с экономической гетеродоксией конца XIX – начала XX вв. – историко-социальным направлением в экономической мысли Германии. Исследуется роль ученого в основании интердисциплинарных экономических исследований – социально-этического течения и институционально-ориентированной экономической мысли начала XX ст.

Ключевые слова: экономическая гетеродоксия, историко-социальное направление, этико-правовое течение, институционально-ориентированная экономическая теория.

The paper undertakes a historical and economic analysis of indications as to methodological affinity between S.N. Bulgakov's economic views and economic heterodoxy in late 19th and early 20th century, i.e. the Historical and Social Schools in German economic thought. Bulgakov is considered in light of his role in launching the interdisciplinary economic studies, i.e. socially-ethical streams and institutionally-oriented economic thought in early 20th century.

Key words: economic heterodoxy, historical and social schools, ethic and law stream, institutionally-oriented economic theory.

Значимість наукового спадку багатьох визнаних представників історії економічної науки зазвичай не виходить далеко за межі відповідної епохи чи певної національної наукової школи. У такому випадку ідеї

науковця належить переважно чи виключно тому історичному часу та науковому простору, на ґрунті яких вони сформувались і розвинулись. Проте їх науковий внесок формує невід'ємну ланку у спадкоємному "лан-