

Wisdom as Sophia: An Analysis of the Sophiologies of Three 19th-20th Century Russian  
Philosopher-Theologians—Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky, and  
Sergius Bulgakov—Implications for Adult Learning

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
In  
Human Development

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March 27, 2014  
Falls Church, VA

Keywords: Wisdom, Sophia, Sophiology, Russian religious philosophy, Vladimir Solovyov,  
Pavel Florensky, Sergius Bulgakov, Adult learning, Adult education

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the concept of “wisdom” from the perspective of “sophiology”—a current in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian religious philosophy—particularly as it was used in the writings of Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky, and Sergius Bulgakov. The purpose of the study was to examine how the sophiological perspective as developed in these authors could inform an understanding of “wisdom” in the field of adult learning.

The nature of “wisdom” has been one of the major themes in both Eastern and Western traditions of philosophical and theological thought for thousands of years. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the epistemological tendency to approach the world exclusively from the standpoint of observation and experiment reduced “wisdom” to nothing more than technical knowledge verified by experience.

The concept/construct of wisdom, however, has been experiencing resurgence in the social sciences, including the field of adult learning. My research did not, however, find an instance in which the sophiological perspective had informed the field’s understanding of wisdom. For this reason, the perspective of sophiology and its potential contribution to adult learning offered a unique research opportunity.

In this study, I sought to add another dimension to the already multi-faceted nature of wisdom in the field of adult learning. I also hoped to enhance the value of sophiological thought by demonstrating its application to a field with which it had not been previously associated.

I sought to accomplish these objectives using the method of hermeneutics, an interpretive mode of inquiry with both reproductive and productive aspects. The reproductive aspect established the historical and philosophical context of the three thinkers and discussed how their sophiological texts aided an understanding of their thought as a whole, and vice versa. The productive aspect explored applications of sophiological thought to the field of adult learning. Since I was the “research instrument” for the study, I also introduced the reader to aspects of my own background and experience that prepared me for this interpretive inquiry.

SAPIENTIAE

NVLLA LAETITIA  
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## Acknowledgments

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following:

Dell Services Federal Government, my employer of over 17 years, for its tuition assistance benefit;

Margie, my wife, and Maggie, Mark, and Monica, my children, for their unconditional love;

Rt. Rev. Constantine-Paul Michael Belisarius, my theology teacher at Regis High School in New York City, for introducing me to philosophy—the love of Sophia—in 1973, and for suggesting the topic of this dissertation almost three decades later;

Dr. Linda Morris, Dr. Paul Renard, and Dr. Frederic Harwood, my committee members, for their generous and invaluable assistance and support;

Dr. Marcie Boucouvalas, my advisor, my committee chair, my mentor, and my rock, for believing in me, recognizing my love for Sophia, and supporting my pursuit of Sophia in my research; and

Sophia, the guide of my life.

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## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

### Preface

This dissertation explores questions of a philosophical nature using the interpretive approach of hermeneutics. To accommodate this type of inquiry, I have followed the dissertation format used in historical research, rather than standard, five-chapter format to which readers in the field of social science might be accustomed.

This chapter contains the dissertation prospectus. In it, I provide the background of the study, introduce the research problem, discuss limitations of the inquiry, present an outline, describe the types of sources I use, explain my research approach, and provide an introduction to the research “instrument”—myself.

In the remainder of the dissertation, I set the context for interpretation, examine the thought of three philosopher-theologians in separate chapters, and explore ways their thought can inform the field of adult learning. (A detailed discussion of the outline appears below.)

### Introduction

The fragrance of roses wafted from earth and heaven.  
And in the purple of the heavenly glow  
With eyes full of azure fire  
You gazed like the first shining  
Of universal and creative day.  
What is, what was, and what ever will be were here  
Embraced within that one fixed gaze... The seas  
And rivers all turned blue beneath me, as did  
The distant forest and the snow-capped mountain heights.  
I saw it all, and all of it was one,  
One image there of beauty feminine...  
The immeasurable was confined within this image.  
Before me, in me, you alone were there. (Solovyov, 1898/1996b, p. 35)

In his poem, “Three Meetings,” Vladimir Solovyov<sup>1</sup> described his visions of a beautiful woman, the divine feminine, Wisdom incarnate—Sophia—and her role in his philosophy of total unity.

The nature of “wisdom” has been one of the major themes in both Eastern and Western traditions of philosophical and theological thought for thousands of years. The word “philosophy” is derived from the Greek *philosophia*, which comes from the words *philon* (“loving”) and *sophia* (“wisdom”). Philosophy, therefore, is a “love of wisdom,” and “sophiology” is the “study of wisdom” or the “study of Sophia.”

The word “sophiology” can be used in a broad sense, referring to the role of wisdom as a divine entity in any philosophical or theological system (e.g., one may speak of the sophiology of the Gnostic work, *Pistis Sophia*, from the second century CE). In this study, however, I use “sophiology” in its narrower sense, focusing on the role of Sophia in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian religious philosophy—particularly as it is used in the writings of Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky, and Sergius Bulgakov. The purpose of the study is to examine how the sophiological perspective as developed in these authors can inform an understanding of “wisdom” in the field of adult learning.

### **Background of the Study**

Although “wisdom” had been a topic of study among philosophers since its recorded beginnings, it became, for the most part, a philosophical casualty of the *phenomenal-noumenal* conflict of the nineteenth century. The very concept of “wisdom” seemed to presuppose a *noumenal* ontology and epistemology. This view assumed a reality of things that could be known as they were in and of themselves. Scientific inquiry, on the other hand, took a *phenomenal* view that approached the world from the standpoint of observation and experiment. This reduced “wisdom” to nothing more than technical knowledge verified by experience (Holliday & Chandler, 1986; D. N. Robinson, 1990).

The concept/construct of wisdom, however, has been experiencing resurgence in the social sciences. Scholars recognize that wisdom is not strictly the object of philosophical discourse. They are finding value in differing conceptions of wisdom and are using these as bases for understanding the way humans think about the way they think, act, and live.

Boucouvalas (1987a), for example, developed an “information-knowledge-wisdom” framework in the field of adult learning. It is a developmental framework that involves not just cognition, but the whole person. She used this framework to specify different moments and domains of development that occur during the lifelong process of learning. Based on ancient philosophical sources as well as modern science, her framework recognized the differences in

ways of knowing and the different values society attaches to each of the domains. Knowledge goes beyond information in that it offers an interpretation of data, and wisdom goes beyond information and knowledge in applying both to sound judgment. She offered the framework as an aid to understanding the progression and character of learning, and to challenge educators to use it in realizing the vision of creating a learning society.

The anthology of Sternberg (1990b) contained a selection of articles on wisdom by developmental psychologists. Their approaches were informed by what Sternberg termed “philosophical” (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 1990), “folk” (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 1990; Chandler & Holliday, 1990), and “psychodevelopmental” (e.g., Arlin, 1990) conceptions of wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Although she did not discuss the concept of wisdom at length, Sinnott (1998) identified wisdom with “postformal” thought, i.e., thought that goes beyond the “formal” stage of cognitive development (characterized by the use of symbols, concepts, and hypothetical reasoning). Its characteristics include more sophisticated interpersonal skills, concern for the group over and above the self, deepening spirituality, and the ability to deal with paradoxes.

In their text on adult learning, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) examined “wisdom” in the context of adult cognitive development. They noted that wisdom “is often seen as the pinnacle or hallmark of adult thinking” (p. 351). They cited theories of wisdom that identified it as higher awareness that recognizes multiple worldviews (Becvar, 2005), balance (Sternberg, 1998), and a combination of discerning, respecting, engaging, and transforming traits (Bassett, 2005).

As the field of adult learning continues its receptivity to differing views and uses of “wisdom,” I examine another perspective—that of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian sophiology. It is a unique tradition—at once philosophical, theological, Orthodox, and Russian—that developed in an environment in which people maintained their faith while religion was under constant attack both ideologically and politically. My research on this philosophical/theological aspect of wisdom sought to complement the cognitive/developmental approaches. It is my hope that this study will enable the field of adult learning and all who seek “wisdom” to see beyond current paradigms and to act in accordance with the reality of who they are as individuals and where they fit in the greater whole—a world in which we all develop on a journey of continuous growth and learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My examination of “wisdom” in the field of adult learning has shown a growing use of the concept in cognitive and developmental contexts. I have not, however, found an instance in which the sophiological perspective has informed the field’s understanding of wisdom. For this reason, the perspective of sophiology and its potential contribution to adult learning have offered a unique research opportunity.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of the study is to provide a detailed examination of the rich variety of meanings of “Sophia” in the three most significant authors of the Russian sophiological tradition—Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov—and to explore and propose ways their understanding can inform the field of adult learning. The following questions guide the study:

What did “Sophia” mean to each of the three sophiologists?

How did the various meanings fit into the sophiologists’ historical, cultural, philosophical, and theological worldviews?

How can these meanings fit into current worldviews that might have their bases in different historical, cultural, philosophical, and theological contexts?

How can sophiological perspectives on “wisdom” inform the field of adult learning?

The significance of the research is twofold. First, in approaching a cognitive/developmental concept from a philosophical/theological perspective, I hope to add another dimension to the already multi-faceted nature of wisdom in the field of adult learning. Secondly, I hope that the study will enhance the value of sophiological thought by demonstrating its application to a field with which it has not been previously associated.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

One limitation to the study was my lack of knowledge of the Russian language. This required that I limit my reading of primary sources to those works that had been translated into English. The same language limitation applied to research of the secondary literature. However, the authors’ works that are most significant to the study of sophiology appear in English translation.

In order to keep the scope of the study manageable, I have limited my research to the three major Russian sophiologists: Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov. This limitation did not

prevent me from examining authors whose works helped clarify the perspective of the three sophiologists.

### **Outline of the Study**

The study consists of six chapters:

1. Introduction
2. The context of sophiology
3. Sophia in the thought of Solovyov
4. Sophia in the thought of Florensky
5. Sophia in the thought of Bulgakov
6. Applications of sophiological thought to the field of adult learning

Chapter Two contains an examination of the context of sophiology. I provide an overview of the historical sources of the concept of Sophia and the contemporary philosophical environment in which the thought of the three authors developed.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five each contain examinations of the concept of Sophia in the relevant author, the meaning of Sophia in the context of each author's particular worldview, and an attempt to understand and interpret the author's meanings.

Chapter Six summarizes and consolidates the variety of themes I discovered in the thought of the three sophiologists and discusses ways these themes can contribute to a dialogue on the nature of wisdom in the field of adult learning.

### **Types of Sources**

I consulted a variety of sources for the study. These included literature on the theological and philosophical background of sophiology in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, Orthodox theology, and Greek philosophy; literature on sophiology in the context of Russian religious thought; and primary, secondary, and tertiary sources on each of the three sophiologists.

### **Research Approach**

The research approach I have used in my study is that of hermeneutics. The word "hermeneutics" is derived from the Greek word *hermēneia*, meaning, "to interpret." Boucouvalas (1987b) noted that the same root appears in *Hermēs*, the Greek god who acted as messenger and interpreter between humankind and the gods.

Boucouvalas indicated that hermeneutics was an example of a qualitative research approach, which was interpretive and inductive rather than explanatory and deductive: "The

interpretive approach seeks understanding and the creation of meaning via the intertwining of a dialectic between the researcher and the ‘researched’ to result in a skilled version of our understood meaning” (p. 85).

Boucouvalas identified two main streams in hermeneutic literature: hermeneutics as interpretive method (which reproduces meaning), and hermeneutics as a way of thinking and knowing (which produces meaning). Schwandt (2000) referred to these as *interpretivism* and *philosophical hermeneutics*, respectively.

According to Schwandt, interpretivism assumes that the researcher can leave behind his or her worldview and historical/cultural modes of perception and thinking in order to reproduce the meaning and intention of a text or action. In other words, one can “understand the subjective meaning . . . yet do so in an objectivist manner. The meaning that the interpreter reproduces or reconstructs is considered the original meaning of the action” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 193). “The interpreter objectifies . . . that which is to be interpreted. And, in that sense, the interpreter remains unaffected by and external to the interpretive process” (p. 194).

Philosophical hermeneutics, on the other hand, does not view meaning as some objective reality waiting to be discovered. Meaning is “negotiated” through a dialogical encounter with what is not understood . . . . Understanding is something that is *produced* in that dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis of that which he or she seeks to understand. The meaning one seeks in “making sense” of a social action or text is temporal and processive and always coming into being in the specific occasion of understanding. (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195)

Meaning, of course, is not created out of nothing. According to the concept of the “hermeneutic circle,” we approach a text or new phenomenon with a general, vague hypothesis about its nature, that is, we understand and misunderstand it simultaneously. “This initial hypothesis guides the search for and interpretation of details, which in turn revise the hypothesis, which leads to reinterpretation and further search, and so on” (Diesing, 1991, p. 109). There is both assimilation and accommodation in the hermeneutic circle (Packer & Addison, 1989). It is a subject-object dialogue, in which we initially assimilate the text into the preconceptions and mental model we bring to the inquiry. At the same time, careful reflection and the search for deeper understanding guide us to recognize the shortcomings of our preconceptions and change them as necessary to accommodate the text.

As a matter of practicality, I have combined objective and subjective approaches, recognizing the reproductive and productive nature of my inquiry. I established a starting point in the theological, philosophical, and historical context of each author and then dialogued with their texts in terms of their worldview and life situation. The process was reproductive to an extent, but it took place with an awareness that my own worldview and life situation (as parties to the dialogic dynamic) significantly influenced the outcome.

The specific activities involved included:

1. Background reading in the theological, philosophical, and historical context of the sophiologists
2. A reading of the sophiologists' texts and scholarly literature
3. The selection of relevant passages that mention or refer to some aspect of "Sophia" or sophiology
4. Attempts to understand individual texts in terms of the an entire literary work or the author's philosophy, and vice versa
5. An exploration of meanings in terms of context
6. Summarization and consolidation of meanings

In addition to reproducing the meaning of the sophiologists' texts, however, I have also striven to produce meaning—to create meaning—not only as a part of the interpretive process, but also through the application of the thought of the sophiologists to an area the text did not directly address, i.e., the field of adult learning. This process involved, not a focus on the author's intention, but an attempt to discover the "aboutness" of the text (Mallery, Hurwitz, & Duffy, 1986). Throughout the journey around the "hermeneutic circle," new levels of understanding have emerged and led to additional inquiry and dialogue between text and interpreter.

The method took place in separate steps to match the chapter outline: establishing context (Chapter Two) as a prerequisite for productive dialogue with the sophiologists' texts (Chapters Three, Four, and Five) in order to apply the resulting understanding to the field of adult learning (Chapter Six).

It is crucial to realize, however, that this apparently linear progression is an artificial construct that helps simplify and schematize the overall process of interpretation.

The kind of understanding that results from the encounter is always at once a kind of “application.” In other words, in the act of understanding there are not two separate steps—first, acquiring understanding; second, applying that understanding. Rather, understanding is itself a kind of practical experience in and of the world that, in part, constitutes the kinds of persons that we are in the world. Understanding is “lived” or existential. (Schwandt, 2000, pp. 195-196)

### **The “Research Instrument”**

The interpretive nature of the hermeneutic approach requires an interpretive instrument, and in the case of this dissertation, *I* was the research instrument. Using myself as instrument required *reflexivity*, “a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and responder, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183).

In order that the reader might have an idea of the instrument’s preparedness and suitability for research and analysis on sophiology, I offer a brief synopsis of my own background, experience, and worldview, since each of these things—as well as my own understanding of their significance—have affected my perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of the ideas I read. I recognize, of course, that even in presenting this synopsis, I am being selective in the information I include and subjective in the interpretations I formulate.

Many things may affect an individual’s worldview: the people with whom they interact, their education, their life experiences, and the age and society in which they live and develop. An individual, however, is not simply a product of external influences, but also of internal proclivities and individual decisions. I will attempt to include a bit of all of these factors in my summary.

I also acknowledge—and ask the reader to recognize—that my own development process continued as I conducted my research and interpreted what I read. My own development and that of my worldview continued, and was also significantly affected, during the process of writing this dissertation.

I am a 58-year-old married man with three grown children, and I work as a project manager for a Washington, DC-area consulting firm. I was born in a middle-class community of New York City’s borough of Queens, and my ancestry is Armenian and Sicilian. My parents’ religion was Roman Catholic, and I attended Catholic elementary and high schools in New York.

During high school, at the age of fifteen, I had an internal, individual experience that led me to ask questions about the meaning of my life and to seek the answers in the beliefs and practices of my religious faith. The experience led me to a deeper involvement in the Catholic faith and both a spiritual and academic interest in Catholic theology.

After I graduated high school, the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, which elucidated Catholic doctrine in terms of realist, Aristotelian philosophy, formed the foundation of my approach to both faith and reason. I pursued a double major in theology and philosophy at St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia. I later completed two graduate degrees in theology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. One of my degree requirements was to write and defend a dissertation in my chosen area of biblical studies (Giragosian, 1985). Using a historical-critical approach, I conducted an exegetical study of Jesus' sayings on "turning the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39-40) and "all who draw the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

I taught theology at a Catholic high school and worked as coordinator for a parish religious education program while pursuing doctoral studies at Catholic University. The resignation of my dissertation advisor, an increasingly difficult job market for lay Catholic theology teachers, and concerns about what I considered the narrowness of my own worldview led me to discontinue my studies. I took a job as the coordinator of the National Rifle Association's firearm training program. I was still involved in education, but this time the subject matter was practical and physical rather than theoretical or spiritual. My realist worldview became more and more empirical until I suspended my religious beliefs altogether.

After five years at the NRA, I accepted a job as an instructional technologist at the company with which I am currently employed. Since I was working with adults as learners, I decided that it would be beneficial to acquire an academic background in adult learning and human resource development. I also felt that this field would be a good match for the practice-oriented worldview I had adopted.

In my first semester at Virginia Tech, however, I found that I experienced more of a resonance with the theoretical foundations of the field of adult learning than with the mechanics of the practice. The use of the concept of "wisdom" in adult learning provided me with an opportunity to apply my philosophical training to my current studies. My renewed interest in

philosophy and the ancient personification of wisdom as “Sophia” eventually led to a research focus on sophiology.

My current approach to philosophy has its basis in a number of different traditions. My ontology (theory of being) —informed by elements of postmodernism, systems thinking, pre-Socratic philosophy, and Taoism—views the universe as unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity. There is an interrelatedness and interdependency among diverse and opposing elements that allow us to imagine the universe as a huge system or organism. What affects one part of the system will have consequences for the others.

My epistemology (theory of knowledge) is informed by Piaget’s learning theory, which views the learning process as “a dialectic between assimilating experience into concepts and accommodating concepts to experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 18). The mind, therefore, is not only determined by reality. Reality—at least as it is mediated through the individual’s mental model—is also determined by the mind. Combining these ideas with the premise that the experiences of each individual are unique gives rise to the learning theory of constructivism, according to which individuals construct their own reality on the basis of their own unique experiences and their own unique ways of organizing those experiences. A constructivist approach to epistemology and an exploration of Taoist thought have led me to a new openness to spirituality and an understanding of “spirit” that is more immanent than transcendent.

My axiology (theory of values) seeks to be true to my perspectives on reality and knowledge. It leads me to value actions that will benefit the many elements and systems we see in our physical and social world as well as the unity and interdependence of those elements and systems. It also respects and values diverse “ways of knowing” and the multiplicity of valid perspectives while acknowledging the limited and temporal nature of knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

This study of sophiology from the perspective of adult learning has required a sound plan, a flexible approach, and an open mind. The journey has involved challenges and detours as well as joys and discoveries.

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<sup>1</sup> At least four different spellings of this name occur in the literature, based on differing methods of transliteration. I use the spelling, “Solovyov,” but the reader will notice differences when various sources are cited.

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<sup>2</sup> Sternberg (1990b) admits that any attempt at classification “is bound to be an oversimplification, and a rather gross one at that” (p. 3). He does not offer explicit criteria to distinguish these three approaches, but if I were to formulate an interpretation based on the subject matter of the chapters, I would suggest that his use of “philosophical” implies primarily conceptual discussions of wisdom; “folk” refers to people’s implicit theories of wisdom (“Implicit theories are constructions by people that reside in the minds of these people. They thus constitute people’s *folk psychologies*.” Sternberg, 1990a, p. 142); and “psychodevelopmental” appears to refer to wisdom in terms of cognitive, affective, and developmental processes.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT OF SOPHIOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter examines the context in which sophiology—specifically, the sophiological thought of Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov—emerged and developed. This examination of context is a necessary component of the hermeneutical research method I have chosen for this inquiry. Hermeneutics, as discussed in the previous chapter, seeks both to reproduce and to produce meaning through a dialogue with the texts to be interpreted. This dialogue takes place within a “hermeneutic circle,” in which an initial and admittedly incomplete understanding is enhanced through a process of assimilation and accommodation that takes place as the inquiry progresses.

Since I am the research instrument for this inquiry, the foundation of the initial dialogue is necessarily subjective in nature and based upon elements that I have found significant for an understanding of sophiology. How I understand the context will be important in understanding the interpretations I will make in subsequent chapters. I have, therefore, attempted to be reflective of myself as well as the texts I consulted in preparing this chapter. Recognizing that my way of looking at the world affects—and in fact determines—my understanding, I point out areas where I believe my perspective provided me with a significant insight. In other words, I will seek, not to abandon subjectivity, but to embrace it and even leverage it. In this way, I hope to enable the reader to see not only my understanding of the text, but also my understanding of myself as interpreter of the text.

My first experiences with hermeneutics took place during my graduate studies in theology. I used the “historical-critical” method in my exegesis of biblical texts. This experience has led me to understand the term “context” in terms of the historical sources and the philosophical, theological, and socio-cultural background of the texts under study. I examined not only the words and ideas used in the text, but also where those words and ideas came from.

Russian sophiology is an aspect of Russian religious thought, which developed under a variety of theological and philosophical influences. In laying a foundation for an understanding of Russian sophiology, therefore, I will discuss (a) the historical sources of its conception of wisdom, which date to pre-biblical times, and (b) the contemporary milieu in which the sophiologists applied their conception of wisdom in the development of their own unique philosophical and theological visions.

The historical sources of Russian sophiology include the Jewish and Christian scriptures, selected themes in Orthodox and esoteric theological traditions, classical Greek philosophy, and additional sources that reference wisdom as “Sophia” or the divine feminine.

The contemporary (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) milieu of Russian sophiology includes (a) Russian philosophy and (b) Russian political thought, which Kornblatt (2009) considers “the most important historical context for Solovyov’s work” (p. 25).

The breadth of historical and contemporary sources is enormous, so I present a selective overview in this chapter. My goal was to examine those sources that appear to have most significantly contributed to and influenced the development of a complex and multi-faceted concept in the thought of Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov: the mysterious, elusive, divine entity that from ancient times has been called Sophia.

### **The Historical Context of Sophiology**

#### **Wisdom in the Jewish Scriptures**

The Jewish scriptures (which Christians call the “Old Testament”) contain a rich collection of references to “wisdom.” The Semitic *hkm* is the root of the Hebrew verb “to be wise” and of the corresponding nouns, which refer to wisdom itself or an individual who possesses it (Krause & Müller, 1980; Sæbø, 1997). The abstract noun is the Hebrew *hokmah*, which was translated into Greek as *sophia*. In its basic meaning, it refers to a skill or ability (Murphy, 1992), such as metal work (1 Chronicles 22:15-16) or embroidery (Exodus 35:35). More frequently, it denotes cleverness or cunning. This could be used for evil (e.g., the “very wise” Jonadab in 2 Samuel 13:3) as well as for good (e.g., the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Samuel 14:2). Even animals could demonstrate wisdom in their ability to survive (Proverbs 30:24-28).

The terms for wisdom occur in a variety of literary contexts, and modern scholars use the term “wisdom books” to refer to the biblical books that explore different aspects of wisdom or wisdom-related themes. This designation comprises the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, which were originally written in Hebrew, and the books of Sirach and Wisdom, which were originally written in Greek. (The Greek works are outside the biblical canon of Jews and Protestants, but Orthodox and Catholic traditions consider them canonical.)

The wisdom books were written over the span of many centuries and contain a wide range of themes. Von Rad (1972) considered them part of Israel’s search for a permanently valid rule based on human experience, while Perdue (2008) acknowledged that the sages needed to

respond to changes and developments throughout the history of Israel. The book of Proverbs contains examples of what Fox (2000) called didactic wisdom. It is often expressed in terms of the words of a father to his son and contains teachings that are both secular and religious. They are not revelation but represent the accumulated lessons learned from observation and experience. Job and Ecclesiastes are examples of what Fox called speculative wisdom. They do not deal at length with wisdom as a concept but question traditional teachings on the nature of justice and its reward. The book of Sirach begins with the statement that all wisdom is from the Lord (1:1) and emphasizes the connection between wisdom, the fear of the Lord, and the obedience of the Torah (19:20), the Law that directs all things. The book of Wisdom introduces the concept of immortality as the reward for those who practice wisdom.

Biblical wisdom has its roots in international wisdom traditions that began two thousand years earlier in Egypt (Fox, 2000). Egyptian wisdom was the work of a royal or scribal class, and the Jewish scriptures make frequent references to King Solomon as the paradigm of wisdom (e.g., 1 Kings 3: 1-15). But biblical wisdom cannot be explained exclusively in the court school of Jerusalem or a class of sages. Family or tribal traditions contributed to it as well (Murphy, 1992).

Wisdom provides guidance to “enable one to cope with life, and to impose a kind of order” on personal experience (Murphy, 1992, p. 920). The objective of biblical wisdom is proper action. “This orientation . . . is fundamental, for wisdom is practical, not theoretical” (p. 920). Murphy notes the importance of morality as a corollary of wisdom, and he cites the frequent parallelism between *hkm* and *šdq* (wisdom and righteousness) in the books of Proverbs and Sirach.

Perdue (2008) emphasized the inclusion of cosmological as well as anthropological themes in wisdom literature:

The sages who compiled the wisdom texts in the Bible represent a group of intellectuals whose fundamental efforts were to determine the order present in the cosmos and to set forth the major features of righteousness that were to be incorporated in human character and to guide moral behavior that would master life. (p. 412)

The concept of a cosmic “world order” that is reflected in the social order has its origins in the ancient Egyptian concept of *ma’at*: “truth, justice, and order” (Perdue, 2007, p. 41). *Ma’at*

was sometimes worshiped as a goddess, the daughter of the sun god Ra, and was the patron of the Egyptian sages.

The personification of wisdom as a female figure is also found in biblical wisdom literature. Perdue (2007) described several metaphors for Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8:

She is the teacher who searches for students to assume her discipline . . . . She is the queen of heaven who selects, gives life to, honors, and makes wealthy kings who, in ruling justly, enable their society to live in concert with the cosmic order . . . . Wisdom is also personified to be the firstborn (and only) child of Yahweh . . . . She provides the linkage between the Creator and his creation. . . . Wisdom serves as the mediator between heaven and earth. (p. 57)

Perdue (2007) acknowledged the similarities between personified wisdom in Israel and the fertility goddesses of the ancient Near East. Quispel (1987) cited archeological evidence of Egyptian or Canaanite goddess figures standing before the godhead to please and entertain him, as in Proverbs 8:30. Fox (2000), enumerated various images associated with personified wisdom: she is depicted as a goddess, an angel, a mother, and a lover. He warned, however, against identifying Lady Wisdom with the symbols used to represent her. He found value in all of the feminine images used. For example, the image of a lover who seeks and is sought by her beloved represents the “spiritual-intellectual eros” (p. 294) of mutual attraction between wisdom and humanity. Wisdom indeed possesses characteristics similar to those of various goddesses, an angel, a mother, and a lover, but it would be wrong to identify her with any one of these types. Personified wisdom, rather, is a “new and independent literary figure . . . composed of fragments of reality” (p. 341). He also remarked that this imagery represents “a rare feminine element in the unremittingly patriarchal and masculine theology” of at least one tradition in the Jewish scriptures (p. 338).

Wisdom could lead her followers to a deeper understanding of the cosmic order, but she also possesses an element of mystery and uncertainty (Murphy, 1992). Von Rad (1972) pointed out that those who sought wisdom needed to acknowledge the limitations of their inquiry, since the world was part of God’s mystery (Proverbs 25:2). Perdue (2009) stressed the presence of an affective element in wisdom as a complement to the rational:

The sages were . . . also concerned with beauty, emotion, passion, and delight. The “love” of wisdom, the passion to possess it, and the elegance of deed and expression, both oral and written, were of equal concern to the sages. (p. 48)

### **Wisdom in the Christian Scriptures**

References to wisdom in the Christian scriptures are not as plentiful or extensive as those found in Judaism. There are a number of scattered occurrences of *sophia* (with a lower-case “S”), and Cady, Ronan, and Taussig (1986) admitted that the presence of Sophia in the Christian scriptures is “strangely unacknowledged and muted” (p. 50).

Schipflinger (1998) believed that part of the reason for this may lie in the writings of Philo of Alexandria (13 BCE-45 CE), a Jewish thinker who lived in Egypt and was familiar with Greek and Gnostic philosophy. His writings predate the Christian scriptures. The concepts of *Sophia* and *Logos* (word) play important roles in his cosmology. In Philo’s thought, God and his consort, Sophia, produce the *Logos*, the spiritual reality of God’s word. The *Logos* bears the image of both God and Sophia. Schipflinger believed that Philo’s *Logos* began to take on many of the characteristics of Sophia until the two concepts became virtually identical. Scholars have found an unmistakable presence of the wisdom tradition in the Christian scriptures, but with a definite shift toward Christian references.

In his examination of wisdom in the Christian gospels, J. M. Robinson (1975) used the Jewish context of personified wisdom as a starting point. “The great recipients of God’s successive revelations in history are standardized into a sequence of emissaries through whom Sophia spoke” (p. 2). One of the earliest literary sources of the gospels (which biblical scholars call “Q”) depicts Jesus as the “final emissary of Sophia” (p. 14). This is further associated with Q’s understanding of Jesus as the “unique apocalyptic Son of man,” which has the effect of “identifying Jesus with Sophia herself” (pp. 14-15). Robinson also noted that the “Holy Spirit” referenced in the gospels “is feminine in Semitic languages and at times is interchangeable with Sophia” (p. 6).

Fox (2000) too identified gospel material that belongs to the wisdom tradition. He classified the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), in which Jesus instructs his disciples using sapiential forms of assertion and argumentation, as Jewish wisdom literature. Similarly, he considered the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49) to be indebted to the wisdom tradition. In

this case, the audience is a broader public, and public teaching—“teaching the people knowledge”—is among the activities of the wise person (Ecclesiastes 12:9; Sirach 15:5).

Wilckens and Fohrer (1971) presented a detailed overview of the occurrences of “wisdom” in the Christian scriptures. In the gospels, Jesus’ wisdom is described as evidence of a divine gift. The reference to the young Jesus’ “growth in wisdom” in Luke 2:40 is modeled on Jewish biblical descriptions of divinely endowed children. Similarly, people find Jesus’ wisdom remarkable in Mark 6:2 because of his humble origins. Here the text depicts Jesus in the traditional image of a Jewish teacher of the Torah. In addition, both Jesus and John the Baptist are portrayed as messengers of God’s wisdom in Matthew 11:19, which says that wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

In foretelling his death in Luke 11:49, Jesus says that the “wisdom of God” would send the people prophets and apostles who would be killed and persecuted. This may be a reference to a wisdom myth in Jewish apocalyptic literature (Enoch 42) in which divine wisdom descends to earth and then returns to heaven without result (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971).

The Pauline writings contain a number of passages on wisdom, the most significant of which is in 1 Corinthians 1-2. Paul argued against a Gnostic wisdom teaching that held that Jesus’ death on the cross was not part of God’s plan for salvation. Paul asserted the theology of the cross, proclaimed Jesus as the very wisdom of God, and denounced the false wisdom that had infected the church of Corinth (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971). Throughout his writings, “Paul identifies his gospel with God’s wisdom in much the ways his [Jewish] contemporaries identify God’s Torah with wisdom” (Johnson, 1993, p. 283). This represents a transformation of wisdom from the Torah of Judaism to the gospel of Christianity.

The hymn in Colossians 1:15-19 does not contain the word *sophia*, but it is striking in the manner in which it recalls the imagery of personified wisdom as God’s firstborn and a participant in creation (Proverbs 3:19; 8:23-30; Wisdom 7:22). In Colossians, however, it is the divine Christ who was with God in the beginning, who created all things through him and for him. Horgan (1990) enumerated a variety of explanations for the background of the hymn, but she agreed that Jewish wisdom motifs are prominent.

Creation imagery also occurs in the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18), in which all things were made through the *Logos* (Word), who was with God “in the beginning” and through whom all things were made. Perkins (1999) agreed that the passage recalls the traditions of

Wisdom with God at the creation. This is an example of the blur that Schipflinger (1998) saw between the uses of Sophia and the Logos. In this case, the gospel is using the Logos, rather than Sophia, to refer to Christ.

The book of Revelation contains four main references to wisdom. In 5:12, the heavenly elders sing a hymn in which wisdom is among the gifts the Lamb (a reference to the heavenly Christ) will receive. In another hymn in 7:12, wisdom is praised as God's possession. In the remaining two passages, "wisdom" has the sense of esoteric Christian knowledge (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971). This knowledge is required to understand the "number of the beast" (13:18) and the symbolism of the beast and the harlot (17:9).

Revelation contains heavenly female imagery in the Woman Clothed with the Sun (12:1) and the Bride of the Lamb (19:7; 21:9). Are these figures references to Sophia? According to Pippin (1993), the book of Revelation returns to the idea of a King God:

Wisdom has been displaced from the throne, or at least co-opted into the Son of man figure and the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride. The Woman Clothed with the Sun is the mother of the messiah (Mary), and her astrological surroundings . . . resemble those of Wisdom. The Bride of the Lamb becomes the city of the new Jerusalem. . . . Is Sophia the Bride or the Bride and the Spirit (22:17)? . . . The powerful Sophia of Proverbs is personified in many figures and thus is disempowered. (pp. 292-293)

This multiplicity of references, however, could be viewed as an advantage in that Sophia is one symbol that can stand for many things. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I will show that in Russian Orthodoxy, Sophia can symbolize and evoke Jesus, Mary, the Church, and the Holy Spirit.

The latest work of the Christian scriptures, 2 Peter, refers to the letters of Paul as being written according to the wisdom he had received (3:15). In this instance, *sophia* "has already begun to be equated with apostolic and church theology" (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971, p. 525).

As wisdom in the Jewish scriptures mediates God's plan into human thought and action, wisdom in the Christian scriptures is embodied in the ultimate mediator, the divine human, Jesus Christ, and actualized through faith in him. Sergeev (2006) stated, "Christ in the *New Testament* was understood as the meeting point between human and divine wisdom and even directly identified with Sophia, an idea which later became central in Russian sophiological thought" (pp. 42-43).

## Wisdom-Related Themes in Orthodox Theology

In addition to the numerous images of the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, the teachings of Orthodox Christianity provide a rich background that is vital for an understanding of sophiological thought. The themes of mediation and unity—especially the unity of the divine and the human—are essential elements in many of these teachings. The following is a selective overview with brief explanations of doctrines and themes from Orthodoxy that will recur in later chapters that explore the thought of the sophiologists.

**Mary as *Theotokos*.** Mary, the mother of Jesus, is deeply revered in Orthodox piety as the *Theotokos* or “birthgiver of God.” She is a mediatrix in the sense that she conceived the divine in her human body and bore God’s divine son into the human world. She was the vessel of the Incarnation, which was itself a sanctification of humanity as the divine and human were united in her. Bulgakov (1935/1988) affirmed a specific connection between Mary and Sophia:

The Orthodox Church venerates the Virgin Mary as . . . superior to all created beings. The Church sees in her the Mother of God, who, without being a substitute for the One Mediator, intercedes before her Son for all humanity. . . . The perfect union of divine and human in Christ is directly connected with the sanctification and the glorification of human nature, that is, above all, with the Mother of God. . . . In her is realized the idea of Divine Wisdom in the creation of the world, and Divine Wisdom in the created world. It is in her that Divine Wisdom is justified, and thus the veneration of the Virgin blends with that of the Holy Wisdom. In the Virgin there are united Holy Wisdom and the Wisdom of the created world, the Holy Spirit and the human hypostasis. (pp. 116-118)

**The Church.** The union of divinity and humanity that took place in the Incarnation is also realized in the union between Christ and the Church. Paul compared the love of a husband to his wife as that of Christ for the Church (Ephesians 5:32), and we have already seen the reference to the Bride in Revelation (21:9) as an example of wisdom imagery. In the Orthodox doctrine of the Church, its unity with Christ is paramount:

Christ, the Son of God, came to earth . . . uniting his divine life with that of humanity. . . . Since the Lord did not merely approach humanity but became one with it . . . the Church is the Body of Christ, as a unity of life with Him . . . . The same idea is expressed when the Church is called the Bride of Christ or of the Word; the relations between bride and bridegroom, taken in their everlasting fullness, consist of a perfect unity of life, a unity

which preserves the reality of their difference: it is a union of two in one, which is not dissolved by duality nor absorbed by unity. (Bulgakov, 1935/1988, p. 1)

**The Trinity.** One of the central tenets of the Christian faith is the belief in a Triune God. Orthodox theology teaches that the Trinity is a mystery that cannot be fully grasped by human understanding. It is explained in terms of a God of one essence in a unity of three divine hypostases or persons: God the Father, God the Son (i.e., Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. All of reality is based on unity in diversity, even in the being of God himself:

There is in God genuine diversity as well as true unity. The Christian God is not just a unit but a union, not just a unity, but community. . . . The term “essence,” “substance,” or “being” (*ousia*) indicates the unity, and the term “person” (*hypostasis, prosopon*) indicates the differentiation. (Ware, 1979, pp. 35, 37)

**The Incarnation.** The Christian faith is called Christian because of its belief that God became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. The Council of Nicaea (325) defined that he was *homoousios*, i.e., “of the same substance” as God the Father. The Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) defined that he was one *hypostasis* (person) in a union of two natures, human and divine. We have already seen the identification between Christ and Sophia in some passages in the Christian scriptures. As Sophia possessed characteristics of a mediator, one can say that Christ is the ultimate mediator between the divine and the human in that he is both. Solovyov’s (1881/1995) central concept of divine humanity is based on Christ as the Divine Human.

**Iconography.** Icons—a style of painting religious images, like Christ, angels, and saints—play a significant role in Orthodox theology and piety. The Orthodox faithful venerate icons, and Orthodox theology teaches that this veneration passes from the icon to its prototype. Icons do not merely represent the figures they depict; they also mediate their presence to the person who prays to them. Florensky dedicated an entire work, *Iconostasis* (1922/2000), to an exploration of the icon in Orthodox theology. Of the icon’s symbolism, he says,

Contemporary empirical positivism underestimates the icon . . . . Iconic art accords to its essential symbolism and thereby reveals its spiritual essence in nothing other than our (the viewers’) spiritual ascent “from image to prototype,” i.e., in our attaining ontological contiguity with the prototype itself. (p. 69)

In another work (1914/1997), Florensky referenced the different types of icons in which the image of Sophia appears and connects her icons' symbolism with that of the Virgin Mary. Bulgakov (1935/1988) referenced the "problem" of understanding Sophia and specifically connected it with the manner in which she is depicted in Orthodox iconography:

Icons may represent spiritual visions . . . . As such, these visions, received by the Church by means of the icon, become a new revelation, a source of theological ideas (this is the case in the problem of the Divine Wisdom) from which an iconographic theology is born. (p. 142)

**Cathedrals.** Riasanovsky and Steinberg (2005) noted that two major Orthodox cathedrals in Russia were built by Greeks during the eleventh century and had names associated with "wisdom": the Cathedrals of St. Sophia in Kiev (1037) and Novgorod (1052). This naming convention reflected "a favorite Byzantine dedication of churches to Christ as Wisdom" (p. 55). The Orthodox tradition venerates a first century martyr, St. Sophia, but these cathedrals are dedicated to Sophia as the Wisdom of God. The same is true of the well-known Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

### **Wisdom in the *Pistis Sophia***

Gnostic thought, which is thought to have originated around the second century CE, teaches that salvation is to be found in divine knowledge (*gnōsis*) and not in material things, which are products of an imperfect physical cosmos. Divine knowledge is expressed in the form of myths, one of which is the myth of Sophia (Hoeller, n.d.).

There are many examples of the Sophia myth in Gnosticism (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971), and the best known of them is the *Pistis Sophia* ("Faithful Sophia"). In this version of the myth, Sophia was a heavenly being who sought to create a likeness of herself without the participation of God. She fell from the heavens and was held captive by lower powers. She offered a series of repentances, and Christ sent the archangels Michael and Gabriel to rescue her. After her redemption, she became the bride of Christ (Nash, 2009).

According to Carlson (1996), Solovyov's contemporaries would recognize parallels between their own age and the time of the Gnostics:

Gnosticism was a historically earlier expression of a similar human sense of existentialism, spiritual emptiness, and alienation from a decadent world that we associate with the end of the nineteenth century. (p. 53)

Cioran (1977) found a parallel in Solovyov's thought as well as a message of hope: "The 'Sophia-Mythus' of the Gnostics provided the archetype for Solov'ev's own vision of a unity lost and restored, of paradise lost and regained" (p. 17). MacDermot (2001) alluded to Solovyov as a thinker whose vision was inspired by the *Pistis Sophia*:

Just as the myth of the fallen Sophia represents the experience of a lost sense of unity associated with the development of individual self-consciousness, so her restoration foretells a further stage in human development, when individual consciousness becomes a shared consciousness of self and world. This would mean that individuals learn to see themselves, not only as individuals, but also as interdependent members of a whole. And that whole is not some particular group or society, but the world whole in which the individual sees the world as an extension of himself. (p. 98)

### **Wisdom in Ancient Greek Philosophy**

Ancient Greek philosophy provides an additional context for sophiology. According to Wilckens and Fohrer (1971), there was a marked shift in the meaning of *sophia* in the development of Greek philosophy, moving from the practical to the theoretical and finally to a synthesis of both:

In general *sophia* denotes a materially complete and hence unusual knowledge and ability. In the early [pre-Socratic] Greek period any practical skill of this kind counted as wisdom, then during the classical period [e.g., Socrates, Plato, Aristotle] the range of meaning was strongly restricted to theoretical and intellectual knowledge, and finally in the usage of the philosophical schools of Hellenism and later antiquity the practical element was united again with the theoretical in the ideal picture of the wise [person]. (p. 467)

Sergeev (2006) noted that Russians learned the wisdom of the ancient Greeks in the form in which it was assimilated into Hellenistic Christianity. He cited the integrative function of wisdom in this context, which is especially relevant to sophiology.

Plato's interpretation of wisdom emphasizes its intellectual rather than practical aspect (Sergeev, 2006). According to Plato, true wisdom consists in being, the [Platonic] ideas, and especially the *agathon* [good] and *kalon* [beautiful] "beyond being." As the idea of the good and the beautiful is not a special thing in the

world, but something divine, so wisdom is proper to God alone. (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971, p. 471)

At the same time, philosophy is possible through the power of *erōs*, which functions as a mediator between ignorance and wisdom.

Like Plato, Aristotle took an “integrative-intellectual approach toward Sophia” (Sergeev, 2006, p. 30). For Aristotle, however, “*sophia* is an attainable and quite specific knowledge” (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971, p. 471). Wisdom is the knowledge of first causes and what flows from them. As such, wisdom is the most complete form of knowledge (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI,7).

In the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Plotinus, the goal of philosophy is to become like God through the contemplation and practice of virtue. This requires the flight of the soul from the lower sphere of the physically evil to the heights of the divinely good, [*Ennead*] I,2,1. This is the upward path of virtue . . . . On this level of true philosophy *sophia* (or *phronēsis* [insight]) is the vision of the spirit . . . . Human wisdom, then, shares in it fundamentally through the mediation of the spirit. Thus *sophia* or *phronēsis* is the most valuable thing in us, I,3,5. It perfects the natural virtues, I,3,6. (Wilckens & Fohrer, 1971, p. 475)

In Plotinus’ thought, the concept of *sophia* possesses both contemplative and practical aspects, and its function is to mediate and lead the individual to God.

### **Wisdom in Augustine**

The writings of Augustine (354-430) make an important distinction between “created” and “uncreated” wisdom. According to Schipflinger (1998), whenever Augustine spoke of “uncreated Wisdom,” he was speaking of the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God. When he referred to images of wisdom in the Jewish scriptures that indicated that wisdom was created (e.g., Sirach 1:4), Augustine used the term “created wisdom.” In his *Confessions* (12,15[20]), Augustine wrote:

Although we do not find time before it, for “wisdom has been created before all things,” surely it is not that wisdom that is coeternal and equal with you, its Father, O our God, through which wisdom all things were created and in whom, as the Beginning, you created heaven and earth. Rather it is that wisdom which is created, namely, an

intellectual nature, which, through contemplation of the Light, is light. For this is also called wisdom, although a created wisdom. (398/1960, pp. 315-316)

Augustine needed to make this distinction in order explain the texts in the scriptures without contradicting the doctrine of the Trinity.

### **Wisdom in Jakob Boehme**

The Lutheran mystic Jakob Boehme (1575-1624) was a cobbler, the son of a farmer, who lived in Silesia in what is now Poland (Nash, 2009). Schipflinger (1998) called him the “Father of Western sophiology” (p. 189). David (1962) named Boehme among the sources that provided the chief inspiration for the leading theologian and philosopher in late nineteenth-century Russia, Vladimir Soloviëv. . . . Sophia supplied above all the final principle of integration of the correlative physical and moral elements in God’s essence . . . and the latent basis for the perfection of [humanity] and through [it] of the world. Boehme’s concept of Sophia was particularly destined to become through Soloviëv the distinctive mark of the latest phase in Russian mystical thought. (pp. 43, 45)

In Boehme’s philosophy, based on his visions of the ultimate nature of reality, the *Ungrund* (“abyss”) is the ground of all existence. In creation, the abyss reflects within itself the possibility of unfolding and giving birth to itself:

When the self’s image is reflected *ad intra* into the mirror’s interior, Boehme prefers to call it the eternally Divine Wisdom. When what is reflected itself turns *ad extra*, outside to external possibilities in creation, a created image of the eternally Divine Mirror is produced and this created mirror is created Wisdom, or Sophia. Creation is the result, which is itself mirrored in Her. In this way Sophia is the Mother of all that is created. (Schipflinger, 1998, p. 193)

Augustine’s distinction between created and uncreated wisdom was clearly reflected in the above passage.

Schipflinger also saw in Boehme’s teachings the idea of mediation. Creation mediates Sophia, who in turn mediates the Creator:

God creates Sophia as the Mirror in which God’s ideas of creation and possibilities *ad extra* are beheld. . . . She transforms these ideas into reality . . . . They are Her Body, and She is the Soul . . . . In beholding creation we behold Her power and beauty, and through Her, the power and beauty of the Creator. (1998, p. 201)

Another important concept in Boehme's sophiology is the concept of the resolution of opposites or polarities. The many possible qualities of existence that emerge from the abyss take the form of "glaring opposites and contradictions" (Schaup, 1997, p. 96) or polarities. In the abyss, everything is beyond polarity, but once the possibilities of existence emerge, so do polarities like good and evil. Boehme identified the abyss with absolute freedom, and spiritual creatures like humans participate in this freedom:

Evil and suffering results [*sic*] from the misuse of freedom, i.e., by separating and activating the polarities of something that is whole, and by disengaging oneself from the full order of existence. The solution lies in the correct reuniting of the polarities in nature. (Schipflinger, 1998, p. 194)

Nash (2009) saw Boehme's reference to the tension between the masculine and feminine principles as an example of the separation of opposites:

Adam initially was androgynous and virginal. That virginity was embodied in Sophia: "not a female, but a chasteness and purity without a blemish." Adam lost his primeval virginity through the fall, and Sophia's place was taken by his earthly companion, Eve. Thereafter man remained in an incomplete state, yearning for his primeval wholeness. The solution lay . . . in a spiritual reunion of the masculine and feminine; through woman man could once again find his primeval Sophia. (p. 33)

Boehme's writings were not exclusively philosophical. He also wrote spiritual works, like the *Christosophia* (usually translated as *The Way to Christ*), which described the individual soul's journey to God. In works like this one, Sophia is the guide of the soul:

For if the Soul wants to gain Christ's knightly crown from the Virgin Sophia, she (i.e., the Soul) must woo it from her (i.e., the Virgin Sophia) with great Love-desire. (Boehme, 1647/1947, p. 15)

### **Wisdom as the Eternal Feminine**

Kornblatt (2009) said, "Solovyov's Sophia often is female and is sometimes depicted . . . in the case of comparisons with Goethe and Dante, with an idealized Eternal Feminine" (p. 82). Jakim and Magnus (1996), Schipflinger (1998), and Nash (2009) also referred to the divine feminine in Solovyov's sophiology. The following is a very brief examination of the divine feminine in the two authors Kornblatt associates with the context of sophiology.

**Dante Alighieri.** Jakim and Magnus (1996) noted that Solovyov was not only a reader, but also a translator of the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), so he was undoubtedly familiar with the character of Beatrice. Dante wrote of his love for Beatrice in his two best known works, the *Vita Nuova* (“New Life”) and the *Divine Comedy*. In the *Vita Nuova*, we read how Dante met and fell in love with Beatrice, “the glorious lady of my mind” (Alighieri, 1294/1992, p. 4), at the age of nine, and how she died at the age of twenty-five. In the *Divine Comedy*, the now heavenly Beatrice sends the Roman poet Virgil to Dante to guide him on a pilgrimage through hell and purgatory, after which Beatrice herself guides Dante through heaven. Musa (1986) proposed that the heavenly Beatrice represents the personification of wisdom leading humanity back to God:

Her role in the poem is to lead Dante the Pilgrim, who stands for all of us, to the blessedness of eternal life and the vision of God, to which [humanity in its] own natural power cannot approach. . . . She is now *Sapientia*; she is all the wisdom God has revealed to [humanity] which allows [it to return to its] Creator. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.** The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) authored numerous works, the best known of which is the drama, *Faust*. In the legend, Faust is a scholar who makes a bargain with Mephistopheles (the devil) in which Faust exchanges his soul for knowledge and worldly pleasures. He seduces the innocent Gretchen, who drowns her child and is condemned to death. Gretchen prays to the Virgin Mary for the soul of Faust, who is then saved from hell. The work ends with the enigmatic phrase, “The eternal feminine leads us on” (Matthews, 2001).

In her discussion of the meaning of the “divine feminine” in *Faust*, O’Brien (2012) explored the influences on Goethe, and interestingly, she mentions Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible as well as Jakob Boehme. She wrote at length about Boehme’s concept of Sophia and its similarities with Goethe’s “divine feminine.” She also mentioned the existence of Sophia in Eastern Christianity and associated the divine feminine with the veneration of Mary in the Catholic tradition.

Matthews (2001) saw the Faust legend as a retelling of the myth of the fall of Sophia, in which Gretchen is the fallen Sophia who repents and the Virgin is the Eternal Feminine who brings redemption. In drawing on the same themes we have seen in other sources, Goethe

continued a tradition in which the divine feminine represented wisdom, heavenly love, and the path to salvation.

### **The Contemporary Context of Sophiology**

I turn now from the historical background that the sophiologists inherited to an examination of the contemporary situation in which they lived and developed their ideas. I focus first on the characteristics of Russian philosophy in general and then on the social-political environment in which Russian sophiology was born.

#### **Russian Philosophy**

Nemeth (2001) began his overview of Russian philosophy by noting that the “very notion of Russian philosophy poses a cultural-historical problem” (p. 1). He observed that there is no general agreement either on the works or the philosophers themselves. The different histories of Russian philosophy I have consulted differ in their positions on when Russian philosophy began, the periods into which that history should be divided, and which philosophers made the most significant contributions. Lossky (1951), for example, who is both a Russian philosopher and a historian of Russian philosophy, held that philosophy in Russia did not begin to develop until the nineteenth century.

Eddie, Scanlan, and Zeldin (1965) emphasized that the most original and influential Russian thinkers have been non-academic, while Nemeth (2001) focused on professional philosophers, as opposed to literary authors who wrote about philosophical themes, such as Tolstoy. Nemeth proposed his own division of the history of Russian philosophy, which he based on that of the Russian philosopher Vvendsky. The professional philosophers in the first two of Nemeth’s five periods (1755-1825 and 1825-1860), however, had very little to say that appears helpful to an understanding of sophiology.

What is significant during the earliest period, however, is the beginning of a disturbing trend: the political fallout that often resulted when professors of philosophy introduced controversial thought into higher education. Nemeth wrote that Dmitri Anikhov’s 1769 dissertation on natural religion “was found to contain atheistic opinions and was subjected to an 18-year investigation. Legend has it that the dissertation was publicly burned” (2001, p. 4). When the German Ludwig Mellman introduced Kant’s thought into Russia in the 1790s, the public prosecutor charged him with mental illness. He was dismissed from his position and forced to leave the country. In the early 1800s, A. Kunitsyn’s work on natural law included a

condemnation of serfdom. All available copies were confiscated, and Kunitsyn was fired from his teaching position in St. Petersburg in 1821.

Solovyov himself felt he needed to resign from his teaching position after he publicly called upon the Tsar to commute the death sentence of an assassin who had killed a member of the Tsar's family. Even after the Tsar was overthrown, however, political persecution continued to be an occupational hazard for philosophers. Bulgakov was exiled from Russia along with over a hundred other scholars in 1922 (Nemeth, 2001), and Florensky was arrested in 1933 and executed by firing squad in 1937 (Goltz, 1990).

Copleston (1986) took a somewhat different view of Russian philosophy, identifying two significant features. The first is its derivation from, and dependence on, Western influences. The second is its emphasis on practical—and particularly social—applications.

Zenkovsky (1953) observed that among Russian philosophers, one of the most important characteristics is the relegation of epistemology (at least any empirical or “rational” epistemology) to a secondary place. In most cases, he noted, Russian philosophers tend toward ontologism, “the recognition that cognition is not the primary and defining principle” in the human being (vol. 1, p. 5). It expressed “not the priority of ‘reality’ to knowledge, but the inclusion of knowledge in our relationship to the world, our ‘activity’ in it” (vol. 1, p. 6).

Russian philosophy, according to Zenkovsky, is also essentially anthropocentric. There is a prominent moral orientation, even in its theoretical aspects. This anthropocentrism is most evident in the emphasis on historiosophy, i.e., on questions of the meaning and goal of history. Edie, Scanlan, and Zeldin (1965) concurred, stating in the first sentence of the preface to their three-volume work that Russian thought was anthropocentric and that even metaphysics and philosophical theology were linked to ethics, social philosophy, and the philosophy of history.

Epstein (1995) identified twelve theses on the significance of Russian thought, which he traced from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Among the theses that are most significant for an understanding of the background of sophiology are the following:

1. Russia was the first non-Western nation to challenge the Eurocentric view of civilization and offer an alternative understanding.
2. Russia synthesized religion and philosophy into religious philosophy, which is unique in the history of thought. “Faith and reason were approached as complementary

- aspects of ‘integral knowledge.’ The concept of integrity, or totality, is the seminal Russian contribution to the theory of knowledge” (p. 3).
3. Russian thought focused on “the practical transformation of life and society” (p. 4).
  4. Russian philosophy led to “large-scale projects of comprehensive transformation of the world, including such ideas, proclaimed by Solovyov and Fedorov, as [‘Divine Humanity’ and] ‘total-unity’” (p. 4).<sup>1</sup>
  5. In the USSR, philosophy (specifically the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism) played “the role that in traditional societies belongs to mythology and religion” (p. 4).

Epstein (1995), whose overview focuses on the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, saw two opposing tendencies throughout the history of Russian thought:

One asserts the primacy of generalization and unification as tools for religious and historical transformation of reality and leads to ideocracy and totalitarianism; another defends the unsurpassable value of individuality and reveals the relativity and futility of all general ideological constructs. (p. 5)

Interestingly, he specifically mentioned sophiology as a manifestation of the first of these tendencies.

### **The Russian Intelligentsia**

In the introductory chapters to her translations of the Sophia writings of Solovyov, Kornblatt (2009) stressed the importance of understanding Solovyov’s Russia:

He was . . . firmly rooted in the Russia of his day, and his articulations of Sophia are informed by, or sometimes reactions against, contemporary issues. . . . Various related political or social theories that permeated Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century serve as the most important historical context for Solovyov’s work. . . . I will focus mainly on positivism . . . the elevation of sense experience over other ways of knowing . . . and a reliance on what was understood to be concrete and thus “true” scientific evidence. (pp. 25-26)

Copleston (1988) stressed the prominence of the “intelligentsia” in the political thought of Solovyov’s Russia. The “intelligentsia” was not necessarily scholars or intellectuals, but mostly middle-class individuals who were committed to a particular

social-political point of view and tended to subordinate all other interests to attainment of some social-political goal. [They were also] united in their alienation from and hostility to the existing political regime. . . . They did not all share the same ideas of what form of society should succeed the autocracy or how the change should be effected, but they were all convinced that the actual social-political structure should perish. (p. x)

To these aspects of philosophical and political thought, Copleston (1988) added the context of religious thought. In their alienation from the political regime, the intelligentsia was also alienated from the Church. The intelligentsia saw the Church not only as a representative of superstition, but also as a lackey of the state and a supporter of the political status quo:

Theology and metaphysics were regarded as outmoded and best forgotten; science was conceived as both the one reliable path to knowledge and as an indispensable means for the improvement of society . . . . Further, social utility was looked upon as the criterion for deciding moral issues and even for judging the value of literature and art. (p. 6)

What was needed to counter the situation, according to Copleston (1988), was an alternative worldview, one which

also held out a promise of transforming society for the better but which at the same time did justice to aspects of reality and of the human being and human life to which the members of the intelligentsia were blind. (p. 8)

The Russian Orthodox Church was in no position to articulate this alternative worldview. Several Russian laymen began formulating specifically Christian philosophies. I briefly examine three of these philosophers before turning to a focus on Solovyov in Chapter Three.

### **Predecessors of Solovyov**

**Chaadeev.** According to Peter Chaadeev (1794-1856), Russia had given nothing of value to the world, and if there was anything of value in Russia, it was derived from the West (Copleston, 1986). Russia's tendency to look inwards rather than outwards, and the separation of Russian Orthodoxy from Roman Catholicism, resulted in the failure of Russian Christians to influence social conditions (as the Church in the West had done through its involvement in political affairs).

For Chaadeev, the goal of history was the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Because Russia was a "blank sheet of paper," however, she had the potential to surpass the achievements of the West and to realize the social ideals of Christianity. He envisaged "the

creation of a unified Christian society, in which religion would form the basis of moral and cultural life and of social structures” (Copleston, 1986, p. 32).

Chaadeev held that human beings carried traces of moral ideas that were implanted by God and transmitted socially from one generation to the next. Because they faded over time, these ideas needed occasional renewal through persons such as Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. The transmission of these ideas, however, permitted one to view all human beings as a unity. A universal intelligence developed—the sum of all the ideas of humanity—and humankind needed to submit to the truth it contained, a truth that originated in God. Chaadeev saw religion as the basis for the unification of human thought into one thought, “the thought of God himself” or the “accomplished moral law,” a “moral and spiritual unification,” which was the “ideal goal of history” (Copleston, 1986, p. 39).

**Kireevsky.** The Slavophile movement arose as a reaction to the process of Westernization in Russia, which had begun under Peter the Great. The Slavophiles sought to respond to what they considered Chaadeev’s negative picture of Russia. They maintained that Russia’s future political and social development lay not in greater assimilation to the West, but in pursuing a path that was specifically her own. They explored Russia’s history and sought to distinguish a Russian spirit that contained values that were not only distinct from, but also superior to, those of Western Europe.

One of the most important philosophers of the Slavophile movement was Ivan Kireevsky (1806-1856). At a young age, he became a member of the “Society of Wisdom Lovers.” Walicki (1979) described this as a secret society that represented a reaction against rationalism. Its members emphasized instinct over cognition, and they believed that Russia’s mission was to save European civilization.

Kireevsky sought a Russian philosophy based in the Greek Fathers and remaining faithful to the spirit of Orthodoxy without becoming theology. He did not work out the details of this philosophy, although later thinkers like Solovyov would attempt to do so (Copleston, 1986).

Kireevsky also emphasized the superiority of the Eastern tendency toward integration and holism over the Western inclination toward analysis and the external linkage between concepts. Copleston (1986) wrote that Kireevsky sought an “integral knowledge” and urged humanity to “constantly seek in the depths of [its] soul that inner root of understanding where all the separate forces (of the soul) are fused into one living and total vision of the mind” (p. 65).

**Khomyakov.** Another important Slavophile philosopher, Aleksey Khomyakov (1804-1860), was deeply attached to the Orthodox Church, which he considered “an organic community with a collective consciousness, inspired by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit” (Copleston, 1986, p. 68). Zenkovsky (1953) noted that Khomyakov saw the Church as a “spiritual organism” and took the concept of “*ecclesiastical consciousness as a point of departure* in constructing his philosophic system” (vol. 1, p. 187). He rejected individualism and sought to develop “a philosophical anthropology based on the idea of ‘organic togetherness’ [*sobornost*]” in which the Church was seen as a “divine-human unity” (vol. 1, p. 204).

Kireevsky and Khomyakov, as well as Chaadeev, followed the Russian practice of integrating religious thought with philosophy and considered themselves “Christian philosophers” (Kline, 1985, p. 182).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Sophiology has its roots in the earliest concepts of wisdom in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Wisdom—*Hokmah* or *Sophia*—was the firstborn of creation and was with God at the creation of the cosmos. Biblical wisdom can be conceptualized as a dialectic between anthropology and cosmology (Fox, 2000; von Rad, 1972). God shares wisdom with humanity, teaching humans to understand themselves, their relationships with each other, their relationships with the cosmos, and the actions required to actualize these relationships and achieve happiness. This happiness occurs when humans live in accordance with God’s plan, which originated in God and leads to union with God. In the Jewish scriptures, wisdom was identified with the Torah, and in the Christian scriptures, with Christ and his gospel.

The Jewish and Christian scriptures, the iconography of Eastern Orthodoxy, and Gnostic Christianity used female imagery to depict Wisdom. In the Christian scriptures and Orthodox thought, the image of Sophia could evoke Mary, the mother of Christ, and the Church, the bride of Christ, as well as Christ himself and the Holy Spirit. This tradition of a feminine symbol of wisdom continued for many centuries and can be found in mystical and literary works, such as those of Boehme, Dante, and Goethe.

Sophia was both as an attribute of God and a reference to Christ, in whom God and humanity are unified in one person. These theological themes, combined with the theme of mediation associated with Sophia, point to both Christ and Sophia as agents of mediation and unity.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, the influence of positivism was transforming philosophy from an ally to an adversary of religious thought. Christian thinkers in Russia sought not simply to defend the Orthodox faith, but to conceptualize it in ways that united faith and reason. The emphasis among Russian thinkers on anthropocentrism, integral thought, and social ethics, along with the belief in Russia's destiny to save civilization, provided fertile ground for the development of sophiology as a response to positivism and a radical renewal of faith.

Sophia both symbolizes and actualizes a grand totality in her pervasiveness and inclusiveness. She mediates and unifies aspects of reality that are frequently characterized as opposites: the practical and the theoretical, the secular and the religious, the simple and the complex, the rational and the mysterious, the masculine and the feminine, the created and the uncreated, the human and the divine. Through the power of *erōs*, Sophia calls humanity to a perspective in which individuals can understand their inseparability from and interdependence on one another, the cosmos, and that internal spark in which we can recognize Sophia herself. By uniting their actions with this understanding, individuals can transcend themselves and follow Sophia's call to transform the cosmos from what is to what should be.

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the practice of several contemporary authors in using the term "Divine Humanity" rather than "Godmanhood" to translate *Bogochelovechestvo*, the union of God and humanity, which is one of the central ideas in Solovyov's philosophy.

## CHAPTER THREE: SOPHIA IN THE THOUGHT OF VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV

### Biography

Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov was born in 1853 in Moscow. His father was noted Russian historian Sergei Solovyov, a professor at Moscow University who had written a twenty-nine volume history of Russia, and his mother was Poliksena Romanova, “a deeply religious woman of mystical inclination, a descendant of the eighteenth century Ukrainian pilgrim, bard, prophet, and philosopher Grigory Skovoroda” (Young, 2012, p. 93). Solovyov was also the grandson of an Orthodox priest. Edie, Scanlan, and Zeldin (1965) described a “lively intellectual and religious atmosphere” (vol. 3, p. 55) in the Solovyov household, which Zenkovsky (1953) preferred to characterize as “strict and pious” (vol. 2, p. 472).

Lossky (1951) described Solovyov as a sensitive child who liked poetry and who possessed a mythical attitude toward nature. He even gave proper names to inanimate objects: Gregory was his satchel, and Andrew was his pencil. He read the lives of the saints, which inspired him to practice acts of asceticism, like sleeping in the wintertime without a blanket. Solovyov sometimes had visions and prophetic dreams, one of which is particularly significant as background for understanding his sophiological thought:

In his tenth year he had a vision which was subsequently twice repeated and stands in close connection with his whole philosophical system. It was connected with his first love. The girl he was in love with turned out to be indifferent to him. Seized with jealousy he was standing at Mass in church. . . . He perceived suddenly the blue of the sky all around him, and in his own soul; and through this blue he saw the “Eternal Womanhood”. . . . That which he saw he subsequently interpreted as the vision of God’s wisdom, Sophia—the Eternal and Perfect Feminine. (Lossky, 1951, pp. 81-82)

In his editor’s introduction to the translation of Solovyov’s *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (1881/1995), Jakim said that

the future philosopher long remained immersed in the dreams of early childhood. “A strange child I was then / And strange dreams I saw,” Solovyov later wrote about himself. These “strange dreams” never lost their power over his soul, and in some sense the realm of mystical dreams always remained his spiritual home.” (pp. vii-viii)

Edie et al. (1965) also noted that “Solovyov was well aware that he was subject to hallucinations, but, as he said, the fact that something is a hallucination is not a reason for denying its meaning” (vol. 3, p. 56).

When Solovyov was fourteen years old, he was influenced by the ideas of the radical intelligentsia and embraced atheism, materialism, and socialism (Copleston, 1986). In 1869, at the age of sixteen, Solovyov enrolled as a student in the Faculty of History and Philology at Moscow University, probably with the encouragement of his historian father. He soon transferred to the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, perhaps under the influence of the positivist and utilitarian outlook he had embraced. This was a mistake, however, and after three years he decided to withdraw from his studies and applied to take examinations in the Faculty of History and Philology. “As a mark of both his talent and audacity, he received his degree in June of 1873 without completing any classes as an official student of that faculty” (Kornblatt, 2009, p. 13).

By the age of eighteen, Solovyov returned to his Christian faith, which he would retain for the rest of his life (Copleston, 1986). From the fall of 1873 to the summer of 1874, Solovyov audited courses at the Moscow Theological Academy (Zenkovsky, 1953). According to Kornblatt (2009, p. 14),

Solovyov’s early biographer, S. M. Luk’ianov, cites a letter from Pavel Florensky, who became a professor at the academy in the early twentieth century: “It seems to me that Solovyov entered the academy simply for theology and church history. But then, having come across the idea of Sophia, as it already existed in his soul, he left the academy and theology entirely and occupied himself solely with Sophia. Or at least that is my guess. It would be very interesting to verify it.” (Luk’ianov, *O Vl. S. Solov’eva v ego molodyy gody* 1:344 n. 662)<sup>1</sup>

In 1874, Solovyov defended his master’s thesis, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy (Against the Positivists)*, in which he proclaimed the necessity of a universal synthesis of science, philosophy, and religion as the supreme goal of intellectual development (Solovyov, 1874/1996a). He began teaching at Moscow University that same year. But from June to October of 1875 he took a leave of absence to do research at the British Museum in London, where he studied mystical literature (Jakim & Magnus, 1996).

While in London, Solovyov sought out the spiritualist community there (Kornblatt, 2009). According to Cioran (1977), Solovyov took an active interest in spiritualism and frequently participated in séances. “Solov’ev considered himself to be a very sensitive medium and often confided to friends the nature of his contact with the spirits (p. 41). Kornblatt (2009) noted that he “attended a number of séances in London and indulged in bouts of automatic writing, during which spirits (principally Sophia herself) spoke to him through his own pen” (p. 15).

In one of Solovyov’s notebooks from that time is “a prayer for the descent of the Holy Divine Sophia” (Lossky, 1951, p. 82). And it was in London that he had his second vision of Sophia, which he describes in his poem, “Three Meetings.” He saw only her face and asked to see all of her, and she replied that he should go to Egypt (Solovyov, 1898/1996b).

Solovyov did just that. Under the pretext of needing to study certain materials in Egypt, he left London and traveled to Cairo (Zenkovsky, 1953). According to Lossky (1951):

After staying there for a time he went, one evening, on foot to Thebaide, without provisions, wearing a town dress—top hat and overcoat. In the desert, twelve miles from the town, he met some Beduins [*sic*] who at first were frightened, taking him for the devil, but then apparently robbed him and went away. (pp. 82-83)

He went to sleep on the ground in the desert that night, and at dawn he had his third vision of Sophia (Solovyov, 1898/1996b; see translation above, p. 1).

Solovyov returned to Moscow and resumed teaching in the fall of 1876 (Copleston, 1986). In the winter of that year, he visited Italy and France and began writing a work in French, *La Sophia*, part metaphysical tract and part dialogue between Sophia and “the philosopher.” The following year he moved to St. Petersburg. He published *The Philosophical Foundations of Integral Knowledge* in 1877, whose title shows the influence of Kireevsky’s epistemological theory. He successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, *A Critique of Abstract Principles*, in 1880. From 1878-1881, he gave a series of lectures in St. Petersburg, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, in which he outlined his vision of a union between humanity and God as the goal of history and human existence (Solovyov, 1881/1995).

By this time, Solovyov had “formulated the philosophical views he would retain for the rest of his life—among them the political philosophy of a free theocracy—and he saw Russia as embodying this ideal” (Edie et al., 1965, vol. 3, pp. 53-54). For this reason, he called on Tsar

Alexander III to set an example of Christian love by pardoning the assassins of his father, Alexander II. He may have had a brilliant teaching career ahead of him, but this appeal angered the authorities. Solovyov thought it best to resign from the university, which he did in 1881, and he devoted the rest of his life to writing (Copleston, 1986).

During the 1880s, Solovyov turned his attention to the unification of religious and political rule through theocracy and also so the unification of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. He wrote *The History and Future of Theocracy* (1887), and *Russia and the Universal Church* (1889, in French) during this period (Lossky, 1951). He had to publish these outside Russia to avoid censorship. In these works, “mankind’s crowning fate on earth was to be spiritual unification under the pope and political unification under the Russian emperor” (Walicki, 1979, p. 374). Solovyov’s hopes for achieving unity in these realms were in vain.

During the 1890s, Solovyov wrote *The Meaning of Love*, in which he explained love as the beginning of an inner movement from the individual self to the totality of the cosmos (Solovyov, 1894/1985). And in *The Justification of the Good*, he described the unity of moral principles as a participation in the goodness of God (Solovyov, 1895/2005).

According to Edie et al. (1965), Solovyov lived in a more and more eccentric fashion, like a monk without a monastery. In 1899 he made a final journey to Egypt, where it is likely he had another vision—not of Sophia, but of something evil, because he returned in a very pessimistic frame of mind. In his final work, *War, Progress, and the End of History*, Solovyov wrote of the powerful existence of evil in the world and the impossibility of eradicating it during human history (Solovyov, 1900/1990).

According to Zenkovsky (1953), Solovyov’s health had always been delicate, and in July of 1900 he became ill while staying with his friend, Prince Eugene Trubetskoi. Solovyov made his confession and received the sacraments of the Orthodox faith before his death later that summer at the age of 47. Solovyov’s funeral service was held in the same Moscow University chapel where he had had his first vision of Sophia, and he was buried with two icons on his breast: one of the Virgin Mary, and the other of Sophia, the Wisdom of God (Groberg, 1991).

### **Overview of Solovyov’s Philosophy**

Lossky followed Stremoukhoff (1935/1980) and cited Trubetzkoj (*Soloviev’s World Conception*, 1913)<sup>2</sup> in enumerating three periods in Solovyov’s life that reflect his interests and agenda: theosophy, theocracy, and theurgy:

During the first period, Soloviev hoped that the incarnation in the world of Sophia, [the] Wisdom of God, [could] be achieved through Christian *theosophy*, that is[,] through the knowledge of God and of his relation to the world. . . . During the second period, after 1882, Soloviev placed his hopes in the transformation of mankind through *theocracy*, that is[,] through the creation of a just state and a just social order, which realizes Christian politics. . . . Finally, during the third period starting about 1890, Soloviev was absorbed in the problem of *theurgy*, that is[,] mystical art, creating a new life according to Divine Truth. (Lossky, 1951, p. 95)

Zenkovsky (1953) preferred a thematic rather than a chronological approach to understanding Solovyov's thought, and he cautioned against trying to ground all of Solovyov's philosophy in any one particular idea—and he emphasized that this included the idea of Sophia. Rather, Zenkovsky enumerated six fundamental themes in Solovyov: (a) the quest for social progress; (b) the plan to present and justify historical Christianity in terms of contemporary knowledge and philosophy; (c) the search for total unity, which Zenkovsky said “gradually became the central idea and guiding principle of [Solovyov's] philosophy” (vol. 2, p. 482); (d) Solovyov's sense of history, in which all aspects of being were revealed; (e) the idea of divine humanity, a union of God and humanity, which was “the nucleus around which [Solovyov's] thoughts crystallized” (vol. 2, p. 483), and (f) the idea of Sophia, which Zenkovsky considered secondary, since “Solovyov's basic doctrines can be expounded without reference to his Sophiology” (vol. 2, p. 483).

My own method in approaching Solovyov's thought was to seek an understanding of his ideas in the three basic areas of philosophy, which deal with being, knowing, and doing. I turn now, therefore, to an overview of Solovyov's metaphysics or ontology (theory of being), his epistemology (theory of knowledge), and his moral philosophy or axiology (theory of values to inform proper action). I examine these separately, but with the realization that for Solovyov, being, action, and knowledge were essentially interconnected:

Metaphysics tries to understand reality as a unity, while moral philosophy and social thought show how the egoism of individuals can be overcome and unity restored.

Theoretical knowledge, therefore, . . . is oriented to practical knowledge and, finally, to actual restoration of unity between human beings and between them and the divine Absolute. (Copleston, 1986, p. 215)

Due to the enormous breadth of Solovyov's thought and my goal of providing a background for an understanding of his concept of Sophia, this overview is both basic and selective in nature.

### **Metaphysics**

Metaphysics, or ontology, is the branch of philosophy that deals with fundamental concepts of being. These include concepts related to God (theology), humanity (anthropology), and the cosmos (cosmology).<sup>3</sup> Solovyov's ideas of total unity, divine humanity, and Sophia are all part of his metaphysical thought.

For Zenkovsky (1953), the two fundamental concepts in Solovyov's metaphysics are: (a) the doctrine of the Absolute or total unity, and (b) the doctrine of divine humanity. Solovyov brought these two ideas together—the first having its origins in Spinoza and Schelling, the second in Christianity—and they remained his “decisive orientation to the end” (Zenkovsky, vol. 2, p. 494).

Absolute being, for Solovyov, was identical with the concept of God. The Absolute cannot simply *be*, but must be *something*. God affirms or posits its essence, and this “second Absolute,” the Logos, is the expression of the essence of the first. The Absolute knows that the posited essence is its own, and this relationship between the two Absolutes is the Spirit. Solovyov (1877/2008; 1881/1995; 1889/1948) considered this to be a rational deduction of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

How does humanity result from this self-contained Absolute? Solovyov explained the divine activity of creation in terms of God as love. The creation of humanity allowed God to manifest his love in all its fullness. But humanity has fallen from its original unity, and the restoration can be achieved only through divine humanity, i.e., the deification of humanity through the Incarnation of Christ and participation in his divine life (Solovyov, 1881/1995). Copleston (1986) explained it this way:

Ideal humanity, the eternal archetype, is one, and though the emergence of individual human beings is described as a fall from unity, human history is a process in which unity is restored in and through Christ, the incarnate Logos. This . . . is possible . . . because human beings . . . participate in one divine life. This participation makes possible the reconstruction of humanity as one universal organism. (p. 227)

According to Zouboff (1944):

The original unity . . . could not be simply restored: it had to be *attained*, and attained only through a free and twofold self-denial—that of God, temporarily laying aside His glory and infinite power in the assumption of human limitations, in the incarnation of God the Son; and that of [humanity], abnegating [its] natural will in favor of the will of God the Father, in the twofold but indivisible person of Christ. (p. 64)

For Solovyov, the cosmos too has experienced a fall. “Having fallen away from the divine unity, the natural world appears as a chaos of discordant elements” (1881/1995, p. 135). The cosmos, like humanity, is an outward manifestation of divine love. The diversity in nature is not problematic, because it is a manifestation of the diversity in God’s ideas. The conflicts within nature, however, are evidence of the fall:

The same elements may exist in nature as in the First Principle, but they occur “in an *improper* relationship”: mutual displacement, hostility, conflict, and “inner discord” betray the dark foundation of nature, the chaotic principle which is characteristic of “existence outside of Deity.” (Zenkovsky, 1953, vol. 2, p. 504, citing Solovyov, *Sochineniya* [Works] III, 132)<sup>4</sup>

The cosmos, like humanity, must have its unity restored, and this can happen only through the action of the divine principle. Until this happens, the present cosmos is a work-in-progress:

In the natural order, this organism (the cosmos) is actually disintegrated but retains its ideal unity as a hidden potency and tendency. The gradual actualization of this tendency, the gradual realization of ideal all-unity, is the meaning and goal of the cosmic process. In the divine order, the all is an absolute organism eternally, while according to the law of natural being, the all gradually becomes an absolute organism in time. (Solovyov, 1881/1995, pp. 135-136)

Lossky (1951) explained it like this:

Absolute fullness of being . . . can only be reached through a perfect mutual interpenetration of all creatures united in love with each other and with God. As a final aim, it is contained in the idea of every entity, but its realization cannot be secured mechanically; it must be a free act, based upon love for God and for all beings. In seeking to attain it, the world-manifold gradually becomes one whole, i.e., the Absolute. Thus, the world is the Absolute that *becomes*, while God is the absolute that *is*. (p. 99)

## Epistemology

As mentioned above, Solovyov envisioned a synthesis of science, philosophy, and religion as the supreme goal of intellectual development. However, he found the positivist approach of science and rationalist approach of philosophy too narrow in their epistemological methods. Positivism stressed empirical knowledge based on experience, but it did not reveal the concepts behind the experience or the interrelationships among the concepts. Western philosophy stressed rational knowledge based on reason, but there was no guarantee that its rational speculations had anything to do with reality. He criticized what he called “*the one-sidedness and therefore falsity of both tendencies of philosophical knowledge* in the West, namely the *purely rationalistic* tendency, which gives only *possible* knowledge, and the *purely empirical* tendency, which *does not give any* knowledge” (Solovyov, 1874/1996a, p. 148 [italics in original]).

For Solovyov—a mystic and a man of faith as well as a philosopher—a third source of knowledge was necessary to acquire a complete understanding of reality. In *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge* (1877/2008), Solovyov specified three forms of knowledge, each from a different sphere of existence:

Mystical phenomena, as the most central and profound, possess primary and fundamental importance; psychic [rational] phenomena follow them; and finally, as the most superficial and not independent, physical phenomena. . . . Universal truths or ideas . . . must have their own existence that is independent of phenomena, and consequently, for a knowledge of them a specific form of cognitive activity is necessary . . . “mental contemplation” or “intuition” (*intellektuelle Anschauung*, intuition) and which constitutes the actual primary form of integral knowledge. (pp. 81-82)

Solovyov called this “faith” in the *Critique of Abstract Principles* (1880, p. 45; cited in Copleston, 1986, p. 219).<sup>5</sup> This type of knowing must be part of a system that integrates the truths of religion with those of science and philosophy.

## Moral Philosophy

*The Justification of the Good* (1895/2005), completed five years before his death, was Solovyov’s work on moral philosophy. Riasanovsky and Steinberg (2005) referred to it as his “masterpiece” (p. 436).

At the very beginning of the work, Solovyov established the independence of moral philosophy from both metaphysics and epistemology. “In moral philosophy we are concerned

with our inward relation to our own activities, *i.e.*, with something that can *unquestionably* be known by us, for it has its source in ourselves” (1895/2005, p. 8).

According to Solovyov, the basis of morality is the “good,” and it should not come as a surprise that a mystic explained that we come to understand the good, not on the basis of abstractions, but from three fundamental human feelings: shame, compassion, and reverence. These “fundamental feelings . . . exhaust the sphere of [humanity’s] possible relations to that which is below [it], that which is on a level with [it], and that which is above [it]” (1895/2005, p. 32). Shame, originally connected with sexual modesty, reveals humans’ natural dignity and separateness from the exclusively material nature of the rest of the world. Compassion manifests humans’ moral relationship to other humans and is the root of social relations. And reverence expresses humans’ moral relationship to the divine principle, which manifests itself as the perfect good.

Walicki (1979) saw the theme of unity as the ultimate role of these three fundamental feelings. Shame develops into conscience, whose role is to restore wholeness to the inner life of the individual; the role of compassion is to transform society and bring about true solidarity among humans; and the role of reverence is to “restore the wholeness of human nature by uniting it with the absolute center of the universe” (p. 388).

Solovyov devoted part of the work to a discussion of virtue, and he included the virtue of wisdom. Interestingly, he made no mention of Sophia either in this discussion or anywhere else in the work:

The third of the so-called cardinal virtues, *wisdom*, *i.e.*, the knowledge of the best ways and means for attaining the purpose before us, and the capacity to apply these means aright, owes its significance as a virtue not to this formal capacity for the most expedient action as such, but necessarily depends upon the moral worth of the purpose itself. (p. 84)

Lossky (1951) emphasized the role of activism in Solovyov’s moral philosophy. The task of humanity is to overcome evil and imperfection deriving from the fall and to further the reunion of all creatures with one another and with God. Humanity cannot do this alone, but can do so only in cooperation with God. Copleston (1986) too remarked that Solovyov’s moral vision was socially oriented in that it involved the attainment of a goal: the regeneration or transformation of humanity.

## **Sophia in Solovyov's Writings**

I have provided the above sketch of Solovyov's philosophy without reference to Sophia. This is not to imply that Sophia plays no role in Solovyov's philosophy—she does indeed—but the most fundamental principles of his philosophy do not depend on his sophiology. In my view, the proposition that Sophia is the central concept in Solovyov's philosophy is not correct.

In order to get a complete picture of Solovyov's sophiology, I believe it is necessary to go beyond his philosophical writings. Solovyov does fit Sophia into his rigorous philosophical framework, but Sophia manifests herself as a significant source of his inspiration and energy in his other writings as well. I believe Solovyov realized that expressing his sophiology from an exclusively philosophical perspective would compromise the richness of her symbolism and rob her of her transcendent power.

I agree with Kornblatt's (2009) assessment that Solovyov had an intuition of Sophia early in his life and spent a good deal of the rest of his life "re-visioning" that intuition (p. 5). A philosophical system, however, is not necessarily the ideal medium for the expression of a mystical experience. This is perhaps better accomplished using other means. I strongly agree, therefore, with Jakim's (2008a) assertion that Solovyov's relationship with Sophia "finds its most complete expression in his poetry" (p. 1). For Solovyov, "Sophia is more than a theory, more than a metaphysical construct; she is also a feminine being" (p. 3), and so "Solovyov's poetry . . . is a necessary complement to his philosophy" (p. 5).

Even Solovyov's sophiological heir, Sergius Bulgakov, remarked that "an inner fairness with regard to Solovyov would perhaps require us to expound his world-view precisely on the basis of his poems, while considering his prose to be a philosophical commentary to them, and not vice versa" (Bulgakov, 1915/2008, p. 155).

By following Solovyov's pervasive theme of inclusiveness and integration, therefore, I approach Sophia by integrating the vision Solovyov expresses in a variety of ways—prayer, poetry, and even a short story—in addition to the technical explanations he provides in his philosophy. I examine his references chronologically in order to show the development in Solovyov's sophiology.

### **"Prayer of the Revelation of the Great Mystery" (1875)**

Among the earliest references to Sophia in the writings of Solovyov is his "Prayer of the Revelation of the Great Mystery." This prayer dates from the period when Solovyov was

studying in the British Museum (1875), where he had his second vision of Sophia. The prayer is addressed to Sophia herself. The following is an excerpt from the translation of Carlson (1996):

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Ain-Soph, Jah, Soph-Jah. . . . O most holy Divine Sophia, essential image of the beauty and sweetness of the transcendent God, the bright body of Eternity, the Soul of worlds and the one Queen of all souls, by the inexpressible profundity and grace of thy first Son and beloved, Jesus Christ, I implore thee: descend into the prison of the soul, fill our darkness with thy radiance, melt away the fetters that bind our spirit with the fire of thy love, grant us light and freedom, appear to us in visible and substantial form, incarnate thyself in us and in the world, restoring the fullness of the Ages, so that the deep may be confined and that God may be all in all. (p. 49)

Carlson (1996) cited the prayer as an example of the Gnostic elements in Solovyov's thought, e.g., the redemption of spirit from matter, or light from darkness, as part of the process of restoring unity with God. But the prayer also provides some hints about the broad spectrum of symbolism the image of Sophia can evoke.

Solovyov began with an invocation of the triune God and continued with what appears to be a parallel three-part wordplay on the name Sophia. He began with "Ain-Soph," a term from the Jewish Kabbalah (a form of mysticism that explored the inner dynamism of God). "Ain-Soph" refers to the fundamental and absolute infinity of God. The second term, "Jah," is an abbreviated form of the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh. The third term combines elements from the first and the second to produce "Soph-Jah." The three terms do not provide an exact parallel with the Christian Trinity, but their placement directly after an invocation of the triune God suggests a connection between Sophia and the Holy Spirit. "In all of Solov'ev, the third principle is a bridge or connector, and in this case the intermediary unites God and [humanity] . . . . Soph-Jah thus moves God from transcendence to immanence" (Kornblatt, 1991, p. 489).

There are several other possible allusions in this prayer. There is a reference to Jesus as the "first Son and beloved" of Sophia, evoking Mary, whom Orthodox Christianity reveres as *Theotokos* or "birthgiver of God." Solovyov also referred to Sophia as the image of God, recalling the language of Genesis 1:26, in which God creates human beings in his image. Solovyov described this image in terms of sweetness and beauty, after which he referred to Sophia using the feminine image of a queen.

Solovyov called Sophia the “soul of worlds.” This may be a reference to the “world soul” of Neo-Platonic philosophy, which viewed reality as a series of emanations from three fundamental entities: the one, the intellectual principle, and the world soul. It may also be a reference to the Gnostic Sophia who had fallen and was later redeemed (Carlson, 1996).

In this one short prayer, Solovyov intimated that there are connections between Sophia and the Holy Spirit, Mary, humanity, and the universal soul behind the many individual souls in the cosmos.

### **Early Poems of Sophia (1875-1876)**

Jakim and Magnus (1996) translated three early poems that Solovyov wrote while he was in Egypt (November 1875 to March 1876), where he had his third vision of Sophia. In the seven short verses of the first poem (“All in azure did my empress”), Solovyov described this third vision in the desert. Sophia, Solovyov’s “empress,” appeared to him “all in azure” (p. 13), a recurring theme in which the hue of the sky is her signature color.<sup>6</sup> The vision made his “heart beat in sweet rapture” and his soul “shine with quiet light in rays of dawning day,” in contrast to the “cruel flame of earthly fire” in the distance.

In the second poem (“My empress has a lofty palace”), Solovyov spoke of Sophia as an empress in a palace with “seven golden pillars” (Jakim & Magnus, 1996, p. 15). This recalls the language of Proverbs 9:1, which describes personified Wisdom as having a house on seven pillars. The seven pillars are clearly illustrated in several Sophia icons in Russian Orthodox cathedrals.<sup>7</sup> This poem describes Sophia’s faithfulness to her lover, even when he betrays her. Jakim and Magnus (1996) believe Solovyov wrote this poem before his vision of Sophia in the desert, since he makes no specific reference to this vision in the poem.

In the third poem (“Near, far off, not here, not there”) Solovyov was writing after his third vision. He contrasted it with the first vision of his childhood, which he had long considered “the obscure creation of a childish dream” (Jakim & Magnus, 1996, p. 19). Faced with the heavenly light of Sophia’s azure eyes, Solovyov celebrated the death of his ego to become united with his lover. Kornblatt (2009) offered an insightful interpretation of this poem, in which she saw

a mystical reconciliation of opposites: “In free bondage and in living death / I am the sanctuary, I am the sacrifice and priest. / Tormented by bliss, I stand before you.” In all of Solovyov, Sophia unites opposites, transforming both into a new whole (p. 102).

In these three poems, Solovyov again combined several themes. Sophia is a beautiful woman, a royal woman, a heavenly woman. She is the Divine Wisdom of both the Jewish scriptures and the icons of Russian Orthodoxy. She brings opposites together, restoring the unity of heaven and earth. She is faithful to her inconstant lover in the human world and calls him to abandon his ego, which he eagerly sacrifices in a blissful act of self-transcendence.

### ***The Sophia (1875-1876)***

According to Kornblatt (2009), Solovyov began *The Sophia* in 1875 in French before his trip to Egypt, but he never completed or published it. He described it as “a kind of work of mystical-theosophical-philosophical-theurgic-political content, in a dialogic form” (*Pis'ma* 2:23, cited in Kornblatt, 2009, p. 109).<sup>8</sup>

Despite the title, *The Sophia* is not a work about the woman whose name it bears. Rather, it contains discussions of various philosophical themes in the form of dialogues between *Sophie* and *le Philosophe*. Sometimes the dialogue changes to monologue in which, presumably, Solovyov presented his own thought. He repeated several sections of *The Sophia* in his early epistemological work, *Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge*, which he published in 1877 (Kornblatt, 2009).<sup>9</sup>

In a section in which Sophie and the Philosopher discuss epistemology, we can detect in his poetic language the Philosopher's fascination with Sophie. She, on the other hand, uses the Philosopher's experience as a didactic example of the unifying nature of knowledge (Kornblatt, 2009):

*Sophie*: Do you know me? Do you know with whom you are speaking?

*Philosopher*: As if I could not know you!

*Sophie*: You no doubt know me as a phenomenon, that is, insofar as I exist *for you* or in my external manifestation. You cannot know me as I am *in myself*, that is, my thoughts and intimate feelings as they are in me and for me. You know them only when they manifest themselves outwardly . . . .

*Philosopher*: And yet, when I look into the deep azure of your eyes, when I hear the music of your voice, is it outward phenomena of sight and sound that I perceive? My God! I know your thoughts and feelings, and, by your thoughts and feelings, I know your inner being.

*Sophie*: And this is the way that all beings know each other. (Solovyov, *The Sophia*, translated in Kornblatt, 2009, p. 123)

Carlson (1996) cited *The Sophia* in her discussion of the Gnostic elements in Solovyov's writings. She focused particular attention on Solovyov's references to Sophia as the "World Soul." Carlson recalled the use of this term in Gnostic sophiology, which portrays Sophia in a dualistic fashion:

Gnosticism postulates an Agia Sophia, the Holy Wisdom of God that remains in the glory and perfection of the Pleroma [divine fullness], and her antitype, the Sophia Prouneikos, Wisdom the Whore, the "formless" entity who in being pushed out of the Light of the Pleroma and into the Darkness of the Void beyond, thrusts a spark of Divine Light into the Darkness. . . . Sophia splintered her divine light and placed one spark of it into the soul of each human being, thereby herself becoming the Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World. In the world then, the lower Sophia lost the original state of All-Unity and dwelt in a state of multiplicity and fragmentation. (Carlson, 1996, pp. 58-59)

Kornblatt (2009) too acknowledged that the World Soul possesses a dualistic nature in *The Sophia*, but she emphasized its positive aspect: "Even as the soul of the material world, it maintains its connection to the Spirit. The World Soul remains ever one with Sophia, and we are not lost from Wisdom" (p. 114).

### ***Lectures on Divine Humanity (1881)***

Up to this point, Solovyov's writings have provided only glimpses of Sophia. In a series of twelve public lectures he gave in St. Petersburg, the *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, Solovyov sought to explain the structure of the cosmos and the goal of human history: the union of God and humanity through the Divine Human, Jesus Christ. In the course of these lectures, Solovyov provided a metaphysical/theological explanation of who Sophia was and where she fit in his concept of Divine Humanity.

Solovyov introduced Sophia in the context of the divine organism, which he described in terms of a unity of the absolutely one (God) with the multiplicity of creation. Solovyov distinguished two unities in the organism: an active and a passive one. Sophia is the passive or "produced" unity:

There is the unity that produces and the unity that is produced, or the unity as the principle (in itself) and unity in phenomena. In the divine organism of Christ, the active,

unifying principle . . . is obviously the Word, or Logos. The second kind of unity, the produced unity, is called Sophia . . . . And just as an existent being is distinct from its own idea but is at the same time one with it, so the Logos, too, is distinct from Sophia but is inwardly united with her. Sophia is God's body, the matter of Divinity, permeated with the principle of divine unity. Actualizing in Himself, or bearing, this unity, Christ, as the integral divine organism, both universal and individual, is both Logos and Sophia. (Solovyov, 1881/1995, pp. 107-108)

Sophia is sanctified through Christ's union with her, and through this union, "Sophia is ideal or perfect humanity, eternally contained in the integral divine being, or Christ" (Solovyov, 1881/1995, p. 113).

Solovyov also described Sophia in terms of the world soul, but he equated this term with ideal rather than fallen humanity and emphasized its mediating function:

This second, produced unity—in contrast to the primordial unity of the divine Logos—is, as we know, the world soul, or ideal humanity (Sophia), which contains within itself and unites with itself all particular living entities, or souls. As the realization of the divine principle . . . the world soul is both one and all. The world soul occupies a mediating position between the multiplicity of living entities which constitute the real content of its life, and the absolute unity of Divinity, which is the ideal principle and norm of its life. . . . Insofar as it receives the divine Logos into itself and is determined by the divine Logos, the world soul is humanity, the divine humanity of Christ, the body of Christ, Sophia. (Solovyov, 1881/1995, pp. 131-132)

Sophia, then, is an essential aspect of the *unity* between God and humanity. Christ is the active aspect of the unity, in that he produced the unity through the Incarnation, and Sophia is the passive aspect, the unity that is produced. Solovyov, unfortunately, fell into the trap of equating "active" with the masculine gender of Christ and "passive" with the female gender of Sophia, but he was using Sophia as a symbol for humankind, not womankind. Solovyov used different descriptions to illustrate that Sophia's "passiveness" does not detract from her participation in the unity. As "phenomena," she is the outward expression of the unifying principle; as God's "body," she holds the divine spirit; and as the "matter of Divinity," she receives the divine form. Sophia is also a *mediator* between the multiplicity of human souls and the oneness of God. She is the ideal, divine humanity of Christ.

### ***Russia and the Universal Church (1889)***

In his actions as well as his theories, Solovyov was always a proponent of integration and unity. During the 1880s, Solovyov turned his efforts to the reunification of the Eastern and Western churches. In the first two parts of *Russia and the Universal Church*, Solovyov outlined the state of the church in Russia and discussed how it could benefit from a unity with Roman Catholicism under the leadership of the papacy. The third part of the work is theological, and among the topics Solovyov discussed is Divine Wisdom.

Solovyov's theology has a strong emphasis on the Christian Trinity. In describing the Trinity, Solovyov said that its substance and inner unity is Wisdom:

It now remains to define and name the absolute objectivity itself, the unique substance of the divine Trinity. It is one; but since it cannot be one thing among many, a particular object, it is universal substance or "all in unity." Possessing it, God possesses all in it; it is the fullness or absolute totality of being, antecedent and superior to all partial existence. This universal substance, or absolute unity of the whole, is the essential Wisdom of God. (Solovyov, 1889/1948, p. 156)

Solovyov also discussed the World Soul in this work. Now, however, he described it as "the antitype of the essential Wisdom of God" (1889/1948, p. 162). The World Soul is the primeval chaos, which "can will to exist for itself outside of God" or can "abase itself before God and, by freely attaching itself to the Divine Word, bring all creation back to perfect unity and identify itself with the eternal Wisdom" (p. 163). The Wisdom of God, in contrast,

is not the soul, but the guardian angel of the world, overshadowing all creatures with its wings as a bird her little ones, in order to raise them gradually to true being. It is the substance of the Holy Spirit Who brooded over the dark waters of the forming world. (p. 167)

Humanity's role in the union of created reality and the divine is also of crucial importance in Solovyov's thought. Through its free union with God, humanity transforms the earth, and through humanity "all the world outside the Godhead must become a single living body, the complete incarnation of the divine Wisdom" (Solovyov, 1889/1948, p. 174).

Since *Russia and the Universal Church* is primarily about the unity of the churches, it is not surprising that Solovyov's sophiology has a relationship to this theme. In describing the unity that humanity must achieve with God, Solovyov distinguished humanity's division into male and

female, and he also distinguished the individual human from human society. He used these distinctions to introduce the concept of Wisdom's threefold incarnation:

[Humanity's] reunion with God, though necessarily threefold, nevertheless constitutes only a single divine-human being, the incarnate *Sophia*, whose central and completely personal manifestation is Jesus Christ, whose feminine complement is the Blessed Virgin, and whose universal extension is the Church. (Solovyov, 1889/1948, p. 176)

Solovyov concluded his discussion of Divine Wisdom with a reference to the icons of "St. Sophia" in Russian Orthodoxy, noting how these icons depicted a heavenly being who was linked to, yet distinct from, both Christ and Mary:

Side by side with the individual human form of the Divine—the Virgin-Mother and the Son of God—the Russian people have known and loved, under the name of St. Sophia, the social incarnation of the Godhead in the Universal Church. (Solovyov, 1889/1948, p. 178)

In this work, Solovyov continued his emphasis on the unifying role of Sophia, but there has been noticeable development. Sophia is the substantial unity that exists within the Trinity; she is the opposite, rather than another aspect, of the World Soul; she transforms creation through the activity of humanity; she is incarnated in the world in Christ, in the Virgin Mary, and in the Church; and the intuition of Sophia by the ancient Russian Christians is manifested in the icons of the Orthodox Church.

### **"At the Dawn of Mist-Shrouded Youth" (1892)**

Solovyov did not directly mention Sophia in this semi-autobiographical short story. It is noteworthy, however, in its similarities with Solovyov's description of his third vision of Sophia in the poem, "Three Meetings" (see above, p. 1).

In Solovyov's short story, which he told in the first person, the narrator describes his train trip to see his cousin Olga, to whom he planned to propose marriage (and who rejects him at the end of the story). On the train, he meets a woman named Julie and becomes infatuated with her. As he is accompanying her from one car to the next, he faints. Julie prevents him from falling from the moving train, and other passengers carry him back to his seat. When he regains consciousness, the narrator gives this description:

I saw only the bright sunlight, a strip of the blue sky, and in that light and in the midst of that sky, the face of a beautiful woman was bending down to me, and she was gazing at

me with marvelous familiar eyes and whispering something quiet and gentle to me. . . . A rosy light was emanating from her face! . . . As in a clear mirror, one miraculous image was fixedly reflected; and I felt and knew that this one image contained all. (Solovyov, 1892/1999, p. 26)

Jakim (1999) pointed out the similarities with Solovyov's description of his third vision in "Three Meetings":

In one case, the narrator regains consciousness; in the other, he comes out of a deep sleep. In one case, he sees "a strip of blue sky"; in the other, "the purple of the heavenly glow." In one case, "something quiet and gentle" is whispered to him; in the other, he hears a "gentle whisper." In one case, "a rosy light was emanating from her face"; in the other, her "eyes were full of an azure fire." In one case, "one miraculous image was fixedly reflected; and I knew that this one image contained all"; in the other case, "I saw it all, and all of it was one, One image there of beauty feminine. (Jakim, 1999, p. 4)

Jakim (1999) believed that these similarities suggest Solovyov's vision in the desert was not a fictional but an actual event. In the same volume as the story, Jakim included several of Solovyov's letters to Ekaterina Romanova, Solovyov's real-life cousin, who has a number of similarities to the character Olga (Solovyov, 1892/1999). At the end of the story, the narrator says that he later visited Julie in Italy. Jakim noted that

after his experience in the Egyptian desert, Solovyov traveled to Italy, where he met Madame Nadezhda Evgeneevna Auer, who helped nurse him after he injured his leg in a fall. In the 1890s, he dedicated two poems to her. . . . However, we do not know if Julie and N. E. Auer were one and the same person, or if they were different women in whom Solovyov saw the same erotic and/or sophianic qualities. (1999, p. 30, n. 1)

Jakim concludes:

In his Author's note to "Three Meetings," Solovyov called the vision in the Egyptian desert "the most significant thing that had ever happened in my life." I submit that the encounter with Julie (the "fourth meeting") is the second most significant thing that had happened in his life. (Jakim, 1999, p. 6)

### **"The Idea of Humanity in Auguste Comte" (1898)**

Solovyov first delivered this essay as an address to the Philosophical Society in Russia to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Comte's birth: March 7, 1898 (Kornblatt, 2009).

Solovyov was strongly opposed to positivism and devoted his master's thesis to its critique (Solovyov, 1874/1996a). He believed however, that Comte's transpersonal concept of Humanity has very close parallels with Solovyov's notion of ideal humanity in his sophiology. He saw additional significance in the fact that Comte's symbol is feminine:

The Great Being of Comte's religion has yet one more constant sign . . . that makes it our Providence: the fact that it is a feminine being. This is not a metaphor or the personification of an impersonal concept . . . He clearly distinguished humanity as a sum of national, familial, and personal elements (his *humanité* with a small *h*) from Humanity as an essential, actual and living principle of all these elements (*Humanité* with a capital *H*), or the Great Being. And in this main sense of Humanity . . . it possesses its *own proper existence*. . . . He is not speaking about a concept, but about a being. (Solovyov, 1898/2009, p. 223)

Solovyov then compared Comte's idea of the feminine Grand Being first with the Christian veneration of the Madonna and second with the Wisdom of God in Russian iconography:

[Our Russian ancestors] built churches and cathedrals to Sophia everywhere, an image sometimes resembles Christ, sometimes resembles Mary, but there is never complete identity with either one. . . . The Wisdom of God . . . was understood either as a general abstract attribute of Divinity, or was accepted as a synonym for the eternal Word of God: Logos. . . . Who could it be other than the truest, purest, and most complete humanity . . . eternally united, and in the process of time uniting with the Divine, and uniting to Him all that is. It is without a doubt that this is the full meaning of the Great Being, which was in part felt and consciously realized by Comte, and wholly felt, but certainly not consciously realized by our ancestors, the pious builders of the churches of Sophia. (Solovyov, 1898/2009, pp. 225-226)

In her comments on this essay, Kornblatt (2009) noted that it contains "the most complete discussion anywhere in his writing of the Sophia icon and its meaning" (p. 212). She also does not hesitate to say that for Solovyov, Comte's "*Humanité* with a capital 'H,' this Great Being that was supposedly intuited by medieval Russian icon painters and church architects, *is* Sophia" (p. 168).

### **“Three Meetings” (1898)**

In this narrative poem, Solovyov articulated his three visions of Sophia: while attending Liturgy in Moscow in 1862 (when he was nine years old), in the British Museum in London in 1875, and in the Egyptian desert outside Cairo in 1876. Solovyov himself referred to the poem as “a short autobiography” and said that it depicted “the most significant thing that had ever happened in my life” (1898/1996b, p. 39, note). Groberg (1991) is of the position that Solovyov’s third vision “served as the wellspring of his philosophical and poetic inspiration” (p. 83). Kornblatt (2009) stated that Solovyov’s writings are “verbal ‘re-visions’ of the personal visions he claimed to have had in his youth” (p. 5), and that “Three Meetings” is the “clearest of all of Solovyov’s re-visions of his beloved Divine Sophia” (p. 264).

Interestingly, when Solovyov wrote the poem, more than 20 years had elapsed since the last of the visions. This leads to the question: Were Solovyov’s visions of Sophia actual occurrences or the literary invention of an individual whose poetic and philosophical talents were equally extraordinary? Du Quenoy (2010) conducted a detailed examination of Solovyov’s personal correspondence and found no mention of these visions, not even to the individuals who were closest to him. If the visions were real, and if they truly represented such great significance in Solovyov’s life and philosophy, would he have remained completely silent about them in all his other writings? Du Quenoy concluded that Sophia—at least the Sophia who is the subject of the visions in “Three Meetings”—represents “a symbolic metaphor for, or perhaps even projection of, its author’s lifetime spiritual quest for ecumenical unity rather than a late-hour confession of its origins” (p. 155).

At the same time, du Quenoy (2010) did not address Jakim’s (1999) evidence of the similarities in language between Solovyov’s visions in his short story and his poem. I found Jakim’s theory—that the short story and the third vision represent actual events or two versions of one event—more plausible, especially since Solovyov was writing poetry, not history. One can use poetry to describe personal events without writing about them in other media, and poets can change the setting of those events in order to portray their significance in a more dramatic fashion. Perhaps Solovyov felt that the Egyptian desert at dawn was a more poetic setting than a railroad car for the portrayal of the most significant event of his life.

Groberg (1991) focused on the mention of the “eternal feminine” in Solovyov’s third vision and attempted to illuminate its significance in terms of Jungian archetypes:

A spontaneous vision such as Solov'ev's [first vision] represents the surfacing of a primordial archetype. The archetype as such allows the human being a premonition of the divine and becomes a symbol by which the unconscious is brought to the conscious. . . . In the case of Solov'ev's self-solicited second vision and anticipated third vision, Jung would undoubtedly have concluded that Sophia represents not only the emergence of the Feminine archetype, but the recognition by Solov'ev of his own *anima*, the female aspect of his psyche. (pp. 86-87)

Helleman (2010) compared the feminine aspect of Sophia with the idealized Beatrice in the writings of Dante Alighieri. She noted that Solovyov's association of the feminine with passiveness and receptivity reflected common nineteenth-century assumptions about women that should not be considered acceptable. She believed, nonetheless, that Sophia, who is neither human nor mortal, is ultimately androgynous.

Jakim and Magnus (1996) also noted the "Dantesque echoes" (p. 7) throughout the poem, but they preferred to view the visions in terms of Solovyov's understanding of love. It is no accident, they said, that his first vision of Sophia occurs immediately after his experience of jealousy over a girl who did not reciprocate his love. It is an illustration that true love requires the annihilation of the ego. This leads to the "full development of the divine image in the individual human soul, the individual's living participation in the oneness and wholeness of being" (p. 7).

"Three Meetings" was among Solovyov's last works, and it provides a profound look at the visions that inspired a career and a life devoted to the love of Sophia and furthering her mission of restoring humanity's union with the divine.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Vladimir Solovyov was a radically innovative thinker whose philosophy was informed by his poetic visions. He responded to Russia's demand for intellectual and social reform by articulating a worldview that combined science, reason, and faith, not as competitors but as complementary approaches to one unified reality, a total unity. He had caught a glimpse of that total unity in his visions of Sophia.

Solovyov's thought is full of threes: the three persons of the Christian Trinity are at the heart of his metaphysics, the three sources of knowledge—experience, reason, and faith—are the foundation of his epistemology, and the three fundamental human emotions—shame,

compassion, and reverence—are the basis of his ethical system. In each case, the importance of the three is in their unity. The triune God is the principle of all that is, the three ways of knowing produce an integral knowledge, and the three emotions lead to a morality that results in individuals' unity within themselves, with each other, and with God. Unity is the essence of all that is. Unity is the essence of God himself, and for Solovyov, that unity is Sophia.

For Solovyov, the central event of human history was the Incarnation: the unity of the divine and the human in the Divine Human, Jesus Christ, and Sophia was a participant in that unity. The Logos, the second person of the Christian Trinity, was the divine and active principle of that unity, and Sophia was the human and passive principle. Despite its “passive” nature in that unity, humanity is now responsible for action: to freely cooperate with divinity and sanctify the cosmos and restore its original unity with God, which is the goal of human history. Sophia is present to humanity in her three incarnations: in Christ, in the intercession of the Virgin Mary, and in the Church.

This is not to say that Solovyov's philosophy and theology are his best articulation of his sophianic visions. Sophia had many meanings for him. She could evoke the personified Wisdom of the Jewish scriptures, Christ as the Wisdom of God, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, the Church, and the Sophia icon of Russian Orthodoxy. Walicki (1998) said that “the concept of Sophia in Solov'ëv's philosophy is somewhat ambiguous” (p. 29), but Sophia is more than a concept. She is a divine reality who possesses a symbolic richness as well as a unifying power.

I agree with Kornblatt's (2009) assertion that for Solovyov, Sophia is a principle of mediation and unity, bringing opposites together and transforming each of them in the process. I would add that Sophia is also a principle of transcendence in that she requires an abandonment of the ego as a prerequisite for the unity she brings. In responding to Sophia's call, humans join themselves with each other and with the divine principle through her. In so doing, together they bring about the restoration of the unity of all things by transforming themselves and the cosmos from what is to what should be.

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<sup>1</sup> Luk'ianov's work is not available in English.

<sup>2</sup> This work is not available in English.

<sup>3</sup> I use these terms in their strict philosophical sense rather than in reference to the broader fields of study that use the same names.

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<sup>4</sup> This work is not available in English.

<sup>5</sup> This work is not available in English.

<sup>6</sup> Florensky presented an extended discussion of sky-blue as a symbol of heaven in religious art (1914/1997, pp. 390-406).

<sup>7</sup> I discuss Sophia's depiction in iconography at greater length in Chapter Four, "Sophia in the Thought of Pavel Florensky."

<sup>8</sup> This work is not available in English.

<sup>9</sup> There is no complete translation of *The Sophia* in English. Kornblatt provided translations of several sections (2009, pp. 109-163).

## CHAPTER FOUR: SOPHIA IN THE THOUGHT OF PAVEL FLORENSKY

### Biography

Pavel Aleksandrovich Florensky was born in 1882 in the small town of Evlakh in what is today Azerbaijan (Chant, 1996b). His abilities and contributions in a broad range of fields amaze scholars even today. One could say that he was a living example of the ideal of integration that Solovyov had proclaimed:

Probably no one deserves to be called “the Russian Leonardo” more than Pavel Florensky, whose wide-ranging, seminal contributions to mathematics, physics, electrodynamics, folkloristics, philology, marine botany, art history and theory, earth science, philosophy, theology, and esotericism were all part of his lifelong quest for a comprehensive worldview, uniting science, religion, and art; reason and faith; Orthodox tradition and futuristic thaumaturgy. (Young, 2012, pp. 119-120)

Pavel’s father was Aleksandr Ivanovich Florensky, a Russian railway engineer, and his paternal grandfather was a doctor, descended from a long line of priests. His mother was Salome Saporian, a woman from an old Armenian family who believed they were descended from the pre-Romanic Greeks (Pyman, 2010). Despite this heritage, she was “thoroughly Russified” and had “little to no interest in things Armenian” (Young, 2012, p. 120). She used the Russian form of her family name, Saporova, and after her marriage, she used Olga as her first name instead of her Armenian name, Salome.

The Florensky household was agnostic. Pavel’s father was “neither religious nor antireligious” (Young, 2012, p. 120), but Florensky’s Aunt Julia—his father’s sister—taught her nieces and nephews about the Orthodox faith and even took Pavel to receive communion when he was seven years old (Trubachev, 2012).

As a student in the Gymnasium, the young Florensky studied a wide range of subjects and had a particular talent for mathematics and physics. Despite all the knowledge he was acquiring, he felt “that Truth is there for the discovering, but that to comprehend the Whole Truth is a task beyond the mind of the individual” (Pyman, 2010, p. 22). He awakened one night from a nightmare and heard himself saying aloud, “It’s impossible without God” (p. 22). And on another night, he felt himself getting out of bed, climbing through his window, and walking into the courtyard where he heard a voice call him by name, “Pavel.” It was not until several years later that he understood this as a call to the Christian faith.

Florensky attended Moscow University where he studied mathematics, and he graduated in 1904. After graduation, he declined the university's offer of a research scholarship and chose instead to enroll at the Moscow Theological Academy (Slesinski, 1984).

Florensky's brilliant start as a mathematician . . . could have led to a productive and distinguished academic career. But like Solovyov before him, Florensky turned to the study of theology, not abandoning science for religion, but . . . adding profound immersion in Orthodox spirituality to his previous precocious accomplishments in mathematics and natural science. (Young, 2012, p. 124)

After graduating from his theological studies in 1908, Florensky became a lecturer in philosophy at the Academy. He had considered becoming a monk, but his confessor advised him to marry. Florensky married Anna Mikhailovna in 1910, much to the surprise of his friends, who were concerned that all of his close relationships had been with other males (Young, 2012). He was ordained an Orthodox priest in 1911, wrote his master's dissertation, *On Spiritual Truth*, in 1912, and defended his doctoral dissertation, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, in 1914 (Gustafson, 1997). In this latter work, Florensky devoted an entire chapter to a discussion of Sophia.

Florensky taught as a professor at the Theological Academy until it was closed after the revolutions of 1917, at which time he also had to curtail his activity as a priest. The new government, however, acknowledged his mathematical and scientific talents and their value to the state:

He was a recognized, valuable national asset during the early years of the Soviet Union. He served on a large number of scientific and educational boards and commissions, lectured on all of the many subjects he was qualified to speak on, wrote hundreds of technical papers, led research expeditions, [and] edited and contributed more than 140 entries to a great encyclopedia of technology. (Young, 2012, p. 130)

The breadth of Florensky's talents was astounding:

From 1920-1927, he lectured on the theory of perspective in the Higher State Technical-Artistic Studios . . . and at the same time was a leading collaborator in the Commission for the Electrification of Soviet Russia . . . . [In 1927, he invented] an extraordinary noncoagulating machine oil, called "dekanite" by the Soviets in commemoration of the

tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. In addition, one of his scientific works, a book on dielectrics, even became a standard textbook. (Slesinski, 1984, p. 34)

Florensky continued to wear his priest's cassock, cap, and pectoral cross while he performed his secular duties, which put him at odds with the Soviet authorities (Slesinski, 1984). Young (2012) saw this, not as an expression of defiance, but a result of Florensky's being "a walking example of unified contraries. . . . He was indifferent to politics and inwardly free of all forms of external government" (p. 121).

When the Soviet government sent more than two hundred intellectuals—including Florensky's friend, Sergius Bulgakov—into exile in 1922, Florensky stayed behind, undoubtedly knowing what awaited him. He was arrested in 1928 on charges of being part of a counterrevolutionary plot. He pleaded guilty rather than inform on others, and he was sentenced to prison, although he served only two months (Young, 2012). Florensky was arrested on similar charges in 1933 and again pleaded guilty. This time he was sentenced to ten years. In November 1937, the Soviet authorities held a secret meeting "to put an end to the activities of the 'professor-priest'" (Goltz, 1990, p. 352). Florensky was sentenced to death, and he was executed by firing squad on December 8, 1937.

Professor Leonid Sabaneeff, who knew Florensky from the time they had studied together at Moscow University, remembered him as a serious man of extraordinary depth, a quiet personality, and a mysterious, dark side, "creepy . . . demoniac or diabolical, and yet holy" (1961, p. 312). Sabaneeff said that his colleague, Professor Luzhin, once told him of three of Florensky's spiritual disciples, "whom he was training in 'spiritual asceticism.' All three committed suicide" (p. 313). Whether this is fact or legend, Sabaneeff said that "Lucifer was closer to him than Christ" (pp. 316-317), and he recalled that Florensky's "intellect prevailed over his 'charisma' . . . . In him the motif of loving-kindness, of grace and forgiveness, sounded muted, and he disliked making it sound at all. Beyond any doubt there was a demoniac element in him" (p. 325).

Florensky's grandson, Igumen (Abbot) Andronik Trubachev, however, painted a quite different picture. In order to save others, not only did Florensky plead guilty to the false charges of creating a counterrevolutionary monarchist organization, he also confessed to being the ideologue behind it. This guilty plea was the primary obstacle to his canonization by the Orthodox Church (Trubachev, 2012). Moreover, a close associate had arranged to have Czech

President Masaryk appeal to the Soviet authorities for Florensky's release. In 1934, Florensky's wife was permitted to visit him in the prison camp. She told him of this plan, but he would have none of it (Goltz, 1990). Trubachev believed that Florensky viewed his imprisonment not as the result of political oppression, but as a path to Christ (Trubachev, 2012).

Young (2012) concluded that the Soviet authorities were correct in their assessment that Florensky's loyalties were not to the existing government, but neither were they to the existing world. He was a man who happened to be dwelling in this world, but was not of it, [a] part ancient, part medieval, part modern and even postmodern man, a resident of more than a single dimension in time. (p. 133)

### **Overview of Florensky's Philosophy**

Florensky's philosophy was close to that of Solovyov in its essence, although Florensky added his own particular "flavor" to many of the ideas and their expression. Like Solovyov, he integrated philosophy and theology, so he explored philosophical themes from a Christian perspective and vice versa. In his introduction to Florensky's most important work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Gustafson (1997) said that "the whole book can be considered an exploration of the epistemological, ontological, and moral implications" of Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation (p. xiv). Florensky's sophiology was very closely connected with the doctrine of the Trinity, as I will explain.

I begin with a brief overview of Florensky's philosophy as a context for understanding his sophiology. He articulated a metaphysics that was grounded in the Christian triune God and the goodness of creation, an epistemology that embraced faith in order to attain truth, and a morality in which humanity could ascend to divinity by means of an ecclesial, transpersonal, self-negating, self-transcending love. I also explore Florensky's sophiology and its relationship to his understanding of Christian doctrine and life in the Church.

### **Metaphysics**

Like Solovyov, Florensky grounded his metaphysics in the triune God of Christianity: The Subject of Truth is a Relationship of Three. . . . I speak of the number "three" as immanent to the Truth, as inwardly inseparable from the Truth. There cannot be fewer than three, for only three hypostases eternally make one another what they eternally are. Only in the unity of Three does each hypostasis receive an absolute affirmation, which

establishes this hypostasis as such. Outside the Three, there is not one, there is no Subject of Truth. (Florensky, 1914/1997, pp. 37-38)

The Trinity is an essential part of Christian theology, and Florensky presented a detailed discussion, including propositions expressed in symbolic logic, to demonstrate it. Zenkovsky (1953) did not find deductive reasoning helpful in this instance. Florensky's explanation, "though intending to be rational and logically convincing . . . is essentially formal, and thus without value" (vol. 2, p. 883, n.2), at least to one who did accept the Christian faith.

Florensky's metaphysics viewed the cosmos as the created work of God. "The fundamental dogmatic premise of Florensky's theodicy (as of Solovyov's theology of [Divine Humanity]) is that the Creator and Creation are one, as God and [Humanity] are one in Christ" (Gustafson, 1997, p. xiv).

The faith of Christianity was instrumental in revealing to humanity that the cosmos was not something evil in its materiality:

Only Christianity has given birth to an unprecedented being-in-love with creation. Only Christianity has wounded the heart with the wound of loving pity for all being. . . . This relation to creation became conceivable only when people saw in creation not merely a demonic shell [e.g., Gnosticism], not some emanation of Divinity [e.g., Neo-Platonism], not some illusory appearance of God . . . but an independent, autonomous, responsible creation of God, beloved of God and capable of responding to His love. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 210)

For Florensky, the ultimate goodness and holiness of creation were nonetheless tainted by sin:

Objectivity does exist. It is God's creation. To live and feel together with all creation, not with the creation that [humanity] has corrupted but with the creation that came out of the hands of its Creator; to see in this creation another, higher nature; through the crust of sin, to feel the pure core of God's creation . . . . is to posit the requirement of a restored, i.e., a spiritual, person. Once again, the question of asceticism arises. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 192)

The recurring theme of asceticism—self-denial as a pre-requisite for the approach to God—accorded with Zenkovsky's (1953) observation that Florensky "renounces all 'deduction' of created being; his method is not to 'descend' from the Absolute to creation, but rather to 'ascend'

from creation to the Absolute” (vol. 2, p. 884). Goltz (1990) saw a similar idea in what he considered Florensky’s Christian approach to science:

In the controversy between the “law of entropy” (i.e.[,] of general levelling down, of death and chaos), on the one hand, and the “law of ectropy” (i.e.[,] of life, culture and the Logos) on the other, Florensky spoke basically of nothing but the struggle of Christ the Logos against the Antichrist who wants to reduce the world to the chaos of entropy. (p. 347)

It is in Florensky’s sophiology that one can see the culmination of his metaphysical thought, combined with its expression in the symbols and doctrines of Orthodoxy. I will examine Florensky’s sophiology in detail after a brief discussion of his epistemology and moral philosophy.

### **Epistemology**

Like Solovyov, Florensky distinguished three types of knowledge: sensuous, intellectual, and mystical. But all three of these types of knowledge had a critical limitation:

These are the three kinds of self-evident intuition. But all three of these aspects (sensuous-empirical, transcendental-rationalistic, and subconscious-mystical) have one insufficiency in common: their naked, unjustified givenness. . . . But why is “this” precisely “this,” and not something else? . . . “It consists in the fact,” it is said, “that, in general, every given is itself: every A is A.” . . . But by no means is this formula an answer to our question “Why?” (Florensky, 1914/1997, pp. 21-22)

Florensky’s use of the principle of identity in his epistemological reflections stemmed from the early formulation of his worldview based on his study of mathematics. At the age of eighteen, he wrote to his mother, “For me mathematics is the key to a world view” (*Pi’sma 1900 goda*, cited in Pyman, 2010, p. 27).<sup>1</sup> During his studies at Moscow University, Florensky adopted the concept of “arythmology,” a theory of discontinuous functions in mathematics, which he applied as a complementary concept to the idea of continuity in all things:

Florensky believed that the mathematics of continuity formed the basis for the nineteenth century determinism and materialism that new thought needed to overcome. . . . The logic of discontinuity allows Florensky to argue that instead of accepting that “truth” is either something or its negation, A or (-A), “truth” must be considered both something and its negation, A + (-A). . . . So in Florensky’s discontinuous worldview, one thing does not

counter or replace its opposite but joins with it, neither part losing its identity, to form something higher and greater. (Young, 2012, pp. 121-122)

Sabaneeff (1961) recalled the same emphasis in Florensky: “He obviously regarded antinomy as the basic law of the universe” (p. 314).

The existence of antinomies represented for Florensky both the inadequacy of reason for the attainment of eternal truth and the effects of sin on human understanding:

From the point of view of dogmatics, antinomies are inevitable. If sin exists . . . then our entire being, just like the whole world, is fragmented. . . . The existence of a multitude of dissonant schemes . . . is the best proof that there are cracks in the world. . . . Only the purified God-bearing mind of saintly ascetics is *somewhat* more whole. In this mind, the healing of the fissures and cracks has begun . . . . For the mind itself is the healing organ of the world. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 118)

Gustafson (1997) said that, for Florensky, “Every singular truth is to be understood symbolically as a truth about the Truth, which can be experienced only ‘discontinuously.’ Christian doctrine is seen as a web of antinomial statements about this Truth” (p. xv). Florensky gave several examples, such as the one essence and three hypostases of the Trinity, and the unmerged yet inseparable divine and human natures in Christ. Human reason was damaged by sin, and so for Florensky, ultimate Truth was possible only through faith.

Knowledge, therefore, had an ecclesial dimension. In the very first sentence of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Florensky said, “living religious experience [is] the sole legitimate way to gain knowledge of the dogmas” (1914/1997, p. 5). Slesinski (1984) explained the term Florensky used—“ecclesiality” (*tserkovnost*)—as “none other than the stance that religious truth is graspable only in the context of ecclesial life, or more specifically, in the experience of divine worship” (p. 64). Gustafson (1997) described “ecclesiality” as “new life in the Spirit, experienced within Orthodoxy as represented ideally in the lives of the ascetics and elders in the monastic tradition” (p. xiii). Humans understood that they could not grasp the totality of divine revelation on their own, so they required the guidance and support of the Church:

Yes, in life everything is in a state of unrest, everything is as unstable as a mirage. And out of the depths of the soul there rises an unbearable need to find support in the “Pillar and Ground of the Truth” . . . (1 Tim 3:15). (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 12)

For Florensky, this epistemological principle applied to all of Orthodoxy: “Orthodoxy is shown, not proved. That is why there is only one way to understand Orthodoxy: through direct Orthodox experience” (p. 9).

### **Moral Philosophy**

Florensky’s epistemology was closely connected with his moral philosophy in that the ecclesial approach to the truth was based on love:

The spiritual activity in which and by which knowledge of the Pillar and Ground of the Truth is given is love. This is love full of grace, manifested only in a purified consciousness. It can be attained only by a long (O how long!) ascesis. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 285)

This love purified the heart and permitted the soul to ascend to God. One developed it through “ascesis,” the denial of the ego: “Self-renunciation is the only thing that brings us close to Godlikeness” (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 121).

Love actualized itself and manifested itself in relationships, both human and divine. According to Gustafson (1997), Florensky’s moral philosophy

focuses on mutual relationships between human beings and between humanity and God, understood subjectively and metaphysically. The Goodness of these relationships rests on what is called love. This love is modeled after the Incarnation and is imagined as a process of kenosis, of self-emptying. (p. xvii)

Florensky used the mathematical principle of identity as a contrast to the transcendent nature of love, a metaphysical event that actualized the same consubstantiality that was the basis of the unity of the Trinity:

The metaphysical nature of love lies in the supralogical overcoming of the naked self-identity “I = I” and in the going out of oneself. And this happens when the power of God’s love flows out into another person and tears apart in him the bonds of finite human selfhood. . . . I becomes consubstantial with the brother, consubstantial (*homoousios*) and not only like-substantial (*homoiousios*).<sup>2</sup>. . . I thereby freely makes itself not-I . . . . It deprives itself of the attributes necessarily given and proper to it . . . according to the law of ontological egoism or identity. For the sake of the norm of another’s being, I transcends itself, the norm of its own being, and voluntarily submits to a new image so as

thereby to incorporate its I in the I of another being, which for it is not-I. Thus the impersonal not-I becomes a person, another I, i.e., Thou. (1914/1997, p. 67)

Lossky (1951) commented:

The conception of consubstantiality must guide us both in considering the relation between the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity and the relations between earthly creatures in so far as they are individual and seek to realize the Christian ideal of mutual love. . . . The love that leads to the identification of two beings is not, of course, a subjective mental process, but [one that] ontologically [transforms] the beings that love one another. (p. 181)

Young (2012) drew a parallel with Florensky's epistemology:

Knowing is a real going of the knower out of himself, or (what is the same thing) a real going of what is known into the knower, a real unification of the knower and what is known. . . . Thus "knowing" in Florensky is . . . an act of love, earthly and heavenly, a going out of oneself and a taking into oneself of an other. (p. 124)

Sidorov (1995) linked Florensky's conception of love with his metaphysics as well as his epistemology: "In the creative unity of the knower and known, ontology and epistemology—being and the knowledge of being—are necessarily identical" (p. 43).

I turn now from this overview of Florensky's philosophy—rooted in the Trinity, the goodness of creation, the ecclesial nature of knowledge, and the unifying action of love—to his understanding of Sophia. Unlike Solovyov, whose references to his sophiology are scattered throughout his works, Florensky provided a detailed exposition of his sophiological thought in a single chapter in his most important work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914/1997, pp. 231-283).

### **Sophia in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914)**

Each of the twelve "letters" in Florensky's most important work has a brief Latin saying above the chapter heading. Letter Ten is entitled simply, "Sophia," and the saying that introduces it is "*Omnia conjungo*. I unite all" (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 231). Florensky recognized that there were quite a few things to "unite" in a rational explanation of Sophia:

When a religious object enters into the sphere of rationality, what is most appropriate is the conjunction "and." . . . In writing this, I realize that . . . I cannot say *at once* all that is crowding together in my consciousness. (1914/1997, p. 235)

For Florensky, as for Solovyov before him, Sophia was a being that was not rationalized, but experienced. Chirovsky (1992) noted that Florensky exhibited a “distaste for over-systematization” (p. 177). Florensky, in fact, interrupted his technical explanation of Sophia to acknowledge the inadequacy of any attempt to express her philosophically:

That monad about which I speak is not a metaphysical essence given by logical determination. Rather, it is experienced in living experience; it is . . . determined . . . not by the pride of construction but by the humility of acceptance. True, I am compelled to use a metaphysical terminology, but in my speech these terms have not a strictly technical sense but a conventional or rather a symbolic one. They have the significance of colors by means of which inward experience is painted. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 236)

In this overview of Florensky’s sophiology, I outline the major themes he discussed: the relationship among Sophia, creation, and the Trinity; Sophia as a reference to various Orthodox teachings; the depiction of Sophia in different Orthodox icons; and the basic interpretations of Sophia in Orthodox history.

### **Sophia, the Trinity, and Creation**

In introducing Sophia, Florensky said that his main theme was “the perception by ascetics of the eternal roots of all creation by which creation is anchored in God” (1914/1997, p. 235). In other words, Sophia expressed the relationship between God and creation. It is noteworthy that in presenting Sophia, Florensky wrote of “the perception by ascetics,” referencing his belief that the monastic tradition represented the ideal of the ecclesial life in Orthodoxy (Gustafson, 1997).

According to Gustafson (1997), Florensky was the first Russian religious philosopher to develop Solovyov's idea of Sophia. Florensky, however, began his discussion by specifically distancing himself from Solovyov’s comparison of Sophia with Comte’s concept of the “Great Being.” Instead, he situated her origin in the creative love of God:

God’s love, which flows into this Entity, is the creative act by which this Entity acquires: (1) *life*, (2) *unity*, and (3) *being*. . . . But every monad exists only insofar as it allows Divine love to approach it . . . . This is the “Great Being,” not that to which Auguste Comte prayed, but one that is truly great: It is the actualized Wisdom of God. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 237)

Florensky continued:

Sophia is the Great Root of the whole creation . . . . That is, Sophia is all-integral creation and not merely all creation. Sophia is the Great Root by which creation goes into the intra-Trinitarian life, and through which it receives Life Eternal from the One Source of Life. Sophia is the original nature of creation, God’s creative love . . . . With regard to creation, Sophia is the Guardian Angel of creation, the Ideal person of the world. The shaping reason with regard to creation, Sophia is the shaped content of God-Reason, His “psychic content.” (1914/1997, p. 237)

There are several important ideas in this passage. For Florensky, Sophia was “all-integral” creation, that is, creation taken as a whole, not simply the sum of all creatures. She mediated the relationship between the Trinity and creation. As a root anchors a plant to its source of life and brings it nourishment, Sophia entered into the divine life of the Trinity to bring this life to creation. She was the “original nature of creation,” ideal creation, creation as it was meant to be before it was tainted by sin. Sophia was creation’s “guardian angel,”<sup>3</sup> providing divine protection, and the “ideal person,” a paradigm for humanity.

Sophia was also both the “shaping reason” of creation and the “shaped content of God-Reason.” This was reminiscent of the “created and uncreated” aspects of wisdom in Augustine and the “active and passive” principles of unity in Solovyov. In her “shaping” aspect, Sophia was the idea or prototype of creation, and the “shaped” aspect was the result of the actualization of God’s “psychic content” in creation.

Florensky emphasized the closeness of God, Sophia, and creation while maintaining their separate identities:

She is the Eternal Bride of the Word of God [the “Logos,” i.e., Christ]. Outside of Him and independently of Him, she does not have being and falls apart into fragments or ideas about creation. But in Him she receives creative power. One in God, she is multiple in creation and is perceived in her concrete appearances as . . . the spark of the eternal dignity of the person and as the image of God in [humanity]. (1914/1997, p. 239)

Florensky expressed a similar idea about the creaturely aspect of Sophia when he said, “She is a supramundane hypostatic collection of divine prototypes of that which exists” (1914/1997, p. 252).

Sophia, however, was more than just a collection of ideas in God’s mind. She was a “Person” with a capital “P,”—a term that Christian theologians generally reserve for the three

persons of the Trinity. I imagine that Florensky raised more than a few eyebrows in the Orthodox world with his description of Sophia as a “fourth Person.” This terminology may be the reason that the letter on Sophia was omitted from the initial publication of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* as a result of ecclesiastical pressure (Misler, 2002). Florensky explains:

Sophia takes part in the life of the Trihypostatic Divinity, enters into the interior of the Trinity, and enters into communion with Divine Love. Since Sophia is a *fourth*, creaturely, and therefore nonsubstantial Person, she does not “form” a Divine Unity. She “is” not love, but only enters into communion with Love. (1914/1997, p. 252)

Florensky carefully emphasized that he was not equating Sophia with the three persons of the Trinity, yet his terminology was unprecedented. Sophia entered into the very interior of the Trinity as a “*fourth* Person,” but Florensky added that she did so “by God’s condescension (but in no wise by her own nature!)” (p. 252). Gustafson (1997) commented:

While the designation of Sophia as a fourth hypostasis (albeit not by nature) was perhaps unfortunate and to some seemed heretical, Florensky succeeded more clearly than Solovyov in bringing the concept of Sophia into relationship with the whole Trinity. From the point of view of the theological Trinity *ad intra*, Sophia is the substance and power of being, the reason and meaning of being, and the purity and beauty of being. (p. xxi)

### **Sophia and Orthodox Teachings**

After emphasizing the unity of Sophia with the Trinity and creation, Florensky linked his understanding of Sophia with a number of other concepts, including humanity, the Church, and Mary, the Mother of God:

Sophia has yet another series of new aspects, which fragment the unified *idea* of Sophia into a number of dogmatic *concepts*. . . . If Sophia is all of Creation, then the soul and conscience of Creation, [Humanity], is Sophia *par excellence*. . . . [and] the soul and conscience of [Humanity], the Church, is Sophia *par excellence*. . . . [and] the soul and conscience of the Church of the Saints . . . the Mother of God . . . is, once again, Sophia *par excellence*. But the true sign of Mary Full of Grace is Her Virginity, the beauty of her soul. This is precisely Sophia. (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 253)

For Florensky, Sophia was humanity’s “Guardian Angel,” and as such, she was “the guardian of [humanity’s] purity” (1914/1997, p. 256). Humanity attained purity of heart through

the ascesis of self-denial. Florensky used the virginity of Mary as a symbol of purity, and so he referred to humanity's purity as its "virginity." This spiritual virginity was "the source of the contemplation of Sophia and the contemplation of Sophia [was] the source of virginity" (p. 255). In other words, one was able to practice self-denial and become pure by contemplating the purity of Sophia, and this contemplation in turn reinforced one's purity. This might appear to be a causal loop, but for Florensky, it was "only a particular case of the great antinomy between God's grace and human ascesis" (p. 255).

Florensky linked Sophia with both the Church and the Holy Spirit:

Sophia is the beginning and center of redeemed creation, the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Only by co-participating in Him . . . do we receive from the Holy Spirit freedom and mysterious purification. In this sense Sophia is . . . the Church in its heavenly aspect. And insofar as the Holy Spirit is the source of the sanctification of the earthly side of creation . . . Sophia is the Church in its earthly aspect. . . . And since purification occurs through the Holy Spirit . . . Sophia is the Holy Spirit to the extent that he has deified creation. (1914/1997, p. 253)

Florensky also associated Sophia with Mary, the mother of Christ. According to Slesinski (1984), "Sophia realizes itself in the cosmic beauty of all creation, but does so especially, indeed, incomparably so, in the Virgin Mother of God. Her chaste heart radiates spiritual beauty and can only inspire us in her sophianic splendor" (pp. 183-184).

Orthodoxy honors Mary with the title, *Theotokos*, "Birthgiver of God." For Florensky, she was also the "Bearer of Sophia, the Manifestation of Sophia" (1914/1997, p. 259), who, like Sophia herself, played a mediating role between heaven and earth:

The Mother of God combines Sophianic, i.e., angelic, power and human humility. [She] stands at the boundary separating creation from the Creator, and since what is intermediate between the two is utterly unfathomable, the Mother of God is also utterly unfathomable. . . . She is . . . the Queen of Heaven, and, *a fortiori*, the Queen of Earth. (pp. 259-260)

### **Sophia and Orthodox Icons**

Solovyov had referenced the icons of Russian Orthodoxy in his discussions of Sophia in *Russia and the Universal Church* and "The Idea of Humanity in Auguste Comte." As an art historian, Florensky found Sophia's depiction in iconography particularly significant. "The icon

of Sophia, the Wisdom of God[,] exists in many variants, and this alone proves that sophianic iconography was imbued with a genuine religious creativity, emanating from the soul of the people” (1914/1997, p. 267). He distinguished three types of Sophia icons based on the images they contained and the cities in which the best examples could be found: (a) the type of the Angel or the *Novgorod* Sophia, (b) the type of the Church (sometimes called the Sophia of the Cross) or the *Yaroslavl* Sophia, and (c) the type of the Birthgiver of God or the *Kiev* Sophia.

The Novgorod type, according to Florensky (1914/1997), dated from the eleventh century. It depicted an angel on a throne of seven columns, recalling the seven columns on which personified Wisdom had built her house in Proverbs 9:1. The angel was in the center of a sky-blue circle which was itself surrounded by stars. The angel wore a crown surrounded by a golden halo, and its hands, face, and wings had a fiery color. Above the angel was the image of Christ, who also had a golden halo. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was slightly below the angel and on the right, and John the Baptist was slightly below the angel and on the left. Both of these figures had green-blue halos.

Florensky (1914/1997) believed that the Novgorod icon depicted Sophia as an abstract, divine attribute. The wings represented closeness to heaven, and the fiery color represented fullness of spirituality. The sky-blue of the circle represented “the world on high, in the center of which lives Sophia” (p. 271), and the positions of the figures and colors of the halos represented their hierarchy: first Christ, followed by Sophia, followed by Mary and John the Baptist.

The Yaroslavl type, which dated from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, depicted a crucifixion scene (Florensky, 1914/1997). The crucifix rested on an altar under a baldachin (liturgical canopy), supported by six pillars with the cross in the center as the seventh. Above the baldachin was Mary surrounded by angels, and higher still was a figure representing God the Father or Christ. In front of the altar was a figure that represented either King Solomon or a priest. There were inscriptions on the pillars referring to the sacraments and councils of the Church, and the entire scene was surrounded by ten groups of saints. Because of all the ecclesial elements, Florensky interpreted this icon as “*the Church as a whole*, with all its spiritual powers and foundations” (p. 274).

The Kiev type of Sophia icon, whose style Florensky (1914/1997) dated to the sixteenth century, had many similarities to the Yaroslavl type, except that Mary, the mother of Christ, was the central figure. She stood beneath a baldachin supported by seven pillars. Two angels held a

crown above her head, and above them were figures representing God, the Holy Spirit, and seven archangels. Below her were figures representing seven prophets. The style of the icon along with the elements it depicted led Florensky to interpret it as “a syncretic union of the crowning of the Mother of God and the Bride in the Apocalypse” (p. 276).

### **Sophia and Orthodox History**

Florensky (1914/1997) concluded his discussion of Sophia with a brief overview of how Sophia was understood in different periods of Orthodox history. Gustafson (1997) summarized his interpretations:

Historically, Florensky argued, the image of Sophia has surfaced at three different moments, in Greek patristics as an object of contemplation, in the Slavic medieval world as an emblem of chastity and spiritual perfection, and in modern Russia as a symbol of the unity of all creation, the mystical church. (pp. xx-xxi)

Florensky (1914/1997) himself acknowledged the seeming incompatibility of these interpretations, which Slesinski (1984) called Sophia’s “dynamic multiplicity” (p. 183). For Florensky, however, this presented no problem at all:

Separate aspects of faith disintegrate atomistically only for scholastic theology, but, in living life, these aspects, each retaining its independence, become so closely interwoven that one idea imperceptibly evokes another. For a believer . . . these are realities that cannot be experienced independently of one another, realities that are interpenetrating and interconnected. . . . The speech of faith is in no wise like the speech of theology, and faith clothes its knowledge . . . in figurative language, which covers the higher truth and depth of contemplation in consistent contradictions. (1914/1997, p. 244)

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Pavel Florensky was in many ways a practitioner of the integral approach to the world that Solovyov had advocated. He was a physicist, mathematician, art historian, philosopher, theologian, priest, and mystic. He was equally at home in the physical, rational, and mystical worlds. He was a husband, father, priest, and prisoner of conscience; a man who preached the Christian path of faith and asceticism; a man who lived this path until his tragic death.

Florensky’s philosophy was similar to that of Solovyov, but he expressed it very differently. His mode of expression was more like that of a spiritual director than a philosopher or theologian. He stressed the importance of experience in the context of a lived, ecclesial faith,

and the significance of a self-denying love as a means of purification. He was aware of the many contradictions in life and in faith, and he accepted these as the consequences of a fragmented reality. He also had an intuition of the original unity of that reality in Sophia:

Since Holy Sophia is an all-embracing reality, no one concept can capture its essence and describe its nature fully. Florensky must, therefore, resort to various figures to try to elucidate his sophiological insights. One of his most basic intuitions is that Holy Sophia lies at the basis of, or more profoundly, is the transcendental unity of all created being. (Slesinski, 1984, p. 177)

For Florensky, Sophia was the very root of creation, entering into the inner life of the Trinity itself, relating to it as a “fourth Person.” She was the mediator between the Trinity and creation, between heaven and earth. Sophia was the guardian angel of creation, ideal humanity, the prototypes of creation in the mind of God, and the actualization of those prototypes in his creative acts. She was the Bride of the Logos, and could even be associated with the Logos itself, as well as the Holy Spirit, Mary the Mother of Christ, and the Church. Sophia was the inspiration of icons, which simultaneously represented and mediated the presence of the images they symbolized. And behind all these varying portrayals, there was a resolution of antinomies in Sophia’s unifying being. The saying with which Florensky introduced his discussion of Sophia was most appropriate: “*Omnia conjungo*. I unite all” (1914/1997, p. 231).

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<sup>1</sup> This work is not available in English.

<sup>2</sup> The term *homoiousios* (like-substantial) was rejected in favor of *homoousios* (consubstantial) in defining the relationship between Christ and God the Father at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

<sup>3</sup> Here Florensky echoed Solovyov’s use of this same term in *Russia and the Universal Church* (1887/1948, p. 167).

## CHAPTER FIVE: SOPHIA IN THE THOUGHT OF SERGIUS BULGAKOV

### Biography

Sergius Nikolaevich Bulgakov was born in 1871 in Livny, Russia (Chant, 1996a). His mother came from a noble background, and his father was a priest whose ancestors had been priests for six generations. The young Sergius had a strict religious upbringing, and he described the family house as resembling a church (Evtuhov, 1997). According to Valliere (2000),

the Bulgakov family's daily life revolved around the rituals of Orthodoxy. . . . Bulgakov described the religiosity of his early years as "a child's Christian 'pantheism,'"<sup>1</sup> . . . a sense of the wholeness of things in God. (p. 228)

Bulgakov's childhood, however, was not without its emotional challenges. According to Evtuhov (1997), he remembered his father as "a somewhat pathetic figure: a man of passive character" and his mother as "excessively nervous, never sleeping or eating but always worrying and smoking" (p. 23). Bulgakov's father and two older brothers died of alcoholism, and his mother was troubled by this loss in addition to the death of several of her children in infancy (Engel, 1996).

The young Bulgakov planned to become a priest, and he entered the seminary at age thirteen. But he left after three of the required four years because he had lost his faith. This period of unbelief lasted until he was in his thirties. He would later write in his autobiography, "I gave up the positions of faith without defending them. . . . I accepted nihilism without a struggle" (pp. 27, 30, cited in Zenkovsky, 1953, vol. 2, p. 890).<sup>2</sup> He committed himself instead to the struggle for social and economic justice. Bulgakov transferred to a secular school and later attended the University of Moscow (Valliere, 2000). He studied political economy there from 1890-94, and he joined the Marxist movement.

Bulgakov would later write of two experiences he had during his Marxist years that made him re-think his orientation. In 1895, he was on a train:

Evening was falling. We were traveling across the southern steppe . . . . In the distance the fast-approaching Caucasus Mountains appeared blue. I was seeing them for the first time. And fixing my avid gaze on the mountains . . . drinking in the light and air, I harkened to the revelation of nature. . . . My soul was not reconciled with a nature without God. . . . My soul became agitated, started to rejoice and began to shiver: *but what if*. . . if it is not a wasteland, not a lie, not a mask, not death but him, the blessed and

loving Father, his raiment, his love? . . . And that moment of meeting did not die in my soul; this was her apocalypse, her wedding feast, the first encounter with Sophia.

(Bulgakov 1917/2012, pp. 8, 9)

Three years later he had a similar experience when he saw a painting of the Sistine Madonna while visiting Dresden:

There, into my soul peered the eyes of the Queen of Heaven approaching on clouds with the Pre-eternal Child. . . . They know what awaits them, what they are destined for, and they come freely to surrender themselves, to accomplish the will of the One who sent them . . . . I was beside myself, my head was spinning, tears at once joyful and bitter flowed from my eyes, the ice in my heart melted and a kind of knot in my life came undone. . . . I was still a Marxist then and I involuntarily called this contemplation *a prayer*. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, pp. 9-10)

In 1898, Bulgakov married Elena Ivanovna Tokmakova, with whom he would later have two sons and a daughter (Engel, 1996). He was a professor of political economy at the Polytechnical Institute of Kiev from 1901-1906 (Jakim 2008b). He had become an active member of the Social Democratic Party, and he maintained ties with social activists and thinkers in Russia and Germany. As he began to gain a reputation as a Marxist political thinker, however, Bulgakov began questioning the fundamental principles of Marxism (Young, 2012). In his master's thesis, *Capitalism and Agriculture*, which he had defended in 1900, Bulgakov

investigated agricultural structures in England, Germany, France, Ireland, and the United States [and] ended by asserting the inapplicability of Marxist theory to agriculture and, hence, the impossibility of any generalized theory of capitalist society. (Evtuhov, 1997, p. 5)

Under the influence of the idealist philosophy of Kant, Bulgakov also concluded that “the fundamental principles of social and individual life must be established in connection with a theory of the absolute value of goodness, truth, and beauty” (Lossky, 1951, p. 192). He severed ties with Marxism, and in 1904, he published *From Marxism to Idealism*, a collection of essays in which he outlined his philosophical crisis, which ultimately returned him to a Christian worldview (Zenkovsky, 1953).

Bulgakov had an additional religious experience at a hermitage he visited in 1908, after which he re-embraced Orthodoxy:

I had come here in the secret hope of encountering God. But here my resolution definitely abandoned me. . . . I almost ran out of the church . . . . I walked in the direction of the guest house . . . and I came to my senses . . . in the elder's cell. *It led* me there . . . . From the elder I learned that all human sins are like a droplet in the ocean of divine mercy. I left there, forgiven and at peace, trembling and in tears, feeling myself borne up inside the churchyard as if on wings. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, p. 11)

In 1909, Bulgakov contributed to *Vekhi (Signposts)*, a collection of articles that opposed the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia. In his article, "Heroism and Asceticism," he criticized the intelligentsia for taking spiritual principles out of their Christian context. The intelligentsia had turned those principles upside down, worshipping humanity in place of divinity, and while they expressed opposition to the Orthodox Church, they had actually created a religion of their own:

The intelligentsia rejects Christianity and its standards and appears to accept atheism. In fact, instead of atheism it adopts the dogmas of the religion of [Human Divinity (a reversal of "Divine Humanity")] . . . and then turns this religion into idolatry. (Bulgakov, 1909/1986, p. 26)

Under the influence of Solovyov and Florensky, Bulgakov began to develop his own sophiological conception of philosophy (Jakim 2008b). According to Schipflinger (1998), Bulgakov's<sup>3</sup> commitment to social welfare and his familiarity with the Sophiological ideas of Soloviev and Florenski led him to Sophia, and She subsequently became the focal point of his thinking. Bulgakov wanted to demonstrate the relationship between the Wisdom inherent in creation and the Wisdom of God. His intention was to . . . [emphasize] creation's unity and value and to also oppose the prevalent atheism of the time . . . . Through Sophiology he was attempting to penetrate the world's hidden meaning, and he believed to have attained this by coming to understand Sophia as the universal, living element at the basis of all existence, both created and divine. (p. 274)

Bulgakov and Florensky became close friends, and Bulgakov first expressed his sophiological ideas in *Philosophy of Economy* (1912), for which he received his doctorate from the University of Moscow (Lossky, 1951). In this work, Bulgakov articulated his sophiology in a secular, social context (Evtuhov, 1997). He later elaborated his sophiology in *Unfading Light* (1917), his first religious work (Jakim, 2008b). After this, Bulgakov's writings became

predominantly theological, and he was ordained a priest in 1918, shortly before his forty-eighth birthday (Valliere, 2000). Florensky was present at his ordination (Schipflinger, 1998).

In 1922, Bulgakov was expelled from Russia along with many other academicians who opposed the government. He lived in Prague and taught in the Russian Faculty of Law at Prague University until 1925 (Zenkovsky, 1953). Bulgakov then went to Paris, where he helped found the Paris Orthodox Theological Institute (Engel, 1996). He was both the dean and a professor of theology there until his death (Zenkovsky, 1953).

In the spring of 1939, Bulgakov underwent an operation for cancer of the throat. The operation was successful, but his vocal cords had to be removed. Several months later, he was able to speak, but barely above a whisper. Nonetheless, he continued to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, and he even gave lectures. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage in the summer of 1944 (Zenkovsky, 1953).

Bulgakov, according to Jakim (2008b), “was the twentieth century’s most profound Orthodox systematic theologian” (p. x). During the course of his career, he wrote a huge number of books and articles. The most significant included his trilogy on Divine Humanity: *The Lamb of God* (1933) on christology (the theology of Christ), *The Comforter* (1936) on pneumatology (the theology of the Holy Spirit), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (published posthumously, 1945) on anthropology and ecclesiology (the theology of humanity and the Church). Also noteworthy were the books in his “small trilogy” (Zenkovsky, 1953, vol. 2, p. 893): *The Burning Bush* (1926) on mariology (the theology of Mary), *The Friend of the Bridegroom* (1927) on John the Baptist, and *Jacob’s Ladder* (1929) on angelology (the theology of angels). His *Sophia, the Wisdom of God* (1935) contained a summary of his sophiology.

Bulgakov’s ideas were not without their critics. His sophiology was strongly criticized by some Orthodox theologians, who believed that his positions did not adequately separate the uncreated God from the created cosmos (Lossky, 1951). The Orthodox Church appointed a special commission to investigate Bulgakov’s “heresy,” but he was exonerated of this charge and permitted to continue teaching (Zenkovsky, 1953). I provide additional details about this controversy later in this chapter.

### **Overview of Bulgakov’s Philosophy**

As I did in my earlier chapters on Solovyov and Florensky, I preface my discussion of Bulgakov’s sophiology with an overview of his philosophy. Since the bulk of Bulgakov’s

writings were theological in nature, several of the major histories of Russian philosophy available in English had relatively little to say about him (Copleston, 1986; Edie, Scanlan, & Zeldin, 1965; Walicki, 1979). Lossky (1951), however, devoted an entire chapter to Bulgakov's philosophical thought, and Zenkovsky (1953) was emphatic in his position that

Bulgakov remained a philosopher even when he turned to theology; it is impossible to *separate* the philosopher from the theologian in him. It would be truer to say that he was more a philosopher than a theologian in his theologizing, than to say that theology suppressed his philosophic creativity. (vol. 2, p. 896)

It is important also to note the profound influence of both Solovyov and Florensky on Bulgakov, not just in his sophiology, but in his philosophy as a whole. Zenkovsky (1953) observed:

The style of Bulgakov's thought and the inner logic of his creative activity made him a "solitary person." He was not interested in the opinions of [others]; he always blazed his own trail. Only Solovyov and Florenski entered permanently and powerfully into his inner world. (vol. 2, p. 897)

## **Metaphysics**

In his first religious work, *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov articulated that "the absolute"—God—was the ultimate goal of philosophical inquiry, and he described it in terms of Solovyov's metaphysics of total unity:

For philosophy, *God is a problem* [i.e., a subject of inquiry], just as everything is and must be a problem for it. . . . Philosophy unavoidably strives towards the absolute, towards all-unity or towards Divinity, inasmuch as it is disclosed in thinking; ultimately it too has as its sole and universal problem God, and only God. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, p. 81)

According to Zenkovsky (1953), Bulgakov's reference to "all-unity" in this passage was "wholly in the spirit of Solovyov" (vol. 2, p. 896). Although Bulgakov mentioned it only in passing, the reference to total unity was "the key to Bulgakov's philosophic searchings" (vol. 2, p. 896, n. 1). Bulgakov added a sophiological reference as well: "In this problematization, philosophy is essentially an unquenchable and always reigniting 'love for Sophia'" (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, p. 82).

Bulgakov also followed the metaphysics of Solovyov and Florensky in connecting the triune God with creation and specifically with humanity:

The world is created by God. It is a creation, and in the Trinity it has the beginning of its being. . . . In all of its immeasurableness the world's being does not belong to it, it is *given* to the world. And in the heart of the human being is heard the same unceasing whisper: You do not have the root of your being in yourself; you are created. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, p. 181)

Zenkovsky (1953) observed, however, that unlike Solovyov, Bulgakov found the transition from the absolute being of God to the relative being of the world incomprehensible:

God creates the world—in Absolute super-unity the relative and the plural, the cosmic *hen kai pan* [one and all] arises by an incomprehensible means. This origin cannot be thought of according to the category of causal connection; the world is not a result, and God is not its cause. . . . The transition from the Absolute to the relative is not accessible to understanding. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, p. 182)

Almost thirty years later, Bulgakov's thought reflected a similar theme: "There cannot be two equally prototypical realities; that would be ditheism. But there can be and are two unequal realities: divine and creaturely" (1945/2002, p. 195).

The created world had fallen because of sin, and Bulgakov did not explain this in terms of some inherent imperfection in creation. Rather, the fall was a deliberate human choice, an "act of freedom," a "fundamental metaphysical and cosmic catastrophe" that "happened only in the lowest center of sophianic life, in creation with its ontological center—the human being" (1917/2012, pp. 268, 269). The entire cosmos longed for reunion with God in what Zenkovsky called Bulgakov's concept of the "paneroticism of nature" (1953, vol. 2, p. 900).

### **Epistemology**

For Bulgakov—as for Solovyov and Florensky—knowledge began in the experiences of life:

Philosophizing is always about something that stands before us as an immediate and uncontingent given, or, to use a current phrase, philosophy is always *oriented toward something* outside itself. . . . Life is more immediate than, and prior to, any philosophical reflection or self-reflection. Life is ultimately undefinable, though constantly in the process of definition. (1912/2000, p. 46)

Bulgakov considered life to be a subject of immediate experience, through which it was possible to know things in themselves rather than simply in their outward appearances:

Life is the *Ding an sich* [thing in itself] in its immediate mystical depths of phenomenal experience; this is how it comes to the surface of thought and knowledge, as foam or reflections appear on the surface of a bottomless body of water. (1912/2000, p. 57)

Knowledge, for Bulgakov, was an active rather than passive concept. According to Evtuhov (2000), he was “concerned above all with constructing a worldview that addressed the real concerns of our life in the world, that treated human beings as active creatures, interacting with the world around them” (p. 19). As a former economist, he also felt that philosophy and economy were closely linked, and so he sought “to introduce a new epistemological principle, borrowed from political economy—namely, labor—into the discipline of philosophy proper” (Evtuhov, 2000, p. 18). Bulgakov used the term “labor” to emphasize that philosophy required an active rather than passive subject:

Cognition, as an act of will, also requires energy, effort, labor; and labor, as an integral part of the cognitive process, ought to free us from the sense of the I as a mirror and the world as a phantom no less than does the economic process. In this sense cognition too is economic activity and involves labor; it also overcomes the division of subject and object and leads to their mutual penetration. . . . Every conscious, intentional overcoming of the opposition of subject and object in the ideal or sensual sphere is an act of labor.

(1912/2000, pp. 116, 117)

At the same time, Bulgakov held that knowledge of things took place through intuition, a sort of “mystical empiricism” in which “every reality, be it another’s I or the external world, is established not rationally but intuitively, with the intuition of reality having roots in the sense of efficacy, i.e., not gnoseological but praxeological roots” (1917/2012, p. 34). In other words, it was based on experience and, unlike religious faith, it possessed an element of compulsion:

The existence of this table does not depend in the least on my will, my person: it is enough for me to feel it or bump against it for the table to stand before me in all its indisputable reality. (p. 34)

Bulgakov, like Florensky, also believed that knowledge required a synthesis of the logical and the alogical:

Life is the concrete and indissoluble unity of the logical and the alogical, and only this proposition makes the face of knowledge comprehensible; in philosophy, in science, and in our self-consciousness we find this same living synthesis of logical and alogical. . . . And this living and mysterious synthesis of two different yet not contradictory principles—the logical and the alogical—takes place in every act of thought. (1912/2000, pp. 53-54)

The synthesis of the logical and alogical, Bulgakov believed, was necessary because of the existence of antinomies. These could be found in reason, e.g., in the simultaneous existence of absolute and relative being, which Bulgakov considered the “maximum cosmological antinomy” (1917/2012, p. 196). They were also found in religion, such as the simultaneous presence of the divine and human in the person of Christ. The resolution of antinomies—for Bulgakov as for Florensky—took place through religious faith:

*Christianity is the absolute religion*, for precisely in it the basic religious antinomy comes to light and is experienced with the greatest intensity . . . . In Christ . . . the “fullness of Divinity”<sup>4</sup> transcendent to the creation is united with humanity immanent to the world. (1917/2012, p. 348)

This was different from the “mystical empiricism” of intuition in that faith was an act of pure freedom:

It is identified not by the coercion of external senses, not violently, but by the free, creative aspiration of the spirit. . . . My faith is not passive perception but active coming out from the self, the divestment from the self of the weight of this world. (1917/2000, p. 35)

### **Moral Philosophy**

In *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov, refuted the position, popular among German idealist philosophers like Kant, that morality was the sole essence of religion. “It is true that morality is rooted in religion,” Bulgakov wrote, but in such a reduction, “religion’s own proper nature is ignored” (1917/2012, p. 47). Religion definitely included ethics, but it was not exhausted by ethics. “The human being must be able to rise even above ethics” (p. 49).

For Bulgakov, morality was not an autonomous discipline, but one that depended on the sanction of God. The human conscience came from God: “The inner light in which good and evil are distinguished in a human being proceeds from the Source of lights” (1917/2012, p. 47). Once

religion was reduced to ethics, talking about religion in addition to ethics became a duplication of efforts, and “only what is carried out for the sake of duty . . . is valued” (p. 50). On the contrary, Bulgakov asserted, “the unattainable ideal of religious righteousness [was] virtue *not* for the sake of the Kantian ‘good,’ but for God, not in the name of lifeless duty, but entirely out of love for the Creator and his commandments” (pp. 51-52).

Bulgakov’s morality was based on the Christian emphasis on love, the element that was the ultimate criterion of morality for Solovyov and Florensky as well. There may have been echoes of Florensky’s emphasis on the virtue of self-denial in Bulgakov’s reflection on creation as an act of divine love:

The creation of the world by God, the self-bifurcation of the Absolute, is the sacrifice of the Absolute for the sake of the relative, which becomes for it “other” (*thateron*), a creative sacrifice of love. . . . *Love-humility* is the ultimate and universal virtue of Christianity. It is the ontological basis of creation. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, pp. 185-186)

As was the case in Florensky’s writing, there was a link for Bulgakov between metaphysics and morality: God’s love in the act of creation served as a model for Christian virtue.

### **Sophia in Bulgakov’s Writings**

According to Gustafson (1997),

with Solovyov and Florensky Sophia became the privileged image of God's original vision of Creation, which, although now fallen, is to be restored as the universal church. The doctrine of salvation as deification is redirected from the individual to the cosmos. Thus conceived by Solovyov and legitimized by Florensky, Sophia entered Russian religious philosophy, spawned a whole school of sophiology, and culminated in the systematic theology of Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), the most complete and suggestive expression of Russian sophiological theology. (p. xxi)

Solovyov had scattered references to Sophia in many of his works, and Florensky had a chapter devoted to her in his most important book, but Bulgakov expressed his ideas about Sophia throughout his writings. From his economics, to his philosophical speculations, to his Trinitarian theology, anthropology, christology, pneumatology, mariology, and ecclesiology, Sophia was everywhere. Zenkovsky (1953) said that, for Bulgakov, Sophia “became such an all-embracing concept that it swallowed up all other categories” (vol. 2, p. 902).

Bulgakov introduced his sophiology in *Philosophy of Economy* (1912), elaborated it in *Unfading Light* (1917), and developed it in his later writings (Gustafson, 1997; Zenkovsky (1953). *Sophia, the Wisdom of God* (1935) contains a summary of Bulgakov's mature sophiology (Bamford, 1993; Smith, 2012). In my examination of Bulgakov's sophiology below, I begin with a discussion of his early sophiological formulations before moving to an analysis of his mature thought, in which his sophiology provided the foundation for his expression of the most important teachings in Orthodox theology.

### ***Philosophy of Economy (1912)***

In *Philosophy of Economy*, Bulgakov described Sophia as “the transcendental subject, the world soul . . . the higher metaphysical reality” that lay beyond the “imperfect and disharmonious” empirical world (1912/2000, pp. 144, 145). Bulgakov used imagery similar to Florensky's<sup>5</sup> to describe Sophia as the principle that elevated humanity above a purely material existence:

The world as cosmos and the empirical world, Sophia and humanity, maintain a living interaction, like a plant's nourishment through its roots. . . . This resolves the puzzle of human creativity, for in all fields—in knowledge, economy, culture, art—it is *sophic*, that is, it partakes of the divine Sophia. (Bulgakov, 1912/2000, p. 145)

Several scholars found it significant that, in the passage above, Bulgakov connected Sophia with human creativity and culture. Sergeev (2006) noted that in Bulgakov's concept of economy, human creative activity transformed the universe into culture, and “the origin of creativity . . . lies neither in the Creator nor in the individual creature” (p. 98), but in Sophia. Young (2012) interpreted Bulgakov's adjective, “sophic,” as a term for “cosmic interconnectedness and interpenetration. . . . To recreate nature, we need models, images, icons. By attuning ourselves to models given to us by Sophia, we will reshape the world for the better” (p. 116). Valliere (2000) expressed a similar idea:

Sophia is Bulgakov's name for that which accounts for the unity and coherence of the cultural process in all fields . . . . Although the process is unfinished, human agents must believe it is basically coherent, for without this assumption they would be incapable of sustaining creative work. Sophiology is the systematic expression of this faith. . . . Sophiology is not a gnostic quest for truths beyond the world but reflection on creative processes taking place within the world. (pp. 260, 261)

In the introduction to her translation, Evtuhov (2000) described *Philosophy of Economy* as “a work of social theory” which, on the simplest level, was “Bulgakov’s rejection of Marxism” (p. 2). She found it noteworthy that Bulgakov introduced Sophia, the central concept of his theology, in a secular context. Evtuhov believed that the idea of Divine Wisdom had value as a social-philosophical concept, not just because of its role in the Orthodox faith, but also because of its universality. “Indeed, the sense of elusive and beautiful divinity would not be alien to a Muslim or even a Buddhist” (p. 12). This represented “a leap in Bulgakov’s thought from strictly philosophical argumentation to an affirmation of the meaning and joyousness of life that he calls Sophia” (p. 14). The concept of Sophia countered the positivist emphasis on the material aspects of economic institutions and

instead stressed the internal content, or “spirit,” of society. . . . Bulgakov took the revolt against positivism all the way—and ended up with a modernist philosophy that was also deeply religious. (pp. 15-16)

In her article on Bulgakov’s early sophiology, Rosenthal (1996) wrote:

Bulgakov regarded Sophia as the living link between God, [humanity], and nature; she is that which endows the creative world with divine force, gathers chaos into cosmos, and forms an organic, living whole. . . . Through her, the wholeness of creation shattered by the Fall will be restored at the end of history, when the heavenly Sophia and the earthly Sophia will be reunited with one another, and with the Logos, Jesus Christ[,] in a new heaven and a new earth. This eschatological process, however, is not foreordained, because the principle of Sophia is freedom. (p. 155)

She also connected Sophia with the unifying principle of a selfless love:

Sophia unites people by love; capitalist self-interest and Marxist class hatred are alien to her. The cosmic Sophia is eternal humanity, the unifying center of the world, but “only to the extent that she rejects her own *selfness* [*samost’*] can she posit her center in God.”<sup>6</sup> (Rosenthal, 1996, p. 161)

### ***Unfading Light (1917)***

Bulgakov elaborated his understanding of Sophia in *Unfading Light*, which Lossky (1951) called his “main religiously philosophical work” (p. 203). In it, Bulgakov turned from the language of economics and discussed God, creation, humanity, and the relationships among them from the perspectives of philosophy and faith.

In his discussion of creation, Bulgakov maintained that “creation is an act not only of the omnipotence and wisdom of God, but also of sacrificial love” (1917/2012, p. 185). The love began within the Trinity, with the three hypostases loving one another “in a single combined act of Love and Identity” (p. 216). This love, complete in itself, went out of itself in the free and selfless act of creation:

In setting alongside itself the extra-Divine world, the Divinity thereby places between itself and the world a certain border and this border . . . is itself neither the one nor the other but something completely particular, simultaneously uniting and separating the one and the other . . . . Holy Sophia is the Angel of the creature and the Beginning of the ways of God. She is the *love of Love*. The divine tri-unity, God-Love . . . exteriorizes . . . the object of this Divine love, loves it, and thus pours out on it the life-creating power of trihypostatic Love. . . . And this love is Sophia. (p. 217)

Bulgakov maintained that Sophia not only received the divine love, but she also returned it, and thereby possessed “personhood.” As a person or “hypostasis,” Sophia could relate to the three divine hypostases of the Trinity. Bulgakov echoed Florensky in calling Sophia a “fourth hypostasis,” which he carefully qualified as being outside the Trinity:

Sophia is not only loved, rather she loves with a corresponding Love, and in this mutual love she receives everything and *is Everything*. And as the love of the Love and the love for Love, Sophia possesses personhood and countenance, is a subject, a person or, let us say it with theological terminology, a hypostasis; of course she *is different* from the Hypostases of the Holy Trinity, and is a special hypostasis, of a different order, a fourth hypostasis. . . . She is not God . . . . But she is the beginning of a new, creaturely multi-hypostaseity, for after her follow many hypostases (people and angels) which are found in a sophianic relation to the Divinity. (Bulgakov, 1917/2012, p. 217)

After he made a careful theological distinction to avoid confusing Sophia with the Trinity, Bulgakov described her unique relationship with the different persons of the Trinity as well as the multiplicity of references to Sophia in Orthodox tradition:

As one who receives its essence from the Father it is the creation and daughter of God; as one who knows the divine Logos and is known by him, it is the Bride of the Son (Song of Songs) and wife of the Lamb (New Testament, Apocalypse); as one who receives the outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is the Church, and together with this it

becomes the Mother of the Son who is incarnated by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit from Mary, the Heart of the Church, and it is the ideal soul of the creature, Beauty. And all of this at once . . . is divine Sophia. (1917/2012, p. 218)

Bulgakov also referred to Sophia as the “Eternal Feminine.” Like Solovyov, he understood this as the passive, receptive aspect of Sophia, but he also explained it as a generative aspect:

Sophia only *accepts*, not having anything to return . . . . By the self-surrender of Divine Love, she commences everything in herself. In this sense she is *feminine*, the one who receives; she is the “Eternal Feminine.” At the same time, she is the ideal, intelligible world, Everything, the true *hen kai pan*, the all-one. *In the Feminine are the mysteries of the world*. In its feminine “principle” . . . the world is generated before it is created and from this seed of God, implanted in it by a path of disclosure; the world *is fashioned* out of nothing. (1917/2012, p. 218)

Commenting on what she called Bulgakov’s “exaltation of the feminine” in *Unfading Light*, Rosenthal (1996) wrote:

Bulgakov had an “essentialist” view of women [i.e., he believed there were certain traits that were essentially feminine] . . . but he was not a misogynist. He did not use “the eternal feminine” to depersonalize real women, as is sometimes the case, or to deny female sexuality by exalting the Madonna over the Whore. . . . Citing Genesis 1:27 (“In the image of God, created he him; male and female he created them”), Bulgakov maintained that “The full image of God in this sense is male and female.”<sup>7</sup> (p. 169)

Lossky (1951) said that Bulgakov hinted in *Unfading Light* at a theory of two Sophias: one Divine and one created. Bulgakov did not use Augustine’s terminology of “created” and “uncreated” Sophia, but he did reference several aspects of Sophia that were not created:

What then is this Eternal Feminine in its metaphysical essence? Is it a creature? No, it is not a creature, for it is not created. . . . 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. (1917/2012, p. 219)

In some respects, Sophia defied the language of philosophy, and Bulgakov even acknowledged the sophiology of Plato as he elaborated his own:

The metaphysical nature of Sophia is not covered at all by the usual philosophical categories: absolute and relative, eternal and temporal, divine and creaturely. With her face turned towards God, she is his Image, Idea, Name. Turned towards nothing, she is the eternal foundation of the world . . . . She is the empyrean world of intelligible, eternal *ideas*, which was revealed to the philosophical and religious contemplation of Plato who confessed it in his doctrine that truly is a sophiology . . . . The created world exists, having as its foundation the world of ideas, which illuminates it; to put it differently, *it is sophianic*. (1917/2012, p. 221)

### ***Sophia, the Wisdom of God (1935)***

Bulgakov developed his sophiological thought in his later theological writings in which he discussed the major doctrines of Orthodoxy—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, Mary, the Church—at great length. Some conservative Orthodox theologians, however, were suspicious of Bulgakov’s sophiological perspective. According to Bamford (1993), “in 1927 the Holy Synod of the Russian Emigré Church had accused the Russian Theological Seminary in Paris of ‘modernism’ and ‘freemasonry.’ The bone of contention was Sophia” (p. xix). In 1935, both the Russian Emigré Church and the Moscow Patriarchate condemned Bulgakov’s sophiology as heretical (Valliere, 2000). Part of the issue was the newness of the sophiological perspective and the lack of clarity on the exact nature of Sophia.

The Metropolitan Evlogy appointed a seven-member commission to investigate Bulgakov’s work, and a five-member majority cleared Bulgakov of the charges of heresy. At the same time, the majority also found “unconvincing his conflation of Sofia with ousia or the divine essence of God [and characterized] his teaching on creation as theologically suspect” (Geffert, 2005, p. 50). They classified Bulgakov’s positions as personal opinions and not official teachings of the Church, however, and he was permitted to continue teaching.

It was in this context that Bulgakov wrote *Sophia, the Wisdom of God* in 1935, not as an apologetic work, but as a clear statement of his mature position on Sophia (Bamford, 1993). Bulgakov explained that his sophiology was founded in the relationship between God and humanity. In his sophiological thought, Bulgakov sought to avoid the two extremes of world-denying Manicheism on the one hand and secularization on the other:

The central point from which sophiology proceeds is that of the relation between *God* and *the world*, or, what is practically the same thing, between *God* and *humanity*. In other

words we are faced with the question of the meaning and significance of Divine-humanity . . . . Within Christianity itself there is a neverending struggle between the two extreme positions of dualism and monism, in a constant search for truth, which can only be found in the synthesis of Divine-humanity. (1935/1993, p. 18)

I used *Sophia, the Wisdom of God* as my primary text in summarizing Bulgakov's sophiological perspectives on the major teachings of Orthodox theology.

**Sophia and the Trinity.** Bulgakov explained that in the history of Christian theology, there were two important aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. The first, the relationship among the three persons and their hypostatic qualities and distinctive features, had been elucidated in detail in the history of Orthodox doctrine. The second aspect, the substance (*ousia*) of the Trinity, had been “far less developed and, apparently, almost overlooked” (1935/1993, p. 24).

To fill this gap, Bulgakov attempted to clarify the nature of the Trinity's *ousia* in sophiological terms. He began by examining the “Wisdom” terminology in the Jewish and Christian scriptures and noting how, alongside the revelation of the personal being of God, there was a doctrine of divine Wisdom either in God or with God. Bulgakov observed that there was a similar notion, the “Glory” of God, which the Scriptures also used to express God's self-manifestation. This multiplicity of terms, however, did not imply a multiplicity of substances in God. They were different terms for one and the same substance. One could say, therefore, that “the divinity in God constitutes the divine Sophia (or glory), while at the same time we assume that it is also the *ousia* [substance] . . . . The tri-hypostatic God possesses, indeed, but one Godhead, Sophia” (1935/1993, pp. 33-34).

In addition, Bulgakov held that Sophia was possessed by all three persons of the Trinity, both in their tri-unity, and each in a different way. In this sense, one could say that “the entire Holy Trinity in its tri-unity ‘is Sophia,’ just as all the three hypostases are in their separateness” (1935/1993, p. 52). In summary,

The tri-personal God has his own self-revelation. His nature, or *Ousia*, constitutes his intrinsic Wisdom and Glory alike, which we accordingly unite under the one general term Sophia. God not only *possesses* in Sophia the principle of his self-revelation, but it is this Sophia which *is* his eternal divine life, the sum and unity of all his attributes. . . . This is no mere self-determination of the personal God; *Ousia*, and therefore Sophia, exists for God and in God, as his subsistent divinity. (pp. 54, 55)

**Sophia as divine and creaturely.** I mentioned above that Bulgakov acknowledged, in *Unfading Light*, Plato's sophiological concept of a world of divine ideas. In *Sophia, the Wisdom of God*, Bulgakov cited St. Athanasius, St. John of Damascus, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Augustine, and St. Gregory Nanzianzen—authorities that were probably more acceptable to his intended audience—to support the same concept: the existence of prototypes in the mind of God. Bulgakov identified these prototypes with Sophia:

What then are these eternal prototypes of creation . . . ? Although the Fathers themselves do not describe them by the name of the divine Sophia, nevertheless in essence we have here, quite undoubtedly, the divine world considered as the prototype of the creaturely. . . . [In the Scriptures] also the Wisdom of God is represented precisely as a prototype of creation existing with God prior to the creation of the world. (1935/1993, p. 65)

Bulgakov continued, "In general, our position here is to maintain that God in his three persons created the world on the *foundation* of the Wisdom common to the whole Trinity" (1935/1993, p. 67). In addition, "That Wisdom, which is an eternal reality in God, also provides the foundation for the existence of the world of creatures" (p. 71). Since the world's capacity to exist had its basis in the Wisdom of God, the world had a fundamentally divine character. This was not pantheism in which God and the world were the same, but *panentheism*, in which God was present in all things:

Wisdom in creation is ontologically identical with its prototype, the same Wisdom that exists in God. The world exists in God . . . . It exists by the power of his Godhead, even though it exists outside God. . . . God confers on a principle which originates in himself an existence distinct from his own. This is not pantheism, but panentheism. The created world, then, is nothing other than the creaturely Sophia, a principle of relative being, in process of becoming. (pp. 71-72)

Sophia was also, according to Bulgakov, the mediating principle between God and the world. Some theologians might hold that the Logos (Christ as the second person of the Trinity) could fulfill this function, but Bulgakov's position was that the Logos could do so only if he were subordinate to God. The mediating principle, on the other hand, was

not to be sought in the person of God at all, but in his Nature . . . . And here we have at once Sophia in both its aspects, divine and creaturely. . . . Remaining one, Sophia exists in two modes, eternal and temporal, divine and creaturely. (1935/1993, p. 74)

For Bulgakov, the fundamental characteristic of the created world was its becoming, its development. But he did not view the world's development as a blind evolution without a goal, for "*ex nihilo nihil fit*" (1935/1993, p. 75)—nothing comes from nothing.

On the contrary, this development represents the germination of the divine seeds of being in the soil of non-being, the actualization of divine prototypes, of the divine Sophia in the creaturely. Nevertheless, the seed remains only a seed . . . . The world of becoming must travel by the long road of the history of the universe if it is ultimately to succeed in reflecting in itself the face of the divine Sophia and be "transfigured" into it. (p. 75)

**Sophia and the Incarnation.** Bulgakov discussed the mystery of the Incarnation and the doctrine defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. According to the definition, there was in Christ one person in two natures, divine and human, and that he was the second person of the Trinity. The existence of two natures in one person, Bulgakov reasoned, could not be "the mere mechanical conjunction of two alien principles" (1935/1993, p. 87). He suggested another explanation:

The real basis of the union of the two natures in Christ seems to lie in their mutual relationship as two variant forms of divine and created Wisdom. It is conceivable only because humanity is the created form of divine Wisdom, which is simply God's nature revealing itself. . . . So we may say that the very dogma of Christology rests on sophiological foundations. (p. 88)

According to Bulgakov's explanation, there was an essential conformity between the divine and human natures, which was obscured by sin but not in Christ, who was without sin. The conformity of the two natures rested upon the unity in diversity of Wisdom in God and in the created world:

Our Lord in his abasement never ceased to be God . . . . At the same time, we understand his humanity to have been capable of so embodying his divine life that he was in truth both Son of God and Son of Man. And between these two terms there must be some connection, an identity in distinction. This is found in Divine-humanity, that unity of eternal and created humanity which is Sophia, the Wisdom of God. . . . The union of

natures . . . presupposes their original conformity. And we discover this conformity in interpreting the two natures in Christ as two forms of the one Wisdom of God, those which it takes respectively in God and in creation. (1935/1993, pp. 89, 95)

**Sophia and the Holy Spirit.** In his discussion of the Holy Spirit, Bulgakov began with a description of the actions of the Trinity: God the Father reveals himself through the two divine persons of the Word (Christ) and the Holy Spirit. Together, the two divine persons disclose God the Father in one revelation, and this revelation is Sophia—not a lifeless abstraction, but “live, vital thought, the word of the Word, upon whom the power of the Spirit abides” (1935/1993, p. 99).

Sophia reveals the Logos (Christ) and the Holy Spirit together. She is also the heavenly type of humanity, and Bulgakov saw a reflection of this in the two human principles of masculine and feminine. “This feature of humankind as created in the likeness of God undoubtedly finds its analogy in heavenly humanity, Sophia” (1935/1993, p. 99). He found the masculine and feminine principles in the appearance of the Logos as a masculine human, and in the Church, with the Virgin Mary at its head, as the corresponding feminine being. Bulgakov considered Mary to be not only the bearer of Christ, but also the bearer of the Holy Spirit.

According to Bulgakov, it was through Sophia—as God’s self-revelation in the Logos and the Holy Spirit—that Christ became human in the Incarnation and Mary became the birthgiver of God:

The Word was not fully made flesh till he came down from heaven and was conceived by the Virgin; and this, too, was the act of the Spirit as well. In the Annunciation both the Word and the Spirit are sent from the Father to reveal Sophia to the world, and thus to reveal, in the earthly, the heavenly humanity. . . . In the Incarnation, the Son and the Spirit come down from heaven together, for the Spirit, who rests on the Son inseparably and unconfusedly, in his descent on the Virgin brings down the Word too in person, in virtue of which she, conceiving the Son, becomes the birthgiver of God. (1935/1993, p. 101)

The action of the Holy Spirit in revealing Sophia was especially present at Pentecost. At this event, the Holy Spirit came into the world to sanctify it, just as the Word had come into the world in the Incarnation. Each of these events was a union of the divine and creaturely Sophia:

Each is a union, and even identification, of Sophia divine and created, which yet maintains the distinction between their two natures. In the Incarnation, created Sophia, earthly humanity, receives in the Logos the personal Wisdom of God. At the descent of the Spirit the same human nature receives the personal Spirit of Wisdom. The fullness of Divine-humanity can be achieved only through both events in conjunction. (1935/1993, p. 105)

**Sophia and Mary, the mother of Jesus.** Bulgakov emphasized that the connection between Sophia and Mary, the mother of Jesus, was particularly close in Russian Orthodoxy. He found evidence for this in the dedication of cathedrals, in iconography—as did Florensky—and in the liturgy:

The shrines of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, which for Byzantium bore a christological meaning, received a mariological interpretation in Russia. . . . There even exists a proper office of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, which is combined with the office of the Dormition [death of Mary]. Its fundamental peculiarity is that . . . the Christo-Sophianic and Mario-Sophianic interpretation[s] are there simultaneously. (1935/1993, pp. 124, 125)

Bulgakov suggested that there were two reasons for identifying Mary with Sophia. The first was that, since the Holy Spirit descended upon her, she was the Spirit-bearer as well as the Christ-bearer. The second reason, in which Bulgakov referred specifically to created Wisdom, was that Mary was herself Sophia: “She *is* created Wisdom, for she is creation glorified. In her is realized the purpose of creation, the complete penetration of the creature by Wisdom, the full accord of the created type with its prototype, its entire accomplishment” (1935/1993, p. 126).

At the same time, Bulgakov did not exclude the christological aspect from this interpretation. Mary had the title of Wisdom only insofar as she was the mother of the Divine Human. “The two natures in Christ correspond to the two forms of Sophia, the divine and the created” (1935/1993, pp. 126-127).

Bulgakov took this line of reasoning a step further in asserting that created Wisdom was manifested in all of creation. In his explanation, he once again referred to the Platonic concept of divine ideas:

Even the holy Mother of God is not the only manifestation of created Wisdom. Ontologically it includes, in it is grounded the existence of the whole creation, “heaven and earth,” the world of angels and the world of humans. Consequently their mutual

relation is that which holds between exemplar and substantial forms, as in the Platonic world of ideas and its realization in empirical fact, in becoming. (1935/1993, p. 127)

**Sophia and the Church.** For Bulgakov, the Church was a visible institution with an invisible foundation. He considered the ontological essence of the Church to be “outside the scope of our empirical mode of knowledge” (1935/1993, p. 133) and ultimately a matter of faith.

In its visible form on earth and its invisible foundation in God, the Church was both created and divine Wisdom, and this was a reflection of the two natures in Christ:

The Church is properly uncreated and yet it enters into the history of humankind. That implies that it has a theandric character; it is, in fact, Divine-humanity *in actu*. . . . The world of humans . . . is already destined for deification . . . . And this deification . . . is effected through the Church . . . . Insofar as it is grounded in God, the Church is divine Wisdom. . . . And equally, in its earthly, historical existence, it is created Wisdom. In short, in the Church the two aspects of Wisdom mutually permeate one another and are entirely, inseparably and unconfusedly, united. The divine shines through the created Wisdom. The definition at Chalcedon of the mode of union of the two natures in Christ was at bottom a definition of the Church. (Bulgakov, 1935/1993, pp. 134-135)

As Bulgakov mentioned in this passage, the Church also effected the deification of humanity. “The Church is the heart and essence of the world . . . . the source of eternal life and salvation. . . . It is called to lead the whole creation up to the glory of God” (pp. 139, 140).

For Bulgakov, the Church’s mission of deification included a respect for the sophianic character of human freedom and human creativity as they existed in the arts and sciences:

In Divine-humanity is included the whole fullness of humanity, with its freedom and creativity. . . . The history of Christianity has marked a flowering of human creativity, for Christianity gave human beings spiritual freedom, and thereby liberated the creative element in them. . . . Human creativity—thought, science, art—is in its data and its principles sophianic. (1935/1993, pp. 141, 142)

The Church, as a divine-human community, helped humans recognize their own communal existence and the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor. For Bulgakov, the Church’s social mission was a direct result of its mystical and historical—i.e., its sophianic—life:

Such is the Church, a divine-human community. Such is the *sobornost*’ of its mystical life. Such, too, in consequence, the *sociality* of its historical life. . . . A consequence of this fact is the historical mission of the Church, which leads it to extend its solicitude to, and to accept responsibility for, the redemption not only of the individual personality, but also of social life. This is not merely the practical application of Christian ethics . . . it is of the very essence of the Church. (1935/1993, pp. 143, 144)

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Sergius Bulgakov took the long road to Sophia. Leaving Orthodoxy in his teens, he wrestled with atheism, Marxism, and German idealism, not realizing that his arduous journey would ultimately lead him back to the faith of his youth and his ancestors. His commitment to social action was motivated by a love for humanity, and as a practitioner in the field of economics, he understood the value of labor as a force that transformed nature into culture. In the course of his journey, Bulgakov came to recognize that, at the heart of the nature he respected, at the heart of the humanity he loved, at the heart of the faith he had once rejected, and at the heart of the God to whom he would soon return, there was another force, another reality, a being that united them all. That being was Sophia.

Bulgakov’s love for Sophia was evident in the many profound writings he completed during his career as a social activist, economist, philosopher, theologian, and priest. His Orthodox faith in the Trinity was at the heart of his metaphysics—and the substance of the Trinity was Sophia. Bulgakov emphasized the active role of the subject by introducing the concept of labor into his epistemology, accepted antinomies both in reason and in faith, and asserted the value of intuition and religious experience as sources of truth—and truth was revealed in Sophia. He valued morality, not as the essence of religion, but as a basis for human action that was modeled on God’s love—and that love was expressed in Sophia.

In the spirit of Solovyov and Florensky, and even more, in the spirit of Orthodoxy, Bulgakov sought to give expression to the being he felt was central not only for Orthodoxy, but also for all of reality. For Bulgakov, Sophia’s simultaneous presence in various expressions of faith—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, and the Church—revealed her as a living symbol of Orthodox piety. At the same time, her simultaneous closeness to the substance of God and the divine presence in creation revealed her as the source of all life. As the mediator of eternal life, Sophia also fostered communal life among humanity. She was an active

force in the world, helping humanity recognize its own sophianic character in creativity, freedom, and social action.

Sophia, in Bulgakov's theological writings, was not only vital for an understanding of the major doctrines of Christianity. As the prototype of ideal humanity, she was also the symbol and the goal of human progress who united all things with herself, and in her, with God:

*In the beginning*, i.e., in Sophia, through Sophia, on the foundation of Sophia, by Sophia, God *created* heaven and earth . . . . Heavenly Sophia and earthly sophianicity, perfect actuality and “formless and void” potentiality, divine fullness and hunger for divinity . . . this is the unity of opposites . . . transcendent to reason, and it tears it asunder antinomically. But even if this stays a contradiction for reason, it is not able to come up with anything cleverer than this contradiction in order to solve the problem. The opposition of heaven and earth is the basis of creation, its initial outcome; its removal, the establishment of a living ladder between heaven and earth, is the final task of the world and historical process: “*Thy will be done as in heaven so on earth.*” (1917/2012, pp. 244-245)

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<sup>1</sup> Valliere cited Bulgakov's *Autobiograficheskie zametki*, pp. 16-18. This work is not available in English.

<sup>2</sup> This work is not available in English.

<sup>3</sup> As was the case with “Solovyov,” different spellings of “Florensky” and “Bulgakov” occur in the literature, based on differing methods of transliteration.

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 2:9

<sup>5</sup> Florensky called her the “Great Root of the whole creation” (1914/1997, p. 237).

<sup>6</sup> Rosenthal's translation from *Philosophy of Economy*. The passage appears in Evtuhov's translation (Bulgakov, 1912/2000) on p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenthal's translation from *Unfading Light*. The passage appears in Smith's translation (Bulgakov, 1917/2012) on p. 294.

## CHAPTER SIX: SOPHIA AND ADULT LEARNING

### Introduction

In this chapter I explore the implications of sophiological thought for the concept of wisdom in adult learning. As I explained in Chapter One, this study is a hermeneutic inquiry in which I have included both reproductive and productive approaches. I have attempted to *reproduce* the major aspects of the sophiological context and thought of Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov in Chapters Two through Five. I attempt now to *produce* an understanding of Sophia's implications for the field of adult learning. This understanding is based on the premise that Sophia cannot be separated from her history, her context, or the worldviews in which she developed. The chapter follows this process; I:

1. Summarize the major themes that Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov associated with Sophia and the roles she played in their thought.
2. Identify and interpret several themes through which sophiology can contribute to the current dialogue on wisdom in the adult learning field.
3. Offer an example of how sophiology's emphasis on integration and inclusiveness can respond to a current issue in the adult learning field.
4. Reflect on ways in which my personal dialogue with sophiological thought has informed my own approach to life in general and my adult learning practice in particular.
5. Conclude with a challenge to those who work with adults as learners to engage sophiological thought and consider ways in which sophiology can inform and transform their theory and practice and transcend the current boundaries of the adult learning field.

### Summary of Sophiological Thought

Sophia's origins preceded recorded history. She was already two thousand years old and known by other names when she first appeared in the Jewish scriptures with echoes of the Egyptian wisdom traditions. From her very beginnings, she was a teacher and a mediator, teaching lessons that unified theory and practice as well as individual and social concerns. In the book of Proverbs, she was a divine feminine being who was with God from the origins of the cosmos. Her femininity signified not passivity but intimacy and complementarity with God himself, and the erotic language that sometimes described her suggested the intrinsic attraction

between humanity and divinity. The Jewish scriptures taught that God's wisdom—*Hokmah* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek—was inherent in both the order and the mystery of the cosmos he had created. The Jewish faith identified God's wisdom with the Torah and taught that human beings could achieve happiness by learning and practicing its teachings. Wisdom was something that was lived. It was not merely a guide for thought, but a guide for life.

The Christian faith identified God's wisdom with Christ, the Word of God, his *Logos*. Christ was the ultimate mediator, one person in whom both divine and human natures were united without separation or confusion. Christian wisdom became associated with Christ's gospel of love. In the Christian tradition, the female imagery associated with Sophia evoked Mary, the mother of Christ, and the Church, the bride of Christ, but Sophia was also associated with Christ himself and the Holy Spirit. Over the course of many centuries, the dedication of cathedrals to Sophia, her depiction in iconography, and her association with the major doctrines of Christianity solidified Sophia's presence as a significant symbol of the Orthodox faith. She was present as a symbol for wisdom in a variety of mystical and literary works as well.

Vladimir Solovyov inherited these traditions when he formulated his own sophiological vision in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Philosophy was already contending with the challenges of positivism, and in Russia this situation was compounded by a pressing need for social and political reform. Solovyov joined other Christian thinkers in responding with a philosophy that acknowledged the importance of humanity while uniting reason and faith. Solovyov's poetic visions of Sophia as a divine, unifying principle informed his integral worldview of total unity. In his Christian philosophy of divine humanity, the consequences of humanity's fall could be reversed in free union and cooperation with Christ, the Divine Human. Through this union and cooperation, humanity could be restored to unity with God, which was the final goal of history.

Pavel Florensky, like Solovyov, saw Sophia as the unity of all created being. For Florensky, she entered into the inner life of the Trinity itself, mediating between heaven and earth as a non-divine "fourth Person." Sophia could evoke many related realities of faith at once, including Christ as the Logos, the Holy Spirit, Mary the Mother of Christ, and the Church. This dynamic multiplicity was not a problem because there was a resolution of antinomies in Sophia's unifying being. According to Florensky's sophiology, the believer experienced and lived Sophia in the life of the Church and the practice of a self-denying love.

Sergius Bulgakov continued and developed the sophiological thought of Solovyov and Florensky. His understanding of Sophia was the foundation of his theology and even informed his early work on the nature of economy. For him, God was present through Sophia in all things. Early in his career, the value he placed on human freedom, creativity, community, and progress led him to abandon Marxism, and these values informed his sophiology. The real presence of Sophia in the Church promoted community through love and social responsibility.

### **Sophia in Dialogue**

Valliere (1996, 2000) was of the position that sophiology was more than just a response to the philosophical, religious, and social challenges the Russian people faced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Sophiology was also Orthodoxy's attempt to dialogue with modern civilization. Valliere "suggested sophiology be read as a representation, virtually a dramatization, of Orthodoxy's struggle to engage with the modern world" (2000, p. 71).

I propose that sophiology can play a similar role in the field of adult learning. Its thematic breadth and spiritual depth can contribute to the current dialogue between philosophical-theological understandings of wisdom and other understandings of wisdom in the adult learning field. In the following sections, I explore several themes from sophiological thought and note similar themes in other conceptualizations of wisdom that inform the adult learning field. It is my hope that this exploration can serve as a foundation for introducing sophiology into the discussion about wisdom and adult learning. I believe that sophiology's contributions to this dialogue can inform both the ways in which we, as adult learning professionals, think about wisdom and the ways in which we apply wisdom to our practice.

### **Mediation and Unity**

The three sophiologists I studied did not give a precise definition of Sophia. Reflecting on her many aspects and the dynamic multiplicity of her symbolism, I believe the sophiologists understood that no definition could contain her, and so they needed to describe rather than define her. The most basic—but by no means complete—description of Sophia, based on the thought of the three sophiologists in this study, is that she was the living unity of all things in creation, the living unity within God himself, and the living unity between God and creation. In the scriptures and in theology, the unity of Sophia mediated and unified aspects of reality that might have otherwise been characterized as opposites: the practical and the theoretical, the individual and the

social, the secular and the religious, the simple and the complex, the rational and the mysterious, the masculine and the feminine, the created and the uncreated, the human and the divine.

Adult learning professionals might recognize in this description the integrative aspect that is found in many modern concepts of wisdom (Bassett, 2011; Hall, 2010; Labouvie-Vief, 1990). Tisdell (2011) said that “there is an integration quality to wisdom that attends to the hidden wholeness and interconnectedness of everything in the universe” (p. 6). One might consider modern research to be a validation of the ancient traditions from which sophiology emerged. Sophia, however, integrated according to a divine prototype, an ideal that existed in the mind of God from all eternity, a concept that was reflected in Platonic philosophy as the “world of ideas” and in Gnosticism as the “world soul.” Tisdell proposed a similar line of thinking when she suggested we look for ways to see the “wisdom of nature” in order to better understand the nature of wisdom. Sophia’s breadth and depth could facilitate further development of this discussion about wisdom in the adult learning field by emphasizing the metaphysical basis of wisdom.

### **Theory and Practice**

Part of Sophia’s integrative aspect was the way she unified the elements of theory and practice, and modern scholars recognize these elements in their discussions. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) said, “Wisdom is often characterized as the pinnacle or hallmark of adult thinking” (p. 351), but they acknowledged its practical aspects as well. Baltes and Smith (1990) saw wisdom as expertise in everyday life, and Hall (2010), Bassett (2011), Jarvis (2011), and Swartz (2011) recognized wisdom as pragmatic and experience-based. Boucouvalas’s (1987a) information-knowledge-wisdom framework also took a holistic approach in connecting wisdom not just with cognition, but with the entire person. Sophiology could join this discussion and add yet another dimension: that the unity of knowing and doing (epistemology and moral philosophy) is based on the unity of being (metaphysics), i.e., on the total unity of the cosmos that Sophia expresses.

### **Multiple Perspectives**

Sophiology’s metaphysical foundation in total unity was also connected with its epistemological doctrine of integral knowledge. Modern conceptions of wisdom have acknowledged that it involves a “higher order awareness” (Bassett, 2005) and that this awareness “confronts us with a multiverse—many possible paradigms, worldviews, reality tunnels, and

epistemologies, each of which is a plausible explanation of the way the world really is” (Becvar, 2005, p. 29). Sophiology could contribute its integral worldview to this discussion as well as its connections among metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy.

### **Paradox**

Another aspect of Sophia’s integrative activity was in dealing with paradox. Florensky wrote that philosophy and religious faith contained paradoxes, which he expressed, using his background in mathematics, as the unity of A and (-A). Bulgakov had a similar view in mind in his description of the necessary union of the logical and the alogical in philosophical and theological thought. The resolution of these paradoxes was in Sophia, who united all aspects of creation. Perhaps this could add to modern discussions of wisdom. Tisdell (2011) said that wisdom “allows people to negotiate opposites in creative ways that lead to . . . an ability to deal with paradox (p. 7). Sinnott (1998), Hall (2010), and Bassett (2011) also mentioned the connection between wisdom and paradox. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) cited a complementary idea when they said that wisdom “is most often characterized by the acceptance of ambiguity” (p. 351).

### **Society and Morality**

The sophiologists believed that Sophia dwelled in the ecclesial life of Orthodoxy in which the faithful observed a morality based on the Christian gospel of love. Modern research has also acknowledged the social dimension of wisdom (Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Staudinger, 1996; Sternberg, 1998) and connected it with behavior that is directed toward the common good (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Bassett, 2011; Kupperman, 2005; Merriam et al., 2007). Sternberg (1998) described the goal of wisdom as the “achievement of a common good” (p. 350). Baltes and Kunzmann (2004) said that wisdom “plays a central role in the development of one’s self and one’s contribution to the development of others” (p. 295), and Bassett (2011) defined wisdom as having sufficient awareness “to act in ways that enhance our common humanity” (p. 36).

Modern researchers have also identified an element of selflessness in wisdom. Sinnott (1998) said that wisdom included concern for the group over and above the self. Kupperman (2005) cited the element of altruism, and Hall (2010) included compassion among the characteristics of wisdom. He understood compassion as not mere sympathy, but as “a transcendent ability to step outside the moat of one’s own self-interest” in a manner that could

lead to “other-centeredness (as opposed to self-centeredness)” (p. 116). Sophiology had a similar approach in its emphasis on the self-denying aspect of love, which ultimately had a metaphysical foundation in God’s free expression of otherness in the act of creation.

### **Contextual Factors**

A true understanding of Sophia cannot separate her from her history, her context, the sophianic values with which she was associated, the ecclesial community in which she dwelled, or the worldviews of the sophiologists who contemplated her. As I discussed in the preceding chapters, Sophia was connected with a great many things. Modern researchers have also begun to include more and more related factors in their attempts to articulate the nature of wisdom. I consider the theories that attempt to be the most inclusive to be closest to sophiology, not only because of Sophia’s basis in an all-inclusive total unity, but also because sophiology has identified so many different realities that are associated with Sophia.

Hall (2010) has taken wisdom research in a new direction by attempting to discover its biological basis in the human brain. He identified “eight neural pillars of wisdom”: emotional regulation, establishing value, moral reasoning, compassion, humility, altruism, patience, and dealing with uncertainty.

Bassett (2005) created an “Emergent Wisdom Model” that mapped numerous characteristics of wisdom, which she divided into four dimensions: discerning (cognitive), respecting (affective), engaging (active), and transforming (reflective).

Sternberg’s (1998) “balance theory” defined wisdom as the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among multiple (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments. (p. 347)

Sternberg (1986, 1990a, 2003) also connected wisdom with intelligence and creativity, and he synthesized all three in a construct he called WICS: wisdom, intelligence, and creativity synthesized. His position was that intelligence and creativity were necessary, but not sufficient, for the development of wisdom.

Baltes and Kunzmann (2004) defined wisdom as an “expert knowledge system dealing with the fundamental pragmatics of life” (p. 294). Their theory dealt “with knowledge and

beliefs about a good life, excellence in mind and virtue, fundamental issues concerning the meaning and conduct of life, and ways of achieving a perfect balance between the personal and common good” (p. 292). Wisdom operated in the areas of “life planning, life management, and life review” (p. 294), and it was associated with a variety of cognitive, emotional, motivational and social factors.

These approaches provide a valuable foundation for further dialogue with sophiology, because Sophia too defied a simple description. In addition to the metaphysical, epistemological, and moral characteristics of Sophia, she was associated with specific values, like freedom, dignity, and creativity; she was associated with various aspects of the ecclesial life of the Orthodox faithful, including doctrine, iconography, the sacraments, and the liturgy; and her wisdom was associated with a theory of progress according to which humanity needed to freely cooperate with divinity in order to restore a fallen world to union with God, which was the ultimate goal of human history.

I believe that part of the “wisdom” of modern research is that it has begun to realize that wisdom cannot be understood as a standalone concept. Sophia is indeed connected with everything, since she is the embodiment of total unity.

### **Sophia in Application**

Sophiology can not only inform how we, as adult learning professionals, think about wisdom, but also how we apply it in our practice. One current issue that Tisdell (2011) cited from her experience in the adult learning field was the “emphasis on difference and division [rather] than on what integrates or unites” (p. 10). She connected this with another issue in the field, namely, “the emphasis on rational critique that requires separating out positions into parts or categories” (pp. 11-12).

In a response informed by sophiology, would one take a holistic as opposed to an analytical approach? I would say no, because among Sophia’s characteristics is her inclusiveness. A combination of analytical and holistic approaches could be more advantageous to either approach alone. The analytical approach would explain the differences and divisions, and the holistic approach would explain what they had in common and integrate them if appropriate. Sophia cannot mediate and unify until she has elements to unite.

This does not mean that everything is right or that all perspectives are valid. Thorpe (2006) was correct in observing that “*wisdom is neither moderation nor relativism. . . . It is not*

about giving equal weight to all perspectives nor about compromise” (p. 46). True wisdom involves the application of sound judgment as well (Boucoulalas, 1987a; Hall, 2010; Merriam et al., 2007).

### **Sophia and the Research Instrument**

In the spirit of Sophia, this hermeneutic inquiry includes both reproductive and productive elements. The productive element involves a “dialectic between the researcher and the ‘researched’” (Boucoulalas, 1987b, p. 85). Now that I have discussed the implications of sophiology for the adult leaning field, I offer some reflections on how Sophia has informed my own worldview both as a person and as an adult learning professional.

I consider Sophia’s unifying aspect to be among the primary informants of my thoughts and actions as well as my adult learning practice. I do not dwell in the Orthodox tradition, so for me she is not an object of religious faith, and I have not benefited from her presence in the totality of the Orthodox ecclesial life. I am of the position, nonetheless, that she represents the unity of all things throughout the cosmos, including myself as a part of that cosmos.

In my metaphysics, my dialogue with Sophia has given me a deeper sense of total unity, the inherent order of all things, the cosmic “glue” that holds everything together, from subatomic particles to galactic clusters to human consciousness. I believe that the principle she represents underlies the interconnectedness, interrelationships, and inseparability of all things on both the human and cosmic levels.

In my epistemology, my dialogue with Sophia has enabled me to experience the intuition of a holistic, integral, and organic vision of the many manifestations of the oneness of reality. This dialogue has given me a greater appreciation and respect for integral knowledge, including “other ways of knowing”—since every way of knowing is also a way of not-knowing. She has also given me a deeper faith in the nature of reality, a faith that allows me to accept and embrace paradox.

In my moral philosophy, my dialogue with Sophia has enabled me to better understand the connections between my intuition of total unity (theory) and my actions within that unity (practice). She has informed my decision-making so that I take these relationships into account and move toward actions in which I apply sophianic values like selflessness in order to transform the greater self of humanity and the world in positive ways.

On a meta-philosophical level, Sophia has informed even the way I view philosophy. She has guided me to integrate my metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy—just as she united these aspects in the philosophies of the sophiologists I studied. Sophia enables intuitive knowledge of the reality of what-is, she informs actions that reflect sophianic values, and she even provides the goal: to transform the real what-is into the ideal what-should-be in selfless acts of self-transcendence that lead to ultimate fulfillment of the individual self and the greater self of all humanity.

In informing my philosophy, Sophia has also informed my approach to adult learning. She has given me a deeper appreciation for viewing the learning process in a holistic way and for integrating it with values that will benefit and empower the learners in my practice. Sophia has helped me understand that the polarities of the theory and practice of adult learning are actually two aspects of the same reality, existing in a dynamic state of continuous, mutual transformation.

The same is true of the relationship between individual learners and the communities to which they belong. Sophia has helped me understand that the two aspects of individual and social in adult learning are also mutually transformative. What affects one affects the other because of their interconnectedness and inseparability. This relationship is modeled in Sophia's presence in the ecclesial life of the Orthodox faithful. The Sophia of Orthodoxy does not exist in a vacuum, but in the experiences of an ecclesial community for which faith is not a simple belief but a commitment to a shared, spiritual way of life.

Sophia has also informed my sense of the values I bring to my adult learning approach. She has led me to be mindful of the sophianic values of selflessness and community and to bring these values to my practice in dealing with adult learners. She has helped me understand the importance of creating learning experiences that will be beneficial to the greater community as well as the learners themselves.

Sophia has helped me recognize the value in the simultaneous possession of multiple valid perspectives. This can be particularly helpful when conducting learning experiences that involve adults who bring different worldviews to the learning environment. I recall a class I attended at Virginia Tech in which a guest speaker proposed different perspectives on how a bird could fly: (a) because its shape and movements conformed to the laws of aerodynamics, and (b) because flying was part of the bird's *anima* or animating principle. I remember thinking that both were valid, although each would be more useful in a particular, practical application: the former

would be more applicable to someone designing an aircraft and the latter to someone writing poetry.

Sophia's transformative aspect has informed my understanding of the ultimate goals of learning. Sophia's final goal of the deification of humanity helps me realize that the *mutual* transformation of theory/practice and individual/social has the ultimate goal of the *progressive* transformation of the world from what-is to what-should-be.

Finally, I understand Sophia as a principle of transcendence, and also of self-transcendence. Through the act of transforming reality, we, as adult learning professionals, transform and transcend ourselves. In assimilating ourselves to something beyond ourselves, we become one with the transformational principle. By acting in accordance with the greater self, we actualize it and become one with it.

### **Sophia as Challenge**

For many students and professionals in the adult learning field, the ultimate mission of lifelong learning is not to amass information nor even to acquire a greater breadth and depth of knowledge. It is rather to transcend both these levels through the pursuit, acquisition, and practice of wisdom, i.e., to love and to live Sophia.

According to the three sophiologists I studied, Sophia was the living, life-giving Wisdom of God. She was the unity within God himself and his unity with creation. She permeated all things, for all things were created through her. She was present in Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, and the Church. She inspired poetry, prayer, art, spiritual life, philosophical thought, and theological inquiry. She called humanity to free cooperation with divinity to transform a fragmented cosmos and restore it to unity with the divine.

For over two thousand years, Sophia has inspired, enriched, and sanctified the lives of the Orthodox faithful, and she continues to do so today by personifying God's wisdom and actualizing it in his Church. Sophia cannot be separated from her history, her context, or the worldviews of the sophiologists who elaborated on her nature, and the adult learning field cannot be truly "sophianized" outside of her traditions. She does, however, have thousands of years of knowledge and experience behind her azure eyes, and the adult learning field has much to gain by engaging her in dialogue.

I challenge adult learning professionals to engage Sophia as I have attempted to do in this inaugural inquiry. I have sought to begin a dialogue with the wealth of the traditions she offers,

and I invite others to continue the conversation. My hope is that this will facilitate progress toward a richer, more inclusive, and more empowering understanding of who Sophia is and how she can benefit the adult learning field.

I believe that Sophia can help move us beyond the levels of information and knowledge to create a unified perspective of wisdom in which we can recognize that we participate in a higher self that is greater than the sum of its parts. That perspective can empower the comprehension not only of what-is, but also of what-should-be, and not only to comprehend it in human thought, but also to effect it through human action.

Fraser and Hyland-Russell (2011) observed that, “Paradoxically, we are more likely to encounter the wisdom of *Sophia* if we are willing to abandon rational certitude and embrace a stance of curiosity and openness, what we could call ‘unknowing’” (p. 33).

Sophia calls humanity to unify its values with its lives in a continuous act of selflessness and self-transcendence that brings ultimate fulfillment and final joy. In the words of Florensky, “Sophia is perceived as the intermediary of joy and is therefore identified with Joy” (1914/1997, p. 254).

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*Nulla laetitia sine Sapientia.*

There is no joy without Sophia.

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