Sophiology and Theurgy: the New Theological Horizon

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1. The genius of sophiology

At the dawn of the 21st century, it increasingly appears that the most significant theology of the two preceeding centuries has been that of the Russian sophiological tradition. Latin theology within the same period has been characterised by a gradual recovery of a more authentic tradition, rooted in the Church Fathers, the earlier to High Middle Ages and the better contributions of the Rennaissance legacy. This recovery eventually became focussed on an attempt to recover the sense that there is no great gulf between creation and deification, since humanity, and even the cosmos through humanity, has always been orientated in its fundamental being towards receiving the gift of supernatural grace.[1] In this way it opened up the possibility, even if it has never completely been followed through, of restoring the integral links between theological and philosophical discourse. The Eastern tradition, on the other hand, had never posited such a gulf, because it had never given rise to the Western problematic concerning the relation between nature and grace, reason and revelation. Although it was indeed much corrupted by alien scholastic influences, and even by certain rationalising trends of its own engendering, it was still possible for Vladimir

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[1] See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids Mich: Eerdmans, 2006)

Soloviev and other religious philosophers in the 19th century to resume a mode of thought in which the philosophical and the theological were seamlessly fused.

However, this greater rooting in ancient Christian tradition also allowed the Russians to respond to post-Kantian German thought in a manner not only significantly different from that of the West Europeans, but also, arguably, more attentive to the deep character of German idealism. Under the goad of Jacobi's contention that pure reason, without the support of faith, will have to confine itself to the supposedly graspable apparent truth of phenomena, thereby evoking the spectre of an underlying nihilism, Kant himself already sought to incorporate an understanding of faith, grace and even Christian doctrine within the scope of his philosophy. Still under the goad of Jacobi's incisive writings, which now called into question the very idea that reason could really round upon its own presuppositions, or intuit what is required for thinking without thereby simply performing yet another move within ungrounded discursive reason itself, Fichte, Hegel and Schelling were forced to try to ground reason by incorporating in their philosophies an account of the entire history of human cultural and theoretical reflection. This endeavour inevitably appealed to the history of religion and the history of Christianity in particular, in order to try to elucidate how finite discursive reasoning is related to the infinite self-establishing logos. The idioms of faith and belief were here respectfully seen as the vital clues to the comprehension of reason itself. In this manner, Jacobi's charge of nihilism was, it was hoped, held at bay, or else nihilism itself, as by Hegel, was given a more benign interpretation.[2]

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[2] See John Milbank, 'Knowledge: the theological critique of orthodoxy in Hamann and Jacobi' in *Radical Orthodoxy* eds J.Milbank, C. Pickstock and G.Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 21-37; Paul W. Franks, *All* or *Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP 2005); Frederich C. Beiser , *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge

Recent scholarship has emphasises the trajectory which I have summarised above, and what is striking is the way in which this accords with the older Russian reception of German philosophy. First of all, it remained far more emphatically aware, compared to the later Western recension (second half of the 19th and 20th C), of the way the nihilist problematic lurked always in the background of this tradition. Secondly, it realised that, in effect, German idealism had restored the integral unity of faith and reason, albeit in a mode which, even perhaps in the case of Schelling, was too biased towards the pole of reason. The Russian thinkers, from Soloviev through Pavel Florensky to Sergei Bulgakov in particular, then sought both to extend and to criticise this tradition, especially in the form it took in Schelling, in a manner that would free it of its rationalist and transcendentalist biases and render it more consonant with genuine Christian doctrine. In particular, they gradually purged away the notion, ultimately derived from Jacob Boehme, that is so pervasive in post-romantic German thought, according to which there is some sort of endemic conflict in the absolute which involves God himself in the Fall, the latter being regarded as an inevitable rather than a contingent event.[3] At the same time, the existential and conceptual issues that tended to support this notion were never skirted round by the Russians, who tended to provide more orthodox versions of the Behmenistic solutions.

Mass: Harvard UP 1987); Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1993); and on the German-Russian link, Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche,* (Durham NC: Duke UP 1995)

[3] For Germanic Gnosticism, see Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (New York: SUNY UP 1994) and *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (New York: SUNY 2001). For the modern Russian sophiological tradition, see Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Thought: Bukharev, Soliviev, Bulgakov – Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids Mich: Eerdmans, 2000); Antoine Arjakovsky, *La Génération de Penseurs Religieux de L'Émigration Russe* (Kiev/Paris: L'Esprit et la Lettre, 2002). For Bulgakov's adaptation of Schelling, see *Philosophy of Economy: the World as Household* trans Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven Conn: Yale UP 2000)

Pavel Florensky's return to the Jacobian perspective was drastic: he argued that because reason lacks a 'reasonable' intuition, and we cannot ground general truths upon isolated empirical intuitions, that therefore 'we revolve in the domain of postulates and presuppositions of certain knowledge'.[4] On the basis of this prodigiously 'postmodern' conclusion, he concludes that according to pure reason itself it is perfectly possible that there is no truth and that the 'true' horizon is rather a nihilistic one. Thus, in the long term wake of Jacobi and Hamann and beyond idealism, he concludes that reason of itself, in order to save itself, must 'postulate' by faith an infinite ground for the conclusions of reason which will confirm fleeting finite truths, snatched from the flux of time and the elasticity of space, only as participations in an infinite truth where the exclusivity of opposites on which finite logic must rely has necessarily (since in the infinite there are no boundaries to establish exclusive 'identities') ceased to apply. The Trinity, he suggests, is the revelation to faith and to a heightened reason of the logic of a coincidence of identity with non-identity in the grounding infinite.

For all these reasons, it seems to me that the scope, ambition and modernity of Russian theology is greater than that of their Latin contemporaries. They tended to start at the point where de Lubac and von Balthasar, to name only the most considerable names in the West, only finally arrived. This is because, by fusing the classical tradition with German idealism, heavily tempered, they did rather more than simply arrive at a *ressourcement*, plus certain thin post-Kantian glosses. Instead, in a more full-blooded way, an attempt was made, not simply to recover and defend orthodoxy, but even to extend it by attending both to untapped resources in the

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[4] Pavel Florensky, *On the Pillar and Ground of Truth* trans Boris Jakim (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP 1997) 47 and see 47-9.

tradition, and to new problematics thrown up by the experience and reflection of modern humanity.

Here, I think, two brief remarks are in order. First of all, one respect in which orthodoxy might be 'radical' is in recognising that orthodoxy is an always unfinished task. This is not only because new heresies may negatively pose to the Church new questions, but also because existing doctrinal formulations may enshrine unresolved problematics, as much as they successfully resolve old ones. It is also because, as Henri de Lubac says in his essay on the development of doctrine, the narratives and symbols of the Bible and the Liturgy always contain a surplus of mysterious meaning that is infinitely in excess of our achieved speculative comprehension.[5] There always remains pre-discursive material, or even blocks of such material, not yet done justice to. And any reflection on this material will involve a renewed engagement with philosophical resources that is able not just to borrow from these resources, but also to modify them in the light of the data of faith. Such a primary level of engagement has, I think, rarely been undertaken by theology since Medieval or even since Patristic times; but it is very clearly attempted by Florensky and Bulgakov. Clearly, the block of insufficiently explored primary material which they above all consider, concerns the question of wisdom, of the heavenly Jerusalem and of the eternal humanity. Such a consideration rightly involves asking whether extra-canonical texts, some texts loosely considered to be 'gnostic'and even pagan monotheistic texts, have not at

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[5] Henri de Lubac, 'The Problem of the development of Dogma' in *Theology in History* trans A.E. Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996) 248-80. See also Lewis Ayres' insightful footnote to this essay in his *Nicaea and it Legacy: an Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York OUP 2004) 427-9. Ayres, is however, wide of the mark in construing RO as too 'systematic' in a modern sense and too neglectful of scripture, Christology and the redemptive process on p. 403 of the same section of this important book. Indeed, it is precisely its lack of any 'overt' (ie presumably methodological) 'theology of scripture' and eschewal of pietistic rhetoric that renders RO 'non-systematic'.

certain points done more justice to these Biblical elements than that which hitherto has passed for mainline orthodoxy.

My second remark concerns the nature of the new questions posed by modernity, and treated in a certain fashion by the German idealist tradition. Above all, this means questions arising from the new awareness, since the Renaissance, that nature is a dynamic process, and that human nature is most of all dynamic and creative in character. In consequence, one becomes more aware of time, change and collective processes. The questions which then inevitably arise are, why, philosophically and theologically, is there life in time? Why are there successive human generations? Is human collective existence primary over individual existence? What exactly is it that binds together the human collectivity to compose human nature? If human creativity possesses a seemingly unlimited and potentially catastrophic power to transform non-human nature, then what exactly is our role within nature and what is the meaning of nature for us? In addition, the awareness of dynamic processes within nature is greatly increased by the discovery of biological evolution, which renders life a more unstable and violence-dominated process. Within a post-evolutionary climate, the traditional question of theodicy becomes much intensified: what can justify this endemic *agon* within life itself -- this formed the thematic of Schelling's novella *Clara*.[6]

All these questions are taken up by the Russsian sophiologists and their genius here is to be able to distinguish that which is ineluctable and unavoidable within modernity – namely the thematics I have just named - from more questionable intellectual

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[6] F.W.J. Schelling, *Clara or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World,* trans Fiona SteinKamp (Nw York: SUNY UP 2002)

manoeuvrings in the face of these thematics: in particular the assumed normativity of the turn to the individual knowing subject and the primacy of epistemology and representation after Descartes and Kant. The Russians rather wager on the possibility that a more traditional ontologically and cosmologically focussed mode of reflection can be renewed, so as to take account of the specifically modern issues.

And here their further genius is to link the under-unexplored matrix of material in the Bible concerning wisdom with the new issues posed by modernity concerning nature, humanity and evil. Often this linkage is brilliantly counter-intuitive: thus to take better account of the dynamism of nature appeal is made to a non-temporal heart of nature which is created Sophia as the world-soul. In a similar fashion, in order to take better account of human historicity and collectivity, appeal is made to some sort of ahistorical Adam-Kadmon figure. Finally, in order to come to terms with evolutionary struggle, the primacy of life and the unreality of death is invoked, along with a new insistence on the fallenness, and indeed, evil, of the natural world as we in time experience it. Later in this chapter I will try to indicate the coherence of these counter-intuitive moves.

If sophiology contrives to connect new problematics with a renewed hermeneutic of neglected texts, it also tries to deal with the standing *aporias* of existing doctrinal formulations. In every case, I think, this has to do with the question of mediation. Thus between the persons of the Trinity defined as substantive relations (following a tradition successively elaborated across East and West by the Cappadocians, Augustine and Aquinas) there are no third terms between Father and Son or between Father plus Son and the Spirit: *media non dantur*. Likewise there is no third term

between the essence of the Godhead and the persons of the Trinity themselves. Were there such *media*, then persons and relations and essence would become specific instances of something more general and fundamental. Likewise, if there were a third term between God and the Creation, if God were related to the creation and not just the Creation constitutively related to God, there would be a greater than God and God would not be God.

Again, in the case of Christology, there is no third term between the two natures, nor between both the natures and the divine hypostasis. Nor is there any third term between the Holy Spirit and the collectively infallible Catholic Church. Finally, there is no third term between manhood in general and Godhead, nor between God who is able to become man and humanity which is destined to be deified. However, as the Irish Catholic philosopher William Desmond has abundantly pointed out, where there is no third, no between, no *metaxu,* to use the Platonic term also favoured by Bulgakov (as Desmond is well aware), then one tends to get a resolution of all relations into impossible free-standing univocal identities, resulting in an unexplained pluralism, or else alternatively into a monistic equivocal flux whose self-grounding remains equally inexplicable.[7] And as Desmond, a renowed Hegel scholar, also contends, any merely dialectical version of mediation tends in reality to evacuate mediation by turning it into an agonistic shuttle between univocal pure self-standing identity on the one hand (perhaps with an accompanying hierarchy of an original identity over a secondary one), and an equivocal pure process of differentiation on the other. A little later on I shall consider how the traditional theological formulations, if left unmodified, can also fall prey to these sorts of dissolution.

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[7] William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (New York: SUNY UP 1995); Sergei Bulgakov 'The Unfading Light' in Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov* [a collection of translated texts and commentaries] (Edinburgh: T.and T. Clark, 1999), 134

For now the important thing to note is that one can take sophiology as the attempt to think through the place of mediation in instances like the theological ones mentioned where, it would seem, there cannot possibly *be* any mediation and yet, without it, everything threatens to fall apart. To anticipate, one could say that Sophia names a *metaxu* which does not lie between two poles but rather remains simultaneously at both poles at once. As such it does not subsist before the two poles, but it co-arises with them such that they can only exist according to a mediated communication which remains purely occult, a matter of utterly inscrutable affinity.

So we can now see that the notion of Sophia brings together three distinct things in modern Russian thought. First of all, it asks about divine wisdom in the Bible and the wisdom that is the first created of God's creatures (*Proverbs* 8:22-31). Secondly, it tries to confront the modern realities of dynamic collectivity and seemingly endemic evil in nature. Thirdly, it tries to tackle the problem of a necessary but seemingly impossible mediation that lurks within traditional speculative theology. By bringing these three problematics together, it arrives at a new sort of Trinitarian ontology which makes conjoined but distinguished relation and mediation the fundamental principles for all of reality, in such a manner that the dynamism of nature and humanity is both saved and accounted for. Here it is by no means exclusively Eastern, but tends to marry an orthodox understanding of the divine presence in the *economia* (for example, Maximus's ontology of the *logos/logoi*) with the Augustinian Trinitarian legacy and what can be regarded as valid in the German idealist Trinitarian speculations.

The modern and postmodern relevance of Russian sophiology is seen more specifically in the way it foregrounds the instability and uncertainty of understanding, the question of technology and the human relation to nature, together with the question of sexual difference and the preponderance of evil in finite reality. With respect to postmodern philosophy, Florensky and Bulgakov's often somewhat surrealist thought appears much more at home in the world of difference, simulacra, life, the event and the question of mediation than any of the other early 20thC theologies.[8]

2. Impossible mediation: (a) The Trinity

In what follows, I will try to give a schematic summary of how all this is done in my own idiom, which will not hesitate, where it seems necessary, to extend sophiological reflection beyond the conclusions arrived at by the great Russian masters.

In the case of the divine Trinity, Sergei Bulgakov insisted, as he thought, and most probably wrongly, against Aquinas, that the divine essence cannot in itself be considered something sheerly impersonal, even though it is not in itself an hypostasis, or in Latin language a *persona*.[9] Although it is not a hypostasis, it is still fundamentally 'hypostasising', or formative of the personal as characterised, reflective and spontaneous. This, then, is the primary reality that can be named 'Sophia' – the divine essence, or the divine being itself. There is, indeed, nothing that

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[8] See especially Pavel Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of Truth* which was both conceived and presented in some sense as a symbolist-surrealist work, especially in its depiction and commentary upon a series of emblems at the head of every chapter.

[9] Sergei Bulgakov, ' The Unfading Light', in Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 133-161; *Sophia: the Wisdom of God; an Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson NY: Lindisfarne, 1995), 3-53; *Le Paraclet* trans. into French from Russian by Constantin Andronikof (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1996) 171-82; *Du Verbe Incarné*, also trans C. Andronikof (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1982), 13-39

lies 'between' the persons of the Trinity, since they are substantive relations such as to ensure that the poles, so to speak, here encompass the entire globe. Insofar as the love that subsists between Father and Son can be considered to be a third reality, this is nothing that subsists between them, much less before them, but rather something that itself proceeds from them both (or from the Father through the Son, if you like -- it makes little difference to reason, if it has made a lot to history) to constitute a third hypostasis.

As Rowan Williams expertly sums all this up: 'Sophia is certainly a concrete reality, but not as a *subject* in any sense at all. If love always loves love (and how very Augustinian Bulgakov is in this respect!), the loving persons of the Trinity cannot love what they are if that nature is simply an abstract set of divine qualities; what they love is the capacity for love which is the foundation (though not the cause or origin, as if the abstract came before the concrete) of the eternal life they actually lead.'[10]

Bulgakov himself links this 'hypostasing' love which is Sophia with the fully hypostasised 'love in person' of the Holy Spirit, in the following way. We can recognise a mutual kenotic 'sacrifice' between Father and Son which would be, in itself, a tragedy, a strange kind of 'unlimited' sadness, were it not that this ecstasy gives rise to a productive joy that is 'more' than them both. If one considers purely the dyad of Father and Son then, says Bulgakov, one has only a kind of 'ideal' formal relationship, such that for the Father the Son is merely his own perspective of generating, and for the Son the Father is merely the perspective of being generated. Bulgakov links this ideality with 'sadness', by remote analogy to the travails of

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[10] Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 166-7

human conception and birth. In the latter case, the actual birth of a child, which gives rise to joy, achieves a new separation of parent and child which causes humans to forget the preceeding anguish. In the case of the Trinity, Bulgakov suggests, this anguish is so eternally surpassed that it never actually occurs. It is always already suppressed as the mutual joy of the Spirit which yet hypostatically exceeds the first two persons, because this joy is something 'objective', communicable beyond themselves as the *ethos* or peculiar shared 'culture' of their mutual love (to elaborate Bulgakov's reflections) and for this reason one can say that the person of the Spirit as 'the spirit of truth' in some particular sense most of all *is* Wisdom, or Sophia, the person that most personifies the divine essence.[11]

But Bulgakov's most subtle point is that it is only this 'joy as mutual product' which permits Father and Son to be, as it were, 'separately' actual for each other, beyond the mere formality of relationship, just as parent and child gradually come to see each other as free-standing persons. In the case of the Trinity, of course, because of substantive relationality, this is not precisely the case, but nevertheless, the joyful upshot of mutual relation allows this relation to be constantly and dynamically renewed, precisely because it incites a tension between the two poles of the dyad that is a response of Father to Son as 'released' Son, and of Son to Father as 'persisting' Father. For insofar as the surprise of the joy of the Spirit exceeds them both, it rebounds as renewed mutual awareness of the alterity that could instigate this astonishment. In this way, double sacrifice is surpassed by that joy which is the ecstatic beholding of the integrity of the other.

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[11] In a similar fashion, Claude Bruaire argued that while the essence of the divine Trinity is personal spirit or 'gift' (a function which he saw as being very much like that of *Sophia*) the Holy Spirit nonetheless is most of all spirit and gift, most of all 'the personal essence'. See Claude Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit* (Paris: PUF 1983), 159-204

The sacrificial, utterly self-abandoning moment of love is, according to Bulgakov, a crucial moment of love, and it is the ground for the possibility of love persisting in a world of evil as the experience of actual suffering. It is also the ground for the divine redemptive assumption of this suffering in the incarnation, although one should say here that the anguished separation of the Son from the Father undergone in Gethsemane and on the Cross is only something which he experiences, through the *communication idiomatum, qua* possessing an individual human nature, and not *qua* divine *persona.* Bulgakov's appropriation of Schelling here is actually more cautious than that of von Balthasar: he speaks indeed, like the German romantic philosopher, of an internal divine 'Victory' over the shadow of something that has never really come to pass: but in Bulgakov's case this is the shadow of suffering, rather than, as for Schelling, the shadow of a divine choice of evil or else of eternal possibilities that the divine Father has arbitrarily not elected. [12] Nor, for Bulgakov, is there any reverse transfer of Christ's suffering rupture from the Godhead in time back into the life of the Trinity itself, linked with a lingering Hegelian sense that, from all eternity, it is the Spirit which ensures the union of Father and Son, who are otherwise in a certain anguished separation from each other. But in the case of Balthasar, one has an element of *both* these still somewhat (in a bad sense, because they tend to ontologise the agonistic) 'gnostic' notions.[13] By contrast, and with far greater philosophical acuteness, Bulgakov associates the shadow of divine anguish not with the rupture of two mutually isolated subjects, but to the contrary with a relatedness to the other so absolute that one loses the sense of the independent integrity of the other (and thereby of one's own integrity also?) altogether.

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[12] Bulgakov, *Le Paraclet,* 174

[13] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama,* trans Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002) Vol 3: 183-92, 489-521; Vol 4: 235-7, 336-85. See also my remarks in *The Suspended Middle*, 74-5

And also in contrast to Balthasar, he never allows that any shadow of separation is truly actual in the immanent Trinity, nor requires any 'theodramatic', dialectical healing. Whereas the Swiss theologian spoke of the Spirit as 'reminding' the Father, in the event of the Cross, of the shadow of redemptive suffering rupture that had always hovered between him and the Son, the Russian theologian again spoke much less dialectically, but actually far more catastrophically, of the extinction also --or rather especially -- of the Spirit as Joy in the finite realm on the night of Gethsemane and the following Good Friday. For here, in terms of the divine assumption of human sinful nature, the shadow of the mere dyad, of merely 'ideal' relations between Father and Son, of relations without *relata*, has, indeed, eventuated. Because of the reality of substantive relation, and because, also, of the 'ideal' moment of sacrificial love now activated, both the Father and the Spirit are also affected by the *communicatio idiomatum:* the Father is 'con-crucified' as freely giving his Son unto death, while the Spirit must not merely suffer but 'vanish', if she is but the joyful upshot of love between Father and Son and this is now obliterated through an extremity of suffering that reduces the Son to 'being generated' and the Father to 'generating'.[14] If neither can for the moment see the other's face, then this (as I think Balthasar failed sufficiently to see) is *not* because the dyadic substantive relation has been impossibly severed in the vertical dimension, but rather because it alone – on the human, horizontal level, by virtue of the communication of the human idiom of suffering -- remains, without the 'comfort' of the Spirit's procession. Yet Bulgakov strongly insists that nothing eternal has changed and that nothing eternal has been 'put-off' by the incarnate Christ: the only *kenosis* is the eternal one of the dyadic 'mutually

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[14] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné,* 288-9

sacrificial' relation: Father to Son and Son to Father. Because nothing eternal has changed, and because this is reversely communicated to the humanity, the absolutely desolate and joyless suffering of the Cross (the only absolute desolation that there is, since it appears to destroy the eternal possibility of joy itself) is instantly and spontaneously converted from the ecstasy of sorrow into the ecstasy of the resurrection of joy, which brings the about the resurrected 'return' of the persons of Father and Son, as integral persons not 'exhausted' by their substantive relating (which of course paradoxically destroys also the relation, which requires a 'real two'). For if the Spirit was eternally the 'excess' product of mutual love, always already present beyond the merely 'ideal' mutually sacrificial love of a dyad, as their commonly emerging *ethos,* then when, in time, this sterile ideality is actualised on the Cross, then even so, or rather *all the more,* this excess product of joy will once again arise, to annul that death which is love only as sacrifice and not also as mutual positive ecstasy. This is precisely why Jesus was 'raised in the power of the Spirit', and we can see at once how, if 'communication of idiom' from the divinity to the humanity is a matter of personal putting on of a 'nature', that once again, it is the Spirit which most especially hypostasises the divine nature or Sophia as such, and so makes this communication possible.

With such a nuanced Trinitarian *schema*, Bulgakov is able to achieve a remarkable synthesis which does justice both to the Augustinian sense that the Spirit expresses only the mutual love that flows between Father and Son, and to the Eastern sense that it is the Spirit which alone enables their fully personal relationship. The Spirit proceeds 'by way of' the Son, and yet is also received by the Son from the Father ('resting on the Son's head', as in Christ's baptism in the Jordan) and is in turn

received back by the Father from the Son.[15] (In allowing this, Bulgakov shows a very

Western-influenced perspective, and he speaks variously of the Spirit proceeding 'by'

the Son, 'on' the Son and 'of' both father and the Son, thereby conceding the

filioque.)[16] Hence while the Spirit merely 'announces what the Son says of the

Father', as the 'spirit of truth', but not 'the truth itself', it nonetheless 'establishes the

reciprocity of Father and Son'.[17]

This joy that is the Spirit knows, in turn, no 'interval' or 'distance' between itself and

the Son taken together with the Father: there is no shared medium between these two

realities, any more than there is between Father and Son. Nevertheless, if there were

in no sense a shared 'something' (*homoousios,* if one likes) involved in substantive

relation, then the engendered would be sheerly 'other' to the engendering, and the

proceeded to the proceeding, on analogy with a bifurcation between *natura naturans*

and *natura naturata*: a dualism of process and upshot (which Bulgakov subtly avoids,

in the manner above indicated) that would in fact entirely undo substantial relation.

Instead, the Son 'is not' the Father as in pure relation to him, but at the same time he

'is' the Father (as Augustine indicates), insofar as the *persona* is not other to the

essence and stands forth just as much in respect of being in itself the essence as in

respect of being in itself a substantive relation.[18] Hence *persona* for both Augustine

and Aquinas *is not* just the name of a pure relation, but also the point of the

intersection between the relational and the essential register.[19] It is this 'essential'

aspect of the person which helps to ensure its 'actual content' and 'independence'

(only so-to-speak) in the way which we have just seen was spoken of by Bulgakov.

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[15] Bulgagov, *Le Paraclet,* 174-77
[16] *Ibid*
[17] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné,* 18-20
[18] Augustine, *De Trinitate,* VII, 3, 11
[19] Thomas Aquinas, ST I Q9 a.4 resp; Q 39 a 1

Here again we see a link between the role of essence as Sophia and the Holy Spirit as Sophia, insofar as both tend to actualise, to concretise, to insinuate 'beauty', 'sensation' and 'life' as Bulgakov puts it,[20] and so even to 'objectify' in such a fashion as to furnish a definite shape to Father and Son, or to 'supply character'. (For the latter notion see further below).

Via this point of intersection between relation and essence in the person, the unengendered in some sense is the engendering and the proceeded is likewise in some sense the proceeding. It follows then, that there is in a certain fashion a dynamic substantive mediation between essence and relations which involves also a mediation between the persons themselves.

However, it is hard to understand how this can be so. If there is any third term between the essence and the persons, then this threatens to become itself a fourth hypostasis, or else the persons to be reduced to mere modes of a super-fundamental process. Third terms regarded as fundamental are always liable to become genera which contain the linked items as specific instances of themselves. Hence the betweenness involved here cannot really concern, even metaphorically, any intervening space. Instead, Bulgakov's point is rather that what is common to the three persons cannot itself be exactly impersonal, even if it is also not exactly in itself a person: therefore it is at once an essence and yet something already approaching the personal. His thought here is specifically and distinctly vitalist or organicist in character – thus he speaks of the deity as a super-organism. If one takes the analogy of a tree, then Bulgakov is refusing to say that what binds the forest together is an

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[20] Bulgakov, *le Paraclet,* 174-9

archetypal super-tree, but on the other hand he is also denying that the shared

common form 'tree' is in itself a static intellectual abstraction.[21] Rather, if we want to

account for why there is a certain dynamic stability of treeness throughout the ages of

the earth, we need to think of the universal form 'tree' as not apart from the entire

arboreal process of growth and decay and formation, such that it is in a sense identical

with the total life of all trees throughout all time as that which mysteriously enables a

certain stability of shape and activity within a continuously non-identical repetition.

By analogy, in the case of God, the divine essence is not an impersonal being,

substance, essence, set of realised truths or potential that is fully in force. Rather it has

in itself, although infinite, a specific and definite 'character' which is the aesthetic

shaping power of wisdom, or the manifesting power of the divine superabounding

light which, according to the Bible, is 'glory'. This character is not as such in itself

fully personal – somewhat as trees and houses or shared social practices can have

characters as much as persons do, even though they are not themselves rational,

willing or conscious.

Moreover, this 'character of things' is by no means merely a weak echo of that

character which persons possess purely in their own right. To the contrary, one can

argue that if the divine essence did not in possess 'character' or rather, shall we say, a

'power to characterise', then the divine persons themselves would not be personal.

This is because their relationality alone does not guarantee their possession of

character. A stone, for example, can have 'a parent' in the sense of a physical origin,

just as much as can a human being. Therefore why should not an eternal offspring that

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[21] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné*, 1-22; *Sophia: the Wisdom of God*, 54-81; *Philosophy of Economy,* 44-58

is a pure substantive being-engendered be a kind of infinite impersonal super-stone? The possessable and transferable character of all persons, human and divine, rather derives initially from the 'shape' that they derive from the objective world. A human aworldly self would be empty: 'character' only emerges through doing and making, through interaction with things and with other people through the mediation of things.

Nevertheless, 'character' is intensified by the greater reflexivity and spontaneity of the personal: by its power to sustain surprising continuities of form through willed changes of shape. It is just for this reason that the most *definite* human characters are precisely the most *enigmatic* ones -- such that, indeed, character is enigma and enigma is character: it is *only* enigma that can generate characterisable variations, to allude to Elgar's unique musical composition.[22] Enigmatic persons impart the most singular shape to their actions, even though we cannot quite say what this is. Thus the people who convey the most unique flavour are also those who are sometimes the most unpredictable, or at least never *precisely* predictable, because no-one else fully has the secret of that art which is these persons themselves. It is for this reason that, even though our contemporary sense of the word 'person' itself derives from the classical idea of the performance of a theatrical role,[23] *all* characters in plays and novels are caricatures (even Jane Austen's Emma, even Flaubert's) compared to the extraordinary people that we meet with in real life, who are destined to play roles of a far greater definiteness and complexity. (And this is why the novelist should

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[22] On this elusive topic, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Echo of the Subject' in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP 1989), 139-208
[23] See Robert Spaemann, *Persons: the Difference Between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, trans Oliver O'Donovan, (Oxford: OUP 2006), 16-34. See, particular, 23: 'the term 'person' came to mean a subject relating to its nature like an actor to its role.' Spaemann goes onto to describe how this new sense of person as role or character (rather than as mere rational autonomous being, as for earlier Greek thought), was decisive in showing how the persons of the Trinity could be one yet distinct as 'playing different roles' in relation to each other, and how God incarnate could be 'personally' united by singularity of character, without confusion of created and uncreated, finite and infinite natures.

concentrate on creating 'another' world, not on placing invented characters in something like our world. Thereby she has more chance of creating, out of her own unique character, relatively life-like fictional characters whose uniqueness belongs to the unique *ethos* of the invented world. The consequent reality-effect then has more chance of illuminating our world, than any more direct attempt at *mimesis*. Even an apparently 'realist' novel like *Adam Bede* in fact succeeds, perhaps contrary to what George Eliot herself supposed, because she has in effect created her 'own world' out of the characterised singularity of her intense perception of the real one that she knew about.)[24]

But the necessary resources for the emergence of this intensified and enigmatic personal character lies initially in the idioms proper to things, and especially in the transfiguring power that is already proper to things. Hence even the infinite persons of the Trinity cannot be personal, which is to say 'enigmatically characterised', simply in themselves and as relational, unless they are always *mediating* and are equally *mediated by* an objective personifying power, or a 'power to characterise'. This power must combine a definite though infinite aesthetic shape with the pre-ground for conscious reflexive judgement and loving will in the mode of an impersonal 'bending-back upon itself' (without which there could never be any shape, only an impossibly abstract 'line') and unconscious spontaneity. What is thereby jointly unpredictable in objective formation is the ground for the enigmatic 'reserve' of the personal.

Why though, cannot the power to personify, Sophia, be herself a self-grounded hypostasis, akin to the Islamic Allah? The answer here has to do with fact that, as

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[24] See George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), Chapter 17, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little' where she enunciates her realist aesthetic credo.

Bulgakov recognised, one cannot take Being alone to be the primary principle. What is, manifests itself, else it is unthinkable.[25] Therefore, as Gregory of Nyssa affirmed, Being is also *dynamis*, which is the power to affect. However, for Gregory *dynamis* is equally the power to be affected, because manifestation requires also a registering of this manifestation if it is to be there at all – whether or not this registering is taken to be 'conscious' in character.[26] In consequence, if we posit an initial Being which is 'one', and insist that it can only be if it shows itself, then we have immediately also to posit a 'second', which is the receiving capacity. The problem of mediation between the expressing first and the expressed – and so it would seem, reflexively expressed – second, then arises.

This can be resolved dialectically and dynamically after Hegel: the initial One is not just from our point of view, but really and truly ontologically lacking, such that it must express and define itself to move out of its own nullity. But in this conception, the *aporia* of a double beginning is in a sense evaded by recourse to a philosophical myth of a 'counterfeit double' as William Desmond so well expresses it, even if no knock-down reasons may be available to stop people believing it.[27] No real daemonic *metaxu* or sophianic principle is invoked here, since differing is the work of the original One itself, through a self-denial which it must of course later cancel in order to retain an integral identity. In eventually re-claiming for for the One itself the *formal process* of othering, the finitude of multiple difference in its real substantively constituted content is abandoned to sheer equivocal contingency: this is the reverse face of Hegelian absolute identity, which so many commentators overlook. Moreover,

[25] Bulkagov, *Du Verbe Incarné; Sophia,* 37-81
[26] See John Milbank, 'The Force of Identity', Chapter 8 of *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Langauge, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 194-16
[27] See William Desmond, *Hegel's God: a Counterfeit Double?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

since the One in-itself remains empty, even the content of the Absolute's 'for itself'

can be nothing other than the sheer accidental randomness of unfated difference,

outside providential governance -- Hegelian shit, as Slavoj Zizek graphically regards

it.[28]

This is why it remains possible to read Hegel as a kind of nihilist, as argued first by

the remote if deviant disciple of Soloviev, Alexander Kojève, or indeed as a kind of

atheist, as argued against Gillian Rose by Jay Bernstein.[29] And Schelling's more

'positive' version of this same dialectical mediation is really but a slight

improvement. Here an original positive willing of determination which establishes the

regime of love does, indeed, bring a finite contingent order within the sway of

providence, and also announces a more final 'victory' (Schelling's preferred name for

God) over the originally indeterminate and mechanically necessitated shadow reality,

which God from the outset refuses as the ground for his 'pre-ontological' original

willing of freedom. However, Schelling's essentially non-teleological concept of

freedom, which fails to see freedom as only really free in its orientation to the good,

but rather tries to regard the good as without remainder the decision of freedom,

assumes first of all 'the faculty to be one or the other of the contradictories' and

secondly 'that incomprehensible primordial act in which the freedom of a person is

decided for the first time'. This act reveals 'character' and Schelling (against the

Aristotelian tradition of practical reason) takes it to be obvious that the 'choice' of

character is entirely prior to 'reasoning or reflection'.[30] In this way Schelling extended

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[28] His most important statement of this reading remains, in my view, his essay 'Not only as *Substance,* but also as *Subject'* in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 201-231
[29] Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans James H. Nicholas Jr (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP 1969)
[30] F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (Third Version, 1815) trans Jason M. Wirth (New York: SUNY 2000) 78

the post-Scotist negative understanding of free choice as rooted in a fundamental 'indetermination' into a validation of the purely positive 'existential' character of an actual choice when it occurs. He also, as we have just seen, ontologised and theologised this scheme by conceiving God as fundamentally a decisive choice for actual particular things over against a refused realm of indeterminacy and indifference. But this means that the positive peaceful affirmation of difference is for him always grounded upon a refusal of both the unrelated self as same and of the other as external and alien.

In Trinitarian terms, as Schelling later expressed it in his *Philosophie der Offenbarung,* this means that the pre-ontological 'Father', in his ungrounded decision to be as a character or 'person', at once generates the Son *as* the location of this now 'existing' decision, and *also* as the thereby conjured-up hinterland of unrealised possibility. It is in terms of this latent tension that the Son possesses an independent personality, and he is therefore potentially the site of a constant impulse to return to the Father, but equally of a constant impulse to re-establish his independence. (One should contrast here Bulgakov's 'shadow of suffering', because this dos not proceed from any implicit tension between Father and Son, but only 'anticipates' – from our *modus cognoscendi* – a trouble to both that might arise from outside them both.) This *mélange* of simultaneous affirmation of, and yet exception to the Paternal character, gives rise immediately to the third person of the Holy Spirit who establishes the divine reclaiming of itself as the union of both the *actus purus* of eternal positive decision and the affirmation also of the other, necessarily at first excluded

possibilities, so permitting a full 'acceptance' of the Son's inevitably independent moment.[31]

So within God, for Schelling, there is no *actual* eternal tension, struggle, alienation or refusal, not even in sublated form. In this respect he is far closer to Patristic orthodoxy than Hegel, just as he also approaches Aquinas's distinction between being and essence to affirm the priority of the former and the secondariness of human thought with respect to existence; recovers the reasonableness of revelation by linking it with the (essentially Aristotelian) notion that it is always actualities, including historical actualities which alone disclose truth and re-affirms at last Hamann (and Jacobi's) view that, this being the case, every act of reason continues to rest upon an unsurpassed act of faith.[32] Unfortunately Schelling also invented 'existentialism' by extending the primacy of being over intellect to God himself and then by grounding the divine being upon the divine will -- for Aquinas by contrast, infinite being, thought and will all coincide, without any priority, in the divine simplicity. By doing so he betrayed, at the most fundamental metaphysical level, his own insight into the primacy of action and the embedding of truth within an actual state of affairs, to which true desire is responsive. By admitting possibilism and indeterminate freedom to ultimate status within God, he replaced a true positive mediation within God with a latent tension between the realised and the unrealised and ensures that within the creation itself this tension will become really and truly fundamental.

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[31] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung* 1841-2 (Darmstadt: Leske, 1843) II, 15, 16. For a modern abridged version see that of Manfred Frank (Frnakfurt am Main, 1977) But for the most conveniently available complete edition see the French translation: *Philosophie de la Révélation,* livres I-III translated under the direction of J-M Marquet and J-F Courtine (Paris: PUF, 1989-94)
[32] Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung,* I, 8

For the notion of an original necessary shadow of indetermination ensures that the creation, unlike the creator, must be seen as necessarily grounded in ontological violence. By rooting evil as a 'positive' possibility within this pre-original (but never infinitely actualised) divine estrangement, Schelling renders inevitable and paradigmatic for nature a process of initial reactive suffering and agonisedly resistant overcoming and so fails really to grasp the primacy of the good as self-giving plenitude. This follows because the 'revelation' of God in actuality or in being, which is also the constitution of the cosmos, demands the simultaneous instantiation of the 'No' as well as the 'Yes', since they are mutually conditioning, even though they are also ineradicably opposed. In consequence the finite world of nature emerges initially as the actualisation of the divine 'No' and therefore involves also the temporary actualisation of the indeterminate and mechanical which this very 'No' refuses. Now that *agon* which is merely latent in God becomes the heart of living reality. For this reason, the diversity of nature *cannot* be explained 'by the peaceful eisemplasy [*Ineinsbildung*] of various forces'; rather, 'everything that becomes can become only in discontent' [33] The products of love for this vision, are, since they are rooted in a primordial gesture of the will that establishes once and for all (outside any real historical accumulation of habit in the case of human beings, or any rational adoption of a desirable pattern in the case of God) personal 'character', unmediably diverse.[34] They therefore reduce to so many various subjective affirmative gestures whose different content, in the case of finite spirits, is inextricably linked to the different paths of negation which they have traversed. If a single affirming will is to achieve this affirmation in affirming the will of another, then it must always first negate the other's exteriority such that (effectively against the teaching of St Paul about the

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[33] Schelling, *Ages* 91
[34] Schelling, *Ages,* 77-8

uniquely non-reactive character of charity) 'a root of bitterness lies even in sweetness' and 'a root of hatred lies in love' which 'although concealed …is necessary for its support'.[35]

So as with Hegel, so for Schelling, mediation remains linked to an instable and agonistic process, not, as for the greater radicalism of Orthodox Trinitarian thought, with the perpetual and peaceful dynamic *stasis* of a genuinely doubled and so tripled eternal beginning and end. Hence for even the final Schelling, the generation of the Son inevitably involved the realisation of the latent possibilities conjured up by the Paternal decision as the created world whose otherness is inseparable from its tensional alienation. An immediate and yet contingent human fall (here again, Schelling improves upon Hegel) proceeds from a will infinitely to actualise the pre-given positive tendency in nature to establish itself as a power separate from God and not, as for Augustinian tradition, form a pure negation of the fullness of created reality which, without remainder, is tending back to its creator.[36]

Neither Hegel nor Schelling therefore, entertained the truly radical thought of a real original difference exceeding any tensional process of development. But if onedoes entertain this, then one can project the epistemological necessity of original twoness onto the ontological plane (as seems already to have been obscurely affirmed by Plato)[37] Then one is confronted with the mystery of Sophia, of original mediation, or of original supplementation without Derridean deception and anguish.[38] That which *is* is dynamic self-expressive life, but as such it is also the otherness of active reception

[35] Schelling, *Ages,* 39
[36] Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung* II, 16
[37] See Hans Joachim Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics* trans John R.Catan (New York: SUNY 1990)
[38] See Milbank, *The Word Made Strange, Logos*, 55-123

of this dynamism. It is, indeed, super-eminently sperm and womb, forever conjoined and forever apart. But this eminent life is also eminent intellect, or precisely 'wisdom', because, in our experience, the reception of *oneself* as a gift, or the receiving of a gift such that one *is not* outside this reception, is, as the French Catholic philosopher Claude Bruaire argued with explicit reference to both Bulgakov and de Lubac, most of all characteristic of conscious life, capable of gratitude.[39] Merely in gratitude one can already *be* according to a new mode, and one cannot think at all without receiving something and without understanding oneself *to be* this reception, such that one reflexively gives what one has received from another again to oneself. But in the Trinity of course, these two moments of reception and reflexivity absolutely co-incide, such that there is, strictly speaking (and in contrast to Hegel) no reflexivity of the second, expressed and cognitive principle. Here indeed, process (paternal generation) and upshot (sonship) are entirely co-terminous.

All the same, the process is not a mere univocal essence that 'distributes' the three persons. Were it so, then modalism would threaten, as it would likewise if we took the essence itself, or Sophia, to be a fourth hypostasis. And such modalism would either tend towards an original monism, raising power or will above love (which is always relational), or else to a primacy of triadic pure difference beyond oppositional duality, grounding a general priority for difference as such throughout all being. Or else one could have a dialectical version of the latter position, which would aporetically oscillate between the supremacy of an empty one and the supremacy of an accidental difference, in the fashion we have already seen. Hegel or Deleuze: it makes fewer odds than most suppose.

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[39] Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit*, 51-87

Where difference enjoys priority then, in the absence of mediation, one has a situation of implicit incompatibility and so of latent conflict: mediation will here be required for the sake of a liberal peace, but it will only be able to assume an extrinsic formalist mode which will therefore have to suppress to some degree the expressiveness of difference and thereby will only operate through the exercise of a re-doubled violence. Without original mediation, external conventional mediation can only itself be in reality one more instance of arbitrary difference.

To avoid this ontological and socio-political upshot, one must indeed conceive of the divine essence as Sophia, a characterising power. As we have seen, process and relation do not guarantee an instance of personal character, but, on the other hand, character can be communicated from one person to another and there can indeed arise a kind of collective character. Indeed for character to be character at all as an expressive showing-forth, it must be in principle communicable and must even be actually communicated in some measure. Thus all of the godhead is characterised, and all the persons of the Trinity share in and hypostasise the power to give which is also the power to receive that marks life as such and supremely intellectual life as such. It follows that Bulgakov's Trinitarian ontology is not just an existentialism but rightly and equally a vitalism and an intellectualism.

3. Impossible mediation: (b) God and Creation

In the above fashion one sees the sophianic principle of 'impossible' mediation operating most supremely in the case of the Divine Trinity. The same principle is then participated in, in various modes, by the Creation, by Humanity, by the Incarnate Logos, by the Mother of God, by the Church, and by what one might call the liturgical-economical process.

In the case of the whole of the Creation, how can it possibly be at all? There is nothing but God, in his ubiquity. If there is also the Creation as well as God, then the Creation must lie within God. The internally emanated Son and Spirit are already the Creation as gift and response, expression and interpretation – as Aquinas in his earlier work affirmed, at least in relation to the Son.[40] More specifically, Sophia as the feminine power of active reception is super-eminently the Creation, while Son and Spirit are super-eminently the Creation as hypostasised by the angels and by humanity, while the latter more differentially images Son and Spirit as masculine and feminine – to such a degree that the divine love is most especially manifest in male/female relationships of every conceivable type (Mother-Son, Brother-sister etc as well as Man-Wife).[41] Bulgakov says in this respect that Eve proceeds from Adam in a dream because she is a 'spiritual' donation of a second flesh; hence the union of man and woman and their resultant reproduction is also always symbolically the union of flesh with spirit, just as the fleshly aspect of the union has a spiritual aspect also. The Son is for this reason already prototypically the divine humanity, ina clear echo of Swedenborg, while the 'feminine' Spirit alone 'actualises' and 'manifests'

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[40] See Philipp Rosemann, *Omne ens est aliquid: Introduction à la lecture du "système" philosophique de saint Thomas d'Aquin,* (Louvain/Paris: Peeters, 1996), 191-210
[41] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné* 35-6

this *theanthropos*. [42] The Spirit as it were brings the eternal divine humanity to birth, while equally she simply reflects it, in such a way that, according to Bulgakov, she is the prototype of deified humanity, rather than humanised deity, the incarnate God. Likewise she is the prototype of Mary and of the Church, which is why, together with the bride, she says 'come' in the *Apocalypse* (Apoc 21:21) Meanwhile, although the Father is *only* manifest in this double 'theandrism' of Son and Spirit, he himself stands in a certain monarchic and mysterious reserve above it – although it is, of course, just this height and reserve and mystery which is alone shown in the eternal human image.

But if creation lies within God, God must inversely lie within creation. God must be also that in himself which goes outside God, as Dionysius the Areopagite indicated.[43] Since God is all in all, at the bottom of that nullity which is alone proper to the Creation must lie God – who, for Augustine, is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Or, in Maximian terms, just as the one *logos* in God is also the many *logoi* that are the inner principles of created things (things as most fundamentally divine thoughts, which Augustine described in similar terms as created divine 'numbers')[44], so these many *logoi* in creatures are in themselves the unity of the one *logos* in the created order. Since the creation is not God, and yet God is everything, this constitutive

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[42] Bulgakov, *Sophia,* 79: 'We can say of the Logos that he is the everlasting human being, the human prototype, as well as the Lamb slain "before the foundation of the world".' See also 80, but there are translation and typographical errors here, so see also the French version, *La Sagesse de Dieu: Résumé de Sophiologie* trans Constantin Andronikov (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1983); *Le Paraclet,* 311-313 for the passage about the creation of Eve and *Du Verbe Incarné,* 34-7

[43] Dionysius the Areopagite; Div. Nom. 4.1. See also Thomas Aquinas, ST I Q 20 a ad 1

[44] Augustine, *De Musica: Libri Sex; De Libero Arbitrio* II 45, xvii, 45-47; *De Quantitate Animae* – where the fundamental element is 'the point' rather than the the number. See also Emilie zum Brunn, *St Augustine: Being and Nothingness* (New York: Paragon House, 1988); Catherine Pickstock, 'Music: Soul, City and Cosmos after Augustine' in *Radical Orthodoxy* eds J.Milbank, C.Pickstock and G.Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 243-78

divine intimacy of word or number must, in some sense, be 'created God', as John Scotus Eriugena put it.[45]

This is why there is an earthly as well as a heavenly Sophia. Like the heavenly, uncrerated Sophia the earthly, created Sophia is not, in herself, an hypostasis. Rather, for Bulgakov, as the world-soul, she is that power of self-engendering life which logically must be prior to death and which undergirds the non-organic as well as the organic – he stood very close to Bergson at this point.[45] She is that which forms and patterns and orders and empowers creatively – not by arbitrary power, nor yet according to a fixed formula. She is an artist, albeit an unconscious one, and she is supremely shown through her prime attribute of beauty, which Bulgakov, following Dosteyevsky's dictum, believed would 'save the world'.[47]

But why, in the face of a modern temporalisation of nature, invoke the pre-modern notion that, at the heart of nature, lies something supra-temporal? The answer is surely that Bulgakov, in the wake of Soloviev and Florensky, realised that if all arises through a process of action and reception, ever non-identically repeating itself, then things are bound together in a more organic, more unified and even a more quasi-personal way than within an Aristotelian cosmos. It is not that there are abstract genera external to their specific instances which would involve an oscillation between the concretely particular and the abstractly universal. It is rather that universality

[45] John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon: Liber Primus* ed I.P. Sheldon-Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1999), 453c30- 454a10 pp 62-5. See in particular, p 65: '[the Divine Nature] is (also) created because nothing except itself exists as an essence since it itself is the essence of all things' and earlier, pp 63-5: 'in all things the Divine Nature is being made, which is nothing else than the Divine Will. For in that nature being is not different from willing, but willing and being are one and the same in the establishment of all things that are to be made'.
45. Bulgakov, 'On the Transcendental Subject of Economy' in *Philosophy of Economy,* 123-56; *Sophia,* 54-82; *Du Verbe Incarné,* 39-52

[47] Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulkakov,* 128

consists more Platonically in the process of engendering and being engendered itself, in the totality of this process. For if one wants, to echo Florensky and Bulgakov's way of posing the problem, to think of the ontological 'transcendental condition' for the possibility of consistent yet varied processes in time,[48] then no appeal can plausibly be made, after Darwin, to a set of fixed kinds, nor yet to an ontic first cause since, within the material universe, this cannot originally precede what is caused, and in any case the notion of 'cause' is a pragmatic fiction which disguises the fact that what causes is only a change into something else -- such that all ultimate causes are more primarily effects, or, as neoplatonism and Aquinas had it 'emanations'.[49] Instead, given that time-space is a relative framework (a point already invoked very early on by Florensky), it becomes possible to pose the question of how all instances of a process might exist, simultaneously, from a perspective above and outside time. From this vantage one can think of all natural processes and the one process of nature herself as Sophia, as created wisdom, the first of God's works according to the Biblical Wisdom literature, and so not as anything abstracted, but rather as a concentrated universality of aesthetic character.[50] Clearly a belief in a transcendent, creator God validates this notion that there is an eternal inner dimension to the finite and the temporal. And this dimension, since it does not abstract from time and complexity, actually guarantees the irreplaceable significance of process and becoming with all their manifold concrete instances. It does not replace it but sums it up and presents it to the Godhead,

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[48] Bulgakov, 'On the transcendental Subject of Economy'; Pavel Florensky, 'Letter Ten: Sophia' in *On the Pillar and Ground of Truth,* 231-84

[49] See Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* 31, citing Jean-Luc Marion's correct recognition that Aquinas thinks of divine causality more fundamentally in terms of the Dionysian *aitia* or 'requisite' than of strictly Aristotelian 'cause' and this is why he describes an effect more frequently as *causatum* than as *effectus* This view (to elaborate Marion) renders 'causing' much more as 'giving', such that the cause *is* a going out of itself as an effect, while the effect is wholly 'from' the cause, in which it 'eminently' abides. For Marion see 'Saint Thomas d'Aquin et L'Onto-Theo-Logic' in *Revue Thomiste*, Jan-March 1995, TXCV, no 1, 31-66

[50] Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy,* 13-156; Florensky, 'Letter Ten: Sophia'.

while at the same time supplying it with its regular but inexpressible bounds, without which it would lapse into indistinction.

Between God and Creation then, there is no between. To suppose so would be idolatry. On the other hand, if the created order univocally enjoys its own existence which sufficiently possesses existence as finite being, then there is after all, by the working of an inexorable dialectic, a third term, namely 'being', invoked as lying between God and the creation and thereby threatening idolatrously to include them both. To avoid this outcome one must rather say that all created being borrows its being from God who alone fully 'is' or is 'to be'. Finite being shares in and is remotely like the *esse* of God.

Yet at the limit of such an analogical conception one must admit, with Eckhart, who is merely extending Augustine's *dictum* to its logical conclusion, that by an unforeclosed and mysteriously harmonious dialectic (unlike that of Hegel) what shares in God through its very unlikeness to God, can only do so because it is also precisely like, indeed identical with, the Godhead in its hidden heart.[51] If nullity shares in being, then at bottom created things are God in some sense and God is in some sense created. To avoid at this point either acosmism or pantheism (and thereby lose the ultimacy of gift and relation,) the best we can do is to affirm both these further strange impossibilities at once. Sophia is the creation in God: Sophia is also God in the creation. There is not one Sophia, hovering ontotheologically between God and the creation; there are two Sophias on two sides of the chasm, yet somehow their deep-beyond-deep affinity renders them after all but one. But not 'one' in the sense of

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[51] See John Milbank, 'Preface to the Second Edition: Between Liberalism and Positivism' in *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), XI-XXXII

an hypostasis; one rather in the sense of a shared essence or character or power-to-personify.

For Bulgakov, the created order is in the image of the Trinity because it has to be constituted by the Sophianic capacity to hypostasise, plus actual hypostases which alone render this power actual and operative.[52] Hence the idea of a reality without spirits is unthinkable and impossible. Here one can re-invoke my argument about giving that was intended to prove that primary created reality must be intellectual. Again following Bruaire, the inner reality of creation is a gift that establishes a receiver, the gift of a receiver as such, and this, for reasons already seen, must be intellectual being. It then follows that the inner reality of created Sophia is created angelhood and humanity. Humanity has itself an eternal and atemporal aspect because it is another, and indeed the supreme example, of a natural community of generation. Here again, the notion that there is an eternal 'collective personhood' of all humanity does not detract from, but rather confirms, the significance of life in time, following the same logic that I have already unfolded with respect to life in general. This might not seem to be the case if one supposes that the eternal humanity is, unlike Sophia, an hypostasis, but it is not. Although it is a more intense degree of the power-to-hypostasize, the only actual human hypostases for Bulgakov are real human beings existing in the course of time.

Nevertheless, a significant difference ensues from traditional Christian emphases. It is also the eternal Adam as created (not as uncreated, not as the *Logos* itself) who has fallen, and the original unfallen eternity or else benign time enjoyed by actual human

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[52] Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* trans Boris Jakim (Eerdmans/T. and T. Clark: Grand Rapids Mich/Edinburgh, 2002), 79-124

beings has likewise been lost to fallen view. It is also this Adam – the dynamic human essence – which must be restored if we are all to be restored. Hence Bulgakov, much more directly than hitherto within Christian tradition (but there are analogies here with Jewish Cabbalistic and Hasidic thought), saw salvation in collective and historical terms. It is a gradual work, culminating in and enabled by, the work of Christ. Deification itself now incorporates and criticises the bastard Promethean insights of the West concerning godlike human power emancipated from a transcendent horizon, and recovers the earlier non-Promethean perspectives of neoplatonic theurgy and the Hermetic *Asclepius* that astonishing Egyptian work which at once prophesied the technological era, *and* warned against its potential excesses leading to ecological catastrophe, once a sense of reverence for the earth and the need to cherish it have been lost.)[53] To become divine now means for Bulgakov also constantly to shape better images of deity (as the Hermetic corpus suggests)[54], and to mediate the divine creative economy such that all human working is a coming to know and inversely, coming to know is a constant process of collective just distribution: 'economy is knowledge in action; knowledge is economy in theory'[55] Also, in coming to know by working, we arrive at new vision through the images we have made, the songs we have sung, the words we have uttered, and this 'seeing through' is the theurgic invocation of the divine by which alone God can descend to us – the infusion of our own works with his inspiration. Strictly speaking, for Bulgakov, human theurgy (as opposed to 'theurgy' proper, which is simply the divine work) is 'sophiurgy', since 'Sophia' names the synergic fusion of human and divine work which is brought about through the Incarnation and Pentecost and sustained by

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[53] 'Asclepius' in *Hermetica*, trans Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: CUP 1992) pp 67-92 esp paras 8-9, pp 71-2 and para 25, p 82
[54] 'Asclepius' paras 22-4, pp 79-81
[55] Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy* 131

liturgical activity, focussed upon the transformation of bread and wine into God's body in the eucharist.[56]

In this way, resuming after a long time the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, who first mediated the best pagan monotheism to Christian thought, and of Maximus, Eriugena and Cusanus, Bulgakov explicitly and by name adds theurgy to theosis, thereby enabling, with this ancient resource, more justice to be done to the modern sense of the importance of human fabrication. Outside an ultimate liturgical reference, economic activity sinks into sensual and greedy debasement, while, as Rowan Williams has underlined, aesthetic activity falsely pursues an immanent spirituality which seeks to abandon the body, in default of any recognition of sacramental mediation of the real transcendence of the Creator God by all modes of embodiment.[57] On the other hand, modern Christianity, Bulgakov suggests, must now more fully grasp that the theological is always also theurgic: that God only reaches us through the liturgical invocations latent in all human creative bringing forth of the unanticipated.[58] These invocations reach their highest pitch in language, which synaesthetically blends the imaginative work of all the senses: thus Bulgakov defended the contemporary Russian revived Palamite notion (much refracted by Russian aesthetics' reception of French symbolism) that by uttering the name of Jesus the energetic presence of the divine person is thereby brought about, because in some ineffable way the sonorous patterns and other sensorial resonances of human language have become atuned over the ages to a certain receptivity of transcendence [59] Or, as the symbolist forerunner Charles Baudelaire realised this thought in words: '*Comme*

[56] Bulgakov, 'The Unfading Light', 149-59
[57] Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 113-131
[58] Bulgagov, 'The Unfading Light' op cit
[59] See Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 'General Introduction', 1-19

de longs échos qui de loin se confondent/ Dans une ténébreuse et profane unité, /

Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté/ Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se

respondent.'[60]

Indeed, only this sort of theurgical perspective helps us to understand, in theological

terms, just why there exist many human generations. It is because the work of praise

takes time and is collective, like a cathedral taking many centuries to build. For this

reason, I would say that generation, including sexuality, can be seen as belonging to

our original humanity. This should be asserted against the austere and dubious

Eastern-derived views of Louis Bouyer, cautiously supported by Hans urs von

Balthasar who cites more or less approvingly the German idealist view that where

there can be no death, neither can there be any birth, and who erroneously regards a

restoration of paradisal virginity alongside the salvific need for the incarnation as the

ground for the requirement of the virginal conception. My own, opposite view is,

however, in keeping with that of Augustine, who acknowledged marriage and

therefore possible descendants of Adam and Eve before the fall, and still more

Aquinas, who regarded successive generations children as an intrinsic 'blessing',

rather than as a continent post-lapsarian remedy. He also considered that sexual

sensible pleasure before the fall would have been more intense despite the fact that, in

(in agreement with Augustine by the time of the *Summa*, revising his position in his

Sentences commentary) Eve's hymen would not have been broken and there would

have been no concupiscence, since both mind an the entirety of the body would have

integrally consented to the maximum to the performance of the sexual act. Rather,

precisely *on account* of harmony with reason, ecstatic bodily pleasure (perhaps

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[60] Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* [*Les Fleurs du Mal*], parallel text trans James McGowan (Oxford: OUP 1993), *Spleen et Idéal* 4. 'Correspondences' pp 18-19

because true ecstasy is other-directed?) before the Fall would have been far greater, just as, in the absence of irrational lust (that is wrongly directed and inappropriate desire) there would have been no merit whatsoever in sexual abstinence. So for Aquinas it is an unlimitedly erotic being that humanity has denied and lost through sin.[61]

Nevertheless, it is true that, after the Fall, generation becomes a prime means of mercy: constantly putting an end through death to our inadequacies, but also holding out the hope through birth that our unfinished work of self-redemption may be renewed and taken forward by our descendants, just because this work must also be part of the work of collective redemption.

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[61] Thomas Aquinas, ST I Q.98 a.1 resp; a. esp ad 3. In the latter article he explicitly refutes Gregory of Nyssa on this point. See also Louis Bouyer, *Le Trône de la sagesse. Essai sur la signification do culte marial* (Paris: Cerf, 1957) 257; Balthasar, *Theodrama* II 365-382; III 344-31. One can qualify Balthasar's account of Mary's virginity to say that it in one respect necessary in order to restore female integrity and sexual painlessness, but not in order to restore an asexuality. This ground for necessity is not, however, the main one – in theory one could imagine *ex potentia absoluta Dei*, the creation of tow new, uncorrupted parents for Jesus. Rather, the Virgin Birth, which of course orthodoxy must uphold as literal truth (there is something sadly comic about the many Anglican theologians who deny this, yet still insist on the literal truth of the Resurrection) is 'aesthetically appropriate' first of all as returning for the sake of redemption to the original creative power of God which can override the normal physical laws. As Aquinas argued, with the virginal conception, God completes the quadrilateral repertoire of possible ways of creating the human being: from the earth with Adam, from Adam with Eve, normally from man and woman and now purely from woman: ST III Q.31 a.4 resp. One can add to this that the fact that the last mode is the final one and generates not just a human being but the God-Man, suggests that woman is especially the partner of God, and that woman rather than man is the highest as regards he 'purely human'. The male relative physical-spiritual lack of self-enclosure, inability to enfold things and then to creatively bring forth a new physical being, ensures a more nomadic character which is only completed in the hybridity of the God-Man and the 'entire enclosure' of the male human subject within the divine Sophia. It is interesting in this respect that the the Sufi theologian Ibn 'Arabi, argues that Mary was the new Adam, since Jesus preceeded from here alone (as Eve from Adam's side), while symmetrically Jesus was the new Eve: see Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP 1997) 'The Creative Feminine', 157-175. Secondly, the *convenientia* of the virginal conception derives the birth of the Logos entirely from an act of human assent – thereby revealing to the most extreme degree the mystery of female 'active receptivity' and power of integral self-enclosure which can also bear fruit. It is in these respects that Mary is already in person the Church, and that in her we see that the seemingly secondary human 'reception' of Christ is also, paradoxically, a pre-condition for his very coming into being. This understanding of the necessity of the Virgin Birth therefore, is in line with the idea that the historic saving event involved a 'double descent' of Sophia. And see further below.

For nothing that we do can be a good action save in a certain receptive situation where others are able to pick up and continue the peculiarly 'characterised' action which we have initiated. Indeed, it is often the case that we can only judge a past life as 'happily fulfilled' (or otherwise) when we see posthumously what it was really leading to: this has nothing to do with 'consequentialism', but rather concerns the limited and fragmentary nature of our insight into teleological ends and the *intrinsic* trajectory of our activities – a limitation which demands an inescapable element of 'moral risk' whose misadventures may often require retrospective pardon. Here one has to say that while, indeed, moral failing is not as such attributable to finitude (which is only a necessary but not sufficient condition of their possibility) that nevertheless in a fallen world it is frequently impossible to disentangle culpable from innocent ignorance such that much of the time 'we know not what we do' in a double sense (both as already blinded and as self-blinding). It is just because of this double ignorance that we can be forgiven, since the unforgivable sin against the spirit would be an evil performed despite the full light of the good – and because evil just is, following Socrates, blindness as to the vision of the good, we can confidently say that this 'maximum' sin is also not a possible sin, even in the case of Lucifer. [62]

For Bulgakov, this collective and historical aspect of fall and salvation extended also to the natural world. Uncompromisingly and rightly, citing *Wisdom* 1:13, 'God made not death', he insisted that for the Wisdom literature and then clearly for the New Testament death is no part of the original divine order.[63] In league with death and in opposition to life, are 'blind necessity, unintelligible raging elements' besides 'deadened mechanism, iron fate'. Both the divine and the human economy (the latter

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[62] For all this, see Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence* trans Jeremiah Alberg SJ (Notre Dame Ind: Notre Dame UP, 2000)

[63] Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy,* 68-76

in only a slight extension of the usual sense) seek constantly to oppose the
'disintegrating forces and deeds of death' with the 'organising forces of life'. For
given that the Creation only subsists through hypostatic beings, angels and humans, it
becomes possible to understand that, when they refuse the supreme gift of intellectual
life, all life falters and is impaired in the wake of this catastrophe. But this means that
also the heart of Creation, Sophia, is somehow dragged downwards: *Viens-tu du ciel
profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,/ Ô Beauté?'* as Baudelaire asked.[64] Thus Bulgakov
declared that 'Sophia – primordial humanity – as the soul of the world………..may
realise the dark side of its being in exercising a blind and chaotic will. So there is, as
the Christian gnostics intimated, albeit in a heterodox mode, also a fallen Sophia to be
constantly sought out and recovered through art, through good science, through the
contemplation of nature – for there is something here not merely to be redeemed, but
also a lost spark of beauty presently trapped under the spell of evil, that is yet for the
moment missing from the plenitude of beauty as such: '*Grain de musc qui gis,
invisible,/ au fond de mon éternité!'* [65]Surely a too-limited orthodoxy is quite wrong to
ignore this obviously 'gnostic' aspect to Christ's parables of the lost sheep and the
lost coin?

So nature, as Schelling expressed it in *Clara*, lies as it were under the hand of a
malign enchanter, but looks to Humanity to free it from its imprisoning spell. Here I
think, very important and complex questions arise as to the relationship between the
modern medical attempt to 'defeat death' and the Christian Eucharistic working for
resurrection. How do we distinguish between an impious attempt to lead us into a
pseudo-eternal life and a possibly genuine medical collaboration with the process of

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[64] Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal, Spleen et Idéal*, 21, 'Hymne a la Beauté, pp 44-5
[65] Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal, Les Épaves,* X. 'Hymn', pp 302-3

ushering-in the eschaton? This, I suspect, is a very Russian question – invoking the
'God-building' philosophy of Nikolai Fyodorov, in particular.[66]

Because the creation only subsists through hypostasisation, the presence of creation in
God and God in creation is also of itself the process of deification. Here again though,
mediation does not lie between, but at once on one side and the other through an
obscure but crucial echo or atunement. Above all, we cannot distinguish, in Gregory
Palamas's fashion (and I think that Bulgakov in the end implies a rejection of this)[67],
between the divine essence and the divine uncreated energies which enable the
economy of human redemption. It is clearly not the case that Palamas distinguished
them in any simple fashion that would entirely forego the divine simplicity.
Nonetheless, the distinction which he did make appears to have something in common
with the almost contemporary Western Scotist 'formal distinction' – less than a real
one, more than merely one made by our minds: rather a kind of latent division within
a real unity permitting a real if partial separation on some arising occasion.[68]

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[66] See Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 45-6

[67] Bulgakov, *Le Paraclet,* 236. Here Bulgakov seems to say that he agrees with Palamas that 'energy' is God but not identical to the divine *ousia*, only because the essence comprehends 'many energies'. One could elaborate as follows: a single divine energy, like truth or inspiration or beauty, is not the divine essence because it is only an aspect of God. But by the same token it is therefore a created energy, even though it acts with the power of the uncreated. When, by contrast, one is speaking of 'all' the divine energies, and therefore truly of energy as such, then in their uncreated simple unity they are identical with the divine essence.

[68] Denials that this is the case generally deploy language which only confirms that it is, indeed, the case. Gregory Palamas's own language seems directly to confirm it. See, for example, referring to Gregory Nazianzus and to – a misreading of – Dionysius: *Triad,* III, 2. 13 in Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychasts,* ed. And trans. Jean Meyendorff (Louvain: "Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense", 1959) pp 666-7: 'How cannot the shinings-forth [*ellampsesi* -- of the good and the beautiful], without beginning and without end be other than the imparticipable essence of God, and different, even though inseparable from the essence?' And again see Triad III, 2.22, pp 680-3 where Palamas says that the energies pre-exist in God outside his creative activity like the faculties of seeing and hearing in the soul when these faculties are not actually being exercised., and so 'just as the soul is not simply these faculties, likewise with God; and just as the soul remains unique, simple and without composition, without any multiplicity or composition entering into it on account of the faculties which rest in it and proceed from it, likewise God is not deprived of his unicity and simplicity on account of the powers which are in him, he who does not merely possess many powers, but who is all-powerful.' Hence it would seem that there must be some 'ground' for the separation of the powers (energies) rom the essence in the 'all-powerfulness' of God, apart from the divisions which follow upon createdness

In this respect the Palamite theology does appear slightly to ontologise the epistemological truth that God 'in himself' remains beyond the grasp of even the beatific vision, as though this reserved aspect were a real ultimate 'area'. By contrast, and following Dionysius, this God in himself is in no sense whatsoever 'other' to the God who goes kenotically forth from himself in his *dynamis* which is also the plural *dynameis* towards the creation, and likewise his eternal essential *energeia* (actus) which is equally the diverse economic 'energies'. The divine intrinsic outgoing kenosis (freely willed as a reach into contingency, and yet God eternally *is* this willing), or the divine *logos/logoi,* or the divine uncreated/created Sophia, or the Platonic 'daemonic' *metaxu*, simply *is* the divine essence and not something even formally apart from it, lying in an impossible no man's land between God and the world.

By and large, as I have just indicated, Bulgakov refuses this over-literal 'between'; when he does lapse into affirming it, he also and inevitably tends to erect Sophia as too literally a fourth hypostasis, possessing a kind of uniquely independent substantiality.[69] Clearly, for Bulgakov, the Palamite energies played the same role as Sophia, and infused human actions with theurgic power; nevertheless, sophiology is superior to the Palamite theology precisely *because* it moves away from a literal between and allows the energies simultaneously to be identical with the divine

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and the perspectives of the creation. So while Palamas rightly opposed the crude onto-theology of Baarlaam which imagined that God could act not as God but by created mediators as his real powers, he still falls himself into a more subtle onto-theology which is like that of Scotus in wanting to see the distinction of powers which reach us as distinct as in some 'formal' way distinct in the divine essence as opposed to become distinct only when this essence is refracted as creation and created powers – which are not directly divine powers as Baarlaam supposed. To give a pertinent created example: the colours of the rainbow all indeed display pure light in its many aspects when refracted – yet pure light as the 'eminent' reality of these colours is not in itself even latently red, green, blue, yellow, orange, violet and indigo.
[69] On this, see Rowan Williams' remarks in *Sergii Bulgakov,* 113-120, 165-7

essence itself and yet also to be created as well as uncreated. This actually brings Eastern theology more in line with the best Thomism for which has to be created as well as uncreated if it is ever to reach us – but occupies no phantom and limboesque border territory.

4. The Theurgic dimension

To suppose that there is even a formal division between essence and energies risks two things: first of all it risks supposing that deification is merely an irradiation by the light of the divine energies, lying in this sort of idolatrous 'between', or false mediation, with the final divine darkness reserved. Secondly, it risks a contrasting of the divine darkness with the divine dazzling and overwhelming light, such that one is supposed, rather in the manner of Vladimir Lossky, once and for all to exceed the cataphatic, and as it were finally to access God in a sheerly negative mode by abandoning all images and their anticipations and plunging super-theoretically into the absolute night.[70] Of course such a stance means that one has, dialectically, in fact positivised the negative and tried to make it do a concrete work. To some small degree this perspective may be encouraged by Gregory of Nyssa's almost proto-Scotist view that God is most of all an uncircumscribed positive infinity, to which there corresponds, on the part of finite spirits, an endless 'epectasic progress'. Likewise by Gregory's presentation, in his version of a *Vita Moysis,* of Moses as in some hyper-sense 'seeing' the divine darkness, possessing a *theoria* of an infinite

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[70] See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1973), 23-44

'luminous' darkness that of itself dazzles counterwise to the shining of light: 'this is the seeing that consists in not-seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness'[71]

But in both cases, as Ysabel de Andia argues against Jean Daniélou and von Balthasar, Dionysius the Areopagite, ironically (perhaps) under pagan monotheistic influence, supplied important correctives which were crucial for the later history of Western mysticism. In the first instance, he more construed God as the coincidence of bounded and unbounded, with a corresponding stress that mystical access to God has supereminently to exceed *both* the cataphatic and the apophatic. Here I see no warrant whatosever for Denys Turner's contorted and anachronistic attempt to 'grammaticalise' this and so to regard this exceeding as a kind of meta-*apophasis,* whose corollary would be to turn the negatively and yet eminently known God of Dionysius into the *Deus Absconditus* of the post-Ockhamite Luther.[72] This is to treat the Areopagite as if he were a post-Kantian delineating the transcendental bounds of our finite cognitive speculative powers, rather than as a pre-modern mystic who is describing the ontologically real psychic motions of negative and positive ascent from the finite to the infinite. This latter perspective is also quite clearly the way in which Dionysius is read by Aquinas when he develops his own account of 'eminent' attribution.[73]

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[71] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* trans A.J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978 163 p. 95 and see further 162-5 pp 94-6; Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'Union à Dieu chez Denys l'Areopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 304-75. On p. 338 she cites Gregory at *In Cant., home XI:* 'the divine night……………gives to the soul a certain sense of its presence, while escaping from the grasp of evidence, hidden by the invisibility of its nature'. [My translation from the French]

[72] Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Mystical Theology', Chapters One to Three, 1032 D-1048 B in *The Complete Works*, trans Colm Luibheid, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp 138-141. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP 1995), 19-50

[73] Thomas Aquinas ST I Q. 13 a.6

In the second instance, Dionysius speaks of Moses's communion with the divine darkness *not at all* as a seeing, even as a seeing that blinds, since *theoria* is for him confined to the sight of the 'heavenly place' wherein God is sought within the heavenly cloud, but is rather purely and entirely a liturgical 'plunging into' the inner sanctuary of the divine darkness. In contrast to Gregory of Nyssa, this liturgical entering-in is not exceeded by an epectasic 'desire to see' which at once holds God at a slightly greater distance and also considers him ontologically in more absolutely negative terms. Instead Moses, by plunging into the night, is absolutely and finally united with the One in which finite and infinite coincide. [74]

This makes it sound as if Dionysius is more the mystic of the night than is Gregory. But in fact, just the opposite is the case: as Abbot Suger in the 12thC West perhaps realised, in probably deploying Dionysius thought to promote the fractal aspirations of gothic architecture (even if it is untrue that this is the unique source of this architecture, and that the Islamic *arabesque* was also an important influence, the latter still does not have much stone-dissolving, glass-deploying quality – and may in any case in turn have Christian Syrian roots).[75] Dionysius is supremely a mystic of light, and still more so than Gregory. For when Moses enters blindly into the darkness, he is at once overwhelmed by a divine excess of light. Thus whereas, for Nyssa, the infinite darkness is said of itself to coincide with light, for Dionysius the infinite-finite darkness of the One is said to be also a 'super-luminous darkness' -- *hyperphotos gnophos,* a linguistic hyperbole added to an oxymoron, whereas Gregory deploys *only*

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[74] Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Mystical Theology', Chapter One, 3, 1000D-1025A
[75] For a qualified defence of Erwin Panofsky's Dionysius-Suger thesis, and dismissal of Bernard McGinn's critique, see L. Michael Harrington, *Sacred Pace in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 158-64. See also Erwin Pnofsky, *Abbot Suger: on the Abbey Church of St-Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP 1946)

the oxymoron of 'brilliant darkness: *lampros gnothos*). Dionysius' hyperbolically and asymmetrically augmented oxymoron represents rhetorically an inconceivable eminence of light that is the supereminence of all forms and not just, as with Gregory's mere paradox, a sort of positive counter-shining of indefinite obscurity. Thus Dionysius declares: 'if it is invisible because of a superabundant clarity, if the excess [*hyperbolē* – now ontological] of its luminous and superessential effusions remove it from every regard, yet it is here that is found everyone worthy to know God and to look upon him.'[76] God is in this passage only an absolute darkness, because he is the Platonic sun of the Good, the donating source of light by which all see and can be seen (and so *are* at all) which cannot itself be seen because it blinds. While we cannot in any way regard this absolute light-darkness, we can, at the height of mystical ascent, liturgically 'be' at this source itself.

So curiously, while Gregory retains the 'seeing' of Paul's 'then we shall see as we are seen', and Dionysius appears to abandon it, Dionysius retains the sense of identity with the divine that Gregory appears to refuse. Moreover, the blinded identity with absolute light, suggests indeed that we may after all 'see as we are seen': for while we remain blind in the end, since we can never grasp the divine essence, since this blinding is by the very excess of light, we do come to coincide, in the highest possible measure with that divine radiation which *causes* things to be seen by causing them to be, and so cannot be any 'looking at' in an ordinary sense. For Aquinas God only 'sees us' in terms of a sense of the capacity of his own power[77] – it is *this* kind of looking, which defines the 'as we are seen,' with which, for Dionysius, we can eventually be united.

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[76] Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Letters', V, p. 265 [the very loose translation has here been modified].
[77] Thomas Aquinas, ST I Q. 14 a5 resp: ' He [God] sees other things not in themselves but in Himself; in as much as his essence contains the similitude of things other than Himself'.

Gregory, by contrast, still in a partially Plotinian fashion, suggests that the mystic encounters, hyper-theoretically, the removed, infinite, 'in-itself' and ontologically dark divine presence, by ascending the inward mountain heights of the psychic, beyond passion and intellect, even if he regards this ascent still more collectively than Plotinus, and insists far more than the latter that the psychic is the inner reality also of the corporeal.[78] But the unknown Syrian writer is rather the legatee through Proclus of neopagan theurgical perspectives (as well as very probably, their Christian equivalents before Dionysius himself) for which the human soul is 'fully descended' into the body, and even in its knowing aspect can never escape from the mediating contemplation of surrounding *locus*[79] The soul must always *be in a place,* whereas for Plotinus -- and perhaps to a degree Gregory -- it could escape place. For Iamblichus, again opposing Plotinus, even the gods had to be approached through place since sacrifices are not simply 'sent heavenwards' but also draw the divinities downwards, by invoking those resonances and sympathies which hold the cosmos together; likewise in Dionysius, the mystic comes liturgically to the place where he God dwells – so even the One God has in himself a temple, a dwelling place, which is something like the cosmos in its eternal aspect and this point must clearly be linked both to God's outgoing in creation and his full descent in incarnation. So for Dionysius the Mosaic journey towards God leads upwards only by going first outwards through cosmic and socio-historical (ecclesial) mediations and the passage upwards is not an inner seeing, but rather a raising up by being externally overwhelmed by the divine

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[78] See Milbank, 'The Force of Identity'
[79] See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park PA: Penn State UP 1995)

through liturgical processes in which God himself has eternally come to meet us in the eternal spaces of his cosmic temple.[80]

It might be objected here that theurgy intrudes something non-Christian: a sense that one can influence the divine which affronts any genuine sense of apophatic mystery. But quite the opposite in fact pertains, and we should remember here that *just because* they were involved, unlike Plotinus, in anti-Christian polemics, Iamblichus and Proclus tended, sometimes unconsciously, to search for pagan equivalents for what people found attractive in Christianity.[81] Thus the pagan neoplatonist Iamblichus already rejected the metaphor of 'seeing' God, precisely because God is not an idolatrous ontotheological object. To the contrary, he is that which utterly surrounds and perfuses us and therefore he cannot be subject even to a non-intellectual gaze, since even this suggests that something (looking) can be done to him.[82] Iamblichus

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[80] See L.Michael Harrington, *Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* on both Iamblichus and Dionysius, 51-125

[81] Augustine in *The City of God* X 9-10 criticised theurgic practices all too simplistically as pagan polytheistic delusion and devil worship. Yet on the other hand, as others have pointed out, it is possible to see strong parallels to theurgy in *Confessions* Book IX and XII. For in the first case the *aporias* of time are only pragmatically resolved in terms of the idea that in uttering the psalm to God Augustine is able to synthesise without 'dispersal' past, present and future as an echo of eternity. Here liturgy 'shows' an answer which *theoria* cannot really comprehend. And this liturgical act is only possible because God himself has descended into time in order to counteract his dispersive tendencies which have been activated by sin. In the case of Book XII Augustine's quest for his own identity passes beyond the 'confession' of all that is *only* himself and therefore not his true self towards the true 'confession' of divine praise in which he truly finds himself. But this finding is ecstatically impersonal because it consists in a praise of the cosmos and of God through the cosmos. Hence it is quite untrue that Augustine follows the spiritual road of 'interiorisation' that was later taken by Bonaventure. To the contrary, somewhat like Dionysius and later Aquinas, he strives towards God only *with* the entirely of his fellow creatures – by exteriorising himself.

[82] Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries,* trans E.C Clarke, J.M Dillon and J.P. Hershbell, (Atlanta: SBL 2003), I.11-15, pp 47-61. Iamblichus here argues tht theurgic rites do not change the minds of the gods, or even bring us into the relation of seeing the gods, but rather bring us close to the divine presence through procedures that allow us to resonate with it: 'by the practice of supplication we are gradually raised to the level of the object of our supplication and we gain likeness to it by virtue of our constant consorting with it' (I. 15 pp. 58-61). The immediate reaction to this of some Christians, however, may be that any sense of 'grace' is here lacking. Such, however, is not the case, because our transformation is *not* (as it is slightly more for Plotinus) a self-alteration based upon a better 'regard' of the divine. To the contrary, the liturgical-magical procedure of theurgy, by achieving an atunement with the divine, allows us more to receive 'the excellent gift of the gods' and 'the divine care which has been denied us' and which is founded upon the fact that the gods 'embrace in unity within themselves all beings together' because 'the light of the gods illuminates its subject transcendently, and is fixed steadfastly

in itself even as it proceeds throughout the totality of its existence' (I.9 pp. 38-9; I.15 pp. 58-9). Thus while prayer and invocation does not, indeed, change the minds of the gods, it is not simple a disguised mode of self-therapy because it permits us, through achieving the right topological, bodily and spiritual dispositions to receive more fully the divine flow of grace. For this reason one can speak of a 'persuasion' of the gods: 'the persuasion (*peithō*) which expiatory rites exercise upon the higher class of being, recalling them once again to care and goodwill towards us……' (I.13, pp. 54-5). One can indeed speak of grace (*charis*) here because the gods have no need, says Iamblichus, of sacrificial 'service' from us (I.11 pp. 48-9): this is not the point of the therugic rites at all; rather it is the case that 'earthly things, possessing their being in virtue of the *pleroma* of the gods, whenever they come to be ready for participation in the dvine, straightway find the gods pre-existing in it prior to their own proper essence' (I.8. pp. 36-7: this is the first known occurrence of the New Testament/Christian Gnostic term 'pleroma', linked initially to cosmic Chrstology, in a neoplatonic text.) So in Iamblichus, as in many Christian writers, grace and participation lie close together, and in the case of Iamblichus this is supported by his view that the entire 'divine world', comprising the One beyond the good, the good beyond being, and the gods, daemons and heroes, is in 'in itself' and as such imparticipable, while at the same time this entire divine world descends into the earthly one and is mysteriously participated in by the realities of the temporally and spatially extended cosmos (*On the Mysteries,*I 5-7, pp.20-31; I.19, pp. 72-3: 'the gods….and all the multitude which is generated around them constitute a totality in unity, and the totality is the unity and theirbegnning and middle and end consist in the very mode of unity'). Hence despite his distinctions between the unparticipated One or monad and a 'participated' going forth in the divine which is constituted by the 'dyad' of goodness which mixes the limited with the unlimited, 'going forth' in general lies either, as the 'dyad' or 'the Good', on the 'ontological' or para-ontological (divine) side or else, as 'the participating', on the ontic (cosmic) side of the ontological difference, and *does not* hover in any limboesque 'between'. Indeed it is partly a denial of this literal 'between' which encourages the theurgic sense that the divine must kenotically descend into the cosmic. We know from Damascius and from certain indications in surviving texts of Iamblichus himself that he posited an ultimate One beyond even the One that gives rise to the dyad, and so beyond the contrast of 'unparticipated' and 'participated'. Damascius explicitly affirms that his own 'unique principle' is 'before the two', and continues to say that 'it is therefore that absolute which Iamblichus affirmed as an intermediary between the two principles, and as that which is absolutely ineffable, whereas the two are, for example, the limiting and the unlimited or again, if one prefers, the the one and the many, understanding here the one opposed to the many, not the one [ie the absolute just referred to] anterior to the many and without opposition' (Damascius, *De Principiis* R.I. 103 6-10; in the French bilingual edition, *Traité des Premiers Principes, Tome II: De La Triade et de L'Unité* trans Joseph Combès, Paris: Les Belles Letttres, 2002, pp.27-8.) So, as Gregory Shaw correctly argues, this ultimate One is not 'still more unified' and entirely cut off from everything that follows from it, but rather is a secret ground *beyond* the later division between the one and the many, entirely in keeping with the general Theurgic thrust towards elevating matter and multiplicity. Iamblichus himself (?) seems to refer to the generative one as 'the monad' which the Pythagoreans 'call…..''matter'' and the ''receptacle of all'' since it is the cause of the dyad and of all receiving ratios' (Iamblichus (?), *Theologoumena Arithmetica* 5, 12-15.), suggesting a certainy identity of this one and the dyad which is then grounded in the one beyond both; a further passage in *On the Mysteries* also makes a Pythagorean distinction between the ultimate one and the unity that 'governs the many' (VIII. 3 pp. 312-3). This would mean that Iamblichus is not, as Rowan Williams once suggested in his now classic *Arius*, taking further the Plotinian tendency to posit an ultimate one that is radically alone and cannot, as such, be in any sense participated-in, but rather moving in the very opposite direction; a direction which from the Christian point of view is more tending towards 'orthodoxy' than any encouragement of Trinitarian. heresies, Arian or otherwise, for it turns out that he, and in his wake Damascius, was rather shifting to a perspective, or rather perhaps recovering the original view of Plato, that would render 'mediation' still more ultimate than the One. (Nor, I think, is Iamblichus at all guilty as Williams suggests, following E.F.Osborn, of a 'bureaucratic fallacy' of multiplying entities for the sake of it. Rather, Thomas Taylor in the 18th C understood better that his 'luxuriance' is to do with a sense that the divine *is* proliferation; that it lies in otherness as well as identity, in the many as well as the one, the material as well as the spiritual, the mediating as well as the singular, the outgoing and returning as well as the remaining.) It follows, then, that the Palamite notion of 'energies'is not at all a recursion to Iamblichus, but a Christian deviation which if anything is more in a Plotinian line. While, indeed, Iamblichus' dyad, does not quite attain an equality with the generating One-as such that would approximate to the Chistian Son-Father relation, there is still a tendency in his writings to see this dyad as an 'inner emanation' proper to the divine sphere as such, while the 'absolute' ultimate one can to some degree be

fully grasps the link between oracular revelation on the one hand, and apophatic mystical ascent on the other. Because God is unknowable he must reveal himself to us, he must descend, though still as unknowable. But we encourage our awareness of this descent not when we merely look, but when we act in accordance with the processes of nature, which means being alert to the subtle affinities between matter and spirit and between one material thing and another. Mysticism is therefore for Iamblichus entirely liturgical and located, and surprisingly it appears to be this pagan current which bequeathed to Christian mysticism a more rigorously ritual, cosmic, topographical and collective focus.

Thus for Dionysius, as for Iamblichus and Proclus, God is 'there' for us not when we 'look' at him, but rather when we call upon him and perform actions atuned to him. This 'higher magic' is not merely automatic, but then no magic ever is according to the profound researches of Marcel Mauss,[83] and it is not possible to influence God, but rather it is possible to atune ourselves and the cosmos to a greater receptivity of the divine. How else are we to understand prayer without reducing it either to a mythical attempt to change God's mind, or else to mere self-therapy? Clearly liturgical prayer is indeed a kind of higher magic.

Dionysius also took over the pagan neoplatonic insistence that to receive an emanation from above or a *doron*, a descending gift, is at once to contemplate this gift

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approximated to the 'one essence' (or 'sophia') of the Christian Trinity. Of course it is also true that Christianity realises a much fuller sense of grace; however, since this is by virtue of the Incarnation, one could also say that this is because it realises a far fuller sense of the *theurgic* in that it thinks of worship as only possible at all because God himself has decended in person to offer worship to God and so to re-atune all of humanity to its divine origin and goal. See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul,* 33-4; Rowan Williams, *Arius* (London: SCM 2001), 194-5

[83] Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic,* trans Robert Brain (London: Routledge, 2001)

and actively to pass it on.[84] In this way he was able, with pagan assistance, to make better sense than hitherto of the Christian centrality of love: to love is at once to know and to receive and at the same time practically to communicate goodness. As I earlier indicated, the final Pauline *telos* is still in place, but here we only 'see' God, not through a Nyssan unexhausted desire to see God, but rather, indeed, 'as we are seen', namely through God's super-surrounding and sun-like sight of us, a communicative light which remains something that we distribute downwards in the very act of regarding it.

Now these Dionysian perspectives appear to me only to be resumed in their full implications within the Sophianic tradition – and we have already noted the theurgic elements in Bulgakov's thought, which even extended to a cautious embrace of notions of occult sympathy. Deification is active and liturgically creative as well as contemplatively passive. It does not mean to 'see' God across a mythical intervening distance, nor to be grasped by God's energetic outskirts on the brink of an always inaccessible pool of darkness. Neither of these false mediations pertain. But on the other hand, the ascent of deification is impossible unless God constantly descends to us -- meeting liturgically with our acts in time, which are our modes of being in time. Were it possible for us to ascend under our own efforts (in that Pelagian or semi-Pelagian sense which Augustine in the West resisted) then grace would be denied and this ascent would itself constitute an impossible mediating ladder between humanity and God. No, we can become God, because God is constantly becoming us. Here again there cannot be mediation, yet there must be mediation in the sense of

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[84] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy,*Chapter Three, 2, 165A-165C,p. 154; *The Divine Names,* Chapter Eight, 5-6, 889D-893A pp. 111-3

something that abides simultaneously on both sides of an absolute rift, held together by an ineffable atunement.

5. Sophiology and Christology

But does this 'God constantly becoming us' displace the unique incarnation of the *Logos?* Not at all. Recall that the eternal Adam is only the universal human hypostasising power. The Fall of man impairs this essence, but by rights this should lead to absolute extinction for both human essence and human hypostases. It only does not do so because, in some sense, when Sophia falls to become the sinister 'Achamoth' according to Bulgakov, the heavenly Sophia is 'impossibly' affected, and God cannot suffer, for a hypothetical 'instance', a loss to his glory.[85] It is as if he only maintains his aseity, which of course he cannot not do, through the retrieval of languished glory, the lost wailing woman who forever in time wanders through the streets of Babylon, and according to *Proverbs* accosts young men at the crossroads in a way which so oddly echoes the conduct of the virtuous beauty, Sophia herself, who cries to them from the housetops : *cette nature étrange et symbolique/ Oû l'ange invîolé se mêle au sphinx antique......'.*[86]

Hence if the essence of humanity is not after all extinguished and hypostasised humanity along with it, this is because through all eternity the essence is immediately restored. So much is this the case, that when God as the divine Son descends in the Incarnation so also does the eternal humanity or the Son of Man, as many problematic

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[85] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné,* 77-80, 127. And see John Milbank, 'The Name of Jesus', in *The Word Made Strange,* 145-71
[86] Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal, Spleen et Idéal* 27, 'Avec ses vêtements......', 54-7

passages in the New Testament attest – this quasi-figure emerges from the Hebrew priestly and wisdom traditions given a middle Platonic gloss by Philo. Thus, for example, one can read First Colossians, Chapter 1 verse 15, which refers to Christ as the image of the invisible God as being nevertheless like Sophia the *first-born of creation*, more honestly and critically, and yet not in an Arian mode, if one takes it to refer to the Philonian primal man rather than to the pre-existent *Logos*, which is not thereby, of course, denied.

So for Bulgakov, in the Incarnation, not only is it the case that a human being is hypostasised by the *Logos*, it is also the case that here, uniquely, the human essence coincides with an individual human being – though not, of course, with a human hypostasis; rather with the divine hypostasis which is the second person of the Trinity. But the eternal divine humanity or human essence or *Adam Kadmon* – at once the first and the second Adam spoken of by Paul – is itself eternally saved and united with God *entirely because* of the unique descent of the *Logos* at one specific point in human history. Here alone occurs the event of the final finding and retrieving of the lost and fallen Sophia.

Nevertheless, the ground of the possibility of incarnation is the eternal descent of God into the Creation as Sophia, and the eternal raising of humanity through deification. In Christ, the 'obscure echo' becomes coinciding resonance that itself echoes throughout the cosmos and along all the corridors of human history. In Christ the divine Sophia, like the divine *esse*, works to hypostasise a natural creature without any finite hypostatic supplement. Here a pure mediation is carried out from the divine pole alone. Because of the general echo, the general indwelling of God in the world as

Sophia, this full descent is possible, but once it is accomplished, the *aporia* of

mediation is, so to speak, practically resolved -- if scarcely in theory. God is now

more than God simply by remaining God. The world through humanity is now also

God by remaining the world, since something other than God has come to be

enhypostasised by the divine *Logos*. Otherwise, it would seem, God lacks the lack of

God which is the positive good of dependence and seeking desire; God, as Pierre

Bérulle said, lacks the worship of God, but now even this lack is made good, such

that human beings can now adore God adequately, through God alone.[87] With

Aquinas, rather than with Bérulle (who is only Scotist in this one respect of believing

that the Incarnation would have transpired even without the Fall) one should claim

that only the need to mend the Fall occasioned this upshot; nonetheless, one must also

insist that the ontological glory of the upshot far exceeds the instrumental occasion,

and that, by an incomprehensible paradox this state of affairs, this remedy, is as old as

God himself. So from all eternity God has always been the God-Man and the Russians

are right: the theanthropic exceeds even the theological. 'God appears and God is

light/To those poor Souls who dwell in Night./But does a Human Form Display/To

those who Dwell in Realms of day.' as William Blake put it, in his gloss upon

Swedenborg.[88].

Christology, so regarded, reverses the business of mediation. For now it is not

hypostasising that mediates, but rather the hypostasis of the Logos. He indeed sustains

through his concretely realised character the separation of human and divine nature.

At the same time they are mediated by an extremity of mutual echo: the divine nature

impassibly suffers; the human nature is conjoined to the divine attributes -- such is the

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[87] Pierre Bérulle, *Opuscules de la Piété*, ed Miklos Veto (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1997) III. 72. viii p.
364. See also Veto's long essay in the same volume, 'La Christo-logique de Bérulle', 7-136
[88] William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', in *William Blake,* selected by J.Bronowski, p. 71

communicatio idiomatum. Moreover, the character of the divine hypostasis is fully and only displayed through the two natures and their characterological fusion. For, in keeping with Bulgakov's trajectory, we are no longer to see these essences as abstract and static; instead, they are both, of course, hypostasising powers, the uncreated and created Sophia.[89] Hence because they display one and the same character of the hypostasis of the logos in the respective idioms of finite time and infinity, they tend also radically to fuse these idioms together in a very Cyrilline fashion. Christ as personal, one might say, has fully assumed human traits; Christ as in two natures has finally blended the divine and the created Sophia.

What this adds to Chalcedon is subtle but crucial, and also tends to integrate atonement doctrine with Christological ontology. It is not satisfactory merely to say, with Chalcedon, that Christ is divided by nature and united by person or character. For this suggests that he is in one aspect (the personal) the God-Man or incarnate, but in another aspect (the natural), he is not. An entirely personal union on its own, involving no unity of nature whatsoever, would, in Nestorian fashion, render the communication of idioms impossible and suggest that Christ was only identical with the *Logos* in terms of a kind of distilled 'ideality', emanating from his concrete, embodied life like a perfume, but not truly including that life. Hence to allow for this, and yet to avoid monophystism which would abolish the creator/created divide and in effect suggest, in an over-Oriental fashion, that Christ was entirely an uncreated divine *avatar*, one requires a category that mediates between personhood and nature.

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[89] Bulgakov, 121-7

This, of course, is for Bulgakov provided by 'Sophia'. Because the two natures are 'characterising powers', the exchange of idioms is not extrinsic, since both natures are fluid and dynamic, rather than fixed and substantive. Furthermore, the two characterising powers are at bottom one, since the uncreated and created Sophia are more fundamentally one in 'foundation and content' according to Bulgakov, – given that God is the all and the creation itself is 'nothing but' the outgoing of God, even though God is in himself mysteriously the 'self-exceeding'.[90] They differ only as to 'condition' of respectively eternal glory and finite becoming, and for this reason the two conditions can come together in the Incarnation not just actually on the basis of the one divine hypostasis, but also transcendentally on the conditional basis of the more fundamental unity and tendency to unity of the two essences taken as the two Sophias or objective characterising powers. Just as, for Aquinas, the orientation of humanity to deification is an ontologically transcendental condition for the 'appropriate' possibility of the Incarnation, so, for Bulkagov, the fundamental divine-human unity of Sophia performs a similar role.

And it is this same fundamental unity which for him permits God to assume even fallen human nature. This would be impossible, given the nature of sin as *absolute* estrangement from God, 'impossible' removal from the 'all' that is and can ever be, were it not for the fact that the human hypostasing power, Sophia, even as fallen, remains, in her fallen heart, insofar as she remains actual at all, like a *fleur du mal* 'ontologically unbreakable', still entirely united with her heavenly counterpart.[91]

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[90] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné,* 124
[91] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné,* 127

6. Sophia, Israel and the Church

What remains briefly to be considered with respect to the problematic of mediation is Mariology, ecclesiology and liturgical theology. However, they can all be considered with respect to a problematic that Bulgakov, uniquely to my knowledge, raises and yet partially shies away from. This is the following: if the personhood of the Son is substantively relational, then how is it possible for the Son alone to be incarnated and not the whole Trinity?[92] That is to say, if the personality of the Son can be expressed in time, this must itself be a relational expression, even if not, of course, at the human level a fully substantially relational one, and therefore the Father and the Spirit must in some fashion be also incarnated, since the Son simply *is* his relation to the other two hypostases.

This problem can then be combined with a modern sense that Jesus's expressed personality must have been more social and historical than the tradition allowed. But Augustine indeed was near to combining these two insights: for him in *De Trinitate*, the Son as relational has to be incarnate in the relations of time which he repairs and restores, so allowing a recuperation of all true psychic life in time. Moreover, for Augustine the incarnate Son through his humanity only relates to the Father and the Son through temporal images or voicings of these realities – not to an impossible mythical hovering of these divine persons in their economic function between the Creator and the Creation.[93]

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[92] Bulgakov, *Du Verbe Incarné,* 119
[93] Augustine, *De Trinitate,* Books I-IV

Can one possibly go further than Augustine and say that the Father must in some fashion be 'incarnated' as the voice of human memory, especially as the memory of Israel? After all if Christ is sinless, then this memory now becomes retrospectively perfected? By retroaction, the temporal source that is Israel becomes one with the eternal Paternal source – and this perspective also acts as a salve against the grosser forms of supercessionism. And can one also say, with Bulgakov this time, that the Church in its eschatological totality is collectively personified by the Holy Spirit?[94]

Here, once more, one sees the playing through of the sophiological schema in its fully incarnational mode: for salvation to arise, there must be a retrospective remaking of the past through forgiveness: this is possible since the past is only ever 'there' through the traces it leaves in the present and its promise of the future.[95] In this manner, all human paternity or cultural legacy is restored, because it is imbued with the character of the true, infinite origin. Here also, then, the divine Sophia now fully plays the role of the earthly one.

Similarly, salvation is only possible because it is fully anticipatory. Hence if there is the presence of redemption, since the present is only the promise of the future and has always already given way to the future, then the perfect future is entirely imbued with the Holy Spirit as the united mutual expression of memory and awareness. The Holy Spirit has descended as displaying the actively receptive, feminine and so perhaps most fundamental aspect of Sophia while, equally, as in the case of *Adam Kadmon*, the eternal power collectively to deify humanity which is the celestial city, heavenly

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[94] Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb,* 97-102
[95] See John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003) 44-61

Jerusalem, has descended here on earth.[96] Memory as collective is relatively impersonal; yet as personal it is also collective and capable of being transmitted. Future hope, likewise, is sustained collectively and is a sacramental anticipation of eternal consummation, without which it would be mere optimism; at the same time it is only fully expressed and given concrete character in individual members of the Church. Hence in a full economic, or rather actually incarnate Trinitarian display, there is a triple mediating without mediation between collective process and individual fully personal embodiment.

Bulgakov acknowledged that Christ is only incarnate through the Church by means of the person of Mary, and only personally expressive in human time through the always already begun receptivity of the Church.[97] In this way he faintly pointed to the radicalism of the surely logical view that the Bride is collectively and eschatologically the equal of the Bridegroom. Given his sexual ontology of the eminent 'maleness' of the Son-*Logos* and the eminent femaleness of the Spirit-*Donum* that is a crucial part of his vitalism and which I broadly endorse, this suggests also gender equality. Bulgakov only evades this by insisting, quite wrongly, that in some sense the eternal Son in his activity has a kind of hierarchical superiority over the essentially passive Spirit. We should surely reject this and link gender equality to the equality of Bride with Bridegroom, thereby not abandoning the essential significance of Biblical engendered typology, nor the Biblical and theological significance of sexual difference.

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[96] Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb,* 79-103. Here he stresses that all human males are hypostasised through Christ and all human females through Mary who is identical with the Chruch which is in trun hypostasised by the Holy Spirit who is eminently female.
[97] Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb,* loc.cit.

These radical proposals seem to me to complete sophiology by suggesting, indeed, that Sophia as such becomes incarnate, since the three substantive relations become incarnate in the retrospectively, repletely and prospectively perfected human temporality of past, present and future. These moments are specifically represented by parenthood as past performance and redeemable memory, woman in her fertility as proleptic and eschatological, and man as elusively present and immediate -- exhausted by his current deeds of love for the sake of the future, which nonetheless enshrine their own intrinsic worth.

Such a radical perspective avoids the perennial dilemma of Mariology, which appears to require that her *fiat* is an instigation of the Church as the community of the redeemed before its foundation by Christ. It is this dilemma which gives rise to the solution of the immaculate conception in Anselmian and Scotist terms, whereby Mary is required to give the highest possible honour to Christ, just as Christ is ontologically required to give the highest possible honour to God, in default of any proper understanding of human deification in general. But instead one can say, thereby evading the need for this doctrine, or rather perhaps finding a way to recast it, that since the *fiat* is not merely the opening occasion for the Incarnation, but also relationally constitutive of the Incarnation, that Mary must already be the presence of the Church, yet as such must be from the outset of her life so composed that her orientation to the supernatural is also the beginning of the actual birth of the *logos* within her. Here again, on the ground of Sophia's double presence in God and creation, we have the possibility of heavenly wisdom's full descent to earth at a certain point in time.

The Church, however, is not just Marian and spiritual. It is also the body of Christ. Here the physical aspects and evocations in icon and eucharist of Christ's humanity continue to unfold the hypostasing power of his human nature which is fully stamped with the character of the hypostasis of the *Logos*. Thus the Church in its physicality most acutely poses to us the question, why is there a physical life in time? As regards its temporality, as Rowan Williams has often indicated, this has something to do with the positive value of lack, of dependence and of slow coming to be, not just in a lifetime, but also across the generations. As regards its corporeality, here again it seems that Christian theology needs to have some recourse to the resources of pagan monotheism. For it is Proclus, and not one of the Church Fathers untouched by his influence, who seems to supply the radical answer which then gets remotely echoed right down to Aquinas. Human and daemonic (Christians would say angelic) intelligence, says Proclus, is removed by its constitutive doubling of being in the conceptual image from the absolute simplicity of the One and from the non-reflexive understanding of the henads or gods (Christians would say from the non-reflexive and intuitive intelligence of the Triune God). But material things, as non-reflexive, although lower than intellect, are also in a certain way simpler than intellect: automatically, in a kind of slumbering innocence, physical things have to praise the gods and God simply by existing and showing themselves forth in their integrity.[98]

This means that there is a limit to the corruption of nature spoken of by Bulgakov: it is always imposed upon nature, and always silently opposed by her. It follows that while, indeed, sinful humans turn from spiritual things to rational ones and then to sensual ones, the cure for this is homeopathic. First of all that is because this descent

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[98] Proclus, *Elements of Theology,* 57-8 and see Jean Trouillard, *La Mystagogie de Proclos* (Paris: Les Belles Lettes, 1982) 119-142

loses by definition the power to re-ascend; it corrupts the freedom of the will. Hence fallen humanity can only be rescued by the descent of the divine: in this sense quite clearly, the Incarnation, or the restoration of true worship, is the supreme theurgic action. But secondly, because material things of themselves lead back in their simplicity, despite every degree of fall. Hopkins was right: 'there lives the dearest freshness deep down things'. So it is just for this reason that divine incarnation must reach beneath even humanity into the material, the Eucharistic. Or rather for a double reason: because humans have degenerated just this far, and because simple material things are the only true allies of deity in a fallen world.

So this supplies the only plausible reason for the instance of material creation: it captures something of the highest which reflective intelligence – the gift to itself of a gift – does not. At the same time, one can inversely point out that, without the 'suspension' of matter by spirit and form, matter itself evaporates into all the various shapes through which it can alone ever be or appear. There is no coherent 'materialism', because every materialism always dissolves matter into atoms, laws, processes and rhythms which are strictly speaking always formal or spiritual in character. Pure matter by contrast is, as Aristotle and still more Aquinas realised, a pure mystery, the subject of an *apophasis* for knowledge, since its potential is only ever 'there' when in some degree it is already actualised by form. In consequence, hylomorphism is the *nearest* one can get to materialism; hylomorphism saves matter by regarding it as the vast shadow cast by form which ensures that there is a distinction for human being between the ideas they intend and the real external things they intend by those ideas. In the case of angels, there is no such distinction, which means that angels encounter their internal ideas also as the presence of other discrete

beings. In the case of the Trinity however, the reduction of hypostasis to pure relation means that 'the idea' of the other is also a purely *external* (as it were) relation to the other. In this way the divine coincidence of idea and otherness recovers something of the quality of that spatial and temporal exteriority which humans enjoy and which is unknown to angels. The play of the divine essence through the Trinitarian relations is therefore in a sense eminently matter, and this coincides with the sense that Sophia is eminently a female womb. So just as matter 'recovers' in the mysterious depths a lost simplicity and a lost negative mystery, so also it recovers in a 'weak', strangely absent and yet by that very token creative form, the power and integrity of Sophia.[99]

It is for this reason that the cosmos requires there to be humans as well as angels – they alone reflexively synthesise, as microcosms, all of the cosmos, because they are at once both spiritual and material and combine material externality with an intimation of angelic intimacy in a manner that ensures that they, most of all creatures, exhibit an image of the Trinity. But given the fact of the Incarnation, sophianic, theandric, metaxological ultimate reality is also both spiritual and material, or radically kenotic, and its characteristic double echo across no gulf applies also to the ineffable union of body with soul, matter with mind.

So from a final sophianic-theurgic perspective, matter is not a mere contingent residue, like Hegelian detritus according to Zizek, but nor is it simply a sacramental mirror to be ultimately left behind. Rather, as for Maximus the Confessor in his thoroughly theurgic *Mystagogy*,[100] it is always to be returned to, because the ultimate points all the way back, always to the rain falling silently on the remote beautiful

[99] Bulgakov, 'The Unfading Light' in Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 145
[100] Maximus Confessor, 'The Church's Mystagogy', in *Selected Writings,* trans George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) Chapter Two, 188-9

pond in the earthly countryside. Sophia rests in the Godhead and in the pond: there lies nothing between the two, but -- as 'the true intermediary – *metaxu*'[101] -- she brings them most intimately together.

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[101] Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 123