
ABOUT THE METAPHYSICAL BASIS OF FATHER SERGIUS BULGAKOV'S ICONOLOGY

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Abstract

The main objective of our article is to analyse metaphysical principles of the religious-philosophical thought of Sergius Bulgakov addressing the problem of icon veneration. There is no doubt, father Sergius was one of the first in our time, to review the reflection on the specifically Christian image and to investigate into its ultimate meaning: how is the icon possible, how is it possible to paint the image of Christ. How can the indescribable and totally transcendental God be depicted in Christ, how does His face, visible in human features, relate to His divinity? Father Sergius understood very well that the question of Christ's describability has to do with ontological and gnoseological problems, but his task was complicated by his own central contention – he based his image-doctrine on antique Hellenistic metaphysics and the categories of platonic Gnoseology. Bulgakov built up an idealistic Christian metaphysical project, based on 'natural theanthropic unity'. As eyes to be used for the contemplation of his utopic project to 'see God as He is' he strongly suggest 'Sophia' - the Divine wisdom. According Bulgakov, sophiology is the gnoseological answer that is achieved on the way of synthesis of knowledge and faith. However this synthesis, resulting from the utopic ideology of 'all oneness' and especially in its projection into icon theology was doomed to fail. There resulted finally an iconology speaking a language different from Tradition.

Keywords: sophiology, icon, consubstantial image, sophiological antinomy, hypostasis

1. Introduction

In this article our intention is to analyze the metaphysical principles of the religious philosophy of Sergius Bulgakov addressing the problem of icon veneration in his dogmatic study 'The icon and its veneration'.

'The icon and its veneration' was published in 1931. It was a first attempt in Russian religious and philosophical thought to give a systematic exposition of the theological doctrine concerning icons in close relation with metaphysical problematic. This relation proved to be entirely based on sophiology – a theory about a certain ideal theanthropic essence and its images. In 1929, that is two

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years prior to the publication of his book about icons, in a letter to one of his spiritual children Julia Nikolaevna Reitlinger – the future icon-painter Sister Ioanna – father Sergius Bulgakov wrote: “If God will give me life and strength, one of my theological tasks will be to explain the meaning of the veneration of icons – it is sophiological. The icons are possible only because the human image is at the same time also God’s image – the prototype – since man has been created according to His image and likeness. This is why Christ assumed flesh and human nature not like a lower vestment alien to Him, but rather like His own, - only absolute, because is uncreated. His face shows the unity of eternal humanity and created mankind – sophianity. Usually people say, describable because incarnate - in fact it’s the contrary, incarnate because describable – the one and unique image”. [1]

All these declarations are based on Bulgakov’s strong conviction that man and God have one common image, which is understood in theanthropic categories as a sort of special and independent essence. This is why it becomes obvious that the above quoted letter already contains the quintessence of the sophiological interpretation of the image of God, which will determine the developments in Father Sergius’ book about the icons. His central idea is absolutely fundamental for Sophiology: the icon is possible, since God in Himself is describable.

The energy and enthusiasm with which Father Sergius realizes his sophiological speculation oblige us to come immediately to the core of the matter and to ask – “how true is this doctrine?” I must recognize that my task is greatly simplified because I have to deal with a written text, i.e. a matter of thought. Our objective analysis has certainly become easier since we are no more charmed by the powerful and charismatic personality of Father Sergius, so often mentioned and described by his contemporaries. It remains though that even if one can come across some more or less severe overall critics of sophiology by contemporary scholars, in Russia the notion of image is never the less mostly dealt within sophiological categories [2].

2. Three basic aspects of the patristic thought about the image of God

Thus my approach will be different from the one to be found in the usual polemical writings against Sophiology. Its scope touches the theological notion of the image of God, formulating its three basic aspects:

1. The intratrinitarian image – the Son as consubstantial image of the Father;
2. The Christological image – Christ as His own image;
3. The anthropological image – man as created according to the image and likeness of God.

In the framework of these three types of images, the theology of the icon has been articulated emphasising the fundamental fact inspiring the Christian image-concept that God the Son, the second person of the All-Holy Trinity, became man. For the Orthodox mind the unquestionable testimony to this key-point of our salvation, has always been the ‘handmade image of Jesus Christ’. Consequently our task will be to examine the philosophical and theological

themes developed by Father Sergius in his dogmatic study, in order to grasp the internal logics of the Christian thought transfigured as it is by the dogma of the veneration of icons. This will help us – so we hope – to give a clear and accurate picture of Bulgakov's sophianic iconology.

3. Chalcedonian dogma or sophiological antinomy is the only way to the icon theology?

There is no doubt, Bulgakov was one of the first in our time, to review the reflection on the specifically Christian image and to investigate into its ultimate meaning: how is the icon possible, how is it possible to paint the image of Christ. How can the indescribable and totally transcendental God be depicted in Christ, how does His face, visible in human features, relate to His divinity. These questions introduce a totally different approach to the problem of philosophical knowledge. The human image, not being the image of a human person, becomes the image of a Divine Person, who although depicted according to its human body is not deprived of its consubstantiality with the person of God the Father. This ontological situation defined the only correct metaphysical vector in as much as precisely the fullness of Christ's human nature testifies to the concrete and dense unity – without mingling – of God and man, maintaining absolute divine transcendency. Therefore, it is not enough to say that the iconoclastic dilemma was decisive for the destiny of art, as so remarkably showed Christoph von Schoenborn in his excellent book [3], but we consider it not less decisive for the destiny of philosophy as well. In fact image-theology like nothing else provides awareness of the true relation between theology and philosophy. They cannot be separated, but cannot be reduced either one to the other. Very much like the person of Christ, it unites undividedly and unmingled God and man. Father Sergius understood very well that the question of Christ's describability has to do with ontological and gnoseological problems, but his task was complicated by his own central contention – he based his image-doctrine on antique Hellenistic metaphysics and the categories of platonic Gnoseology.

With his vertiginous temperament ignoring all critical comments of other orthodox theologians, Father Sergius built up an idealistic Christian metaphysical project, based on 'natural theanthropic unity'. As eyes to be used for the contemplation of his utopic project to 'see God as He is', he strongly suggested 'Sophia' - the Divine wisdom.

While attentively studying Father's Sergius approach to the dogmatic fundamentals of the iconoclastic controversy, we rather frequently observed his tendency to look at dogmas from point of view of ratio as such, revealing by and in itself the divine and normative law of aesthetic contemplation.

A consistent logical inquiry of the Christological definition of Chalcedon, of the Trinitarian dogma, and of the dogma about Creation, he brought to the common denominator of the sophiological antinomy, which consists in the ontological identity of the opposite principles of the Divine and creature. From

here stems the main conclusion of Bulgakov's analysis – the two natures in Christ, the uncreated and the created, can unite, without mingling and division, only through the union of the divine and created Sophia.

“The christological antinomy expresses here the general sophiological antinomy with ultimate clarity – the unity and ontological identity of the different and contradictory principles of the Divine and the creature” - writes father Sergius [4]. What does this mean for the understanding of the Christian image? It means that this identity liberating itself from the sole and personal union in Jesus Christ is generalized to such an extent that it becomes a sort of new substantial common nature.

4. Sophianic image of Bulgakov against theological notion of hypostasis

This is the reason why Father Sergius tries to oblige us to perceive in the icon of Christ's face, that can be seen with our physical eyes according to its human nature, the – due to its theanthropic nature, - unapproachable and invisible ‘face’ of Sophia. Unapproachable not because ‘nobody ever saw God’, but because nothing underlies, and nobody stands behind this face. This absent reality certainly can't be related neither to human existence nor to the divine. The image of Sophia does completely vanish at any attempt to conceive of her nature in a logic manner – not to mention its recognition as an authentic image of any existing prototype. Speaking about the lack of Christological realism in Bulgakov's system, Archbishop Seraphim (Sobolev) cunningly remarked: “We have to say, that not only it's impossible to call the ‘Sophia’ an image of God, or of any reasonable being, or of any object what so ever since the ‘Sophia’ found in the teaching of Bulgakov and Florensky, can represent absolutely nobody and nothing since she never existed in reality.” [5]

The main reason, leading to the sophiological interpretation of the image-concept was the sheer absence of the very idea of the theological notion of hypostasis. For father Bulgakov, the reality underling an image is again an image; the material image reflects the noetic image – the idea.

To be an image's (eidos) image – is a Hellenistic reminiscence of a monistic ontology, where the phenomenon is understood as the image of thing's essence – noetic eidos. In such a logical situation, the level of phenomenon is naturally devaluated and the artistic representation is brought into direct relation with the noetic eidos - image, taking the representation for a weak copy of the ideal prototype. Therefore according to the holy fathers the concept of ‘hypostasis’ is so important for the theological understanding of the icon – a concept able to tear apart the stiff causal relation between the idea (ore the noetic image) and its empirical manifestation (ore painted image), - in one word, a concept able to demonstrate the patristic understanding of the ontological link between image and hypostasis. Unfortunately despite of his seemingly profound penetration into the very essence of the iconoclastic controversy we do not find any such perspective in the teaching of Father Sergius. According to father Sergius the describable image has to represent the preeternal theanthropic image.

“Christ’s icon is possible, precisely according to His visible human image, that is however identical with its invisible image – the divine one”, - he wrote [4, p. 95].

The dubiousity of these words becomes obvious as soon as we understand that this identity abolishes the notion of personhood itself, i.e. the very reality, without which we better forget all metaphysics of the Christian image! If not, serving the logic of the identity of the two images, or of what is just the same, of the two natures in the Chalcedonian dogma, will receive a totally different meaning from the one known by the Church.

5. Foundation of all ‘iconhood’ in Bulgakov’s doctrine is the cosmological image of the three hypostatic God – the Divine Wisdom

To prove the ontological and even aesthetical describability of God, as rooted in His deepest being, Bulgakov considers as the major task of his iconology. The spiritual bone of his sophiology is the idea of an initial Divine icon in God Himself. For the orthodox tradition this perfect image of God the Father is the Only begotten Son. The fathers do not foresee any other image. The intratrinitarian life consists in contemplating the Father in the Son and the Son in the Holy Spirit. There are no other hypostases and images in the inner being of the Trinity and no other can there be.

Nevertheless, in the framework of Bulgakov’s sophiology there is one more image in God and this is precisely the one that contains the unique principle and foundation of all ‘iconhood’ - the “relation between the threehypostatic God and His Image, the Divine Wisdom, who is the initial model of the created world in God on one hand, and the relation between this initial cosmic model and the cosmos as its created image on the other”. [4, p. 82]

Thus the supported existence of this sophianic image – the image of the three hypostatic God, presupposes that God has His image not only as a person, but also as the ‘One God’. If these are not the Son and the Spirit, the only conclusion left is to envisage the image of one common divine nature understood simultaneously as the archetype of all creation in God. This double-image is according to Bulgakov’s, interpretation of biblical terms the ‘Khokma’ or ‘Sophia’ - the protoicon of all icons.

However, having strayed away from the Christological image and thus from the consubstantial one, we find ourselves face to face with the sophianic image, undistinctable from the paradigm of creatureness. Consequently, Bulgakov concludes that creature is such is God’s image. Here we reach the very nerve of his teaching – God’s image in Himself, related as the ‘archi’ - or ‘prototype-image’ to the created world, “that has been created by and according to Wisdom, and in this sense the world itself is the created icon of the Godhead” [4, p. 81].

6. What is the icon?

What is the icon for Bulgakov? It is a particular case of representing Sophia. The antinomy of the icon is nothing else than ‘the particular manifestation of the general sophiological antinomy’ and unites both “God’s indescribability and more particularly those of our Lord Jesus Christ the God-Man” [4, p. 55]. The visibility of the invisible and the describability of the indescribable – that is the Icon [4, p. 56]. The icon belonging in the orthodox understanding entirely to the mysterious and intimate realms of personhood, is reduced to represent whatever has been created in this world, where any object, not less than man, is capable of revealing the Divine, where the human being, even as an individual will always be considered just a particle of the cosmic whole. As a matter of fact we have seen, that here the same fate awaits even Christ Himself... On the other hand, sophiology clearly leads to the concept of The God the Father’s describability, since the human image is proper to the Godhead as such. Therefore we may conclude: in such a system the concept of person or hypostasis does not exist – neither is Christ a divine hypostasis, nor man a person, both are rather ‘variations on the theme of Sophia’.

The acme of our native theological symbolism – sophiology, preaches an abstract theanthropic image that in fact has nothing to do, neither with the Divine Person, nor with the human one. To conclude we must recognize that Father Sergius Bulgakov definitively convinced us that sophiology belongs to the kind of symbolism, where the image, totally lacking any personal dimension, is considered nothing more than a particular case of cosmological revelation.

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