Assessments of the Recent Russian Sophiological Tradition

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Oh, how I wish that God would speak,
That he would open his lips against you
And disclose to you the secrets of wisdom [Sophia],
For true wisdom has two sides
—Job 11:5-6a (NIV).

I. Introduction

Today in western feminist, theological, and religious-philosophical studies there appears to be a growing interest in what one might call the Sophia motif in Russian poetry, literature, religious philosophy, and art that arose with gusto during the years leading up to the Soviet period. The Russian Silver Age witnessed various versions of the Divine Sophia, which were often connected with other motifs in literature, such as Goethe’s “eternal feminine.” Although Vladimir Solov'ev introduced Sophia into Russian thought, he did not make the concept as central to his work as some Russian writers who followed him. The intellectual project that Solov'ev’s heirs vetted in the years after his death in 1900 is now commonly called “Sophiology” after the term used by Sergei Bulgakov. Some Russians, mostly critics, refer to the tradition loosely as sofianstvo or sofianizm, more derogatory terms for what I believe is essentially the same tradition. Since the task of speaking about Sophiology itself involves a discussion of the debates concerning the definition of this concept, I will only offer a minimal definition. In
Russian parlance, Sophiology is the study or reflection upon the divine and feminine nature of wisdom.\(^2\)

The following overview of contemporary Russian appropriations of this tradition or motif aims to provide recent examples of Sophiology in an effort to assess what might be considered a remnant or a rebirth of the Sophiological strand in Russian religious philosophical thought. I make no pretensions to producing a catalogue or even offering a bibliography. What follows is merely a selection of some contrasting examples of the Sophiology tradition in Russia today.\(^3\) Although my own research interests are primarily historical, the following assessment does not concern the Silver Age writers themselves. Rather, I have surveyed some of the more recent reflections upon Sophia in Russia with the following concerns in mind: What attempts have there been on the part of post-Soviet Russian scholars to self-reflectively assess or appropriate the Sophia tradition in Russian thought as a uniquely Russian project? Which of these have aimed to be faithful to the pre-Soviet tradition? Which aimed to appropriate the motif explicitly in contrast to the foregoing tradition? Are any of these post-Soviet Sophiologies viable projects for post-Soviet philosophy? I will provide examples from various fields, ranging from cultural-historical intellectual studies, confessional esotericism, cosmology and theoretical physics, and religious philosophy more generally, examining how Sophiology is assessed both in relation to Russian religious thought and in historical perspective as a feature of Russia’s national philosophical heritage.

II. Background

Since the late 1990s there have been several international conferences in Russia on Silver Age religious philosophy and philosophers, subjects that have attended to the tradition of

*Landshaft* 2 (2008), http://www.pitt.edu/~lands
Sophiology.² Two years ago I had the opportunity to present at a conference on Pavel Florenskii in Moscow. Anecdotally, I would suggest that today in Russia there exists no philosophical cult of Sophia such as there was in the Silver Age. A full treatment of the phenomenon as a cultural-linguistic and theological tradition of the Russian Silver Age itself still remains to be written despite the appearance of several studies on the topic in Russian and western European languages. Although the theological use of Sophia, particularly Bulgakov’s version, came under severe criticism by the ecclesiastical hierarchy in various jurisdictions starting in the 1930s, I am not aware of any explicit objections among the current Russian Orthodox leaders, signaling that Sophiology is not perceived in the Church as a threat at present.³ However, while I was attending the conference on Florenskii in 2005, I did hear that a few days prior to it a very large conference was held in Kiev on the theme of Hesychasm, an ascetic tradition within Eastern Orthodoxy that has experienced a significant revival recently. It was organized by Orthodox scholars, including Sergei Horujy, a central figure in the revival of Hesychasm and, not coincidentally, an outspoken critic of the Sophiological tradition. One attendee of that conference told me that Horujy was so overwhelmed at the high attendance—around eight hundred compared to the sixty or so who attended the Florenskii conference—that he declared the event a clear victory of Hesychasm over Sophiology in Russia.

Horujy has himself developed an alternative tradition of post-Soviet religious philosophy based on the Eastern Orthodox tradition of Hesychasm, melded with certain elements of French postmodern theory. He considers his project a replacement for the misdirected aspirations of Silver Age thought, which he has criticized as a mish-mash of mixed methodologies and careless philosophizing akin to the milieu of ancient Alexandria, which involved a strong Gnostic element.⁶
Another recent voice from the Russian Orthodox Church was the priest and martyred social activist of the late Soviet years, Aleksandr Men’. Although himself a figure of controversy, Men’ did not support the Sophiological tradition, although he did not condemn it either. He wrote of Bulgakov’s Sophia, “I avoid it (ia chuzhd ego) and I am quite distant from this teaching. I have never accepted it but I acknowledge that this concept has a place as a theological opinion” (Men’ 530). He described it simply as conceiving the world as more connected with God than traditional theology, and as a doctrine that approaches pantheism. Men’ recognized that Bulgakov never considered Sophiology to be more than a theological opinion, and that he never suggested that it should be accepted as Church dogma.

However, there are some scholars, such as A. K. Popov, who believe that the writings of Silver Age religious philosophers like Bulgakov are indeed relevant today, because they view the problems Bulgakov faced as a religious intellectual in his day as very similar to those faced by post-Soviet Russian society (Popov 47). Accompanying the post-Soviet renaissance of the Russian intellectual heritage, which included religious dimensions such as Sophiology that flourished in the pre-Soviet years, there are two main classes of scholarship: constructive-confessional and historical. We may consider the former those scholars who constructively or confessionally develop the Sophia motif apart from an in-depth reflection upon the Silver Age tradition, or by claiming no continuity with that tradition. Other scholars aim primarily to reconstruct a historical account of the Silver Age tradition as a critical reflection upon Russia’s philosophical heritage, and still others attempt a historical reconstruction in order to positively influence the appropriation of Sophiology today, finding support for their task in the pre-Soviet writers.
III. Sophiological Construction

In the constructive vein, one article written by Aleksei Viktorovich Ivanov in 1996 applies concepts found in Silver Age Sophiology to contemporary philosophical questions. Ivanov’s is perhaps the purest example of post-Soviet engagement with the various levels of the Sophiological discourse of the pre-Soviet era: he examines the religious-philosophical-mythic notion of Sophia, using approaches ranging from national-Slavophile, cultural-historical, theological, theoretical-physical, comparative religious, ascetic-spiritual, and finally, gender studies. The latter is in fact the most surprising element, because Ivanov ended what was largely a scientific-philosophical study with a brief commentary on how germane the notion of Sophia is for an ecologically conscious ethics and suggested that “woman, and especially Russian woman, is substantively and intuitively closer to the ‘eidos-bearing fountainheads’ of the Cosmos than is man with his cold egoism and flawed rational logos” (“The Philosophical-Theological Idea of Sophia,” 19). While this comment could find support in some of the Silver Age thinkers, the degree to which Silver Age writers made this explicit connection requires closer study.

It is somewhat surprising that Ivanov makes no explicit connection to the manner in which the motif of Sophia is being appropriated and re-conceived in feminist and gender studies in the West, including theological thinkers from Christian and non-Christian religious traditions. Instead it appears that his goal is precisely to recapture the essential idea of Florenskii and Bulgakov. Ivanov argues that although the theological content of the Sophia tradition is useful, it is possible—even for non-religious Russians who wish to reconnect with their native cultural-intellectual tradition—to benefit from Sophiology on a purely theoretical-scientific level, without any theological or religious commitments. He suggests that the contemporary problems in science, especially theoretical physics, could gain much from the very conceptual foundations
that were built largely by Florenskii and Bulgakov. Based on this short study it appears that the cosmological dimension of pre-Soviet Sophiology will not be abandoned entirely. Ivanov’s constructive approach, which sees the Silver Age writers as comrades in the task of developing a post-Soviet philosophy, is highly reminiscent of the original Sophiologists themselves and best captures the spirit of the Silver Age.

In a different field—the field of contemporary esotericism, which for some is as equally ethereal a field of study as Russian Sophiology proper—we find one very vocal Russian proponent of the Sophia motif named Sergei Olegovich Prokofieff, who co-founded the Anthroposophical Society in Russia in 1991. In fact, his grandfather was the famed composer Sergei Prokof’ev, who brought us *Peter and the Wolf* (1936) and many other symphony classics of the Soviet era. In my view, Prokofieff’s project is probably the most unabashedly confessional usage of Sophiology in Russia today.

The major work in which one finds Prokofieff’s thoughts on Sophia is *The Heavenly Sophia and the Being Anthroposophia* (*Nebesnaia Sofiia i sushchestvo Antroposofiia*), written in the early 1990s. His aim is to unite the Russian anthroposophical movement with the same movement outside of Russia. Therefore, relying heavily on the thought of Rudolph Steiner while transposing standard anthroposophical concepts into a new Sophiological key, he sets out to recast the original anthroposophical doctrine in a contemporary context. Not surprisingly, he does not appropriate the Russian Sophiologists wholesale, but in fact attempts to distance himself from them considerably.

Prokofieff’s main reason for rejecting the Russian Sophiological tradition differs little from critics who charge that Sophia remains utterly undefined and amorphous or, rather, that she is defined in so many various and differing ways that it is impossible to settle on any adequate
conceptual understanding of what is meant by the term “Sophia.” Instead of referring to this tradition, however, Prokofieff attempts to conceive of a consistent concept *de novo*. Linde summarizes:

According to Prokofieff, humanity is able through Steinerian spiritual science to establish contact with the heavenly Sophia through her emissary and “bridglet,” the being Anthroposophia. By coming together in a wish to serve her, anthroposophists “have the task of together creating on Earth something akin to an all-embracing soul-chalice into which this supersensible being [Anthroposophia], the youngest member of the heavenly Sophia, can descend. And this means none other than the beginning of the incarnation of the heavenly Sophia on Earth.” (12-13)¹¹

Prokofieff designed a three-stage schema to describe the transition that humanity must take to commune with Sophia: “Sophia (Theo-Sophia) → Philo-Sophia → Anthropos-Sophia” (94). Here the principle of reason, i.e. philosophy, plays a mediating role between the more pre-modern mythological concept of Sophia and the fuller culmination of anthroposophia. Prokofieff’s creative attempt to re-develop Sophiology within anthroposophy in contemporary Russia not only mirrors the post-Soviet project within Hesychasm, but hearkens back to the pre-Soviet attempt to identify and name that which is unique to Russian *qua* Eastern religious thought, in contrast to that found in the West. These two examples of constructive Sophiology both reflect impulses that were alive within the Silver Age tradition—ranging from the pure-scientific to the esoteric—although Ivanov’s view of the pre-Soviet tradition is highly positive, compared to Prokofieff’s negative dismissal.
IV. Historical Scholarship

Within post-Soviet scholarship’s historical treatment of the Sophia motif in pre-Soviet culture we find two different, though related, areas of activity: cultural history and the history of philosophy. First, there is the ongoing assessment of the cultural roots of the Sophia tradition within Russian Orthodox cultural and intellectual life, which Florenskii in particular already explored in depth.

One cultural historian, Elena Mitina, provided an extensive comparison of the approaches previous scholars took concerning the shift from the Greek concept of Holy Wisdom, or Divine Sophia as male and connected to Christ, to the Russian tradition of connecting Sophia to divine femininity and the Mother of God. Mitina found that the motif was not only iconographical, but connected with ideal representations of female royalty in medieval Rus’ that depicted the ruling state as the flourishing of Sophia’s political presence. In her attempt to reclaim the significance of Sophia as a national-cultural motif, or symbol, Mitina charged that “these [feminine features of the Russian Sophia of the middle ages] have been interpreted by modern scholars, including Russian religious philosophers, much too freely to correspond to their agenda as well as that of contemporary European and American feminism” (10). She also suggested, however, that there could very well be a constructive role for discussing aspects of Sophia or divine wisdom in its moral-political sense in the context of contemporary Russia, offering the work of political theorist I. I. Liakhov as one viable starting point. Therefore, Mitina’s scholarship aims to rescue the motif of Sophia from loose appropriations that fail to appreciate the historical context and traditions out of which Sophiology arose, while at the same time welcoming contemporary constructions, perhaps even those like Ivanov’s, that carry the original tradition forward.
Finally, in the field of the history of philosophy, where the highest level of scholarly activity is found, it may suffice to highlight the work of three scholars who directly engage and assess the element of Sophia in the Silver Age. Aleksei P. Kozyrev currently teaches Russian philosophy at Moscow State University and in addition to writing several interpretive essays on Solov'ev and Bulgakov, he has edited and translated their texts. Originally his work began with a dissertation examining the role of Gnosticism in Solov'ev’s early concept of Sophia. Whether arising from polemical concerns or Gnostic attraction, I have not found such approaches to be capable of dealing with the serious manner in which the Sophiologists approached the texts of the biblical and Christian tradition, nor do they, in my view, take seriously the actual Christian-reforming intent of the Sophiological project. However, Kozyrev’s engagement with the pre-Soviet tradition reflects a high level of appreciation for the creativity of the original tradition, while also offering cautions against an uncritical appropriation of the same.

Another historical study that warrants greater attention is the lengthy study by Galina F. Garaeva, entitled *Sophian Idealism as a Historical-Philosophical Phenomenon* (*Sofiinyi idealizm kak istoriko-filosofskii fenomen*, 2000). Garaeva focuses specifically on the Russian character of the tradition, alongside her comparative treatment of the thought of Solov'ev, Florenskii, and Bulgakov, considering the manner in which these three thinkers demonstrate the intellectual traditions that coalesce in Sophiology. The three approaches she highlights are: the philosophical, the ecclesiastical-theological, and the mystical-esoteric. While this approach seeks to produce a more balanced picture of the origins of Sophiology, Garaeva’s study still does not grasp the degree to which the Sophiologists were seriously concerned with, and indebted to, early Christian thought and biblical concepts as well, perhaps due to the limited availability of some works that Bulgakov wrote in exile. Still, Garaeva’s study remains among the most serious.
attempts in Russian to provide an account of the main lineage of Sophiology as religious
philosophy through the Silver Age.

Another major work that deserves attention is a new, in-depth study in Russian entitled
simply Vladimir Solov’ev and Sophia (Vladimir Solov’ev i Sofiia, 2006), written by Viktoriia
Kravchenko. This work of 380 pages aims to provide a definitive account of the sources and
influences that appear in Solov’ev’s conception of Sofia, without much reflection on the tradition
that succeeded him. It explores the Gnostic interests he had, as well as the patristic-Orthodox
intellectual occupations that he carried with him throughout much of his literary career.
Kravchenko also assesses the connection of Solov’ev’s thought to the German theosophical
movement stemming from Boehme and other naturalists like Bruno, whose ideas were then
picked up in the German idealist writers for whom Solov’ev seemed to have an insatiable
appetite. The work contains a helpful bibliography of sources that might escape many western
scholars’ radar and, overall, it is a well-documented analysis of a theme that captures a large
amount of scholarly attention, despite the minor role Sophia proper plays in Solov’ev’s written
corpus. Any future study that deals with Solov’ev’s concept of Sophia will benefit greatly from
Kravchenko’s work. Given the widespread interest in Sophia in the West in general, it may even
be desirable to make this book available in English. However, it does contain a modicum of
discussion on writings from the Christian tradition, and so still greater attention to the Orthodox
theological engagement that Solov’ev clearly valued is warranted. Still, all of these historical
studies could have offered a much fuller appreciation of the ecclesiastical and doctrinal
commitments of Solov’ev, Florenskii, and Bulgakov.
V. Conclusion

Russia’s present, self-reflexive task of retrieving various strands and concepts from the pre-Soviet philosophical tradition is fruitful, I believe, and this productivity is increasing at a steady pace. Although many Russian scholars engage western scholarship on the subject, the flourishing of Sophiological scholarship in Italy remains relatively unnoticed or underappreciated. The present task of assessing Russia’s philosophical heritage aims to, on the one hand, avoid starting over from scratch by appropriating western philosophy, and, on the other hand, revive a nearly forgotten tradition of religious philosophers that cannot possibly speak to all the issues in post-Soviet society. Russian philosophers have sought to integrate reflection upon Silver Age religious philosophy and the concept of Sophia. While projects like Ivanov’s seem slightly eccentric, they do provide an example of something that was stylistically rather typical of the pre-Soviet philosophical culture in Russia. Prokofieff’s esoteric Sophiology also reflects the sort of engagement between philosophy and unconventional religious thought that emerged during the Silver Age.

The process of Russia’s self-reflection upon its pre-Soviet intellectual heritage is ongoing. Sergei Horujy told me recently that he was amazed to witness a transformation in Russian philosophical circles, particularly institutional philosophical culture, where in the early 1990s some of the greatest atheists surfaced as the greatest advocates of Russia’s heroes of Orthodox philosophy, including Solov’ev and other such religious thinkers. This could be seen as similar to the shift in which the greatest communists became the most adept capitalists overnight with the collapse of the Soviet Union. While I doubt that there is a link between these phenomena, it sets the scene for the rather contentious process of negotiating the retrieval of any prior tradition of thought. There are complexities and challenges for any such tradition that
attempts to recreate its original core, vision, or the essence of its founding fathers, and such attempts inevitably runs into myriad hurdles as one attempts to define the purpose for such a retrieval or critique. As Russian scholars continue to assess Sophiology they may either take the cautious path of the traditionalist or the ambitious and grandiose way, combining the flair of a Solov'ev, the intellectual dexterity of a Florenskii, and the determination and endurance of a Bulgakov.
Notes

1 This paper was originally presented on a panel at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in New Orleans on 17 November 2007 under the title “Recent Russian Assessments of the Sophiological Tradition.” Subsequently I became aware that my assessments, however slight a role they play in this presentation of current scholarship, were in fact the general subject of the paper and that others’ assessments, which I was surveying, were the material I used by way of introduction. More correctly, therefore, this is a presentation of my assessments and others’ assessments of a motif or tradition. I wish to thank T. Allan Smith and Alyssa DeBlasio for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 Within the limits of this presentation I make no attempt to compare scholarship in Russia with that found outside of Russia. For the most recent summaries of literature on the general topic of Sophiology, although confined primarily to interests in theology, see Joos’ “Sophianic Christology and Sophiological Theology Today: A General Introduction” (“Cristologia Sofianica e Teologia Sofiologica Oggi. Introduzione Generale,” 2008).

3 Addressing this issue in the context of this new online journal, it is not clear to me whether the audience is under- or over-informed about this topic and a specialist will see that I have favored a generalist audience.

4 One institution in particular, the Biblical-Theological Institute of St. Andrew in Moscow, has held a series of annual conferences devoted to Silver Age authors. Following Solov’ev (2003), Bulgakov (2004), Florenskii (2005), Berdiaev (2006), and Frank (2007), in 2008 the conference will be on Sophiology. See St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute. The institute also publishes the proceedings in the following year.
A search of the terms “Sophia” and “Sophiology” in Russian on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate (www.mospat.ru) produced no hits that related to any official position taken.

See Institute of Synergetic Anthropology and Stockl.


One of the earliest and most informed studies concerning how western feminism might engage the Sophiological thought of Russian religious philosophy can be found in Brenda Meehan’s “Wisdom/Sophia, Russian identity, and Western feminist theology.”

For this brief summary of his significance in the contemporary anthroposophical movement in Russia, I am entirely dependent on a paper delivered at the recent Sophia conference in Amsterdam, written by Fabian Linde. The paper is expected to appear in the proceedings of the conference where it was presented in June 2007, at Nijmegen in the Netherlands. See de Courten and van der Zweerde.

The work was translated into English from the Russian by Simon Blaxland de Lange in 1996 (republished 2006). It was originally published in German (translated by Ursula Preuß) as Die himmlische Sophia und das Wesen Anthroposophie (1995). The book appeared two years later in Russian as Nebesnaia Sofiia i sushchestvo Antroposofiia (1997).

Here Linde cites Prokofieff’s The Heavenly Sophia (96).

The paper is expected to be published this year in Manon de Courten and Evert van der Zweerde’s edited volume Sophia - Transcultural Bridget.

See Kozyrev.
Many Italian scholars could be noted whose work on Russian Sophiology is exceptionally rich. Some of the most widely published include: Graziano Lingua, Natalino Valentini, Piero Coda, and Nynfa Bosco.
Works Cited

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