

The Masculine and the Feminine Dimensions of Being Human in the Icons of Sister Joanna Reitlinger and Mother Maria Skobtsova¹

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Introduction

If God is *pleroma*, then people made in God's image manifest this fullness, which also includes the unity of masculine and feminine principles. The issue was reflected in this way in the work of two of Sergei Bulgakov's spiritual daughters, refugees to the West after the 1917 revolution, Sister Joanna Reitlinger (1898–1988)² and Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945).³ They both represent the revivalist tradition of icon-painting of Saint Sergius Theological Institute and in the case of Sister Joanna also the tradition of the Kondakov Institute in Prague.⁴

¹ This study is a part of the research project "Symbolic Mediation of Wholeness in Western Orthodoxy," GAČR P401/11/1688.

² She chose her monastic name Joanna, as her clothing was on the feast of John the Baptist. For the detailed information see Julie Jančárková, "К вопросу о рождении 'творческой иконописи' (на примере чехословацких работ Ю. Рейтлингер)," [On the Issue of the Birth of "Artistic Iconography" (Using the Example of the Czechoslovak Works of J. Reitlinger)] *Вестник русского христианского движения* 191:2 (2006): 285–94.

³ Elizaveta Skobtsova chose her monastic name after Mother Maria of Egypt. See Sergei Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova Martyr of Ravensbrück* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965).

⁴ Kaari Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon: Émigré Russian Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Images* (Åbo: Åbo University Press, 1999), 211–344.

As multifaceted artists they both created with their whole lives, and with no limits to their activities. Here I will concentrate only on one part of their creative work, which is fine art. I will look at their icons together with their icon-like work: watercolors, drawings, and Mother Maria's embroidery. Their understanding of icons was very broad and neither of them observed strictly the dividing line between the traditional depictions of icons and other pictures that they created. Their broad definition of icons first came from their theological presuppositions concerning what can be called the "sophianity" of the created world.⁵ Second, their creative work took place in the new milieu of diaspora in the West, which was marked by a different motivation than pre-revolution icon-painting. We find in it more improvisation, based on a lived experience than on asking about the authorization of the icons or strictly following the Church rules.⁶

To show their depiction of the holistic image of people on the basis of both feminine and masculine principles, I will first trace their holistic view of God, where Holy Wisdom as eternal feminine played a significant role as a complementary part to the "masculine" within God. This understanding came especially from the tradition of the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900).⁷ His encounter with the eternal feminine principle that he called Holy Wisdom and that he experienced also as pan-unity was later theologically interpreted by Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944).⁸ Both female artists were mostly influenced by the sophiology of Bulgakov, so I will show the theological connec-

⁵ Following Bulgakov Reitlinger spoke about the symbolic foundation of the world, where the visible reality expresses the invisible, and art speaks in a visible way about this invisibility, which is eternal. She also worked with Bulgakov's term "iconization of the world" and assigns art to the sphere of human co-creativity with God. See Julia Reitlinger, Sergei Bulgakov, *Диалог художника и богослова. Дневники. Записные книжки. Письма* (Moscow: Nikeja, 2011), 144.

⁶ Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon*, 203.

⁷ For the topic see e.g. Viktorija Kravchenko, *Владимир Соловьёв* (Moscow: Agraf, 2006).

⁸ For this topic see e.g. Kateřina Bauerová, "The Mysticism of Pan-Unity: Sophiology Revisited," in Ivana Noble et al, *Wrestling with the Mind of the Fathers* (forthcoming from St Vladimir's Seminary Press).

tion with him in their artistic work. This part will demonstrate that both Sister Joanna and Mother Maria avoided a feminized picture of Sophia. However, we will see that in Mother Maria's work – in discussion with Bulgakov and also Nikolai Berdyaev – we touch also the anthropological notion of Sophia identified with the Mother of God. In the second part I will analyze Mother Maria's transition of the divine feminine into the maternal feminine as the basis for her notion of the bi-une image of God together with God's Mother in people. Lastly I will show how this bi-unity manifests itself as wholeness in human relationships.

Sophia as Divine Feminine or Divine Logos?

In their art, both Sister Joanna and Mother Maria could follow two types of icons of Sophia as they were categorized for example in the work of Pavel Florensky, Georges Florovsky or Nikodim Kondakov: firstly the Novgorodian type (15th c.), where Sophia as a Fiery Angel dressed in royal garments symbolized the heavenly Son of God from the prophecy of Isaiah 9:6 or the apocalyptic vision of the book of Revelation (1:13; 19:12),⁹ or the second Kievan type (17th c.) in which Sophia is personified as the Mother of God, as the apocalyptic woman from the book of Revelation (12:1) influenced by Western depictions thus:

⁹ For details see Pavel Florensky, *Стол и утверждение истины: Опыт православной теодицеи в двенадцати письмах* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1989), 319–392; Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov, *Русская икона, IV* (Prague: Kondakov Institute, 1933), 275–276; Georges Florovsky, “О почитании Софии Премудрости Божией в Византии и на Руси,” *Библиотека Вехи* (2003) accessible at <http://www.vehi.net/>.