

# Graced Creatureliness: Ontological Tension in the Uncreated/Created Distinction in the Sophiologies of Solov'ev, Bulgakov and Milbank

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## Abstract

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The author reviews the sophiological thought of Vladimir Solov'ev, Sergii Bulgakov and John Milbank to suggest that there is congruence between the first two, as Orthodox theologians, and that of John Milbank, as founder and proponent of Radical Orthodoxy, insofar as all agree in rejecting any notion of nature that can be thought other than under the sign of grace. Milbank's recent essay "Sophiology and Theurgy: the New Theological Horizon," is discussed at length, and Milbank's indebtedness to Solov'ev and Bulgakov is analyzed in depth. The history and problems of sophiology in the twentieth century are detailed, and a possible "Christological corrective" to some of them is offered.



In their understanding of grace in relation to the human being,  
 Catholics mainly emphasize its supernatural,  
 super-creaturely character, the moment  
 of divine condescension as divinising power,  
 but they do not give full value to graced creatureliness,  
 to the Divine image in the human being,  
 an image that is real and living precisely because it receives and,  
 one can say, draws towards itself heavenly grace – by its natural  
 graciousness, by the very image of its nature.  
 (Sergii Bulgakov, *Kupina neopalimaia*)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. *John Milbank and the Revival of Sophiology*

Radical Orthodoxy, from John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* to the eponymous volume,<sup>2</sup> has been concerned with attacking any notion of nature that claims it can be thought other than under the sign of grace. As Milbank puts it:

in concrete, historical humanity there is no such thing as a state of "pure nature": rather, every person has always already been worked upon by divine grace, with the consequence that one cannot analytically separate "natural" and "supernatural" contributions to this integral unity.<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, the program of Radical Orthodoxy is an endeavour sympathetic to Eastern Orthodoxy, which has never ac-

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgakov, *Kupina neopalimaia: opyt dogmaticheskago istolkovaniia nekotorykh chert v pravoslavnom pochitanii Bogomateri* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1927), 87. English translation: *The Burning Bush: An Attempt at a Dogmatic Interpretation of Certain Features of the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. and ed. T. Allan Smith. Forthcoming from St Vladimir's Seminary Press. Thanks are due to Prof. Smith for allowing me to cite his translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Radical Orthodoxy: a New Theology*, eds., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London/New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006), 206 [*Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (Oxford: Blackwells, 1990), p.206]. I will cite the second edition and then in brackets the first edition.

cepted the modern Western division of the sacred from the secular.

In witness of this, consider the account of a conversation between Thomas Hopko, dean emeritus of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, and his father-in-law, the liturgical theologian, sometime dean of Saint Vladimir's, and former student of Sergii Bulgakov,<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann. This conversation nicely illustrates this holistic tendency in Orthodox life and thought. As Hopko relates, Schmemmann told him, "When I die, you can ... say that my whole worldview, my whole life, could be summed up in one little sentence: two 'nos,' one 'yes,' and eschatology – two 'nos,' one 'yes,' and the Kingdom to come."<sup>5</sup> The first no was to secularism or any explanation of this world that claimed it had meaning in itself. A favourite quote of Schmemmann was from the French novelist and diarist Julian Green, "tout est ailleurs, mes amis, tout ce qui est vrai est ailleurs."<sup>6</sup> The world could only be explained, Schmemmann argued, by something other than itself, "ailleurs," "elsewhere," and that elsewhere can only be God – never oneself or a nature opposed to grace. The second "no" was to religion, which is the role faith plays in a world that explains itself by itself. In religion, faith is a psychological aid to assist man with his "problems," to fulfil his "emotional needs," rather than, when nature is understood as always already suffused with the divine energies, being the vision of the Kingdom of God in Christ through which we are not only redeemed from our sins but fulfilled by becoming more than ourselves in deification. The "yes" of Schmemmann is to the fact that in the Church the fallen world (i.e., nature opposed to grace) is redeemed in Christ; it is the Kingdom of God, the last things (the *eschata*), which *have already come in*

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Tri Obraza," *Vestnik Russkogo Studencheskogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia* 101–102 (1971): 9–24.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hopko, "Homily: Two 'Nos' and One 'Yes'," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 28 (1984): 45–48. Also available at <http://www.schmemmann.org/memoriain/1984.svtq8.hopko.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 6 and 286.