

"TRUTH IN THE LIKENESS," THE DIVINE SOPHIA AND THE REBIRTH OF CHRISTIAN ART

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This paper will briefly outline Titus Burckhardt's view of the state of religious art in the modern period and it will go on to explore what three Russian thinkers, namely Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov, have to offer by way of amplification of Burckhardt's view. It will attempt to show where the Burckhardt thesis and the contribution of the three modern Russians belong in the tradition of sacred knowledge, the Sophianic tradition.

I

Burckhardt

When Christian art begins to appear in paleo-Christian works, it is not conditioned by any particular aesthetical theory. However, genuine Christian inspiration clearly sprang from certain images of Christ and the Holy Virgin, images which largely have a miraculous origin and which are determined by the great facts of the Christian faith itself, that God became a man in Jesus Christ, a Saviour to deliver mankind from death and to open the way to eternal life in the community of the Holy Trinity. Assimilated to and woven into the art which expressed this mystery of God made man, were the craft traditions which became Christian by adoption. These two currents, along with some liturgical music springing from the Pythagorean inheritance, deserve to be considered truly *sacred art*.¹

Christianity inherited craft symbolism in which the craftsman imitates formation of cosmos out of chaos, creating a vision of the cosmos which is holy through its beauty. Christianity purified the craft inheritance and released those elements that re-enact the laws of the cosmos, such as the Cross,

monogram and circle which signify the Christ as the spiritual synthesis of the universe, the all, the beginning, the end and the timeless centre.² His Cross rules the cosmos, and judges the world.

Christian thought, with its emphasis on the person of the Saviour, demanded a figurative art. In forming its art Christianity assimilated some germs of naturalism in the anti-spiritual sense of the word,³ but on the whole, from paleo-Christian times to the end of the Middle Ages, in both east and west, Christianity developed a tradition of sacred art which expressed itself according to an artistic canon sensitive to theological vision and expressive of spiritual beauty. Of course, latent naturalism never failed to break through every time there was a weakening of spiritual consciousness. The same is true for the germs of philosophical rationalism, and the Christian world has always known, side by side with art that is sacred in the strict sense of the word, a religious art using more or less "worldly" forms.

Through the experience of Eastern Christianity and worship in particular, Burckhardt gives prominence to the fact that Christian art and architecture are subordinate to the liturgy, which is itself *the* work of art. Its centre, the Eucharist, belongs to the order of Divine Art, producing the most perfect and mysterious of transformations. He notes that when Grace is in question, no environment can be neutral.⁴ It will always be for or against the spiritual influence; whatever does not *assemble* must inevitably *disperse*. Accordingly, Christian architecture emphasises the totality of space, the totality of existence and creates a sacred edifice which is a symbol of the cosmos, an image of Being and its possibilities, manifested, externalised or objectified in the cosmic edifice. Like the cosmos, the temple is produced out of chaos. Canonical sacred art creates and serves this environment, while sentiment, however noble its impulse, can never create such an environment.⁵

In the light of the tradition, the demise of even the reflection of sacred traditional art from the sanctuaries (meeting places?) of western Christian communities could be read as a sign of the collapse of the sacramental and mystical tradition, and in some cases as the entry of the 'abomination of desolation' into the Holy Place. How has this come about? Burckhardt's answer is that in the period of the Renaissance the canon was abandoned and the sacred tradition neglected by artists who were energised by the emancipation of the Promethean ego and individualistic expansive

expression. Burckhardt adopts Hans Sedylmayr's view (in *Verlust der Mitte* — Loss of the Centre) that the decadence of Christian art is a decadence of the image of man. The illusory autonomy following the Renaissance implies a loss of centre, for man is no longer truly man when he is no longer centred in God; thereafter the image of man decomposes; first it is replaced, so far as its dignity is concerned, by other aspects of nature, and then it is progressively destroyed; its systematic negation and disfigurement is the goal of modern art.⁶ This conclusion of Burckhardt and Sedylmayr is an extreme view, but their argument up to that point has factual support.

II Bulgakov

Perhaps this is the point to leave Burckhardt for the present and to introduce Fr Sergius Bulgakov, one-time Marxist and professor of political economy become Christian theologian and Orthodox priest, one of the three Russian thinkers who have something to say about the nature of art, Christian art in particular, and on the nature of beauty. In writings published in 1918 he included an essay entitled "*The Corpse of Beauty*", a response to viewing an exhibition of the work of Pablo Picasso. Let me emphasise that Bulgakov believed that Picasso was a true genius whose work was a powerful, yet terrible mystical insight. However, he would concur with Burckhardt that in this work the image of man decomposes in a systematic negation and disfigurement. There follows the conclusion of the essay which provides a powerful visual metaphor for understanding some of the darker currents in modern art:

There exists a mysterious rhythm, a certain musical correlation between light and darkness, in obedience to which the unknown architect of Notre Dame in Paris placed on its outer balustrade his chimeres, demonic monsters of great artistic power and profound mystical reality. I have always marvelled at the riddle of the chimeres, those demons that have settled on the roof of the cathedral: what anguish wrung them from the artist's heart? To how many men have they been a temptation and a stumbling block? I do (not mean the

guided crowds of tourists), but those who gathered under the roof of the beautiful cathedral to pray, both in the far-off Middle Ages and in our own day. Are not Picasso's paintings also chimeres on the spiritual temple of modernity? It is impossible to imagine these evil things inside the cathedral; if Picasso's pictures were brought into a church one fancies that they would, like the chimeres, be immediately burnt up and turn to ashes. And yet, in virtue of some mysterious attraction, those unclean spirits settle on the roof of a church. It is remarkable, too, that so many motifs in Picasso's art go back to African idols which his African ancestors may have worshipped; thus his chimeres are hieratic in their very derivation.

There remains another question, unanswerable and enigmatic: was the majestic portal of the Paris Cathedral the work of the same artist as the chimeres, or of two quite different men? History does not say.⁷

III

Burckhardt Again

Both Burckhardt and Bulgakov agree that at the beginning of our era, in artists such as Matisse, Gauguin, Cezanne, Renoir and Rodin, new possibilities opened for a return to an art more honest, if not actually traditional. However, thrown back upon himself, the artist, such as Pablo Picasso, his contemporaries and his continuators, sought new sources of inspiration. As heaven was closed to him, and because the sensible world was no longer a source of wonder and adoration, to use Burckhardt's exact description:

*he burrowed in certain cases towards the chaotic regions of the subconscious; in doing so he released a new force, independent of the world of experience, uncontrollable by ordinary reason and contagiously suggestive: "flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo!" (Aeneid, VII. 312). Whatever it may be that comes to the surface of the soul out of these subconscious fogs, it has certainly nothing to do with the symbolism of 'archaic' or traditional arts; whatever may be symbolised in these lucubrations are certainly not "archetypes", but psychic residues of the lowest kind; not symbols but spectres.*⁸

Sometimes this infra-human subjectivism assumed the 'impersonal' demeanour ... of 'machinism', expressed in grotesque and sinister machine dreams which clearly reveal the satanic nature of certain features that underlie modern civilisation.

In contrast to the satanic deformation of the image of man, Burckhardt and the Russian philosopher-theologians emphasise what they call the Sophianic experience as an experience of beauty. They would propose a new aesthetic principle, a Sophianic aesthetic of beauty which alone has the power to carry man upon its wing to the world of the Real and towards the embrace of union with the Beloved, God. However, this is not achieved by a flight from the material world into some ethereal, purely spiritual realm. Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, recognise that '*beauty is the reflection of the Immutable in the stream of becoming*'.⁹ It is a this-world experience. As Rumi, the Sufi sage expressed it:

*Consider creation as pure and crystalline water
In which is reflected the Beauty of the Possessor of Majesty
Although the water of this stream continues to flow
The image of the moon and stars remain reflected in it.*

IV Soloviev

The reason that the three Russian philosopher-theologians, Soloviev, Florensky and Bulgakov are important in any discussion of the rebirth of Christian art is that each represents an important development of the idea of Sophia, the All-Wisdom of God, an idea crucial for creating a new aesthetic view that can speak to modern men and women and which goes beyond merely repeating neo-Platonic platitudes.

All three, beginning with Vladimir Soloviev, had a direct, visionary experiences of the Divine Sophia during their lives. All three brought their theological critical abilities to bear upon their experience in order to explain the new knowledge that the experience of the Divine Sophia gave them.

This theological excursion remains full of promise, but there are also some still unsolved problems raised by Soloviev's first

attempts to give a coherent theological explanation of the nature of the All Wisdom of God, problems which were further developed, but remain unsolved by later Eastern Orthodox thinkers such as Florensky and Bulgakov.

To appropriate Soloviev's thought we must always remind ourselves that before anything else he is a visionary and his pursuit of the Divine Sophia, the Eternal Womanhood, is visionary and experiential. The first vision of Sophia came *in the midst of the liturgy* when he was only ten years old. It was the first explicit experience of the one he identified as Sophia the Eternal and Perfect Feminine. The second vision was in London. As a young man he had gone there to study Indian, gnostic and medieval philosophy. This time Sophia summoned him to Egypt. He obeyed and at dawn in the Thebaide he experienced the fullest vision of her. Reflecting on the vision in the poem *Three Meetings*, He wrote:

All that was, and is, and ever shall be
My steadfast gaze embraced it all in one.
The seas and rivers sparkle blue beneath me,
And distant woods and mountains clad in snow.
I saw it all, and all was one fair image
Of women's beauty, holding all as one.
The boundless was within its form enclosed-
Before me, and in me is you alone.

His views developed and they were altered as he explored the mystery more deeply. At first Soloviev attempted to explain the Divine Sophia as "God's body, the matter of the divinity, permeated with the beginning of divine unity".¹⁰ which immediately brought him into difficulties with Orthodox theology, for whom the Divine Son is the Logos, 'the Word made flesh'. The problems multiplied when he attempted to use Sophia for the humanity of Christ, stating that "Christ is the integral divine organism-universal and at the same time individual, both the Logos and the Sophia".¹¹ The problem is that if this line of thought is followed, the Christ could become other than human. Soloviev called the Divine Sophia the flesh of Christ, but this created a serious problem in that the Logos might become merely a spiritual being, who united with the Sophia as the matter to form the integral Christ. He recognised the danger and divided the

Sophia into 'divine' and 'creaturely' parts. The divine part of Sophia was equal to the humanity of Christ, the creaturely part was the equivalent of the World Soul. In another essay it is not the World Soul, but the Church. Clearly he was struggling with mystery and the answers were not entirely satisfactory.

It is urgent to rediscover the Divine Sophia, sacred knowledge, to experience again in contemplation the "long loving look at the Real", or what Huxley called "perennial philosophy", because our times have witnessed the loss of any transcendent referent for human existence.

By way of a postscript to these briefest of notes on Soloviev, it is worth noting that in his visionary story "*Three Conversations*," which is a vision of the last days of the world and the appearance of the anti-Christ, Soloviev portrays the anti-Christ establishing his power over the masses of men and women through a beauty of sorts: through displays of power wrought by illusion and technology. His anti-Christ resembles Simon the Magician of the Acts and of Christian pseudepigrapha. But this is only an appearance of beauty. Behind the illusion is the abyss and the deepest hatred for mankind.

V

Florensky

Florensky is a relief from the neo-Platonist platitudes in the representation — materiality debate, but his radically anti-Aristotelian position is *neither* pre-Socratic nor oriental. It also owes nothing to oppositional voices in Western thought; voices such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Swedenborg. Florensky's thought is based on the icon, even so is his faith, which is to say upon the liturgically expressed faith of the Orthodox Church. For Florensky, the existence of the icon is itself "proof of the existence of God". Experienced within the art of arts, the Eucharistic liturgy, there is no longer a question of learning about God, but of receiving him and being converted in Him. For this reason Florensky once exclaimed "there is Rublev's *Trinity*, therefore there is God".¹²

He considered a work of art to be a living organism, a "never-expiring, eternally brimming stream of creativity. With Kandinsky he proposed that art is a 'living being', possessing its

own active creative powers to form the spiritual atmosphere.¹³ For Florensky, art exists at the ontological level and not merely at the psychological. Being ontological, its function is to reveal new and previously unknown reality. As Florensky declared:

The artist does not himself invent the image, but only removes the covering from an image that already exists, supramundane and eternal; he does not put paint on canvas, but, as it were, clears away the alien patina, the overpainting of spiritual reality."

Therefore, the goal of art is the transformation of reality in such a way as to reveal its essential foundations¹⁴ which are revealed and encountered through the power of the symbol, the next significant concept in Florensky's thought. With Herman Hesse he would agree that

Every phenomenon on earth is a symbol, and every symbol is an open gate through which the soul, if it is ready to do so, can penetrate to the depths of the world, where you and I, day and night, become one.

The symbols which transform reality such as to reveal its essential foundations are the many aspects of Sophia which we encounter in the created world, but Sophia herself, the single deep root of existence is spiritual beauty, the incorruptible, first created beauty. Sophia is the spiritual principle in the creaturely world and in man which makes them beautiful. Florensky made it very clear by declaring that "*Sophia alone is the essential beauty of all creation; the rest is mere trumpery*".

Sophia is the first and most subtle product of God's activity and is a focus of the creative energy that fertilises art. Sophia participates in the life of the Triune God, in the deepest communion with divine love while she is closely connected with the second divine Person in whom she acquires creative power. In man Sophia shines through as the image of God, mankind's original beauty.

In Florensky's theology the theme of Sophia as beauty returns again and again. Sophia is:

the true adornment of the human being which penetrates through all his pores, shines in his eyes, flows out of his smile, exalts in his heart in ineffable joy, is reflected in his every gesture, surrounds him in moments of spiritual uplifting with a fragrant cloud and a radiant nimbus, makes him 'higher than the world's union', so that while remaining in the world he becomes 'not of the world,' becomes supra-worldly ... Sophia is Beauty.¹⁵

As such, Sophia is virtually coterminous with the aesthetic. Florensky describes both Sophia and the aesthetic of being as "*a certain energy pervading the whole of being, almost identical with spirituality, and virtually eluding formalisation ...*"¹⁶ At this point it is crucial to be reminded that spirituality is not some ethereal, purely spiritual realm. The spiritual expresses itself only in matter. Therefore, sensually received symbols do not conceal or obscure *spiritual essences* but, on the contrary, reveal them.

For this reason Florensky was convinced that there is no being without "an aesthetic face", "nor should there be a discourse about being that does not itself participate in being". Every text therefore has an aesthetic aspect. Likewise, every act has not only a cause and effect, but an aesthetic.¹⁷ In the same way that Christ declares that the kingdom of God cannot be forced by the wise or the clever, but only by the little child, the simple, the lover, knowledge of the Truth is possible only through what Florensky calls "the transubstantiation of man, through his deification, through the acquisition of love as the divine essence", through a real change in the essence of man. Love is a real merging of the subject and the object of knowing, and it is the touch stone of Truth, whose splendour is Beauty. In the created universe, love is objectively perceived as beauty, a beauty which manifests divine love for the world. For Florensky, beauty is expressed most of all in religion. God is precisely the Highest Beauty, through communion with Whom everything becomes beautiful. Beauty is understood as Life, Creativity, as Reality.

VI Bulgakov Again

In moving to a conclusion, let us turn again to Bulgakov on the subject of Sophia and Beauty. He believed that Sophia has personality because Sophia is not only an object of the Divine Love. She is herself an "answering love". As such she is a special hypostasis of *another order* appearing at the beginning of a new creaturely, multi-hypostaticity which is in a Sophian relation to deity.

Bulgakov examined Genesis in a Sophian light and concluded that the "heaven and earth" of Genesis refers to the Sophian archetype of the whole creation. Once 'without form and void' the meonic earth is penetrated by the rays of Sophia, Sophia like a sun of being. Every such created entity is shaped and caused by her. She contains the "ideative seeds of all things". The root of their being is in her. Finally, how does one come to know Sophia and to recognise and participate in the Sophianity of the world? It is by 'mystical intuition' by a mystical leading that is revealed directly to everyone according to the measure of his or her mind. This knowing is the stream of sacred knowledge, a sacred river flowing "*in caverns measureless to man, down to a sunless sea*". This explains why it is that when human beings contemplate the absolute, they have similar ideas and experiences.

However, Bulgakov gives a central place to the Church in his Sophianic vision. For him the Church is the soul of the soul of the world in which the corrupting individualism resulting from the fall is healed. In the atmosphere of the Church's love and in her sacraments collectivism no longer conceals conciliarity and the process of divinization goes on apace. In the Church the manifestation and operation of Sophia are especially clear. The Church has a crucial role in fostering human unity and in manifesting the Sophianic beauty of the creation. For Bulgakov, under the influence of Dostoevsky and through him of Soloviev, underlines the place of beauty in creation and salvation. The beauty of something is its "Sophian idea shining forth in it" and every created thing, including the creation itself, has a Sophian idea which imparts true being and induces an erotic yearning in its material basis, a yearning to be transformed.

Like the Sophia and the Church, Beauty is all-unifying.¹⁸ As the force of unceasing yearning of all that is for its Logos, for life eternal, Beauty is the inner law of the world, a world-organising, cosmo-urgic force. It holds the world ... and in the fullness of time, with its final victory, beauty 'will save the world'. It seems to me that the contribution of these three Russian philosopher-theologians takes Christian art a long way towards refining the sources of its inspiration in the timeless "Light [which] is beautiful beyond all fragmentation, beyond form; [which] is beautiful in itself, and through itself makes beautiful all that appears". Christian art can only be reborn when, acquiring the Holy Spirit, it returns in a deeply contemplative spirit to the creative, Sophianic canonical forms which manifest the "intelligent light", the light of Tabor.

The Sophia Tradition: A Dramatis Personae The Sapiential Current in Christianity does not equal Gnosticism

Paul

Justin the Martyr (c.100-c.165)

Hermas (o Poimhn c.140-c.155)

Clement of Alexandria (140-220)

Origen of Alexandria (185-253/4)

Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-c.395)

Gregory Nazianzus (329-389)

Augustine (354-430)

Dionysius the Areopagite (c.500)

John Scotus Erigena *De divisione naturae* (c.864-866)

Hugh of St Victor (1096-1141)

Richard of St Victor (d.1173)

Raymond Lull (c.1235-1315) *Doctor Illuminatus*

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64)

Hildegard *Sibyl of the Rhine* (1098 -1179)

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Meister Eckhardt (1260-1327)

Henry Suso (c.1295-1366)
 Johann Tauler (c.1300-61)
 The Cloud of Unknowing (1300's)
 The Lady Julian (c1342-post.1413)

Duns Scotus
 Bonaventure
 Aquinas

Gemistus Plethon (1355-c.1450)
 Marsiglio Ficino (1433-99)

Jacob Boeme (1575-1624)

Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) *Der Cherubische Wandersmann*

Cambridge Platonists:

Benjamin Whichcote (1609-83)
 Ralph Cudworth (1617-88)
 Henry More (1614-87)
 John Smith (1618-52)

Martines de Pasqually
 Claude Saint-Martin
 Joseph de Maistre(1753-1821)
 Fabre d'Olivet
 Honé Wronski

Freidrich Oetinger
 Jakob Obereit
 Karl von Eckartshausen
 Novalis (1772-1801)
 Friedrich Schelling
 (1775-1854)

Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)
 John Hutchinson (1674-1737)
 Isaac Newton (1642-1727)
 Franz von Baader (1765-1841)
 Antonio Rosmini-Serbati (1797-1855)

Ivan Lopouchine
 Alexander Labzine

Vladimir Soloviev(1853-1900)
 Pavel Florensky(1882-1937)
 Sergei Bulgakov (1870-1944)

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