



Andrew Louth

## Theology of Creation in Orthodoxy

### Abstract

This article starts from the celebrated controversy over creation between (then) Dr John Zizioulas and Philip Sherrard that took place in the pages of *Synaxi* in the years 1982 to 1984. Each presented sharply conflicting understandings of the theology of creation both claiming to be Orthodox; little resolution was reached in the exchange of letters to *Synaxi* that followed. Zizioulas laid stress on the gulf between the uncreated God and creation, implicit in the doctrine of creation out of nothing; Sherrard, in contrast, interpreted the ‘nothing’ out of which God created the cosmos as, in some way, an aspect of himself, so there is no gulf between God and his creation, rather he is profoundly present to it -



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‘everything that exists is holy’. The conflict between Zizioulas and Sherrard reflects a controversy over creation earlier in the twentieth century between Fr Sergii Bulgakov and Fr Georges Florovsky: Zizioulas’ stance being prefigured in Florovsky, Sherrard’s in Bulgakov. The Bulgakov–Florovsky conflict is traced back to their very different attitudes to the currents of esoteric thought, popular in Russia religious thought of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, that flowed into the doctrine of sophiology. Both sides of the dispute make valid points about the Christian doctrine of creation, which are not beyond being reconciled, though the currents of thought that lie behind the two sides are likely not reconcilable, but represent radically different idioms of theology, that can illuminate each other.

### Keywords

Zizioulas, Sherrard, Bulgakov, Florovsky, creation, Sophiology

## 1 Introduction

In 1982 in the Greek theological journal, *Synaxi*, John Zizioulas, then still a layman and Professor of Theology at Glasgow University, published an article, ‘Christology and Existence: the dialectic of created and uncreated and the dogma of Chalcedon’.<sup>1</sup> This article provoked some correspondence to which Zizioulas replied. A little later Philip Sherrard took part in the discussion in a letter, published in *Synaxi* eighteen months after Zizioulas’ original article,<sup>2</sup> which provoked a lengthy response

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<sup>1</sup> *Synaxi* 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 9–20.

<sup>2</sup> *Synaxi* 5 (Winter 1983), pp. 67–8.

from Zizioulas, published in the next issue of *Synaxi*.<sup>3</sup> This exchange has been published twice in different English translations: one by Elizabeth Theokritoff in a three-volume collection of articles from *Synaxi*,<sup>4</sup> the other by Norman Russell, included in the second collection of Zizioulas' articles, *Communion and Otherness*.<sup>5</sup> Both translations appeared independently in the same year, 2006, the collection in *Synaxi* being slightly longer, as it included Zizioulas' initial response to (unnamed) critics, as well as the original article, Sherrard's letter, and Zizioulas' response to Sherrard, which is all that is contained in *Communion and Otherness*.

In this paper we shall look at the dispute between Zizioulas and Sherrard (though it is evident that Sherrard's concerns were shared by other readers of *Synaxi*), but then relate it to broader issues in relation to the understanding of creation in Orthodox theology, primarily in the last century.

## 2 John Zizioulas and Philip Sherrard

Who were the two protagonists? Oddly, in an English context, it is perhaps Philip Sherrard, the Englishman, who needs more introduction than the Greek theologian and churchman, John Zizioulas! Zizioulas has become well known in the English-speaking world, and the Western world more generally, largely through his involvement in the Ecumenical Movement; moreover, he was for thirteen years Professor of Systematic Theolo-

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<sup>3</sup> *Synaxi* 6 (Spring 1984), pp. 77–85.

<sup>4</sup> *Synaxis. An Anthology of the most Significant Orthodox Theology in Greece appearing in the journal Σύναξη from 1982 to 2002*, 3 vols. (Montréal: Alexander Press, 2006), I, pp. 23–61.

<sup>5</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2006).

gy in Glasgow before in 1986 being ordained bishop and appointed Metropolitan of Pergamon, a titular see attached to the Œcumenical Patriarchate. Philip Sherrard is, I suspect, much less well known nowadays, and insofar as he is known it is less as a theologian than as, with Edmund Keeley, one of the principal translators of the great Greek poets of the twentieth century: Kavafy, Seferis, Elytis, and others, on whom he has also written several books. From the end of the 1950s, he mostly lived in Greece, where he died in 1995. He was also involved, with Kathleen Raine and others, in establishing a journal called *Temenos*, which sought to recover a sense of the sacred in the great religious traditions of the world, a sense lost, they maintained, in modern secular society. As a theologian, he was deeply concerned for the way in human beings were laying waste the planet and was one of the earliest to write, passionately, on ecology. He was also the principal translator of the *Philokalia*, the collection of Byzantine ascetic and mystical texts, that is probably better known now than at any time in the past. But that must do by way of introduction: if you want to know any more, then I suggest that the easiest way of doing that would be to consult my latest book, published this summer, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: from the Philokalia to the present!*<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1 Zizioulas on Creation

Let us begin by summarizing the main points of Zizioulas' article. He begins in a recognizably 'existentialist' vein by insisting that the dogmas of the Church are not just abstract positions held to be true, but are concerned with life, with fundamental questions of existence. He then turns to the Chalcedonian defi-

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: from the Philokalia to the present* (London: SPCK, 2015), pp. 230–46, pp. 361–3 (bibliography).

nition which speaks of the union in Christ of divine and human natures without division and without confusion. By the divine is meant the ‘uncreated’ and by the human the ‘created’: the Chalcedonian definition is about the union in Christ ‘without division’ and ‘without confusion’ of the uncreated and the created. The first question then is: what is the existential meaning of uncreated and created? Zizioulas deals with this by presenting a contrast between what he calls the view of Hellenism and the Christian view. Creation, he maintains, has no place in the Hellenistic view, which sees the world as eternal, and sees the question of creation as really to do with the fashioning of a kosmos out of chaos, a process wrought by the divine, but not fundamentally what Christians mean by creation. As he puts it, ‘Creation by the Christian God is in its essence an *ontological* act, an act that constitutes another being; while for the god of Plato it is in essence an *aesthetic* act, giving form to a matter which pre-exists’ (p. 25).<sup>7</sup> It follows from this that the ‘presupposition of ancient Greek thought’ was ‘an organic and unbreakable bond between god and the world’. This destroys what Zizioulas calls a ‘dialectical’ relationship between God and the world: they are yoked together by necessity. The Christian notion of creation—encountered for the first time in Christian writings in St Paul—presupposes an ‘ontologically absolute beginning’—‘something like an *event* which *happens* for the first time’, as Zizioulas puts it (p. 26).

The Christian notion of creation is concerned to preserve this dialectical relationship between created and uncreated. To this end, there is, in Christian usage, no difference between μη εἶναι and οὐκ εἶναι: a relative denial of being and an absolute denial of being. Whether it is said that creation is ἐκ μη ὄντος or ἐξ οὐκ

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<sup>7</sup> Quotations from Theokritoff’s translation in *Synaxis*; page reference given in brackets.

ὄντων, what Christians mean is that creation is from ‘nothing’ that is ‘*ontologically absolute*’ (p. 27).<sup>8</sup> I don’t want to sprinkle my account of Zizioulas with too many notes of doubt, but I cannot help here remarking that the collapse of any real distinction between μή and οὐκ is not, as Zizioulas seems to suggest, for the purposes of expressing a notion of radical nothingness, but simply a matter of the development of the Greek language, and the way in which in the prayers of the Divine Liturgy affirm creation out of nothing by using both negative particles to govern εἶναι and its derivatives is better seen as an illustration of how deeply rooted the notion of creation out of nothing is in the prayer of the Church. From all this Zizioulas goes on to insist that what we see in the development of the doctrine of creation out of nothing is the acknowledgment by the (Greek) Fathers (Zizioulas has nothing to say about the Latins) of the Hebrew understanding of God as one ‘quite provocatively arbitrary, who has mercy on whom He will have mercy (...) and who is not answerable to any Logic or Ethics’ (p. 27). This means that it is ‘not *being* that has the final word in ontology (...) but *freedom*’ (p. 27). It follows that ‘*this world could absolutely have not existed*’ - a notion incomprehensible to the ancient Greeks, Zizioulas maintains.

This provides the background for Zizioulas’ treatment of the dialectic of created-uncreated. The world need not have existed; it is not eternal. From this it follows that ‘for us, existence is a *gift of freedom*; it is *grace*. Creation and grace are thus synonymous’ (p. 28). This gives our existence an ‘entirely particular quality’: ‘our consciousness of the being - ontology - becomes *eucharistic* in the deepest sense of the word’. Secondly,

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, on that page, Zizioulas says that the Fathers speak of creation ἐκ τοῦ μῆδενος. I can’t recall ever having come across that phrase which would be the Greek version of the Latin *creatio ex nihilo*.

‘[e]xistence is constantly threatened by death’ (p. 29). ‘Absolute nothingness, the non-being which is a precondition of the created, is not automatically removed by existence, but constantly pervades and suffuses it’. He refers to Athanasios and affirms, with him, that ‘the *nature* of the created is mortal’. ‘The threat of death is the threat of nothingness, of absolute nothing, non-being - of a return to the state prior to creation’. Zizioulas refers to Heidegger’s notion of *Sein zum Tode*, ‘being-unto-death’. This is what we are ‘biologically’. He goes on to rule out various ways of overcoming death: belief in the immortality of the soul, some sort of human means of transcending death (legal or pietistic, as he puts it). ‘Death is endemic to createdness, and cannot be overcome by any effort of possibility belonging to created being itself’ (p. 30). We should be indignant at the threat of death, and not become reconciled to it: ‘The dialectic of created-uncreated preserves this indignation in the human consciousness, because it sees existence as a gift worthy of gratitude and affirmation; a gift that, precisely because it is grace and freedom, cannot possibly exist of itself’ (pp. 30–1). ‘Rage, rage, against the dying of the light’: Zizioulas does not quote Dylan Thomas’ words, but he might have done.

The overcoming of the dialectic of created-uncreated is what the Chalcedonian definition is about. It is overcome through the union of the uncreated and created in Christ ‘without division, without confusion’. The union ‘without division’ means that the created is brought into intimate union with the uncreated; the created can ‘bridge the gulf that inevitably results from createdness and commune constantly with something outside itself’—through love. Union ‘without confusion’ means that the dialectic between the uncreated and the created remains, for otherwise existence would not be a gift of freedom. Ἀδιαφρέτως enables love; ἀσυγχύτως preserves freedom. As Zizioulas puts it, ‘By uniting created and uncreated “without confusion” and

“without division”, Christ conquered death in a victory which is not a compelling fact for beings, but rather a possibility to be won only through freedom and love.’ He goes on, ‘This victory was brought about at His Resurrection, without which one cannot speak of salvation, since the problem of created being is *death*’ (p. 32).

The apprehension of what the Christological dogma reveals is something that can only take place in the Church. In an ecclesiological sense, as Zizioulas puts it, this dogma has become a mode of existence: through the Church and pre-eminently in the celebration of the Eucharist, each member of the Church is freed from the necessity of his biological hypostasis, ‘is united with the other members in a relationship of unbroken communion, which is the source of the otherness of each person, of his true identity’ (p. 33). In the Church we are born again: ‘[i]n order to escape this “fate” of created being, we need a *new birth*; a new *mode of existence*, a new *hypostasis*’ (p. 34).

As I have already remarked, this article of Zizioulas’ provoked controversy in the pages of *Synaxi*. Before Sherrard’s letter was published in *Synaxi*, Zizioulas had already begun to respond to his critics. He singled out two issues he regarded as ‘substantial’: the question of the relationship between Hellenism and Christian dogma, and the issue of death and its existential meaning (pp. 37–46). I don’t want to develop his response now, save to note that as he seeks to defend himself he draws on St Athanasios and the great Russian theologian of the emigration, Fr Georges Florovsky, under whose supervision he had written a thesis on St Maximos the Confessor.

## 2.2 Sherrard’s Criticism of Zizioulas

In the brief letter Philip Sherrard wrote that was published in *Synaxi* (pp. 47–9), he made four points of criticism. First, if one



affirms creation ‘out of nothing, “from things that were not”, *ex nihilo*’ (p. 47), what is this *nihil*, this nothingness, out of which everything emerged? Does it not mean that from all eternity there existed God and nothingness, so that ‘[w]ithout the nothingness, which is something outside God, God could not have created’. In other words, ‘God is not absolute and His freedom is not unrestricted...’ Secondly, Sherrard takes issue with Zizioulas’ assertion of the radical contingency of the world: the fact that, ‘being created, it could have not existed’ (p. 48). He makes two points: first, the strikingly anthropomorphic conception that lies behind Zizioulas’ finding a reason for God’s creation of the world; secondly he asks what it would mean to say that God had a creative power which he did not exercise. Thirdly, he addresses Zizioulas saying that in order to escape death and annihilation, the human must in some way go out of itself and commune with the uncreated: there must, Sherrard argues, be something within himself that enables him to transcend himself—there must be something uncreated within the human. Fourthly, Sherrard questions Zizioulas’ rejection of the immortality of the soul, because the soul ‘is not eternal, but created’, and raises the issue of the angels, presumably both created and immortal.

### 2.3 Zizioulas’ Response

Zizioulas’ response to Sherrard is substantial (ten pages in the English translation: pp. 51–61). Mostly he restates his position. The most important clarification, it seems to me, lies in his response to Sherrard’s third point, that there must be something in human nature that is akin to the uncreated, if the human is to go out of himself into God. Here, Zizioulas makes a distinction between person and nature: *qua* nature, there is nothing in the human that is commensurate with God, but *qua* person, through

personal relationship we can freely respond to God's love with a love that is indeed uncreated. Our biological hypostasis is completely determined and earthbound, and there is nothing that it is capable of that can provide even an analogy for our relationship with God. Zizioulas explicitly, and repeatedly, rejects any kind of analogy between human erotic love and divine love. But a new hypostasis, 'mode of existence', is conveyed to us in baptism and the life in Christ in the Church, a relationship no longer bound by necessity, but characterized by freedom.

I don't know what you have made of all this so far. I have tried to be clear and concise—and that has not been an enormous problem, as all the contributions are brief themselves. I could proceed by trying to bring the two protagonists into dialogue, but I am not going to attempt that, simply because it seems to me that what we have here is a *dialogue des sourds*, conversation of the deaf. It strikes me as extraordinarily interesting that Sherrard was hardly able to see what Zizioulas was driving at: something matched by the similar failure on Zizioulas' part to divine what lay behind Sherrard's criticisms. It is not because they, either of them, were in some way obtuse, nor even that they had very little in common. Zizioulas' academic background was in patristics (though mostly ecclesiology, in his published works at least), and as a translator of the *Philokalia* Sherrard was profoundly familiar with fundamental aspects of the patristic vision, but, nevertheless, they seem to me to have very different presuppositions, something like what R.G. Collingwood had called 'absolute presuppositions'. They could have made common cause over the ecological problems facing humanity, though Philip Sherrard, a pioneer in this field, was dead before such concerns became fashionable - and anyway they would have spoken in very different idioms.

## 2.4 Sherrard on the sacredness of the created cosmos

Let us continue by looking more deeply at Philip Sherrard's vision of God and the cosmos. In 1992, less than a decade after his letter to *Synaxi*, he published a book, *Human Image: World Image. The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology*, which for a time was fairly widely read. It was published, not by a theological press, nor by an academic press, nor by an Orthodox press, but by a small literary press, or poetry press, the Golgonooza Press. This book was a clarion call, drawing attention to the way in which scientific ways of thinking had destroyed any human sense of the sacredness of the cosmos, and in the ecological crisis, and other ways, we were reaping the whirlwind. The name, Golgonooza, recalls Blake and his similar criticisms of the intellectual presuppositions that held sway in his day. The last chapter, 'Notes towards the restitution of Sacred Cosmology',<sup>9</sup> is mostly about creation, and concerned to reject the doctrine of creation out of nothing - or, at least, suggest that it is deeply misleading, as it is usually understood - and set forth another way of understanding the relation of the world to God.

Sherrard begins by asserting that the doctrine of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Creation are not unrelated; rather they deeply coinhere with each other, are mutually implicated one with another. However, he argues that very quickly these doctrines became detached from one another, and although the councils of, especially, Nicaea I and Chalcedon sought to preserve their mutual coinherence, they did so in a way that was purely abstract, and so perhaps worsened the problem they sought to

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image. The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1992), pp. 147–81.

solve. Western scholasticism inherits this lack of coinherence, but the East is by no means innocent of it, and he cites the example of St Gregory Palamas (pp. 148–9) - criticism of whom, in some Orthodox circles, is like waving a red rag at a bull. The eternal begetting of the Son from the Father, the manifestation of the Son in the Incarnation, and the way in which the cosmos symbolically expresses the union of the spiritual and the material, the uncreated and the created: all these are different aspects of a fundamental reality. As Sherrard put it:

The doctrine of the God-man, therefore, refers not simply to the historical Incarnation of the God-man Himself; it refers also and equally to the theandric union between God and the whole created world, through man and in man. The Son is generated - and eternally generated - 'prior to all creation'; but in and through that generation the created aspect of the world appears as an immediate and inseparable consequence. The cosmogonic problem is linked with the generation of the Logos; but some of the effects of this eternal act of generation are manifest in a temporal and spatial form, and these effects constitute what we call creation. These two aspects of a single divine act - the generative and the cosmogonic - are clearly distinct, for the second depends on the first, and not *vice versa*; but they are also linked and inseparable. (p. 149)

Once this union is shattered, the several doctrines have little to do with each other; for example, the Incarnation is about the historical birth of a baby in Bethlehem and loses its cosmic significance, and, indeed, soon its historical significance - think of the notion propagated by Christmas cards. As the doctrines are alienated from each other, we are left with either 'Protestant a-cosmism [such as Pietism] or even... an anti-cosmism of pseudo-asceticism... closed to the sacral sense of sensible beauty' (p. 150). The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is understood to reaffirm this lack of doctrinal coherence, driving a wedge between

God and creation, the Incarnation being seen as some strange exception. Nothingness, as Sherrard put it in the letter to *Synaxi*, becomes part of an eternal dualism. We are far from what Jacob Boehme made of this doctrine: 'God created the world out of nothing, because He Himself dwells in nothing - that is, He dwells in Himself' (quoted on p. 155). Creation out of nothing becomes at best a defensive attempt to avoid the equally dangerous error of pantheism. The doctrine, bound up with creation *ex nihilo*, that God created in freedom a world that could well have not existed again ends in a fundamental dualism between God and man. One might summarize Sherrard's point by suggesting that he wants to restore the kind of vision often found among Christian Platonists, especially Dionysios the Areopagite, of creation as essentially theophany: manifestation of God. A little later on Sherrard says that what he is trying to do is 'to clarify here (...) the theandric significance of the world, and the theandric mystery (...) enfolded most synoptically and unambiguously in the historical Incarnation' (p. 163). Sherrard goes on to deal with the problem of evil, the problem that the world as we see it does not seem at all to be a theophany, a manifestation of God. Here he draws on St Maximos the Confessor, both his doctrine of the *logoi* or inner principles of creation and his doctrine that the natures of everything are inviolable, because created by God. He sums this up rather well in the following words:

(...) we must always remember, first, that in its essence everything is incorruptible, immortal and timeless, and that God can never cease from being the Creator of a creation which at each instant is reborn *from the beginning* in all its pristine innocence and beauty; and, second, that if we do not know what we are in our natural state, we will not realize to what, through our connivance in evil, we have debased ourselves (p. 173).

## **2.5 Zizioulas and Sherrard: provisional conclusions**

Why is all this so important, one might ask? It is not simply a matter of being accurate, but of correcting a vision of, and attitude to, the world which is having a dire impact on that world and our place in it. A further aspect, mentioned only in passing in the chapter I've been drawing on, because treated at length elsewhere in the book, is that the coinherence of Trinity, Incarnation and Creation has profound implications for our understanding of what it is to be human. For to be human is to be created in the image and likeness of God, and we need to recover this truth, rather than taking ourselves to be 'little more than two-legged animals whose destiny and needs can best be fulfilled through the pursuit of social, political and economic self-interest' (p. 3). We have degraded ourselves by building up a 'self-image and world-view' which have their origins 'in a loss of memory, in a forgetfulness of who we are, and in our fall to a level of ignorance and stupidity that threatens the survival of our race' (ibid.).

Although we find what we can only call an uncomprehending confrontation between Zizioulas and Sherrard, there are nonetheless points of convergence. I would draw attention to two, at least: first, a sense that Christian doctrine is concerned with life and existence, not abstract concepts, and secondly, a sense, perceived I think rather differently, of the profound centrality of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

## **3 Florovsky and Bulgakov: an earlier controversy over creation**

In this confrontation over creation between Zizioulas and Sherrard we find something that had already been played out in the

history of twentieth-century Orthodox thought among the thinkers of the Russian emigration. The great beasts of the early twentieth-century confrontation were Fr Georges Florovsky and Fr Sergii Bulgakov; it was part of, or was caught up in, the so-called Sophiological Controversy, which led to the condemnation of Bulgakov, fortunately for him by the two Russian jurisdictions to which he did not belong.

### 3.1 Bulgakov, nature and art - and Sophia, the Divine Wisdom

Let us introduce this earlier controversy by looking briefly at the way in which Sergei Bulgakov introduced his understanding of the created cosmic order in his first theological work, called *Unfading Light*, written on the eve of the Russian Revolution, while he was still in Russia and, indeed, about to be ordained to the priesthood after a long spiritual journey from the Marxism of his youth to the spiritual heritage of his ancestors. Later on in the volume, there is a long discussion of creation, which raises lots of the issues that we have encountered, briefly, in what we have seen so far: creation as *creatio ex nihilo*, what is meant by *nihil*, nothingness, a long discussion of μή ὄν and οὐκ ὄν, not at all assimilated as with Zizioulas, grateful borrowings from Jacob Boehme, and above all speculations about Sophia, the Wisdom of God, who was, according to the book of Proverbs, created by God as the 'beginning (ἀρχήν) of his ways for his works' (Prov. 8:22). However, right at the beginning of *Unfading Light*, as he introduces what it means to have a religious sense, Bulgakov draws on his diary for three 'calls and encounters' as he calls them - which must be a conscious reference to Solov'ev's famous poem, 'Three Encounters', telling of his three encounters with Sophia as a feminine figure. I want to quote extracts from each of these passages (which are quite extensive).

The first passage tells of his travelling in the twilight one evening within sight of the Caucasus. It was 1895, he was twenty-four, still an atheist, a Marxist.

Evening was falling. We were travelling along the southern steppe, covered with the fragrance of honey-coloured grass and hay, gilded with the crimson of a sublime sunset. In the distance the fast-approaching Caucasus Mountains appeared blue. I was seeing them for the first time... My soul had become accustomed long ago to see with a dull silent pain only a dead wasteland in nature beneath the veil of beauty, as under a deceptive mask; without being aware of it, my soul was not to be reconciled to nature without God. And suddenly in that hour my soul became agitated, started to rejoice and began to shiver: *but what if...* if it is not wasteland, not a lie, not a mask, not death but him, the blessed and loving Father, his raiment, his love? ... God was knocking quietly in my heart and it heard that knocking, it wavered but did not open... And God departed.<sup>10</sup>

But it didn't end there, Bulgakov goes on to speak of renewed experiences:

'[b]efore me the first day of creation blazed. All was clear, all became reconciled, replete with ringing joy... And that moment of meeting did not die in my soul; this was her apocalypse, her wedding feast, the first encounter with Sophia...'<sup>11</sup>

His experience of nature was something he could not make sense of 'without God'. Something was lodged in his soul; he

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<sup>10</sup> *Unfading Light*, trans. Thomas Allen Smith, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012, p. 8 (slightly modified) [French translation: *Age d'Homme*, 1990, pp. 22–3].

<sup>11</sup> *Unfading Light*, 9 [French translation: p. 23]



speaks of his 'first encounter with Sophia'. He remained a Marxist, but a doubt had been laid in his heart.

His second encounter a few years later (probably 1898) was rather different, aesthetic, but not this time of nature:

En route we hurry one foggy autumn morning to do what tourists do and visit the Zwinger with its famous gallery. My knowledge of art was perfectly insignificant and I hardly even knew what awaited me in the gallery. And there, into my soul peered the eyes of the Queen of Heaven approaching on clouds with the Pre-eternal Child. They had the measureless *power of purity and insightful sacrificial readiness*, knowledge of suffering and readiness for voluntary suffering, and the same prophetic sacrificial readiness was visible in the mature wise eyes of the Child... I was beside myself, my head was spinning, tears at once joyful and bitter flowed from my eyes, the ice in my heart melted and a kind of knot in my life came undone. This was not an aesthetic emotion, no; it was *an encounter*, new knowledge, *a miracle*... I was still a Marxist then and I involuntarily called this contemplation *a prayer*; and every morning, aiming to find myself in the Zwinger before anyone else, I ran there, 'to pray' and to weep before the face of the Madonna; there will be few moments in my life more blessed than those tears.<sup>12</sup>

The third encounter took place ten years later, in 1908.

Autumn, A lonely, forgotten hermitage in the woods. A sunny day and the familiar nature of the north. Confusion and impotence control my soul as before. Taking advantage of an opportunity I had come here in the secret hope of encountering God. But here my resolution definitively abandoned me... I stood through vespers unfeeling

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<sup>12</sup> *Unfading Light*, p. 10.

and cold, and after it, when the prayers ‘for those preparing for confession’ began, I almost ran out of the church, ‘went out, weeping bitterly’. In melancholy I walked in the direction of the guest house seeing nothing around me, and I came to my senses ... in the elder’s cell. *It led me there...* When the father saw the prodigal son drawing near, he made haste one more time to meet him. From the elder I heard that all human sins are like a droplet before the ocean of divine mercy. I left him then, forgiven and at peace, trembling and in tears, feeling myself borne up inside the churchyard as if on wings...<sup>13</sup>

The first and last encounters took place in nature, in the country: the first within sight of the Caucasus, the third in the forests of northern Russia. The second took place before Raphael’s Sistine Madonna in the Zwinger Gallery in Dresden. They were experiences, through nature and art, in which Bulgakov encountered what he identifies in the account of his first experience as Sophia. What is meant by this is revealed in another experience recorded in his diary, published in the *Autobiographical Sketches* after his death, this time after he had become a priest, and was passing through Constantinople, as it was then still generally called, in 1923, having been expelled from Russia on a so-called ‘Steamship of the Philosophers’, as one of the intellectuals of no use to the new Soviet State.

He found himself in the church of Hagia Sophia, then still a mosque, and as he looked round he reflected:

This is indeed Sophia, the real unity of the world in the Logos, the co-inherence of all with all, the world of divine ideas, κόσμος νοητός. It is Plato baptized by the Hellenic genius of Byzantium—it is his world, his lofty realm to which souls ascend for the contemplation of Ideas. The pa-

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<sup>13</sup> *Unfading Light*, p. 11.

gan Sophia of Plato beholds herself mirrored in the Christian Sophia, the divine Wisdom. Truly, the church of Hagia Sophia is the artistic, tangible proof and manifestation of Hagia Sophia—of the Sophianic nature of the world and the cosmic nature of Sophia. It is neither heaven nor earth, but the vault of heaven above the earth. We perceive here neither God nor man, but divinity, the divine veil thrown over the world. How true was our ancestors' feeling in this temple, how right they were in saying that they did not know whether they were in heaven or on earth! Indeed they were neither in heaven nor on earth, they were in Hagia Sophia - between the two: this is the μετὰξύ of Plato's philosophical intuition.<sup>14</sup>

For Bulgakov, any philosophical understanding of creation has to acknowledge the sacredness of the cosmos, the sense of God's abiding presence in it: this is the real meaning of his sophiology, and it was rooted in his own experience of returning from his youthful Marxism back to the faith of his ancestors. The vision is what is important; his philosophical account, based on his wide reading in the classical philosophers and the German idealists of the nineteenth century, is complex and convoluted, but for all its abstraction it is this experience that it is seeking to express.

### 3.2 Florovsky on Creation out of nothing

For Fr Georges Florovsky, the principal opponent of Bulgakov's sophiology, the doctrine of creation out of nothing is fundamental, as it is for his one-time pupil, Metropolitan John Zizioulas.

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<sup>14</sup> Prot. Sergii Bulgakov, *Avtobiograficheskie Zametki*, Paris: YMCA-Press, 21991, pp. 94-5 (English translation by Natalie Duddington and James Pain in *A Bulgakov Anthology. Sergius Bulgakov 1871-1944*, edited by James Pain and Nicolas Zernov, London: SPCK, 1976, pp.13-14).

Florovsky saw it as perhaps the central perception of Christian Orthodoxy as it took shape in the fourth and fifth century. He often discussed this doctrine in connexion with St Athanasios, for whom the doctrine was indeed fundamental in his opposition to Arianism; in one of his later articles - a paper given at the Third International Patristics Conference in Oxford in 1959, and published in 1962 - he explicitly discussed the Alexandrian saint's doctrine of creation out of nothing. He finds the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in Athanasios at the beginning, even before the Arian controversy, in his work *On the Incarnation*.<sup>15</sup> Here he finds a vision of an 'ultimate and radical cleavage or *hiatus* between the absolute being of God and the contingent existence of the World': the Being of God eternal and immutable, beyond death and corruption, while the created order is intrinsically mutable, marked by death, change and corruption. The whole creation is only held in being at all by the Word of God, who binds it together and provides coherence. The Word of God, being truly God, is absolutely transcendent over the world, but it is present to and active in the world by its 'powers'. So in summary Florovsky asserts that '[t]he world owes its very existence to God's sovereign will and goodness and stands, over the abyss of its own nothingness and impotence, solely by His quickening "Grace" - as it were, *sola gratia*. But the Grace abides in the world.'<sup>16</sup> What is striking about this mature presentation by Florovsky of his thought on creation is his emphasis on the way in which it is through the Word that creation comes into

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<sup>15</sup> G. Florovsky, 'St Athanasius' Concept of Creation', *Studia Patristica*, VI (1962), pp. 36-57; reprinted in *Aspects of Church History*, Belmont, MA, 1975, pp. 39-62, pp. 283-5 (notes). When Florovsky gave his paper, it was still generally accepted that *De Incarnatione* was composed prior to the Arian controversy; that view is no longer so widespread, but I think it has much to be said for it.

<sup>16</sup> Florovsky, 'St Athanasius' Concept of Creation', p. 51.

being and is sustained in being—the Word being present to and active in the created order by his powers: it is the Word, who became incarnate, who is at the centre of Athanasios' vision as Florovsky expounds it.

Much earlier on, Florovsky had discussed in greater detail his understanding of creation in an article, 'Creation and Creaturehood', originally published in 1928. Early on in the article, he notes that the notion of creation out of nothing was unknown, and indeed incomprehensible, to classical philosophy; it is a doctrine that grew out of reflection on the Biblical witness to God and the world (even though the doctrine is hardly expressed explicitly in the Scriptures themselves). It means that the universe, the world, might not have existed: it is contingent, it is not self-sufficient. It is also radically new:

In creation something *absolutely new*, an extra-divine *reality* is posited and built up. It is precisely in this that the supremely great and incomprehensible miracle of creation consists—that an 'other' springs up, that heterogeneous drops of creation exist side by side with 'the illimitable and infinite Ocean of being', as St Gregory of Nazianzus says of God.<sup>17</sup>

There is then an absolute contrast between the uncreated God and creation out of nothing. Florovsky illustrates this fundamental antinomy of creation in a vivid image drawn from a sermon by St Philaret, the great Metropolitan of Moscow in the nineteenth century: 'the creative Word is like an adamantine

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<sup>17</sup> 'Creation and Creaturehood', in *Creation and Redemption*, Belmont, MA, 1976, pp. 43–78, pp. 269–79 (notes); here p. 46.

bridge, upon which creatures stand balanced beneath the abyss of divine infinitude, and above that of their own nothingness'.<sup>18</sup> This new thing, creation, is manifested in creaturely freedom, which is more than simply the possibility of choice, but as it were enacts the fundamental choice faced by creatures, poised on Philaret's adamantine bridge, between the infinity of God and the infinity of nothingness. There is, as Florovsky puts it, the 'possibility of metaphysical suicide'- not self-annihilation, however, for creation is God's gift and is indestructible. Creaturely freedom is but a reflection of the Divine freedom with which the world was created, a divine freedom difficult to conceive, and easily compromised, as Florovsky maintains was the case with Origen, for whom God, as Pantokrator, needed the universe, *ta panta*, over which to rule. Not so, for the Fathers and Florovsky: God creates the world in radical freedom. In his later article, Florovsky quotes with approval a remark of Gilson's: 'it is quite true that a Creator is an eminently Christian God, but a God whose very existence it is to be a creator is not a Christian God at all'.<sup>19</sup> It is to God that the created order, through the human, who is a little cosmos, a microcosm, has to respond with its own freedom. It is through responding to God's presence in creation in his energies that creation moves towards its goal, which is deification, union with God.

Fr Georges Florovsky - and following him, Metropolitan John - sees the infinite gulf between Creator and creation bridged by God's creative Word, and this bridging is manifest in powers, *δύναμεις*, that abide in the created order. Florovsky reaches back to Athanasios, and finds there the distinction between

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<sup>18</sup> Svatitel' Philaret, Mitropolit Moskovsky, *Slova i Rechi*, vol. 2; 1825-1836 (Svyato-Troitsaya Sergieva Lavra, 2009), p. 277; my own translation. Florovsky quotes it: *Creation and Redemption*, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Aspects*, 41; the quotation is from Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1941), p. 88.

God's unknowable essence and the energies (or activities) through which he is known, which was raised to a dogmatic principle by St Gregory Palamas in the hesychast controversy of the fourteenth century; the distinction that for Palamas reconciles an experiential knowledge of God with his unknowability serves for Florovsky to reach across the gulf that exists between God and creatures drawn into being by his will out of nothing. (It is interesting to note that Zizioulas does not follow his mentor, Florovsky, here, and makes no use that I know of of the distinction between essence and energies in God.<sup>20</sup>) Florovsky insists that this means that 'Grace abides in the world'. As we have seen, it is precisely this conviction that creation is graced, and not godless, that was the inspiration behind Bulgakov's doctrine of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, his sophiology, and it is not difficult to see Florovsky's movement of thought in both the articles mentioned as directed against Bulgakov. Florovsky does this in a positive vein: by providing the desired reconciliation of God and the cosmos by a route that is, to his mind, perfectly Orthodox, and does not require recourse to the doctrine of Sophia, the Wisdom of God.

#### **4 Conclusions**

What conclusion are we to draw, or am I to draw, from all this? First of all, a remark about the links of lineage between, on the

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<sup>20</sup> Lack of interest in, or use of, the essence/energies distinction is striking in Metropolitan John, given the way it has been picked up by so many Orthodox theologians in the twentieth century. However, my impression is that his distance from Florovsky over this is not so great, as Florovsky himself, though acknowledging it, seems to me to make little use of the distinction either. I'm tempted by the thought that Florovsky appeals to this Palamite distinction in this context, because Bulgakov had referred to it in support of his sophiology.

one hand, Florovsky and Zizioulas and, on the other, between Bulgakov and Sherrard. The links between Florovsky and Zizioulas are evident: Zizioulas was Florovsky's research student and the parallels between their treatments of creation out of nothing are clear, indeed in his defence of his position in *Synaxi* Zizioulas appeals to Florovsky. What about links between Bulgakov and Sherrard? I doubt if they are at all direct. Sherrard *could* have read Bulgakov, who had been available in French in Andronikov's translation for decades, but I doubt if he did. He doesn't, I think, refer to him, and certainly makes nothing of him. The affinity between Sherrard and Bulgakov is of quite a different kind. First of all, they read and appreciated some of the same writers. In his 'Acknowledgement and Dedication', Sherrard gives a long list of writers to whom he feels himself indebted. They include several people important for Bulgakov, including Jacob Boehme and Vladimir Solovieff (sic), profound influences on Bulgakov (Sherrard also includes Florovsky, but not Bulgakov). Both Boehme and Solov'ev were indebted to the occult, or esoteric, tradition of early and later modernity. Indeed it has been suggested that one reason for Florovsky's rejection of sophiology is that he saw its roots in this esoteric tradition, something he found distasteful and a cause of anxiety.<sup>21</sup> I think it has to be acknowledged that some currents in modern Orthodoxy run close to modern esotericism. In my view, this is because they both have a similar analysis of the problems facing the modern world, so that they can, as it were, hear one another.<sup>22</sup> There is another affinity between Sherrard and Bulgakov, which is closely related to this. Both

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<sup>21</sup> See Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 132–58.

<sup>22</sup> I have a few lines on this in my *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: from the Philokalia to the present* (London: SPCK, 2015), pp. 342–3.



had a profound experience of the sacredness of the world: it was this sense that drew Bulgakov from his youthful Marxism back to Orthodoxy, as we have seen, and a powerful element in what drew Sherrard to Orthodoxy was the experience of Greece and its evocative landscape. In an unpublished essay, he says, 'no country is more haunted by history than Greece... no country in which the divine has dwelt so close to man, or in which its absence is more poignant'. And he goes on to say, 'The Greek land and seascape is perhaps more immediately symbolic than that of any other country; never has more been conceived in the realm of ideas than became actual there; no where else does the actual demand so immediately to be imaginatively recreated.'<sup>23</sup>

One might go further and point to the way in which when Metropolitan Kallistos speaks of the *Philokalia*, he traces this back to the experience, which he feels deeply, of the Holy Mountain of Athos. He speaks of the Holy Mountain as 'itself a sacrament of the divine presence', and quotes a remark of an Athonite elder, Fr Nikon, 'Here every stone breathes prayers'.<sup>24</sup>

So what is my conclusion? Let me leave you with two thoughts. Someone speaking about the theology of creation and Orthodoxy might well have considered some such title as 'The Theology of Creation: an Orthodox view/perspective'. But there are several: I have talked about two, not on the face of it easily reconcilable. Furthermore, it seems to me that there is nothing wrong with this; we need to develop an understanding of theology as embracing different idioms, each capable of expressing orthodox ideas (I am using orthodox without a capital, but one could well keep the capital). I can envisage ways of understanding Thomism and Palamism not as contradictory, but rather

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, p. 238.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, pp. 341–2.

using different idioms, both equally valid, neither absolutely complete.