Correspondences 14, no. 1 (2026): 137–142

Marcus Plested. *Wisdom in Christian Tradition: The Patristic Roots of Modern Russian Sophiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xiv + 288 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-286322-5. $105.00

Across the entire expanse of Eastern Christian theology since the fall of Byzantium, perhaps no single concept has a legacy more indeterminate, more cryptic, or more shrouded in controversy than Sophiology—the theological discourse concerning divine wisdom. Here one finds more questions than answers regarding everything from the role of philosophical knowledge in salvation to the Christian doctrine of the divine feminine.

Marcus Plested's *Wisdom in Christian Tradition* was written to address these issues and to answer the pressing question of whether Sophiology lies inside or outside the bounds of acceptable Church teaching. Attempts to address this question have typically taken one of two forms: the pious rejection of Sophiology outright as merely heterodox occultism, or the embrace of its esoteric strangeness as the grounds for forwarding a feminist/Gnostic critique of orthodox Christianity. Plested seeks to finally move beyond this stagnant dialectic by situating Sophiological discourse within the patristic and medieval sources upheld by Church tradition, while also providing a critically supportive interpretation of twentieth-century Sophiological writing. After performing his examination, this seasoned theologian offers his own solutions to the mysterious paradoxes constituting Sophiology. Such antinomies revolve around the energy-essence distinction, the presence of the uncreated God in contingent creation, the divine masculine and feminine, as well as the apparent conflict between divine immanence and transcendence.

In order to reconstruct an Orthodox Sophiology that also addresses the concerns of its twentieth-century form, Plested takes a seven-pronged approach. The first section gives an overview of the Sophiological movement and its

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associated figures, namely Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), and Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944). The next three sections cover, respectively, the roots of Sophiology in the Old and New Testaments, the Ante-Nicene Fathers, and authors spanning from Clement and Origen to St. Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers. The fifth and sixth sections cover the invocation of Sophiological themes across the late antique and medieval periods, in both the Greek East as well as the Latin West. In the final section, Plested forwards a "Re-Oriented" Sophiology situated within the whole of Christian tradition.

This powerful rehabilitation results in a Sophiological project which has all the promising qualities of its forerunners whilst remaining rooted in the very center of Christian Orthodoxy. This stunning genealogy offers a perspicacious treatment of the Christian divine feminine and the creature-creator distinction, while overturning the dominant conception of Sophiology as something fringe or heretical. The resulting vision frames Sophiology as something that pious critics and detractors are not only compelled to consider but obligated to accept.

When he begins his examination, Plested first covers the legacy of Vladimir Soloviev, Fr. Pavel Florensky, and Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. He distinguishes them primarily on the basis of the degree to which their Sophiological projects situated themselves in the work of the saints, the scriptures, and the early Church Fathers. The thinker whose concept of Sophia is least rooted in the soil of Eastern Orthodoxy is Vladimir Soloviev, who situates his work in sources both internal and external to Church tradition. Rather than embrace German Idealism and esotericism as a preferred source, like Soloviev, or sheepishly downplay its influence, like Florensky, Bulgakov openly critiques German Idealism and seeks to assert his Sophiology solely on the basis of tradition. Plested notes that it was really Bulgakov who gave Sophiology the Orthodox grounding it needed, since he went "far beyond both Florensky and Soloviev in the extent and depth of his engagement with patristic treatments of the theme of wisdom" (36).

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Plested situates this Bulgakovian move in its historical context. In a period when Russian elites were fascinated with German Idealism, organizations like the secret "Lovers of Wisdom" circle sought to build an authentically Russian philosophical culture. Prince Vladimir Odoevsky and the poet Dmitri Venevitinov organized this particular group around replacing spiritually benighted French Enlightenment thinking with a fundamentally numinous, organic metaphysics. They drew primarily from Schelling and believed that the arts and poetry granted access to metaphysical truths unavailable to empirical reason. Bulgakov's emphasis on a tradition-centered Sophiology was preceded here by Ivan Kireevsky, an occasional member of the "Lovers of Wisdom" circle, who had reportedly been "surprised to find in the Church Fathers everything that had captivated him about Schelling" (23).

Plested generally intertwines the German Idealist and ecclesial bases for Sophiology, questioning the notion that the two can be neatly divided. More will be said on this shortly, but first it is necessary to cover his most useful schematization: the fourfold notion of S0–S3, used to classify Sophiological insight.

Mentions of wisdom take such varied meanings across Christian and Western esoteric literature that confusion becomes inevitable. Plested schematizes references to wisdom in the following manner: S0 refers to wisdom as a purely human thing—wisdom in its colloquial usage. S1 refers to wisdom drawn from encounters with life and the created order. S2 wisdom refers to the divinely guided inculcation of talent or knowledge and the educative process of formation (*paideia*) that gives rise to insight and intuitive understanding. Finally, S3 wisdom is presented no longer as the object of knowledge but "as an active divine subject or hypostasis calling humans to herself (and she is undoubtedly a 'she')" (71). Sophiology is most famously associated with this last category.

This novel and valuable schema allows for the classification of the varied references to wisdom present in the historical record, providing key conceptual tools for scholars and seekers alike. Plested uses it to effectively track the

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development of Sophiology through the centuries, concluding that it ought to be understood as a polyvalent reaction to Anglo-Saxon modernity. While modern, Sophiology is itself anti-modernist. It seeks to reject the divide between reason and revelation that gave rise to the increasing exclusion of God from nature, culminating first in Descartes, followed by Deism, and finally in secular or atheistic naturalism. However, Plested avoids a standard cliché so rampant in Eastern Orthodox literature: polemicizing against the West with unsophisticated, broad-stroke analysis. Perhaps most remarkable about this book is his historiographical blending of Western European and Russian sources, expressed most clearly in his trailblazing sixth chapter on Sophiology in the Latin world.

To my knowledge, there has never been an extended treatment of the Latin West's Sophiological thinking. Most Sophiological writing tends to disregard the West and Latin theology due to its rationalistic, Aristotelian nature. Plested lays out a short but tantalizing genealogy to demonstrate an alternative view. His broad historical examination spans Alcuin's commission of the *Missa de Sancta Sapientia*—a special votive mass—to transcultural figures like John Scotus Eriugena, who goes to great lengths explaining how it is that divinity mediates between itself and creation—a chief Sophiological concern. Plested sharply observes that Eriugena is "the principal conduit for . . . the emergence of modern Russian Sophiology" because Eriugena impacted Soloviev's greatest German influences by inspiring "later Christian Platonist mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, and indeed the functionally pantheistic Idealism of Schelling and Hegel" (202). In this, he subtly problematizes the notion that German Idealism lies wholly outside the bounds of ecclesiastical tradition.

He goes on to perform a stunning analysis of St. Hildegard von Bingen, claiming she had an indirect influence on the German Romantic and Idealist movements via her monastic epigones. German philosophical trends are of course precisely what gave rise to Sophiology upon their reception in Russia by Soloviev and others. Hildegard's visions depict a *Sapientia* understood as

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the energetic activity of God in creation, representing prophets, Mary, and contemplation itself as various colors adorning a divine woman. Her visions stand out as a clear example of Plested's S3 category of wisdom discourse. Soloviev and company never cite Hildegard directly, on account of her obscurity in the Christian East, yet all parties are in candid agreement: Sophia seems to stand primarily for the divine immanence and activity within creation.

By tracing the role of wisdom in the rational structure of creation, Plested even rescues Aquinas from Bulgakov's charge of being unsophiological and critiques the latter for this claim. Plested's most salient critique of the Russian Sophiologists is that they rejected Latin discourse on divine wisdom, despite the fact that Latin sources most clearly state that divine wisdom is identified chiefly with the simple divine essence rather than with a person like the Son. Given that this is a central plank of Sophiology—essential to avoid wisdom's reduction to the logos, the Holy Spirit, or a discrete divine energy—Plested claims it was a mistake for Bulgakov to view Latin sources so negatively.

Plested concludes by offering his own attempt at reconciling the Sophiological paradoxes that have defined the trajectory of this strange and powerful strain of Russian esoteric theology. For Plested, "God is wisdom according to essence, hypostasis, and energy. God is wisdom in his unknowable and transcendent essence; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are essential wisdom—one wisdom" (241). Additionally, creation is the manifestation of divine wisdom, the eternal ideas for creation corresponding to the uncreated divine energies sustaining and underpinning the world, whose soul is Sophia herself, the bridge between the created and the uncreated. Plested argues that the separation of nature from divine wisdom is what gives the world its spiritual aimlessness, environmental destruction, materialism, global neoliberalism, totalitarianism, and dialectics of opposition. In contrast, Sophiology theologizes about everything that makes the world brilliant, artistic, and knowable, marrying incarnational theology to the principal insight of German Idealism—that the finite is the vehicle expressing the eternal rather than its opposite.

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Thus, Plested's work stands as an attempt to invite Sophia back home from cold Russian exile—from the periphery of the Christian world back to its center. It is clear that he wishes to invite along with her the whole world's wisdom, and he makes this evident through citations spanning both the Greek East and the Latin West. His methodology does not in any way foreclose participation from the Orient either but rather provides a framework that makes further Sophiological investigation possible in places where it has not occurred before. This points to Sophiology's potential to integrate gender, culture, and global *Wissenschaft* into a new universal project modeled after Byzantium and Constantinople. Plested chooses for the cover art the interior of the Hagia Sophia, a center of the world where Asia, Africa, and Europe are one. His book is like the Church of Holy Wisdom's marble. Both express the living memory of a time when the Christian contemplative life was not tied to a geographical domain but was understood as a universal noetic horizon.

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