

## Article

# Emerging Religious Consciousness—A Cosmotheandric Understanding of Reality in the Light of Sophiology of Some Russian Theologians towards an Eco-Theology

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**Abstract:** Intercultural theology is increasingly a major subject matter of 21st-century scholarly inquiry. This results in an interreligious discourse and encounter at different levels. However, gone are the days when the aim is to identify or even to fuse certain overlapping magisteria. A linguistic-cultural approach takes us beyond mergers or grand unified theories. To speak of reality as a whole is not to talk about the whole of reality. *Creatio continua*, the radical newness of each moment and phase unfolds in unpredictable ways. The ecological crisis of planet earth has forced all responsible researchers to engage with the Anthropocene by establishing space for a common earth religion. Through *ressourcement*, it appears that the sophiology of theologians of the Russian Silver Age (e.g., Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky) can open up a vista in the spirit of *aggiornamento* to a meta-religious approach recognising the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularised religious identities and so belong in different ways too, with, and in God. In the end, sophiology is a form of progressive Christianity that puts together philosophy and faith by promoting an ecological public theology that is concerned about raising society's awareness about creation as material nature.

**Keywords:** eco-theology; sophiology; Russian Silver Age; public theology; cosmotheandric understanding; meta-religious experience; metatheism; ecodomy; wisdom



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## 1. Introduction

The relatively unknown adjective “cosmotheandric” in the title is borrowed from Raimon Panikkar (1993)<sup>1</sup> in his seminal work, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging religious consciousness* followed up and revised by *The Rhythm of Being* (2010) which is based on his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh of 1988<sup>2</sup>. This nomenclature helps us fuse the horizons of different cultures and traditions, trying to come to grips with a unified understanding of reality without sacrificing differences. However, contends Panikkar,

[w]e must resist the temptation into which many Western scholars fall today when they speak of a “global perspective” or of a world vision, which is a residue of a colonialist, or monocultural, mentality, even though today it is called scientific. Instead, it is a matter of a healthy pluralism and of an interreligious perspective for our diachronic age. (Panikkar 2019, p. 149)

Cosmotheandricism indicates the intertwining of the “cosmic”, the “divine”, and the “human being”, providing a lens on a multi-layered understanding of reality, i.e., *κόσμος*, all matter, from the heaviest metals to the lightest molecules, which make up everything from universes to quarks; *ἄνθρωπος* all biological life leading up to the climax of the evolution of human beings with profound potential and atrocities; and *Θεός*, all metaphysical thinking has its roots in God. Yet, the cosmotheandric vision does not gravitate around a single point; neither God nor man nor the world forms a single point of gravity and are, in this

sense, polycentric. God's trinitarian immanence is not primarily a doctrine but contrasting facets of reality to which different religions (read cultures) bear witness. The trinitarian structure of reality presumes differentiation and diversity:

Panikkar feels that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be treated, as it often is, as recondite teaching about the inner life of God cut off from the rest of life and experience. Rather, so potent and rich a symbol it is that it invites further deepening and development, preferably by intercultural and interreligious communication. (*Foreword*, by Joseph Prabhu in Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 253)

In the title, we have alluded to a meta-religious approach instead of an "inter-" or "intra-religious" one because this approach transcends the traditional boundaries of space and time, which leads to a "Theology Without Walls" as Christopher Denny (2016) epitomises it.<sup>3</sup> This approach acknowledges that there are various paths of coming to grips with reality and experience subsequently deification or *θεωσις*. "Theosis is recognition of the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularized religious identities and so belong in different ways too, with, and in God." (Denny 2016, p. 370). This is the movement from knowledge to encounter, from *I-it* to *I-Thou* (Buber).

It is impossible to know the essence of God; we can only know who God is. Pope John Paul II says it rightly in his Apostolic Letter, *Oriente Lumen* (Pope 1995):

Thus is born what is called the apophatism of the Christian East: the more man grows in the knowledge of God, the more he perceives him as an inaccessible mystery, whose essence cannot be grasped. This should not be confused with an obscure mysticism in which man loses himself in enigmatic, impersonal realities. On the contrary, the Christians of the East turn to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living persons tenderly present, to whom they utter a solemn and humble, majestic and simple liturgical doxology. But they perceive that one draws close to this presence above all by letting oneself be taught an adoring silence, for at the culmination of the knowledge and experience of God is his absolute transcendence. This is reached through the prayerful assimilation of scripture and the liturgy more than by systematic meditation. (Pope 1995, § 16)

The path of union with God is not an academic pursuit but based on applied revelation, i.e., wisdom. Panikkar uses the word "ecosophy" to describe the wisdom of the earth as a subjective genitive, i.e., not our personal view of what the earth is, but the earth's wisdom, which humans grasp when we engage (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 9414). This leads to unveiling or discovering of the real. God's wisdom is, therefore, revelation removing the mystery. Panikkar is a philosopher of wisdom in the sense of seeking a tripartite way to engage with pluralism and practise dialogue.

The *raison d'être* of this paper is that the Russian Orthodox theology's sophiology is not only typological of a cosmotheandric experience but has the nature of both *ressourcement*<sup>4</sup> and *aggiornamento*<sup>5</sup> towards a meta-theistic understanding of reality. The authors of this paper apply the prism of Russian sophiology to support a vista for a holistic and integrated understanding of reality, i.e., a cosmotheandric view of reality. Despite living in a world full of suffering, vulnerability, and death, evolutionary biology and ecological sciences are reluctant to face natural suffering. Celia Deane-Drummond (2021) contends that "it can still make sense to speak in the theological language of Sophia, wisdom, both creaturely and divine. When read through New Testament lenses, Sophiology points to a new creation that provides a basis of joy filled hope rather than a false optimism that overlooks present troubles" (Deane-Drummond 2021, n.p.). Sophia is an ontological foundation of all material things illuminated by the world of ideas (cf. Obolevitch 2019, p. 136). Panikkar (2010, *loc.* 1111) is of the opinion that a sophianic approach tries to overcome the insufficiencies of both the historical (piecemeal) and the rational (formal) approach.

## 2. Sophiology as Eco-Theology and Public Theology

Solovyov<sup>6</sup>, Bulgakov<sup>7</sup>, and Florensky<sup>8</sup> are not the initiators of Russian sophiology. The interest in Sophia among 19th-century Russian theologians began with Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), who was not a theologian like any of the three but a fully-fledged theosophist and esotericist. Blavatsky became known worldwide due to her *Isis Unveiled* (Blavatsky [1877] 1891), a book that contains numerous references to Sophia and her multifaceted aspects. One of the most striking features of Blavatsky's Sophia is her connection to what Blavatsky considers "the belief of the genuine primitive Christians" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 183). Sophia appears to be a distinct entity that became united with Christos, whom Blavatsky calls "the perfect" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186), immediately after the birth of Jesus. In this context, Sophia is depicted as "wisdom and spirituality" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186). Still, her becoming one with Christ in Jesus reveals that each name represents an entity of individual self-standing: Jesus, Christ, and Sophia. They are, as it were, distinct hypostases if we were to use the language of traditional trinitarian theology. Blavatsky's system is profoundly gnostic in the sense that the many characters she alludes to appear to be emanations of some sort under the powerful influence of the demiurge. According to Blavatsky, the demiurge seems to have become incarnate as Christ in the man Jesus; as Christos, the demiurge seems to have "entered into the man Jesus at the moment of his baptism in the Jordan" as Sophia because before that specific moment in time, "he had been completely ignorant of his mission" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186). Moreover, when Jesus was crucified, both Christos and Sophia "left his body and returned to their own sphere" (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186). Before the crucifixion, however, Sophia gave Jesus "perfect knowledge" and "perfect Gnosis" which he communicated to his apostles, the tiny cluster of people who were able to receive this special gift (Blavatsky [1877] 1891, p. 186).

Blavatsky may have sparked the flame of intellectual interests among Russian sophiologists, but none of the three, Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky, fully agreed with her theosophic-esoteric approach. Many did not entirely support her gnostic perspective; in fact, Solovyov (her contemporary) became highly critical of Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, which he considered "obscure" and "disjointed" (Kornblatt 2009, p. 32, n.63). Suffice to say that Solovyov and Blavatsky did not appreciate each other's works. For instance, while Solovyov accused Blavatsky of obscurity, Blavatsky pointed out his alleged incompetence for not knowing English well enough to read her works nor paying sufficient attention to her arguments (Blavatsky 2018, pp. 2–3). Bulgakov, however, although not a gnostic esotericist but a Christian theologian, was nevertheless quite open to magic and the Kabbalah, while Florensky was highly knowledgeable of Western esotericism and theosophy in general, as demonstrated by the sources that he used to produce his *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Rosenthal 1997, pp. 19–20). Regardless of the actual connections between Blavatsky, on the one hand, and Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky, on the other, what counts is their shared interest in the reality of creation as nature and matter. This feature makes all four crucial for ecosophy (deChant 2009, p. 262). Their references to Sophia as a divine reality or spiritual entity which connects the divine to the natural reality of material creation turn their works into genuine exemplifications of eco-theology. For the intellectual history of ideas, what matters is not that Sophia was portrayed gnostically as an emanation or theologically associated with Christ, the Spirit, or even God the Father. What counts in this respect is that, throughout the works of Blavatsky, Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky, Sophia emerged not only as a unifying theme for underscoring the crucial importance of creation in religious ecology but also as a critical concept for defending the vital role of nature in eco-theology.

## 3. Solovyov's Sophia

Vladimir Solovyov's perspective on Sophia originates from a series of three personal and very intimate experiences, which he details in his prominent *War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ* (Solovyov 1990). He reveals that he had three visions of a woman he describes as blue-eyed and engulfed

in an aura; the woman approached him and addressed him in a Moscow church, the British Museum's Reading Room, and the desert outside Cairo. Regardless of whether one believes these visions to be true or not, it is crucial to notice the personal and experiential character of Solovyov's depiction of Sophia and the fact that Sophia manifests itself within the world, not outside it. It is equally true that, for Solovyov, Sophia is Divine Wisdom, and it works within the world, within the materiality and naturalness of the universe as personal experiential vision (Kornblatt 2009, p. 4). It seems that in making use of Sophia described as a woman who appears to him in visions, Solovyov builds a metaphysical religious philosophy based on his Western readings and an apparent affinity to Hegel, especially concerning his "sense of history" (Kline 1974, p. 160). In this respect, Sophia is the embodiment of human spirituality because, on the one hand, it manifests itself within history and the world<sup>9</sup>.

This image resembles the traditional Christian incarnation of God's Logos in the human person of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it becomes "incarnate" in the form of a woman. In other words, Solovyov's Sophia is God's Wisdom that goes through a process of incarnation as a human being.

However, and this aspect is of paramount importance for one's perception of Solovyov's thought, Solovyov himself is not so interested in Christian theology but in Christian theosophy (probably borrowed from Jacob Boehme). In describing the image of Christ, the pattern he uses to present his image of Sophia, Solovyov mentions that there are two distinct types of "unities" within the image of Christ: first, the Logos, and second, Sophia. Solovyov sees the Logos as theoretical unity while Sophia is presented as a practical unity. The Logos points to the Absolute and Sophia to its contents more concretely. In this respect, Solovyov appears to be a faithful follower of Kant and his distinction between the noumena and the phenomena or between the transcendent and the immanent aspects of reality (McClymond 2018). Yet, he rejects the priority of ethics over metaphysics. The genuine force of the moral principle rests on the existence of absolute order (cf. Nemeth 2022). While the Logos is the intention, more concretely, Sophia is the materialised intention. The two are consubstantial; they exist as one despite their duality, so they live together inherently, without the possibility of separation. In Solovyov's words:

In the divine organism of Christ, the acting, unifying principle, the principle that expresses the unity of that which is, is the Word, or Logos. The second kind of unity, the produced unity, is Sophia in Christian theosophy. If we distinguish in the Absolute in general between the Absolute as such (that which is) and its content, essence, or idea, we will find the former directly expressed in the Logos and the latter directly expressed in Sophia, which is thus the expressed or actualized idea. And just as an existent being is distinct from its idea but is at the same time one with it, so the Logos, too, is distinct from Sophia but is inwardly united with her. (Solovyov quoted in Kornblatt 2009, pp. 7–8)

Although tempting, he does not identify Sophia, the divine wisdom, with the second Absolute or Logos. Christ unites the Logos and the Sophia in himself since he is the eternal Godmanhood (Copleston 1986, p. 224). Even if Solovyov uses the imagery of the God-Man, as reflected in the person of Christ, to describe Sophia, the result appears to be an anthropological reality connected to the divine. Alexandre Kojève notices that, in Solovyov, Sophia is "eternally united with God" although this entity is never separated from God (Kojève 2018, p. 4). Her comparison to humanity also reveals the predominantly anthropological constitution of Solovyov's Sophia. Thus, Kojève (2018, p. 40) notices that, according to Solovyov, "Sophia is perfect humanity, ideal, forever contained in the complete divine being".

Moreover, Sophia cannot be compared exclusively to God, and her existence is not that of Christ in traditional theology, in the sense that she is far from the classical sinless constitution of God's incarnate Logos in the person of Christ. Concretely, in Solovyov, Sophia is described as "fallen humanity", which contains "the essence of the empirical world", the very "anima mundi" in traditional theology, is presented as "creation" (Kojève

2018, p. 40). In other words, Solovyov's Sophia is representative of the human being and the universe in its entirety. In this respect, it departs further away from the image of Christ as God-Man; Sophia is neither perfect nor unchanging. On the contrary, Sophia is eternal in the temporal existence of the world, which also means it is "becoming", a reality that is constantly changing in the sense that it progresses towards something (Kojève 2018, p. 53).

Judith Deutsch Kornblatt's (2009, p. 7) observation that Solovyov's thought is not theological but rather theosophical is shared by Arthur Versluis (1994, p. 158), who emphasises that Solovyov studied Boehme, among other Western esotericists. The theosophical influence on Solovyov was tremendously powerful because, as Versluis points out, his image of Sophia is trans-religious and encapsulates a range of notions that are seen by "the Hindus as Maya", "the Greeks as Idea", and "the Hebrews as Sophia" (Versluis 1994, p. 158). Versluis expands his analysis of Solovyov's Sophia by insisting that these three religious patterns reflect three fundamental characteristics of Sophia as "magic" wisdom, "ideal" wisdom, and "incarnate" wisdom (Versluis 1994, p. 159). These three features reflect Solovyov's intention to move Sophia from the transcendence of the theological God to the immanence of the theosophical God, which is but an image of the human being and its spiritual aspirations for transcendence. In this respect, Sophia seems to be Solovyov's instrument. He presents traditional Christianity with its metaphysics of the absolute otherness of God into a more scientific light, reportedly more suitable for the nineteenth century's rationalistic inquiries. Soloviev subsequently postulated a synthesis of science, theology, and philosophy in the shape of integral knowledge or so-called free theosophy (Obolevitch 2019, p. 77).

Thus, Zenkovsky (1953, p. 481) reveals that Solovyov always regarded traditional Christianity as "inadequate", which means that the classical image of the Logos as God-Man was equally problematic. Sophia was Solovyov's way to tune orthodox Christianity and its image of Christ as the God-Man to the rationalistic essence of "contemporary knowledge and philosophy" (Zenkovsky 1953, p. 481). Solovyov's point thus is not to identify Sophia with the traditional Christ of Christianity (who is said to be in heaven) but with the mundane spirit and actuality of the world, which makes his Sophia a theology of creation. Therefore, according to Christopher Ben Simpson, Solovyov's Sophia "has to do with the interrelation between God and creation" because it is "eternally oriented towards creation"; it is also "the eternal creation-ward-ness of God" (Simpson 2020, p. 165). But since Sophia manifests itself within the immanence of the world, it can be argued that it is intrinsically human and profoundly anthropological because it represents the idea and actuality of the entire universe (or creation, in traditional terms). This consideration alone allows Solovyov's Sophia to be described as a concept of eco-theology; in this respect, Sophia reveals Solovyov's profound concern for creation, for the world, a preoccupation that is framed today by eco-theology, as suggested by Celia Deane-Drummond (2008, p. 63). Solovyov argues against positivism and moves away from a dichotomy of "speculative" (rationalist) and "empirical" knowledge in favor of a post-philosophical enquiry that would reconcile all notions of thought in a new transcendental whole (Nemeth 2022, n.p.).

#### 4. Bulgakov's Sophia

"Bulgakov is a theologian of Wisdom" (Nichols 2004, p. 605). One of the books that propelled Sergius Bulgakov to fame was *The Comforter* (Bulgakov 2004), which presents the Holy Spirit resembling Solovyov's Sophia. Kornblatt (2009, p. 4) shows that Bulgakov was influenced by Solovyov, a clear indication that Solovyov's Sophia must have shaped Bulgakov's perspective on the same. Concretely, Bulgakov imitated Solovyov's qualified adherence to Kant's methodology (Sergeev 2000, p. 4). Still, instead of writing about Sophia from the perspective of the Western esotericism's theosophical tradition, Bulgakov appears to have preferred a more theological take on the subject. Concretely, unlike Solovyov's leaning towards theosophy, Bulgakov built his image of Sophia by getting closer to Patristic theology. Both Solovyov and Bulgakov had experiential perspectives on Sophia, but while visions influenced the former, the latter seems to have been smitten by beauty. Thus,

Bulgakov moved from his initial Marxist economic pursuits (Nichols 2004, p. 599) to theological interests (Copleston 1986, p. 204) because of two aesthetic experiences: one which revealed to him the beauty of creation as he was overwhelmed by a mountain scenery (Nichols 2004, p. 600) and another one that showed him the beauty of art as he saw a painting by Raphael (Nichols 2004, p. 602). In both cases, Bulgakov realized that matter can be transcended, and the reality of beauty extends beyond the world's naturalness. A third experience was much more dramatic, as the death of his four-year-old son defined it, but it played a key role in pushing him definitively into the realm of theology as he sensed that his child "still lived in the life of the Resurrection" (Nichols 2004, p. 602). These three personal experiences, coupled with his openness to Kant's take on traditional Christianity, turned Bulgakov into a theologian with a distinctively idealistic perspective on Christian theology in its Eastern Orthodox manifestation.

While Solovyov's Sophia is more anthropological, Bulgakov presents Sophia in terms that resemble the classical definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Thus, Bulgakov's Sophia appears to be consistently more "divine" than Solovyov's because he connects Sophia to the Father through the idea of divine substance or "ousia". Here is how Bulgakov writes about Sophia: "The Son then is the hypostatic self-revelation of the nature of the Father, or the hypostatic Sophia, the self-consciousness or hypostatization of the divine ousia of the Father; the Son is present before the Father as His Truth and Word, His knowledge of Himself in the Son" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc.* 992–993). Although Bulgakov sounds more theological than Solovyov's theosophical language, the former's influence by the latter sheds doubts on the actual interpretation of Bulgakov's Sophia. In other words, even if Sophia is presented in "hypostatic" terms, it is not a "hypostasis" *per se*, as the Son, but rather a "hypostatizedness" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc.* 2881), something that exists beyond the hypostasis of the Son. If this is true, it is logical to infer that Sophia exists not only as an external reality in conjunction with the Son but also as a different reality from the Holy Trinity itself. Sophia has more connections to creation, to the world than the world of the divine Trinity. As it exists in the three persons of the Trinity, Sophia is distinct from creaturely Sophia that is expressed in the created world. Therefore, God, extant and revealed as Trinity remains a hierarchy of unified persons (Heath 2021, p. 22).

In Bulgakov, as in traditional Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian theology in general, the world is distinct from God, but God is continuously reflected in the world. Consequently, one can argue that Bulgakov promotes a theology of creation or theology of nature and an eco-theology because the Spirit is inextricably connected to nature. In his words, the "Spirit is *natura naturans* which, through the word implanted in it, engenders *natura naturata*, or becomes it" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc.* 2950). These very few words are crucial for Bulgakov because they reveal his extreme preoccupation with the reality of creation to the point that he introduces the reality of the divine, as—for example—the Spirit, into the reality of nature itself. Thus, while traditional Christianity postulates the absolute ontological gap between God and creation, Bulgakov seems to infuse divinity into creation, but this exercise is merely symbolical. Paul Ladouceur notices that, in Bulgakov, symbols indicate the presence of the divine being within a created reality; for instance, the name of God is a symbol that not only points to God but also to the unity between God and the believer (Ladouceur 2019, p. 367) or between God and creation or between God and nature. It is clear that Bulgakov is so concerned about the reality of the world, or, in other words, the reality of nature is so crucial for him that the traditional doctrine of God is infused into his modernistic approach to nature.

It is as if God validated nature, the Spirit permeated creation, and the Logos gave life to the world; the world itself originates in God because of the "Spirit in the world in its extradivine divine aseity" (Bulgakov 2004, *loc.* 2951). However, even if the connection between God and nature is so evident through the mediation of the Spirit, it is still Sophia that keeps the world existing as nature, especially from the perspective of its continuous change. God does not change in traditional theology, but the world does change, and Bulgakov is not one's orthodox theology. His connections to modernity and Idealism force him to notice

the changing or progressive character of nature and the fact that God himself might be subject to change. While it might have been too much for him to plainly and openly argue in favour of the divine change, Bulgakov uses Sophia to connect both God and creation to the reality of change: “. . . Sophia, the organizing force that leads this world to Truth, and it, therefore, bears the mark of truthfulness, Truth as a process, as becoming” (Bulgakov 2000, p. 138). Indeed, Bulgakov does not say that God changes, but in traditional theology, God is described as Truth, and, in his thought, Truth does change via the mediation that is provided by Sophia. What Sophia does is symbolize the immutable God in a changing world, a static God in a progressive creation, and a faithful God in a truthful nature; in this respect, Bulgakov’s Sophia is an attempt to transform the traditional view of God as immutable Truth through the modernistic view of God as changing and progressive truthfulness. For instance, Celia Deane-Drummond (2021) notices that Bulgakov manages to transcend the hierarchical presentation of God as Godhead, and he does so via the instrumentality provided by Sophia. This very reality connects God and the world. This is what makes Bulgakov’s thought a sample of eco-theology: Sophia as a divine agent of change within a world which is in the process of becoming nothing else but Sophia itself. In Bulgakov, Sophia explains not what the world is but rather how the world is and who the world looks, especially considering his aesthetic component of conversion. Thus, David Cheetham (2020, p. 101) writes that “Bulgakov aligns Sophia with beauty”, and it is Sophia as the beauty that provides consistency to his aesthetic eco-theology. This is similar to Gregory of Nazianzus’s understanding of the Spirit’s inhabitation of creation.

### 5. Florensky’s Sophia

Famous for his *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Florensky 2004), Pavel Florensky presents Sophia in terms that resemble ecclesiology more than Christology, as it is in the case of Solovyov and Bulgakov. If Solovyov and Bulgakov Sophia are associated more with Christ, Sophia is depicted as a bride in Florensky (2004, p. 239). This image reminds us of the traditional notion of the church. The imagery of the bride helps Florensky ascertain the total dependence of Sophia on the Word of God because—as in conventional theology—Sophia is the bride of God’s Word. She has no independence of her own, but she is closely connected to God’s Word (Florensky 2004, p. 239).

Furthermore, Sophia’s ontology is dependent on God’s Word because she cannot exist on her own. Her very existence is postulated as anchored and originating within divinity itself. John Chryssavgis (2019, p. 83) notices that Sophia is “the uncreated beauty of God” in Florensky, making his description like Bulgakov’s and his sophiology another example of aesthetic eco-theology. Florensky is very clear about this aspect because Sophia is not merely an idea; it represents creation’s actuality. Without her connection to God’s Word, she remains a purely theoretical construct; but her actuality is given by her dependence and link to the being of God (Florensky 2004, p. 239). Sophia, in Florensky, is totally about creation; therefore, his thought is another sample of eco-theology, in line with Solovyov’s and Bulgakov’s; Sophia is the actualization of creation because she is endowed with power, the same power to create, which reveals her mediatory activity between God and creation. As far as Florensky (2004, p. 239) is concerned, Sophia explains traditional theology to the point that she is a sort of “missing link” between God and creation. Specifically, regarding the human being—which is traditionally described as the bearer of God’s image—Florensky states that Sophia is God’s very image in the human being. Here is how Florensky presents Sophia:

She is the Eternal Bride of the Word of God. Outside of Him and independently of Him, she does not have being and falls apart into fragments of ideas about creation. But in Him, she receives creative power. One in God, she is multiple in the creation and is perceived in creation in her concrete appearances as the idea person of man, as his Guardian Angel, i.e., as the part of eternal dignity of the person and as the image of God in man. (Florensky 2004, p. 239)

It is important to see here that, in Florensky, Sophia is a concrete reality, not a mere conceptual construct. Sophia overlaps with creation; Sophia is all creation in Florensky (2004, p. 37). Sophia is the actuality of creation; even more so, it is the actuality of the human being that builds a bridge between humanity and divinity. In other words, Sophia makes it possible for the human being to anchor itself in the reality of God as Trinity.

Nevertheless, Sophia and creation are not merely synonymous; Sophia is more than just a synonym of creation—it is the very root that allows creation to anchor itself in God. Copleston (1986, p. 226) interprets Florensky saying that Sophia mediates between creation and God, between humanity and divinity, actuality and idea/s. Sophia shows Florensky's concern for the entire creation; therefore, his sophiology is a sample of eco-theology.

The way Florensky sees creation is fundamentally integrative; creation exists as rooted in divinity. Therefore, he rejected Kant's distinction between transcendence and immanence. In Florensky, the reality is unified into an existence that includes both, and Sophia reveals the unity between God and creation, idea and actuality, which brings him closer to Hegel (Nichols 1999, pp. 58–59). Nevertheless, Florensky cannot resist distinguishing between creation itself and the “core” of creation, between the reality of the human being, for instance, and the very reality which sets the human being in motion, and this core engine is Sophia. Florensky's words: “If Sophia is all of creation, then the soul and conscience of creation, mankind, is Sophia par excellence” (Florensky 2004, p. xxii). The duality of Sophia is not synonymous with dualism; on the contrary, what Florensky wishes to explain here is that Sophia exists in two distinctive aspects: as divine and as creaturely. In other words, Sophia is both divine and human, both God-connected and creation-connected, and it is in this dual capacity she mediates between God and creation. This is why Florensky sees Sophia as the exact imprint of God in creation; it is what makes creation divine, what makes the whole universe a reality that originates in God (Florensky 2004, p. 251). Thus, Sophia is creation, Sophia is mediation, and Sophia is God; Florensky's Sophia makes creation meaningful by connecting it forever with God. This aspect reveals Florensky's eco-theology in conjunction with his emphasis on Sophia as inclusive of humanity in its capacity as a particularisation of the actuality of creation. Thomas Schipflinger, however, explains that Florensky's Sophia discloses the “spirituality of creation” and her “beauty”; hence, Florensky's sophiology is an aesthetic eco-theology (Schipflinger 1998, p. 399).

It is essential to realise that, in Florensky, Sophia is not a hypostasis, as the Logos, but one cannot exclude the possibility that it is presented as if it were some hypostasis. Sophia reveals God's love, so it may not be a divine hypostasis as in traditional theology. Still, it is a symbolic hypostasis of the divine because it permeates creation by connecting it to God's being. According to Teresa Obolevitch (2019, p. 103), by making this connection between God and creation employing Sophia, Florensky explains that God's being impregnates the reality of creation through “love, beauty, and harmony”. Thus, creation is rooted in the divine through the mediation that is provided by Sophia. This explains why Robert Powell (2000, p. 38) noted that, in Florensky, Sophia was “the root and pinnacle of the whole creation”. The concern for the whole creation is visible again here because Florensky's eco-theology should not be seen as exclusively connected to environmentalist problems; on the contrary, Sophia reveals Florensky's preoccupation with the whole of creation: its reason for being, its very substance, and its spirituality (Powell 2000, p. 38). Bruce V. Foltz shows that, in Florensky, Sophia is the life-giving reality that connects God and creation; it is through the mediation that is provided by Sophia that God gives life to the whole of creation.

In his Early Religious Writings, Florensky writes, “there can be no consistent world-view without a religious foundation; there can be no consistent life, a life according to the truth, without religious experience” (Florensky 2017, p. 25). Sophia, Foltz puts it, is a “symbol” that brings the “everything” of creation into the “one” of God; it is the reality that anchors the diversity of the universe is the reality of the divine (Foltz 2019, p. 82).



## 6. Conclusions

Panikkar shows his discontent clearly with theism:

I have been saying that theisms are inadequate, that they often contradict each other, although they may also be mutually complementary if we enlarge the horizon from which they emerge. I have also been suggesting that theisms as such do not exhaust the human ways to encounter the divine Mystery. The world of theisms has been a domain of great power. Theism has persisted for millennia and will no doubt continue to survive in some form. “Right” or “wrong” are inapplicable epithets here. The world of theism is a universe in itself, which selects its own criteria for judging what is right and wrong. Yet theisms no longer seem able to satisfy the most profound urges of the contemporary sensibilities both in the civilizations that first nurtured these theisms, and in others as well. The world of theism is not alone in facing religious problems, as well as vital metaphysical issues. In short, the divine Mystery remains a mystery. (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 4832)

We suggest the concept of meta-theism (openness to the notion that there are unfathomable depths behind an anthropomorphic God). Perhaps no two words than “ressourcement” and “aggiornamento” were used more frequently by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) to define the question regarding the nature and extent of the Church’s aim of renewal. First, the concept of ressourcement, regarding it as the questions that confront us big as life, makes it imperative to return to authoritative sources to meet the challenges of our time. Second, aggiornamento is essentially a question of a new and wider contextualisation to find new ways to rethink and reformulate the fundamental affirmations of faith to come to grips with reality<sup>10</sup>.

Wisdom or Sophia provides a vital cue to connect God as the Divine Sophia with the creaturely world and come to terms with the suffering and loss of our dispensation. This is rooted in the wisdom of the cross, the deep incarnation or the “shadow Sophia” (Deane-Drummond 2021, n.p.). Sergeev gives a concise conclusion where he states:

In other words, however far the world has fallen, it is always possible for the creatures to become saved, because the divine idea of creation, this wisdom of God or Sophia rooted in God’s will, is eternal and unchangeable, and serves as a guarantee for the ultimate goodness of every creature. (Sergeev 2000, p. 15)

The Russian sophiological tradition does not promote only religious ecology and eco-theology. Due to its complex range of meanings and intricate symbolism, Sophia may situate itself rather uncomfortably on the verge of Christian orthodoxy leaning towards heterodoxy and even heresy, or it may just make sense in a non-Christian religious context. Either way, however, Sophia does speak about religion, it does point to creation, and it does explore the reality of the universe in a way that may inspire people to investigate religion, theology, ethics, and other similar fields of inquiry leading to personal (even sacrificial) involvement in society and the public square (Tapley 2017, p. 50). In which case, Sophia—by its capacity to connect the spiritual divine and the material universe—may be a specimen of eco-theology and a foretaste of public theology. Paul S. Chung provides ample evidence of how Sophia is viewed in the Judeo-Christian tradition as pointing incessantly from God to creation:

Wisdom (Sophia) is begotten and brought forth before the beginning of the earth. God’s Saying is connected with the bringing forth of Sophia from within God’s self. In Proverbs’ account of the beginning, Sophia is poured out of the depths of God’s self. God’s being is the One who is concerning the Word and the Spirit. The inner life of God through the Word and Spirit (Sophia) is directed toward the world. (Chung 2010, p. 54)

If God demonstrates interest in the world, so should we, and this is the very essence of eco-theology as public theology. Subsequently, Denny states it aptly:

An inclusivist theology of religion departs from theological exclusivism in its willingness to afford revelatory value to other religious traditions, but insists that other religious traditions are at best a less adequate path for adherents to achieve the enlightenment and salvation offered in one's own religion. (Denny 2016, pp. 363–64)

In line with this insight, Paul Valliere (2000, p. 263) emphasises that sophiology is a new theology in “a new key”, but also a theology that “empowers progressive Christianity”. This means that sophiology is neither secularist nor traditionalist. Its progressive aspect lies in its delving into cultural creativity and cultural activity (Valliere 2000, p. 262) to open a middle way between metaphysics and history. In so doing, sophiology creates a progressive form of Christian thought that aims at serving the whole society, not only atheists and their secularist philosophy or practising Christians with their traditionalist theology. Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky did, alongside Blavatsky, provide a cultural and progressive Christianity that promoted the importance of creativity in the public square for the benefit of all human society. In the end, sophiology is a form of progressive Christianity that puts together philosophy and faith by promoting an ecological public theology that is concerned about raising society's awareness about creation as material nature.

Ressourcement is about revisiting, and *aggiornamento* is the challenge of a new and broader contextualization to find new ways to rethink and reformulate the fundamental affirmations of the (Christian) faith to more effectively communicate the Gospel. God, humans, and cosmos combined as an integrated approach are expressed in the concept of a cosmotheandric sophiology finding its ethical complement in *ecodomy*<sup>11</sup> (cf. Buitendag and Simut 2020, p. 2, as well as Rössing and Buitendag 2020, pp. 1–2). Panikkar set this task already at the Gifford Lectures:

Our task and our responsibility are to assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and, having made it our own, to allow it to grow. Life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once rupture and continuity. Life is creation. (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 416)

Cosmotheandric sophiology looks at the interrelations of the economy, ecology, theology, religion, life, and suffering where the emphasis is on an ontology of relations and processes rather than of substance in which the One is both grounding differences as well as emerging in and through them (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 271). The only feasible way out is an *advaitic*<sup>12</sup> approach of pluralism and interdependence. Panikkar was “painfully aware that the health of our natural environment and what we human beings do to it are all causally interconnected and interlinked” (Yusa 2017, p. 235). We desperately need the hope of the invisible.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Raimon Panikkar was born on 2 November 1918 in Barcelona, the son of a Spanish Christian mother and a Hindu father. Ordained a Catholic priest after being educated by the Jesuits, he earned doctorates in theology, philosophy, and chemistry between 1946 and 1961. Over a theological career that spanned almost half a century and encompassed dozens of published books, Panikkar probed both classic texts and contemporary societies in a synthetic quest for truth and cross-cultural understanding” (Denny 2016, p. 365).

- 2 See <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/trinity-and-theism> (accessed on 30 November 2021).
- 3 However, one should be careful with claims such as “theology without walls” (Christopher Denny) in the global context beyond the West. For it was the imperialist mission of Western Christianity that built rigid walls and raised conflicts among religions in East Asia where multiple religions co-existed harmoniously without walls before Western Christianity came in for millennia. This antagonistic reality in the Non-Western world requires Western theologians, first and foremost, serious reflection on the deep metanoia for the tragic missiological errors of Western Christianity, especially in the 19th-century, before saying any new theological idea for interreligious and intercultural peace and cooperation.
- 4 For a fine description of ressourcement see <https://ressourcementinc.com/about-ressourcement/about-the-name/> (accessed on 30 November 2021). Panikkar sees his task as follows: “My originality, if any, will be that of going to the origins—not to do archeology or to make anachronistic interpretations, as if the beginnings were always exemplary, but to perform the task of a latter-day hunter-gatherer, re-collecting life from the stupendous field of human experience on Earth since the days when our ancestors felt the need to consign their adventures to that mature fruit of language which we call script. This is our historical period” (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 404).
- 5 See Bishop Butler’s interpretation of the background of aggiornamento: <https://vatican2voice.org/3butlerwrites/aggiorna.htm> (accessed on 30 November 2021). Panikkar has his version too: “If rhythm were not the very Rhythm of Being, the order thus created would become a competitive chaos. If, however, Being itself is Rhythm, the order is ever new and does not follow a preexistent or preordained pattern. It is the creatio continua I mentioned several times. The ontonomy that is referred to is not the blind following of an absolute and immutable norm or nomos (law), but the discovery of the ever-new or renewed nomos of the one. The mentioned inter-in-dependence becomes an intra-in-dependence” (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 1824).
- 6 For the life and work of Solovyov see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Sergeyevich-Solovyov> (accessed on 30 November 2021).
- 7 For a detailed account of Bulgakov’s life and work see Evtuhov (1997). *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- 8 For a formal biography of Florensky see Pyman (2010). A more concise version is available on the web by Palini (2017) and the outline of these few biographical lines is taken from that. Available online: [http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altronevecento/articolo.aspx?id\\_articolo=34&tipo\\_articolo=d\\_persona&id=145#sdfootnote19anc](http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altronevecento/articolo.aspx?id_articolo=34&tipo_articolo=d_persona&id=145#sdfootnote19anc) (accessed on 21 September 2021).
- 9 Hans-Urs von Balthasar was very impressed by Solovyov’s writings on Sophia and the church: “While avoiding Soloviev’s sophiological language, the movement of purified sexuality which Soloviev advocated is very congenial to the thought of Balthasar” (Gawronski [1995] 2015, p. 222).
- 10 Echeverria Eduardo (2014, p. 192) pays qualified recognition to the Dutch Reformed theologian Gerrit C. Berkouwer’s interpretation of the Second Vatican Council with his “hermeneutics of continuity” as discussed in his book, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Berkouwer and Smedes 1965).
- 11 “The underlying concept is taken from 1 Corinthians 14:12 in the Greek New Testament, *oikodomé*, where it is used in reference to God’s household or total cosmology. Ecodomy looks at religious worldviews and norms but has a strong interdisciplinary research focus on aspects of global justice, human dignity, reconciliation, moral formation and responsible citizenship” (Buitendag 2019, pp. 5–6, See also Kok 2015, p. 3) for the linguistic reference: “The verb *οικοδομέω* occurs approximately 40 times in the New Testament. ‘According to Louw and Nida (1996)—who put the words *οικοδομέω*, *ἐποικοδομέω*, *οικοδομή* and *ἤς* f: in the semantic domain 74.15—in the NT these terms denote the following meaning: “to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved . . . to strengthen, to make more able, to build up.” The verbs *οικοδομέω*, *οικοδομεῖν* and *οικοδομή* (v) (noun) (1 Cor 14:12) denote the act of building or constructing or edifying, or the result thereof (a building/construction), whereas the noun *οικοδόμος* refers to the “builder of a house” or “architect” (Ac 4:11; cf. Lk 20:17)”. (Kok 2015, p. 3).
- 12 “The advaitic knowledge is knowledge of reality and not the abstract knowledge of a formal pattern of reality. This is why I spoke of advaitic spiritual experience: the awareness of relationship is not a secondary knowledge derived from the knowledge of individual things. It is a primary knowledge, a spiritual knowledge indeed, but knowledge after all. It belongs to the third eye” (Panikkar 2010, *loc.* 6083).

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