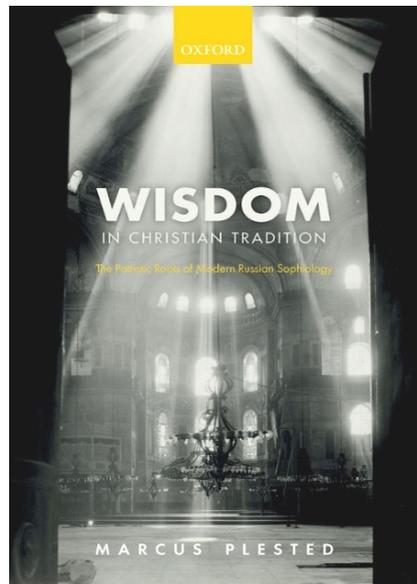


## Book Review:

**Marcus Plested, *Wisdom in Christian Tradition: The Patristic Roots of Modern Russian Sophiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.  
x + 274 p. ISBN 978-0-19-286322-5**

The Sophiology of Soloviev, Florensky, and Bulgakov has always had an ambivalent relation to patristic tradition. Soloviev frankly averred that his own sources lay primarily in the esotericism of authors such as Paracelsus, Boehme, and Swedenborg. Florensky, although clearly indebted to Soloviev, nonetheless made a determined effort to claim a patristic lineage for his own teaching about Sophia. This tendency culminated in Bulgakov, who (especially in his later works) repeatedly and emphatically claimed that his teaching about Sophia was in line with the best of the patristic tradition. In the present work, Marcus Plested undertakes to assess the accuracy of such claims. In the process, he offers an evaluation of both the strengths and weaknesses of Sophiology as seen from an Orthodox standpoint. The work concludes with a “framework for a re-oriented sophiology” that seeks to develop biblical and patristic teaching about wisdom in a way that is both grounded in Orthodox tradition and open to Sophiology’s legitimate insights.



After an introductory chapter on Sophiology and its critics (primarily Lossky and Florovsky), the bulk of the work consists in a detailed examination of wisdom as it is presented in the classical, biblical, and patristic sources. The study of the Greek Fathers is selective, as nothing is said of even such

prominent authors as John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Damascus, and Symeon the New Theologian. There is, however, an extensive treatment of the authors most invoked by the Sophiologists, including Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas. There is also a relatively complete survey of the Latin West up through the thirteenth century, including Augustine, Boethius, Cassiodorus, Eriugena, Anselm, Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux, and others. I confess that the principle behind these selections was not wholly clear to me. It would seem that in treating the Greek Fathers the focus is on those whom the Sophiologists regularly cited, whereas in treating of Latin authors the aim was to give an accurate sense of the Latin tradition as a whole. This is reasonable enough, but it leaves one wondering whether the Greeks who are not covered had anything important to say on the subject.

In any case, the historical survey quickly turns up a number of ways in which Sophiology is out of step with the patristic tradition of both East and West. One is its largely ignoring wisdom as a human trait, whether this be “merely” human wisdom or wisdom as a divine gift that can bring one into a participatory relationship with God. As Plested shows, a great deal of the patristic discussion of wisdom focuses on the virtues and various ascetic and spiritual disciplines as a means of becoming receptive to wisdom as a divine gift. He is surely right that this is a major lacuna within Sophiology. To repair it, however, requires merely an addition rather than an alteration to the existing structure. The same cannot be said of another major failing—the fact that the Sophiologists’ conception of divine Sophia as (in Bulgakov’s words) “the Godman before and beyond the Incarnation” has no real foundation in biblical or patristic sources. Plested finds Sophiology sharply deficient on this score: “rather than centering itself on Christ, Sophiology remains more in line with the classical philosophical notion of wisdom somehow ‘in between’ God and the world and associated with the realm of ideas . . . Somehow, *personification* of Sophia (as Lady Wisdom or the realm of ideas represented by the heavenly Aphrodite) has come to prevail over the *person* of Christ” (p. 97). This is an important point—indeed, to my mind, the most important made in the whole book. Assuming it is correct, Sophiology can only be seen as fundamentally unfit to serve as a framework for Christian theology.

That is not to deny, however, that it may offer important insights. Several of these emerge from Plested’s historical review. One is that Bulgakov was correct to insist that the Fathers by no means always identify divine Wisdom with the Son; sometimes they instead identify it with the Holy Spirit and sometimes equally with any of the three Persons. There is also abundant support for Bulgakov’s view that Wisdom can be understood as a divine energy, so that Sophiology is, to this

extent, in line with the teaching of Palamas and other advocates of the essence-energy distinction. Bulgakov identified Augustine's doctrine of divine simplicity (with its equation of the divine essence and attributes) as the reason why there is no "gap" or "in-between" in Latin theology whereby divine Wisdom could be anything other than the divine essence or one of the divine Persons. This, too, Plested finds to be correct. On the other hand, he gives credit to the Latin tradition for more fully appropriating the biblical imagery of Wisdom as feminine than did the Greek Fathers. Plested advocates more fully exploring this feminine dimension of Wisdom within a "re-oriented sophiology."

These conclusions seem to me largely correct, and Plested's treatment of the historical material is in general both well-informed and illuminating. Nonetheless, there are a few points at which I must demur. Several of these relate to the divine Ideas, or (in the Greek Fathers) the divine *logoi*. Plested says that for Dionysius, Wisdom (which, of course, is one of the names treated in the *Divine Names*) "corresponds" to the Ideas. This is imprecise at best, for Dionysius does not in fact speak of Ideas, either in *Divine Names* 7 (which Plested here cites) or elsewhere. It is instead to the *logoi* of *Divine Names* 5 that we must look for the nearest correlative in Dionysius to the Ideas, for it is they that serve as paradigms for creation. The *logoi* are not Ideas, however, but "divine and good acts of will," a definition that became canonical in the later tradition. The *logoi* thus have an active and voluntaristic dimension that is lacking to the Ideas. The difference is relevant because the Sophiologists equate divine Wisdom with the realm of Ideas, and Bulgakov faults the Greek Fathers for failing to say much about this realm. Dionysius and Maximus say quite a bit about the paradigms of creation, however; they just do so under the heading of *logoi*, not that of Ideas. All of this is surely worth discussing in any examination of the relationship between Sophiology and the patristic tradition.

A couple of other issues related to the Ideas and *logoi* also call for some comment. Plested includes among the *logoi* the "things around God" discussed by Maximus in a famous passage of his *Chapters on Theology and Economy* (I.48-50); in fact, however, *logos* is not mentioned in this passage, and the *logoi* and "things around God" are different concepts with sharply distinct lineages (some of which Plested himself relates). I am also puzzled as to why Plested says that for the Latin tradition the divine Ideas are "temporal (or perhaps pan-temporal) and created." It is true that Augustine and Eriugena speak of the Ideas as created, but they do so in a decidedly non-standard sense, which Augustine (in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*) immediately corrects to "begotten." Aquinas does not do so at all; nor do any of these authors understand the Ideas as temporal, unless one means by this that they have temporal effects.

I also found Plested's advocacy of a more feminine view of divine Wisdom somewhat problematic. He rightly applauds the Sophiologists for moving in this direction. At the same time, however, he dismisses as "outdated" their understanding of the feminine as "intuitive rather than rational and as all-encompassing rather than strictly focussed" (p. 239). Very well—but then what *does* count as feminine? The biblical sources that Plested primarily has in view, Proverbs 8–9 and Wisdom 7, also have a view of the feminine that is "outdated" by modern standards. Are they too to be dismissed on this basis? These are difficult and perhaps awkward questions. Still, without a willingness to face them squarely, to call for a more feminine understanding of divine Wisdom is little more than a pious gesture.

Finally, there is a passage in the program for a "re-oriented sophiology" at the end of the volume that I find puzzling. Plested writes, "As vessel and house of wisdom, the Mother of God is also to be identified with the Church as the body of wisdom incarnate and the pre-eminent means by which humans are incorporated into the divine life" (p. 242). This came as a surprise, for there is otherwise very little in the book about the Theotokos. The only substantial discussion is a summary of Bulgakov's view that she is the hypostasization of created wisdom, whereas the Holy Spirit is the hypostasization of divine Wisdom and Christ is the hypostasization of both. Even Bulgakov says only that she is a *personification* of the Church, however, not that she is to be *identified* with the Church. And in any case, no patristic texts are mentioned that would give support to Bulgakov's view. Since the book's aim is to assess Sophiology in light of patristic teaching, it is odd to find one of Bulgakov's more extravagant ideas here adopted wholesale (if that is how we should take this statement) without any argument or explanation.

These are all fairly minor quibbles. They by no means detract from the value of this learned and informative volume. We can be grateful to the author for shedding light on the extent to which Sophiology does, and does not, live up to its claim to represent the best of the patristic tradition.

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