

## **Abstract**

### *The Novgorod Sophia Icon and “The Problem of Old Russian Culture” Between Orthodoxy and Sophiology*

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This study will show that Florovsky's hidden polemic against Sophiology, and particularly his opposition to the sophiological writings of his mentor, Father Sergius Bulgakov, influenced his vision of Muscovite culture and the Novgorod Sophia icon. Florovsky embodied this hidden critique in a group of writings between 1926 and 1932-- a 1926 letter to Sergei Bulgakov, a 1928 article "Creation and Creatureliness," a 1930 article, "The Dispute about German Idealism," and the 1932 article, "On the Worship of Sophia the Wisdom of God in Byzantium and Rus." His famous 1962 article, "The Problem of Old Russian Culture" built from the 1932 interpretation of the icon. There he asserted that, like the Novgorod Sophia icon, Muscovy departed from the "existential approach to the problem of man" expressed in the great art of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century. Implicitly he saw the icon as a herald of Muscovy's self-conception as "political-cultural utopia in which the desire to achieve the "perfection, completeness, and harmony of Byzantine civilization," resulted in an "enormous synthetic effort was the most conspicuous sign and symptom of decline...." The first part of this article elucidates the critique of Sophiology hidden in Florovsky's writings between 1926 and 1932, and especially in his "Dispute about German Idealism." After exposing his hidden agenda, I describe how his analysis of the "illusory Sophia" in the Novgorod Sophia icon reflects his hidden critique of Sophiology. I then identify Florovsky's conception of the "true

Sophia.” I argue, that, if read in its own cultural context, the Novgorod Sophia icon embodies this “true Sophia,” as mediated through the poetics of the hesychast age. Rather than a symptom of stasis and decline, this icon’s innovations draw on the creative sources of Orthodox theology. Thus, the icon’s actual meaning invalidates the categories that Florovsky derived from his battle against Sophiology to explain Muscovy’s betrayal of the vigor of Byzantine civilization and descent into “intellectual silence.” Rather, the icon establishes the language in which Muscovite theocratic ideology will use Orthodox values to sanction the state.

Keywords: George Florovsky, Sophiology, Orthodox theology, humanism, intellectual silence, the Novgorod Sophia icon, German idealism, Sergei Bulgakov, hesychast poetics, Muscovite culture, Patriarch Philotheos, Dionysius the Areopagite, Byzantine civilization, Council of Trullo