Let’s get one thing straight. Bulgakov’s Philosophy of Economy is not about economics. It is a work of mysticism, and Bulgakov’s economy is closer to that of God than to that of Karl Marx or Adam Smith.

Bulgakov read Marx and Smith, but he also read Vladimir Solov’ëv and Pavel Florenskij, and he applied their notion of the Divine Sophia to economic activity. Bulgakov tells us that, in all its domains, human creative activity “partakes of the Divine Sophia” (p. 145). “Economy is sophic in its metaphysical basis; it is possible only because man belongs simultaneously to both worlds, to Sophia, and to empirical reality” (p. 146). “The Divine Sophia . . . ever soars above the world, illuminating it through reason, through beauty, through . . . economy and culture” (p. 145). “The economic process . . . always partakes of Sophia, for [it] is the effort to overcome nature by culture, to ‘humanize’ nature” (p. 147). Sophia “can be perceived only by means of revelation” (p. 155). And “only one path leads directly to Truth – the acceptance of the One who said of himself: ‘I am the way, truth, and life’; whoever partakes of life in Christ already partakes of life in Truth. He becomes a living member of the divine Sophia, the body of Christ”1 (p. 156).

If this is economics, it is a mystical economics. The Divine Sophia, which Solov’ëv calls “the realization of the divine principle, its image and likeness” (Lectures on Divine Humanity, revised and edited by Boris Jakim, Lindisfarne Press, Hudson, NY, p. 132) and which Florenskij calls “the Church in its heavenly aspect” (The
Pillar and Ground of the Truth, translated by Boris Jakim, Princeton, 1997, p. 253), is about as mystical as you can get. She comes out of the Old Testament and the Kaballah; Boehme, Jane Lead, and Solov’ëv had personal knowledge of her; she is somehow personified by the Mother of God; the old Russian iconographers painted her; she goes by the name “goddess” in the New Age literature. But just what is she, and why does Bulgakov need her?

Bulgakov’s main purpose in the Philosophy of Economy is not to formulate a philosophy of economy. It is to introduce a theory of Sophia; and this theory is later spun out by him, painstakingly, through many iterations, in The Unfading Light, in The Lamb of God, and in The Bride of the Lamb. Why does he need her? His theology is the most elaborate one ever produced by a Russian Orthodox theologian, and perhaps he needed a mystical concept to prop up this vast structure. She was his muse, and starting in 1912, he could not write if she was not by his side. Toward the end of his life, Bulgakov turned away from Solov’ëv, but he could not turn away from the one who gave Solov’ëv’s works its living impulse. Without Sophia we would have The Tragedy of Philosophy, The Friend of the Bridegroom, and a few little books, but we would not have the Great Trilogy.

It must be admitted, though, that on the surface the Philosophy of Economy looks like a book on economics and political economy. It has chapters on the basic economic functions (consumption and production), the nature of science, social determinism, the phenomenology of economy, and economic materialism. But this is only a ruse. Bulgakov intentionally put a mask of political economy on this work of sophiological mysticism. “The World as Household” is volume one of a projected two-volume work. Volume two, never written, was to be called “Justification of the Household: Ethics and Eschatology.”² In a letter to Vladimir Ern dated 19 March [1 April], 1912, Bulgakov explains his decision to divide the work into two volumes: “I have left eschatology for later treatment because, in the first place, I am not yet mature enough to treat it; and secondly for reasons of academic deception: this is, after all, a dissertation toward the doctorate in political economy . . . and after I gain the degree, my
hands will be unloosed and I will be able to proceed without thinking about extraneous things. Moreover, the division into two volumes happened naturally and unintentionally. Not only will I not mind if economism is blown apart by catastrophism, I think that it could not be otherwise. But my task has been to cart ontologism through gates that till now have let nothing enter except materialism” (as quoted in Evgenii Gollerbakh, *K nezrimomu gradu: Religiozno-filosofskaja gruppa ’Put’* (1910–1919) v poiskakh novoj russkoj identichnosti, St. Petersburg, 2000, p. 194; the translation is mine).

We thus learn that volume one was an “academic deception”: after getting his doctoral degree, in political economy (!) Bulgakov would be free to do what he really wanted: to blow economism apart by catastrophism (something the Bolsheviks did not in books but in life). Volume two was never written, but Bulgakov did not fail, later, to develop an eschatology. In fact, if he was anything, he was an eschatologist: see the conclusions of *The Unfading Light* and *The Bride of the Lamb*; not to mention his final work, *The Apocalypse of John*.

Catherine Evtuhov, who previously wrote an able book about Bulgakov’s early thought (*The Cross & The Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy*, 1890–1920, Cornell, 1997), gives a fine introduction to the “secular” background of the *Philosophy of Economy*. She should be commended for bringing into the English-language universe one of the classic, “seminal” works of Silver-Age Russian philosophy.

NOTES

1 Cf. Vladimir Solov’ev: “Insofar as it receives the divine Logos into itself and is determined by the divine Logos, the world soul is humanity, the divine humanity of Christ, the body of Christ, Sophia” (*Lectures on Divine Humanity*, revised and edited by Boris Jakim, Lindisfarne Press, Hudson, NY, p. 132).

2 Solov’ev is ubiquitous in the early Bulgakov. Was the “ethics” to come out of *The Justification of the Good* and the “eschatology” out of *Three Conversations*?

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