Martin Luther, Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov and Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky: an unexpected convergence regarding the concept of the "new theology"
Martinho Lutero, Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov e Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky: uma convergência inesperada em relação ao conceito da "nova teologia"

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Abstract

Luther, on the one hand, and Bulgakov and Florensky on the other, are theologians who at first glance show numerous differences. They belong to different historical periods and different geographical and linguistic areas, to different Christian denominations and to different schools of theology. From another point of view, however, these three figures show a series of convergences regarding one of the main aims of their intellectual activity: the elaboration of a "new theology" capable of generating a better understanding and transmission of the living and life-giving truth of Christian revelation. Adopting an epistemological perspective as the basis of an analysis of their theologies, the present article seeks to highlight an unexpected agreement between the epistemological choices that the three theologians make on their way to the creation of a new theological model. The study invites the reader to consider that, as in the case of the two Russian theologians, one of the problems for the interpretation and reception of Luther's theology lies in his epistemological particularity. This fact is relevant to the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue.

Keywords

Renewal of theology. Theological epistemology. Critique of metaphysics and ontology. New theological language. Logic of paradox.

Resumo

Lutero, de um lado, Bulgakov e Florensky, de outro, são teólogos que, à primeira vista, mostram inúmeras diferenças. Eles pertencem a diferentes períodos históricos, a diferentes áreas geográficas e linguísticas, a diferentes denominações cristãs e a diferentes escolas de teologia. De outro ponto de vista, porém, estas três figuras mostram uma série de convergências em relação a um dos principais objetivos de sua atividade intelectual: a elaboração de uma "nova teologia" capaz de gerar uma melhor compreensão e transmissão da verdade viva e vivificante da revelação cristã. Adotando uma perspectiva epistemológica como base de uma análise de suas teologias, o presente artigo procura destacar um inesperado acordo entre as escolhas epistemológicas que os três teólogos fazem no caminho para a criação de um novo modelo teológico. O estudo convida o leitor a considerar que, como no caso dos dois teólogos russos, um dos problemas para a interpretação e recepção da teologia de Lutero reside em sua particularidade epistemológica. Este fato é relevante para o diálogo entre católicos e luteranos.

Palavras-chave

Renovação da teologia. Epistemologia teológica. Crítica da metafísica e da ontologia. Nova linguagem teológica. Lógica do paradoxo.

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INTRODUÇÃO[2]

What could possibly unite Martin Luther, the reformed theologian of the 16th century, and the Russian scholars Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov and Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky, both of whom lived in the 20th century? Could it be that Luther's works were studied in-depth by the two well-known Russian theologians, so that they became the key players in an Eastern Orthodox *Lutherforschung*? This is certainly not the case. As a matter of fact, apart from two brief and passing mentions of Luther in Bulgakov's *The lamb of God* (1933), the two theologians never really dealt with his theology. Nevertheless, a remarkable bond exists between these three theologians, even though to the present day, it has never been particularly noted by scholars. This was not because no one had ever envisaged a link between the Lutheran Reformation and Orthodoxy. As is well known, such a hypothesis is still supported by Lutherans of the so-called *Finnish School*, whose members have produced interesting – though often controversial – studies on the relationship between a Lutheran theology of justification and an Eastern Orthodox theology of divinization. These studies aim at demonstrating a point of contact between the two theological traditions with regard to the themes of sanctification and salvation.

The bond that links the two Orthodox theologians with Luther, in fact, is of another kind. It operates on a different level: that of theological epistemology. Just as Luther had done, Bulgakov (1871-1944) and Florensky (1882-1937)[3] sought to establish a "new theology" that would faithfully promote a better understanding and spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But that was not all. Their project was marked by some choices and traits that were typical also of Luther's scheme. Among these we can mention (a) the criticism of scholastic metaphysics and, in particular, ontology and (b) the idea of having to use a "new (conceptual and terminological) language" to express, in the light of God's revelation in Christ, the knowledge of the *ordo creationis* and that of the "realities" of the *ordo salutis* (Church, faith, grace, etc.).

Given that the two theological traditions are so distant in time and confession, is this a mere coincidence, a fortuitous convergence that should not be given too much weight? Or rather, might we claim that underlying such a convergence is something more, some kind of epistemological "universal element" that is to be found each and every time someone plans and carries out an authentic renewal of theology? The present article does not seek to offer an explicit answer, dealing rather with another aspect altogether. However, we shall underline some of the main features in the epistemological convergence between the Wittenberg reformer's theological project and that of the two Russian theologians, in the hope that this may contribute to a more open interpretation of Luther's thought, still little considered in the Roman

[3] For a brief introduction to their thought, see Oravecz (2014, p. 264-324). See also the studies by Žak (2002, p. 134-148), Shaposhnikov (2017, p. 535-562), Tataryn (1998, p. 315-338) and Valliere (2000, p. 227-371).

Catholic Church and in its theology.[4] Therein lies the purpose of the present study and its originality.

To put it another way: by comparing Luther's epistemological insights[5] with those of the two Russian theologians, this article will seek to show that the former was not a "breaking point" with the Roman Church,[6] nor was he a theologian who possessed arbitrary doctrinal inventiveness. He was, in fact, a creative scholar and a careful pastor who was concerned with the need to understand and communicate faith in its saving truth revealed by Jesus Christ.

1 REASONS BEHIND THE CRITICISM OF SCHOLASTIC METAPHYSICS AND ONTOLOGY

At this point, much has been written regarding Luther's criticism of scholastic metaphysics and the reformer's stance against Aristotle and the latter's metaphysics. However, as underlined by Wilfried Joest in 1967 and more recently by many other scholars, various authors – Catholic and Evangelical/Lutheran – approach this topic without doing full justice to the reformer's true epistemological intuitions. Some claim, therefore, that Luther replaced metaphysics and ontology with soteriology in existential terms, "thus eliminating all types of philosophical content" (ROSTAGNO, 2002, p. 10).

I believe this to be a fundamental topic that should be examined in the light of Luther's original *intentio*. This is key in correctly interpreting his theology; moreover, it is also relevant from an ecumenical point of view, given that the Roman Catholic Church used the very

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[4] This paper begins from the assumption that what happened during the 20th century for the two innovative Russian theologians Bulgakov and Florensky also happened – and is still happening – in the case of Luther. The difficult interpretation and arduous reception by Catholics of his theology have been and continue to be influenced by his "unusual" epistemic choices in his aim of creating a "new" theology (that had different styles and methods compared to "official" theology). Allow me to also add that identifying such assumption is by no means incidental; rather, it is born from my very own experience. I have taken part in Catholic-Lutheran debates and have been elected among experts in a research project fostered by the World Lutheran Federation and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (the project – which was not carried to completion, aimed at drafting a document that would speak about Luther's excommunication). In academia, I have often engaged in debates with Catholic colleagues who are critical of Luther's theology, and I have come to the conclusion that the difficulty Catholics have in approaching, understanding and interpreting the reformer's theology is not only due to doctrinal matters, but first and foremost to his style, method, hermeneutics and language. His epistemic traits, essentially. Thus, it is no wonder that some contemptuously call it "Als-ob-Theologie" (a semi-theology). This study is primarily meant for Catholics, to demonstrate that Luther's theology features some epistemic specificities that are indeed legitimate and in agreement with the theology of many other theologians-innovators from other creeds, in-cluding Bulgakov and Florensky.

[5] For this aspect, I refer especially to the studies of the Catholic-Lutheran research group founded in 2001 by cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, with scholars from the Lateran University in Rome and the German universities of Heidelberg and Tübingen. The results of their painstaking theological work have been published in Herms and Žak (2008a, 2008b, 2011a, 2011b, 2017, 2020). For an outlook of this area of research, its aims and its working methods, see Herms (2010, 2013), Lorizio (2013) and Schwöbel (2013).

[6] This conviction seems to characterize, even if only indirectly, the hermeneutic perspective of the ecumenical document *From conflict to communion* (2013). See chapters 3 and 4 on the causes underlying the newly born Reform, the history of its first developments and the outline of the original intuitions and intentions behind Luther's theology (LUTHERAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC COMMISSION ON UNITY, 2013).

concepts/terms of scholastic metaphysics and ontology in order to formulate its numerous dogmatic definitions. Any serious comparison between Roman Catholic doctrine and that of Luther is necessarily influenced by the way in which this topic is tackled.

What, therefore can be said about Luther and his criticism of scholastic metaphysics/ontology as derived by Aristotle? Suffice it to sum up what Joest wrote about the matter, beginning with his clarification: "Luther uses the word metaphysics for what we call ontology, given that Aristotle's metaphysics to which he had to address himself in the first instance, is in itself a doctrine of being" (JOEST, 1967, p. 88). According to Joest, therefore, the reformer did not use the word metaphysics in the way in which it later became widely accepted, namely as "doctrine on the transcendent and on supernatural matters" (JOEST, 1967, p. 88).

Joest underlined the fact that if Luther criticized Aristotle and his metaphysics/ontology, he was really criticizing the established custom of medieval theologians who understood and explained the realities of faith by means of Aristotelian concepts and specifically of ontological ones. The reason behind the criticism, therefore, was not that he despised philosophical knowledge *per se* and metaphysics/ontology as such. Rather, Luther rejected their *transferal* between the order of "the visible" to that of "the invisible",[7] which was accompanied by the *claim* that such concepts could fully grasp and define the realities of the world as the work of God, created and kept in existence by him, and even that they could grasp and define the realities he revealed as subject to faith. According to Luther, such *transferal* and *claim* possess a serious flaw that is typical of Aristotelian-scholastic metaphysics: the extreme narrowness of the cognitive perception of the human being, creation and, obviously, of all other realities in the history of salvation. But what did he mean by "narrowness"? The answer to this question may be found in one of Luther's first explicit criticisms of Aristotelian/scholastic metaphysics, found in the *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans* (1515-1516) where, in contrast, he praised the apostle Paul for his all-encompassing and global view of creation (WA 56, 371,1-372,25; LUTHER, 2006, p. 235-237).

The problem identified by Luther was that Aristotelian metaphysics – and with it, scholastic theology – were interested in grasping and defining the being of things; they therefore focused on the *hic et nunc* of being, describing the essence and accidents of what presently exists. Saint Paul, on the other hand, was the one true philosopher because he focused on the being of things in their present and future dimension, which lay in the actuation of the bond existing between things and their creator. One could sum up the matter as follows: that which Aristotelian metaphysics (and the scholastics) were unable to do was to look at the human being and the whole of creation in their structural relationship with God; this relationship has a primary ontological value. This is precisely why Luther states: "But alas, how deeply and

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[7] Luther states: "Unde intelligere in Scriptura aliter quam in philosophia capitur, sive sit abstractiva sive universalis: quia philosophia semper de visibilibus et apparentibus, vel saltem ex apparentibus deducta loquitur, fides autem est non apparentium, nec ex apparentibus deducta" (WA 3,507,36-508,4).

painfully we are caught up in categories and quiddities, and how many foolish opinions befog us in metaphysics!" (WA 56,371,11-12; LUTHER, 2006, p. 236).

Coming now to the Orthodox theologians Florensky and Bulgakov, we should note that just like Luther (JOEST, 1967, p. 13-16), they had no intention of developing a "new metaphysics" or a "new ontology" as independent philosophical branches that would go alongside theology.[8] Rather, their aim was that of integrating speculation on classic metaphysical and ontological questions in a "new theology". If, moreover, we consider their criticism of scholastic metaphysics/ontology and theology,[9] we cannot fail but notice that part of its impetus was an accusation of reductionism: the said metaphysics/theology eradicated the realities that are defined by their vital root, their structural bond with the creator, thereby reifying what lives in them: basically, presenting them as simple lifeless "things" or "objects" (FLORENSKY, 1997, p. 366-367). The two authors did actually glimpse the limit posed by reductionism: in fact, they often warned of its danger, even in Immanuel Kant's philosophy and in positivism,[10] by speaking of the negative consequences these philosophical currents had even for the Orthodox theology of the time.

According to Florensky, when theology is affected by such metaphysical/ontological reductionism, it is not able to understand and interpret Christian doctrine as a reflection of living and concrete faith in the "living God" and to see him as the "living center of Christian religion", "the foundation of all truth and worthiness" (FLORENSKY, 1994, p. 559). In other words, it is not able to conceive the realities and events of either the *ordo creationis* or the *ordo salutis* in the light of the reality of the triune God's creative and salvific act. Such a divine act creates and animates processes of an anthropological, ecclesiological-sacramental and soteriological kind, which Luther described with the term *justification* and the Orthodox theologians as *divinization.* This, according to Florensky, explains why theology is not harmonized and coherent in its explanations, definitions and arguments. In such theology it is impossible to find unity and a reciprocal dependence of the individual concepts and themes "as organs of a single body, of a single and planned whole" (FLORENSKY, 1994, p. 559). In the face of this type of theology,

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[8] Florensky had tried to elaborate a "concrete metaphysics" (and termed it "concrete idealism" or "symbolism"); however, he did not aim at constructing a philosophical system, but rather a model of thought – "a future and global vision of the world" (1994, p. 38) – which was based on the principle of "incarnation" as the universal principle behind each structure of the things/realities found in the *ordo creationis* and *salutis*.

[9] The core of their criticism was motivated by the obsession for systematization taught by the "official" Orthodox theology of the theological academies and within the Russian Orthodox Church, but was also centered upon the positivist tendencies shown by some Orthodox theologians at the time.

[10] By talking in a philosophical manner and by referring to the presence of such reductionism in philosophy, Florensky speaks about the denial of the sense of reality, that is the denial of *eternity* in temporal realities. That which characterizes this tendency is "a metaphysical and gnoseological *egoism.* Reality is completely isolated and completely extraneous to anything that is unlike itself. Reality lacks what could be termed as an *umbilical cord* that could connect it to the fertile womb of existence as a whole. It has no roots by which it can penetrate other worlds. Moreover, in time, it is not connected to itself and as itself, it does not portray itself as a whole and coherent being" (FLORENSKY, 1999, p. 83-84).

which he found taught at the Moscow Academy of Theology, Florensky could not remain silent. With emotional pathos not far from that of Luther, he stated:

> we are obliged to recognize one fact: in the current age, the system of doctrinal teaching has suffered the worst damage spiritual values could ever endure: such system has no value for knowledge. Salt has lost its flavor; the light has been turned off. The hearth has ceased to warm our conscience, the core of life has been evicted. […] Life passes by outside of our doctrine of faith, and our doctrine of faith passes by outside of life. […] There is no God in our dogmatic (FLORENSKY, 1994, p. 558-560).

The path of renewal initiated by the two Russian theologians is specifically mirrored in Florensky's *The pillar and ground of the truth* (1914) and in Bulgakov's "great trilogy" *The lamb of God* (1933), *The comforter* (1936) and *The bride of the lamb* (1945). These works suggest rethinking each and every argument in the doctrine of faith in the light of Christianity's central and unifying truth: divine-humanity (theanthropy),[11] which had manifested itself in Christ as a fundamental ontological dimension, but also as both a *vital/redemptive process in act* and the ultimate goal of all human beings and all inter-personal relations. It is therefore essential for the present and future existence of the whole of creation. Seen in these terms and interpreted in the light of the truth that lay in God's triunity (his being-one/being-three as a being-in-a-relation-of-love), divine-humanity is suggested as both the central theme of dogmatics and a hermeneutical horizon. By being faithful to Christian revelation and in a unitary framework, such a horizon makes it possible to delve deeper into all the treatises on dogmatic theology: from the theology of creation to anthropology, Christology and soteriology; from pneumatology and ecclesiology to the theology of the sacraments and eschatology, etc. However, such hermeneutics can only function provided that divine-humanity is intended/lived by the theologian as a *locus theologicus.* This is why Bulgakov loved to say that "*primum vivere, deinde philosophari et dogmatisari*" (1989, p. 169).[12]

The fact that both authors linked such a conclusion to the *kenotic* experience of self-denial, self-humiliation and self-emptying (ORAVECZ, 2014, p. 281-318) underlines the convergence between their epistemological intuitions and Luther's *theologia crucis*.

2 THEOLOGY AS *SAPIENTIA DIVINA*: IN THE SPIRIT OF "COMPLEX THOUGHT"

However, Luther's criticism of scholastic theology and its reductionist ideas that sprang from the use of Aristotelian metaphysics must be seen in an even broader perspective. The same can also be said about the project of theological renewal the two Russian theologians had undertaken.

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[11] See the introduction to Bulgakov's three volumes and its emphasis on divine-humanity (theanthropy) as the core truth of Christian doctrine.

[12] These words by the author are absent from the English translation (BULGAKOV, 1988, p. 71).

One of Luther's texts that deploys such a perspective is the disputation *De homine* (1536),[13] a treatise that is also extremely relevant for the study of his stance on the relationship between faith and reason and between philosophy and theology (LEPPIN, 2016, p. 275-287). Its 40 theses include explicit and harsh criticism of Aristotelian philosophy/metaphysics – that is, of the scholastic's *philosophizing* theology that was fully subjugated to the Greek philosopher's metaphysical categories and concepts. Furthermore, they include a critical judgement against such philosophizing metaphysics/theology that states, "it knows nothing about the reality of man and the whole world, since it ignores that God is the creator".[14] Together with the aforementioned reduction, however, Luther saw another equally disqualifying trait: metaphysics and the scholastics' philosophizing theology is not able to conceive the reality of man and the world in their *complexity* (*globality*); basically, it is not able to conceive them by grasping and gathering the various aspects/dimensions of their being.

What complexity was he talking about? And which aspects/dimensions? Apart from not being able to conceive mankind in its true condition as a creature of God, metaphysics/philosophizing theology is unable to conceive it as a creature that fell because of Adam (and therefore is subject to the devil), and as a creature whose liberation is brought about through faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is not only unable to conceive these singular truths about mankind: it also fails to conceive them simultaneously by harmonizing them in an individual frame of mind. Yet the truth of mankind's reality is precisely this: man is and continues to be God's creature; man is and continues to dwell in the condition of a fallen creature (and lives *in hac vita* under the influence of original sin); man is, lives and operates in God the creator (see Acts 17,28), in God who operates everything in everyone, even outside the ambit of the Spirit's grace (therefore, in the ungodly, too).[15] These truths are obviously joined by another, the most important one: if man believes in Christ and walks with him in God's way (by letting God guide him), he is already a new creature and is already in the hands of God, who brings about a new creation (by beginning to infuse the human being with his *futura forma*).[16]

This way of seeing the world's being and humanity itself is what characterizes Luther's "new theology" from the beginning of his work as a professor in Wittenberg. It can be seen in the *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*. While commenting on Paul's words (Romans 12,2, "but be reformed [by the renewing of your mind]"), Luther tries to describe the complexity of the being in those who are baptized. He builds on the assumption that the realities ("things") of both the natural and spiritual orders are determined by five degrees or – one could say –

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[13] See WA 39/I, 174-180,32; in part. 175,1-177,14.

[14] See thesis 14: WA 39/I,175,30 (LUTHER, 1536). And Luther adds: "And there is no hope that man can know himself from this perspective, until he sees himself in the very origin [*in fonte ipso*], which is God" (thesis 17: WA 39/I,175,36-37).

[15] Luther developed this idea – for example – in *On the bondage of the will* (WA 18,753,39-754,17; see also WA 18,709,5-712,29).

[16] See theses 35-38: WA 39/I,177,3-10 (LUTHER, 1536).

modalities: "not-being, becoming, being, action, and being acted upon, i.e., privation, matter, form, operation, and passion" (WA 56,441,13-443,8; LUTHER, 2006, p. 321-323). These different degrees of being manifest themselves in the spiritual order as being-in-sin (not-being), becoming-justified (becoming), being-justified (being), being-just-in-action (action), being-passive (being acted upon), in the sense of being actuated/perfected (fulfilled) by God. According to Luther, all of these degrees or modalities of being are *always in movement* in the baptized person, so that each one of them refers to and presupposes the other as part of a sequence. Yet, at the same time, in the baptized person's being these degrees or modalities *are simultaneously present*, so that the being "is always in not-being, in becoming, in being; always in privation, in potency, in act; always in sin, in justification, in righteousness, i.e., always a sinner, always penitent, always righteous" (WA 56,442,1-2; LUTHER, 2006, p. 322).

A similar way of describing the being's complexity can be found in Luther's reflections on the Church, the sacraments and other "realities" that exist in the *ordo salutis* (faith, grace, etc.) – and most of all, in his reflections on Christ's divine-human person. This dynamic complexity had not been grasped by Aristotelian metaphysics and the scholastics' philosophizing theology, thus showing the unavoidable limitations of their wisdom, their syllogisms and their "wicked dialectic". This is why, after having established that "there is no possibility for man to understand himself from such philosophical perspective" (WA 39/I,175,36-37), in *De homine* Luther states that "Theologia vero de plenitudine sapientiae suae Hominem totum et perfectum definit" (WA 39/I,176,5-6). The reference here is obviously to a *theologia sacra* that is an exemplar for all theological debate; that which "descended from the heavens and was given and poured into us through the Holy Spirit" (WA 39/I,260,23-24) as *sapientia Christi,* which is to be found in the Holy Scriptures. With regard to it, one can say that "Sapientia enim nova verba facit ex veteribus, quia non est nata ex nobis, sed donata e coelo sapientia, innovans omnia, immutans omnia" (WA 39/I,262,25-27).

The idea of the complexity of being is typical also of some Russian Orthodox theology and is found in a part of Russian religious philosophy, inspired in particular by the philosophy of *vseedinstvo* (unity-of-all) as elaborated by Vladimir Sergeyevich Solov'ëv (OBOLEVITCH, 2010). The theologians and philosophers who belonged to this current elaborated a sort of "complex thought" they termed sophiology. Florensky and Bulgakov are among the most original representatives of this school of thought, their hope being to implement it in theology.

It is well known that sophiology has been criticized by many Orthodox and Catholic theologians, who have blamed its illicit dogmatic ingenuity believing that it is not in harmony with the Church's doctrinal tradition. However, Bulgakov and Florensky's sophiology was not aimed at suggesting an alternative doctrine featuring contents at variance with those of the Christian faith. Rather, it was an original *epistemological invention* that sought to consider the

truths of the faith and all other objects in reality within a unitary hermeneutical horizon, that of the trinitarian revelation found in Scripture.[17]

When examining Bulgakov's "great trilogy", one can find a type of theology that aims at gathering and collecting within a single conceptual framework the various truths of the faith regarding creation, the divine Trinity, God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the Church, the sacraments, divinization and so forth. This kind of theology believes that all of these truths (and the realities they point to) are reciprocally connected as pieces of a single mosaic, since they contain and manifest one great mystery: God's life within and without himself, that is the divine Being's revelational dynamic as the fundamental dynamic of any creaturely existence. Therefore, Bulgakov elaborates an ample understanding of all dogmas by seeking the points of connection with God's triune being of all realities that have been dogmatically defined. Ontology itself allows him to emphasize the structural and dynamic links between the "realities" with which dogmatic theology deals, contemplating them in both a protological and an eschatological sense, and giving great importance to the idea of the history of salvation as a progressive and salvific "becoming" of God-Trinity-love in everything and everyone.

Florensky's *Pillar and ground of the truth* contains a similar perspective, created by the author to prevent human rationality destroying the "objects" of religious perception, fragmenting them "into a multiplicity of aspects, into separate facets, into fragments of holiness, and there is no grace in these fragments" (FLORENSKY, 1997, p. 234). The hermeneutic he uses aims at expressing in an organic and unitary conceptual way, the truths – that is the contents – of Christian dogmatics. It does so by grasping and describing in light of revelation the ontological complexity of the "realities" that are involved in the history of salvation; these include mankind's being in-a-state-of-divinization as actuated by God. In order to aid reason, which in the face of such contents/realities seems unable to proceed on the path of a "before and after" logic (that gathers the concepts in successional order), Florensky's sophiology suggests a new perspective: that of conjunction or *simul*, since no-one is able to decide what comes before or after in the being of the frail creatures who participate in the process of divinization (of the already-being-in-God). In any case, the *simul* logic is the natural consequence of a theology that aims at achieving knowledge of the truths of faith (but also of reality itself) that is not fragmentary nor sectorial, but rather unitary, global and synthetic. Moreover, since Florensky

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[17] Bulgakov explains: "Sophiology represents a theological or, if you prefer, a dogmatic, interpretation of the world (Weltanschauung) within Christianity. It is characteristic only of one trend of thought within Christianity, and that one which is by no means dominant in the Orthodox Church, just as, for instance, Thomism or 'modernism' exists within Catholicism, or liberal 'Jesuanism' or Barthianism within Protestantism. The sophiological point of view brings a special interpretation to bear upon all Christian teaching and dogma, beginning with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation and ending with questions of practical everyday Christianity in our own time" (BULGAKOV, 1993, p. 13). The very same remark regarding sophiology can be found in Florensky's explanation in *The pillar and ground of the truth* (1997, p. 234-237).

deems the mystery of God's Trinity to be the source of all truth and created reality, his idea of synthesis has a distinctly trinitarian dimension.[18]

3 THE NEED FOR CONTRADICTIONS

Apart from this intellectual framework there is another essential feature in Bulgakov's and Florensky's sapiential theology: the use of logic and language based on the principle of contradiction or – to be more precise – the use of *antinomy*. Such logic and language, as a matter of fact, are nothing more than a necessary consequence of the insight that seeks to grasp and to express, intellectually and terminologically, the complexity of the realties with which theology deals. But what is this all about? One answer comes from Bulgakov, who states:

> In order to avoid misconceptions let us remind the reader that an antinomy differs from both a logical and a dialectical contradiction. An antinomy simultaneously admits the truth of two contradictory, logically incompatible, but ontologically equally necessary assertions. An antinomy testifies to the existence of a mystery beyond which the human reason cannot penetrate. This mystery, nevertheless, is actualized and lived in religious experience. All fundamental dogmatic definitions are of this nature. It is futile to attempt to dispel or to remove an antinomy. In a logical contradiction, however, exactly the opposite is the case. Such a contradiction is always an indication of a mistake in reasoning which should be detected and removed. Hegel's "dialectic" contradiction, for instance, is in no sense an antinomy (BULGAKOV, 1993, p. 77).

In any event, an interesting explanation of the antinomy of concepts and terms within a theology that aims at conceiving and debating *sub revelationis luce,* that is *sub specie aeternitatis*, can be found in Florensky's *The pillar and ground of the truth* (chapter 6, titled *Contradiction*). The author moves from acknowledging that life "is infinitely fuller than rational definitions and therefore no formula can encompass all the fullness of life. No one formula, therefore, can replace life itself in its creativity" (FLORENSKY, 1997, p. 108). Therefore, when one has to grasp the reality of all that is part of life, the truth of the being of existing realities, a fundamental rule is true: "The thesis and the antithesis together form the expression of truth. In other words, truth is an antinomy, and it cannot fail to be such" (FLORENSKY, 1997, p. 109). However, Florensky deals with antinomy both in judgement and in concepts.[19] And most of all, he tackles not only the antinomies arising from the truths that pertain to life in general, but even

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[18] He explains: "The actually given synthesis of the separate aspects of the object of faith finds its justification – the justification of its necessity – in the everlasting light of the Holy Trinity. But neither the justification of the synthesis nor the synthesis itself is subject to rational derivation" (FLORENSKY, 1997, p. 234).

[19] Florensky explains: "Everything said heretofore has been said – for the sake of simplicity – under the assumption that in logic we take judgments as our point of departure. Truth then turns out to be an antinomy of judgments. But it is not difficult to see that, from another point of view, i.e., in *the logic of concepts*, we would arrive at a similar conclusion, namely, that truth is an antinomy of concepts" (1997, p. 110).

more, those that deal with life with God, the living-in-movement-of-divinization. Florensky explains:

> Indeed, only an antinomy can be believed. […] If truth were non-antinomic, then rationality, always revolving in its proper sphere, would not have a fulcrum, would not see extra-rational objects and therefore would not be induced to begin the ascesis of belief. That fulcrum is dogma. With dogma begins our salvation, for only dogma, being antinomic, does not constrain our freedom and allows voluntary belief or wicked unbelief. For it is impossible to compel one to believe, just as it is impossible to compel one not to believe. According to Saint Augustine, "no one believes except voluntarily (*nemo credit nisi volens*)". […] The mysteries of religion are not secrets that one must not reveal. They are not the passwords of conspirators, but inexpressible, unutterable, indescribable experiences, which cannot be put into words except in the form of contradictions, which are "yes" and "no" at the same time. They are "mysteries that transcend meaning" (1997, p. 109, 117).[20]

Florensky, however, adds another important detail that is undoubtedly key in finding points of contact between his epistemological intuitions and those of Luther. Florensky reaffirms that thinking and speaking in antinomies corresponds to the way Scripture is structured. This can be found mainly in Saint Paul, the author of the *Letter to the Romans,* the most dialectical and fiery Epistle, "this antinomy-charged bursting bomb against the rational mind". Florensky writes:

> Consider the apostle Paul. His brilliant religious dialectic consists of a series of discontinuities; it jumps from one affirmation to another, where each successive affirmation is antinomic with respect to the preceding one. Sometimes an antinomy is even embodied in a stylistic discontinuity of exposition, in an external asyndeton. Rationally contradictory and mutually exclusive judgments have their sharp edges directed against each other. But, for direct perception, these virgin blocks of "yes" and "no" that are piled on top of one another reveal a higher religious unity, a unity that is capable of achieving its culmination in the Holy Spirit. What inner insensitivity, what religious tastelessness it would be to reduce all these "yes's" and "no's" to a single plane, to consider one layer or another inessential! Antinomies belong to the very essence of experience. […] Antinomies are the constituent elements of religion, if we conceive it rationally. Thesis and antithesis, as warp and woof, bind the very fabric of religious experience. Where there is no antinomy, there is no faith (1997, p. 120).

The way in which Saint Paul and his way of presenting the *Evangelium* were a key source for Luther is a well-known fact. The point is that antinomy (or, one could say, paradox)[21]

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[20] And he also states: "An object of religion, in falling from the heaven of spiritual experience into the fleshliness of rationality, inevitably splits apart into aspects that exclude one another. The task of an orthodox, universal rationality is to collect all the fragments, their fullness, while the task of a heretical, sectarian rationality is to choose the fragments that please one: 'You need many strings to play on the psaltery of eternity'. […] But connected fullness is only a hope. It will be given only by the One who will wash all the filth from creation, by the Holy Spirit. Dogmas are comprehended by the Spirit, in whom is the fullness of understanding. But, for the time being, the more profound and full the experience, the more acute and diverse the antinomies of faith" (1997, p. 119-120).

[21] See Janz (1998, p. 6), Markschies (2017, p. 180-181) and Ferrario (2020, p. 26-27).

is a typical trait of the reformer's theology, of his way of thinking and debating and of his concepts and terms. I firmly believe that the reasons for this are the same as those of Bulgakov and Florensky: the will to understand and to describe in a theological way the complexity of the realities one grasps through faith (which often include contrasting polarities) forced Luther not only to use concepts and terms that were interconnected, but also contradictory ones.

One could cite many further examples. Among them are the numerous pairs of concepts/terms that are used by Luther in order to describe the reality of the Church. The following are the most "antinomic" ones: *Ecclesia abscondita - Ecclesia rivelata*;[22] *Ecclesia invisibilis – Ecclesia visibilis*; *Ecclesia vera – Ecclesia falsa*; authentic Church ("spiritual and internal Christianity") – external Church ("earthly and external Christianity");[23] holy community (*communio sanctorum*) – community of sinners; *Ecclesia sancta – Ecclesia peccatrix*;[24] *creatura (non mater) Verbi*[25] – *mater fidelium*,[26] and so forth. In order to interpret correctly Luther's ecclesiological thought, these concepts/terms must never be isolated from one another. On the contrary, each concept/term must be seen as a piece in a puzzle, and its meaning must be considered within the whole.

Other examples can easily be found in Christology, where antinomic/paradoxical concepts/terms are often used in connection with the two (ontologically significant) ideas/themes that are also based on the principle of antinomy/paradox: *communicatio idiomatum* and *admirabile commercium* (*der fröhliche wechsel und streit*). However, as is true for many other sectors of Luther's theology, such a principle and logic of conjunction are fundamental mainly in formulating his idea of justification by way of well-known conceptual and terminological tools. For example: *simul (sunt) iusti et iniusti*; *simul peccator et iustus*; *partim iusti et partim peccatores*; *simul peccator et sanctus*; *aegrotus simul et sanus*; *peccator in re et iustus in spe*; *simul spiritualis (sum) et carnalis*; *rei sumus et non rei*, and so forth.[27]

All of these concepts/terms are central in Luther's "new theology"; they are its most characteristic features and its most effective instruments. However, the fact that they exist is not accidental: a thought complex in consequence, cannot but be antinomic/paradoxical and therefore must necessarily be expressed through concepts/terms such as these. This, among

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[22] Rather than being a proper term, this is a concept linked to the idea of the holy community's *absconditas*, as developed in *On the bondage of the will* (WA 18,649,26-653,31), and to the idea of the so-called "external signs" as developed in *On the councils and the Churches* (WA 50,628,19-649,6); these signs are necessary so that one may recognize where the said community really is, by creating the necessary conditions for it to *make itself manifest* in the world (HERMS; ŽAK, 2008a, p. 564-571; HERMS; ŽAK, 2008b, p. 452-457; GERARDINI, 1994, p. 221-226).

[23] See WA 6,296,37-297,6 (LUTHER, 1520). For an explanation of this paradoxical view of the Church, see Gherardini (1994, p. 101-142).

[24] See WA 34/I,276,11-12 (LUTHER, 1531). For an in-depth study of this important theme which was carried out in the context of the Lutheran-Orthodox theological dialogue in the USA, see the article by Yeago (2000, p. 331-354).

[25] See WA 42,334,12 (LUTHER, 1535-1538).

[26] The Church "is the mother that begets and bears [in her womb] every Christian through the Word of God" (LUTHER, 1529, p. 1060).

[27] A detailed list of the most important *simul*-expressions in Luther can be found in Christe (2014, p. 703-711).

many past and present authors, is confirmed by Gregory of Nazianzus, who wrote: "of a paradoxical matter", one must "speak paradoxically" (2003, p. 183).

CONCLUSION

This study has not sought to pronounce on the convergences and divergences between Luther's theology and the theology of Bulgakov and Florensky. It merely wanted to show that on the epistemological level there are convergences between them. However, this fact is not of little importance from the ecumenical point of view. Why? Because if the theologies of Bulgakov and Florensky[28] have often been misunderstood in the Orthodox and Catholic theological world, precisely because of the inability of their critics to understand fully their epistemological peculiarity, the same can and must be said of Luther's theology. And it is precisely this fact that the present study seeks to emphasize.

Even though they acknowledge that what sparked the clash between Luther and his opponents was complex, some scholars who insist how difficult it was for the "Roman side" to understand Luther's words, perceive correctly his theological affirmations and reflections, and thus his critique and his desire for reform. Suffice it to remember that, referring to Luther at the *Diet of Worms* (1521), the papal nuncio Girolamo Aleandro (1480-1542) used words that betrayed his unease not only with the content of the reformer's theology, but also with his approach to the topics in question and the way he understood and expounded them; Luther's approach was very hard to classify. The nuncio noted: "many who have spoken with him [Luther] have already concluded that he is neither a grammarian nor a dialectician nor a philosopher nor a theologian, but simply crazy" (ALEANDRO, 1884, p. 196).[29]

The point is, such a situation endures within the Catholic Church to this day, even though many important changes have been made thanks to the Vatican II and the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue. That being said, I do not want to belittle the efforts of pontiffs such as John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, nor of cardinals Johannes Willebrands, Carlo Maria Martini, Reinhard Marx, Kurt Koch, Walter Kasper and many others, who have striven to place Luther's life and ideas for reform in a good light. I merely want to recognize the fact that the long

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[28] Bulgakov and Florensky have generically been termed "Orthodox Modernists" (ŽAK, 2005, p. 92-111). As for the criticism against Florensky's theology, an emblematic point of view can be found at the beginning of an article by Stanislao Tyszkiewicz: "Florensky est un des plus influents représentants de la théologie moderniste pravoslave. Le prestige qu'il s'est acquis par son célèbre livre *Stolp i outvierjdienie istiny* (*Columna et firmamentum veritatis*) s'est encore accru par la résignation chrétienne qu'il montra, en sa qualité de prêtre, durant la persécution bolchéviste. Mais c'est surtout à la traduction allemande de longs extraits de ce livre que nous devons la diffusion des idées de Florensky dans les milieux modernisants occidentaux, en premier lieu évidemment dans les pays protestants (TYSZKIEWICZ, 1934, p. 255). Before concluding the same author affirmed: "comme tout bon moderniste, Florensky fait grand cas de l'esthétisme en religion. […] Cet esthétisme est actuellement une arme de combat fournie par la pravoslavie au modernisme international pour l'aider à faire la guerre à l'intellectualisme de Saint Thomas. Hélas! que de catholiques, que de prêtres même, se sont dejà laissés séduire par les charmes de la piété ultra-artistique néo-pravoslave au point de s'égarer dans une spiritualité 'irrationnelle', parfois même d'abandonner ouvertement l'Eglise!" (TYSZKIEWICZ, 1934, p. 260).

[29] "[...] già è stato osservato da molti che hanno conferito seco [Luther], che lui né è gramatico, né dialetico, né philosofo, né theologo, ma mero insensato" (ALEANDRO, 1884, p. 196).

shadows cast by the violent interpretative clashes in the past still actually endure to the present day, and still determine a Catholic comprehension of Luther's theology (ŽAK, 2021, p. 173-185). Indeed, on a more general level, many perplexities and criticism still remain, due mainly to a theology that is deemed doctrinally problematic, thematically unbalanced (an excessive focus on justification) and conceptually and terminologically vague/ambiguous.

As a classic example of Luther's puzzling theology, scholars often cite the concept *simul peccator et iustus*, to which the Roman curia officially made reference in a note[30] of 1998 regarding the *Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification*. The text reads:

> For Catholics, therefore, the formula "at the same time righteous and sinner", as it is explained at the beginning of n. 29 ("Believers are totally righteous, in that God forgives their sins through Word and sacrament. [...] Looking at themselves [...] however, they recognize that they remain also totally sinners. Sin still lives in them"), is not acceptable. This statement does not, in fact, seem compatible with the renewal and sanctification of the interior man of which the Council of Trent speaks (4). The expression "opposition to God" (*gottwidrigkeit*) that is used in nn. 28-30 is understood differently by Lutherans and by Catholics, and so becomes, in fact, equivocal (CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH; PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, 1998).[31]

I strongly believe that this judgement needs to be amended, since it does not grasp the *intentio* and the *res* (intended by Luther) regarding the "problematic formulation". A possible path to follow might be that which allowed the Roman Catholic Church and its theology to move closer – after Vatican II – to Orthodox doctrine/theology. What lead the way was admitting (in the *Unitatis redintegratio* decree, number 17)[32] that despite their diversity, between Orthodox and Catholic theological formulas there can be some points of contact or even complementarity, which should be seen as a means of enrichment rather than of division.

It is obvious that trying to reach an official recognition of the legitimate diversity of Luther's theological formulas (or of some of them, at least), will be an extremely long and difficult endeavor, since Luther himself is a theologian still considered excommunicated and a publicly declared heretic. But it would make sense for various reasons to try to do so. One such

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[30] The note stands as the official response to the text of the joint declaration and was drafted as mutually agreed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and was signed by the latter's president.

[31] Therefore, the note states: "So, for all these reasons, it remains difficult to see how, in the current state of the presentation, given in the joint declaration, we can say that this doctrine on "*simul iustus et peccator*" is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification" (CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH; PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, 1998).

[32] I am hereby referring to the text: "What has just been said about the lawful variety that can exist in the Church must also be taken to apply to the differences in theological expression of doctrine. In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God's truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting" (UR 17).

reason is the importance of doing justice to the original, acceptable and still pertinent epistemological intuitions of the reformer's theology, including those of a metaphysical-ontological nature.

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