

although it was generally concerned with religious philosophy. It allegedly received the official blessing of Patriarch Tikhon, but could not establish itself overtly due to the tense period in which it was conceived.⁸ It may be said that without such an intellectual circle, Bulgakov might otherwise have struggled later on to maintain the degree of collegiality with his fellows that ultimately safeguarded him against further alienation when his theological writings were attacked on several fronts in the mid-1930s.

In 1923, the Brotherhood of St Sophia became a means for a wide variety of exiled professors who had significant religious commitments, mostly in Prague and Paris, to communicate on issues of common purpose. The minutes state that their main concerns included an analysis of the relationship between ecclesiastical and "holy" power, the monarchical consciousness in Orthodoxy, its relationship towards Catholicism, the activity of the Church in everyday life, the position of the Church in Russia as well as the social, cultural and political aspects of the doctrine of sophiology.⁹ Its membership in the early days was indeed diverse, including those who were unsympathetic or eventually hostile to sophiology in general or at least to Bulgakov's project. Whatever harmony and unity of vision existed at the outset was short lived as potent personalities such as Berdiaev, Struve, and Florovsky led factions that separated from the brotherhood. This resulted in the eventual formation of a smaller and more unified core group by late 1925. This smaller group was seemingly loyal to Bulgakov and in good relations with the local metropolitan, Evlogii.

In the early days when the Paris community was starting to re-establish for itself the necessary institutions to serve the growing needs of the Orthodox community, the Brotherhood of St Sophia continued to debate issues concerning the relationship of the church to the state. The minutes from the meetings of the brotherhood relate some of the arguments that broke out, showing the internal tension between those who continued to advance the reforming spirit of the 1917-18 Council, and those who remained steadfast in their adherence to prior interpretations of canon law. Often the most contentious debates arose from matters that, due to the changed political environment, could not be resolved by applying existing canon law to the status of the Russian ecclesial hierarchy at home and abroad. Here is precisely where the community of exiles became embroiled in the clashes between its various outspoken leaders, whether ordained or self-appointed.

The drastic transitions that the Church had undergone since the 1917-18 Council made the Paris community a tenuous battleground where internal splits were a near certainty as varying interpretations of the lines of authority or leadership for the exiled Church arose out of the uncertain status of the hierarchy in Russia. The minutes of the 21 May 1925¹⁰ meeting of the brotherhood in Prague, for example, discussed the problem of the deposition and death of Patriarch Tikhon and the possibility of legitimate autonomy for the Orthodox community abroad. Members discussed the canonicity of notions like autocephaly, internal and external freedom, and the option of other ecclesial forms.¹¹ In general their discussions were lively and deeply concerned with remaining faithful and loyal to the mother church in Russia. The minutes indicate that the frequency and intensity of the meetings reached a peak in the summer of 1925. Subsequent meetings geared more toward intellectual matters as members settled into their academic pursuits and became occupied with appraising each other's publications. This led to further controversy as they debated whether the group could even consider itself to be a brotherhood when it proceeded in such an unbrotherly fashion.¹²

In the late 1920s the meetings used a different format and, for the core members who were generally sympathetic to Bulgakov, they held theology seminars to explore the ideas of Divine Wisdom. These meetings soon expanded to include numerous participants, including several women, beyond the original core.¹³ They provided an open forum to discuss theological questions where Bulgakov tested and developed his sociological doctrines in dialogue with others. The notes taken by V.A. Zander offer an excellent source for further study into this highly developmental period of Bulgakov's thought, and provide a means to understand the social context and resonance of his ideas.¹⁴ The fact that these records were made by a laywoman indicates that Bulgakov, who went from being a political economy professor to an ordained priest in 1918, and finally a leading theologian, should not be mistaken as an obscurantist academic.

Throughout its life, the Brotherhood St Sophia waxed and waned and functioned more as an ad-hoc committee or intellectual organ than an established or regulated society. The one constant thread was the leadership of Bulgakov who was widely respected in the budding intellectual Russian Orthodox community in Paris. The relationship of the brotherhood to the local ecclesial hierarchy was very positive in their mutual aim of re-establishing the educational, diaconal and liturgical life