

# Foreword

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In recent decades, there has been increasing interest in the theological, philosophical, and political legacy of Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944). This is especially true in the English-speaking world. Looking at the recent history of Orthodox theology, one can hardly miss the dominant position of the neopatristic program of Georges Florovsky (1893–1979), once considered by many to be the best way of approaching and doing theology. However, things have dramatically changed in late modernity; the neopatristic synthesis is now hardly considered by the young generation of Orthodox theologians as the normative or even guiding model of what it means to do Orthodox theology. This is so particularly because of the deeply altered landscape we all live in and experience: the contemporary Western way of life, or rather our globalized and secularized world.

As a constructive thinker, a devoted priest, a pioneer of ecumenism, and a widely recognized and prolific author, Bulgakov was destined to attract exceptional scholarly interest in comparison with his Orthodox contemporaries, a level of interest commensurate only to that of Karl Barth and other giants of twentieth-century Christian theology. With his extremely wide range of interests, from philosophy to economy, politics and dogmatic theology to hermeneu-

tics, Bulgakov opened new horizons and blazed new trails on many topics, traditional topics like *theosis*, the core of Christian life—see Norman Russell’s contribution in this volume—but also on questions of the interpretation of doctrine, the role of philosophy in theology, anthropology, the church-state relationship, eschatology, political theology, spirituality, the relationship between faith and science, and theological aesthetics. Father Andrew Louth, Katerina Bauer, Sister Teresa Obolevitch, Inga Leonova, Brandon Gallaher, and Antoine Arjakovsky reflect on some of these not-always-obvious facets of his thought.

Contemporary Orthodox theology could not find the proper means to deal with the critical challenges our world is facing without the pioneering work of Bulgakov. Urgent anthropological investigations that question the very nature of human identity are pursued by Bryan Rich; Regula Zwahlen and Father Robert Arida deal with issues related to the ecological crisis and political economy respectively, two of the major threads of contemporary societies. Often quite obscure in his writings, Bulgakov flirted occasionally with condemned or marginalized figures of the patristic tradition. In the case of his sophiology, for instance, Aristotle Papanikolaou attempts to

clarify this controversial concept by examining Bulgakov's Trinitarian thought, while Archbishop Rowan Williams sheds light into the Bulgakovian obscurity by showing us aspects of his intellectual journey. A special reference should be made to the unique graphic biography by Andrej Strocaŭ, which offers a visual account of Bulgakov's life. Father Michael Plekon reflects on *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, one of the most important philosophical works of Bulgakov, only recently made available in English translation. Finally, the issue is adorned with images by Sister Ioanna Reitlinger, a spiritual daughter of Father Sergii.

Struggling with the demons and fears of his early unbelief (Marxism, atheism), Bulgakov experienced the critical upheavals of his time (the Bolshevik Revolution, two world wars), yet never ceased grappling with the spirit of his age. The present tribute avoids focusing on the dramatic controversy that emerged within the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) around sophiology. An overly narrow focus on Bulgakov the controversialist would lead to the false idea that he spent most of his energy on resisting a useless, parochial witch hunt; such an approach would undervalue Bulgakov's incredible strengths in dealing with issues whose broad impact would not be understood until decades after his death.

Bulgakov's agenda as described here should not be regarded as a luxury for Orthodox theology today. On the contrary, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, theological engagement with the various facets of late modernity, secularism, church-state relations, liberal democracy, human rights language, gender debates, the rise of religious extremism, and how we might deal with a pandemic like Covid-19 or a climate crisis are just a few of the challenges we now confront. If we, as Orthodox, have been used to a traditional way of doing theology, a theology resembling a history of doctrine, or an old-fashioned dogmatic theology grounded in an excessive use or repetition of patristic authorities, Bulgakov's theology opens the way for Orthodoxy to meet head-on—albeit with a certain delay—a new model of theology, what is called today systematic theology, which, by using the language of our time, tries to interpret the cornerstones of tradition (hermeneutics) in a way that is able to address the challenges of our age, not bygone concerns or problems (such as Christological disputes). By making use of Bulgakov's theology—not necessarily of all his theses, but his fundamental premises and intentions—Orthodoxy has the opportunity to contextualize the message of the Gospel in our time, to confirm the constructive role of Orthodoxy in the public sphere, and to highlight the prophetic and eschatological dynamic of Tradition in dialogue with the multiple parameters of modernity. ✱



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