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Sergii Bulgakov: An Intellectual Biography

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Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov is still, for many Orthodox Christians, a somewhat ambiguous figure. In conservative circles, he is seen as one of the main architects of what is oddly called the "Paris School" of supposedly liberal (revisionist, ecumenically-minded) theological thinkers; in more mainstream discussion, he is still very often read through the lens of "neo-patristic" writers, Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky above all, who were sharply critical of some of Bulgakov's distinctive ideas.

Yet there is frankly no other modern Orthodox writer with anything like Bulgakov's intellectual range and originality—and this is increasingly recognized in the wider scholarly world. More and more of his work is available in translation (sometimes of very uneven quality, it must be said), his ideas are discussed in the work of leading non-Orthodox theologians (the Anglican John Milbank was among those who led the way here), and doctoral dissertations are multiplying. Bulgakov has been bracketed with Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar as an innovative Trinitarian thinker (as in the excellent study by Brandon Gallaher), and Joshua Heath's recent articles in the international journal *Modern Theology* brilliantly sketch the metaphysics and philosophy of language that Bulgakov developed alongside his theological speculations.[1] Scholars in continental Europe like Barbara Hallesleben and Regula Zwahlen have contributed enormously to stimulating and co-ordinating research. Michael Miller is completing a monograph on Bulgakov's engagement with modernity as worked out in his social and political thought. Belatedly, the learned world seems to have grasped that Bulgakov is a serious intellectual presence well beyond the world of Orthodox dogmatics.

There is no doubt, however, that Father Sergii himself considered his work on dogmatic subjects the climax and focus of his labors. The great trilogy "On Godmanhood"—*The Lamb of God* (1933), *The Paraclete* (1936), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (posthumously published in 1945)—is effectively a work of systematic theology, in which the interrelatedness of the doctrines of creation, incarnation, sacramental life and redeemed community is displayed and elaborated with what can only be called dazzling creativity as well as formidable complexity. Both the creativity and the complexity contributed to the suspicion with which some regarded him: the persistent use of the "sophiological" theme, the idea of divine Wisdom as an integrative theological principle, alienated those who saw sophiology as at best a fanciful metaphor and at worst a sort of gnostic mythologizing. It was not

[1] Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Joshua Heath, "On Sergii Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*," *Modern Theology* 37.3 (July 2021): 805–23; Joshua Heath, "Sergii Bulgakov's Linguistic Trintarianism", *Modern Theology* 37.4 (Oct. 2021): 888–912.

too difficult for hostile readers (then and now) to interpret him as in thrall to a German Idealist philosophical agenda, and a German Idealism shot through with hermetic and occult elements—the use of Jewish Kabbalistic imagery, myths of the "fall" of Sophia from heaven, a panentheistic idiom that sailed dangerously close to actual pantheism, an obsession with the groundless creativity of the human spirit and much else. Two of the major influences on Bulgakov's religious outlook, Vladimir Solovyev and Pavel Florensky, were certainly deeply marked by that world and its imaginative conventions; and when Bulgakov returned in his twenties to the Christian faith, it was a faith absorbed very much through this medium. The pervasive language about Sophia, the divine Wisdom, served for him as a bridge into a metaphysic centered on the incarnation—as is clear in his first extended work on theological themes, *The Unfading Light*, published in 1917, the year of his ordination as a priest.

Even in this work there are regular references to liturgical texts and copious discussion of biblical material. By the time of the great trilogy, this is even more in evidence; biblical allusions abound, and there is more overt criticism of Idealist philosophy. Despite the accusations that Bulgakov was developing a fundamentally individual perspective on classical Christian doctrine rather than simply expounding the orthodox faith as universally received, it is clear enough that what he *thinks* he is doing is reflecting on the faith and practice of the liturgical community rather than advancing a personal religious philosophy. Vladimir Lossky, in a fiercely critical discussion of Bulgakov in 1936, went so far as to use the word "dilettante" of the older writer's theological approach; the first duty of Bulgakov, as a priest of the Church, is the proclamation of the common tradition, not the creation of speculative systems. But Bulgakov might well have responded that this was what he saw himself as doing, and that the doing of it in the intellectual and political climate of modernity inevitably required the theologian, ordained or not, to ask what sense theology could make of the wider world in which it was set—which, in turn, entailed paying attention to the intellectual currents of that wider world.

Bulgakov, the son of a provincial cleric, had abandoned Christian faith for Marxism in his youth. In his studies and researches, first in Russia, then in Germany, he had won a precocious reputation as a bold and original exponent of Marxist economics. Once he was established in a teaching position in his mid-twenties, however, he became increasingly disaffected with the system he had espoused. As he makes clear in his writings from this period, and in his autobiographical notes, it was not only the theoretical inconsistencies and explanatory weaknesses of Marxism that troubled him: he was concerned about the underlying *anthropology* of both Marxism and its economic critics, concerned about what a much later writer, Herbert Marcuse, would famously call the "one-dimensional man," the *homo economicus*, of both classical and Marxist economic theory.

What brought Bulgakov back to Orthodox Christianity, by way of an engagement with the thinking of Friedrich Schelling and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the religious metaphysics of Solovyev, was the conviction that Christian theology alone could do justice to the liberty of the human subject to remake the world:

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not to subdue and homogenize the world but to devote human freedom to the task of revealing the deep interdependence of created things by way not only of social and economic action but of art and worship. It is this emerging vision of the human that holds together the abundant and diverse work on economics, politics, culture and philosophy that Bulgakov produced between 1903 and 1917. To understand the later dogmatics, we need to remember this perspective: Orthodox Christianity matters intensely for a confused and precarious modernity because it secures the only possible foundation for absolute human dignity and acknowledges the full range of human experience and aspiration. Thus, any adequate dogmatic theology must take the utmost pains to clarify how this is so. It is not, Bulgakov would have argued, a matter of being led by an external agenda; it is to do with the specific ways in which orthodox doctrine can convey good news to the social environment in which it finds itself.

Hence it is fair to say that the speculations of *The Unfading Light* and the intense work on fundamental philosophical issues (much of it published only in fragmentary form) that occupied Bulgakov's energies in the following decade represent a sustained effort to lay the foundations for this task. He is a restless thinker, constantly aware of what has not been said or needs saying differently; but in this stage of his work, he is seeking to elaborate in various ways what it is that is distinctively and undeniably human. He offers analyses of the fundamentals of human self-awareness, and outlines a picture of finite being as, on the one hand, an interdependent *material* reality in which all particular finite agents are bound inseparably together, and, on the other hand, a system always structured by and for conscious intelligence, an intelligence, moreover, that is always in some sense communal and relational. Our basic linguistic practices show us that human behaviour constantly moves in a co-operative pattern in which the speaking self is presupposed on the same basis as other speaking selves and the common world they speak of: they are absolutely simultaneous and mutually implicatory. And further, the way in which our language unites a "what" with a "how," a subject with a predicate, points us to the infinitely fluid medium in which the actualization of possibilities takes place, the fundamental process of energy, actuality, in which no subject or substance is frozen in atomistic self-identity.

These immensely complex and not always consistent accounts of the workings of language and consciousness circle back repeatedly to the idea of a Trinitarian image inscribed in finite being as such: the divine nature, which can never be defined or conceptualised in itself, is the "world" of the divine persons, it is what they communal-

ly, and yet in distinct and multiple activity, know themselves to be, the living essence that they *together* are. And it is this living divine essence, this common "world" of exchange, that Bulgakov ultimately identifies as "Sophia," Wisdom: it is not some kind of actual intermediate being between finite and infinite, let alone a "fourth hypostasis" in God (an implication certainly present in some of his interlocutors like Florensky), but the pattern or structure of identity as constituted in a mutuality that exchanges a diversely activated form of life. In God, this is the unconditional self-emptying (*kenosis*) of love, which obviously can never be objectless. God, we might say, loves to be God; but this divine love is a loving of the sheer difference of that common life as it is lived in eternal diversity. And this loving of irreducible difference is the rationale for the world's existence, a world that is literally infinitely distinct from God but whose inner logic is a recapitulation of the trajectory of eternal love, finding its fullest expression in human awareness and language, which are able to serve and realise the "sophianic" potential—the potential for life-giving interconnectedness—in the entire cosmos through the exercise of art and politics and liturgy.

This is the ambitious background to the more strictly dogmatic work, and the first volume of the great trilogy, dealing with Christology, sets out to show that the classical Chalcedonian formula and its later Byzantine refinements allow us to understand Christ as embodying the union of divine and creaturely Sophia and thus as releasing our own sophianic potential as human agents and sub-creators. As the trilogy unfolds, the sophiological vocabulary becomes more muted: this may be a result of the bitter controversy triggered by the first volume, but it is also as if the sophianic theme has done its work as a vehicle for holding together Trinity, creation, and incarnation. This is why reading Bulgakov solely in the light of his language about Sophia—language which undergoes some dramatic shifts and developments between, say, 1912 and 1936—is to do him a lot less than justice; though the thread that unites his discussions throughout is the conviction of human existence as always already interconnected with the world and as always already engaged so as to transform that interdependent environment. By the time he writes *The Paraclete*—arguably the best-focused and clearest of his major theological works—the theme in the foreground is how the ecclesial body represents what he had already, in *The Lamb of God*, called "the self-revelation of an authentic humanity." And this should be read in tandem with some of the less systematic thoughts about the political realm that he outlines in writings of the late 20s and early 30s.[2] Modernity is increasingly faced with two monstrous social distortions, competitive individualism and forced collectivism, both portending lethal damage to human freedom and communion. Without something like the doctrine of the divine image and the sophianic world of mutuality, these dangerous mythological schemes will claim ultimate eschatological authority; they will claim in effect that history has ended. And the dangers are compounded by the growing power of technology, with the prospect of a "technocratic" elite governing a passive and frustrated population deprived of meaningful transformative labour. The paragraphs in which Bulgakov spells out

[2] See especially "The Soul of Socialism," in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. and trans. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 229–67.

these dangers might have been written yesterday.

So if anyone should ask why Bulgakov is still worth reading—whether or not the sophianic vocabulary is congenial—the answer is surely in these prescient analyses and in the clarity with which he argues that the Church (without having a political manifesto or a political power of coercion) is the necessary critical partner for modern society. He says bluntly that the sin of modern Christianity is its failure to articulate and model social relations that break through the sterile opposition of individualism and state tyranny. But for him that calling to embody a radical alternative sociality depended on grasping that contemporary political clichés actively worked against the truth of human nature and human capacity; it mattered to get the doctrine clear and to trace the connections between metaphysics and the imperatives of common life. He used the language of "Christian humanism" to describe what he saw as a new extrapolation from the historic doctrinal deposit; but there was never any doubt that this deposit was the standard by which he judged the Christianness of any professed humanism.

It is true that he could be critical of some traditional formulations or at least of their incompleteness. He insisted that the Definition of Chalcedon provided an agenda for positive theological labor rather than a final statement of a truth beyond understanding, and he could be quite strongly critical of aspects of fourth century doctrinal language, expressing unease with some of the Cappadocians' ideas about the Trinity and noting the lack of really sustained theological reflection on the Holy Spirit in patristic thought. He offered a perhaps ill-judged defence of Apollinarius in *The Lamb of God*. Lossky had some grounds for seeing Bulgakov as approaching patristic tradition with a somewhat critical and selective eye. But nowhere is there any hint that Bulgakov considered patristic theology overall to be simply mistaken or in need of rethinking: his concern is to make explicit what it gives us implicitly–which sometimes means that the explicit phrasing of the texts we have needs to be qualified, glossed, or tightened in its logic. He might well have argued that this is what patristic writers themselves regularly do: think of Saint Basil on the Holy Spirit, or the careful explanations by Chalcedonians of what Saint Cyril of Alexandria could and could not have meant by speaking of the one "nature" of the Incarnate. And if we were to look for a prototype of philosophical engagement driving theological enquiry, something like Saint Gregory of Nyssa's treatise "On the Soul and the Resurrection" is doing something not at all dissimilar to Bulgakov in many passages of *The Unfading Light*, trying to articulate a coherent anthropology, consistent with Scripture but explicitly addressing current intellectual questioning. Indeed, Lossky's own later essays on the theological concept of the person exhibit a very similar structure, though the philosophy in view is phenomenological or existential rather than Idealist.

In fact, Bulgakov's range of patristic reference is impressive. Well before Saint Maximus the Confessor or Saint Gregory Palamas became standard sources for modern theological development, Bulgakov cited their works: The Unfading Light contains a very insightful overview of the history of apophatic theology, and he clearly sees Palamas as foreshadowing some of his own sophiological thinking. *The Lamb of God* begins with a lengthy

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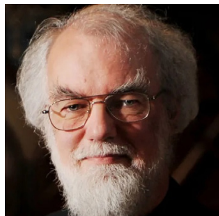
summary of the evolution of patristic Christology (unfortunately omitted from the French translation). But he does not see his task as simply providing commentary on these texts (any more than Lossky does in practice, or even Florovsky, who takes more pains to stay close to the language of the fathers). They are there to "think with" in both senses of the phrase: we think alongside them, looking into the same mystery; we use them as a needful resource to develop our own thinking.

Debate continues in Orthodox circles about the "neopatristic" project and whether it is still a viable vision for modern Orthodox theology. A good many would echo the early and polemical Lossky of 1936 in regarding Bulgakov's style of "thinking with" as a mark of arrogance. But the fact is that anything beyond a mere "theology of repetition," to borrow Florovsky's scornful phrase, is going to require some extrapolations from purely patristic vocabulary. The strength and interest of Bulgakov's work is in the clarity with which he identifies how a traditionally shaped theology can speak into the confusion of modern reflection on the human condition, not simply as a denunciatory critique but as drawing out the implied questions that modernity has lost crucial tools to address. We have seen that he foresaw the dangers of technocratic solutions to social problems; he also attacks the mindset that opposes privileged human consciousness to a passive material world, and offers an ontological perspective that speaks to the heart of our environmental fears and confusions. He exposes the contradictions and inhumanities that fuel capitalism; and he also shares with Dostoevsky a capacity to display with merciless lucidity the self-dramatizing side of revolutionary radicalism and the dangerous vacuity of messianic politics. There are many pages of Bulgakov where readers may think they have wandered into the work of Alasdair MacIntyre or Charles Taylor. Bulgakov will never be an uncontroversial theologian (nor, I think, would he have wanted to be). But as a model for a historically informed, metaphysically grounded, and spiritually oriented theological conversation with the bleak landscapes of late modernity, he sets a very high standard for writing theology that carries good news to the culture. As a thinker—and as a servant of God—he deserves our gratitude and our prayers. Eternal memory! ❃



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