The Autobiographical Element in Sergii Bulgakov's Theology

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Autobiography and theology do not necessarily belong together. There are many theologians who reveal nothing directly of themselves in their writings. There are, however, exceptions, beginning with the Apostle Paul, who reveals something of himself in his letters to the churches. These exceptions do not, so far as I can see, constitute a tradition; they are rather singular, luminous examples. The most famous is Augustine. Although his *Confessions* do not constitute an autobiography, they give us access to his inner life, which can then be discerned in his other works, not least the homilies on the Psalms. Other writers in the West followed, or were inspired by, Augustine's example.

There is, however, little similar in the East, although there are certainly those who reveal something of themselves in some of their works: Gregory the Theologian wrote a long poem *On His Life*, and several other poems are also autobiographical (conveniently collected, with English translation, by Carolinne White). The other Cappadocian Gregory ventures into the autobiographical in his dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, set beside the deathbed of his sister Makrina, though there is dispute over the extent to which this can be regarded as veridical. Symeon the New Theologian speaks in a very personal vein, too. These examples, however, are exceptional; Irénée Hausherr's verdict that Eastern spirituality is averse to autobiography seems valid.

This is not the case with Sergii Bulgakov: an autobiographical element sometimes directly erupts into his theological reflections, right from one of the earliest of his Christian works, *Unfading Light*. Elsewhere, allusions are not difficult to discern. In this way, Bulgakov seems to be entering what is, at least, a Russian tradition, though very likely with roots in the German romanticism that cast such a spell over Solovyev and his disciples. One can detect a similar impulse in his theological mentor (though a younger man), Pavel Florensky, who wrote his early major work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, in the form of letters to a close friend and their common mentor, Vladimir Solovyev. Solovyev was similarly inclined to autobiography, especially in recounting his encounters with Sophia in his poem *Three Encounters*.

It is interesting to note the structure of this poem, for elements of Bulgakov's own biography and sophiology often reflect it, either through mirroring or directly contrasting elements. In the *Three Encounters*, Solovyev first encounters Sophia as the vision of a young woman, in a church service, filling his soul with a sense of azure. His second encounter is in his awareness, while sitting in the reading room of the British Museum in London, of a feminine Sophia, again filling his soul with azure and gold, and urging him to go to Egypt. There, in the Egyptian desert, having been beaten up by Bedouin who mistook him for a demon, Solovyev finds in Sophia the healing and consoling presence of "a single image of all female beauty."

Much of the autobiographical material that we have concerning Bulgakov comes through his friend and disciple Lev Zander, who wrote what is still the fullest account of Bulgakov's thought, *God and the World: The Worldview of Father Sergei Bulgakov*, in 1948. After Bulgakov's death in 1944, Zander published a collection of autobiographical fragments in 1946. Some extracts from them can be found translated into English in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, edited by James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (1976). A French translation by Irène Rovere-Sova and Mireille Rovere-Tsivikis appeared only in 2015 (*Ma Vie dans l'Orthodoxie: Notes autobiographiques*).

The nature of this collection is not entirely clear; Zander says in his foreword, "The present collection contains within itself articles, writings by Father Sergii from different periods and on various occasions and partially published in various editions. In the true meaning of the word this book reveals a 'collection of variegated chapters,' as Father Sergii called his *Unfading Light*." Certainly the *Autobiographical Notes* begin with passages from what would seem to be a journal, but it is often unclear what the context of these extracts is and what else there might be of an autobiographical nature among Bulgakov's unpublished papers and diaries (some of which have since been published). However, we need not concern ourselves too much with this problem, as our focus is on the presence of the autobiographical in Bulgakov's published works: we are concerned less with the *why* of the autobiographical references, but rather *what* they reveal about the nature of his theology.

As we have seen, it is in *Unfading Light* (literally, "the light that knows no evening" or "that never sets," the light of the day that opens on to eternity, the "*anesperon phōs*" of the resurrection that resounds throughout the Orthodox liturgy) that Bulgakov first draws on the experiences he confided to his diary. The first collection of autobiographical reminiscences is called "Calls and Encounters" and is described in a footnote as "from the story of a conversion." It is a long account, consisting of three extracts—a clear allusion to Solovyev's three encounters—from which we can only pick out a few highlights. The first extract talks about the crisis of doubt that marked his passing from childhood, so that

> a kind of gray twilight set in as the light of childhood was fading away. And then unexpectedly this happened . . . . Mysterious calls resounded in my soul and it rushed to meet them. . . .

So Bulgakov looked back on that experience, the experience of a twenty-four-year-old, finding there the beginnings of his return to his ancestral faith: a failed beginning, alas. The account continues with his reflecting on his experience, finding there nostalgia for the lost innocence of childhood. Note, however, that it was an experience of the beauty of *nature*, something that his training in Marxist economics had discouraged him from taking seriously. It is, in fact, Bulgakov's first intimation of Sophia, not, as with Solovyev, as a young and beautiful woman, but as the fashioner of nature (see Prov. 8).

The next extract tells of a later experience during his first "encounter with the West" and what he calls a "sudden, miraculous encounter" with the *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden:

> En route we hurry one foggy autumn morning to do what tourists do and visit the Zwinger with its famous gallery. My knowledge of art was perfectly insignificant and I hardly even knew what awaited me in the gallery. And there, into my soul peered the eyes of the Queen of Heaven approaching on clouds with the Pre-eternal Child. They had the measureless *power of purity and insightful readiness*, knowledge of suffering and readiness for voluntary suffering. [. . .] They know what awaits them. [. . .] She is "to take a sword in the heart"; he goes to Golgotha. . . . I was beside myself, my head was spinning, tears at once joyful and bitter flowed from my eyes, the ice in my heart melted and a kind of knot came undone. This was not an aesthetic emotion, no; it was *an encounter*, a new knowledge, *a miracle*. . . . I was still a Marxist then and I involuntarily called this contemplation *a prayer*, and every morning, aiming to find myself in the Zwinger before anyone else, I ran there, "to pray" and to weep before the face of the Madonna; and there will be few moments in my life more blessed than those tears. . . .[2]

This encounter is indeed an encounter with a woman; not, however, Solovyev's "eternal feminine," but more precisely with the Mother of God, her eyes reaching into his soul, eyes themselves knowing pain and sorrow. Bulgakov cannot but respond; something loosens in his heart; his response is prayer and tears.

In the next section Bulgakov traces his faltering steps toward the faith, describing the sense of powerlessness and unworthiness that barred his way to seeking forgiveness and holy communion. Here he returns to nature, the wild forest of northern Russia; he reaches a final resolution, seemingly by chance, certainly not by his summoning himself to make a decision; rather, it is the words of an elder that bring his heart to repentance, to life: "Autumn. A lonely, forgotten hermitage in the woods. A sunny day and the familiar nature of the north. Confusion and impotence control my soul as before." He comes to the church and then, sensing the coldness of his heart during Vespers, leaves and flees—only to find himself at the cell of the elder, the *starets*: "From the elder I heard that all human sins are like a droplet before the ocean of divine mercy. I left him then, forgiven and at peace, trembling and in tears, feeling myself borne up [. . .] as if on wings."[3] And with that, Bulgakov is now able to receive forgiveness and "taste the most holy Body and Blood of my Lord."[4]

There are two sides to the notion of experience here. On the one hand, the sense of experiencing *something* and trying to make sense of it: the landscape, the painting in the gallery. On the other hand, there is experience in the sense of *an* experience, being the person experiencing this, finding oneself moved, finding an awareness within oneself that seems to come from a depth or sensitivity that one hardly recognizes, that takes one by surprise. This ties in very closely with Bulgakov's twofold conception of Sophia, the

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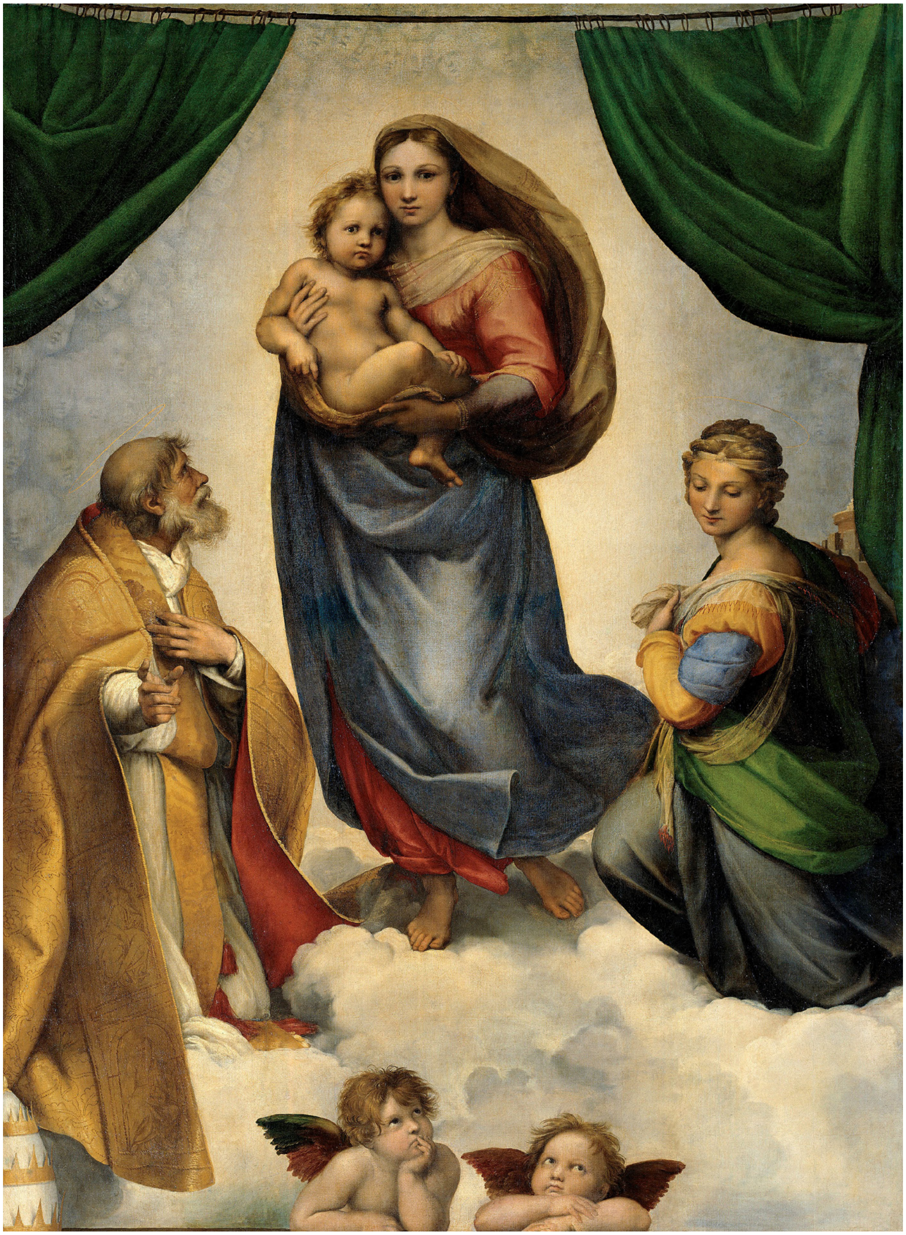
[1] Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 8.

[2] Ibid., 9–10.

[3] Ibid., 11.

[4] Ibid., 12.



Raphael, altarpiece for San Sisto, Piacenza (*Sistine Madonna*), 1513–14. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Wisdom of God: the one through whom God created the world ("O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all," Ps. 103/104:24), but also Wisdom as the one leading us on our way to God. Wisdom or Sophia can be seen as the face God turns to the world, but also the face that the world, through the human, turns to God; both what is experienced, and what makes the experience possible for us.

The next set of experiences evoked in this first chapter of *Unfading Light* belong more to the second category. They are quotations from a "private letter," recalling his experience of the loss of his three-year old son Ivan in 1909:

> My holy one, at the sanctuary of your remains, beside your pure body, my fair one, my radiant boy, I found out *how* God speaks, I understood what "God spoke"

> means! In a new and never-before-known clairvoyance of heart, along with the torment of the cross heavenly joy came down into it, and with the darkness of divine abandonment God reigned in my soul. My heart was opened to the pain and torment of people—hearts until then strange and hence closed were exposed before it with their pain and grief. For the only time in my life I understood what it means *to love* not with a human, self-loving, and mercenary love, but with that divine love with which Christ loves us. It was as if the curtain separating me from others fell and all of the gloom, bitterness, offence, animosity, and suffering in their hearts was revealed to me.[5]

This suffering opens up for Bulgakov a sense of co-humanity, a sense of contact with, openness to, union with the whole of humanity. The experience of suffering was to turn out to be only the beginning of deep, personal suffering for Bulgakov. The decade that followed knew further suffering, of maybe a less intimate kind, but harrowing nonetheless, as he lived through the Bolshevik Revolution and the experience of imprisonment, until he was eventually expelled from the Soviet Union in 1923 as a result of the decree against the non-Bolshevik intelligentsia by Lenin and Trotsky. On arrival in Constantinople, he was diagnosed as suffering from sclerosis, which manifested itself in a profound heart attack from which he nearly died in 1926, not long after his arrival in Paris. This experience made a profound impression on Bulgakov, for he retained a vivid sense of this near-death experience, writing about it in a piece called "The Sophiology of Death" that was published posthumously in later editions of *Quiet Thoughts*. However, he included an excerpt from this piece in the last volume of his little trilogy, *Jacob's Ladder*, published in 1929 very soon after this near-death experience. *Jacob's Ladder* is on the angels, and there in the introductory chapter, he discusses the experience of death, or in this case, near-death. His immediate point is that, though death is an experience we undertake on our own, in a more profound sense, in dying we experience in a new way the presence of our guardian angel. The aloneness is experienced as the presence of sin, separating us from our fellow humans, the sense of being in a fiery furnace, in which one would naturally be consumed and perish, and yet there was a certain coolness, as with the three holy children in the furnace, a coolness associated with the presence of his guardian angel—and in this coolness, Father Sergii sensed "*forgiveness*, its measureless lightness and joy." Bulgakov goes on to write about his sense of aloneness, and yet at the same time his sense of the presence of those who were gathered about his bed (his deathbed, as they thought; they had already begun the prayers for the departed), though he was unable to communicate with them.

> I was calling loved ones to myself, as if I was touching them spiritually, those long dead as well as the living, one after the other. I was being moved where I wanted to go. And over everything the presence of God reigned. . . . Then by some sort of interior command, I moved forward, from this world to there—to God. [. . .] The ineffable lights of God's approach began to blaze, the horizon grew brighter, the joy even more indescribable: "it is not for a human to say."

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[5] Ibid., 14.

> At that time the voice of a *companion* sounded within—I was not alone but together with my own other I; it was my guardian angel. He told me that we had gone too far ahead and it was necessary to return . . . to life. I understood and heard with my inner hearing that the Lord was bringing me back to life, and I was recovering.[6]

This near-death experience remained with Bulgakov for the rest of his life. He had been sent back to life, after a very close brush with death. Sister Ioanna Reitlinger speaks of the way in which "the *concrete* thought of his possible imminent death was henceforth Father Sergii's constant companion, though, physically, this was, of course, only the beginning of his illness." She goes on: "I remember many a liturgy that he performed as if it were his last; in fact, he summoned me to attend many liturgies as if 'they might be his last.'" Furthermore, she reflects,

> Perhaps, this *memento mori* gave a peculiar acuteness to his peering into God's mysteries, to his inquiring theology. In particular, it gave an acuteness to his conscience, which he would painstakingly examine. After any little quarrel, such as all of us have, he would say: "May the sun not set on our anger." In the evening, Father Sergei would always seek a full reconciliation: "This night you may die," said his inner voice. The *memento mori* would also give a special rhythm to his whole life. He never put anything off; he always lived the *present* moment to the full, as befits a true Christian.[7]

Here, in his experience of suffering and near death—both in his pondering on the death of his young son and in his own experience of illness and the constant threat of illness—we can find some of the central themes of Bulgakov's mature Christian theology: his conviction of abandonment, *kenosis*, as integral to what it means to be the divine, so that in the incarnation and on the cross the Word reveals what it is to be divine, rather than putting aside his divinity in order to experience being human; the way in which suffering opens up in the human heart a sensitivity to the pain and torment many carry in their hearts; and, above all, the deepest meaning of forgiveness, which dismantles the barriers that humans have erected to shield themselves from others, thus fragmenting the oneness in which humankind is created.

Toward the end of the *Autobiographical Notes*, there is an account ("My Illness") in which Bulgakov wrote of his experience of the operations to remove a cancer from his throat. The second operation took place during Holy Week, coloring his reflections on what was happening. Of his experience after the larynx had been removed, Bulgakov writes:

> A disgusting tube was stuck into my nose, through which some nasty liquid was poured in. "'I thirst.' And they gave him vinegar to drink." The most agonizing part of it all was not pain but breathlessness, absence of air, together with mortal, unendurable weakness. I had several attacks of terrible, deadly breathlessness—chiefly at night—when in fact I was on the point of death. [. . .] I was plunged into a kind of darkness and lost the sense of space and time; I only vaguely remembered that it was Holy Week and that Good Friday and Lady Day

[7] From Sister Ioanna Reitlinger's account of the final days of Father Sergii Bulgakov in *Sergius Bulgakov: Apocatastasis and Transfiguration*, trans. Boris Jakim (New Haven: The Variable Press, 1995), 33.

[6] Sergius Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder: On Angels*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 19.

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> were at hand. I was chronologically aware that Easter came, received Easter greetings, but the Gethsemane darkness was not dispelled and was unendurable; there was no Easter joy for the dying man to whom it was not given to taste death. No, there was no nearness of death, but mere dying. [. . .]
>
> There was no more prayer as a way of ascending to God, just as there was no ascending for the "forsaken." There was a joyless night without dawn, without morning. There remained a sense of physical suffering, but even this paled by comparison with the general sense of having lost the power of spirit, of being forsaken; that, perhaps, was the most terrible of all.[8]

For Bulgakov, there is no easy consolation, only hard-won endurance, and despite his resistance to easy clichés of transcendence through suffering, his voice is not one of despair but of faith—a faith not easily attained.

It is striking that this second operation took place during Great and Holy Week, of which he was aware, calendrically, so to speak, but held back in what the Russians call *Strastnaya Nedelya*—the "Week of Suffering"—aware that he could not pass onward to the joy of the resurrection. Bulgakov senses his sharing in Christ's thirst, but even more tangible to him is the terrible breathlessness of one barely supporting himself by his arms nailed to the cross, and a deep sense of being "forsaken." It is the "Gethsemane darkness," the ultimate moment of *kenosis*, that Bulgakov is most conscious of. Easter joy is not denied, but it is not within the grasp of the dying man. It is not something that he can know. At this point he can only believe from the furthest point of forsakenness.

It is this very forsakenness, this ever-presence of death's dark reality, lived out in his own life, that permeates Bulgakov's theological contribution and imparts a uniquely incarnational quality to his reflections on God and man. ❃

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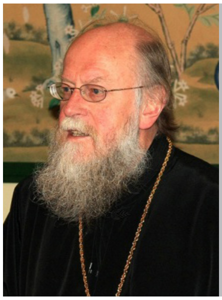
[8] Sergius Bulgakov, *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicholas Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), 23–24.



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