

The Sophianic Spirituality of Father Sergii Bulgakov

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Sergii Bulgakov's great love for the biblical figure of Sophia, or holy Wisdom, a love that shines from so many of his writings, was a natural outworking of his life's journey as a priest and spiritual father.¹ Bulgakov was an accomplished scholar, to be sure, but he was also a dedicated pastor. When Alexander Schmemmann described Bulgakov's three finest qualities, he introduced him first and foremost not as a distinguished professor or a great thinker, but as a human being: for Schmemmann, Bulgakov was "simply a Russian priest—or even a village spiritual father."² Bulgakov went on to become a devoted spiritual father to many Christian disciples, among them Elizaveta (Liza) Skobtsova (the future Mother Maria) and the artist Julia Nikolaevna Reitlinger (later the icon painter Sister Ioanna). He was also spiritual father to Georges Florovsky during Florovsky's exile in Prague. Rather than impose his authority on his disciples, Bulgakov respected their individuality and supported their freedom and natural gifts. His reflections on holy Wisdom led him to see the spiritual journey as an open, dynamic, and creative process of deification based on freedom and love, a vision that would become problematic for church officialdom and its view of orthodox (and indeed Orthodox) dogmatic theology. Bulgakov's

non-authoritarian and non-fundamentalist approach to spiritual experience—both his own experience and that of others—arose from a sophianic understanding of the world that rejected atomization and all forms of extremism in favor of unity and integrity.

A Polyphonic Understanding of Truth

What was it that made Bulgakov such a sought-after spiritual father? What were his principal spiritual qualities, and what were their theological roots? Bulgakov's open approach to spirituality grew out of his understanding of truth: Truth, as identified with God and understood in creation, is always a plurality. Here Bulgakov followed the tradition of Vladimir Solovyev and his close friend Pavel Florensky, who saw Truth as a reconciliation of opposites rather than a monolith. Borrowing a term from Kant, Bulgakov described three kinds of "antinomy" or contradiction: theological antinomy, in which God is both the untouchable Absolute, the Nothingness, but also, in the Holy Trinity, relational life itself; cosmological antinomy, where God is both wholly outside of creation, but, having created the world, is intimately related to it; and sophiological antinomy, where Sophia is both uncreated Wisdom, the divine life in fullness and

¹ The writing of this paper was supported by Research Centre 204052 at Charles University, Prague.

² Alexander Schmemmann, "Три образа," *Вестник РСХД* 101–2 (1971): 13. Translation mine.

perfection, and created Wisdom, the divinity of God in the world.³

These antinomies were not mere academic concepts. For Bulgakov, they provided a spiritual and existential way of grasping important theological realities: the reality of God, others, and the whole of creation as a dynamic and unfinished space for co-operation between human beings and God; and the reality of the Chalcedonian dogma as understood by Florensky, that is, the paradoxical reality of the Incarnation, of Jesus Christ, in whom two natures—the divine and the human—are both fully present. And if there is something divine in humanity, there is also something human in divinity, and this in turn affects how human beings can know God. Such a view considers the apophatic way, in which God is beyond all human definition, to be insufficient. To take seriously the cataphatic way, the fact that people can know God through their concepts and ideas, is to understand the influence of human nature on the divine nature in Jesus Christ. The relationship between the two natures expresses the fundamental truth that Christianity cannot avoid incarnation, cannot avoid corporeality, or the materiality of the world, and cannot avoid the notion that the Creator has a relationship with creation, that cosmic reality is both historical and embodied.

It is this epistemological key of the antinomical principle that provides the foundation for Bulgakov's theology and spiritual life. It also helped him to understand the boundary between the iconic perception of reality, in which the transcendent and immanent realms co-exist, and the idoloc view that separates these realities and closes them in themselves.

Not a Human Caricature but the Image of God

The concept of antinomy was also reflected in Bulgakov's theological anthropology and in his practical and personal approach to his spiritual children. For Bulgakov, the biblical account of the creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26) carried ontological meaning. The image of God saturates every person's humanity and cannot be destroyed by any sin, even original sin. Moreover, this likeness to God applies to the whole person, not just to one part, such as free will or the ability to reason.⁴ Here was the theoretical and theological source of Bulgakov's open and caring attitude toward other people and their spiritual journeys, his refusal to narrow anyone down to a single path.

This belief in the *corporeality* of the image of God in people led Bulgakov to respect the unique nature of each person's spiritual journey as embodied in that individual's personal, historical, and cultural context. It also led him to follow the patristic idea that people are microcosms inseparably linked to the macrocosm, that people are interconnected with the rest of creation, including the plant and animal kingdoms—all while acknowledging that it is people alone who carry the spark of divine Spirit, which obliges them not to lord it as masters of creation but to manifest their true humanity and humility.⁵ These principles enabled him to recognize and receive other people in their individual realities, without imposing idealistic demands they could not fulfill and without seeing their corporeality as an obstacle to reaching unity with God, other people, and the rest of creation.

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³ Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 35.

⁴ Sergii Bulgakov, "Об Откровении," *Вестник РСХД* 140 (1983): 8.

⁵ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 153.

At the same time, Bulgakov's holistic notion of the image of God in the human person ruled out any attempt to relate that image to the body alone. He interpreted the creation of human beings according to a twofold divine image of man and woman (Gen. 1:27). The mutual love between man and woman led Bulgakov to reject those hierarchical interpretations prevalent in Christian tradition that suggested that because man was chronologically first, he was ontologically higher. Instead, Bulgakov's theological anthropology held that on the level of the psyche and the human heart, the first man, Adam, was androgynous—a notion that already existed in Russian religious thought, particularly in the work of Vladimir Solovyev and Nikolai Berdyaev. Bulgakov identified the masculine element of this dual human nature with Jesus Christ and the feminine with God's mother: "In his genuine and innermost being each man is the Child-Mother, Christ-Mary."⁶ In everyone's soul is a desire to give birth to divine Logos, and in everyone's heart to love as God's mother.

This androgynous image of God's mother and her Son was adopted and developed by Bulgakov's spiritual daughter, Mother Maria Skobtsova, as the starting point for her understanding of human solidarity: "Both the Son of God and his mother are age-old archetypes, symbols by which the soul orients itself on its religious path. In this sense it should imitate not only Christ but also the mother of God."⁷ Following this twofold path means both freely choosing our own cross and helping others with theirs. This broader interpretation of God's image in human beings enabled Bulgakov to receive people into his pastoral care without having to consider various notions of hierar-

chy—including gender—or to "iron out" the psychological complexities that are a natural part of everyone's spiritual journey.

From Icons to the Iconization of the World

Bulgakov's interpretation of the image of God as an ontologically given state, as the breath of God given to every individual at the event of creation, provided theological grounding for his deep respect for human beings and his commitment to caring for others. Diary entries from his time in Prague, where he lived between 1923 and 1925 before settling in Paris, are full of references to love—God's love for people and people's love for God and each other. In the modern world, love can become an empty word, a nostalgic or wistful cliché, but for Bulgakov, Love—with a capital L—was the *ousia* of God, the fullness of the loving relationships between the three persons of the Trinity. Human beings were created out of and through this love, which is the highest beatitude, the greatest gift that God gives to people. The fullness of loving relationships points both to people's original state and to their ultimate purpose: it is both the *arche* of their journey and the final *telos*.

Freedom and creativity also play an important role in this journey between *arche* and *telos*—that is, in the process of deification. Bulgakov cherished these two qualities as part of the image of God in the people he met. His appreciation of the human ability to create with God led him to encourage his spiritual children to realize their natural gifts rather than be passive instruments, either of him as their spiritual father or of God as a kind of dictator. Each person is called to make the world more human in the way he

⁶ Sergii Bulgakov, "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*," trans. A. F. Dobbie Bateman et al., *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49.1-2 (2005): 36.

⁷ Mother Maria Skobtsova, "On the Imitation of the Mother of God," in *Essential Writings*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 70.

or she alone can, a way that reflects his or her unique and original character. Here, Bulgakov broadens the classical concept of icon. People are not only icons. Rather, made in the image of God, they are able “to see the images [zoón eikonikon] and . . . also create them [zoón poiētikon].”⁸ People do not only perceive, reflect upon, and reproduce icons, they also take an active part in the iconization of the world, seeing in things their true being and meaning, and linking them with eternity. Bulgakov was aware, moreover, that iconization is not simply a human activity, but is possible only because of the world’s sophianic substance.⁹

The iconizing of the world concerns all human creativity, including icon painting, art in general, and all other processes in which God and people co-create and, in so doing, reveal the original beauty of the Wisdom of God through which the world was created. This theological reflection had a material effect on Bulgakov’s relationship with his spiritual daughter Julia (later Sister Ioanna) Reitlinger, whose highly original artistic vision and creativity he actively encouraged, as we read in their mutual correspondence.¹⁰

The process of iconization also relates to the realm of church tradition and is reflected in Bulgakov’s view of how tradition was perceived and lived by his spiritual children. Bulgakov’s understanding of the co-existence of the transcendent and the immanent, of the unity (rather than duality) of God and the world, led him to a dynamic understanding of tradition that always accounted for cultural and historical context. Like icon painting, tradition is not static but always bears traces of creativity, of the personal touch. It is not a closed system but an organic process in which God and

human beings cooperate. It cannot be mechanically transmitted, copied, or repeated as it relies on the spiritual experience of every individual: “The life of the Church is never exhausted by the past; it has a present and a future and is always moved by the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

Sister Joanna shared this understanding: tradition must respect our ancestors but acknowledge all the same that their world was different from ours. Based on her belief that creativity and inspiration belong to the sphere of human cooperation with God, Sister Joanna developed, in exile, a new and creative form of icon painting incorporating elements from the Symbolists, which enriched many liturgical spaces and the spiritual and ecclesial life of countless believers. The same notion of tradition was also held, at least initially, by Bulgakov’s spiritual son Georges Florovsky. Later, however, Florovsky’s concept of returning to the tradition of the fathers created a new normative system, in which plurality and the creative potential

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Father Sergii Bulgakov and Julia Nikolaevna Reitlinger.

⁸ Bulgakov, *Icons*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ Julia Reitlinger and Sergii Bulgakov, *Диалог художника и богослова. Дневники. Записные книжки. Письма* (Moscow: Никея, 2011).

¹¹ Bulgakov, *Icons*, 74.

of the contemporary context were underestimated and underplayed.¹²

Bulgakov's broader understanding of God's image in people as dynamic, that is, as the human ability to co-create with God, helped him to see the spiritual journey as a process, as something unfinished, and as something that did not have to follow any pre-set model. In the iconization of the world, human existence enters a real dialogue with the world, in real time and space, and in the same time as God and eternity. It excludes the extreme dualism in which people are simply passive recipients of God's rule, which can so often be replaced in the church by the figure of the priest. Bulgakov's emphasis on iconization shows his deep conviction that the world is still God's creation, and that the sophianic structure by which the world and people were created still shines in and through them as God's glory. It also expresses his understanding that God's love in no way suppresses human creative freedom.

"Three Visions" of Bulgakov

It was already noted that, of Schmemmann's three accounts of Bulgakov,

the first was as a priest and spiritual father. Schmemmann's other two comments in praise of Bulgakov fill out this first one: Bulgakov was, second, a liturgist, but one who truly lived his life liturgically; and finally, he was a deeply spiritual man who viewed reality from an eschatological perspective.¹³ When Schmemmann witnessed Bulgakov celebrating the liturgy, he saw not just a service but a genuine celebration, a natural extension of Bulgakov's spiritual journey. This journey was rooted in a sophianic understanding of reality in which each person is seen as God's image, as a complex original, as an embodied existence bearing the divine spark—not a mere instrument of God, but someone called to cooperate with God in the iconization of the world and to appreciate the beauty and poetic meaning revealed in all creation, including liturgical celebration. This celebration provided Bulgakov with a means of connecting with creation, always with the awareness, nonetheless, that spiritual life includes the joyful expectation of hope for the future, and that this hope, this anticipation, offers us a wholly different perspective. ✱

¹² See Ivana Noble, "The Neo-Patristic Synthesis," in Ivana Noble et al., *Wrestling with the Mind of the Fathers* (SVS Press, 2015), 35.

¹³ Schmemmann, "Три образа," 16, 19.



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