

## Theosis in Bulgakov: The Fulfillment of Creation's Sophianicity

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*Theosis* is defined by Dionysius the Areopagite as “the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as possible.”<sup>1</sup> Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov came to his mature understanding of theosis as a result of a personal spiritual journey that took him from Marxist materialism (although he was to deny that he had ever been an atheist), via German philosophical idealism, to a recovery of the Church’s faith strongly colored by the sophiology of Vladimir Solovyev. Unlike his friend and mentor Pavel Florensky, Bulgakov was not a graduate of one of the theological academies, the Russian Orthodox Church’s institutions of higher theological studies. His early work was in economics and was strongly influenced by Marxist theory. Yet by the time he was appointed professor of political economy at the Kiev Polytechnical Institute in 1901, he was already moving away from Marxism, under the influence of Neo-Kantianism. By 1902, he had discovered Solovyev, who showed him a way of integrating the spiritual realm with the material, and he began to immerse himself in the study of the Greek church fathers. This spiritual evolution gave rise to the two books with theosis as a major theme that were published before Bulgakov was expelled from Soviet Russia in 1922: *Philosophy of Economy* (1912) and *Unfading Light* (1917).

Although theologically an autodidact, Bulgakov did not work in a vacuum. He was a prominent participant in the Russian Religious Renaissance of the last three decades of the “long” nineteenth century, a renaissance that was itself part of the broader movement of cultural and intellectual ferment in the visual arts, literature, music, and philosophy that characterized the Russian Silver Age (1890–1917). Religious searching and independent philosophical thinking were part of the air Bulgakov breathed.

*Philosophy of Economy* came at a stage when Bulgakov had already abandoned Marxist materialism. Moreover, his growing dissatisfaction with the Neo-Kantianism he had adopted instead was leading him to reengage with the Orthodoxy of his youth in an attempt to give spiritual and philosophical meaning to economic endeavor beyond the nineteenth-century idea of progress or the pragmatic pursuit of power through wealth. Theosis lies at the center of this enterprise because, in Bulgakov’s mind, seeking deification and engaging in economic activity are both concerned, on different levels, with the struggle for survival, with the assertion of life against death.<sup>2</sup> In articulating this conviction, Bulgakov draws principally on the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm

<sup>1</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86), 3:376a. Bulgakov consistently uses the Russian term *obozheniia* rather than the Greek *theosis*.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 152–55; also see Boris Jakim, “Sergius Bulgakov: Russian Theosis,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 250–58.

Joseph Schelling, which, following the model of Vladimir Solovyev, he combines with insights derived from the Greek patristic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Two elements of Schelling's philosophy in particular are important to Bulgakov: the identity of spirit and matter and the ontological status of nature as an animate being that realizes itself by producing subjectivity. The first element is a counter-proposal to Kant's dualism contrasting things as they are in themselves with their appearances, which are all we actually know; the second combats the monism that results from the denial of dualism (the problem of how the One is also the many). Nature in Schelling becomes an absolute producing subject, a unified organism, which Bulgakov adopts and correlates with Sophia, the hypostatized divine Wisdom of the Greek Old Testament: "Sophia reconciles the world to the Absolute by restoring the unity-in-difference of matter and spirit."<sup>4</sup> The world is in need of reconciliation because the original unity of the divine Ideas was broken by the emergence of finite particulars through the exercise of freedom by the Ideas. This is correlated by Schelling with the fall, which he sees not as a historical but as a metaphysical event, the incarnation then taking place historically in order to restore the broken bond between spirit and nature. Bulgakov believed that "Schelling expressed one of the most fundamental truths of Christianity in the philosophical language of his time," namely, the unity of flesh and spirit that "is the basis for the doctrine that the human incarnation of God brought about a potential divinisation of the flesh."<sup>5</sup> Bulgakov thus sees Schelling's principal insight as a philosophical restatement of the "exchange formula" that we find in the

Greek patristic tradition (and also in Augustine): God became human that we might become divine, which for Bulgakov is the realization of the potential divinity in humanity through our participation in Sophia.

When Bulgakov returns to the theme of deification five years later in *Unfading Light*, he shows a greater familiarity with the patristic tradition. The Russian Silver Age was an era of impressive achievements in patristic study, mainly through work carried out in the theological academies of Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, and Kazan. All the important church fathers had by then been translated into Russian. Landmark publications cited by Bulgakov in *Unfading Light* include Aleksandr Brilliantov, *The Influence of Eastern Theology on Western Theology in the Works of John Scotus Eriugena*; Bishop Aleksii, *Byzantine Church Mystics of the Fourteenth Century*; and Sergei Epifanovich, *St. Maximus the Confessor and Byzantine Theology*. Curiously, Bulgakov does not mention Ivan Popov, whose groundbreaking study, "The Idea of Deification in the Early Eastern Church," published in 1909, was the first examination of the origins of Christian thinking on deification by a modern Orthodox scholar, but its influence is still apparent<sup>6</sup>. Popov distinguishes between a "realistic" and an "idealistic" form of deification. In Popov's terms, Bulgakov's focus in *Unfading Light* is squarely on the idealistic form, with its emphasis on the Platonic notion of participation.

*Unfading Light* is divided into three sections, each considering from a different angle how the transcendent and the immanent are bridged in human experience. The first sec-

<sup>3</sup> Coates, *Deification*, 142, n. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Coates, *Deification*, 146. Coates points out that the concept of Sophia first appears in Bulgakov in his *Philosophy of Economy*.

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 87; cited (modified) in Coates, *Deification*, 155.

<sup>6</sup> I. V. Popov, "The Idea of Deification in the Early Eastern Church," trans. Boris Jakim, in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 42–82.

tion, on “divine nothing,” is on apophatic theology, which alone can express the transcendent with any adequacy. The second, on “the world,” discusses how divine Sophia, by virtue of her dual nature, mediates between the absolute and the contingent, making the transcendent immanent. Turning to the contingent, Bulgakov sees creation as “the self-bifurcation of the Absolute . . . the sacrifice of the Absolute for the sake of the relative, which becomes for it ‘other’ [*that-eron*], a creative sacrifice of love.”<sup>7</sup> Creation thus entails a self-renunciation by God in order that the relative, while remaining relative, may come to participate in the freedom of the Absolute. In the third section, on “the human being,” Bulgakov turns to the biblical account of creation with a commentary on the first chapter of Genesis. He opens his account with a citation of John 10:34, where the Savior quotes Psalm 81/82: “I say, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.’” Bulgakov interprets this as a programmatic statement of the divine origin of humanity and its ultimate return to union with God. Adam before the fall represents the human being as simultaneously a creature and not a creature: “the absolute in the relative and the relative in the absolute.” It is the divine potential in humanity that makes it capable of divinization. This also has implications for the incarnation of the Word. As Bulgakov puts it: “Neither the inhumanization of God nor the divinization of the human would be possible if the very nature of the human was not deiform and receptive of God.”<sup>8</sup> This is the truth encapsulated in the assertion of Genesis 1:26 that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God.

Following Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus, Bulgakov makes a distinction between the image and the likeness. In a sense “the world is God *in process*” as the initial image develops to become the full likeness.<sup>9</sup> The details of Adam’s life in Paradise stand for stages in the growth of self-awareness. The first stage, the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17), is God’s awakening in the creature the recognition of its creaturely freedom. The second, the naming of the animals, is the establishing of self-definition with regard to all living things. The last stage, the temptation of Adam, is his being prompted to misuse his “theophoric dignity,” to seize divinity by an act of will before the proper time, for humanity was not yet ready to participate in the freedom of the Absolute, which is the full realization of the likeness.

The fall inhibited but did not annul the destiny of human beings to become “gods by grace.” The creation of the world was a kenotic act of love, God’s free limitation of his own omnipotence which included the kenotic act of divine incarnation as a pre-eternal decision to recreate humankind in Christ in order that it might come to share in the life of the Godhead. Christ became “the deep foundation, the most intimate essence of humankind,” and through his obedience to the Father, even to the cross, raised it by his sacrificial struggle to a level it could not have attained by itself: “the divinization of humanity can by no means be achieved through the path of evolution.”<sup>10</sup>

In *Unfading Light* Bulgakov conducts his discussion of theosis on the level of philosophy, which, of course,

<sup>7</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. and ed. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 185.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 348, 351.

in the Orthodox context does not exclude theology. Yet for a fuller consideration of the theological dimension we need to turn to the great masterpiece of Bulgakov's maturity, the trilogy *On Divine Humanity*, divided into volumes on Christ (*The Lamb of God*, 1933), the Holy Spirit (*The Comforter*, 1936), and the Church (*The Bride of the Lamb*, 1945).

The first volume, *The Lamb of God*, reveals that Bulgakov undertook a thorough study of the Christological tradition of the Fathers only to find it wanting. In his view, patristic theology failed to arrive at a coherent doctrine of the incarnation: "It knew only God and man, divinity and humanity, outwardly conjoined but not inwardly united."<sup>11</sup> He reserves his most severe criticism for John of Damascus, whose interpretation of divine-human action is simply "a variant of monophysitism" and whose discussion of the divine and human wills in Christ is "a series of nearly incoherent and even divergent propositions."<sup>12</sup> Suspicious of what he calls Cyril of Alexandria's "obstinate monism," Bulgakov is impressed by Nestorius' understanding of "bi-unity as a unity not of natures but of their personal centers."<sup>13</sup> This leads him to his own "sophiological" solution to the problem of how divinity and humanity are inwardly united in Christ. With the dual aspect of Sophia, both created and uncreated, he attempts to give an ontological foundation for the incarnation. He is attracted to the expression "theandric energy" (a term found in John of Damascus's *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*), which he thinks goes some way to elucidating "the mode of the union of the natures in relation to the one hypostasis."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, given the creation of humanity in the divine image, the human itself is

theandric, presaging the incarnation from the beginning:

Man is created as the god-man in the sense that, in his creaturely psycho-corporeal essence, he contains a spirit of divine origin. In the God-Man this spirit is the Logos Himself. And if the uncreated-created human spirit is open for the reception of divine life, for deification, for communion with the divine nature, then in the God-Man this divine nature exists, from the beginning, without separation from the hypostasis.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, humanity was created in the divine image precisely in order to be a receptacle for the inhomination of God. Humanity is the creaturely Sophia with which the Divine Sophia is able to unite herself because both are different sides of the same reality. The deification of Christ's human nature is distinguished from the deification of the creature "by the fact that the creature receives it as the supernatural, grace-bestowing principle of life, whereas the Son only returns to the heaven he voluntarily abandoned, to his proper natural consciousness of himself."<sup>16</sup>

The second work of the trilogy, *The Comforter*, has little to say about deification beyond the claim that the descent of the Holy Spirit fulfills and continues the work of the incarnation with the aim of bringing about the deification of all creation.<sup>17</sup> The universality of deification is a theme that becomes prominent in the final work, *The Bride of the Lamb*. For Bulgakov, "the ontological possibility of 'salvation' through deification is predetermined by the very creation of man in the image of God."<sup>18</sup> Here Bulgakov

<sup>11</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 210. Bulgakov ignores John of Damascus's use of the concept of *perichoresis* to express the dynamic interpenetration of Christ's human and divine natures and the relationship between the divine hypostases in the Trinity.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 210, 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>17</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 278.

<sup>18</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 203.



distinguishes between natural grace and divine grace. Natural grace is entailed by creation; it is that which keeps creatures from sinking into “the abyss of *nothing*.” Divine grace is “precisely the power of deification, in which creation surpasses itself in man, transcends the bounds of natural or physico-sophianic being, and acquires the power of new sophianization by receiving the principles of divine life in divine-humanity.”<sup>19</sup> The goal is the deification of the whole of humankind. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost “lays the foundation not only for the world’s being but also for the world’s deification through the penetration of the creaturely Sophia by the divine Sophia.” Eternal life is a dynamic, actualized

sophianization. Bulgakov then (but without discussing the role of human freedom) goes on to refute the idea of eternal damnation: “Can the sophianization of creation in resurrection fail to be accomplished?” It is not surprising that his most quoted patristic authors in this work are Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Isaac the Syrian.

Bulgakov is not directly concerned in his writings with the journey to deification by the individual believer. Theosis is a structural element in his theological vision: the creation of humanity in God’s image both as the preparation for the incarnation—Bulgakov goes so far as to speak of Christ as “a maximally deified Man, in whom the entire fullness of divinity abided bodily”—and as the condition of humanity’s reception of divine life by grace. Bulgakov’s preferred way of speaking of this reception is in terms of the sophianicity of creation and of the coming together in deified humanity of the creaturely and the divine Sophia. It is a theological vision of great power, which although ignored for many decades is again receiving serious attention. Despite some aspects that are questionable from the neopatristic viewpoint, it has the potential through its philosophical coherence to enrich our understanding of the concept of theosis. \*

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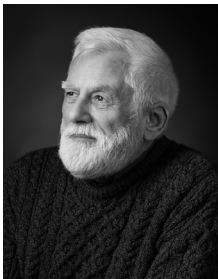
The Transfiguration.  
Icon by Theophanes  
the Greek, early  
15th century. State  
Tretyakov Gallery,  
Moscow.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>22</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *Relics and Miracles: Two Theological Essays*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 88.



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