

The Revolutionary Spirit of Revelation: Sergii Bulgakov's Personalist Sociology

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During World War II, toward the end of his life, Sergii Bulgakov spoke about the “revolutionary spirit of Revelation.” With this phrase, he meant that divine “judgement is not only on individual persons, but also on the social and political system, all kinds of despotism, both state and economic. This is characteristic of [. . .] the revolutionary spirit of Revelation [which] takes on a somewhat political character—vengeance for all kinds of violence done by man to man, [not only] related to persecution of religion and its adherents, but to all who have died from any form of bourgeois-political terror.”¹ In this context, any regime that does not seek social justice but preserves privileges for a few by oppressing many is “bourgeois-political.” Bulgakov’s sociopolitical ideal was to unite “personal freedom in all of its distinctiveness with a uniform order equal for everyone.”² His passionate commitment to guaranteed freedom, social justice, democracy, legality, and human rights is witnessed in many texts from his early career as professor of political economy, such as this little-known one from 1906:

There is only one way to save Russia: to put it on the path of truth and law, to correct the moral dislocation, to improve the sources of life, to turn it into a legal state, to make the kingdom of evil into a kingdom of truth. [. . .] To give

force to the law and eliminate arbitrariness, to secure freedom and put it in a legally defined framework, and to give it lasting guarantees—this is the job that belongs above all to popular representation. [. . .] For this purpose, [the State Duma] must ensure and strengthen by law the rights of man and citizen, as natural and inalienable rights.³

Bulgakov insisted on the importance of the rule of law and human rights, because without them, any political system—not only a monarchy or a socialist state but even a democracy—could become a merciless tyranny of the majority.⁴ These views were rather unusual among Russian religious thinkers, who often followed the condescending Slavophile attitude toward Roman law or even Tolstoy’s legal nihilism. But, following in Vladimir Solovyev’s footsteps, Bulgakov did not think of human rights as a specifically Western concept, but rather as a profoundly Christian one. He claimed that, “having found the source of human rights in the divine dignity of the human person, Christianity thereby affirmed the rights of the citizen,” and should “guard the human person’s natural and sacred rights to freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of association among people, or, put in another way, freedom of alliances and gatherings, and so on, and

¹ Sergii Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2019), 146.

² Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 408.

³ Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 408.

⁴ Regula M. Zwahlen, “Sergii Bulgakov’s Reinvention of Theocracy for a Democratic Age,” *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 3.2 (2020): 176.

must exclude class and other privileges, which destroy legal equality among people. These rights must be an axiom of Christian politics.”⁵

Bulgakov never took back his early words and writings. In the autobiographical notes he wrote in 1939, Bulgakov proclaimed his “progressive” principles of freedom and human dignity to be irreconcilable with any kind of “totalitarianism.” This is significant because in today’s Russian context, *progressive* is synonymous with *liberal*, and Bulgakov explicitly did “not even want to deny that word.”⁶ Furthermore, his view that the Church should retain its inner freedom and endorse political reform or even revolution, if power was abused and not applied to promote the welfare of the people, never changed.⁷ He was deeply convinced that the rise of both Marxist communism and National Socialism was caused, among other factors, by the Church’s neglect of the social question.

Revolution and Revelation

In his 1927–28 lectures on Christian sociology in Paris, Bulgakov taught that “at the Last Judgment, the Lord will ask us what we have done in our own times, in our circumstances,” and insisted on the freedom and responsibility of each person. We will be asked about what we did in order to realize our own (and others’) spiritual freedom and individual talents (Matt. 25:14–30) despite any given circumstances or necessity: “at the Last Judgment there will be no question about external circumstances, but about our self-determination on the basis of each one’s freedom.”⁸ Overcoming present social and material circumstances defines Bulgakov’s concept of human freedom: “It remains true that the human makes his

history, although he does not make it out of nothing but out of indirect and resisting material [. . .]. Whatever layers of passive matter we uncover in our [economic] studies, the only active, truly creative force remains the spirit, which breaks through these obstacles, overcomes them, and in this victory becomes aware of itself [. . .]. What is truly creative in history belongs of course to the human spirit in its living and therefore concrete self-determination; the nature of the spirit is freedom. History in this sense is a free act, a work, a feat of humanity.”⁹ In short, unconvinced by Marxist historical materialism, Bulgakov claimed that social progress was not a law of historical development, but a moral task of human freedom and culture.¹⁰

Even ten years after the 1917 revolution, Bulgakov would not disavow the concept of revolution itself, despite preferring peaceful reforms.¹¹ During a debate in 1924, Bulgakov stated that “on a religious (but not on a practical) level, it is not possible to assume that all aspects of the revolution came from the devil.”¹² In a time when many Russian emigrants dreamed about the restoration of the Russian monarchy, it was rather provocative to speak about how the old system’s flaws caused the revolution.

Quite new was Bulgakov’s presentation of Christian sociology from the perspective of “Christian personalism” with its striving for the kingdom of God not only *within* (spiritually, individually) or *ahead* (eschatologically), but also *around* us (socially, culturally, ontologically), which in his view entailed a difficult path between a progressive overestimation of high ideals and a conservative insistence on old customs.¹³ In political

⁵ Sergei N. Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, ed. Vadim Sapov (Moscow: Hayka, 1997), 66; Sergei Bulgakov, “An Urgent Task,” in *A Revolution of the Spirit*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 144–45.

⁶ Sergei N. Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, ed. Vadim Sapov (Moscow: Hayka, 1997), 66; Sergei Bulgakov, “An Urgent Task,” in *A Revolution of the Spirit*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 144–45.

⁷ Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 528, 533.

⁹ Sergii Bulgakov, *Два града: Исследования о природе общественных идеалов* (1911; Farnborough, UK: Gregg International, 1971), I, VIII.

¹⁰ S. N. Bulgakov, “Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress,” in *The Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, ed. Randall A. Poole (Yale University Press, 2003), 111.

¹¹ Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 538.

¹² Nikita Struve, *Братство Святой Софии: Материалы и документы 1923–1939* (Moscow: Русский Путь, 2000), 55.

¹³ Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 528, 532.

¹⁴ Bulgakov, *Два града*, 214–15.

¹⁵ Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 530.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 531;
Bulgakov, *Два града*, I, 302; II, 27.

¹⁷ Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 532.

¹⁸ Sergii Bulgakov, “The Soul of Socialism,” in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 261–62.

¹⁹ Samuel Moyn, “Personalism, Community, and the Origins of Human Rights,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87.

²⁰ Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 545, 547.

matters, and despite his “revolutionary spirit,” Bulgakov appealed to Augustine’s motto *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas* (in essentials, unity; in uncertain things, liberty).¹⁴ He considered chiliasm, the search for social progress on earth, a valuable driving force in history, but warned against terrorism and totalitarianism as soon as individual human dignity was sacrificed as a means to the historical end of a so-called “kingdom of freedom” on earth. However, Bulgakov promoted an understanding of the kingdom of God that would integrate personal strivings and social activity in this world, because the “eschatological kingdom of God to come is unfolding for the world and in the world as a cosmic and ontological event. [It] does not exclude living in time. On the contrary, it confirms the significance of what is going on in time, and in time we understand the significance of the Last Judgment.”¹⁵

Personalism and Social Sciences

The lectures on sociology show that Bulgakov remained true to the concept of “the person in her freedom and self-sufficiency [самодовлеимость]” just as in 1908, when he argued that, with Christianity, “a new topic appeared in world history: The human person. One can interpret history in a certain sense as the unfolding of this topic, as a search for exterior forms of living that correspond to the autonomous person [автономная личность] that has been released by Christianity. [. . .] In Christianity, a new individuality was born, [. . .] and, in the historical sense, that was the greatest revolution that ever happened in history, even if it was an inward and invisible one. Living Christianity consists of self-conscious individualities who become aware of their forces and their moral freedom.”¹⁶

Bulgakov’s insistence on individuality must be seen against the backdrop of the rise of the social sciences with their one-sided focus on society or class. He held that in view of the Christian teaching of a “multi-hypostatic humanity,” “Christian personalism” should focus on both the individual person and society.¹⁷ Like Nikolai Berdyaev, Bulgakov can be counted as part of the 1930s current of Christian personalism, which was characterized by its opposition to communist and capitalist materialism and in its striving for a community-based concept of person.¹⁸ Indeed, Bulgakov’s Christian sociology is reminiscent of the social ideal of non-individualistic persons in a non-totalitarian community espoused by his acquaintance, the personalist Jacques Maritain, who became a famous Catholic defender of individual human rights after the Second World War.¹⁹

As mentioned above, according to Bulgakov, human persons do not act or create *ex nihilo* but within given possibilities and communities. Therefore, his concept of personal autonomy should not be confused with wild arbitrariness, since it contains a notion of voluntary obedience:

Today triumphs the principle of the freedom of the person (according to the Christian understanding, the dignity of the sons of God; according to the liberal understanding, the rights of man and citizen), but this principle encounters another: obedience. And just as obedience should not lead to slavery, freedom should not lead to self-will (to a “spiritual revolution”), but both principles should be accepted.²⁰

In my view, Bulgakov meant what Immanuel Kant conceptualized as moral

autonomy: a general human capacity for critical reflection on social values and commitments, and hence a capacity for free social commitment and responsibility. Furthermore, Bulgakov developed a concept of “creaturely freedom” that, in its social aspect, corresponds strikingly with the concept of “relative autonomy” described by the German sociologist Norbert Elias: “the human being possesses a greater or lesser degree of relative (but never absolute and total) autonomy vis-à-vis other people and [. . .] is, in fact, fundamentally oriented towards and dependent on other people throughout his or her life.”²¹

Democracy, Social Christianity, and Pantheosis

In Bulgakov’s view, modern Christian politics should emphasize individual human dignity and social welfare and promote a democratic system, separation of Church and state, and the rule of law. Excited about the “gift of freedom,” especially for the Church, after the first revolution in February 1917, he claimed that “there is no doubt that in its own social and political sphere, democracy has its own justification and its rights. The majority’s voice, the counting of votes is the only and, comparatively, the best instrument to reveal the interests and needs of the people. [. . .] The task of the Church is to lift up, to educate democracy, to bring it close to being a ‘people belonging to God, a royal priesthood’ [1 Peter 2:9].”²² In other words, it is the Church’s task to encourage individual human social responsibility and action, political participation and “legal consciousness,” because in a democratic state, “power is a common task of the Christian people, everybody is responsible.”²³ Under democratic circumstances “the Church’s methods of influence change; the work is no

longer done outside, from above, but from within, from below, from the people and by the people.”²⁴ Thus, the Church should focus on “sociality” and not on the state, which “appears to be a kind of callosity on the skin of the social body” due to its compulsive character.²⁵ With regard to a “Christian state,” Bulgakov remained very skeptical that “such a thing ever existed or can exist,” and even recommended that the separation of church and state be received into Church dogmatics.²⁶

Already in 1906, Bulgakov claimed that “the Church, which has deeply realized and identified the task of personal salvation, of personal holiness, must still be just as deeply conscious of and identify the task of Christian sociality, which seems to us at this time the central question of historical and world consciousness, posed for future generations.”²⁷ This text did not lose its relevance, because thirty years later, Bulgakov still argued that the “mastery of the social element” was one of the main tasks before contemporary humankind.²⁸ What was new in his argument was that such organization “must be understood in the light of the coming transfiguration of the world [as the] further unfolding of the Chalcedonian and ditheletic dogma, according to which the fullness of the human nature and the entire power of human creative will and energy in Christ are united with the divine nature, are co-manifested with it and are deified by it.” During these long years, Bulgakov’s “philosophy of economy,” based on the concept of human freedom overcoming resisting material, had evolved into a Chalcedonian theology of culture. Paul Valliere counted Bulgakov among the Russian “theologians of culture” who not surprisingly ended up with dogmatic theology: “The convergence of theol-

²¹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 48. On “creaturely freedom,” see Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 125–250.

²² Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 290.

²³ Sergii Bulgakov, “Церковное право и кризис правосознания” in *Русская наука церковного права в первой половине XX века*, ed. Irina Borshch (Moscow: URSS, 2008), 201–17. Bulgakov, *Труды по социологии и теологии*, 542, 547.

²⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (SVS Press, 1988), 163–64.

²⁵ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1993), 144.

²⁶ Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John*, 97–98.

²⁷ Sergii Bulgakov, “Социальные обязанности церкви,” *Народ* 5 (1906): 1–2.

²⁸ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 332.

²⁹ Paul Valliere, “The Theology of Culture in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Sacred Stories*, ed. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman (Indiana University Press, 2007), 391.

³⁰ Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 147.

³¹ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 343.

³² *Ibid.*, 333.

³³ Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 143–44.

³⁵ Bulgakov, *Два прада*, 200; Ecumenical Patriarchate, “For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” (2020), <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>.

³⁶ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 332.

ogy of culture upon dogmatics has to do with the bridge building between religion and modern civilization. [. . .] What is the dogma of the incarnation of the Word, after all, if not a bridge to the world?”²⁹ Hence, the Chalcedonian dogma became Bulgakov’s main key to understand the ontological—unconfused, unchangeable, indivisible, inseparable—relation between God and creation, spirit and matter. In Bulgakov’s “personalist sociology,” *theosis* is not only about personal development and individual relationship with God, but about the common work of pantheosis, “the complete penetration of the creature by Wisdom.”³⁰ That is not only a “social” or “ethical”, but also an economic, cultural, and “ontological” task, because, being made in God’s image and likeness, human persons are called to participate in the joint task of “building God’s kingdom” as a “divine-human affair: the divine power is combined with human freedom, as the dogma of dithetism makes clear. As the common work, history is a synergism.”³¹

As for the Church, “it is clear that the fragmentation of Christianity into different confessions serves as an obstacle to such [social] mastery; for as long as Christianity is incapable of overcoming this fragmentation, it will remain impotent in the task of the social ordering of human life.”³² Therefore, by engaging in the “social ecumenism” of the 1930s, when churches sought common ground

on social questions, Bulgakov insisted on dogmatics and criticized the movement’s striving for a “Nicaea of Ethics,” because in his view, “Social Christianity, engrossed with its practical aims, has not yet faced its dogmatic problem, namely, that of justifying the world in God, in contrast to excommunicating it from God.”³³ A “new apprehension of the world in God” should motivate “the social mission of the Church, which leads it to extend its solicitude to, and to accept responsibility for, the redemption not only of the individual personality, but also of social life.”³⁴ To be clear: by “redemption of social life,” Bulgakov did not mean the enforcement of “traditional values” by state law but the development of practical solutions for tangible social issues (see Matt. 25:34–45), a social ethos “for the life of the world,” as it were.³⁵

In Bulgakov’s works, the apocalypse is the ultimate revolution against social, economic, and political evil and the ultimate revelation of God’s kingdom of freedom throughout history. His personalist Christian sociology is based on a vision of divine-human communion existing in a Chalcedonian mode as the creative interrelation of divine power and human freedom (enabled by divine kenosis). “In the light of this dogma, the ‘cosmos’ is not the ‘kingdom of this world’ but God’s radiant creation, which is raised by man toward deification.”³⁶ ✽



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