

Sex and Gender in the Thought of Sergii Bulgakov: An Overview

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Since the beginning of the Church, Christian thinkers have pondered the question, *What does it mean to be created in the image of God?* But at the end of the nineteenth century, new questions began to emerge among Russian religious thinkers: *What is the purpose of woman? And what might it mean to be created male and female in the image of God?* Among the Orthodox theologians who have pondered this question, Sergii Bulgakov offers not only the fullest response, but inspiration for a series of later thinkers who draw from his work.

While we might now speak of *gender*, Bulgakov often wrote of *sex*. In his own time, there was no distinction between these terms. In Russian, both concepts fell under the same word: *pol*. The word shares a root with the word *polovina* (“half”) and refers to the male and female halves of humanity. In addition to *pol*, Russian writers of Bulgakov’s time might also refer to male and female *principles, essences, or polarities*. These terms enter their conversation from German Romanticism, rooted in philosophical idealism. They point toward abstract conceptions of masculine and feminine, believed to be built into the very foundations of the universe. From an idealist perspective, masculine and feminine attributes are not the products of particular cultures, but universal constants that order all of creation. Bulgakov, in

turn, emphasizes these principles as spiritual realities.

To make matters more confusing, Bulgakov also uses the word *sex* as a shorthand for humanity’s fallen state, in which men and women thirst for one another, seeking out marriage and sexual union. With shades of Augustine, he characterizes our current plight as one in which sex is “a rebellious, autonomous element” of “desire and passion,” not subject to the spirit, but rather subjecting the spirit to itself. As a result, the woman desires her man (Gen. 3:16) and he her.¹ In this sense, sex becomes an unhealthy dependence, a captivity. Anglophone readers should note that translators have interpreted Bulgakov’s use of *pol*, rendering it not only as “sex” but also as “gender” and “sexuality.”

To fully appreciate Bulgakov’s thought, a review of previous thinkers with whom he was familiar will prove helpful. As will become clear, his writings are in conversation with a variety of sources: biblical, patristic, mystical, and philosophical.

In his earliest reflections on sex and the human being, Bulgakov notes an unexpected consensus among a variety of Christian thinkers regarding the origin of woman. Though their accounts vary, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, Johannes

¹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 324.

² Sergii Bulgakov, “Пол в человеке: (Фрагмент из антропологии),” *Христианская мысль* 11 (1916): 87.

Scotus Eriugena, and Jakob Böhme all claim that the creation of woman is the first visible sign of the fall already in motion! Bulgakov rejects this idea, however, citing the gospel accounts in which Jesus, alluding to Genesis, notes that “from the beginning” humanity was created as man and woman, two in one flesh (Mark 10:6–9; Matt. 19:3–6).² To illustrate the difference of opinion among patristic writers, Bulgakov goes on to examine the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo.³

In Gregory’s *On the Creation of the Human Being*, the Cappadocian father discusses the seeming contradiction between the creation of the human being in the image of God as male and female in Genesis 1:27 and the declaration in Paul’s letter to the Galatians that in Christ there is no male and female (3:28). Most readers have understood Gregory to suggest in his treatise that, before the fall, humanity would have reached its full complement through some ineffable manner of multiplication like that of the angels. But in omniscient foreknowledge of the coming fall, God provided a divine Plan B that would allow humanity to reach its full number through sexual reproduction.

Expressing an alternative point of view, Augustine of Hippo suggests in his *City of God* that the division of the sexes and sexual reproduction are part of God’s original design for humanity. The prelapsarian Adam and Eve differ from humanity in our current state primarily in their complete mastery of their bodies and appetites. The prelapsarian Adam could will an erection in the same way that he might will his arm to rise. He could then accomplish the sexual act without a hint of concupiscence. For her part, the unfallen Eve could have joined her-

self with Adam and received his seed without passion (a state that perhaps more women can achieve even now than their male counterparts). In the fallen world, however, lust and a loss of rational control over our bodies have corrupted human sexual relations.

In his first major theological tome, *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov republishes his earlier discussion of human sexual difference. In addition, he briefly explores the Jewish mystical tradition, drawing on *Zohar*, a foundational Kabbalist text.⁴ *Zohar* describes male and female souls as descending to earth in pairs that separate and are born into different bodies. Later in life, the paired souls are reunited as husband and wife, joining in a mystical union that results in one body and soul.

In contrast to this sexually redemptive vision of male and female reunion, Bulgakov alludes to the thought of Lutheran mystic Jakob Böhme, who describes Adam as an androgynous “youth-maiden.”⁵ The primordial Adam communed with Virgin Sophia in a state of perpetual bliss. But when Adam strayed from its first love, the androgyne split into male and female principles that subsequently gave rise to men and women. For Böhme, the reunion of the masculine and feminine principles is a salvific return to a pre-sexed state.

In the nineteenth century, the androgyne provides inspiration in German Romanticism, where its influence takes on various forms. Novalis, Franz von Baader, and Friedrich Schlegel tend to follow Böhme’s yearning for androgynous wholeness. In contrast, Friedrich Schelling envisions a more tragic narrative in which male and female attempt to overcome their sepa-

³ *Ibid.*, 87–89.

⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 297–99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

ration through conjugal union, only to produce more offspring that fall back into the fragmentation of being either male or female.

The first Russian religious thinker to adopt the figure of the androgyne is Vladimir Solovyev, the father of Russian sophiology, in whose work Bulgakov found many of his original inspirations. Among the key elements of Solovyev's narrative are the primordial androgyne, its division into male and female principles, resulting in estrangement, and the reconstitution of androgynic humanity (and with it the divine image) through erotic love shared within the marital bond. Solovyev's ideas are a mixture of elements taken from the writings of Plato, Kabbalah, Böhme, and the German Romantics. In a passage that would later shape Bulgakov's thinking, Solovyev reformulates the creation narrative: "Eternal God created the human being, in his image and likeness created it: husband and wife, created them." He continues: "the image and likeness of God, that which is capable of restoration, refers not to a half [*polovina*], not to a person's sex [*pol*], but to the whole person, i.e., to the positive union of male and female principle." This union Solovyev describes as "a true androgyny," one that preserves the physical sex of the partners but joins them in a single person and life.⁶ It is a story that Bulgakov adopts and expands upon.

Finally, a brief mention of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev is in order. Like Solovyev, Berdyaev espouses the idea of a primordial androgyne, split into fallen male and female principles that seek reunification in conjugal love. But diverging from his predecessors, Berdyaev, following Sigmund Freud, suggests that all humans are fundamentally bisexual

beings, containing within themselves both masculine and feminine elements. Biological sex, he claims, is a physical manifestation of the dominant principle in the person. Regardless of sex, both principles exist within each human being.

With this brief sketch of ideas around human sex and gender that were in vogue as Bulgakov began to formulate his own thoughts, it will be easier for the reader to appreciate Bulgakov's reflections in context.

While other religious thinkers and philosophers might begin from the fathers, from mysticism, or from German Romanticism, Bulgakov's thought begins with an exegesis of the Genesis creation narratives: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). From this passage he argues that the individual human being cannot image God. Though each human being has its own hypostasis and spiritual fate, Bulgakov claims that only in the spiritual-corporeal marriage of a man and a woman, male and female, do we find the full human being, created in the image of God. In this he directly follows Solovyev.

However, unlike his interlocutors, Bulgakov rejects the idea that the first human (*ha adam*) was an androgyne. Rather than Adam possessing both sexes, Eve was within Adam, a separate principle to be freed. If Genesis 1 tells us *what* happened in the creation, then Genesis 2 tells us the story of *how* we came to be, including the account of Adam's loneliness and the making of Eve as the completion of the creation of humanity.

Aware of the repeated attempts in Christian history to minimize sexual

⁶ Vladimir Solovyev, "Жизненная драма Платона" in *Собрание сочинений Владимира Сергеевича Соловьёва*, ed. M. S. Soloviev and E. L. Radlov (St. Petersburg: Книгоиздательское товарищество "Просвещение," 1913), 234.

differentiation and conjugal relations between husband and wife, Bulgakov argues that any serious Christian reflection must reckon with the fact that the female sex and motherhood are blessed by the Theotokos through the act of giving birth to Christ. The male sex is glorified in the presentation of the Christ child in the Temple for circumcision on his eighth day. Some Christian thinkers—Bulgakov names Maximus Confessor and Eriugena—claim that the resurrected Christ transitions to a spiritual state, annihilating the difference between the sexes. But as we will see below, Bulgakov rejects this claim, instead arguing that human sexual differentiation will remain even in the eschaton.

Bulgakov's first public attempt to tease out the difference between male and female on the one hand and sex on the other was incomprehensible to his readers. He defines the feminine as "a certain spiritual principle or state, precisely of a reciprocating orientation, a passive love, outside any relation to sex." "Femininity," he writes, "has no relation to womanliness, and even less to woman."⁷ Likewise, his early description of Christ as "a man, but in no way in the sense of human sex" seems to circle something beyond words.⁸

What Bulgakov is attempting to parse bears a strong resemblance to the Romantic ideals of male and female principles. Early on he writes: "Man is active, logical, full of initiative; woman is instinctive, inclined to self-giving, wise with an illogical and impersonal wisdom of simplicity and purity." He goes on to say that "a manly woman produces as ugly an impression as does a womanly man. Such *mixing* of the sexes

differs from the *complementing* which each sex normally finds in itself."⁹ While Bulgakov sees the traits he describes as timeless spiritual principles, many readers today are inclined to hear them as gender stereotypes produced within a particular cultural context.

Bulgakov follows Berdyaev in suggesting that each human being has both masculine and feminine elements in tension within its spirit. Like Berdyaev, he suggests that biological sex is an outward physical manifestation of the dominant principle active in a human being. Turning to an ancient Greek philosophical idea, Bulgakov suggests that each human soul contains faculties of masculine reason and feminine perception. This idea, originating in Plato's chariot metaphor in the *Phaedrus*, takes on gendered meanings in Philo of Alexandria and is alluded to throughout the patristic tradition. Here again, what Bulgakov and his predecessors count as eternal principles sound strangely stereotypical to contemporary ears.

Turning to the Trinity, Bulgakov notes that the Second Person is called Son first according to his generation from the Father. But in the incarnation, he is also born male. The male principle thus enters the Godhead as a personal property of the Son. Bulgakov's argument hinges on what theologians refer to as *communicatio idiomatum* or the communication of divine and human attributes between the two natures of Christ. It is this principle that allows us to say that God was crucified and died or that Jesus is the Son of the Father. By this same principle, Bulgakov suggests that the maleness of Christ is communicated to the Godhead as an attribute of divinity. But what does this mean? Is God male? For Bulgakov the answer is yes, though not in a physical sense. And God is also fe-

⁷ Anastassy Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, "Protopresbyter Sergii Bulgakov: Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (2005): 29.

⁸ Sergii Bulgakov, "Мужское и женское в божестве," in Н. Булгаков: *Религиозно-философский путь*, ed. А. Р. Козырев (Moscow: Русский путь, 2003), 346.

⁹ Bulgakov, "Пол в человеке," 103. Emphasis in the original.

male, but again, not in a physical sense. Here he turns to the Holy Spirit.

Though the male principle is complete, it does not stand alone. Rather, it is relational. Just as the Trinitarian names Father and Son only have meaning in relation to one another, so also the Son as Absolutely Male exists only in relation to the Holy Spirit as Absolutely Female. This intra-Trinitarian relationship is then reflected in the created order. The Son is revealed in the Incarnation as the male principle in the image of the male sex. The revelation of the Holy Spirit, Bulgakov continues, is related to the female nature. However, the parallel is not exact. The Holy Spirit did not become incarnate in the same way as the Son. Rather, the Spirit chose a woman as a vessel: Mary, the Theotokos, the new Eve, Ever Virgin, the Church. While Orthodox are familiar with this litany of images linking Mary with Eve and the Church, Bulgakov is the first Orthodox theologian to use this set of images as a springboard to link the philosophical concept of masculine and feminine principles with Trinitarian Persons.

Returning to his earlier adoption of Greek philosophical categories, Bulgakov chooses another gendered pattern to map his Trinitarian claim. Drawing on discourses of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, he maps these three as principles within the Godhead. As the Savior taught us, no one is good but God (the Father) alone (Mark 10:18). Truth, in turn, maps onto the Son and the male principle while beauty corresponds to the female principle and the Holy Spirit. But if fallen human sex has become a negative force unto itself, ruling over the spirit and enslaving the flesh, what is the alternative? Here, Bulgakov turns to Christ as the first exam-

ple of ever-virginity. Having taken on the entirety of human nature without sin, Christ is free from the ardors of our fallen sexual life. For Bulgakov, ever-virginity is more than abstaining from sex. It is nothing short of the original mastery of body and passions experienced by Adam and Eve before the fall. Because Christ assumed the entire human nature except for sin, he exemplifies for us the true human.

What Christ is by nature, Bulgakov proposes, the Virgin Mary and John the Forerunner experience through grace.¹⁰ Both not only abstained from sexual relations but were also free of the passions experienced by the rest of humanity. The Church, sensing this truth, has adopted the *Deisis* icon, in which Theotokos and Forerunner flank Christ enthroned. Here they image the first man and woman to be restored to the unfallen image of humanity, a state that all the saints will achieve by grace in the resurrection.

But what of our resurrected bodies? Will we, as is popularly read in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, shed our garments of skin in the after-life? Will we become sexless like the angels? Bulgakov responds to this question by pointing to the iconography of the Orthodox tradition. In the Resurrection icon, Christ has destroyed the gates of Hades, freeing Adam and Eve from their captivity. Neither is sexless. Rather, they are depicted as man and woman in their resurrected state. What falls away with the garments of skin for Bulgakov is the need for sexual encounter and reproduction. But the male and female principles within humanity eternally remain. Here Bulgakov follows not only Augustine's vision of healed human sexuality, but also the outlines of Macrina's teaching in

¹⁰ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38–39.

Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

In contrast to many contemporary Orthodox thinkers, Bulgakov denies the continuation of marriage in the afterlife. In our resurrected bodies, freed of both the need to procreate and the fallen desire to seek completion through a mate, humanity is open to new options. Bulgakov suggests that those who have been incorporated into the church all stand as female souls before the Bridegroom (an idea going back at least as far as Origen). With the gift of the Holy Spirit, the hunger for completion in another person wanes by grace. Freed from this captivity, each human person is free to explore relationships of love and friendship with a broad array of chosen affiliations. If husband and wife together are the image of God in this life, it is now the collective redeemed humanity, assembled as the Church, with its many loving affinities and interconnections, that most fully images God in the resurrection.

In a final speculative exploration of angelology, Bulgakov suggests that guardian angels also possess male and female principles.¹¹ By this he does not mean they have male or female biology, but rather that the two lower ranks of angels image the Son and the Spirit respectively through the posses-

sion of the male and female principles. Though there is no way to know in our present condition, Bulgakov suggests that the gendered principle of a person's guardian angel would be best as a complement. Women would have male guardian angels while men would have female guardian angels.

The first to explore human sexuality so fully in his theological works, Bulgakov has provided inspiration for several later Orthodox thinkers. In France, Pavel Evdokimov adopts many of Bulgakov's themes as he explores the role of woman in the world.¹² In the American academy, Thomas Hopko echoes Bulgakov's claims of an affinity between the Son and the Spirit in the intra-Trinitarian life and the activities of men and women in the created order. Theologians such as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Sarah Wilson have explored the consequences of these later authors' arguments, especially as they contribute to contemporary debates over women's ordination and the roles of women in church, family, and society.¹³ But many of Bulgakov's original propositions remain to be more fully explored. A closer reading of his texts may yet offer valuable contributions to reflection on the theological significance of sex, gender, and sexuality. *

¹¹ Sergius Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder: On Angels*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 97–98.

¹² Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1994).

¹³ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "The Meaning of the Participation of Women in the Life of the Church," in *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church*, ed. Constance J. Tarasar and Irina Kirillova (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1977); Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, *Woman, Women, and the Priesthood in the Trinitarian Theology of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (London: T & T Clark, 2013).



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