

On the Path to Theology: Review of Sergij Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*

Michael Plekon



Sergij Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy: Philosophy and Dogma*, trans. Stephen Churchyard. Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020.

This new translation of Sergij Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy* is a most welcome edition to the continuing series of translations of Father Bulgakov's books. Thanks to the enormous efforts of Boris Jakim but also Thomas A. Smith and now Stephen Churchyard, we are close to having most of Bulgakov available in English.

The *Tragedy of Philosophy* was produced in 1920 and 1921, a pivotal time for Bulgakov. He had recently made a transition back to the faith, following a period in which he had rejected it and turned to philosophy, politics, and science. This rejection was due in part to an abysmal experience in a minor seminary, but one also wonders what influence his childhood of poverty had on him. He grew up with a priest-father who struggled to provide for his large family as rector of a cemetery church. Bulgakov's return to, as he put it, "the House of the Father," took him from his academic Marxism and work in political economy to a renewed appreciation of Vladimir Solovyev and Fyodor Dostoevsky and to a religious interpretation of German Idealism, which was dominant in the universities at that time. He returned to the church at a skete via confession and communion from an elder. Robert Slesinski, a leading Bulgakov scholar, has recently pro-

vided a far more detailed narrative of Bulgakov's spiritual and intellectual journey, a more complex journey than can be chronicled here.¹

By 1917, Bulgakov was a lay delegate to the reforming Moscow Council and also advised the elected patriarch, Tikhon Bellavin. On Pentecost Sunday and Monday 1918, Bulgakov became a deacon and then a priest, the seventh generation in his "Levite" family. The present volume was written in Crimea, Bulgakov having lost his academic position in Moscow because of the Revolution's purge of intellectuals. Not long after, the famous "Philosophy Steamer" brought him and numerous other intellectuals in exile to Constantinople and then to Prague and finally to Paris. There Bulgakov was called to serve as both professor and dean of the newly-established first Orthodox theological school in the West, Saint Sergius. In Paris he wrote and published the bulk of his theological work—the smaller and greater trilogies, as well as studies on the angels, relics, and the apocalypse of John, among many other topics. There, in time, he would be criticized not only by fellow emigre theologians such as the young Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky, but also condemned as heretical in statements from the Karlovtsy Synod and the

¹ Robert Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2017).

Moscow Patriarchate. This was occasioned by his efforts to do theology in the twentieth century using not just the fathers but a contemporary philosophical and historical perspective. Any creativity or new views were immediately rejected as contradictory to Orthodoxy's allegedly unchanging doctrinal character. Chief among the elements condemned was the "sophiological" dimension in Bulgakov's theological reflection, that is, a continuing reference to the figure of Sophia or Divine Wisdom in understanding the relationship of the creator to creation. Metropolitan Evlogy convened a panel including both supporters and critics of Bulgakov, which exonerated him. As he repeatedly argued, his sophiological perspectives were but theologoumena, theological opinions, which should always be permitted. To this day, the charge of his work being "heretical" lingers among some Orthodox traditionalists.

The Tragedy of Philosophy is a transitional work, as translator Stephen Churchyard and other scholars observe. The book comes, as noted, after Bulgakov's return and ordination. In it, we see an effort to respond to Western philosophy's leading voices—Kant, Hegel, Fichte, as well as Schelling and others—from a Trinitarian theological perspective. Put summarily, Bulgakov here confronts German Idealism with the contention that "substance is a living proposition consisting of a subject, a predicate, and a copula" (236). This is the book's last line and the core of the effort within it, as Churchyard points out in his wonderful introduction. Not unlike Tillich after him, Bulgakov uses the philosophical language and concepts with which he was formed, those of the thinkers just mentioned, to address theological questions going all the way back to Christianity's start—

the incarnation, the dogma of Christ's identity, the interaction of God with the world, with humankind, with the Church. This theme continues in the series of books and articles coming after *Tragedy* and *The Philosophy of the Name* in the early 1920s, the theological legacy with which we have become familiar. *Tragedy* and *The Philosophy of the Name* are less familiar, but important steps on Bulgakov's road to his own theological language and vision. *Tragedy* is a settling up with the philosophical ethos in which he was formed. It is not so much a dismissal of his philosophical education as an effort to bring theology into a critical dialogue with these crucial views of how we know, who we are, and our relationships to the world and each other. After a close reading of this work one can easily dismiss the facile shot sometimes taken at Bulgakov, alleging that he succumbed to the Western, modern worldview that nurtured him in his graduate training and early work as a scholar and teacher, and thus as an "innovationist" his theology cannot be orthodox. Nothing could be further from the truth.

What is worth noting is that Bulgakov sets forth a conversation with Kant, Hegel, and Fichte, not rejecting their work but juxtaposing it with what he sees as the ultimate truth of revelation, the trinity of reality. Bulgakov's return to the household of the faith after having left it profoundly shapes the rest of his life and work. Woven in are several other shattering experiences—the loss of his young son, the tumult and overthrow of his life further by the revolution, and his expulsion from Russia with other intellectuals. Bulgakov's engagement with theology, with the church and later with the ecumenical movement were not just the path of an academic moving forward in a career. With



then after them Evdokimov, Behr-Sigel, Schmemmann, and Meyendorff, as well as Florovsky and Lossky, though somewhat differently, this is a still dynamic “living tradition,” as the title of their 1937 collection of essays called it. Bulgakov was famous for some, infamous for others, emphasizing the maximal and as well as minimal weight of dogma. He believed and argued the nature of theological thought as necessarily changing—as the historical record evidenced. Bulgakov, for all the intellectual demands of his writings, was a priest-scholar who engaged the world, traveling to England and even America, meeting with Christians he considered sisters and brothers no matter their church membership. He never abandoned political, economic and social issues either, writing against the monstrosities of fascism in the last years of his life.

his two callings as priest and scholar, his life and his work were ministries, efforts to clarify and live out the Gospel. The continuing significance of his colleagues in the “Paris School,” as it is sometimes called, is borne out in a similar manner. For Eastern Orthodoxy, they put into practice the “churching” of all life, the connecting of liturgy to action, learning to witness. For Bulgakov, and for Berdyaev, Mother Maria Skobtsova, Afanasiev, Kartashev, Zander, Zernov, Sove, and

A challenging text, as most Bulgakov writings are, *The Tragedy of Philosophy* fills in an important part of Bulgakov’s legacy, and for further access in English to Bulgakov’s works of this period, we hope for a timely translation of *The Philosophy of the Name*. These works, taken together, show his dexterity and generosity in bringing the world and theology into conversation, a great gift to our present time. ✱



The Very Rev. **Michael Plekon** is an emeritus professor of sociology and religion and culture at the City University of New York–Baruch College and a priest in the Orthodox Church in America.