

The Experiential Grounding of Bulgakov's Sophiological Theology

Manuel Sumares

Universidade Católica Portuguesa (Braga)

Abstract: Sergius Bulgakov, Orthodox priest and philosophical theologian, made it a point of including, in several of his writings, accounts of epiphanic moments that constitute experiential groundings for the strenuous thinking produced in his sophiological theology. They are instructive both in regard to his personal life and as pathways into some of the most central themes of his work, namely, consubstantiality, interconnectedness, death/dying, Divine-humanity, and catholicity.

Keywords: Sophia, Epiphany, Sophiological Theology, Spiritual Experience

Father Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944) has many admirers outside or on the margins of the Orthodox Church and his work has currently been of increasing interest to theologians.¹ Nevertheless, relatively few of his Orthodox brethren make much of him as an

¹ Notable examples of this recent surge of interest are the International Conference, dedicated to Bulgakov and hosted by the University of Fribourg, in September 2-4, 2021; the Summer/ Fall issue of the *Wheel* (26-27, 2021); and the publication of *The Sociology of Death: Essays on Eschatology: Personal, Political, Universal*, trans. Roberto J. de la Noya (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), and Bulgakov's *Spiritual Diaries*, trans. and ed. Mark Roosien, and Roberto J. de Noya (Brooklyn: Angelico, 2022). About Bulgakov's growing recognition in the wider theological world, the comment advanced by the contemporary Orthodox theologian and priest (in this regard, an exception to the rule), John G. McGuckin deserves mention: "His theology, detested and censured in his lifetime by the Russian Church in Exile as being too innovative, has since come to be reassessed and appreciated as having engaged with profound issues in a unique way that was both traditionalist and forward looking. Bulgakov's stature as one of the great Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, of any church, is unmistakable." *The Eastern Orthodox Church, A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), loc. 3236, Kindle.

exemplary proponent of Christian Orthodox theology, someone from whom they might learn for the sake of their Orthodox faith. Still, he expressly adhered to it and its liturgical and dogmatic tradition. An uncommonly gifted thinker and immensely erudite, he consistently maintained that Christian revelation is most powerfully expressed and interpreted in the Orthodox Church and openly manifested his conception of her in a book precisely entitled, *The Orthodox Church*² – not to mention his position as the Dean of Saint Sergius Theological Institute in Paris (1925-1944) as a testimony of his dedication to her. Yet, a cloud remains over his name in most quarters of the Eastern Church and, generally speaking a silence. Concerning this, Robert Slensinski, a Greek Catholic priest, who authored *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, wonders about such a lack of adherence and contrasts it to the interest demonstrated in him coming from Catholics and Anglicans.³

For the sake of economy, and perhaps relevance as well, we shall not dwell here on the ecclesiastical censure that Bulgakov's reworking of sophiology provoked in the 1935 at the Institute in Paris; suffice it to say that he was exonerated. Coming to the point of it all, Rowan Williams' observation about why it is that Orthodox believers tend to find his thinking off-putting sounds right. In his "General Introduction" to *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, Williams suggests that,

[Bulgakov] is not the typical representative of the Orthodox theological world; but, despite the caveats entered by many recent Orthodox theologians, he is the *kind* of theologian he is because of his Orthodox formation and commitment, and he demonstrates what is at present a vastly important fact – that theology in the Byzantine tradition is capable of engaging with modernity and post-modernity with unexpected vigour and integrity.⁴

² Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988).

³ Among the Catholics, besides Slensinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* (Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 1; Aiden Nichols', *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2005) offers good summaries and commentaries on the key aspects of Bulgakov's thought. Among Anglicans, Rowan Williams, and John Milbank recognise the debt they owe to his work.

⁴ Sergii Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 18. One of the most remarkable figures in contemporary Christendom, Rowan Williams was introduced to

Indeed, Bulgakov does come to his subjects from a different angle, but not only was he reading and analysing the works of Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas well before they became the source of so much inspiration for Orthodox thinkers from the second-quarter of the 20th century onward. These authors, and particularly Palamas, provided the theological support for extending the transfiguring power of divine energies unto the cosmos itself, an important contribution to the Christian sophiology as Bulgakov conceived it. Hardly reformist in intent, Bulgakov's deeper wish is to move beyond the antinomic, or paradoxical, formulations of dogmatic positions that, while admirable in themselves, still inhibit – he believes – a fuller discussion the ontological content of Christian revelation in the image of Divine-humanity, namely, the depths of its consubstantiality and catholicity (*sobornyi*).

Granting the impressive scope of Bulgakov's theological vision and its systematisation realised principally in two trilogies,⁵ our more precise intention here is to appreciate the place that ecclesial piety has in the way he himself probes, illuminates and renders intelligible the epiphanic moments in his own life. In other words, ecclesial piety, and more especially understood around the theme of conciliarity (*Sobornost*) as a defining characteristic of what makes the Christian Church "Orthodox," provides the imagery, drawn from her scriptural and liturgical sources, as well as dogmatic guidelines, for his philosophical and theological thinking. There is much to learn from the epiphanic moments about Bulgakov himself who retrospectively reconstructs how they affected him personally and became thematically important for the Orthodox theology that he advances. They obviously have existential significance for him, but it is equally clear that he wishes his readers and disciples to know about them as experiential groundings for his Christian sophiology. Some of the experiences are mentioned in a way that relates significantly to the thematic of

Russian Christian thought by Nicholas Zernov while at Cambridge and, from that encounter, was led to study the works of Bulgakov, Lossky, Dostoevsky, etc.;

⁵ Bulgakov's minor trilogy consists in: *The Burning Bush*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). *Jacob's Ladder*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). The major trilogy: *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). *Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002), 1.

book-length writings, namely, *Unfading Light* and *Sophia, the Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology*; others are central to shorter reflections and essays, the point being that they too ultimately exemplify the workings of universal sophianicity in which he himself is a participant. For him, they, each in their own way, involve an implicit call to draw near to that which, in reality, constitutes them, namely, a *syzygy*, a close, synergistic pairing, underlying the religious experience and demanding an artful philosophical approach to bring it to conceptual light.

The ideas guiding this philosophizing are not united in a ‘system’, but in a certain *syzygy*, an organic articulation, a symphonic connection. From such a philosophical-artistic plan are demanded, on the one hand, faithfulness and precision of self-reflection in description of religious experience, in the exposition of ‘myth’, and on the other hand the finding of a corresponding form that is sufficiently supple and capacious for its disclosure.⁶ Thus, Bulgakov does not hide the keys to his thinking: religious experiences do indubitably happen, but require a mode of approach capable to do justice, to correspond, to their nature and what is actually being given in them; couched in mythico-poetical language, their inner-form can give rise to thought but requires an approach, eventually a sophiological one, “sufficiently subtle and capacious,” in order to explicate its potential for ontological revelation. However, the awareness of the symphonic, inter-penetrating, consubstantial character of the *syzygy*, is not only about a conceptualizing discipline, bringing some degree of intelligibility to what is changing in him on their account. Along with that, he expresses, in his Preface (“From the Author”) to *Unfading Light*, a desire for a philosophical propaedeutic that would enable him “to incarnate in speculation some religious contemplations connected with a life in Orthodoxy.”⁷ Moreover, he recognizes and assumes that philosophical work is itself artistic, or more precisely, the art of creating concepts, embedding them in a narrative framework, invoking a “world” of experience lived from within as well as without.⁸

⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), loc. 689, Kindle.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari make a convincing argument about the peculiarity of the artistic dimension in philosophizing and in the inventing of concepts in *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991). In his own way, Bulgakov anticipates what these post-structuralist authors have to say, but the notion of conceptual creativity in relation to

In regard to the religious character of crucial experiences in his life and the way he seeks to ground them in the symbolism of Orthodox devotional language, Bulgakov himself indicates specific instances that he wishes to make known as revelatory of his own inner transformation that is at once personal and exemplary. We believe that they may be counted among those realised by gifted religious figures, “the saints, ascetics, prophets and [...] living monuments of religion,” and worthy to be appreciated as such.⁹ With this in mind, we shall consider below the events centred around the “the three calls,” cited in *Unfading Light*, the visit to *Hagia Sophia*, and his lifelong acquaintance with “death and dying.” They are all coordinated with the more discursive facet of his theological explorations that he clearly endeavours to share for the sake of Christian Orthodoxy and the catholicity of the Church, the full expression of which remains her principal task and to which the notions of consubstantiality and *syzygy* ultimately refer.

The Three Calls

Against the background of having left Seminary and his subsequent attraction to Marxist materialism, Bulgakov describes his return to faith as an awakening in his soul by “mysterious calls,” drawing him out of the intellectual smugness that he had managed to acquire over a period of ten years.¹⁰ The first occurred while on a train travel through the Caucasus Mountains at sunset. His soul was stirred and made him see more in nature than dead landscape; the beauty that it invoked seemed to him more than something admirable in itself, but suggested to him that it could be as well something personal, indeed, someone. “And suddenly in that hour

religious experience is already established in the Slavophile tradition of thought established by Khomiakov and Kireevsky in the first half of the 19th century. While Bulgakov is manifestly part of this tradition, his work not only expresses the concern for the catholicity of the Church as realised, for those involved, in the Russian appropriation of Orthodox Christianity but arguably surpasses the effects of the East/ West dichotomization by deepening the potential for universality that Orthodoxy, in the name of *Sobornost*, already contains.

⁹ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 7.

¹⁰ It is significant that the signaling of “three calls” echo Soloviev’s three dreams of Sophia. At a decisive point in his spiritual journey, he did decide to “follow” Soloviev as *maître à penser*: “All is life he strove to follow [the source of light] and called others to it. Let us follow him!” “Vladimir Solovyov: Scholar and Seer,” in *Sergius Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (WIPF & Stock: Eugene, Oregon), 48.

my soul became agitated, started to rejoice and began to shiver; *but what if ... if it is not wasteland, not a lie, not a mask, not death but him, the blessed loving Father, his raiment, his love ...?*"¹¹

The hypothetical "what if?" refers to the possibility that, after all, his childhood of simple, joyful faith, when he felt that he lived in the presence of God, was not illusory and that, on the contrary, the intellectualism ("petty, vile, and banal") that he later adopted indeed was. He ridiculed the treasure that he once had. Now, looking back, he recalls with compunction, "Oh, I was held captive as in the clutches of 'learnedness', that scarecrow set up for the intelligentsia mob, the half-educated crowd, for fools! How I hate you, progeny of half-education, spiritual plague of our days, infecting youths and children!"¹² With sunset, the immediacy of the experience passed, but his soul persisted in hearing the call of the blessing that he experienced as "one eternal unmoving *today*," beyond life and death, without any biblical suggestion of divine communication. The revelation consists just in its being there, yet, "[...] that moment of meeting did not die in my soul; this was her apocalypse, her wedding feast, the first encounter with Sophia."¹³

The second encounter did not involve a journey eastward and a possible personhood inhering in the cosmos. It had to do rather with an experience of the West, an immersion in the softer world of cultured Germany. But the theme of personhood reappeared in the form of the painting of Sistine Madonna that he discovered in Dresden's Zinger Museum. Life's sophianicity came to him from a different direction. Like the sunset light of the Caucasian mountains that invaded his soul, the eyes the "Queen of Heaven approaching on clouds with the Pre-eternal child" reflected in the "mature wise eyes of the Child," spoke to him of readiness for suffering: She by a sword to her heart; Him on the place of Golgatha.¹⁴ Both express divine sacrificial love, that is, the primordiality of Christian martyrdom, a sign that dying is the necessary condition for life. This great truth, and not merely an aesthetic experience, came home to him in the Dresden Museum, to which he returned on successive mornings in order to relive and prayerfully absorb this new awareness. Even as he still thought of himself as a Marxist: "the ice of my heart melted and a kind of knot

¹¹ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8. What Bulgakov might mean by intelligentsia mob, the half-educated crowd, finds an interesting expression in C.S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*. Such is described there as "men without chests."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

in my life came undone.”¹⁵ So, inevitably the “what if” question was reawakened for a second time. Intellectually, his ideas about the world were aligned in accordance with the Marxist creed. But, about the latter, creeping doubts about their workability in real life of Marxist ideas were coming to the surface. About the former, he could not deny the experiences that profoundly moved him. To state the situation as Wittgenstein might have: he was, in principle, held captive by that picture constructed around his academic position and reputation, but *that* picture was not really his, the one of his fathers, the one closer to of the “what if?” that moved his soul and was introducing distinctly different content to feed his mind: “Who can say how and when love is born in the soul and bestow on it one’s insights? But for some time, I knew with complete reliability that this had already happened. And from that time on, a golden chain stretched out in my soul.”¹⁶ The will to be tutored to see things differently, namely, to have his insights shaped by love, namely, of the sacrificial kind as imaged in “the Queen of Heaven and the pre-eternal Child.” For this to happen, it required one more experience of disorientation in order to find himself.

The third encounter took place during a retreat in the wooded grounds of a monastery. He was lodged there in an unused hermit’s hut for prayer and in the hope of experiencing God’s presence. To that end, he participated in the divine services. At a given moment and finding himself unmoved by a celebration of Vespers, he walked out of the church building. In a confused state, he wandered back to where he was staying, but ended up instead at the door of the cell of an elder, sensing that the monastic—like the father of the prodigal son—was actually waiting for him. There his confession was heard: “I left him then, forgiven and at peace, trembling and in tears, feeling myself borne up inside the churchyard as if on wings.” Upon seeing him, a “fellow-traveller” who met him on the path uttered, “the Lord has passed by.”¹⁷ He realized that repentance opened the door that God has long left open for him, and so Bulgakov did have his encounter with God.

From the sophianicity of the cosmos of the first calling and the perception of absolute self-givingness of true personhood, configured in the mystical complicity the Holy Virgin and her divine Son and Logos of creation, of the second, in the third one, he experienced repentance and the depths of the sacramental life of the Church, the assembly of the holy ones in the Lord Jesus Christ:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid.

“I looked at everything with new eyes, for I knew that I too was called and I was really taking part in all this: [...] And I was granted to taste the most holy Body and Blood of my Lord... .”¹⁸ The hypothetical “what if?” has gradually given way to insights shaped by love and to the acquisition of spiritual sight: what once appeared to him under the categories of Marxist theory of economy now is seen as an invitatory participation in the economy of grace. Or better, what he once perceived as an awkward fit between the ideas of the intelligentsia and the struggle of ordinary people is now set against a more all-encompassing synaxis, namely, the one anticipating the ultimate syzygy/ symphonic connection of Divine Sophia and the created Sophia, inscribed in course of history under the sign of eternal yearning for communion.

The Great Church of Hagia Sophia

The timespan of the calls that gradually loosened the hold that Marxism had on him was quite lengthy: the first in the Caucasus occurring in 1896, during his twenty-fourth year; the second in Germany, probably at the beginning of stay that would have lasted between 1898 and 1901; and the third at the hermitage in 1908. Particularly crucial in the process would firstly have been his attraction to German idealism and subsequently, moving toward the last encounter, the discovery of sophiology, first via Soloviev’s works and then more markedly through Father Pavel Florensky’s Orthodox rendering of it. In any case, we should keep in mind his intent, in the name sophiology, of bending the givens of the German philosophy in the direction of Christianity as lived in the Russian Orthodox Church, which priested him in 1918, practically concomitant with the Bolshevik revolution. Expelled on the 30th of December 1922, from Simferfol/Crimea with other intellectuals in disagreement with the reigning Bolsheviks, he travelled westward on the Black Sea, stopping first in Constantinople where he visited the Church of the *Hagia Sophia*.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ In his Introduction to *Burning Bush*, of which he was also the translator, Thomas Allan Smith reminds us that, during the period of time extending from 1918 to 1923 and under the influence of Soloviev, Bulgakov was drawn to the idea that unification of the Russian Church under papal authority would be a means of her survival. Having pondered the desirability of conversion to the Roman Church, he changed his mind as he encountered the state of the Catholic Church upon his return to European lands that had begun with this trip to Constantinople. But it must be said that he was none too happy about what he saw in the “vulgar” Phanar, much less

This would have been nearly a thousand years after Prince Vladimir's emissaries made, in 988, their own visit there, reporting back about the incomparable worship that they witnessed there. As the story goes, the experience was so uplifting that they lost the sense of where they were: they entered sure they were on earth, but the beauty of the place, as well as the worship practiced there, transfixed them. They were famously reputed to have said, "[...] we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. [...] We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations." Bulgakov's more studied appreciation appears in the *Introduction of Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, published in 1935. It begins with what he recalls from his notes upon entering the church of *Hagia Sophia* around 12 years before. For the significance that it has for him, we quote it in its entirety:

Those who have visited the church of St Sophia in Constantinople and have fallen under the spell of what it reveals, will find themselves permanently enriched by a new apprehension of the world in God, that is, of the divine Sophia. This heavenly dome, which portrays heaven bending to embrace the earth, gives expression in finite form to the infinite, to an all-embracing unity, to the stillness of eternity, in the form of a work of art which, though belonging to this world, is a miracle of harmony itself. The grace, lightness, simplicity, and wonderful symmetry of the structure account for the fact that the weight of the dome and even the very walls seems to dissolve completely. An ocean of light pours in from above and dominates the whole space below – it enchants, convinces, as it seems to say: I am in the world and the world is in me. Here Plato is baptized into Christianity, for

interesting than Eyup (a district of the city), where he saw in the Muslim worship there something more edifying. In any event, Smith opines that, "[...] in Constantinople his visits to Hagia Sophia reawakened that slumbering fascination with heavenly Sophia" (loc. 170, Kindle). Therein lies considerable irony: Sophia resolved the matter of his interest in Roman Catholicism, but it eventually caused him harm among some of his own Orthodox brethren. Two salient points made in Smith's account are (1) the reinforcing of his Orthodox faith and his determination to act in her defense and (2) the complete turnabout of his appreciation of the Sistine Madonna upon a renewed visit to Dresden and the Zinger Museum: the Madonna was the same, but he had changed and could see nothing iconic or sophianic about her, merely human beauty (loc. 145- 68, Kindle).

here, surely, we have the lofty realm to which souls ascend for the contemplation of ideas.²⁰

Herein we have a central feature of Holy Sophia: it reveals how it is that the world, in its materiality, is in God. It is a revelation that enjoys the collaboration of human creative activity, of its artistic impulse to aspire palpably, as in prayer, to that which is transcendental to it, namely, already living it as an invitational divine presence, infinite but unifying through the prototypical forms coming from above that engage and enlighten the human soul. The dyadic character of Sophia, appearing here in the image of “heavenly dome” and embracing the earth “in the form of the work of art,” is an expression of the ultimate truth of consubstantiality-as-syzygy that is the revealing instance that left Bulgakov spellbound in his visits to *Hagia Sophia*. But what is to be especially retained is the seamlessness which he wishes to accentuate within differentiated natures. The weight of the dome and the walls dissolve in the architectonics of the church, yielding to the grace, lightness, and simplicity of form of its dome. The Hellenic baptism of Plato is thus consummated in the Christian dogma of consubstantiality.

In his own explanation following the passage, he underscores the legacy of pre-Christian Platonism for the benefit of the coming ages, implying that it will be left to its Russian inheritors to bring out the full meaning of Divine Sophia as a protective canopy over the created cosmos. Though, in her very iconicity, the *Hagia Sophia* reflects the rightness of the dogmas of the Ecumenical Councils that ultimately define the Eastern Church, her full meaning cannot be contained in the historical, political, and theological context of Justinian Byzantium. “Byzantine theology as such has left behind no explanation of that to which this ecclesiastical architecture bears witness. It only

²⁰ Sergius Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology* (London: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 1. The account of the experience as cited here is substantially the same as written in notes taken on the day after the visit. See, “Autobiographical Notes,” as included in *Sergius Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Antology*, and the section within it, “Hagia Sophia”. The latter version is preferred in our rendering only because of the wider perspective it offers in regard to its place in the Orthodox tradition. The original notes have the peculiarity of insisting on the sophianic relationship between Plato and the spirit of Byzantine culture, exemplified in the church’s architecture: “The pagan Sophia of Plato beholds herself mirrored in the Christian Sophia, the divine Wisdom. [...] Plato was the prophet of Sophia in paganism,” 14.

bequeathed its hieroglyphic sophiology, as a theological problem, to the generations which succeeded it.”²¹

Bulgakov is clearly looking back here and reflecting on the impact of his visits to *Hagia Sophia* at a distance of a little more than a decade. Bulgakov has a marked tendency to envision the course of history in the light of a glorified humanity with transformative effects on the surrounding natural world. Something of this is already manifest in his early attachment to Marxism, but the series of avowed experiences of a mystical character during a period of about twenty-five years, including now that of the great church of Constantinople, shifted the vectors that would lead him to orient his philosophy of economy progressively in line with what the Church signifies, what the *Hagia Sophia* reveals exemplarily. He had already been rethinking the sophiological approach to philosophical theology under the inspiration of Soloviev and the guidance of Florensky, but the experience of Holy Wisdom in the form of an all-embracing physical structure, itself sustained by the heavenly powers, set the path for his future task on behalf of the revealed God and in continuity with Russia's peculiar and ongoing commitment to it. Catherine Evtuhov expresses this nicely: “Bulgakov lived himself the experience of Vladimir's envoys: indeed, in this stone incarnation of the Platonic world of ideas, he knew not whether he was in heaven or on earth.”²²

Like Thomas Allan Smith,²³ Evtuhov values the “visits” as a defining moment in Bulgakov's life, coming as it did in the sequence of events that included his expulsion from his country and serious doubts about the survival of the Russian Church. Evtuhov's own rendering of it is interesting and worth registering. She considers the experience as provoking in Bulgakov another apocalyptic vision, wherein he saw Muslims peaceably and orderly worshipping in a Mosque, formerly Justinian's church, and this seemed to Bulgakov to be good and the possible fulfillment *Hagia Sophia's* mission to bring humanity ecumenically together. This would be the true vocation of the third Rome, and that of the Church:

It would become again the meeting place of heaven and earth experienced by Vladimir's emissaries almost a

²¹ Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology*, 2.

²² Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 232.

²³ See note 19.

thousand years earlier. [...] The last twenty years of Bulgakov's life were a playing out of the vision in the mosque, as, amidst the petty scrambling of émigré existence, he launched an extraordinarily ambitious, messianic effort to reinterpret Christian doctrine for the modern age.²⁴

In any case, among the events that would have had a decisive impact on Bulgakov's thinking and represent a renewed commitment to bring their meaning to light, the church of the *Hagia Sophia* qua work of art had the special power to reveal a truth about divine reality that surpassed the conceptual tools at the disposal of the Byzantine theologians of the time. The divine reality of which he speaks corresponds to dogmatic pronouncements of the Ecumenical Councils. There the Fathers did indeed demonstrate "theological creativity," but fell short of the kind of clarification that would enable Orthodox theology to proceed further in its vocation to address the fulness of Christ and the universality of its relation to all of creation. However, in an argumentative pattern that will repeat itself throughout his work, especially in what comes from the Greek Fathers, he will admire their creativity, which, led by the Holy Spirit, allowed them to make right dogmatic statements in spite of the limitations of their arguments *per se*. That is, they were saying great truths that outran their capacity to express them with sufficient precision, but yet were accepted as Orthodox and received canonical status and celebrated as such by the believing faithful. And so it is with the truth expressed in the *Hagia Sophia*: "Byzantine theology as such left behind no explanation of that to which this ecclesiastical architecture bears witness. It only bequeathed its hieroglyphic sophiology, as a theological problem, to the generations which succeeded it."²⁵ As art, it was the ultimate and last realization of greatness that is properly Greek in inspiration; as *ecclesia*, it points beyond the New Rome in the name of the universal Church.

In the continuation of the *Outline's* Introduction, Bulgakov traces the itinerary towards a delayed unveiling of Christian sophiology in the late nineteenth century but still in the ambit of the promise that the Third Rome holds out for Church and the humanity that she wishes to call to salvation. In sum, he tells us that the Old Rome would never know how to assimilate her message

²⁴ Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sick: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890-1920*, 233.

²⁵ Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology*, 2.

of catholicity that is signalled in its all-encompassing dome, focused as it was on its pope and its strong sense of hierarchical coordination over its widespread network of churches. About the Third Rome, having accepted the Orthodox faith from Byzantine missionaries, it knew how to keep the promise of an eventual revelation of St Sophia's full meaning. But, still, that will continue for many centuries to be hidden in the architecture of its churches and the symbolic sophiology of its celebrations, either around the figure of the *Theotokos* (prefiguring creaturely Sophia), or Christ (prefiguring divine Sophia): they both represent the Wisdom of God. That which was conceived in Hellenism and made manifest in Christianity stands in need of a new conceptual impulse in order to reinvigorate Holy Tradition and to bring it newly in line with the spirit of catholicity that constitutes its divinely inspired mission. Retrospectively situating epiphanic experience of his visit, he conjugates his intuition of Byzantine theology's inability to penetrate the mystery of *Hagia Sophia* with the sophiological ideas cultivated by Soloviev and Florensky and gradually liberated from Jacob Boehme's gnostic acceptance of it and its workings in the philosophical idealism of Hegel and Schelling. At bottom, it took Russian genius, resourced "from holy tradition, which silently pervades the whole history of the Eastern Church,"²⁶ not only to enhance and enlarge Christian Hellenism, but also to safeguard the essence of the Christian faith in modern times, namely, that which concerns Divine humanity. Sophiology provides a renewed perspective of the theandric shape of the course of history that is essential to the Christian worldview. Again. "As the dome of St. Sophia in Constantinople with prophetic symbolism portrays heaven bending to earth, so the Wisdom of God itself is spread like a canopy over our sinful though still hallowed world."²⁷

As *Unfading Light* demonstrates, much of what he thinks about the sophianicity of the created world is indicative of the active mediating presence, Sophia, realizing the bond between the uncreated and the created. In other words, the idea had been already meditated upon before the visit to *Hagia Sophia*. For example, "Occupying the place *between* God and the world, Sophia abides between being and super-being, she is neither the one nor the other, or both at once."²⁸ In this work, her function as mediatrix acquires various attributes: as a Platonic *metaxu*, as the Angel of the creature, as the exterior expression of Divine love, as *natura*

²⁶ Ibid., 7.

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 219.

naturans and base for *natura naturata*, as Eternal Feminine where the mysteries of the world abide, and the like. In sum, they represent attempts to situate the reality of sophianic experience as an articulating energy. Some twenty years later, at the time of his ecclesiastical trial, he is able to provide in the *Outline* a rounded-out account of what he means sophiology as theological support for the dogmas defined by the seven Great Ecumenical Councils and the Orthodox readings of the *Theotokos* and the Church. The notions coming, strictly speaking, from non-Orthodox sources would be, as far as he is concerned, properly transmuted and made compatible with the Orthodox faith. It seems on the face of it that non-Orthodox sources in the West should not be exempted from this possibility as long as it speaks to what is already available in Holy Tradition, which would necessarily include the Scriptures, composed under authority of the Old Covenant and revealed in the fullness their meaning in the New. The trilogies aim to bring this out in function to the providential actions of heavenly sent (or wrought) persons constitutive of the sophianic inner form that ultimately define the way to salvation and to the new heavenly and earthly creation.

Bulgakov thus finds Byzantine theology wanting in its understanding of the depths of meaning contained in the architecture of the *Sophia*. The transformed sophiology of Germanic origins, once successfully made compatible with Orthodox doctrine, can find true home in the Wisdom literature of the Bible. Bulgakov will advocate consistently for sophianicity's presence in the created order and is, thereby, accessible to all of humankind and in the cultural productions, manifesting yearning for the divine everywhere awaiting for inspired Scripture to put them aright. As we have seen just above, the mediating factor would be the Russian experience of having, on the one hand, assimilated the Byzantine mode of thought and the achievements of what Florovsky calls "Christian Hellenism," and, on the other, assimilated the idea of divine Sophia, emerging in the origins of transcendental thought of Germanic thinkers, who themselves did not have the conceptual means to grasp the full dimensions of Holy Wisdom. What we have is a curious analogue between the Russia and Israel: as the "Church of Israel" was to instruct the nations in true wisdom in anticipation of the Advent of God's Anointed One, the Church of Russia is to instruct the nations in the fullness of that wisdom as the Church of the Anointed One who is God and whose Kingdom is at hand.²⁹ The

²⁹ In Rowan Williams' reflection on "Bulgakov and Anti-Semitism" at the end of his work dedicated to Bulgakov's political theological, the former

plenitude of such a mission in its thoroughgoing catholicity can only be expressed in an Orthodox theology capable of integrating into itself meaning of *Hagia Sophia*.

Developing his sophiological theology alongside Christian Hellenism, he had already had his return-to-the-Fathers moment around thirty years before the Parisian interest in the *ressourcement* of theology. The question for the moment is that of the experience of the *Hagia Sophia* and the envisioning of furthering of Christian Hellenism through the divine energies communicated through, for example, the Church of Israel, or the modern philosophical investigations that announce the presence of the irreducible "I" in personhood and in the immanence of the Trinity. Human creative activity presupposes the sophianicity of creation can be open to a synergetic participation in the source of Life which is self-giving. Human cultural efforts can be revelatory and may reflect of that which is made known to mankind in Scripture and, thus, capable of finding its place in Holy Tradition. The Hellenic sense of the wholeness need not be compromised. On the contrary, it could be enhanced. Moreover, the call to creativity appears impoverished as a notion if it does not involve transmuting in the light of divine Wisdom that which is given to be thought and acted upon in accordance with revealed content for the sake of salvation and Life itself.

Bulgakov is a visionary. He describes himself as having epiphanic experiences that enlarge and points beyond the horizon of what is visibly before him and into the invisible in its fullness. What is seen and temporal engages that which encompasses it. Bulgakov sets his "sights" onto eschatological reality of divine Wisdom, expressive of the kenotic God and the promise of the transformative energies, like the dome of the *Hagia Sophia*, who is apocalyptically to come. Again, "An ocean of light pours in from above and dominates the whole space below – it enchants, convinces, as it seems to say: I am in the world and the world in me." It is the prefiguration of the Lord's Second Coming in Parousia,

Archbishop brings up the issue of the participation of assimilated Jews in the Bolshevik revolution. Bulgakov warns about anti-Semitic revenge on the part of Christians. But what interests us here is the distinctiveness of Russia and Israel as peoples of destiny that Bulgakov sees in them and the promise of their eventual coming together. Transmitting Bulgakov's thinking, Williams says, "[there will a creative period in history] if Russia and Israel can find how to live together: no other people is destined for religious creativity to the degree that Russia is, yet Israel remains the sole chosen race. In their symbiosis we may look for a new vision of Christ, and a recovery of the spiritual roots of Christianity," 296-97.

of heaven bending to earth. Hence, Bulgakov's most insistent prayer that is both the last lines of the last book of the New Testament and of his last, as well as greatest, work, *The Bride of the Lamb*: "And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come! Even so, come, Lord Jesus." This is the ultimate apocalyptic prayer in anticipation of the eschaton. Bulgakov looks over the edge of the visible and the dying and onto an excess of reality that is hoped for. Still, it is open to be grasped and experienced through linguistic and liturgical symbolic expression, structured around divinely inspired Scripture and the historical establishing of covenants with a chosen people. Faith engenders faithfulness and faithfulness the light, leading mind and will to contemplate the inner-connected reality of Divine Humanity that has come and will come again.

Death and Dying

Many commentators who review Bulgakov's early life refer to his long acquaintance with death. It starts with the fact that his father was priest-in-charge of a cemetery church. So, he was constantly present at funerals and burial services. He also saw many of his siblings die at a young age. Thus, from early on, he was able to deal with death in a way that it was permeated with Orthodox religiosity. From what we have already seen, Bulgakov acquired the habit of meditating on the key events of life that were significant marks in his becoming aware of divine presence. These influenced his theological vision and the mission that he conceived for it.

The death of a son, still a young child, in 1909, a year after the third experience of his conversion, set him decisively on the course of life in the Church. Evtuhov's account of the importance that this death had on Bulgakov is significant: "More than any purely intellectual discovery or political experience, the boy's death became a critical landmark in Bulgakov's spiritual return to the church."³⁰ Given his disposition for radicality and maximalism, returning to the Church would entail the creative resolution of his own ongoing positioning as an "intelligent" with his populist sympathies. He believed that, in the Church, the Russian faithful could be guided into the all-embracing reality of ecclesial wisdom:

³⁰ Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890-1920*, 133.

Together with the church I took into my soul the Russian people, not from without, as some sort of object for worship and exhortation, but from within, as my own being, *one* with me. There is no popular and, so to speak, popularising element than the church, precisely because there *is* no 'people', there is only the church, one for all and uniting everyone.³¹

In other words, wherever the Church is, she proclaims that God is and will be all in all. In the mean-time of history, while she anticipates the Kingdom yet to come, she serves as a remembrance of the communal spirit of the early Church, celebrating at once her Lord's enthronement with the Father and invisible presence amongst them.

The death of Ivashechka would thus reinforce this strong sense of communion and inter-connectedness of created reality with the divine. The language used to describe the experience of his son's funeral recalls that used in his vision of *Hagia Sophia* a decade so later "[...] paradise waiting only to bend over you, to stand guard over your grave," but also that attributed to Vladimir's delegates in middle Byzantium times "The liturgy was proceeding. I do not know where it took place, on heaven or on earth... 'Escorted invisibly by angelic ranks ...'"³² In *Unfading Light*, he inserts the account of the funeral while arguing for the special character of religious experience as that which leaves all other evidence behind in regard to the certitude that remains with the one who has it. It is -he says- akin to the experience of the prophets: when the Lord "spoke," communicating to their hearts a word sounding "louder than all the thunders of the world, more convincing and trustworthily than [their] whole understanding."³³ More acutely than the other epiphanic events that we have noted, this one took him more explicitly into the mystery of Christ, whereby dying constitutes the path to a reawakening to something of extraordinary depth about love. Finding himself in a place that is beyond understanding, yet – like Job and Abraham before him – accepting it in faith, God spoke to him with clarity in the darkness of his soul's abandonment to the Father's will.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³² Also, "Your mother fell down with a scream: 'The heavens have opened!' She thought that she was dying and seeing heaven [...] and heaven was opened, in it our apocalypse was accomplished" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 14-5).

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

For the only time in my life I understand what it means *to love* not with a human, self-loving, and mercenary love, but with the divine love with which Christ loves us. It was as if the curtain separating me from others fell and all of the gloom, bitterness, offense, animosity, and suffering in their hearts was revealed to me.³⁴

Bulgakov's personal passion, expressed *in memoriam* of his son's falling asleep, aligns his thoughts and feelings with the kenotic character of the trihypostatic God, a divine suffering beyond measure in comparison to us, yet still comparable in the transformative sacrifice bearing glory and robbing death of its victory. Reminded of Saint Paul's being taken up to the third heaven, he rose above the interestedness of the reciprocity of human love to have a prophet's perception of Christ/ God's love for a fallen human race which He has come to save. The curtain was taken away at that moment and, as the heavens opened, he had a vision that gave him the fullest possible grasp of the oneness of humanity before God. The conviction of universality had already been cultivating from the time of his Marxist convictions, then through the mediation of these in idealist philosophies, and finally in his reengagement with the Christian faith. Now, God spoke to him at the same time that the boy was speaking to him. He came to the realisation of how it was that God spoke to the prophets: "I knew then with ultimate certitude that God spoke to me and thus he spoke to the prophets as well. [Recognising the difference of status, nevertheless,] as a creature I and a prophet are the same thing, and he speaks to the creature."³⁵

So, God spoke to him; the divine (Sophia) reaches down to embrace his created person (Sophia). The heavens opened and he was allowed to see, in accordance with the grace given him, what the prophets saw when God spoke to them: He reveals His purposes to His lost people and the extent to which He is to go to save creation by placing it in the order of the uncreated. The invisible abundance of Absolute self-giving Life makes itself known as an articulate originating presence in the form of a word, calling all to salvation. The prophets hear the word for future reference, as it were. Once chosen and called out from the midst of worldly distractions, the prophet's life consists in attentive hearing to receive the word that speaks to him and in him for edification of others capable of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 14-15.

listening to inspired speech. For these, the heavens open, visible reality is briefly transfigured and revealed (in its sophianicity) for what it is in the mind of the Creator God.

Still within *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov inserts yet another account contributing to his conversion and that has also to do with the theme of death. This one complements the opening up of the heavens with a paean to Matter-mother: "Great mother, damp earth! In you we are born, by you we are nourished, we touch you with our feet, and we are turned back into you." But, at the same time, "Mother earth! From you that flesh was born which became the womb for the incarnated God, from you he took his most pure Body."³⁶ Against this thematic background, he recalls receiving a notice from the "Land" of his birth that a female member of his family was to be laid to rest.³⁷ He returned straightaway to his home village church, accompanied the prayers and procession to the grave, and duly tossed some earth on the lid onto the coffin: "The Great Mother opened her womb to receive her."³⁸

Years later, Bulgakov faced his own death as one afflicted with cancer and having to endure operations attempting to deal with it. A second operation took place during Holy Week and fits in with Christ's Passion. Death did not happen, but the dying gave him a taste of God forsakenness that Christ knew, a plunging "into a kind of darkness" and "the shadow of death."³⁹ And like Christ, love for humankind persisted in his soul undergoing torture: "A man cannot die except in the state of God-forsakenness, just as the universal man, the new Adam, could not die in his God-manhood. I knew Christ was in my dying, I felt his nearness [...]. He could only help me in my suffering and dying with me."⁴⁰ Christ is the hypostatic manifestation of the universal/ particular, God-man, whose own dying is paradigmatic of what means for a human being to be dying; His divine nature weakening, that is, God-forsaken, as His flesh was dying. The entire experience, on the one hand, speaks of the radical *kenosis* implied in the Incarnation, His thorough identification with the human condition: "Death approached him in his humanity. And his dying was the agony of all human agonies.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 191-92.

³⁷ Though not explicitly identified, the deceased is likely his mother: "I prostrated myself before [the grave], this bright and sacred object, overshadowed by the farewell blessing, like a trembling boy on the breast of his mother" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 192).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Pain, James, and Zernov Nicolas (eds.), *Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Anthology* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 1976), 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

In its humanity it was natural, i.e., it was not lightened by being merged with the divine power.”⁴¹ However, on the other, these moments of illumination could be read back into the lively perception of what Christ endured as He died. In other words, the dying Christian can understand himself, even then, as experientially knowing Christ in His longsuffering and as participating with Him in creation’s “groaning and yearning” for the wholeness of salvation. And even here, in recalling Saint Paul’s exclamation of creation’s inherent responsiveness to the call to salvation, Bulgakov remembers to bring into view the intrinsic liveliness of the cosmos.

Clearly, Bulgakov can only speak with precision about the experience of his dying that he was able to recall. However, in the specific case of Bulgakov and given the series of epiphanic experiences that has led him deeper and deeper into the Christian conception of the fullness of life, the mystery of dying and death have been partially revealed and hold out the promise of good things still to come.

[Belief in immortality] can become something self-evident, not admitting even question or doubt, for those who have come to know eternal life within the limits of this world, for those who have encountered God in the life of the spirit, for those who have experienced through love a revelation of death. However, in both cases death represents a *transcensus* into another life, one which remains largely unknown to us.⁴²

Thus, the same confidence is attained by those immersed in the life of prayer, namely, those whose knowledge comes from devotion and sacrificial love. Here again, a first-person experience (I, we) constitutes the primary factor in postulating the conviction that death must be situated in relation to an antecedent and superabundant Life. Clearly, from a purely critical third-person perspective, death is quite literally problematic, namely, looked upon as an irresolvable “problem:” all that can be said is that death happens to living things and human beings are no exception. That which had been alive but is now without life can appear as a phenomenon in the space/ time dimensions of the cosmos. The scientific positivism that critical epistemology encourages eventually resolves the problem with the thesis of annihilation of life in the face of death. Physical nature would constitute, in this

⁴¹ Ibid., 26.

⁴² Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 349.

case, the backdrop for all living reality. Such radical naturalism that runs contrary to Bulgakov's experience and the philosophical theology that he carefully comes to articulate in relation to it.⁴³

For Bulgakov as he presents it more systematically in *The Bride of the Lamb*, the very *possibility* of death is inscribed in the idea of divine creation *ab nihilo*. God, in the act of creating out of nothing did so by establishing this nothing as a condition for creation. From it, He brings forth that which is to have temporal and spatial existence, namely, that which is subject to becoming (*me on*) and is meant to fulfil its place in the created order. Thus, logically, In God's creative freedom, the *condition qua non* for the emergence created being is the postulating from within God's Life a non-being that, in itself, does not have the power of being, but does necessarily accompany all things created. As such, the nothingness of non-being does not denote death with a power of its own, for it is originally complicit with life-giving acts of creation which did not contemplate death as annihilation, but merely as a state of life, i.e., death must be understood on the basis of life and not vice versa. Death should not be contemplated as more than an expected consequence of man's mortality. "Man was not originally created for death, the natural *possibility* of immortality was implanted in him."⁴⁴

Human being is grounded in divine life and it is to this life that it is connaturally inclined as its rightful telos. In a fundamental sense, man cannot die, *non posse mori*. However,

⁴³ The Roman Catholic author, associated with existentialism, Gabriel Marcel, offers a useful distinction between "problem" and "mystery": problem as that which can be dealt with at a critical distance; mystery as that with which we are at once immediately involved, and involves us. Death can be empirically acknowledged in a dead body, but *our* death is a mystery, the meaning of which remains hidden; it cannot be objectified, just as it cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, it can be faced with "creative fidelity," consisting of decisive acts that contribute to the attainment of personal freedom, fully realised in relation to the living God, whose reality is ontologically excessive in relation to objectifications of all sorts. This could describe, from another perspective, at least this aspect of Bulgakov's engagement with the mystery and promise of death. But also from a Western source, Michel Henry's reversed phenomenology is built around the primacy of self-giving Absolute Life and has much that is compatible with Orthodox thinking. See my, "Saint Gregory Palamas' Critique of the 'Mind-out-of-Body' in the Contemporary Purview of Michel Henry's Reversed Phenomenology," in *Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism: Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work*, ed. Constantinos Athanansouplos (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020), 120-41.

⁴⁴ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 350.

through sin and with the weakening of his natural psychophysical equilibrium, a contrary tendency, *non posse non mori*, has gained a foothold and death constitutes a constant threat to human being. Thus, the conviction about the insuperability of death goes *pari passu* with the debilitating of the complex ontological composition of man to face death as an act of life as not more than that; in death, the energy that ought to exist is not absent, but paralysed. And yet, in this *transcensus* from height to fallenness, death has become at once a source of spiritual horror and despondency, coexisting with bodily suffering and weariness derived from the ills of having a corruptible body. Again, just as is necessary to contemplate death in reference to divine life that is all-embracing, a full understanding of fallen human condition appears in the light of the Resurrection of the Incarnate Word, establishing the unity of life, whereby the uncreated source of the human soul and the created body that is extensive to the cosmos remain interconnected in incarnate personhood. In this way, the immortality that human being can attain is one that, “encompasses both death and resurrection. Both the one and the other, accomplished in Christ and in Him, in all humankind, have so to speak, their ontological place in human nature, fully assumed by the Lord in His incarnation.”⁴⁵

Bulgakov offers, thus, a metaphysics for a proper appreciation of death. Its appearance within life does not constitute failure on God’s part but can be attributed to the micro-cosmic character of human being – very different and ultimately richer than that of bodiless angels. Man is “God-earth, an incarnate godlike spirit.”⁴⁶ The unique status of human being in creation leads Bulgakov to extend his metaphysical conjectures to the post-death conditions of existence upon the provisional separation of the soul (which retains life) from the perishing body. “The spirit *lives* beyond the grave by virtue of its immortality and the divine energy that it has [...]”⁴⁷ No longer impeded by corporeality in its fallen state, the human soul in its spiritual-psychic state awakes to the spiritual world that it once shared with the angels. However, the yearning to achieve reunion with the psychic-corporeal being, once enjoyed in the created earthly order, persists and the task consists henceforth “to go to the end of himself, not only in mortal life, but also in the afterlife state” to the achieve full resurrected life and full realization of true humanity.⁴⁸ Understood, going to the end of oneself involves

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁴⁷ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 362.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 359.

self-judgment, renewed self-knowledge and utter responsibility for our actions in the presence of God. In other words, experience continues ongoingly and self-knowledge increases with repentance and in accordance with the (now) inevitable knowledge of God Himself.

Bulgakov's defense of the final recapitulation (*apokatastasis*) of the entirety of all creation in God, who will be all in all, follows Saint Gregory Nyssa's lead this matter of universal salvation. The principle in operation is that judgment is not only a matter of retribution but a life as a continuum extending from this side of death and then still unfolding in the afterlife as souls are receiving Christ's teaching. The telos is always salvation for that which the Creator God conceived for and placed in the created order. "The main significance of the afterlife consists in living out of the fullness of life to the end as a preparation for the universal resurrection and a continuation to the fullness of the sophianicity of creation."⁴⁹ In the end as in the beginning, the being of creation, drawn from nothing by divine will, carries with it the intent of divine Sophia for universal communion.

At the heart of Bulgakov's rationale for why it is that *non posse mori* is his recourse to the Pauline (and patristic) tripartite anthropology: *pneuma/ psyche/ soma*. In the intermediate stage of afterlife, it is granted that the body does perish so that the first expression of immortality resides in the intimate bond between the spirit and the soul, being mindful however that the soul was hitherto embodied. (From the point of view of the body, it is equally correct to say that it is ensouled as long as it has it is alive). This affirms an ontological continuity between the soul and the created order of the material world and, through it, the spirit abides in both. Therefore, it is not merely the case of human being having an uncreated, divine dimension alongside of a created, bodily one. From the supra-physical energy of the spirit to the perspectives opened up in the created world through the economy of human endeavour, a vital connection is realized. In this as well, humankind differs from the angels: "No human spirit can exist independently of the world"⁵⁰ and the bonds it necessarily has with corporeality is not abrogated with death but, through the bodily Resurrection of Christ, can be restored and continued. With Christ's assumption of the entirety of human nature, even its death, in His Incarnation, the intended ontological condition of human being is thus recreated.

⁴⁹ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 375.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 355.

Through the lens of Christ's death and Resurrection for the salvation and life of the world, namely, the destroying of death by death, the disorder of the fallen world, namely, that pertaining to *non posse non mori*, is turned aright: death is hereby known as an act that takes place in the infinitely larger reality of Life, revealed as intimately related to self-giving love, unceasingly realised within the immanence of the Tri-hypostatic God and communicated to the creation brought forth through His kenotic action of Trinity. Concerning the extent of the redemptive action, Bulgakov reminds us of Christ's *descensus* into Sheol as indicative of the extent to which God who is love does indeed go to restore salvation to all. The issue now is the "all" of those save. The response is noteworthy:

In the afterlife, there is no place for anything that is not Christian, even among non-Christians, although, of course, each individual receives the revealed redemption differently, depending on his freedom. It is necessary to add to this the power of the Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit, reposing upon the Son during His earthly life and in His Resurrection, and annihilating hell by the 'radiance of divinity'. The doors of hell are powerless to impede access to the 'rushing wind' (Acts 2:2) of the Pentecost and the appearance of the 'tongues of fire.'⁵¹

The effects of the Pentecostal out-pouring of grace knows no bounds and, while acknowledging varied destinies of the members of the human race, the God of all sees them as one. Moreover, each one is destined to experience abandonment at the hour of death and will endure the afterlife as part of the unfinished business of universal salvation. Once again, the same continuum of life extends from earthly existence through death and into the next dimension of being where changes in individuals can effectively occur as they rise above their fallen condition. In sum, judgement and retribution are not finally a matter of pure passivity, but a process of change and the degree of preparation to receive godlikeness in accordance with an individual's personal logos, or theme: "Man's sophianicity is manifested not only in life, but also in death, in the world on this side, as the general and unique theme of his being."⁵² All of which suggests that the afterlife involves a constant striving in consonance with a specific calling into being, each to his own for glory of all in Christ.

⁵¹ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 371-72.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 375.

In sum, the place that death has in Bulgakov's theological investigations has long roots in his family history. But it was the death of his young son that brought him more deeply into mystery of death as an act of life. Already inclined from the time of his ties to Marxist theory to think in terms of humankind as a whole, he embraced communion as fundamental to the Christian Church's teaching of life on earth and in the hereafter, along with the hope that all human being who passes through godforsaken-ness in the experience of death, i.e., in accordance with the Cross and its overcoming of death, will in the end be made worthy of salvation.

Conclusion

Advancing the case for Bulgakov's Christian theology with striking assertiveness some fifteen years ago, Milbank considered that, alongside Henri de Lubac, Bulgakov, is "one of the two truly great theologians of the twentieth century."⁵³ Closer to our time, in a piece, dealing positively with Bulgakov, he continues thus, "At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it increasingly appears that perhaps the most significant theology of the two preceding centuries has been that of the Russian sophiological tradition."⁵⁴ And, of course, Bulgakov eminently represents this promise for him. Finally, and equally germane to our subject, Milbank very recently raised the level of his estimation of Bulgakov's place in the theological enterprise from the limits of the last century to the entirety of modernity.

[Christian philosophy as he conceives it] is a reflection on Christian 'myths' and 'dogmas' – in the sense of primordial written language or cognitive reflections that have been liturgically acquired such a collective status. He is arguably the very greatest modern theologian just because he realized, like the Church Fathers, both Greek and Latin, that the only real Christian theologian is the one who directly assumes the philosophical task in the light of the Holy Scriptures.⁵⁵

⁵³ John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2005), 104.

⁵⁴ John Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon," in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, eds. Adrian Pabst, and Christoph Schneider (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 46.

⁵⁵ John Milbank, "Foreword, 'From Grammar to Wisdom,'" in Sergius Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma)*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020), xxi.

What Milbank says in this passage taken from his Foreword, “From Grammar to Wisdom” to the English translation of *The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma)* accurately describes how Bulgakov goes about his theological investigations and, possibly, about Bulgakov’s ultimate worth.

Milbank clearly means to promote Bulgakov as one of the high points of theological culture that, even in the West, deserves recognition, or, eventually, must simply come around to having it. However, in underscoring the experiential groundings of Bulgakov’s literary production, we have wished to accentuate the import of these personal revelations that contributed to the eschatological vision that characterizes his thinking. “The three calls,” the visits to *Hagia Sophia*, and his moving reflections on death and dying, such revelations are constitutive of his faith, they are apocalyptic disclosures, whereby “the future [is] deposited in the present, but it is not limited by this, for it contains the revelation about what God does with the world through his providential agency and his omnipotence.”⁵⁶ It matters much that Bulgakov does not treat these matters merely as dogmatic concepts to be contemplated abstractly; what he has to say implies ontological participation with that which was simply but decisively given to him such that those who would eventually encounter his writings know about these experiences and to learn from them, *along with* the extensive, multi-layered meditation on the simultaneity of the Divine and creaturely sophianic orders, a sophio-logic existing between the heavenly and the earthly. To this suggestion, we might finally add: *along with* his conviction that the mystery of human destiny is most truly played out in the history of the Church, ever exposed to trials yet sustained ultimately by the tri-hypostatic God, who is disposed to descend towards humankind, to embrace it, and communicate to it the transfiguring and deifying power that it possesses, through the divine hypostases, on behalf of all and for all.

References:

Bulgakov, Sergius. *The Orthodox Church*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988.

Bulgakov, Sergius. *Sophia: The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology*. London: Lindisfarne Press, 1993.

⁵⁶ Bulgakov, *Unfailing Light*, 213.

Bulgakov, Sergius. *Bride of the Lamb*. Translated by Boris Jakim. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Bulgakov, Sergius. *The Burning Bush*. Translated by Thomas Allan Smith. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Bulgakov, Sergius. *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*. Translated by Thomas Allan Smith. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012.

Bulgakov, Sergius. *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*. Munster: Aschendorff, 2019.

Evtuhov, Catherine. *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890-1920*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Milbank, John. *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Milbank, John. "Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon." In *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

Milbank, John. "Foreward. From Grammar to Wisdom." In *The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma)*. Translated by Stephen Churchyard. Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020.

Pain, James, and Zernov Nicolas (eds.). *Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Anthology*. Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 1976.

Slensinski, Robert. *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*. Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017.

Williams, Rowan (ed.). *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999.

Fr. Manuel Sumares
Faculty of Philosophy (Braga)
Universidade Católica Portuguesa
Rua Camões, 4710-362 Braga, Portugal
<frsumares@gmail.com >