
Sergei Bulgakov: Eastern Orthodoxy engaging the modern world¹

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Summary: This paper argues that the Russian Orthodox theologian, Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), offers a unique engagement with the modern world and thus challenges a reified view of traditional Christian doctrine. Bulgakov's approach demonstrates that the doctrine of the Incarnation (as any doctrinal formulation) must be recognized as an attempt at understanding an ultimate truth (Divine Sophia) within a limiting context (earthly Sophia). Thus, although admitting the centrality of the Chalcedonian formula, theology must offer an interpretation and translation of its insights into the questions and dilemmas of the contemporary world. This open-ended approach is then applied both to Incarnational and ecumenical theology.

Résumé : Cette étude présente la pensée du théologien Russe Orthodoxe, Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), qui, sur la base de son implication avec le monde moderne, lance un défi aux perspectives statiques des doctrines Christologiques. Bulgakov démontre que la doctrine de l'Incarnation (comme toutes les formules doctrinales) doit être reconnue comme une approche pour comprendre la vérité ultime (la Sophia Divine) dans un contexte limité (Sophia d'ici bas). Même en admettant la centralité de la formule de Chalcédoine, la théologie doit offrir une interprétation et une traduction de ses intuitions dans les questions et les dilemmes du monde contemporain. Cette approche ouverte est alors appliquée à la théologie de l'Incarnation et à théologie œcuménique.

The Soviet revolution of 1917-21 was an epochal event producing tremendous political, social and cultural change. Among its many results, one which is not as widely recognized is the destruction of the renaissance of Russian religious thought and the dispersal of its participants into Western Europe. Late 19th- and early 20th-century Orthodox thought is part of the Silver Age of Russian cultural and intellectual ferment.² Such first generation

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thinkers as Alexei Khomiakov (1804-60) and Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) paved the way for the likes of Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), Nicholas Berdiaev (1874-1948), and Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944).³

The latter embodies much of the story of the Russian intelligentsia during this period, both in its development in late Imperial Russia and in its finding a new home in Western Europe. The transplanting of this intelligentsia out of the comfort of Orthodox "Mother" Russia, neither destroyed the fervour of its religious quest nor produced among the intelligentsia a common conservative backlash against the oppressive Marxism of the Soviet state. Rather, many of the innovative and creative seeds which began to sprout in pre-revolutionary Russia matured quickly in the even more welcoming climate of Western Europe. A leading group of Russian religious thinkers coalesced around L'Institut S. Serge in Paris and persisted in their search for making Orthodoxy and Russian religious thought significant in the development of twentieth-century Christian thought. However, in the English speaking world, the contributions of this group are only now becoming the focus of scholarly interest.⁴

The impressive work of Catherine Evtuhov, in her analysis of Sergei Bulgakov's pre-Revolutionary period, *The Cross and the Sickle*, demonstrates that among this group of émigré intellectuals Bulgakov is a leader both because of his creative intellect and because his work exists within the spectrum of Orthodox thought and the Western European intellectual tradition. Evtuhov asserts that Bulgakov's pre-revolutionary work marks a clear move towards modernity in Russian thought. However, although she admits in her study that she does not address Bulgakov's theological period, she notes that this phase in his development awaits close scrutiny. Rowan Williams, in his preface to his anthology of Bulgakov's work, also recognizes the need for "further and better research and of inspiring explorations of his [Bulgakov's] ideas" (1999: vii). Williams accurately assesses the current state of affairs in Bulgakov studies: "the inaccessibility of so much of his work and the unfamiliarity of his idiom meant that he was increasingly relegated to slightly puzzled footnotes; and the climate of Russian Orthodox theology in the next generation was not sympathetic to his more speculative vein" (1999: vii).

Elsewhere I have commented on the virtual shunning in later émigré, especially English language works, of Bulgakov's thought (2000: 96, n.8). In addition, Paul Valliere has suggested that Bulgakov's theological method and that of Georges Florovsky, whose approach came to dominate North American Orthodox reflection, are significantly different. Unlike Florovsky, and the proponents of the Neopatristic synthesis, Bulgakov and other members of the "Russian-school" were committed to "substantive revision of the theological tradition" (Valliere 2001: 230). This revision was rooted in the search for an accommodation between Orthodoxy and the modern world, addressing such questions as tradition and freedom, science, religious pluralism and how to understand dogmatic formulations in the modern intellec-

tual context (Valliere 2001: 229). Bulgakov's work, however, is now being reconsidered and revalued. Some, such as Boris Jakim, are even willing to offer that he was "the twentieth century's most profound Orthodox systematic theologian" (Bulgakov 2002: ix).

Bulgakov's theological contributions commence prior to his priestly ordination, which took place in 1918, amidst the chaos of the Bolshevik revolution and subsequent Civil War. His most productive theological period, however, was during his exile, which began in December 1922. It was during this period, as leader of the Parisian school of religious thinkers, that he most clearly formulated his theological positions and method.

Bulgakov's theological corpus reflects a perpetual search for a principle of unity that not only underlies all creation but in fact binds the created and uncreated realms. In the process of this search Bulgakov co-opts and develops the notion of Sophia⁵ as the all-embracing hermeneutic. However this Sophianic approach does not signal an intellectual pride on Bulgakov's part or an assertion of a new Gnosticism. Rather, it is a response to the limits of historic dogmatic formulations. Specifically, it is a conscious, limited "offer" made to his contemporaries to overcome the problems inherent in bringing the Chalcedonian formula forward into a totally new and different historical context. Bulgakov's Sophiology admits more about the limits of human knowing and theological discourse than some are willing to affirm.

Bulgakov is not simply a product of an Orthodox cleric's family. His life journey reflects a constant questioning, rejection, and embrace of God, faith, and Orthodoxy. There is no denying that for a significant part of Bulgakov's life God was dead. This, however, did not preclude him from speaking about his faith during this period. In his autobiography he describes himself as standing between two worlds throughout his life (1946: 32). When he once more embraces Orthodoxy, he does not simply return to the faith of his youth; he now has a new God. However, this new God is jeopardized by a new, radically unexpected development: the rise of the Soviet state and militant atheism. Bulgakov's God, who re-unites him to the Russian Orthodox Church, jarringly repudiates the integrity of that Church by allowing the rise of Communism and the compromises of ecclesiastical authority with the new state. Bulgakov, now in exile, must reconstitute his God, reconstitute his understanding of Church, and finally, reconstitute his definition of faithfulness to Orthodox tradition. After 1917, Bulgakov experiences fundamental, irrevocable loss. Exile places him in no place, in a time between times. In the midst of being the Dean of L'Institut S. Serge in Paris he experiences loss and further exile, albeit not physical; this was the theological condemnation of him by Metropolitan Sergei of Moscow in 1935. Bulgakov writes: "Now this new wound remains in my heart as an open wound" (1946: 50). Although dean of the leading Russian Orthodox institution of his day, he experiences rejection and condemnation. His Orthodoxy is not lived in a stable, comfortable environment. Upheaval and uncertainty haunt his personal life. Bul-

gakov reflects upon his familial home and, almost in surrender, declares, "there was so much death there" (1946: 20). The death of the Bulgakovs' third child, Ivan, at the age of three, forever marked Sergei's consciousness. According to Valliere, it became "the measuring rod of Christian *podvizhnichestvo*, an example which would challenge Bulgakov, inspire him and bring him to tears for the rest of his life" (2000: 250). Death was for Bulgakov a constant, albeit unwanted, companion, a relentless reminder of his finitude, createdness, and imperfection. Easy answers, simple formulaic repetition of old theological truism, were insufficient to make Bulgakov's Orthodoxy a living response to the realities of his life.

Bulgakov's theology develops as a reflection on the meaning of divine-human interrelatedness in the midst of a very broken and disrupted world. What then does it mean to assert, as Chalcedon did in 451, that humanity and divinity are united in the person of Jesus Christ? How does humanity experience divinity in the midst of such mortality, suffering, and upheaval? Does Bulgakov develop his profoundly complex Sophiological system in response to a perceived, or perhaps intuited, inadequacy in the Chalcedonian formula? In other words, if the fifth-century Orthodox dogma fully constituted the Christian understanding of the divine-human and divine-created nature relationships, why develop this elaborate Sophiology? Is it feasible to see in Bulgakov's work an implicit recognition of the limits of a historical dogma? Bulgakov affirms Chalcedon but recognizes a need to interpret and translate it into the new issues framing intellectual life in the early 20th century. Is Sophiology not a mechanism for opening up Orthodox thought to an understanding of the development of doctrine which validates historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts as significant factors in doctrinal formulations? Is this not perhaps the "danger" that Georges Florovsky recognized and expressed his concern over in the 1930s?

Chalcedon, for Bulgakov, formulates a normative theological insight for Christianity, yet demands the opening up of possibilities, rather than closure. In *Agnets Bozhii* [Lamb of God], he affirms "The Chalcedonian dogma is not only a norm of theology, against which all ecclesial teaching must be tested, but it has also become a higher and pressing problem for theological and philosophical reflection" (1933: 80). Although the Chalcedonian formulation is normative, it is also "a problem." Paul Valliere has interpreted Bulgakov's approach to Chalcedon as "more an outline than a doctrine" (1991: 188). He adds, "In fact, Bulgakov does not believe that an adequate, much less a complete, dogmatics of the Incarnation is to be found anywhere in the patristic tradition." For Bulgakov, Chalcedon presents the parameters within which Christians must come to explain the Incarnation; it does not present the final exact formulation. Chalcedon contains the truth, but can only express that truth within a limiting context and language. It is the contemporary task to restate that truth in a manner comprehensible to the age we are in and in response to the issues of the day. As a result, Bulgakov can rec-

ognize that the categories of teachers of the Church and heretics are less precise delineators of boundaries than is commonly assumed (an important insight bearing in mind the current state of dialogue between non-Chalcedonian and Chalcedonian Christians). In the first pages of *Agnets Bozhii*, he comments that

all of them, regardless of their fate in the Church, created one common action: they formed the theological epoch and thus influenced to some degree, one another so that one cannot understand theological teaching, nor conciliar formulations without recognizing their unity and mutual connection. (1933: 7)

The boundaries are there, but creativity, interpretation and insight are produced when the boundaries are transgressed. Chalcedon functions as normative not because it creates a binding formula, but rather because it presents a binding insight which precludes certain other possibilities and demands explanation. The positive content of Chalcedon is, for Bulgakov, the affirmation that within Jesus Christ there is a complete and true union of humanity and divinity. What this means and how it is to be explained remains the ongoing task of Christian Orthodoxy. Furthermore, it has implications which go beyond Chalcedon; it is a limit which must be recognized for all councils.

Thus no single ecumenical council claimed an exhaustive character to its formulations, rather they left room for further dogmatic investigations both in new councils as well as in wider dogmatic reflections. Nowhere is there an affirmation of a principle of dogmatic completeness. (Bulgakov 1936: 13)

This affirmation presents Bulgakov with a pressing task. In his 1937 work, *Wisdom of God*, he states:

Our modern age stands in need of a new apprehension of the dogmatic formulae preserved by the Church in its living tradition. Moreover, it cannot be overemphasized that there is no single dogmatic problem that does not at present need such reinterpretation. (1937: 35)

Bulgakov's turn to Sophiology then, is not an attempt at a "new Chalcedonian formula" nor is it an attempt at defining a new overarching dogma. Rather, it is a response to the challenge of a new age, a new time, a new human condition. What then are the problems of Orthodox theology as perceived by Bulgakov? In terms of Christology and Chalcedon they centre around the understanding of the humanity of Christ. In a somewhat esoteric work "The Holy Grail," from 1930, he says: "Theology insufficiently advances the idea that the humanity of Christ as the new Adam is all-humanity, that is, the humanity of each of us and all of us together" (1997: 52). But he also adds in the same work that "the body of Christ is not only the 'community of faithful' but also the whole universe in God" (Bulgakov 1997: 34). Bulgakov is suggesting that the humanity of Christ has been too narrowly understood and too focussed in a contemporary Christian setting within the Eucharist.

This insight also presents the antinomy of simultaneously hidden and revealed: “this presence [of Christ in the world] is hidden; it is a mystery of God, inaccessible to human beings, although it is already revealed and being revealed to them” (Bulgakov 1997: 52). This antinomic character of Christ in the world is not exclusive to the Eucharistic understanding; it is also part of the Ascension story and other events (Bulgakov 1936: 19). A contemporary re-configuring of Christian dogma must incorporate this antinomy. Thus Bulgakov turns to Sophiology: a tool for redefining classic Christology with a clear cosmic focus.

Valliere speaks to the connection between Sophiology and the divine humanity:

Sophiology is a reflection on the humanity of God as intimated in the cosmicizing, transformative works of human culture. The discipline starts from the concrete data of human creativity, for “*human creativity*—in science, economy, culture, art—is *sophianic*. (1991: 182)

Sophiology allows Bulgakov to turn his attention to understanding and explaining the Chalcedonian insight in a much wider and broader context than had been done earlier. Bulgakov holds that his Sophiology is “steeped in the pathos of the Chalcedonian dogma” (1936: 12). Yet it breaks the constraints of a mechanistic adoption of the dogma which characterized, for him, traditional Orthodox appropriation of the dogma. But the product of this approach is not a new definitive formula. Bulgakov is conscious of the very limited nature of his project. In *Wisdom of God*, he asserts that although sophiology “is at the present time responsible for a sort of ideological ferment even in our Orthodox milieu” the formulations are limited; they stand “on the threshold of dogmatic considerations” (1937: 28). Nor does Sophiology claim a primacy within Orthodox thought: “It is characteristic of only one trend of thought within Christianity; it is by no means dominant in the Orthodox Church.... It is untrue to affirm that the development of the doctrine of the Wisdom of God leads to the denial or undermining of any part of Christian dogma” (1937: 29). Further in the same work he argues that there are many forms of Sophiology and that there is even a need to distinguish two different Sophia: in God and in the creature; the Divine Sophia is and is not the creaturely Sophia (1937: 114-115). Clearly Sophiology’s purpose is to raise new questions, attempt new approaches, test new answers. It is not a final system, but rather as Valliere affirms:

Sophiology works on dogma in all sorts of wonderful ways—galvanizing, crystallizing, illuminating, extending, elaborating; but it does not discard dogmas or invent new ones. It catalyzes new relationships within dogma and between dogma and culture. Its job is to guide theologians on the terrain, mostly uncharted, where dogma meets experience, Church meets world, Christianity meets culture, Orthodoxy meets modernity. (1991: 190)

Sophiology is the tool by which Christian theology remains completely open to human, historical and thus, ever changing experience, which is consistent with the integral bond between humanity and divinity expressed in Chalcedon. Sophiology is not about finality and completeness but rather about a necessary and perpetual “dogmatic *metanoia*” (Bulgakov 1997: 149), a re-interpretation of Living Tradition as “creative understanding and development” rather than “superstitious idolatry” or dust covered historic definitions (147).

The character of Bulgakov’s Sophiology, in its indeterminacy, lack of completeness and elusiveness, constantly challenges to re-appraisal and re-configuration. It does not present absolutist answers, but rather reaffirms the validity of Christian Orthodoxy in a dialogue with the contemporary world. Sophiology affirms the limitedness of human formulations. Even dogmatic statements, although pointing to the truth, are in and of themselves incomplete. There is always more; there is always Other which calls the hidden into revealedness. The Divine Sophia comes into the light as creaturely Sophia, but is always more than we can know. Sophiology strives within Orthodox tradition not simply to articulate this insight, but to root it methodologically. In defending himself against the condemnation of the Karlovtsi Synod,⁶ Bulgakov defends his Orthodoxy, even though his Sophiology is full of apparent contradictions (1936: 2). At the outset of his *Zapiski* [Notes] he makes much of the fact that his first theological foray into Sophiology (*Svet nevecherni* [Unfading Light]) was published prior to his ordination by Patriarch Tikhon in 1917. At that time, Bulgakov was not judged by Russian Orthodoxy’s highest ecclesiastical authority as a heretic. However, in the post-revolutionary period, he is declared a heretic by the Moscow Synod (1935) and the Karlovtsi Synod (1927). This can occur, according to Bulgakov, because the two synodical authorities only perceive Orthodox teaching in terms of two possibilities: Orthodox or heretical. He asserts that his condemnation reflects the fate of the thought of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) at its inception (1936: 10). Orthodox teaching, however, must recognize its limits and that neither the Fathers nor the Councils are an unassailable authority (1936: 22). In defending Sophiology Bulgakov de-legitimizes the “established” authorities, recognizes the inadequacy of any formulations (which he admits are often contradictory or antinomical), and posits an openness, or better, an invitation to keep trying. Bulgakov goes so far as to assert that the Church is not symmetrical with a denomination. He unequivocally declares “there are Christians in all Christianity” (1946: 46).

In 1933 Bulgakov elaborates an undeniably progressive manifesto for the fledgling ecumenical movement. Again, he rejects simple dichotomies: “The harsh, unbending, unrelenting institutionalism of the one saving Church conflicts here with a service in the Spirit....There exists between the Church and the Churches not only a relationship of mutual expulsion

but also one of concordance" (1976: 101). Without denying the profound differences among Christians, Bulgakov asserts a "new inspiration" by the Holy Spirit which transcends the "confessional differences" (1976: 102). Thus he speaks not longingly of a unity to be achieved, but of a unity "which actually exists even now in the Christian world" (1976: 102). Without "distorting" differences, Bulgakov affirms a common Christianity in many areas of prayer/worship, scripture, the spiritual life, and the sacraments. "Thus there exists even now a certain spiritual unity within the Christian world, although this is not expressed in any formulae. But we should add to this mystical, adogmatic unity of the Christian world the reality of its dogmatic oneness" (1976: 107). Foreshadowing a post-Vatican II approach to ecumenical relations, Bulgakov states: "all Christians must realize not only their division but also their agreement" (1976: 108). Finally, he prophetically appeals for sacramental fellowship among Orthodox, Anglicans, non-Chalcedonian Christians, Roman Catholics, "as well as the Episcopal Church in Protestantism" (1976: 112). Aware that historically sacramental unity only followed dogmatic agreement, Bulgakov asserts that these Churches, having preserved the priesthood, "are powerless to destroy the efficacy of the sacraments" (1976: 112). Thus he allows that unity at the Altar may in fact be a valuable precursor to dogmatic harmony.

The priesthood of the East and the West must realize itself as one priesthood, celebrating the one Eucharist, and, if the minds of the priests could become aflame with this idea, all barriers would fall. For in response to this, dogmatic unity will be achieved, or rather a mutual understanding of one another in our distinctive features. (1976: 113)

Once more Bulgakov's thought challenges strong and steadfast categories of separation and challenges his contemporaries to think beyond the box. Unfortunately, as in the area of Sophiology specifically, here too, after generating acute debate and even recrimination Bulgakov's views were to be rejected (Blane 1993: 65).

Bulgakov's opponents were unprepared for the subversion of the foundational premises by which they defined their Orthodoxy. For Bulgakov, mechanistic repetition of historical declarations was inadequate; totalizing doctrines were vacuous; Christian theology was constantly in process of formulation and re-formulation. His opponents saw Christianity, and particularly Orthodoxy as clearly defined. Even the most progressive among his opponents, Georges Florovsky for example, was among those who saw "the business of theology... as the recovery of patristic sources and the articulation of the meaning of those sources in a modern idiom" (Valliere 2001: 231). The Synodical decrees condemned Bulgakov for heresy; his method was a fundamental challenge to *their* definition of Orthodoxy. Although Florovsky labelled Bulgakov's thought as dangerous, his approach was and is as dangerous, as scandalous, as open to an unknown future as is the Gospel.

Bulgakov's project, and that of his collaborators was "to develop a theology of engagement with and involvement in the secular world, to offer a sympathetic theological interpretation of secular experience, and thereby to introduce into Orthodox theology a more positive and affirmative relationship between church and world than can be found in the traditional fathers of the Church" (Valliere 2001: 232). Historical circumstances transpired against Bulgakov. His voice was silenced by the events of World War II and the transfer of the theological center of Russian Orthodoxy from France to the United States. However, "the world as Neopatristic theology knew it came crashing down in 1989-91" (Valliere 2001: 239). Bulgakov's vision and prophetic voice is once more being attended to. His theological contributions, although in some ways dated, can be seen as precursors for what happened in much of late twentieth-century European Christianity. Thus, not only does Bulgakov serve as a signpost of an interesting historic period within Christian Orthodoxy, but he also signals a unique convergence of East and West, historically all too rare.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion, November 2000, Nashville, TN.
- 2 For the application of the term "Silver Age" to more than just literature see the argument presented by Catherine Evtuhov (1997: 2, n. 1).
- 3 Valuable recent work on thinkers in this period are Aidan Nichols, *Theology in the Russian Diaspora: Church, fathers, Eucharist in Nikolai Afanasev (1893-1966)* (1989); Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov, Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (2000); and my *Augustine and Russian Orthodoxy: Russian Orthodox Theologians and Augustine of Hippo a Twentieth-Century Dialogue* (2000).
- 4 Even in the two years since the original paper was read at the AAR meeting, valuable new contributions have been made to the English language corpus: Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, translated by Boris Jakim (2002); Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World As Household*, edited and translated by Catherine Evtuhov (2000); and Rowan Williams, ed. *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (1999).
- 5 This term of course has been used by many thinkers and has most recently found a resurgence in popularity. Bulgakov used the notion of Sophia in his economic theory to denote an overarching principle and all-encompassing concept. It is further developed in his theological period into his Sophiology.
- 6 A monarchist, conservative grouping of Russian Orthodox outside of the Soviet Union, established in 1921, and headed by Metropolitan Antonii Khrapovitsky.

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