



Barbara Hallensleben,  
Regula M. Zwahlen,  
Aristotle Papanikolaou,  
Pantelis Kalaitzidis (eds.)

# BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations

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Verlag

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Abstract

Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) is one of the preeminent theologians of the 20th century whose work is still being discovered and explored in and for the 21st century. The famous rival of Lenin in the field of economics, was, according to Wassily Kandinsky, “one of the deepest experts on religious life” in early twentieth-century Russian art and culture. As economist, publicist, politician, and later Orthodox theologian and priest, he became a significant “global player” in both the Orthodox diaspora and the Ecumenical movement in the interwar period.

This anthology gathers the papers delivered at the international conference on the occasion of Bulgakov’s 150th birthday at the University of Fribourg in September 2021. The chapters, written by established Bulgakov specialists, including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012), as well as young researchers from different theological disciplines and ecclesial traditions, explore Bulgakov’s way of meeting the challenges in the modern world and of building bridges between East and West. The authors bring forth a wide range of new creative ways to constructively engage with Bulgakov’s theological worldview and cover topics such as personhood, ecology, political theology and Trinitarian ontology.



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Barbara Hallensleben, Guido Vergauwen, Nikolaus Wyrwoll  
in Zusammenarbeit mit  
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## Sergii Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond

Rowan Williams

### 1.

Vladimir Lossky's notorious attack on Sergii Bulgakov in his 1936 pamphlet *Spor o Sofii* (The Sophia Controversy) addresses a range of topics, from the nature of canonical authority to the status of angels, but one of the central points of contention is a set of concerns about Bulgakov's doctrines of the person and work of Christ—not surprisingly, since the publication in 1933 of the first volume of Bulgakov's 'major trilogy,' *Agnets Bozhii* (*The Lamb of God*), primarily an extended treatment of Christology, was the trigger for the series of critical discussions culminating in the dramatic public exchanges of 1936.<sup>1</sup> Lossky—echoing to some extent the criticisms of Bulgakov made by Metropolitan Sergii, deputy *locum tenens* of the Patriarchate of Moscow—challenges Bulgakov's emphasis on the eternally determined character of the Incarnation of the Word, questions the apparent Apollinarianism of Bulgakov's account of the person of Christ, and concludes that Bulgakov allows no real place in the economy of salvation for the free and personal agency of Christ's humanity. 'The Christology

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1 Lossky's pamphlet *Spor o Sofii*. 'Dokladnaia zapiska' prot. S. Bulgakova i smysl ukaza *Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* was published by the Confrerie de saint Photius, Paris, 1936, as a response to Bulgakov's defense of his position against the condemnation of his views issued by the deputy *locum tenens* of the patriarchate, Metropolitan Sergii (Stragorodskii). For a brief summary of the controversy, Sergii Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999), 173–75; cf. Antoine Arjakovsky, *La génération des penseurs religieux de l'émigration russe. La revue La Voie (Put')*, 1925–1940 (Kiev-Paris: Duh i litera, 2002), 433–44, a thoughtful and well-documented discussion of the controversy with some critical perspectives on Lossky's theological assumptions (cf. Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way. Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1925–1940* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, trans. Jerry Ryan).

of Father Bulgakov diffuses itself in a cosmic “panchristism,” swallowing up both the Holy Spirit and the Church, and in the same way annihilating human personhood in a “sophianically-natural” process of divinization.<sup>2</sup> In Lossky’s judgement, what is most conspicuously lacking in Bulgakov’s theology is any vision of the Church as a genuinely plural and interactive human community of unique subjects called into communion by the Spirit, realizing in their countless free and distinctive ways the single reality of a human nature renewed in Christ. Instead of this, according to Lossky, we have a suprapersonal process in which the restoration of the human as such disappears: the incarnate Christ becomes the embodied sign of a non-temporal drama of intra-trinitarian relations and a vehicle of the nebulous activity of divine ‘Sophia,’ whose ontological status remains obscure.<sup>3</sup> And the result of this is a cavalier attitude to the actual historical and social constraints of the Church on earth as the God-given context for each finite self to discover its true uniqueness in the form of a personal discipleship that is worked out collaboratively in a flesh and blood community.

Lossky’s essay sketches many of the concerns that were to animate his own later writing as a dogmatic theologian, and these foreshadowings are well worth a longer discussion in themselves. But my aim in this paper is to look at some of the specific criticisms he makes of Bulgakovian Christology and to suggest that some points have been missed. Briefly, what I want to argue is that Lossky does not ask what questions Bulgakov is actually trying to answer. He does not engage with the metaphysical hinterland of what Bulgakov was writing about theology, and so misses something very central to what the older man has to say about humanity and its transfiguration, and, as I shall suggest, there are elements here that are of very particular pertinence to contemporary theological discussion. The toxic ecclesiastical politics of the Russian emigration in the ’30s certainly intensified Lossky’s polemic, and his later discussions of Bulgakov in the lectures of his last years in the 1950s are more measured. But—ironically—he misses some of the ways in which Bulgakov could have been an ally in his own project; and his characterization of Bulgakov’s thinking has done a good deal to set in stone a view of his system—especially his mature treatment of Sophiology—that continues to cast long shadows over his legacy. It may well be time to see if some of these can be lifted.

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2 Lossky, *Spor o Sofii*, 61.

3 *Ibid.*, 27–28, 71–77. Lossky insists (p. 28) that divine ‘wisdom’ is never treated in classical Orthodox theology as anything other than one among the divine *energeiai*.

One of the points insistently made in *Agnets Bozhii*<sup>4</sup> is that the Chalcedonian Definition provides only a *negative* account of the mystery of the incarnation, a set of cautionary protocols rather than a real theological account of what is entailed in confessing the Logos in flesh.<sup>5</sup> It is tempting to conclude from the Definition that what happens when the Word takes flesh is that divine omnipotence simply brings together two separate substances to attach them to a single subject or *hypostasis*; and the refinements of the centuries that followed do not add up to much more than a set of clarifications of detail within the 'negative' framework. But if that *is* how we read it, we are left with at least two problems. There is a certain arbitrariness about the event of incarnation, the danger of reducing it to a display of divine power (the kind of distortion that came to dominate a lot of late mediaeval Western treatments of the subject<sup>6</sup>), and there is a conceptual problem in that the terms of the Definition seem to deny the inseparability of nature and hypostasis, implying that we can some-

- 
- 4 Sergii Bulgakov, *Agnets bozhii: o bogochelovechestve. Chast' I* (English translation [ET] by Boris Jakim, Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2008); references are both to the original and to this translation), 73–81, 205–06, 219–24, 235–39, 137 (ET 56–63, 182–84, 193–96). Bulgakov begins his book with a lengthy and provocative account of patristic Christology, announcing that it is time for Orthodox theology to do what neither Catholic nor Protestant histories of doctrine have done, which is to clarify the 'dogmatic dialectic' underlying the development of doctrinal formulae. In this introductory account (pp. 79, ET, p. 61) and later (e.g., pp. 235–39, ET 209–11), Bulgakov suggests that the Chalcedonian formula is a sort of providential anticipation of a fuller theological understanding that is still to come: the generation that produced the Definition was theologically unadventurous, but nonetheless by divine guidance kept open the conceptual space which theology would need to fill out in due course.
  - 5 It is worth comparing Bulgakov's account of Chalcedon with that of another brilliantly innovative reader of the tradition at almost exactly the same time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose Christology lectures of 1933 (text in vol. 12 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 299–360) also characterize Chalcedon as providing no more than a 'negative' Christological schema. The presence of Harnack in the background is a factor here for both theologians; Harnack and the doctrinal history associated with his influence had considered the vocabulary of Chalcedon to be a sign of conceptual barrenness or even 'bankruptcy'.
  - 6 This is the model associated with the Christology of William of Ockham and other nominalists, for whom God's freedom to become incarnate in any created substance obscured the interweaving of Christology with the doctrine of the divine image in humanity and its restoration by Christ. As we shall see, a major focus of Bulgakov's Christology is precisely that human nature is created in order to be capable of incarnating the Logos; see especially Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 191–205 (ET, 168–82).

how think of them in abstraction from one another, in defiance of any metaphysical intelligibility.<sup>7</sup> Bulgakov wants, in contrast, to present the incarnation as miraculous but not absurd, and the balanced counter-claims of Chalcedon are, he emphasises,<sup>8</sup> not flat contradictions but ‘perspectival’ truths capable of being held together in a synthesis. Of course, the doctrine of the divine image in humanity is an element which qualifies any apparent arbitrariness, but the chief resource in rethinking Chalcedon in positive terms is Sophiology—not (as Lossky feared) as a system directing our attention away from the concrete relations of finite agents to infinite, and to each other, but as a metaphysical reinforcement for the valuation of the personal/hypostatic which becomes ever more significant in the works that compose the major trilogy.

To understand what is going on in this respect, we need to look at what Bulgakov had been saying about the concept of ‘hypostasis’ in the period leading up to the publication of *Agnets Bozhii*, especially the forbiddingly complex and compressed discussion in the 1925 essay for Petr Struve’s *Festschrift, Ipostas i Ipostasnost’* (*Hypostasis and hypostaticity*),<sup>9</sup> with its attempt to clarify a notion of ‘hypostaticity’ or perhaps ‘hypostatic actuality.’ When we speak of the disjunction between hypostasis and ‘nature,’ we are not designating two *components* of some ontological hybrid: we are simply describing the grammar of *being a subject*: the life of self-reflexive intelligence is what happens as the subject’s engagement with the world becomes itself a matter for engagement. In the light of this, we can say that this process of engagement is the core of hypostatic existence and activity—*ipostasnost’*. This makes some sense of the way in which the earlier Bulgakov writes about divine Sophia as the ‘love of love’:<sup>10</sup> Sophia is not some kind of ontologically intermediary reality between God and

7 It is part of the contribution of Leontius of Byzantium to the development of Christology that he rules out any such misreading of the terminology. Bulgakov devotes some detailed attention to Leontius (pp. 81–94, ET, pp. 63–74), but reproduces (again like Bonhoeffer!) some of the current misunderstandings of his schema. For a more sympathetic reading of Leontius, see Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury 2018), 92–99.

8 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 206–07 (ET, 183–84).

9 Bulgakov, ‘Ipostas i ipostasnost’: Scolia k Svetu nevechernemu,’ in *Sbornik statei posvyashchennykh Pyotru Berngardovichu Struve*, Prague 1925, 353–71 (cf. ‘Hypostasis and hypostaticity: scholia to the unfading light,’ in *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 49, 1–2 (2005), 5–46, trans. Brandon Gallaher, Irina Kukota). The reference is to Bulgakov’s 1917 *Svet nevecherni:sozertsaniia i umozreniia* (ET by Thomas Allan Smith, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012)).

10 Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii*, 212 (ET, 217).

creation, but the sheer actuality of divine engagement with *both* the divine life as such *and* the finite reality which is posited by God as the other in which God realises love 'externally' just as ceaselessly as he does 'internally.' So whether in finite or infinite reality, what 'hypostasis' actually means is the concrete and continuous activity of engaging with what can and must be embraced, loved, understood, connected with, transfigured. 'Nature' is ultimately just that: a world, an environment, in the process of being perceived lovingly and brought into sustainable, mutual relationality. So *ipostasnost'* is in no sense a 'thing' or even a quality or property among others; it is a name for divine actuality in relation—in the eternally stable relation of the Trinitarian life and in the unfolding relatedness of God at work in the created order.<sup>11</sup> And when we speak of 'Sophia,' 'divine' or 'created,' we are speaking of this 'actualization-in-relationality' of the world, the defining environment or defining conditions, of the life that particular hypostases are living. Divine Sophia is simply *what God actualizes*; in eternity, this is the timeless reality of the shared Trinitarian life, in time it is the interdependent order of a creation which God allows to be other than the divine. Creaturely Sophia, accordingly, is what humanity, made in God's image and exercising God's likeness, actualizes when it is restored to its proper hypostatic liberty, and is drawing and holding together the created environment in its maximal harmony, its optimal state of reflecting God.

But this already makes it plain that 'hypostatic' life is one of the ways in which finite subjecthood reflects infinite life: we are made to be hypostatic—that is, to extend a loving, 'sense-making' welcome to the world in which we exist, to learn to see its hypostatic potential and make that real. Our subjectivity is intrinsically 'sophianic' in that sense. And this means that our engagement with our environment is always already caught up in the divine action of making space and making sense, allowing the otherness of the created order to unfold in time and engaging with it so as to serve the mutual life-giving that anchors its stability and well-being.<sup>12</sup> This is typically God's action in making the universe both genuinely other to the divine and also genuinely invited into unitive relation (and so into harmony). But our human calling is to reflect this and realise it in the specific circumstances of our own existence. And in the light of all this, it is possible to see how we can speak of the divine Logos *acting as* the hypostatic centre of a continuum of human 'hypostatizing' agency:<sup>13</sup> it is not that some alien subject has inhabited the shell of a created nature but that

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11 See, e. g., Bulgakov, 'Ipostas ...,' 361–62.

12 Ibid., 368, and cf. Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 158–62 (ET, 136–40).

13 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 208–10 (ET, 185–87).

the mode in which human nature is routinely activated (that is, the ‘hypostatic’ mode of the awareness of the self in relation) remains unchanged even when that activation originates directly in the divine hypostasis of the eternal Word, since all humans have the capacity to act ‘theanthropically’—in the sense that they are always already in some degree involved in the hypostatic transformation of their ambient reality. All human subjects are ultimately defined by their ‘sophianic’ gift and vocation. Humanity is, from its first beginnings, disposed towards the culminating realization of sophianic transformation that appears in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus the mystery of union between divine and human which the Chalcedonian Definition points to is no arbitrary matter, nor is it (so to speak) an opportunistic solution to a problem; it is the crown of the divine purpose in creation, the fulfilment of humanity’s vocation to personalize and humanize the world in alignment with what divine love purposes for it.

Bulgakov says that every human hypostasis is therefore in some sense already ‘supernatural,’<sup>14</sup> and even ‘uncreated.’<sup>15</sup> But it should be clear from our discussion so far that this is not a claim that there is some *part* of human nature that is uncreated: there is strictly speaking no such *thing* as a hypostasis, just as there is no such quality as *ipostasnost’*, in the sense of some identifiable and circumscribable characteristic which we can scrutinise. The human subject is activated at its fullest by a relation with the creator that frees it to behave ‘hypostatically’ in relation to its environment—i. e. to act in a way that releases the world it is part of to be fully and harmoniously itself. From the point of view of the activating energy in this context, we can say that the reality of a finite hypostasis is not an item among created substances but a configuration of finite life such that the infinite agency of God brings about certain liberating and transforming relations within the finite order; from the point of view of the unbroken continuity of the finite world, we can say that the hypostatic agent is unequivocally a created being. Bulgakov undoubtedly pushes the envelope in his terminology, but it is hard to convict him of material heresy here—though his argument<sup>16</sup> that the language of Chalcedon permits a distinction between the human *psyche* of Christ and the divine/uncreated principle of noetic rationality which in Jesus is supplied directly by the Logos is completely unsus-

14 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 211 (ET, 188).

15 *Ibid.*, 197–98 (ET, 174), 211 (ET, 188), where the hypostasis of Adam is described as ‘uncreated-created’; and cf. 160 (ET 137–38).

16 *Ibid.*, 262–63 (ET, 235). This was one of the ideas which was singled out for criticism in the *ukaz* issued by the Patriarchate, and which Bulgakov had attempted to clarify in his response.



tainable; patristic theologians were determined to rule out the idea that any specific aspect of human existence, including the nous, was lacking in Jesus. Bulgakov's sympathy for Apollinaris,<sup>17</sup> as someone who at least saw as no-one else did a question in need of an answer, repeatedly pushes him to defend the idea that the supreme controlling reality in Jesus, that which constitutes him as 'spirit,' is not any created presence. This is at best an ambiguous and misleading emphasis in the context of the traditional insistence on the unequivocal human completeness of Jesus' humanity. Bulgakov himself is clear enough that there is nothing *lacking* in the humanity of Jesus, but this seems to be on the grounds that every created hypostasis is similarly open to the direct action of the divine. Christ's incarnate reality is undoubtedly unique for Bulgakov, but it is also true that Christ fully realizes what all human agents are called to, so that the hypostatic presence of his divinity is in no sense alien to the common pattern of human nature.

## 2.

We noted that Lossky understands Bulgakov as effectively denying a role for genuinely human agency in Christ's redemptive work: in what sense can we think of the incarnate Lord as acting freely, being tempted and so on? In fact, Bulgakov's discussion of the consciousness of the incarnate is one of the most original and interesting features of his Christology, and should qualify any suspicion that he gives insufficient weight to the actual liberty of Jesus as a human subject. It is, however, undeniable that Bulgakov sees hypostatic life as almost identical with self-awareness, and Lossky's challenge has a point. To exist hypostatically is certainly, for Bulgakov, to appropriate a calling to relate consciously to the surrounding reality, and to one's own being as subject. Yet, this being said, it is not quite accurate to think of Bulgakov as identifying 'hypostasis' with a purely psychological reality, the process of the self-realizing of consciousness—which is, I think, what Lossky is (rightly enough) worried about.<sup>18</sup> Bulgakov is certainly not proposing that the human self-awareness of Jesus is replaced by the 'divine Mind,' as if the cognitive limitations and moral

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17 Provocatively, he begins his introductory essay on patristic thought in *Agnets* with a substantial discussion of Apollinaris, arguing that he anticipates something like the Russian idea of 'divine humanity' (20–29, ET, 11–18).

18 Lossky was still teasing out his objections in the lectures he gave in Paris for the Institut Saint Denis in 1955, three years before his untimely death, especially the lectures for 10/11/55 and 17/11/55.

or spiritual acts of questioning and discernment ascribed to Jesus were fictive. The detailed discussion<sup>19</sup> of Jesus' 'theanthropic' consciousness in *Agnets*—one of the most sophisticated speculations on the subject in twentieth century theology—attempts to tease apart the divine 'self-consciousness' as such (which the Word must retain in the incarnation, as the loss of this would be the destruction of the Word's hypostatic existence) from the specific actuality of the self-awareness of a human individuality within particular finite conditions. The Word's divine self-consciousness, we could say, is not and cannot be the awareness of a set of conditions, and so is not in any competition with the self-aware individuality of Jesus the first-century Jew; it does not intrude items of 'divine' knowledge into a human setting. But it is irreducibly a *filial* consciousness, and this is expressed in the fact of Jesus' prayer to the Father. 'Divine Sonship is precisely what the divine "I" in Jesus is, his self-consciousness as divine consciousness.'<sup>20</sup> Follow this through a little further, though, and it implies that we are not in fact looking at any simple identification of hypostasis with self-awareness, and so (as Bulgakov's sections on obedience and temptation<sup>21</sup> make plain) we are not looking at any kind of evacuation of human freedom and finite agency in the incarnate life, of the sort that Lossky most deplors. Bulgakov asserts that *all* human subjectivity includes a tacit connection with the infinite reality of God: it is the immediate effect of our existence in relation to God and our bearing of the divine image. What it is not is an element in our conscious psychological processes, an *item* of consciousness. It could better be described as something grounding or conditioning consciousness; not in fact an idea wholly alien to the mature Lossky's theological account of the personal.<sup>22</sup>

So we might attempt to sum up Bulgakov's concept of hypostasis and the nature of 'sophianic' existence and action along these lines. To exist hypostatically is to exist in a certain relation to a 'world,' an ensemble of life or activity. This relation is not precisely the same as that of a conscious subject to the content of its own perceptions or sensations, though this is the most familiar expression of it; it is certainly to have (in the broadest sense) an 'intelligent' relation to it, i. e. a relation of understanding, even if this is not systematized in concepts, a capacity to respond consistently and creatively to what engages the subject

19 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 291–350 (ET, 261–320).

20 *Ibid.*, 293 (ET, 264; the translation in the text is my own).

21 *Ibid.*, 316–34 (ET, 286–303).

22 See especially the essays in Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), especially 'The Theological Notion of the Human Person,' 111–23.

from 'outside.' In the context of speaking about God, the 'world' on which divine hypostatic action works is simply the divine life itself, the life that is eternally and irreducibly a life of dispossession or self-displacement for the sake of another. This is fundamentally the life of the trinity in itself, but it is also the life of the divine trinity *in toto* oriented towards the otherness of what it brings into existence out of nothing. 'Sophia' is the content of what divine action acts upon—reflexively in the Trinitarian life, 'dialogically' in relation to creation as it generates the vast scheme of coherent interaction that is finite reality. Within the created order, human subjects stand in a special relation to the divine: they are sustained in their particular form of life by a fundamental connection with the hypostatic action of God such that they are enabled to be vehicles of that action in relation to what lies around them in the finite universe. In this respect, they can be said to stand on the frontier between created and uncreated; to use a rather different idiom, their relation with God is 'non-dualistic,' they do not relate to God as one determinate substance to another. For certain limited purposes, we can refer to their spiritual/hypostatic life as 'uncreated.' They exercise their vocation as hypostatic creatures by acting so as to allow or direct or release sophianic energy in the world, so that the world's coherence and beauty, its character as 'cosmos,' are sustained and intensified. Our human fallenness is our turning away from hypostatic accountability: we have erected our subjectivity as an object of knowledge in itself, ignoring the fact that this subjectivity is always already by nature turning towards the world—the human other as well as the entire ecology of a material universe. Salvation is the restoration of that accountability, the recognition of an already-existing relation to our world which requires us to accept the calling to care and make sense of what engages us. And so the incarnational restoration of our humanity is the re-formation of authentic hypostatic existence—a radical self-emptying (*kenosis*) that permits human subjectivity to recognize anew its already given 'investment' in and definition by its world, and to be released from the fiction that the basic ontological truth is a plurality of atomistic and abstract subjects of consciousness and desire.

Divine hypostatic existence in this context is the originating act on which the existence of a world summoned into intelligent, conscious and developing harmony is grounded. God as (threefold) hypostatic existence embraces the unconditioned love and gift that is the actual shape of divine life; in the language Bulgakov uses especially in *Svet nevechernii (Unfading Light)*, God loves God's loving,<sup>23</sup> and God's 'Wisdom' is that love of loving. God loves what is not

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23 Above, n. 10.

God, refusing (as it were) to be God 'alone' but creating a world to share in the love that is God's; so Sophia is God's love of the love God has *for creation*. Finite subjects realizing their hypostatic life are already 'sophianic' in that they are taken up into relation with this love, but they are also called to make it active in finite particulars; the hypostatic/sophianic vocation of human subjects is to love God's love for creation and to be effective conduits of that love. And of course their love for God's love is already itself an aspect of God's love; they are brought into being as lovers by the love God has for the world that God kenotically allows to be.

Bulgakov brings us back repeatedly to the non-duality of hypostatic life/sophianic agency/ transfiguring love as these appear in God and in creation, and this is what makes sense of some of what seem to be the more problematic aspects of his Christology. Nothing in human nature is supplanted or replaced in the incarnation of the Word, because all finite hypostatic existence is at some level in the same non-dual but distinct relation with the eternal hypostatic act of God as Word and Son. Nor is he suggesting that hypostatic life is self-conscious subjectivity ('personality'); it is what makes self-consciousness possible, but is operative at a deeper level as grounded in the finite subject's status as the image of God, activated precisely by the hypostatic life-giving reality of the eternal Other, the Word answering to the Father.

How exactly we are to think about the divine Word/Son—or indeed about the interrelation of the three divine hypostases as such—is an issue about which Bulgakov has a number of diverse and complex ideas. The implication of what we have just outlined is that each of the divine hypostases is what it is in virtue of its activation of the same divine substance, the *ousia*/Sophia which is ultimately self-abandoning gift. But—in the wake of the patristic tradition of distinguishing the three persons on the basis of their 'mode of origination'<sup>24</sup>—Bulgakov offers two schemata for understanding the differentiation of the divine hypostases. They cannot be three co-ordinate instances of divine life (Bulgakov is critical of the degree to which even theologians as sophisticated as the Cappadocians give hostages to fortune on this); they have to be configured in a set of specific and non-transferable relations. So, in *Ipostas*, we have a model that owes something to Fichtean philosophy, though it takes this in a very distinctive direction: the subject is always the subject engaged in/invested

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24 *tropos huparxeos*; the formulation is used by Basil and Gregory of Nyssa in their polemical works against Eunomius (the distinct names of the Trinitarian persons are ascribed on the grounds of their distinct 'modes of origination'—being unbegotten, being begotten, proceeding).

in the object or datum that actualizes it *as* a subject, but at the same time is inseparably bound up in the perspective of the other 'I,' which guarantees that the first subject is not caught in a simple binary relation with what it sees or grasps. There is always an excess beyond the binary of subject and object, an excess constituted by the 'co-ego,' whose presence both establishes the 'I' as what it is (a unique nodal point of relation) and prohibits the reduction of the shared world to what the 'I' is encountering or negotiating. Elsewhere, notably in *Glavy o troichnosti* (Chapters on the Trinity), this is supplemented by the 'linguistic' account of Trinitarian ontology so well explored recently by Joshua Heath.<sup>25</sup> Communicative or meaningful reality has the propositional form of 'x is f':<sup>26</sup> there is a 'this' specifying a unique substantive point of orientation, a 'thus' specifying a continuous or coherent *form* of existing, and the copula which directs us to the actuality of *this* existing *thus* in actuality. Relating this to the earlier Trinitarian model, we can see that the 'thus' of the interhypostatic life of the Godhead is a version of what that model presents as the primordial 'object' which makes the primordial subject what it is, while the copula announces that the relation between subject and predicate is not an abstract or context-free identity, but a living non-equivalence that is at the same time an inseparable interdependence and mutual definition. As Bulgakov argues in *Glavy*, the propositional form 'x is f' has as its paradigm the first-person 'I am A'—the subject's recognition of being constituted in and by otherness, existing in and only in a state of relatedness, an active *mode*; the copula establishes the related and self-reflexive subject as both living and productive of life. The form of predication mirrors the form of subjectivity.

Lossky and other critics worried that Bulgakov's Trinitarian thought reduced the divine life to the self-realization of a single subject—the Fichtean pattern that haunted a good deal of Idealist-inflected theology and philosophy in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> But this is to ignore the subtlety of Bulgakov's models: early on in *Agnets*, he goes to some pains to clarify what he does and does not accept in Fichte, and to warn against any assimilation of divine life to the unfolding of human selfhood.<sup>28</sup> From one point of view, he can indeed affirm that the divine life is a single 'consciousness,' not a fusion or co-operation of

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25 Joshua Heath, "Sergii Bulgakov's Linguistic Trinity," *Modern Theology* May 2021, 888–912; I must record my indebtedness to him for countless illuminations of Bulgakov's texts.

26 To use the most common logical notation rather than Bulgakov's own idiom.

27 Lossky develops this point in his lecture of 10/11/55.

28 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 113–15, 119–20 (ET, 90–92, 96–97).

three subjectivities; from another, it is clear that what it means for God to be a 'subject' entails the irreducible plurality of the points of orientation set out in the two models of hypostatic diversity we have just considered, and that each point in the triadic life is fully 'hypostatic' in the sense that it exists eternally and actually, and is both wholly implicated in and wholly distinct from both other points. So the entire life of the three persons of the trinity is 'hypostatic' action, and we can also rightly say that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are equally hypostases; but because they are hypostases in the fullest and most perfect sense, we cannot enumerate them as three comparable or co-ordinate agents. They act hypostatically only *in* their differentiated relation to one another—and this is an aspect of their 'kenotic' reality, the fact that they have no reality *en soi*, no reality that is not constituted by their unrestricted gift of life to each other: a 'self-sacrifice' that would seem to us a tragic self-destruction is in God the plenitude of productive love and bliss.<sup>29</sup> Infinite spirit and finite spirit are alike in that both are hypostatic agencies realized in the embrace of generative love towards what is other; but what is always *to be* realized in finite spirit (the coincidence of hypostasis and nature, of subjectivity and content) is eternal and simultaneous in God.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.

Bulgakov's Christology cannot be understood without this distinctive approach to hypostatic existence. It is this that enables us to see that his ambiguous—and often lyrically transgressive—language about the 'uncreated' character of hypostatic spirit does not amount to a denial of the concrete humanity of Jesus, just as his conception of sophianic transformation does not subordinate created freedom to a collective or supra-personal cosmic process. Lossky's engagement with this hinterland is sketchy at best; and, as already noted, the irony is that his own insistence on the unfathomable singularity of the hypostasis and its freedom from the determinism and repetition of the merely 'natural' addresses some of the same concerns. But one aspect of Bulgakov's scheme which finds no echo in Lossky—or indeed in other theological 'personalists' of the twentieth century—is the point noted at the end of the preceding section, and is a theme of particular pertinence to current theological and practical discussions. Bulgakov in effect claims that hypostatic existence is intrinsically a form of life characterized by *care*: to exist hypostatically is to be in a relationship of 'nur-

29 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 122–24 (ET, 98–101).

30 *Ibid.*, 117–18 (ET, 94–96).

ture' towards the world that is encountered.<sup>31</sup> To put it still more strongly, any account of subjecthood that ignores the responsibility to nurture and include the environment in the construction of human meaning is illusory and destructive. For Bulgakov, God's 'sophianic' existence is the continuity of a form of life, an 'essence,' that is ceaselessly productive of and affirming of *otherness*: as we have seen, this is primarily the internal differentiations of the Trinitarian life and derivatively the creation and sustaining of the finite world. Earlier, I used the summary formulation that Sophia is 'what God actualizes': the hypostatic agency of God eternally exercises the life of self-emptying 'bestowal' which is the divine reality. Translated into the terms of finite subjecthood, what is significant in the analysis of how the created subject emerges into actuality is that its analogy with the divine subject, the divine 'I,' implies a necessary link between self-awareness or self-recognition and the generative gift of self in nourishing otherness.

Bulgakov's phenomenology of subjectivity is distinctive (and markedly un-Fichtean) in that the object whose co-presence establishes the subject as a subject is not simply an object to be *known*: the sophianic analogy—to use a rather shorthand expression—implies that self-reflexivity is at the same time 'the love of loving.' What is encountered as other is that which has an immediate claim to our love; what I know myself *as* if I know myself truthfully is a subject whose life is constituted by offering or sharing life with the other. In the hypostatic life that is God's, this life is literally generative of the other—the Father's birthing of the Son, the creation of the finite cosmos: we do not and cannot originate 'otherness' in this way, but our role in creation is quite specifically to bring the environment more fully alive in its sophianic interdependence. Bulgakov's already richly developed anthropology in *Svet nevechernii* related the sophianic to art and politics as well as liturgy; it is the transformative vocation of the human in all these diverse contexts that Sophia grounds and enables. What the protracted wrestling with concepts of hypostasis and subjectivity does is to refine this insight by arguing that the hypostatic is necessarily bound up with loving the world in such a way as to enrich and reinforce its beauty, its orderly mutuality, its character as the context of transfiguring reciprocal gift. God as hypostatic knows the divine self as generatively loving; our hypostatic existence is always already given in the bare fact of our creation in the divine image, and so our realizing of the hypostatic calling of our humanity is an 'owning' of the generative loving that is at the root of what we are.

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31 The Heideggerian allusion in this phraseology is deliberate, though Bulgakov seems never to have read Heidegger.

Bulgakov's deepening focus on a strictly theological agenda in the late 1920s and early '30s allows a more detailed Christological reflection to complete these speculations. The incarnation of the Word is the point at which we see with greatest clarity the continuity between divine and finite hypostatic life. If what is affirmed about Jesus in the Chalcedonian Definition is true, *and* (a key point for Bulgakov) if the Incarnation of the Word is more than a display of arbitrary omnipotence, what makes incarnation possible and thinkable is simply that the hypostatic actualization of humanity (including its vocation of transforming and 'personalizing' its material environment) is always a process in which the divine hypostasis of the Word is active: the unique presence of the Word in Jesus as the 'hypostatizing' energy of his human nature is both miraculously and unrepeatably singular *and* in accord with the logic of human existence from the beginning. In that sense certainly, the incarnation is prepared from 'before the foundation of the world.' The questions as to whether the incarnation would have happened without the Fall of Adam or (one of Lossky's anxieties<sup>32</sup>) and whether the eternal determination of the incarnation implies the inevitability of the Fall misunderstand what Bulgakov is trying to say. He is clear<sup>33</sup> about the fact that the work of Christ heals and releases a fallen humanity, restoring the possibility of authentic hypostatic life. But it is possible to say that the incarnation is fully congruent with what has been prepared from before the foundation of the world while also saying that its actual historical and ontological effect *in the circumstances of fallenness* is redemption from sin and release from captivity. It is important not to read his discussion through the lens of a late mediaeval Western debate about the atonement. His aim is manifestly to set out a model for thinking about the incarnation that takes with full seriousness the creation of humanity in God's image and thus allows us to understand the incarnate Word as completing rather than displacing the finite order.

And it is this connection with the divine image that offers decisive insight into what needs saying in a Christian anthropology for our own context. It is almost commonplace for theologians (and others) to complain about individualistic models of human selfhood; it is increasingly common to note

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32 See Lossky, *Spor*, 46–66; Arjakovsky, *La génération*, 438, n. 42, observes that Lossky has to defend some views—or at least, some turns of phrase—in Metropolitan Sergii's critique in this area which do not sit well with the theological tradition.

33 The exhaustive section on 'Redemption' in *Agnets* (372–401 (ET, 342–72) should be read alongside the earlier section on 'The Foundations of the Incarnation' (191–205, ET, 168–82) to clarify Bulgakov's understanding of the nature of the Fall and what exactly needs redeeming or healing in human life.



that many aspects of inherited Christian anthropology have reinforced the illusion of a human destiny detached from the world to which humanity belongs. What Bulgakov's discussion of hypostatic existence achieves—for all the over-complex idioms and loose ends—is a way of connecting non-individualist conceptions of selfhood not only with the givenness of interpersonal relations, but with a pre-existing relation to a world whose fulfilled meaning requires the human hypostasis to be itself and to enact its vocation to responsibility. Not only are we always already connected with the material and temporal universe we inhabit, through the countless natural processes we are part of; we are always already called to love the world that is ours as God loves—that is, to make space for its freedom and integrity and to animate and enrich its interconnection and balance; to serve its beauty and its justice. The self that we become conscious of in reflexive human activity (at any level, not just in 'canonically' sophisticated forms of self-awareness) is a self which *would not exist* except as capable of and summoned to care, because its foundation is the prototypical self-giving identity of God in whose image the finite self exists. There is no other way of being self or 'spirit'; the attempt to create and sustain a culture in which investment in and nurture of our environment is an option irrelevant to the integrity and well-being of our selfhood is an exercise in dangerous fantasy. It is an aspect of the dangerous fantasy that seduces us into trying to think of our selfhood independently of human others or of the transcendent Other; like those doomed enterprises, it will make us less fully human—no less in the divine image, no less embodying a summons to love, but persistently frustrating the expression of that image.

Bulgakov's *Christology* remains a complex and controverted area of his theology, but it is a strikingly bold development of his sophiological thinking. During the '20s, he radically recasts his theories about Sophia to purge away any trace of the 'mythical,' personified Sophia who had haunted the systems of some of his predecessors; in one sense, it could be said that he abandons 'Sophiology' as a direct metaphysical thesis and uses the *imagery* of Sophia in the service of a different kind of metaphysic, centrally preoccupied with language and the conditions for the creation of meaning: 'Sophia' is a helpful shorthand for the increasingly dense package of ideas to do with this 'creation of meaning' that he explores in the two theological trilogies, especially the notion of 'that upon which God acts' in time and eternity, that which is passive to a divine activity pervading and fulfilling it by self-surrendering love. Fundamental in this development is the elaboration of the meaning of 'hypostatic' existence as the locus for a sophianic actuality that is in some way continuous or analogous between the divine and the human: just as God *is* concretely God only in the

reflexive exercise of love towards God's own act of generating and sustaining the Other, so humanity is human only in its alignment with and participation in this act. The phenomenon of human language is to be understood not merely as the creation of shared meaning and communicable purpose among subjects; it is rooted in a call and capacity within the human that persists even when it is denied, because it is implied in the foundational fact of finite hypostatic existence, its relatedness as image to the divine hypostatic action. It is a call and capacity to make sense of the world by renouncing the seductive fictions of self-containment or self-legislation or the generation of reality out of the individual will, or any of the other myths that shore up the fragile illusion of subsistent individuality.

It is what I have called a basic relation of 'care,' but it could equally well be read in the light, say, of Dostoevsky's affirmation of the universal 'answerability' of the self for the healing of the world, not as an individual achievement, a manifestly absurd picture, but as the grace-prompted readiness to exercise care and serve the processes of reciprocal life-giving in whatever situation the self finds itself in. Bulgakov presents his readers with a sometimes disorienting abundance of insight about art, politics and discipleship in their interdependence, and our current social and intellectual context is badly in need of that level of integrated reflection, if we are adequately to resist the dominant myths of a reductive market ideology even more ambitiously destructive than the varieties identified and attacked by Bulgakov in his day. His Christology, I suggest, deserves further unpacking to draw out an anthropology in which, quite simply, what makes us human is a shape or direction of involvement in the making of meaning which is prior to all our choosing or self-positing. Bulgakov's friend and spiritual daughter, St. Maria Skobtsova, argued with passion that Christianity needed an ethic that went beyond an ideal of loving action that was somehow added on to the basics of discipleship and was anchored in connections that pre-existed our moral dispositions.<sup>34</sup> For her, this was symbolized above all in the love of motherhood, where the bare fact of physical involvement entailed a kind of love that went beyond choice and policy, and this symbol provided a key to grasping what love in the Body of Christ actually meant. Bulgakov works in a different idiom entirely, but some of the same concerns are in view—the recognition above all that the self, in order to be a self in any robust sense, must recognize the *givenness* of its investment in

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34 See especially the essays 'The Second Gospel Commandment' and 'On the Imitation of the Mother of God' in Mother Maria Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

the service of the world's ecology, in the embodied meaningfulness of a fully reciprocal pattern of life for human society and for the 'society' of the finite cosmos. Bulgakov's efforts to spell out what life as hypostatic spirit entails are laboured and not always clear; but in their Christological setting it is possible for us to see them as guidelines for imagining the 'spiritual' as essentially the intentional giving of life and building of mutuality and solidarity which runs analogically through the whole pattern of the life that God unveils to us in the narrative of the divine action and supremely in the self-emptying act of new creation that is the Paschal mystery.