



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

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:
New Approaches and Interpretations

 **Aschendorff**
Verlag

Hallensleben, Zwahlen, Papanikolaou, Kalaitzidis (Eds.)
Building the House of Wisdom
Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:
New Approaches and Interpretations

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.



EPIPHANIA

Herausgegeben von
Barbara Hallensleben, Guido Vergauwen, Nikolaus Wyrwoll
in Zusammenarbeit mit
dem Zentrum für das Studium der Ostkirchen
der Universität Freiburg Schweiz

Band 19

Building the House of Wisdom

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:
New Approaches and Interpretations

Edited by

Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen,
Aristotle Papanikolaou, Pantelis Kalaitzidis

 **Aschendorff**
Verlag

Münster
2024

Publiziert mit Unterstützung
des Schweizerischen Nationalfonds
zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung

Publiziert von
Aschendorff Verlag GmbH & Co. KG
Soester Straße 13
D-48155 Münster
www.aschendorff-buchverlag.de

Cover:
Aschendorff Verlag GmbH & Co. KG

Text:
© Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen, Aristotle Papanikolaou, Pantelis Kalaitzidis

ISBN 978-3-402-12060-6 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-402-12061-3 (E-Book PDF)
DOI <https://doi.org/10.17438/978-3-402-12062-0>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No-Derivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND) which means that the text may be used for non-commercial purposes, provided credit is given to the author. For details go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. To create an adaptation, translation, or derivative of the original work and for commercial use, further permission is required. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) not original to the Open Access publication and further permission may be required from the rights holder.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Building the House of Wisdom. Editors' Introduction	11
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12520-5	

PERSONHOOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Sergii Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond	25
Rowan Williams	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12172-6	

Masks, Chimaeras, and Portmanteaux: Sergii Bulgakov and the Metaphysics of the Person	43
David Bentley Hart	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12173-3	

Bulgakov and Lot-Borodine as Shapers of Deification in the West	63
Mark McInroy	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12174-0	

" <i>Transcende te ipsum</i> ": Faith, Prayer and Name-Worship in Bulgakov's <i>Unfading Light</i>	77
Ivan Ilin	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12175-7	

The Kenotic Iconicity of Sergii Bulgakov's Divine-Humanity: Doctrinal, Anthropological, and Feminist Considerations	91
Sarah Elizabeth Livick-Moses	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12176-4	

Sergii Bulgakov's Fragile Absolute: Kenosis, Difference, and Positive Disassociation	107
Jack Louis Pappas	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12177-1	

The Authenticity of Creativity: The Philosophical and Theological Anthropologies of Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov	123
Deborah Casewell	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12178-8	
Bulgakov on Mangodhood—or, Satan after Schelling	137
Justin Shaun Coyle	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12179-5	

POLITICS, ECONOMY, AND ECOLOGY

Seven Days of <i>Narod</i> : Sergei Bulgakov's Christian Socialist Newspaper	153
Catherine Evtuhov and Regula M. Zwahlen	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12180-1	
Is It All the Greeks' Fault? Reconsidering the Byzantine Legacy in Sergius Bulgakov's <i>By the Walls of Cherson</i>	177
Nikos Kouremenos	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12181-8	
“The Sophia Dispute” in the Context of Political Ontology	193
Alexei P. Kozyrev	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12182-5	
Sophiology and Personalism, Foundations of the New Political Science in the Twenty-First Century	209
Antoine Arjakovsky	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12183-2	
Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Politics of Personhood	221
Nathaniel Wood	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12184-9	
The World as the Household of Wisdom: Political Theology and Philosophy of Economy	235
Dionysios Skliris	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12185-6	

Rethinking the Language of Economics as a Systematic Christian Response to Economic and Ecological Crises in the Thought of Sergii Bulgakov	247
Tikhon Vasilyev	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12186-3	
Bulgakov's Ecology	259
Austin Foley Holmes	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12187-0	

SOPHIOLOGY

The Reception of Palamite Theology in the Sophiology of Sergii Bulgakov	275
Liubov A. Petrova	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12188-7	
An Unfinished Dispute. How is it Possible to Criticize Bulgakov's Sophiology at the Present Time?	289
Natalia Vaganova	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12189-4	
Sophiology, Ascesis and Prophecy	301
Joshua Heath	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12190-0	
Mariology as Personalized Sophiology. Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Theology	317
Dario Colombo	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12191-7	
The Training for Dying and Death: A New Reading of Bulgakov's Sophiology	331
Paul L. Gavrilyuk	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12192-4	

 CREATION AND ONTOLOGY

Sergii Bulgakov's Early Marxism: A Narrative of Development	351
Caleb Henry	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12193-1	
<i>Creatio ex sapientia</i> in Bulgakov's <i>Unfading Light</i> : The Influence of F. W. J. Schelling	365
Taylor Ross	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12194-8	
Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology and the Problem of Human Freedom	381
Brandon Gallaher	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12195-5	
Sergii Bulgakov: Between Kenotic Theology of the Event and Trinitarian Ontology	409
Antonio Bergamo	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12196-2	
From Social Trinity to "Linguistic Trinity": Sergii Bulgakov's Contribution to Analytic Theology	419
Nikolaos Asproulis	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12197-9	
Sergii Bulgakov: From Grammar to Wisdom	435
John Milbank	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12198-6	

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Father Sergii Bulgakov’s “Karamazov’s excursus” 463
Pavel Khondzinsky
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12199-3

Ships in the Theological Night? Sergius Bulgakov and
Liberation Theology 475
Graham McGeoch
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12200-6

“Your Labor Is Not in Vain.” Sergii Bulgakov’s Sophiology as
a Key to a (Protestant) Theology of the Kingdom of God 489
Oliver Dürr
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12201-3

Sergius Bulgakov and Modern Theology 501
Paul Ladouceur
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12202-0

The Vision of Unity. The Ecumenical Thought of
Fr. Sergii Bulgakov 521
Adalberto Mainardi
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12203-7

List of Contributors 535

Masks, Chimaeras, and Portmanteaux: Sergii Bulgakov and the Metaphysics of the Person

David Bentley Hart

I.

It seems to me that Sergii Bulgakov demonstrated as thoroughly and convincingly as one could that, if there is such a thing as a distinctively Christian concept of the person, and if that concept is coherent, then it can be adequately expressed only as, at once, a metaphysics of being, a philosophy of subjectivity, and a theology of the one divine Person who is, in the end, the one Person of all persons. Needless to say, however, I cannot *prove* this to be so within the narrow confines I have set for myself here, but I do feel obliged to try to indicate why I make the claim. And I hope it will not be taken amiss if I begin by registering a few disagreements with a scholar of whose work I have a high opinion—not for the sake of disagreement as such, but solely because I am trying to find my way into and out again of something of a labyrinth and, not having the hermeneutical equivalent of Ariadne’s thread readily at my disposal, I am grateful to anyone who has already explored and marked out apparent routes of escape that in fact will not get me where I want to go.

In two recent articles,¹ Joshua Heath calls attention to what he takes to be a tension or even contradiction in Bulgakov’s transcendental account of personal subjectivity, and so also in his theological account of the intratrinitarian relations. The inconsistency appears, Heath suggests, if fleetingly, as early as *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, where it constitutes only an occasional and incidental discordant note. It recurs, however, in the much later epilogue of *The Comforter*, “The Father,” where it swells into a crescendo of sustained disso-

1 Joshua Heath, “On Sergii Bulgakov’s *The Tragedy of Philosophy*,” *Modern Theology* 37:3 (2021), 805–22; *ibid.*, “Sergii Bulgakov’s Linguistic Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 37:4 (2021), 888–912.

nance. In the earlier treatise, Heath believes, the contradiction is easy enough to isolate from the rest of the argument: Throughout that text, Bulgakov frequently affirms that “the transcendent is always linked to the immanent” and that “the subject, the hypostasis, always reveals itself, always expresses itself, in the predicate”;² moreover, he explicitly insists that “the plurality of the *I* is a fundamental axiom of thought and life” and that any attempt to think the *I* without any *you* renders the former unintelligible.³ And yet, even so, at other times he speaks of an abiding transcendence within subjectivity, and does so in terms of “hidden depths” or of “self-enclosure,” or even of a “realm hitherto unknown to light”⁴—language that according to Heath threatens to depict that transcendence as some inaccessible, private *quantum* of subjectivity only secondarily externalized in its predicate.⁵ This, he believes, would appear to be irreconcilable with the insight that the “transcendent subject is [...] not merely an *I*, but a *we*.” As Heath puts the matter, “we can say that what is ‘hidden’ in the subject, that which lies ‘beyond’ the predicate, is not a mysterious *quantum*. Rather, the subject’s ‘noumenal quality’ is the *act* of the subject’s self-positing in relation to other subjects.”⁶

Here is where I must register my disagreement. I believe we are being confronted at this point with a false either-or, and I would in fact argue the reverse: that it is precisely because Bulgakov understands the transcendence of the subject as *in itself* an undisclosed depth, always in some sense logically prior to its manifestation or predicate, that his account of the subject’s total self-disclosure and self-realization in outward relation does not become vacuous; for it is precisely that inexhaustible and indispensable *in itself* that is always also given as *in and by another* and only in this way also given *to itself*. That is to say, what is revealed and thereby constituted in the relation of any personal subject to its predicate by way of the copula is not some process by which an original interiority is somehow always already dissolved in its own exteriority, but rather the imperturbable and abiding structure of personhood, which is of necessity a structure of the hidden and the manifest at once. When Bulgakov says that what is transcendent in the subject is inseparable from what is immanent, he is necessarily asserting the reverse as well. What he is talking about, after all, is a

2 Sergii Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020), 12.

3 *Ibid.*, 111.

4 *Ibid.*, 10, 14.

5 Heath, “On The Tragedy of Philosophy,” 814.

6 *Ibid.*, 814.

single source of subjectivity that is never effaced, exhausted, or negated as the one and only source of the person even in being poured out in its revelation in another: a hidden depth that is always already manifest, but manifest also *as* a hidden depth. The *we* that is implicit in the *I* is not a social concord that yields a subject or that simply dispels the hiddenness of subjectivity; it is still always the hierarchy of the hidden and the manifest in their essential convertibility *with*—rather than their opposition *to*—one another: a hierarchy in which the *I* of the subject is forever constituting itself in the *we* out of its (so to speak) “ingenerate” ground of subjectivity. Simply enough, Bulgakov’s is a structural—not a genetic—account of personhood.

The issue, I think, becomes clearer when one turns to Bulgakov’s account of the intratrinitarian relations in that famous or infamous epilogue, and then to Heath’s criticisms of it. In one sense, Heath is taking Bulgakov to task for claims that are actually inevitable from the very logic of classical Trinitarian theology. In fact, if Bulgakov is wrong in his reasoning in these pages, so arguably is the entirety of post-Nicene theology. But, more to the point, in accusing Bulgakov of contradicting his own earlier insistence that divine personhood is always already interhypostatic and convertible with God’s act of self-manifestation,⁷ Heath is clearly misconstruing the metaphysical content of that claim. The reality is precisely the opposite: far from constituting a contradiction, Bulgakov’s argument in the *Comforter’s* epilogue confirms and renders fully coherent the picture of divine personhood that, say, *The Tragedy of Philosophy* (as well as writings from the same period, such as his “Chapters on Trinitarity”)⁸ expressed in somewhat more inchoate form. True, certain themes—the Father’s silence, his hiddenness and interiority, his life within himself,⁹ his transcendence in remaining forever outside of revelation, as its absolute subject rather than its object¹⁰—assume a dominance in the epilogue that they had not previously enjoyed. And, perhaps more explicitly than had previously been the case, all of these themes apply there no less to the Father’s self-outpouring in the life of the immanent Trinity than to his self-outpouring in the economic Trinity. Heath is wary, I suppose understandably, of any concept of divine transcendence—as well as any apophatic reserve in speaking about that transcendence—that

7 Heath, “Linguistic Trinity,” 911.

8 Sergii Bulgakov, “Glavy o troichnosti” (Chapters on Trinitarity), in *ibid.*, *Trudy o troichnosti*, ed. Anna Reznichenko (Moscow: OGI, 2001).

9 Sergii Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 379.

10 *Ibid.*, 188.

seems to rest not on the mutual inherence of the divine Persons, but instead on the intratrinitarian distinctions of hypostases. He finds it all but impossible to make sense of this in terms of Bulgakov's claim that the real revelation of a subject in its predicate is not merely the disclosure of who that subject already is, but is rather the very act by which that subject is anyone at all; nor does it seem to him to accord with the attendant claim that, of course, in the divine life there is a perfect adequacy of both predicate and copula to the subject they manifest.¹¹ Thus, where Bulgakov asserts that, even within the immanent life of the Trinity, the Father reveals himself to the Son and Spirit not only as Father, but also as *God*, Heath glimpses a troubling specter: "a ghostly separation of the Person of the Father from the single act of generation and spiration, from the particular kenotic act that is constitutive of Fatherhood."¹² And this he sees as incongruous with Bulgakov's earlier, explicitly linguistic Trinitarian reflections, and as a deviation from Bulgakov's own most important insights of such violence that it threatens to overthrow those insights, and to reinstate the idea of a subject already possessed of an interiority prior to relation.¹³

Again, I take these worries to rest upon a misunderstanding. To begin with, considered simply as theologoumena rather than as a metaphysics of personhood, many of Bulgakov's assertions regarding the relations of the divine Son and Spirit to the Father follow necessarily from the one indispensable maxim of all Trinitarian theology and dogmatics: to wit, that the *taxis* of the economic Trinity is the *taxis* of the immanent Trinity, and that only by virtue of that identity is it possible to affirm anything about God as Trinity. Inasmuch as the Trinity is not a confederation of three individuals, but rather the very order of relations whereby God is God, one cannot conceive of the economy of revelation as in any way dissembling that eternal order without effectively denying the reality of the Incarnation. The divine Son is also a man only if his identity as the eternal Son, in relation to Father and Spirit, is also who he is *as* that man. Thus, in the kenosis of God in Christ, all that is not accidental to the humanity of Christ as Son *ad extra* must have its premise in the identity of the Son *ad intra*. By this logic, Bulgakov is quite correct, it seems to me, when he asserts that even the absolute transcendence of the Father to creation has its premise in the intra-divine life,¹⁴ if only because Jesus addresses the Father both as Father and as God, and this reality—the very possibility of Jesus's human prayer

11 Heath, "Linguistic Trinity," 910–11.

12 *Ibid.*, 911.

13 *Ibid.*, 911–12.

14 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 361.

to God being fully compatible with and expressive of the Son's eternal relation to the Father—cannot be attributed solely to the economy: “The kenosis refers to the *life* of the God-Man's Personality, to its state, but it does not refer to His Personality itself; on the contrary, according to the Chalcedonian dogma, the entire power of the Incarnation consists in the unchanging nature of the God-Man's Personality.”¹⁵ Had the Son's prayer to his God and Father been *only* a temporary arrangement, this would have introduced a change into the very personality of the Son.¹⁶ The Logos is, after all—and here Bulgakov is drawing not only on the Letter to the Hebrews, but on one of the very oldest continuous motifs of high Christology—the eternal and Heavenly High Priest, the Great Angel or Angel of Mighty Counsel, in whom the whole of creation is forever turned toward the mystery of the Father in adoration.¹⁷

If, moreover, the revelation of the Absolute in the world presupposes the self-revelation of the Absolute “in itself,” as Bulgakov claims,¹⁸ then he is certainly correct also to claim that it is a revelation not of natural or ontological differences among the divine hypostases, all of whom are equally God in his fullness, but of hierarchical distinctions within the one “trihypostatic Person.”¹⁹ In that hierarchy of relations, the Father is forever, at one and the same time, both God revealing himself in the eternal kenosis of his love *and also* the unsearchable depth of that self-manifesting abyss of love, the divine ἀρχή from whom the Son and Spirit receive themselves, and whom they know as their own inexhaustible source in knowing themselves.²⁰ In his own proper idiom, however, the Father is not the object of that knowledge, but rather the subject who is being made known in the objective manifestation of Son and Spirit. Again, it is vital to recall here that when Bulgakov speaks of the interhypostatic constitution of the divine life, he is speaking not of three discrete persons poured out in one another as though from three distinct sources of personhood; nor is he speaking of a dynamic exhaustion of transcendence in kenosis, or the exhaustion of the interior life of the Father in the absolute exteriority of either the divine or the created order. Rather, he is speaking of one source of all that is, one *fons deitatis*, constituting itself as one trihypostatic Person: not a threefold intersubjectivity, that is, but a single subject in three hypostases who

15 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 372.

16 *Ibid.*, 372–73.

17 *Ibid.*, 74.

18 *Ibid.*, 361.

19 *Ibid.*, 379.

20 *Ibid.*, 376–77.

are one in essence, and three only as distinct moments within the structure of divine personhood. And this must always remain a structure of the hidden and the manifest at once—subjective depth and objective revelation—if God is both one and truly personal. In that life of love, none of the divine hypostases can be deprived of his own proper idiom, his own mode of subsistence—not the Son or Spirit as completely revealing the Father, and not the Father as the transcendent mystery that the Son and Spirit reveal. Hence, again, Bulgakov speaks of the identity of—not the contradiction between—the Father’s inner Word, restrained in silence, and the uttered hypostatic Logos,²¹ in seeing whom one has seen the Father. This was, after all, the most notable advance that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan settlement made over earlier theologies that presumed an absolute disproportion between the Father in himself and the Son and Spirit: the transcendent hiddenness of the Father (which was axiomatic for all theologies, Nicene no less than ante-Nicene) was now understood as also made fully manifest in the Father’s co-equal Son, in the light of his co-equal Spirit. And yet, still, the Son in that theology is not the hidden Father, and the Father is not the revealed Son.

Anyway, Heath need not fear that Bulgakov’s argument in the epilogue will lead back, as he says, to some kind of “self-positing of the Father apart from and prior to his kenosis,”²² analogous to the metaphysics of subjectivity that Bulgakov himself found to be so disappointingly truncated in Fichte’s thought.²³ On the contrary, Bulgakov is speaking of that depth of subjectivity that is constituted precisely *as* unified subjectivity—as, that is, a living “I”²⁴—in the generation and procession of its predicate and copula. This remains clearly the case, and perhaps especially so, even if one sets Bulgakov’s explicitly theological reflections somewhat aside and considers his account of personhood in the abstract. To use the linguistic scheme that he so favored in the 1920’s and never thereafter abandoned, in any act of personal existence there is a subjective depth that is becoming *someone*, so to speak, through its outward expression in its predicate, as accomplished by the mediation of real being, in the copula—the “am” or “is”—of that predication. In that very act, however, the subject becomes true subjectivity, which must of its nature be constituted inwardly as what is withheld even in being given outwardly in its predicate. In

21 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 364.

22 Heath, “Linguistic Trinity,” 911.

23 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 218–19.

24 Sergii Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 89.

becoming a personal subject, that is, I become an object at once to you and to myself; in fact, my own subjectivity, as *pure* subjectivity, remains invisible even to me, and is known to me only in the act of reflecting upon what has been made manifest. To you, however, I am known as the object of *your* subjectivity, which is of its nature withheld from me. Conversely, whenever you reveal yourself to me in words—even if it were possible that the words you speak should be not only perfectly true, but also miraculously wholly expressive of the full depth of your subjectivity—what you disclose to me still remains, in itself, a necessary hiddenness; what I know in the idiom of expressed words you still possess also in the idiom of an interior Word. Were this not so, the event of personhood would be the dissolution of the subject. And, in that exchange whereby each of us is yielded up as the object of another's subjectivity, we are each engaged in the other's constitution as persons, each allowing the other to come to himself or herself as the distinct and personal subject of revelation. Still, the structure of personhood abides. As Bulgakov writes (in that in fact alarmingly clarifying epilogue), "Revelation of the noumenon in phenomena presupposes a subject, a predicate, and the copula between them. It presupposes that which is revealed, that which reveals, and a certain unity or identity of the two: a mystery and its revelation."²⁵

This was always, I submit, the logic of Bulgakov's earlier, more purely linguistic accounts of the Trinity and of personhood. Yes, in his "Chapters on Trinitarity" (for instance) Bulgakov speaks of the life of spirit as the dynamic identity of subject, predicate, and copula;²⁶ he speaks also of the ontological love by which the "I" lives never only in itself, but always also in the you and the he or she and so forth;²⁷ he speaks of the subject as knowing itself only in and through otherness.²⁸ But, even so, he is quite clear that this self-revealing subject is also expressed out of an unrevealed "state of depth,"²⁹ and that in that self-expression the subject is at one and the same time a certain silence, a certain express Word, and a certain concrete life.³⁰ The "I" that grounds itself by expressing itself as I, you, we and so forth all the while remains "I."³¹ Once again, what is at issue here is not a process—not even an eternal and timeless

25 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 360.

26 Bulgakov, *Chapters*, 34.

27 *Ibid.*, 60, 89.

28 *Ibid.*, 66–67.

29 *Ibid.*, 93.

30 *Ibid.*, 64.

31 *Ibid.*, 80.

process—of interiority being converted into exteriority or exteriority being converted into interiority; rather, it is the eternal coinherence of inner and outer, the hidden and the manifest, the ingenerate source and its generated and “breathed” (that is, living) disclosure.

So, then, if indeed this is the structure of personhood, divine and human, what is its ground?

II.

It is something of a commonplace in a great deal of modern theology to speak confidently and even a little proudly of something called Christian “personalism,” or to assert that Christianity, in its understanding of the shape and foundation of reality, uniquely elevates and ennobles and grants special eminence to the concept of “personhood” as such; supposedly, as a result of its Trinitarian and Christological dogmas, and of its language of the Fatherhood of God and of humanity’s filiation to God in Christ, Christianity has produced an understanding of and concern for the person that surpasses that of any other creed or tradition. I take such claims to be false. Quite apart from the silly cultural triumphalism in pronouncements of that sort (inevitably born of ignorance), there is the not inconsiderable reality that, throughout most of theological history, the very language of “persons” has been something of a protean presence in Christian thought that has never assumed the stable form or conceptual clarity or even moral centrality we would like to imagine it has. If we reconstruct the history of its doctrinal usage with sufficient care, and then its theological sequels, what we really find is not so much the story of a lucid and specific idea naturally emerging from earlier epochs of Christian discourse and thought and developing consistently, but rather something more like the tale of an uninvited dinner guest who, by virtue of a tenuous connection with one of his host’s distant relations, insinuated himself into the household and then, by sheer tenacity, somehow established himself as heir to the family fortune.

The Latin word *persona*, after all, entered the Christian lexicon at first as something of a cipher, called upon to discharge the roles of two distinct Greek terms of art in Trinitarian theology, πρόσωπον and ὑπόστασις: in the former case as a more or less literal rendering, in the latter for want of any better way in the Latin of the fourth century for representing the distinction between the two terms ὑπόστασις and οὐσία, which were themselves already hazily amphibologous ciphers whose principal usefulness lay in their syntactic—rather than strictly semantic—distinction from one another. All that these words established within the dogmatic grammar of the faith was that in God there is

an “essential” whatness, οὐσία, of which the Father and the Son, and in time the Spirit, could each be regarded as a “subsistence”, ὑπόστασις. In general, in fact, all the Trinitarian terms proper to the Nicene settlement were not so much names for clear and precise concepts as semantic tokens distinguished from one another only in order to exclude alternative semantic economies. And, in their being translated from Greek into Latin, the range of those distinctions was, if anything, slightly impoverished. What little concrete meaning might have seemed naturally to inhere in the word ὑπόστασις—*subsistentia*, if one were to make a literal transposition into Latin—was progressively diminished; and the same is true of the term πρόσωπον or *persona*, which gradually ceased to carry the connotation of an “aspect” or “expression” of a nature or essence, and began instead to mutate into something else. Down the centuries, in consequence (accidental or natural), the language of “person” (or its equivalent in other tongues) has not only assumed a position of special prominence in Christian discourse; it has come successively to acquire, even within theological usage, all the attributes and connotations with which we have invested it in any given epoch—ethical, legal, psychological, social, what have you—and all the while we have been constantly, retroactively, and largely unconsciously altering our understanding of its usage in the tradition as a whole. In a sense, the very concept of the “person” in any given epoch of Christian thought is like a quantum potentiality wave (in the standard Copenhagen interpretation, at least) that, in being observed, collapses into one particular history, thereby in a sense creating its own past.

Perhaps the most popular and frequent claim regularly made for Christianity’s uniquely “personalist” view of reality is that, for Christian thought, “person” is a concept transcendent of and logically prior to any concept of “nature” or φύσις. This, after all, at least seems as if it must in some sense be true. Orthodox Christology clearly appears to elevate the hypostasis of the divine Son over the difference between his two natures when it proclaims that the single person of the incarnate Logos is at once entirely human and entirely divine; and orthodox soteriology seems also to elevate the human hypostasis over that same difference when it proclaims the deification of human beings in Christ. The logic here appears almost banal in its obviousness. Of course, it is also a logic that gives license to some perilously extreme formulations, as when Maximus the Confessor assures his interlocutor Pyrrhus that the natures hypostasized in Christ share nothing in “common,” κοινόν, other than the one hypostasis by which they are joined in a single activity.³² And extreme formu-

32 *Disputatio cum Pyrrho* 28–31, PG 91: 296C–297A.

lations require careful exegesis. What Maximus is saying here is true if one takes κοινόν to mean one or another *univocum*, some “property” univocally resident in both the divine and the human natures considered in the abstract; for, manifestly, the infinite and simple God possesses nothing under the form of discrete properties or accidents or qualifications, whereas creatures possess their natures always in finite, composite, and diverse fashion, divided between substance and accidents (and so forth and so on). If, however, Maximus were taken as saying that the being and nature of the creature are alien and extrinsic to the being and nature of God, without analogy, and that these otherwise unrelated or even mutually repugnant realities are reconciled to one another in Christ only by virtue of an ontological indifference to the properties of any nature on the part of the hypostasis of the Logos, he would be saying something absurd and somewhat atrocious. For one thing, obviously it would be foolish to imagine that God and creation could be posed over against one another equivocally, within some more capacious context of existence, or that finite beings could possess any real natural properties or perfections that are anything other than participations in the being of God. Clearly the absence of any univocal commonality between Christ’s two natures must not be understood as the absence of an analogous commonality.

More to the point, though, what could it possibly mean to say that “person” or “hypostasis” transcends nature, or is prior to nature, or (in the cases of the God-man and of deified human beings) is indifferent to the differences between the natures it instantiates? Surely, for this to be intelligible, one must also grant the reciprocal claim that any “personal” hypostatic realization of a nature is the realization of a nature that is intrinsically personally hypostatic—which is to say, capable of actuality *only* in and as “personhood,” whatever that means—and that this capacity, which clearly lies at the ground of both natures, is already an essential unity, and can in fact be no less a unity than is the full expression of that capacity in the one indivisible personhood of Christ. Only an intrinsic orientation toward personhood in the divine and human natures at once makes it possible for them to be fully actual in and as the same person, in such perfect unity that those natures are not merely juxtaposed, but truly coinherent one in the other. Otherwise, Christ would not be truly the God-man, but only a kind of chimaera composed of eternally juxtaposed but unreconciled properties, part human, part divine, and wholly *unnatural*; and personhood—far from being the uniquely exalted and integral principle we so keenly desire it to be—would be vacuous to the point of monstrosity. If personhood is not understood as essentially the instantiation and subsistence of the nature it makes actual, and so as rooted in that nature as its own innermost potential, then it

becomes an oddly nihilistic concept: a kind of ontological portmanteau within which potentially any collection of disparate natures and abstract properties might somehow magically be contained together. This would conceptually sever those natures from their own intrinsic modes of expression and manifestation, thereby evacuating the very category of nature of any real meaning, and deprive personhood of the power of truly *expressing* any nature at all. At that point, the words *πρόσωπον* and *persona* would seem to revert to their most “superficial” meaning—a “mask,” either dramatic or funerary—as though they indicated only a kind of sterile haecceity, a unity superimposed only as an *outer* aspect upon what in itself is a mere confluence of divergent forces, as much a rupture as a union, in an almost Deleuzo-Guattarian way: the ever repeated univocity of “person,” the unrepeatable equivocity of “persons.” At that point also, logic would become impotent, and one would be forced simply to rely on affective rhetoric: to speak, say, of the “dynamic” power of personality to unite incompatible things in a single activity, or (once again) to speak of personhood meaninglessly as something that always somehow transcends nature, precisely by being nothing in itself as such.

Yes, of course, the person of Christ is in one sense prior—at least, logically—to the union of natures he comprehends; and, by reciprocal necessity, the persons of creatures enjoy that same logical priority over that same union of natures within themselves when they are deified. Even so, it is not enough to assert that the concept of person transcends the concept of nature in order to explain how it is that Christ’s one divine hypostasis is able to comprehend both his divine and his human natures without confusion or separation. It may be tempting to regard this as the proper “neo-Chalcedonian” solution to the Christological paradox; but, viewed dispassionately, it soon turns out to be no solution at all. It is instead only a repetition of the initial problem, but with the superaddition of a category so scrupulously purged of intrinsic content that it is no longer resistant to even a total contradiction. This is a useless approach to the issue. By this logic, the Logos might just as well have become incarnate as a lettuce. To say that the miraculous coinherence of human and divine natures in Christ without either confusion or separation is “explained” by a concept of “hypostasis” or “person” that is indifferent to the difference of natures in Christ is to say nothing at all, but to do so with a redoubled emphasis in the hope that it will sound like a positive assertion. In the end, this is simply the invention of a category so barren as to be infinitely capacious, and then an attempt to pretend that the problem in question is somehow—magically—its own answer. It may be very dramatic to assert that there is some mysterious quantum called “personality” that possesses the dynamic power of uniting incompatibles, but

nothing has that power; not even God can unite the truly incompatible. True union between disparate realities—and this includes disparate natures—occurs only by way of their reduction to a wider, more encompassing, simpler, and more primordial commonality.

Hence, while it may be necessary to assert the priority of hypostasis over nature in the actual union of human and divine in Christ or in us, it is no less necessary to affirm that personhood is also the subsistence of—and so ontologically dependent upon—the nature it expresses. Hypostasis and nature must remain the two indissoluble sides of a single metaphysical principle: as ontic actualization and ontological axiom. There is nothing wrong, needless to say, in taking all the later developments of the concept of “hypostasis” or “person” into account in one’s Christological speculations; but one can do so to a purpose only so long as one does not render the concept vapid by severing those developments from their most fundamental, original, and indispensable ground: the concept of a subsistence. And so one still must ask what it is about the divine and human natures—what primordial commonality or point of indistinction, that is, that exists between them, at a level presumably more fundamental than any merely univocal properties could occupy—that allows for them to come to full expression in one and the same person. The properly essential question of Christology, then—the only one that can yield an answer that is more than a rhetorical gesture toward some *quantum ignotum* or *persona ex machina*—is not: “How are two incompatible natures reconciled in a single hypostasis?” Rather, it is: “How is it that a full subsistence of the divine nature and a full subsistence of the human nature can be one and the same subsistence, without contradiction?” Only one answer is possible (or interesting).³³

III.

Much of the obscurity in Christian talk of the “person,” of course, lies in the simple and rather trivial reality that, under ordinary conditions, the first question one asks of any person *as* person is who he or she is. But, then, in regard

33 It is probably as well to note that, in the entirety of section II, I am taking exception not only to a certain well-established articulation of Christian “personalism,” but also to many of the Christological premises espoused at present by a small school of young theologians who see themselves as “New Neo-Chalcedonians.” The current manifesto of the movement is a book by Jordan Daniel Wood entitled *The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus Confessor* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022). It is an impressive text, I should note, even if I regard its arguments as defective in numerous crucial respects.

to God, that is a question that has to be qualified by the additional specification of whether it is being asked about “God” as addressed by creatures, and then whether God so addressed is to be understood (as by Jesus) as the Father or rather as the Trinity, and then whether in the latter case this is to be understood as an address to what Bulgakov calls the one trihypostatic Person or to each of the persons according to their distinct idioms ... and so forth. To inquire after the “who” of a human being, by contrast, is to seek not a simple answer, perhaps, but at least one whose subject is more or less precise (or, at the very least, local). So one might legitimately wonder whether an analogical rupture occurs within the very concept of personhood when we attempt to apply it both to God and to creatures. And here too we happen upon a certain seemingly irresolvable ambiguity in the way the language of “person” operates across the analogical interval between the economic and immanent Trinities. Jesus of Nazareth was none other, says dogma, than the person of the divine Son, while at the same time being wholly human in his very personhood; conversely, the whole hope of the creature’s deification in Christ depends on a genuine proportional equivalence between the exchange of divine and human natures in his divine person and that same exchange within created persons. This, however, creates something of a difficulty in defining how the hypostasis of the Son is distinguished as one of the Trinitarian persons, as opposed to the other two. After all, when tradition says that only “one of the Holy Trinity suffered” on the cross of Christ, surely this cannot mean that Jesus’s sufferings belong to only one of the divine persons as a private subjectivity, in a way that simply excludes the Father and Spirit as separate private subjectivities; to say that the Father did not suffer on the cross is not like saying that it does not hurt you when I cut my finger. Originally, of course, all this claim was intended to convey was the real divinity of the one who (by kenosis) suffered in Jesus of Nazareth. Today, we often hear it instead as an assertion that the divine Son was the psychological subject of the passion, and that his was one of three such subjectivities within God. But God does not have a psychology, of course, except by condescension; the psychological self of Jesus—the soul or ψυχή—belonged to no one other than the Logos, just as his flesh and blood did, as something assumed by the Son’s self-emptying. Neither, moreover, does God possess three separate subjectivities, psychological or otherwise. To imagine that he does would simply be to embrace tritheism.

As Bulgakov notes, the Cappadocian fathers who secured the vocabulary of Nicene orthodoxy maintained that it is the divine οὐσία that in a sense “founds” the deity of the Trinity, and is (so to speak) concretized as a true “triune I,” in whom the three divine hypostases are distinguished by relations

of origin, rather than as three distinct subjects.³⁴ By virtue of this essential oneness, “God, as the Absolute Person, is thereby also the trihypostatic Person, truly One in Three and Three in One. He is not Three in one, but the *triunity* of the Divine Person and of His Life.”³⁵ We can then say at one and the same time, perhaps, that the divine simplicity is the “result” of the self-giving transparency and openness of infinite persons, but also that the distinction of the persons within the one God is the “result” of the infinite simplicity of the divine essence. Else we trade in mythology: speaking of God *either* as an infinite psychological subjectivity possessed of plural affects *or* as a confederacy of three individual centers of consciousness, in either case reducing God, the transcendent source of all being, to a composite being in whose “subjectivity” there would remain, even within the immanent divine life, some sort of unexpressed interiority (or interiorities), some surfeit of the indeterminate over the determinate, some reserve of self in which identity is constituted simply as what is withheld by each of the persons for that “person” alone. God is one because each divine hypostasis, in the circle of God’s knowledge and love of his own goodness (which is both wisdom and charity), is a “face,” a πρόσωπον or *persona*, of the divine essence that is—as must be, given the infinite simplicity of God—always wholly God, in the full depth of his “personality.” Each hypostasis is fully gathered and reflected in the mode of the other: as the one and as other, as at once I and we. Obviously, for us this is not the case, except in the most tenuously analogous sense. Even our presence to ourselves as discrete persons is in this life an incomplete and always inadequate revelation of our subjective depths to ourselves, in an always incomplete expression or predicate, which is only partially actualized. As has already been said, we must also come to ourselves in and through others beyond ourselves, and can fully come to ourselves only in God; our personhood is always as much beyond us as within us.

In God, then, the intratrinitarian distinctions among hypostases are distinctions not among separate subjectivities, but among distinct moments within the one “subjectivity” or Personhood of the God who is Trinity. Each of the divine hypostases is the one God in his fullness according to one specific idiom; but the one God nonetheless remains always the one trihypostatic Person who is at once the hiddenness of the Father, the express image of the Son, and the living reality of both together in the Spirit. The alternative to this view of the matter is, once again, simply tritheism. To say that, of the Trinitarian hypostases, it was the Son who suffered on the cross is not to say that the Son alone,

34 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 29–31.

35 *Ibid.*, 44.

in the interiority of his own discrete subjectivity, experienced what the other two hypostases, in the interiorities of their separate subjectivities, did not. The purely subjective interiority of the Son, in its full depth, simply *is* the Father; the Father's fully expressed exteriority simply *is* the Son; the perfect life and actuality of the Father and Son as personal simply *is* the Spirit. Thus Christ names himself as the Son in saying, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." But to say the reverse would be meaningless; it is not a statement about a reciprocal relation between two selves, but rather a structural description of the divine personhood. For the same reason, it would be meaningless to suggest that some other of the three hypostases could have become incarnate. The Trinity is God as the hierarchy of the hidden and the manifest. Where God is disclosed, there is the Son. One ought to say, for instance, not that the Son is the divine person who "appropriated" the incarnation, but rather that God incarnate—God manifest—is of necessity the Son, and that incarnation is therefore always and uniquely a filial *proprium*. Thus, the assertion that "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh" is an idiomatic or even modal claim, not a claim about the subjective identity of the particular divine agent of the incarnation. God suffered, so to speak, in the mode of the Son, as the only proper mode in which God is reflectively present to himself and objectively present to us who live, move, and exist within the life of love and knowledge that he is. The Father is that mode of being God that, as unexpressed and unmanifest in itself, is present to itself and to creation only in the Son, and so does not suffer in itself. The Spirit is the living presence of Father and Son to one another in the one divine life of love that, so to speak, eternally overcomes any abstract opposition of hiddenness and manifestation—such as that between the not-suffering of the Father and the suffering of the Son.³⁶ Or let us put it this way: when you experience pain, the always unmanifest source of your personal existence (we may call it *nous* or *intellectus* if we like, or the transcendental or even apperceptive "I" if we prefer, or even *Atman* or *Sakṣi* if we are feeling a little daring and exotic) is not in itself either the agent or patient of that experience; the empirical or psychological self, however, is; and your existence as a rational spirit is the living unity of these truths that, in being made actual, constitutes you as a real subject. A distant, defective, wholly inadequate analogy of what happened in Christ, no doubt, as all analogies must be; even so, the not-suffering of the Father is more like that than like your not-suffering when I cut my finger.

All of which is to say that the language of "person" in Christian thought, to the degree that it possesses sufficient analogical scope to make sense si-

36 Bulgakov, Chapters, 59.

multaneously of Trinitarian theology and of creaturely personhood, must be a language grounded not simply in the threeness of the divine hypostases, but also, and no less securely, in the oneness of the divine essence *understood as the* “hypostasible” oneness of the divine Person who God is.³⁷ It is only in terms of that same unity that one can make sense of the claim that in the one person of Christ both the divine and human natures in their wholeness are present and fully expressed, and of the reciprocal claim that created persons are called to realize both natures in themselves in like manner. If, as I have asserted, “person” and “nature” cannot be separated from one another as extrinsic principles, the explanation of how it is that human nature is not an impediment to union with the divine in one person, or how it is that the divine nature is not the destruction of the human in that union, is not simply some ontological indifference on the part of the principle of hypostasis to the difference between the two natures, but rather, more originally, the primordial indistinction of those natures in their divine source. Yes, the principle of personhood is neither, as such, divine nor human, but that is only because it is always already both. There must be, Bulgakov insists, some prior commonality in the human and divine natures, mediating and serving as the unalterable foundation of their union in Christ; and this he chooses to call Sophia, or Sophianicity,³⁸ or Divine Humanity, or the pre-hypostatic “hypostasibility” of the divine essence as it is possessed in the Father—all of which is to say, that intrinsic movement of personhood that is always already the essential going forth of the Father, in the immanent divine life and then also in creation. The possibility of the incarnation, says Bulgakov, is not merely the correspondence of the divine and human natures to one another, but is rather something still more radical: “even their primordial identity in Sophia, Heavenly and creaturely,” inasmuch as, “with regard to personality, the Son of God is *kindred* with the sons of God by grace.”³⁹ This is one of those delightfully exorbitant formulations, so abundant in Bulgakov’s writings, that scandalously combine wanton audacity with absolute logical inevitability. Conversely, moreover, the human being must always already be capable of receiving and encompassing the divine hypostasis; “by his initial essence man must already be divine-human in this sense,” such that one must postulate that same

37 See David Bentley Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the Vestigia Trinitatis,” in *ibid.*, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 113–21.

38 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 196–97.

39 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 372.

“primordial identity between the Divine I of the Logos and the human I.”⁴⁰ That is an extraordinary formulation, obviously; it is also necessarily correct if the Christian story is more than a beguiling fantasy. The Logos is the “pre-eternal God-man as the Proto-Image of the creaturely man”;⁴¹ thus all human beings are called to deification by their very nature, and the incarnation is the natural fulfillment of the human essence.⁴² All personhood, whether divine or human, is born of the same divine-human hypostasibility, and so the perfect inherence of the divine and human in the one person of Christ is not an accidental juxtaposition of natures that, as they share no univocal properties, must merely coexist when contained within some kind of ontological portmanteau without any nature of its own; rather, it is the wholly *natural* expression and enactment of both divinity and humanity in the always already divine and human principle of personhood. (Here too, I might note, is the ground of the natural compatibility, noted above, of Christ’s address to the Father as “Father” and his prayer to the Father as “God”: all personhood belongs to this divine Personhood that is at once the perfect filial manifestation of its source and also the “obedient” mission of the self as turning back in spiritual love to its source.) And, once again, given that aforementioned “primordial identity between the Divine I of the Logos and the human I,” it is not only licit, but necessary, to say that the same Logos that is the ground of the self of Jesus of Nazareth is also the ground of every self; but in Jesus the self’s subjectivity—his psychological ego—is so perfectly transparent to that ground that there is no interval of otherness, no distance between the human I and the divine I. Thus he is truly God incarnate. But thus too all human beings, who exist only as participating in that divine source of the I, are called to have their “selves” transformed into that very same transparency before their one shared divine ground. Sophia, hypostasibility, Divine Humanity—what have you: it is that original commonality of the divine and the human logically prior to any differentiation of the two natures that is also the perfectly concordant commonality of those natures in act, even to the point of identity in one and the same person.

40 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 186.

41 *Ibid.*, 187.

42 *Ibid.*, 189.

IV.

Where then to bring these reflections to an end?

There are a number of conclusions I might draw. The first might simply be that, for Bulgakov, the category of “person” spans not only the difference between the divine and human natures, but also the difference between God and creation as a whole. In his thought, with its creative appropriation and Christian reprimatation of German idealist thought, the structure of personhood is also an ontology, a description of the structure of being as such. As he notes, to say that “I am *x*” already expresses the ontological architecture of *all* reality: any “substance” exists not merely “in itself,” as a subject, but also “for itself,” as a predicate, and so “in and for itself,” in the copula that joins subject and predicate in the act of real existence.⁴³ Every “who” and every “what” becomes manifest as “he” or “she” or “this” or “that” in the living unity of an “am” or an “is.” Hence Bulgakov’s impatience with Kant’s Cartesian assumption that there exists some gulf of alienation between the “nomological” realm of the phenomena and the “pathological” realm of the noumena, and that the subjective apparatus of perception is of its nature denied all access to the *Ding an sich*. All being is personal expression, personal communion, and so the conditions of human knowledge and experience are the same conditions as allow for the existence of the known and experienced. The whole of being is an image of the divine life. The whole of being is language, and is *personal* communication of its depths to another.

My second conclusion is a little more radical. For finite beings, as I have noted, our reality as persons is both something given and something never as yet wholly realized in us; our very nature is always also a project for us, one in which we are dependent on and responsible for those outside ourselves. Each of us is, and yet is ever seeking to become, truly the “I” who truly says “I am.” Part of this dynamism I have already described above, as the reciprocity between the way in which we become objects of our own reflective subjectivity by becoming also objects of the subjectivity of the other, and vice-versa. And yet the entirety of humanity by itself, and even the entirety of creation, still does not exhaust the depth of the possibility of that subjectivity, and cannot bring that “I” fully to light. As Bulgakov says, God alone, in his infinite Spirit, overcomes the mere “ipseity” of subjectivity in perfected love, and therefore alone is entirely truly personal.⁴⁴ Only in God is the full depth of personhood fully known and fully

43 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 9–11.

44 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 180–82.

loved and loving. Each of us is in transit; each of us is always as yet becoming a person; and the “I” that we are always seeking to become is the “I” who the incarnate Logos always already is: the human being who is wholly human in being wholly God, and who thereby entirely realizes the divine-human essence of our nature. We truly become persons only in his person, as his person is the full expression of the one trihypostatic Person of God. When that dependence on others that constitutes us as living subjects becomes an ultimate dependence on the person of the incarnate Logos, making his manifestation of the Father the object of our own subjectivities, we are transformed into what he is. Gregory of Nyssa described this miraculous commerce of divine and human identity within us with exquisite loveliness as a kind of inverse and transfiguring reflection—in the “mirror” of the soul’s own structure of hiddenness and manifestation—of the Trinitarian order of God’s self-revelation;⁴⁵ and Bulgakov echoes Gregory when he says that one becomes a true and actual “I” only in gazing upon the divine “I,” and thereby knowing oneself as the image and reflection of that divine sun.⁴⁶

My final conclusion, however, is more radical still, and somewhat exceeds any formulation I am aware of Bulgakov having ever explicitly ventured. Yet, if one follows the metaphysical and theological principles he espoused and developed with such indefatigable and somewhat repetitive resolve, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that there must be a point in his vision of things where the distinction between the language of image and archetype and that of a yet more original identity begins to seem at most merely formal, and even rather arbitrary. After all, if the Father predicates himself in the Son, by the existential copula of the Spirit, and if this is the very structure of being itself, and if all of creation lies in the infinite predication of the Logos in all the logoi it contains, and if all creatures become themselves only in fully realizing the content of that predication through union with the Father in the Son by way of the Spirit—where, precisely, is the demarcation to be drawn between the intrinsic economy of the divine life and its secondary expression in creation? Obviously, creation is a contingent expression of that divine fullness, while that fullness in its absolute nature is unqualified by a relation to anything contingent; otherwise, it would be merely the reciprocal and hence extrinsic relation of two distinct “things.” But it seems clear as well that this is not a distinction that encompasses any actual possible counterfactual (“If God had not created ...”), but only one that indicates a modal definition of creation as

45 Hart, “Mirror,” 122–33.

46 Bulgakov, Chapters, 66.

wholly contingent in relation to the plenitude of content and expression that is the divine life. Bulgakov's is, by any just characterization, a monistic metaphysics. This is not in itself surprising, inasmuch as any coherent metaphysics is a monism in some sense, grounded in some primordial, irreducible, and universal principle: "Being," "act," "the One," "God," "infinite substance in infinite modes," "the *Begriff*," even perhaps "difference" (as pronounced in a strangely transcendental register). What is astonishing and new in Bulgakov's monism, given its Christological foundation, is the discovery that it is not merely possible and coherent but perhaps also necessary to say that, among the privileged names for this most original of principles, the highest of all is "person," or even "*the Person*": he, that is, in whom all personhood has its existence and in which all things have their ground *as personal*—the one divine Person who is all that is, who shall in the end be all in all, and who alone is forever the "I am that I am" within every "I" that is.