



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

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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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“*Transcende te ipsum*”: Faith, Prayer and Name-Worship in Bulgakov’s *Unfading Light*

Ivan Ilin

Introduction: Overcoming „Immanentism“

Anyone who begins to read Sergei Bulgakov’s philosophical magnum opus, *Unfading Light*, will immediately notice its strong emphasis on the proclamation of divine transcendence. Continuing his struggle with anthropolatric *Zeitgeist* that started in his earlier writings, Bulgakov opens the book straightaway with a critique of Western “immanentism” (or onto-theology, to use the Heideggerian-Kantian neologism). The key characteristic of immanentism, as Bulgakov defines it, is an almost complete disappearance of the distance between the Creator and the creation.¹ There is a variety of immanentist manifestations—Bulgakov applies this label to a whole range of philosophical, religious, and social currents—but for all of them God is ontologically immanent within this world. He is sort of “pulled” into being by and on the terms of human reason, which claims to have full access to God’s nature. Epistemological immanence here is inextricably linked with ontological immanence, and the *otherness* of God is put into question. This process is marked, in particular, by the emergence of proofs of the existence of God; after all, they mean exactly that God “possesses” existence, depends on it, and does not condition it as its Creator and giver.

This chapter is the result of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University).

- 1 Sergei Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii* (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 5. English translation (henceforth ET): Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light. Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), xl.

Bulgakov realized that to reaffirm transcendence only ontologically would not be sufficient to overcome immanentism. For the immanentist way of thought is not merely the ontological assertion that there is the Highest Being who gives unity to the whole of being; it is above all the epistemological claim that with reference to this Highest Being it is possible to render the whole of being fully intelligible to human understanding. Therefore, it must be the rejection of both epistemological and ontological claims together that will complete the task of deconstructing “bad transcendences.”² In view of this, in *Unfading Light* Bulgakov is seeking to reaffirm divine transcendence in both dimensions. I think that Bulgakov’s ontological configuration that upholds God’s epistemological alterity, can be presented as a set of several concentric circles: he consistently moves from a more general concept to a more specific, exploring their nature in a transcendental aspect. So, Bulgakov begins with the broadest phenomenon—religion, which is understood as a bond with reality beyond our empirical world. At the center of religion lies faith, which is considered a way (Bulgakov wouldn’t call it a method) of approaching the transcendent. Then, at the center of faith lies prayer, which is understood as an act of transcending. And at the center of prayer lies *imyaslaviye*—“name-worship”, an act of naming the Divine in prayer—treated in this case not as a doctrine but as a “transcendental condition of prayer”. Such a transcendental “ascending” analysis of these phenomena allows Bulgakov not only to display the limitations of speculative reason, but also to show gradually and in detail the ways in which the cognition of the Divine is achieved, or in other words, how transcendence opens to immanence at “the intersection of two worlds.”³

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall briefly analyze said phenomena—faith, prayer, and “name-worship”—and note the distinctive features of Bulgakovian “philosophy of revelation”, to use Paul Valliere’s expression⁴. I will argue that its main feature is its orientation towards the transcendent. My thesis is that for Bulgakov’s transcendent-oriented philosophy of religion, the affirmation of divine transcendence is intrinsically intertwined with the practice of human self-transcendence, or kenotic/ascetic decentering of the self, achieved in acts of faith and prayer. In defining self-transcendence, Merold Westphal’s book on the subject might be of use; there he describes it as “the movement

2 Cf. Michael Frensch, *Weisheit in Person: das Dilemma der Philosophie und die Perspektive der Sophiologie* (Schaffhausen: Novalis, 2000), chapter II.

3 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 26 [ET 24].

4 Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 268.

that draws us away from our natural preoccupation with ourselves.”⁵ Self-transcendence, as Westphal puts it, is that crucial dimension of the religious life in which through the love of God we are drawn out of our usual preoccupation with the question of what is in it for us. It displaces us from the center in our relations with God. In terms of epistemology, self-transcendence has a negative/apophatic side, i. e., epistemic humility, and a positive/cataphatic side, which begins with praise or doxology.⁶

Both of these sides are present in *Unfading Light*, the former however being much more explicit. Affirmation of epistemic humility is precisely one of the reasons why Bulgakov explicitly uses (at least at the beginning of the book) the Kantian methodology of transcendental criticism. For Kant’s critical turn represented for Bulgakov a philosophical version of the *via negativa* approach that provided a means for human reason to limit the claims about metaphysical knowledge.⁷ Developing Kant’s apophatic lines of thought, Bulgakov points out that since the transcendental condition of religion is the disclosure of the transcendent in the immanent, human reason is unable to grasp the divine reality with its own efforts: “there are not and cannot be any naturally determined, methodical paths to him, but precisely therefore he in his condescension becomes infinitely close to us.”⁸ Thus, all intellectual efforts to approach God are futile if they ignore or lack the disclosure of the Divine manifested in religious experience:

The decisive moment remains the encounter with God in the human spirit, the contact of the transcendent with the immanent, the act of faith. God exists. This is what resounds in the human heart, the poor, little, puerile human heart; God exists, sing heaven, earth, and the world’s abysses; God exists respond the abysses of human consciousness and creativity. Glory to him!⁹

Therefore, only living religious experience is considered the real way to gain certain knowledge of Divine truth, and proofs of the existence of God are viewed as attestations to an approaching *crisis* in theology. Here we come to

5 Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2, 10.

6 Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 119 f.

7 See Jonathan R. Seiling, *From Antinomy to Sophiology: Modern Russian Religious Consciousness and Sergei N. Bulgakov’s Critical Appropriation of German Idealism* (PhD dissertation, Toronto: University of St. Michael’s College, 2008).

8 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 24–25 [ET 23].

9 *Ibid.*, 25 [ET, 24].

one of the central points of Bulgakov's philosophy of religion: the epistemological (*ergo*, ontological) importance of religious experience.¹⁰ Here, Bulgakov is in line with Russian religious thought, with its dominance of religious experience over abstract knowledge (specifically, proofs of the existence of God)¹¹—in other words, with its “primacy of the spiritual” (Maritain's formula): doxology (“Glory to Him!”) comes ultimately before speculative theology:

How is one to think this revelation of Mystery, this abstraction of the absoluteness of the Absolute, such as the revelation of the Absolute to the relative is? No answer in human language can be given to this. Not everything is understandable, but God is in everything and in this is the great joy of faith and submissiveness. We draw near to the abyss where the fiery sword of the archangel again bars to us the further path of cognition. It is so—religious experience tells us about this entirely firmly; even religious philosophy needs to accept this as the original definition—in the humility of reason, for the sacrifice of humility is demanded from reason too, as the highest reasonableness of folly. The unutterable, unnameable, incomprehensible, unknowable, unthinkable God is revealed to creation in a name, a word, a cult, theophanies, incarnation. Glory to Your condescension, O Lord!¹²

Like many other theologians in Germany¹³ and in Russia at that time, Bulgakov was preoccupied with the problems arising from the post-Kantian situa-

10 The influence of Florensky, who begins his *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth* with similar reflections.

11 See Christina M. Gschwandtner, “The Category of Experience: Orthodox Theology and Contemporary Philosophy,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 69, nos. 1–2 (2017), 181–221. In relation to Florensky and Bulgakov, Gschwandtner notes (pp. 182–83), “This insistence on experience as ‘showing’ Orthodoxy (and the rejection of proof) might also be a slogan to introduce almost all subsequent Orthodox theology in the 20th century. Although many Orthodox theologians are either quite critical of Florensky and his student Sergius Bulgakov or ignore their work altogether, this emphasis on experience as an essential or even the prime characteristic of Orthodox theology is evident in the work of most of them.”

12 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 136 [ET 159].

13 See Mark D. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), esp. the chapter “Struggles over Epistemology: The Religious A Priori.” For a comparison of German and Russian attempts to apply Kant's transcendental methodology to philosophy of religion see Kirill Ukolov, “Problema religioznogo apriori v zapadnoj i ruskoj religioznoj filosofii,” *Vestnik PSTGU I: Bogoslovie. Filosofija* 29, no. 1 (2010), 25–42.

tion in thought about religion. Those concerns include: dissatisfaction with reductionist—i. e. positivist, psychological and ethicist¹⁴—accounts of religion and, consequently, justification of religion as a *sui generis* and independent reality. That is why in addition to the above-mentioned emphasis on divine transcendence, *Unfading Light* has a second strong emphasis—on declaring the objective character of religion and faith. To claim their objective nature for Bulgakov means to highlight their direction towards the transcendent, beyond this immediate reality. Two important consequences arise here. First, *pace* Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Trubetskoi and Nikolay Lossky, Bulgakov distinguishes faith from a “mystical intuition” which remains entirely within the empirically given reality. For those thinkers (as well as for Semen Frank), faith means an “intuitional, pre-discursive perception of the primordial ontical relation between subject and object which Soloviev expressed by the formula: ‘we believe that the object is.’”¹⁵ Bulgakov is critical towards such a broad use of the term that undermines the objective and transcendent-oriented nature of faith. And it is plausible that Bulgakov had seen in the intuitions of totality, embedded in some of these all-unity projects presupposing the subordination of all spheres of culture to mystical intuition, a mode of thinking which would not be much better than the equally totalizing claims of immanentism that he had struggled with.

Secondly, for the very same reasons Bulgakov doesn’t oppose faith and reason/knowledge. According to Bulgakov, faith in God and knowledge of finite beings are qualitatively different acts: faith is transcendent in its orientation while knowledge deals with empirically given reality. Thus, there is no mutual exclusion between faith and knowledge in the sense that faith is epistemically deficient in comparison to knowledge. There is “neither an epistemic hierarchy nor an opposition”¹⁶ between knowledge and faith. Faith, as Bulgakov argues, “is a function not of some individual aspect of the spirit but of the whole human person in its entirety, in the indivisible totality of all the powers of the

14 Such as found, for instance, in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl and his school. Cf. Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 42 [ET 43].

15 Teresa Obolovitch, “Faith as the Locus Philosophicus of Russian Thought,” in *Faith and Reason in Russian Thought*, ed. Teresa Obolovitch and Pawel Rojek (Krakow: Copernicus Center Press, 2015), 7–23, 15. See Vladimir Soloviev, “Kritika otlvlechennyh nachal,” in: *ibid.*, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij i pisem v dvadcati tomah*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 2001), 296. Emphasis in the original.

16 Christoph Schneider, “Faith and Reason in Russian Religious Thought: Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky and the contemporary debate about ontotheology and fideism,” *Analogia* 8 (2020), 131–42, 140.

spirit”.¹⁷ It has a unitive character and directs all human powers—reason, desire and will—towards their ultimate τέλος, which is God. Thus, Bulgakov sought to recognize the role of faith in all forms of knowledge and the legitimacy of religious experience and language that expresses the data of revelation. And that is why, as it has been noted by scholars,¹⁸ Bulgakov’s theological method considers human person in its entirety and has several dimensions: intellectual, spiritual, psychological and ethical. In the framework of this holistic methodology and its unitive character, faith provides a basis for Bulgakov’s Sophiology, for it is faith that unites the sophiological system by allowing human beings to grasp a key sophiological characteristic that is not grasped by the rationality of reason—the difference between the Absolute and God the Creator. As a philosophical position, faith made it possible to talk about religious knowledge that did not accept reason, but went beyond it.¹⁹ As Bulgakov puts it,

There is no logical bridge between the transcendent or the Absolute and the immanent or God: here there is an absolute hiatus, a bottomless abyss. This has to be recognized simply as a fact in all its triumphal obviousness, but also in its definitive incomprehensibility: it is so [...] Although unsolvable, it [the antinomy of religious consciousness] is resolved constantly in religious life, being experienced again and again as the source of religious illuminations in the flame of faith. For the sake of faith, it does not have to be understood to the end; faith is the child of mystery, the spiritual striving of love and freedom. It need not fear the rational absurd, for here eternal life is revealed, the boundlessness of Divinity.²⁰

Recognition of this logical hiatus necessarily leads to accepting one’s own epistemic humility and consequently to passing from constructing immanentist totalizing systems to a more faithful mode of living and theologizing. “Where divine transcendence is preserved in its deepest sense, the affirmation of God as Creator is not merely the attribution of a certain structure to the cosmos but above all the commitment of oneself to a life of grateful striving.”²¹ Or in Bulgakov’s own poetic words: “The sophianic soul of the world is covered with many veils like the goddess of Sais, and these veils are themselves worn thin ac-

17 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 30 [ET 30].

18 Pierro Coda, *L’altro di Dio. Rivelazione e kenosis in Sergej Bulgakov* (Rome, 1998), 58.

19 Seiling, *From Antinomy to Sophiology*, 247.

20 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 93 [ET, 110].

21 Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 231.

ording to the measure of the spiritual ascent of humankind.”²² There is a direct relationship between how we describe divine being and what is prescribed for our becoming: these are flip sides of the same coin.²³ Thus, faith in its spiritual and ascetic dimension is closely related to the kenotic decentration of the self, or self-transcendence. As Bulgakov puts it, faith

is the highest and final sacrifice of a human being to God—himself, his reason, will, heart, his whole essence, the whole world, all evidence, and is a completely disinterested exploit, giving away everything and demanding nothing. It is the love of humankind for God exclusively and for the sake of God himself; it is salvation from the self, from one’s givenness, from one’s immanence; it is hatred of the self, which is love for God. It is a mute, imploring, searching gesture, it is a single aspiration: *sursum corda, sursum, sursum, sursum, excelsior!* [...] Here a sacrifice is offered by oneself and the world (which here signifies one and the same thing) for the sake of the supramundane and supernal, for the sake of the Father who is in heaven.²⁴

Here the self is called away from satisfaction with its earthly preoccupations, its autonomy and egoism. This kenotic account of faith points us in the direction of ways in which a deeper appreciation of divine *otherness* might be gained. One needs to sacrifice everything—and most of all, one’s ego—so that God can be properly addressed in an act of faith. This needs to be done so that God as the Other can enter our experience on His own terms and not ours.

Later in the book Bulgakov will once again return to the figure of God as the Other (this time speaking specifically about Christ) and about the necessity of self-transcendence, while asserting the intersubjective—i. e., ecclesial—dimension of religious consciousness:

One must hate oneself for the sake of Christ and love him more than oneself, and then in his universal face will be revealed for each one their own face. Each will find themselves in the Other, and this Other is Christ. And finding themselves in the Other, being aware of the source of life in love for them, people will communicate in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mutual emptying of the Divine Hypostases in reciprocal love, the blessedness of life in the Other and through the Other. The

22 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 196 [ET, 229].

23 Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 2.

24 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 33 [ET, 33]. Bulgakov’s emphasis.

human spirit is lifted up to unattainable heights and the human person shines in the beauty of that image after which and for the sake of which it is created.²⁵

The place where such a Trinitarian experience is possible, which has not only a soteriological, but also an epistemological nature, is the Church. This experience is possible thanks to living in the Church, but living inasmuch as “they themselves become Church, men and women receive Christ into themselves.”²⁶ And there is only one condition under which a person becomes the Church: to voluntarily sacrifice his personality, to lose his soul “in order to save it from selfishness and impenetrability, to open to it the joys of love-humility. That sick, Luciferian I which is aware of itself in opposition to every other I as to Not-I, must acquire compatibility with it and through it receive a positive and not only a negative definition.”²⁷ Thus, it becomes clear why any conscience that seeks to establish itself on the foundation of true and absolute truth transcends the world; this is a uniting and conciliar event, according to the words spoken before the Creed during the Divine Liturgy: “let us love one another and confess with one mind.”²⁸

This sacrificial, dynamic nature of faith finds its culmination in prayer, “the fundamental form of religious achievement κατ’ἐξοχήν.”²⁹ Bulgakov remarks in a footnote that the works of church asceticism are filled with a doctrine of prayer, but “the phenomenological analysis of prayer is entirely lacking.”³⁰ So, what he sketches further can indeed be called an “outline of the phenomenology of prayer.”³¹ Answering the question as to what prayer represents according to its “transcendental makeup,” Bulgakov highlights that its transcendental

25 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 300 [ET, 358].

26 *Ibid.*, 299 [ET 357]. See Lubomir Žak, “L’attualità della teologia di Bulgakov in dialogo con l’Occidente,” in *La teologia ortodossa e l’Occidente nel XX secolo. Storia di un incontro*, ed. Adriano Dell’Asta (Bergamo: La Casa di Matriona, 2005), 92–111.

27 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 300 [ET 357].

28 Žak, “L’attualità della teologia di Bulgakov,” 138. See Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 300 [ET 357] and 53 f. [ET 58 f.]. Antonov argues that Bulgakov draws here on Sergei Trubetskoy and his concept of conciliarity of consciousness (*sobornost’ soznaniya*) and his understanding of consciousness as an intersubjective “universal process.” Konstantin Antonov, *Kak vozmozhna religija? Filosofija religii i filosofskie problemy bogoslovija v ruskoj religioznoj mysli XIX-XX vv.* In two pts. Pt. 1 (Moscow: PSTGU, 2020), 396. See Sergey Trubetskoy, “O prirode chelovecheskogo soznaniya,” in *ibid.*, *Sochineniya* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1994), 495–98.

29 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 25 [ET 24].

30 *Ibid.*, 26 [ET 443].

31 Antonov, *Kak vozmozhna religija?*, 391.

content includes “the striving of all the spiritual forces of a human being, of the whole human person, for the Transcendent”.³² Prayer for Bulgakov is thus an act of human self-transcendence *par excellence*. As in the case of faith, it connects human beings to the divine, to something beyond themselves and beyond immediate reality: in prayer, the transcendent becomes an “object of human aspiration as such, precisely as God, as something absolutely other, and not the world, not a human being.” And it is precisely this connection that distinguishes prayer from its “theosophical surrogates”—“concentration, meditation, and intuition”—that “do not deal with God but with the world.”³³ (Note the same “transcendent-directed vs. empirically-oriented” argumentation as in the case of faith.)

Any prayer, says Bulgakov referring to Augustin, calls on: *transcende te ipsum*.³⁴ Praying, one thus makes an effort to come out of oneself, to rise above oneself. Bulgakov uses Augustin’s expression—inherited from the symbolist poet and philosopher Vyacheslav Ivanov³⁵—twice in the book, in different parts but both times while speaking about prayer. Transcending, coming out of oneself, necessarily implies emptying a space within oneself. To speak phenomenologically, emptying a space within ourselves allows us to prepare a space for the appearance of the Divine. In the words of Pseudo-Dionysios: “We should be taken wholly out of ourselves and become wholly of God, since it is better to belong to God rather than to ourselves.”³⁶ Or, as Westphal puts it, prayer “is a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with

32 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 25 [ET 24].

33 Ibid., 26–27 [ET 25].

34 Augustin of Hippo, *De vera religione*, XXXIX, 72. Bulgakov also uses this Latin expression in an article on Tolstoy, “Chelovek i hudozhnik” [The Man and the Artist] (1912).

35 Ivanov has a poem with such a title (1904), where one may uncover references to Augustine’s idea of *transcensus sui* as an early Platonic concept of self-transcendence. See Maria Cymborska-Leboda, “O ponjatii ‘transcenzusa’ u Vjacheslava Ivanova: k probleme ‘Vjacheslav Ivanov i Blazhennyj Avgustin,’” in *Sub Rosa. Köszöntő könyv Léna Szilárd tiszteletére*, ed. Denise Atanaszova-Szokolova (Budapest: ELTE BTK Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2005), 123–32. On Ivanov’s concepts “transcende te ipsum” and “YOU ARE,” which are so influential in *Unfading Light*, see Michael Aksionov Meerson, *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology: The Love Paradigm and the Retrieval of Western Medieval Love Mysticism in Modern Russian Trinitarian Thought (from Solovyov to Bulgakov)* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), 63–78.

36 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *ibid.*, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, N. Y.: Paulist Press, 1987), 106.

myself”.³⁷ Practicing self-emptying, we find ourselves open and receptive before the Divine, which can incarnate itself in our behavior and bodily being. Or, to speak with more traditional patristic metaphors, “the purified soul becomes a mirror of divine perfection” (Gregory of Nyssa). Sharing in the divine is a “disorienting experience, where we lose all our familiar bearings as we mingle with a reality which is so close as to be almost part of us and yet at the same time utterly transcendent.”³⁸

Bulgakov highlights the kenotic/sacrificial nature of prayer once again when speaking about the theurgic dimension of sacraments. But what is more interesting is that he also speaks about the creative or even artistic nature of prayer:

Prayer itself is always a sacrifice to God, a sacrificial giving back of the human element, but to that extent it is also a creative act. Here the straining of all the powers of a spiritual being in a single burst to God is creative effort: *transcende te ipsum*. If sophianic creativity strives for some insight, for artistic achievement, and thus is expressed in *creation*, then prayerful creativity, ‘spiritual artistry,’ ‘noetic doing,’ is realized fully in the *act* itself, in prayer and communion with God.³⁹

Creative essentially means transformative. There is no doubt that praying we find ourselves in the process of change. It has a transformative effect on our passions, so that we learn to love and live differently.⁴⁰ In the prayerful words of St. Paul: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thess. 5:23). Prayer inspires and structures human life so that it becomes true and faithful. And as a transformative force, prayer is to be the most basic and daily activity. That is one of the reasons why Bulgakov mentions the “Jesus prayer” as the very exemplification of prayer. “A religious genius,” Bulgakov writes, “is necessarily an adept of prayer and in essence the whole of

37 Merold Westphal, “Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self,” in *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 13–31, 15. See also James Mensch’s “Prayer as Kenosis” in the same volume, 63–74.

38 Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Yonkers, N. Y.: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 87.

39 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 323 [ET 389]. Smith’s translation modified.

40 Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, “Introduction,” in *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 1–9, 2.

Christian asceticism only teaches the art of prayer, having as its highest goal unceasing (‘automatic’) prayer, the ‘Jesus prayer,’ or ‘noetic activity,’ i. e., the unceasing striving towards the transcendent Divinity by immanent consciousness.⁴¹ All that we do needs to become part of prayer. Or, as the Benedictine motto has it, *laborare est orare*.⁴²

Prayerful self-transcendence is directed towards the union with God, and this union is achieved according to Bulgakov in the central element of prayer, which is invocation of the Name of God. “The Name of God,” Bulgakov writes, “is, as it were, the intersection⁴³ of two worlds, the transcendent in the immanent, and hence beside its common theological sense ‘name-worship’ is in a certain manner the transcendental condition of prayer that constitutes the possibility of religious experience.”⁴⁴ For God is experienced through prayer, the heart of which is the *naming* of Him, and He, as Bulgakov argues, “confirms this name, recognizes this name as His own, not only responding to it, but also being really present in it.”⁴⁵

Here one finds the outlines of the theme that Bulgakov will be developing in his *Philosophy of Name*: the real presence of God in His name invoked by the praying person. According to Bulgakov, God reveals Himself in human consciousness, so that the Divine Names come from God through man. They are not just human concepts, but are the result of *συνέργεια*, of divine and human activity together: “the naming of God is accomplished in man and through man; it is his act, an awakening of his theophoric and theophanic potential, a realization of the image of God contained in him, a realization of his primordial divine-humanity.”⁴⁶ Thus, prayerful kenotic posture witnessing of human finitude finds its *Aufhebung*, to use the famous Hegelian concept, in disclosure of human sophianic potentiality. In calling God’s name human beings start their journey on the way to theosis, “in the process burnishing their likeness or similitude with their Creator.”⁴⁷

41 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 26 [ET, 25].

42 Benson and Wirzba, “Introduction,” 2.

43 It should be noted that Slesinski modifies Smith’s translation: “suppression” (*presechenie*) instead of “intersection” (*peresechenie*). Robert F. Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* (Yonkers, N. Y.: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2019), 219.

44 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 26 [ET 25].

45 *Ibid.*, 26 [ET 25].

46 Sergius Bulgakov, “The Name of God,” in *ibid.*, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 116.

47 Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, 237.

Prayer thus appears in Bulgakov's thought "as the starting point of religious life in general, occupies the place that cult occupies in the thought of the later Florenskii, and revelation in Berdiaev's thought."⁴⁸ Or, as Robert Slesinski puts it, "it is thus in prayer, according to Bulgakov, that human beings truly transcend themselves, thereby *fulfilling their vocation qua humans in a lived encounter with the Divine.*"⁴⁹

Conclusion: Reuniting Theology and Spirituality

Bulgakov's "struggle for transcendence" in *Unfading Light* led him to outline a holistic philosophy of religion that would combine insights into the nature of religious consciousness provided by German idealism with the distinctive features of Orthodox theology,⁵⁰ including its contradictory unity of mystical and rational-discursive aspects, and thus would be able to form the premise of an antinomian representation of the contents of revelation without falling into immanentist/onto-theological modes of thinking.

Recognizing the fundamental role of faith, prayer—both communal and personal—and kenotic self-transcendence for theology, Bulgakov takes us back as if to the first centuries of Christianity, to its very nature, while at the same time trying to preserve our post-Kantian and postmodern consciousness. As Andrew Louth notes, Bulgakovian thought intrinsically combines both

a systematic account of the objective truths of revelation with the root question of the anthropological approach: how do we know any of this? and also: how does this make sense of my human experience? This leads him to be concerned for the *place, as it were, from which we behold the revelation of the glory of God: standing before God in prayer*, fundamentally in the Divine Liturgy. The human being stands before God in prayer and beholds the revelation of God, participates in it, and is caught up with it—and, in particular, for Bulgakov, is drawn towards the fullness of the revelation of God at the end of time.⁵¹

48 Antonov, *Kak vozmozhna religija?*, 392.

49 Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, 219. First emphasis mine.

50 Paul Gavriilyuk stresses four distinctive features of Orthodox epistemology: ontologism, apophaticism, holism and theosis. All of them are present in Bulgakov's works. Paul Gavriilyuk, "Modern Orthodox Thinkers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. Frederick D. Aquino and William J. Abraham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 578–90.

51 Andrew Louth, "Sergii Bulgakov and the Task of Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009), 243–57, 252. Emphasis mine.

Striving to reunite speculative theology with the living experience of faith, Bulgakov symbolizes a spirituality that is premodern, but at the same time he also anticipates many insights of postmodern philosophy with its attention to the theme of alterity and critique of onto-theological thinking. From this living unity arises his perception of the experience of faith as the true foundation of a theological act. For Bulgakov, theology is an act that cannot be understood as a reasoning about some givenness or some kind of experience that one might approach “from the outside,” without having the intellect filled at the deepest level with the novelty of the experience of faith.⁵² This experience of faith is gained daily in the transformative act of prayer. One thus might recall in this regard the famous formula of Evagrius: “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.” This clearly shows how Bulgakov saw the task of doing theology: if one is to inquire about God’s essence, then this essence is to be the essence of an interlocutor.⁵³ This indissoluble link between theology and spirituality would later find its peak in Bulgakov’s major theological writings, but the seed is planted already in *Unfading Light*. For this is what Bulgakov comes to when he points out that the fundamental content of religion is not an abstract “God exists” but a personal “YOU ARE.”

52 Coda, *L'altro di Dio*, 58.

53 Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 97.