



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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The Kenotic Iconicity of Sergii Bulgakov's Divine-Humanity: Doctrinal, Anthropological, and Feminist Considerations

Sarah Elizabeth Livick-Moses

*In the art of antiquity this icon creation attains true heights of sublimity.
This icon creation is direct artistic testimony about [humanity's] likeness
to God, a testimony that religiously justifies its general task.
In antiquity's icon veneration two questions were clearly posed:
What does the image of God in [humanity] consist in,
and if this image of God is portrayable, how is it portrayable?
(Sergii Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 56)*

Introduction

In her article on the gendered dimensions of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology, Jennifer Newsome Martin comments on "the 'subterranean lines of filiation' between Balthasar and the emigré 'Russian School' of Russian Orthodoxy, particularly Sergii Bulgakov, whose highly gendered sophiological commitments are inseparable from his protology, anthropology, and kenotic trinitarianism."¹ Martin's comments on Bulgakov are made in her consideration of Balthasar's understanding of gender and cosmological anthropology, and the alleged inseparability of this understanding from his larger theological project. This paper will provide a partner piece to Martin's that evaluates the same set of questions along Bulgakovian lines. It will treat Bulgakov's liturgical context and iconographic hermeneutics, address his notion of Image and Proto-Image in

1 Jennifer Newsome Martin, "The 'Whence' and the 'Whither' of Balthasar's Gendered Theology: Rehabilitating Kenosis for Feminist Theology," *Modern Theology* 31, no. 2 (2015), 213.

his doctrine of Divine-Humanity, and trace the implications of this doctrine for his anthropology. The consequences of Bulgakov's iconicity for a feminist retrieval will be demonstrated in the last part of the paper while we consider the intersection of Bulgakov's doctrine of God, the icon, and current concerns regarding gender and sexuality, essentialism, and theological anthropology. While his protology reveals an undesirable complementarity between the sexes, Bulgakov's more fundamental iconology illustrates a liberative anthropology to be found in the doctrine of Sophia. It is this which I seek to retrieve.

Theology from the Bottom of the Chalice: Liturgy and Icon

In his article, "Sergii Bulgakov and the Task of Theology," Fr. Andrew Louth argues that the entire cosmological vision of Bulgakov's systematic theology can be best understood through the ritual observation of the liturgy.² He writes especially about Bulgakov's fundamental belief in the mutual influence of the life of prayer and the development of systematic theology. The liminal nature of liturgical celebration well reflects Bulgakov's own antinomic methodology. Liturgy is both temporal and always already participating in the eternal liturgy of the Heavenly Kingdom in the presence of the angels and the choir of saints. It is "together with these blessed powers" that worship is repeatedly offered in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.³ Although a critic of Bulgakov's more contentious theological statements, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann remained an admirer of Bulgakov, most especially inspired by his deeply liturgical disposition. It is liturgy which informs Bulgakov's perception of all things—including his theological inquiry.

For the theology of Fr. Sergii, at its most profound, is precisely and above all liturgical—it is the revelation of an experience received in divine worship, the transmission of this mysterious 'glory,' which penetrates the entire service of this 'mystery' in which it is rooted and of which it is the 'epiphany.' The liturgy is the manifestation of God in the world as God created it, revealing the divine roots of creation and transfiguring it to become that in which God is 'all in all.'⁴

- 2 Andrew Louth, "Sergei Bulgakov and the Task of Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 74, 3 (2009), 243–257.
- 3 Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom," <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-divine-liturgy-of-saint-john-chrysostom> (access 2024/01/26).
- 4 Alexander Schmemmann quoted in Louth, "Sergei Bulgakov and the Task of Theology," 249.

Serving as a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church certainly informed Bulgakov's liturgical vision. Bulgakov consistently held the duality of memorial and eschatological hope throughout his theological works. Indeed, one of the "strongest features [liturgical theologians] note about the liturgical temporality is the paradox or tension evident in its texts and practices between anamnesis (memory) and eschaton (anticipation)."⁵ At the heart of the cosmological import of liturgy lies the iconographic imprint of divinity in the world according to the kenotic nature of the Trinity and the correlativity between Creator and creation. The icon fully represents the incarnational mediation of this ontological reality and while it remains true that he drew the whole of this theological vision "from the bottom of the eucharistic chalice,"⁶ it is also true that he communicates this theological reality through an iconographic construction.

The preeminence of liturgy in the Eastern Orthodox context is intimately associated with the devotional practice of icon veneration; liturgy and icon are inextricably bound. In his review of Bulgakov's *Icons and the Name of God*⁷ and C. A. Tsakiridou's *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*,⁸ Rowan Williams comments on the iconographic mediation of divine presence in the liturgical space. "The icon in some sense stops being a human artefact when it is blessed for use: every icon is—as far as liturgical use is concerned—acheiropoietos, 'not made with hands,' like those legendary images imprinted directly by divine action; every icon is 'wonderworking,' a site of divine intervention."⁹ Already we can see the centrality of Bulgakov's doctrine of Divine-Humanity in his theological

5 Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 35. This work is particularly important in the current discourse of liturgy at the intersection of theology and phenomenological analysis. Gschwandtner offers an excellent and insightful philosophical study of liturgical practice, ritual, space, time, and sensuality. For more of her comments specifically relevant to the work of Bulgakov, see especially her first chapter, "Temporality," 31–56.

6 Quoted in Louth, "Sergei Bulgakov and the Task of Theology," 249; Sister Joanna Reitlinger, "The Final Days of Father Sergius Bulgakov: A Memoir," in Sergius Bulgakov: *Apocatastasis and Transfiguration* (New Haven, CT: The Variable Press, 1995), 31–53; Boris Bobrinskoy, *La compassion du Père* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2000), 160, and see also 173; Boris Bobrinskoy, *La mystère de la Trinité* (1986; repr. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1996), 149.

7 Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

8 C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity* (London: Routledge, 2013).

9 Rowan Williams, Review: "Icons and the Name of God/Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity." *Art & Christianity*, no. 76 (Winter 2013): 12–13.

corpus. The dogmatic significance of icons established at the Seventh Council of Nicaea (AD 787), and its inherent Christologic,¹⁰ remains for Bulgakov both a fundamental part of tradition and a means of theological innovation.

No pre-established forms are prescribed for the tradition of the Church: the Holy Spirit that lives in her “bloweth where it listeth.” In this respect, as sources of the sacred tradition, the canons, the patristic writings, the liturgical texts, and the icons are of equal value. All this—not in isolation but in its living and organic totality—expresses the truth of the Church.¹¹

Unafraid to approach the tradition in a constructive and incorporative method, Bulgakov finds in the liturgical veneration of icons an untapped resource for considering the “eternal correlativity”¹² of divinity and humanity. To understand the unified personhood of the Son, and his position as the cosmic embodiment of Divine-Humanity, it is pertinent to also comprehend Bulgakov’s language of Image and Proto-Image.

10 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 88.

11 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 137.

12 On correlativity: “Eternity and temporality are correlative, without intruding into each other or interfering with each other. In no wise and in no sense can temporality diminish or limit eternity, for it belongs to a different ontological plane. One can say that eternity is the noumenon of time and time is the phenomenon of eternity. They are linked by a relation of foundation and being, but there can be no mixture or confusion between them, and they cannot limit one another. The imprint of God’s eternity therefore lies upon all of creation, for it is the revelation of His eternity.” “God, as the Creator who is correlated with time, does not stop being the eternal God; on the contrary, it is precisely His eternal Divinity that is the foundation for His creation. If He were not the Absolute in Himself, God would not be the Creator, just as, conversely, since He is the Absolute, He is revealed in the relative—that is, He creates the world.” *The Lamb of God*, 135. “The Lord is always creator, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Consequently in some sense the creature is co-eternal with the Creator, as light coexists with the sun, although eternity is realized for it in temporality.” Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 210.

Kenotic Impressions: Proto-Image, Image, and Divine-Humanity

A fundamental insight into Bulgakov's entire systematic theology is that there is more to be positively developed about the *interrelation* between divinity and humanity than has been accomplished in the history of dogmatic theology. While this is considered primarily in the Christological vein of Bulgakov's work, it is also a question which already presupposes a certain theology of creation and Trinity. Christ is the eternal Image of the Proto-Image, that is, the Father. The Father's love pours forth from himself towards an Other who can receive and return it in full. This is the eternal begetting of the Son.

In his essay in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, Aristotle Papanikolaou argues, "The Son, therefore, is the Image of the Father, the Word of the Father in which is contained all words; the 'objective self-revelation' (Bulgakov 1993: 43) of the Father, the Truth of the Father, and, as such, the divine content (Bulgakov 2008: 111)."¹³ It should be noted that Papanikolaou's comments on the Son here do not address the sophiological context of the passage which he cites from *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (Bulgakov 1993: 43), though he later addresses the complexity of Sophia as God's *ousia* of revelation.¹⁴ While it is not the central point of reflection for our study, mention should be made of how Bulgakov develops his comments on the Son's imaging of the Father precisely within the sophiological register. "The imprint of the self-revealing hypostatic love of the begetting Father and of the begotten Son, of the Proto-Image and of the Image, lies also on the Divine world, in the Divine Sophia."¹⁵ Sophia plays a vital role in Bulgakov's systematic theology, *particularly* in his discussion of Divine-Humanity and his non-contrastive theological grammar.¹⁶ The connection here between Sophia and Bulgakov's language of Proto-Image and Image within the Trinitarian relations emphasizes that his language of icon and image already

13 Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Contemporary Orthodox Currents on the Trinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, eds. Emery, Gilles, and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 329.

14 *Ibid.*, 330.

15 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 111. For more on the role of Sophia in Bulgakov's doctrine of God, see the chapters, "The Divine Sophia" and "The Creaturely Sophia" in *The Lamb of God*. Additional resources include Bulgakov's *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* and Andrew Louth's article "Father Sergei Bulgakov on the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *A Transforming Vision: Knowing and Loving the Triune God*, ed. George Westhaver (London: SCM Press, 2018), 183–91.

16 For more on non-contrastive grammar, see Kathryn Tanner's *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1988).

presupposes his doctrine of God's kenotic love. The imprint of this sophianic and iconographic lens in Bulgakov's anthropology might helpfully contribute to contemporary theologies of the body which seek to avoid the polarities of materialism and angelization.

The Son's knowledge of the Father is the self-objective understanding of the divine Icon, a relationship of "mutual mirroring" which is ultimately accomplished in the Incarnation.¹⁷ The mirroring of the Son as the Image of the Proto-Image (Father) is characterized most formally by the sharing of intra-Trinitarian kenotic love. The Father's begetting is itself a kenotic act.

The Father acquires Himself as His nature, not in Himself and for Himself, but in proceeding out of Himself and in begetting, as the Father, the Son. Fatherhood is precisely the form of love in which the loving one desires to have himself not in himself but outside himself, in order to give his own to this other I, but an I identified with him.¹⁸

The Holy Spirit, too, participates in the Trinity as the very reality of the Son and the Father's love, and it is only by the Holy Spirit that "the *reality* of this nature [of kenotic mutuality] is experienced."¹⁹

The kenosis of the Son in the Incarnation is thus grounded in the nature of his divine essence and is not his exclusive personal property. The particularity of the Incarnation is maintained, however, as the full manifestation of God's relationship to humanity; this is what Paul Gavrilyuk terms the "kenosis *par excellence*" in Bulgakov's system.²⁰ "The Proto-Image and the Image are united by a certain identity that establishes between them a positive interrelation and announces the Incarnation to come."²¹ The kenosis of the Incarnation is distinct, though never separate, from the kenotic character of the intra-Trinitarian relations and its subsequent outpouring into creation. It reveals the preeminent desire of divinity to be in full communion with humanity and motivates Bulgakov's confidence that the Incarnation is necessary regardless of the Fall.

17 Papanikolaou, "Contemporary Orthodox Currents," 329.

18 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 98.

19 *Ibid.*, 100.

20 Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "The Kenotic Theology of Sergius Bulgakov," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005), 253.

21 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 138.

According to the direct testimony of Scripture, the coming of Christ into the world, the Incarnation, is predetermined before the creation of the world [...] God's pre-eternal design manifested His love for creation, which did not stop at the creation but went beyond it; as the act of the new creation of the world, it determined the descent into the world of God Himself, that is, the Incarnation.²²

I diverge from Papanikolaou when he writes that Bulgakov holds a “striking affinity” with Barth’s assertion of “the Father as the revealing hypostasis, the Son as the revealed hypostasis, and the Holy Spirit as the revelation.” Indeed, Bulgakov explicitly rejects the statement that the Father is the revealing person of the Trinity.²³ Bulgakov is clear that, “In the Holy Trinity, the Father is the revealed hypostasis, not a revealing hypostasis, and He is revealed in the Son.”²⁴ And again, “A fundamental difference also exists between the First hypostasis on the one hand and the Second and Third hypostases on the other: the First hypostasis is the revealed hypostasis, whereas the Second and the Third are the revealing hypostases.”²⁵ This understanding of revelation is contingent on Bulgakov’s assertion that the immanent and economic Trinity must be identified as one and the same divine reality.²⁶ If the Incarnation of the Son, and the Holy Spirit’s participation therein, is the fulfillment of God’s kenotic nature, then it is precisely in the economy that God’s immanence is revealed. This has major implications for Bulgakov’s iconographic anthropology.

22 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 168–69.

23 Papanikolaou, “Contemporary Orthodox Currents,” 329. Papanikolaou does acknowledge that the Son and Holy Spirit are the revealing hypostasis earlier on the same page, primarily with the Father’s revelation to Godself through the other persons. His connection to Barth’s axiom still does not seem tenable, however, given Bulgakov’s explicit comments to the contrary, though his observations about the revelation of God to Godself do pair well with some of Barth’s notions of revelation and divine knowledge. Andrew Louth also identifies Bulgakov’s emphasis on the Son and the Holy Spirit as the revealing hypostases in “Father Sergei Bulgakov.”

24 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 166.

25 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 304.

26 Note that the famous Rahnerian *Grundaxiom* seems to first appear in the work of Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God* being originally published in 1933, thirty-four years prior to the publication of Karl Rahner’s essay on *The Trinity* (“Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgund der Heilsgeschichte,” in *Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus*, vol. 2 of *Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*).

Image and Likeness

As much as the Son is the eternally begotten Image of the Father as the Proto-Image of divinity, so too is humanity made in the image of the eternally kenotic Trinity. To be made in the image and likeness of God is already to anticipate the Divine-Humanity accomplished by Christ in the Incarnation. The “spiritual being [humanity] is rooted in Divine eternity; the creaturely spirit has an eternity that is analogous to the Divine, and it is uncreated.”²⁷ This is not to say that there is a pre-existent humanity in heaven, as if it might operate from its own ontological foundation. Instead, the divine origins of humanity work in Bulgakov as a form of exemplarism, the fullness of all images grounded in the Proto-Image and eternally “rooted in divine life.”²⁸ The manifestation of the Proto-Image in creaturely hypostases, however, remains distinct from the revelation and accomplishment of humanity’s divine image by the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Bulgakov does not argue for a simple outline of the human person as created in the image of the Trinity. While he claims that “Man is an uncreated-created, divine-cosmic being, divine-human in his structure by his very origin,” and “is the living image of the trihypostatic God in His Wisdom,”²⁹ Bulgakov’s distinction between the Proto-Image (Father) and the other Trinitarian persons introduces a complication which requires further interrogation. The previous emphasis on Father’s role as the *revealed* hypostasis is essential here.

The Paternal Hypostasis, as the eternal and divine Proto-Image, is not revealed to creation “in its own countenance, but through the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and thus cannot be the direct Proto-Image of humanity’s divine imprint. Rather, the Incarnation of the Son in the economy eternally precedes the creation of the world. Christ is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,³⁰ and thus acts as the image in which the first Adam is made. “Man is created in the image of God, but this means that he is created in the image of Christ; for man, Christ is the revelation and accomplishment of this image.”³¹ The natures in Christ are not arbitrarily related; it is not divinity’s taking on of something external to God (for there is no ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of God), but instead “the ontologically grounded and pre-established union of the Proto-Image and the

27 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 91.

28 *Ibid.*, 139.

29 *Ibid.*, 140.

30 Rev. 13:8, Eph. 1:4, NRSV.

31 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 139.

image, of the heavenly Man and the earthly man."³² This incorporates the bodily connotations to Bulgakov's understanding of image. The image is given not only to either spirit or body, but to the singular hypostasis of the spiritual-psycho-corporeal human.³³ The whole human person (body, soul, and spirit) is made as the image of the Divine-Human content of the Son, "worthy of veneration and portrayable on icons."³⁴

Despite his decisive statement that humanity is made in the image of Christ, to read Bulgakov's anthropology only on a Christological level would be to contradict the earlier citations concerning the Trinitarian image of humanity. The significance of Bulgakov's identity between immanent and economic Trinity is once again relevant.

Because the entire Trinity is revealed in the Incarnation, and the Incarnate Word is fully divine, the entire content of the Trinity is revealed in Christ, although the Father and the Spirit are revealed differently than the Son Himself. Because the Father is only revealed by the Son and the Spirit, "the image of the human hypostasis can only come from the hypostases that *reveal* the Father, both in his proper divine world and in the creaturely world."³⁵ Humanity thus has a "double Proto-Image, which belongs to the heavenly humanity in its two countenances: the Logos and the Holy Spirit."³⁶ Notice here that the language of Proto-Image is used not in relation to the Father as the Proto-Image of the Son, but according to the Son and Spirit as the Proto-Images of humanity. Sophia is the proper content of the world's Divine-Humanity, the creaturely Sophia existing as the image of the Divine Sophia. Because Sophia is hypostasized as both the Son and the Spirit, "All *iconicity* is based on this relation between the trihypostatic God and His Image, the Wisdom [Sophia] of God, which is the world's Proto-Image in Divinity Itself, and on the relation of the world's Proto-Image to the world as its creaturely image."³⁷ It is this same Divine Sophia which holds as its content the eternal Divine-Humanity, which is fully realized in the Son's Incarnation and the Spirit's resting upon him.³⁸

Sophia is to be understood as being that eternally hypostasizable *ousia* of God, disclosed in revelation by the Son and the Spirit but not exclusive to any

32 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 17.

33 *Ibid.*, 139.

34 Note that for Bulgakov the body is not equivalent with flesh or matter. Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 61.

35 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 140.

36 *Ibid.*, 140.

37 *Ibid.*, 54.

38 *Ibid.*, 55.

one divine person. As much as Divine-Humanity is made manifest and brought to completion in the person of Christ, there is something about Divinity Itself which already includes the Heavenly Humanity.

One can say that the very Image of God in God [the Son] is the Heavenly Humanity, and that the Proto-Image according to which the anthropocosm was created is precisely this Heavenly Humanity. And man is the image of this Proto-Image; the earthly Adam is the image of the Heavenly Adam, as the creaturely Sophia, the living Icon of Divinity.³⁹

Therefore, to say that humanity is made in the image of Christ, while holding a double Proto-Image from the Son and the Spirit, and also maintaining that humanity is made in the image of the Trinity, is to express in varying accounts the same divine sophianic reality.

Having treated the major themes that Bulgakov develops in his understanding of the “image,” we will turn briefly to how “likeness” is understood in light of this image. The likeness of which humanity is capable is found most foundationally in the kenotic reflection of divinity. It is the acknowledgement of humanity’s kenotic roots in the life of the Trinity. The idolatry of sin takes the divine image found in humanity as God in Godself, using the capacity for self-positing for “solitary I-ness.”⁴⁰ This is what allows for humanity’s self-deception in which “he considers himself to be his own source and proto-image, [transforming] his creaturely I into a pseudo-divine I.”⁴¹ This subsequently extinguishes the love which should more naturally be the content of the image divinized by the grace of God. The alternative for the self-positing I is for the creaturely self to acknowledge in humility her existence as an image of her Proto-Image—she can only “be understood in all the sublimity and absoluteness of its calling.”⁴² Human desire is thus fundamental to its divine ground, intimately intertwined with the gift of God’s image and oriented by kenotic love towards an Other. The Son loves the Father, and humanity, in loving God, sees herself only as an image of her Creator, from whom she has being. Humanity freely posits herself as an image; she accomplishes the act of the kenosis of love.⁴³ The accomplishment of this kenotic act is to develop a disposition of self-emptying

39 Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 55.

40 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 143.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, 91.

43 *Ibid.*, 143.

love towards the Other, the very content of what it means to become like God. This is the same disposition which the Father holds in the kenosis of His eternal begetting of the Son—the same which the Son and Spirit hold in their kenotic response to the Father, to each other, and towards creation.

Gender, Sexuality, and Kenosis

The essential characteristic of humanity's divine image and likeness is to eternally turn towards the Other, both divine and human, in self-emptying love. Bulgakov's treatment of image, icon, divinely ordered anthropology, and humanity's ontologically kenotic foundation raises questions of gender and sexuality which will be the focus of the following section.

Art is itself a kenotic phenomenon. In his work on the Orthodox veneration of icons, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, Fr. Maximos Constatas writes:

It therefore seems churlish to protest that the image is somehow “less authentic” than the archetype, or that the surface acquires meaning only through depth, for it is these very “limitations” that enable creation to share in the life of God. The perceived “weakness” of the icon is precisely its “strength.”⁴⁴

If all bodies are considered to be equally made in the image of God, then it is also true that every body authentically reflects its Christological archetype, even if the historical body of Jesus Christ was one marked by X and Y chromosomes. In his descriptions of the double Proto-Image of humanity, Bulgakov seems to essentialize sexual difference by identifying a “masculine” principle with the Logos and a “feminine” one with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ He maintains that these “two distinct images of man, bear, in their unity, the fullness of humanity and, in this humanity, the fullness of the image of God.”⁴⁶ Bulgakov's greater vision of Divine-Humanity and Sophia seems to elide any kind of essentialism; he comments elsewhere that both men and women hold within them the fullness of the image in their distinctive subsistence as hypostases.⁴⁷ Still, it remains

44 Maximos Constatas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2014), 29.

45 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 140.

46 *Ibid.*, 140.

47 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 82.

difficult to parse Bulgakov's meaning in his more problematic comments. It is, at best, ambiguous where gender and sexuality fit into the iconographic model presented by Bulgakov.

We will once again rely on Martin's work on Balthasar to serve as our companion. She comments that the "whence" of Balthasar's gendered language draws heavily on Bulgakov, but also suggests that the "whither" of potential development draws equally from his use of Russian kenotic theology.⁴⁸ While the language of kenosis and self-sacrifice is already looked upon with suspicion by many feminist critiques of the Cross,⁴⁹ Bulgakov's Trinitarian and iconographic model of kenotic love opens up possibilities for critically conceptualizing desire, gender, and sexuality within the doctrine of Divine-Humanity.

Bulgakov's theology was not concerned with the specific questions of gender and sexuality now raised, but instead with demonstrating the intimate and full presence of the Second and Third Hypostases in the world through the sophianic Divine-Humanity of the Word and world. The creaturely principles in the world exist as images and reflections of the divine hypostases not because of a literal essentialized character in God, "and it is of course self-evident that anything having to do with sex or, in general, with sensuality must be excluded [in imaging God],"⁵⁰ but in a symbolic way which, like the icon, provides a new mode of perception. Even as Bulgakov addresses the "male" and "female" principles of humanity and their reflections in the persons of the Son and Spirit, respectively, he is always attempting to undermine any kind of idolatrous positing of gendered language about God.⁵¹ He sometimes evades this kind of idolatry by omitting sexuality completely from the deified state, describing sex as an introduction of the Fall and suggesting an integral virginity present in the sophianic state. "The male and the female in and of themselves, outside of the fall, are in no way already *sex*."⁵² He maintains that humanity is, in its fullness, that which includes both male and female as "*spiritual* principles,"⁵³ and identifies them in a symbolic way to the Son's "truth in beauty" (m) and the

48 "Here is the whither: informed specifically by the Russians, kenosis itself is construed in a broader context that is robustly Trinitarian and not simply Christological self-sacrifice, preserving kenotic theology both for and from traditionally feminist concerns." Martin, "The 'Whence' and the 'Whither,'" 214.

49 Ibid., 214.

50 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 115.

51 Ibid., 114–15.

52 Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 82.

53 Ibid., 82.

Spirit's "beauty in truth" (f).⁵⁴ As much as he remarks that sex is non-essential to humanity, this does not exclude "the spiritual distinction between the male and female essences," both of which are fully imbued with the image of God.⁵⁵

The question of women's subjectivity is one to which there is no clear solution. Toril Moi, commenting on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, wrote: "Torn between their existence as women and their existence as human beings, women under patriarchy are obliged either to deny their specificity or obsessively focus on it."⁵⁶ Bulgakov's comments on gender seem to do both: excluding the physical reality of sexual differentiation from humanity's universal and divine origin while simultaneously re-inscribing the gender binary in his symbolic order of creaturely spiritual principles. The work of de Beauvoir attempted to dismantle the gender binary, providing insightful developments in the feminist understanding of gender construction, wishing to see both men and women liberated from their obsession with sexual difference. "Only then will she be able to attempt to discover in her life and her works all of reality and not only her own person."⁵⁷ Despite the difficulties of Bulgakov's comments concerning gender, his fundamental theological desire was oriented towards the discovery of humanity's iconicity. This does not, of course, uncomplicate Bulgakov's treatment of sexuality, but it does open new points of consideration in his work for the contemporary theologian.

Rather than take Bulgakov's essentialism at face value, it is important to maintain the kenotic character of his language as it constructs and shapes his symbolic understanding of the icon. It is here that a third way possibly emerges. Rather than a denial of sexuality or an obsession with it, the layering of the two may allow for a kind of fluidity within the universal-particular, divine-human, subject. This is simply to say that as a *symbol*, the work of essentialism in Bulgakov is not itself essential to retrieving other dimensions of his dogmatic theology, but merely depicts the givenness' of bodies present in a world imbued with divine creativity.

Bulgakov comments that "humankind is not only a male or only a female principle, but contains in itself the one and the other, and besides *not as sex*, i. e., half-and-half, non-fullness, but precisely as *the fullness* of its own exist-

54 Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 82.

55 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 299.

56 Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 209–10.

57 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 845.

tence.”⁵⁸ Both male and female are the full image of the kenotic Trinity, but Bulgakov also maintains the necessary union of both as the singular icon of Divine-Humanity embodied in the Son. Christ’s body encompasses the entirety of humanity (both male and female principles, perhaps even somewhere in between the two) while maintaining the particularity of his historical body. The implication is that the kenotic nature of human love and desire are fully realized in the reception of Christ’s body into the life of the Trinity—male, female, and non-conforming bodies. This fundamental insight in Bulgakov’s theology undermines any literal reading of the ‘male’ Logos and ‘female’ Spirit, although those categories continue to operate symbolically in his work.

The difficulty with Bulgakov’s symbolism, of course, is that it does not eschew the patriarchal and possibly abusive assumptions which can be inferred therein. Sarah Coakley reminds us of Paul Ricœur’s axiom that “the symbol gives rise to thought,” in her analysis of Trinitarian iconography and gender.⁵⁹ Without proper care, the antinomy which Bulgakov seeks to maintain can be easily compressed into an unnuanced binary which already pervades so much of the Christian tradition, but this need not be one’s only option.⁶⁰

By pursuing a Bulgakovian anthropology through a critical lens, contemporary theologians may resist the idolatry of essentialism by following his emphatic conclusion that the true essence of humanity is found only in the kenotic iconicity of the God who has already incorporated all things into himself. Of course, the tricky reality of Sophia’s own potential essentialism as a divine ‘feminine’ principle warrants further critical reflection, though it is not possible to address it adequately in this essay.

Bulgakov’s doctrine of Divine-Humanity antinomically maintains both transcendence and immanence, understanding each to be characteristic of divinity’s kenotic love for creation, without completely eliding all conceptions of transcendence. A feminist retrieval of kenosis, as proposed by Martin and Coakley and read through the iconographic hermeneutic outlined in this study, would allow gender, sexuality, bodiliness, and desire to become significant points of reflection in Bulgakov’s theological anthropology and doctrine of God. Coakley argues for the significance of kenosis on feminist grounds,

58 Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 82.

59 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 191.

60 Coakley makes a similar critique of the Freudian-Lacanian school of psychoanalysis and symbolic philosophy, which seems to re-inscribe the very categories which they seek to overcome. *Ibid.*, 1–31.

commenting that kenosis is “vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of [feminism], a manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of ‘losing one’s life in order to save it.’”⁶¹ The kenotic mode of humanity’s sophianic state, orientated always towards the Other, is, as Martin argues, not a denial of the self so much as “a move toward flourishing, whole human persons participating in the mysterious life of the divine Trinity.”⁶² The feminist retrieval of kenosis can thus be centered on our own iconographic approach towards the deified anthropology which Bulgakov manifests in the image of the Trinity.

The passionate, kenotic love of divinity shared within the Trinity, poured forth in creation, and perfected at Golgotha is the very Proto-Image of humanity’s sophianic telos. Bulgakov may not fully draw forth the liberating dimensions of this iconicity for a feminist project, and indeed this paper serves only as an introduction. Paired with the work of Martin and Coakley, however, a feminist theology of Divine-Humanity which accounts for the complexities of gender and sexuality begins to emerge within the space of liturgy, icon, and kenotic prayer.⁶³

61 Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 4.

62 Martin, “The ‘Whence’ and the ‘Whither,’” 231.

63 This final point invites dialogue especially with the following works: Emmanuel Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), Virginia Burrus and Catharine Keller, eds., *Towards a Theology of Eros Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), and Michel Henry, *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Éditions du Sueil, 2000)—there is an excellent translation of this work of Henry’s by Karl Hefty published with Northwestern University Press in 2015).