



Barbara Hallensleben,
Regula M. Zwahlen,
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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 Authenticity of Creativity: The Philosophical and Theological Anthropologies of Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov

Deborah Casewell

The later thought of Sergei Bulgakov, as opposed to his earlier engagement with German Idealism and political thought, is largely contrasted with his theological fellow travellers, some of whom found fault with his sophiology and his reliance on German Idealism. However, through this relationship to German Idealism, Bulgakov can be better linked to his fellow Russian émigré Nikolai Berdiaev. Although their systems are distinctive enough from one another, there are a number of ways in which it is productive to compare and contrast their thought.

Due to their political and personalist interests, it is done on these grounds rather than philosophical or theological ones. However, considering Berdiaev's link to existential philosophy, there exists another way to compare and contrast their thought. One prominent aspect of existential philosophy concerns the creation or realisation of the self, of being authentic or inauthentic. Authenticity can be a complete self-creation from nothing or it can be the alignment of one's life in a certain way. However, there is a sense in authenticity that one decides for oneself how to exist, that the self has the freedom to make itself in its own image. Thus what can be presented to the world is the *true*, individual self. Both thinkers explored in this essay engage with some key concerns of authenticity: in terms of creativity, freedom, and selfhood.

Bulgakov may not engage in existential philosophy or existentialism as Berdiaev does, but he has an understanding of what it means to be fully and truly human such that a theology of personalist authenticity results from Bulgakov's thought. As a result, Bulgakov can thus be seen as part of a wider theological tradition that contains within it the tools with which to respond to claims that authenticity must always be pure self-creation and self-assertion. Seeing Bul-

gakov's thought through this lens also provides us with another helpful way to explore the similarities and dissimilarities between him and Berdiaev, who develops his own understanding of authenticity from his own, more radical, account of self-creation.

I will develop this analysis through the concerns of creation, creativity, and how that bears upon the self. Both these thinkers have rich, complex systems, and this is especially the case for Bulgakov, who constructs a particular elaborate theology. However, the focus of this essay is resolutely focused on theological anthropology, and in particular on how to become truly, authentically human. For it is in this area that theology is especially able to interrogate and engage with philosophical concerns and formulae.

Nikolai Berdiaev

I begin with an account of Berdiaev's thought, in particular his understanding of creation and creativity. Berdiaev's existential character emerged independently of the usual genealogy of existentialism, noting that he saw himself as an existentialist 'before I even came to know of Kierkegaard's writings.'¹ His thought is instead shaped by sources that he shares with Bulgakov: Jakob Boehme and Schelling, alongside his engagement with Pascal, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger.

Berdiaev's key existential concern is to avoid thought he terms "objectivising":² that shuts its eyes 'to the mystery of the life of man, of the world, and of God.'³ This rests on Berdiaev's distinction between the natural and the supernatural, where objectivising philosophy is philosophy that is natural, that remains within the world and works solely within those limits. In contrast, authentic existence and philosophising takes place with a turn towards the supernatural in the natural, beginning its investigations there.

Here, Berdiaev's understanding of creation and creativity is key. Drawing on Jakob Boehme's philosophy, Berdiaev sees that God wills himself into existence from the void of nothingness, the *Ungrund*. From this act of will, God transforms and modulates into the Trinity. This account of God prevents God

1 Nikolai Berdiaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography*, trans. K. Lampert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 102.

2 Objectification means 'alienation, loss of individuality, loss of freedom, subjection to the common, and cognition by means of the concept' (1953, 11).

3 Berdiaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), v.

from being associated with being, because one cannot say that God *is*. Instead, as Berdiaev comments, the vision is ‘*nothingness* as distinct from *something* in order of being’. It is a ‘primal pre-existential freedom’ that precedes being and is beyond the world of causality.⁴ The foundation is freedom rather than being, and human freedom and creativity is also drawn from this non-being. Created as we are in God’s image and likeness, we also will and create, and are called to this free, spontaneous activity, rather than shaping ourselves to a pre-determined ideal. This creativeness, as the exercise of our freedom, is our own creating out of nothingness. However, we cannot create life or matter from nothing, like God. In this way humanity is fraught: both the riddle of and the solution to the universe.

Strictly speaking, Berdiaev does entertain the concept that a separate principle gives rise to God and humanity. He sources it in the meontic *Ungrund*, arguing that it thus has no ‘being’ of which to speak which stands as a *concrete* other principle to God. This metaphysical sleight of hand will save him some of the issues that Bulgakov runs into with his account of Sophia, although it does open his thought up to different problems.⁵ Turning now to Bulgakov’s account of creation, we can see certain similarities: a navigation of nothingness and a debt to mystical German thought, alongside a rather different ontological approach.

Bulgakov on Creation

In Bulgakov’s cosmology, God exists originally as the Absolute, ‘an unchanging entity, wholly satisfied and wholly blessed, and the world process neither adds anything to him nor subtracts anything from him’. Yet God also chooses to create and therefore bind himself to the world, to become in and through the world, and therefore ‘God is not complete insofar as the world is not complete’.⁶ Hence Creation is a kenotic act, the sacrifice of the Absolute’s absoluteness, a

4 Berdiaev, *Spirit and Reality*, trans. George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), 144–45.

5 This is the judgement of Zwahlen, for example, who in her contrasts of Berdiaev and Bulgakov sees that the former’s ontology is too unstabilising, with the world ‘always in danger from the negative forces roaring in the *Ungrund*’; Regula Zwahlen, “Different Concept of Personality: Nikolaj Berdjaev and Sergej Bulgakov”, *Studies in East European Thought* 64, 3–4 (2012), 193.

6 Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. and ed. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 196.

creative sacrifice of love that we are to mirror.⁷ In becoming relative the Absolute limits and subjects itself, and in doing so posits nothing outside of the Absolute fullness of God's being.

What form does this nothingness take? Bulgakov distinguishes between *me on* and the *ouk on* of nothingness, one creative, the other sterile. God creates out of the *ouk on*, transforming it into the *me on*, and it is this nothingness that surrounds being. God originates being and non-being,⁸ and this creative activity is similar but distinguished from creaturely creativity. God can create out of absolute nothing, whereas we create out of the nothingness that God creates.

The above cosmology is one of the ways in which, as Bulgakov states, his understanding of God's relation to the world is panentheistic, his effort to avoid what he sees as the extremes of immanentism and transcendence. The first is found in German Idealism, the latter strays into deism and later dualism. The most famous, and controversial, aspect of this panentheism is Sophia. Originally associated in the *Philosophy of Economy* with the world soul and the *natura naturans*,⁹ Sophia is described contentiously in *Unfading Light* as a fourth hypostasis.¹⁰ In *The Lamb of God*, Sophia is bifurcated, with the divine Sophia subsumed to the nature of God and the creaturely Sophia continuing the role of the world soul. Sophia mediates between God and creation, and distinguishing yet uniting God and the world.

In the *Philosophy of Economy* Sophia is also the human ideal, as the 'original, metaphysical unity of humanity' that 'is a positive spiritual force acting in the world as a unifying principle.'¹¹ Bulgakov unites this doctrine with his own stresses on creativity, on transcendental humanity, and on the sociality of that humanity. As the transcendental human subject is linked with the unificatory role of Sophia, Bulgakov is able to avoid what he sees as the atomism of Kan-

7 This results in a complex series of antinomies, between the Absolute and the Absolute-relative.

8 Gayrilyuk's 2015 commentary on Bulgakov's account of creation notes that God chooses to posit nothing outside of the fullness of God's being.

9 'the world soul, the divine Sophia, the Pleroma', Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy. The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtukov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 13.

10 'And as the love of Love and the love for Love, Sophia possesses personhood and countenance, is a subject, a person or, let us say it with theological terminology, a hypostasis; of course she is different from the Hypostases of the Holy Trinity, and is a special hypostasis, of a different order, a fourth hypostasis' (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 217).

11 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 140.

tian subjectivity. Sophia is also a 'living, organizing force contained in nature'¹² that can overcome brute nature, subject as it is to the laws of necessity. The creativity is also sourced in Sophia and transforms the world out from there, and 'humanity as the soul of the world thus works within nature but is also transcendent with respect to the natural world'.¹³

This underscores Bulgakov's understanding of creaturely creativity presented above: limited as we cannot create from nothing. However, Sophia allows us a form of creativity that we can work towards, for the 'theory of the transcendental subject, the world soul, resolves this question differently'.¹⁴ Sophia allows a relationship to God through the world, where 'Sophia, partaking of the cosmic activity of the Logos, endows the world with divine forces, raises it from chaos to cosmos'.¹⁵ This resolves the puzzle of human creativity, which can then be a free re-creation. Humanity cannot create anything new, metaphysically, but our creative acts are 'flashes of another light in the creaturely darkness'.¹⁶

Creativity, Self-formation and the Person

What do these comments about creation and human creativity mean for becoming, and being human? The kenotic stress in Bulgakov's thought puts the stress on becoming, on work, asceticism, and development. The personalist stress in his thought sees the image and likeness of God as essential to that development. Humanity creates and melds itself into the divine that is revealed in Christ and grounded in Sophia. In participating in the divine world, in the heavenly Divine-Humanity of the God-Man, the Logos, the divine, trinitarian Godhood is mediated to us through the divine Sophia. The world, as the creaturely Sophia 'exists in conformity with its heavenly Proto-Image and is therefore also the human world, centered on and by man'. Amongst these worlds—of God, of the world itself—humanity is 'a "microcosm", and his imprint therefore lies upon the entire world, the macrocosm'.¹⁷ Or, as he put it earlier in a particularly existentialist statement, 'the nature of humankind is marked by genius and nothingness'.¹⁸

12 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 132.

13 Ibid., 143.

14 Ibid., 144.

15 Ibid., 145.

16 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 124.

17 Ibid., 136.

18 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187.

This is the shape of Bulgakov's personalism. God grounds and gives us personhood as a 'hypostasis that has its own nature', in which sense 'He is a living personal spirit'.¹⁹ From this 'man is an uncreated-created, divine-cosmic being, divine-human in his structure by his very origin ... the living image of the tri-hypostatic God'.²⁰ The image of God in the human 'is connected not only with the trinitarity of its spiritual composition but also with the hypostaseity of the spirit. *A human being is a hypostasis, a countenance, a person*'.²¹ The personality is 'the unknowable mystery inherent to each, an unfathomable abyss, an immeasurable depth'. The image is the foundation of our being and the likeness is what we are to realise 'on the basis of the image, as the task of its life'.²² Returning to this image is Bulgakov's account of *theosis*, which, as can be seen from his cosmology and ontology, is enjoined to his sophiology. Even in its fallen state, humanity preserves in itself the image of God, even if the entelechic form of it within us is lost. Yet Sophia is manifested in the world and it is the sophianicity of the world that is an 'inexhaustible source of the inspiration of life with the nature that elevates, purifies, strengthens, and saves the fallen man'.²³

We remain within the world, composed of both the spiritual and the natural. Whilst these are in a sense at odds with each other, Bulgakov saw that brute, deterministic nature could liberate itself. This may only be through 'a cosmic process involving labor',²⁴ but the end is to become a mediator between this world soul and the world, its 'frozen and distorted reflection'.²⁵ The spiritual principle spiritualises the natural (as the natural is not shorn from Sophia), and we are called to this path of work, of 'likening oneself to God'.²⁶ The task and role of humanity, living amongst the tatters of the divine life, is to take these up and patch them together. In doing so we are aided by grace, the reception of which is sophianisation.

Therefore, the process of becoming fully, truly human is the process of shaping the self and the world to the divine. Humanity is always in a process of becoming more what it *should* be: the image of God, not quite what it *could* be,

19 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 89.

20 *Ibid.*, 140.

21 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 290.

22 *Ibid.*, 290–91.

23 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 153.

24 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 132.

25 *Ibid.*, 133.

26 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 147.

as the 'I as I can only be a self-positing'.²⁷ Despite the stress on being shaped into and conforming to the image of God, Bulgakov is keen to preserve humanity's freedom, seeing it as a gift given by God, one included 'in the very creation of this being'.²⁸ Yet the freedom is only justly and correctly used to restore the image of God in humanity, to attend to the sophianicity of human being. Bulgakov sees that 'all creaturely creativity is imperfect and error-prone'.²⁹ It is not our own efforts but our sophianicity that 'signifies the universal fullness of his being' that we are to actualise.³⁰

That task is both individual and ascetic and realised socially and communally in the Church. Bulgakov attends to the singular man and the transcendental man, where both must thrive but not at the expense of the other.³¹ Bulgakov will speak of the importance of the individual labouring and re-creating their existence in the world, but also sees that 'selfness throws its heavy veil over all of life, transforming it into a vale of tears and sorrow, implanting deep melancholy, sadness, and dissatisfaction'.³² Therefore there is a risk in the mandate to labour and create oneself, not out of and into Sophia but instead as mere self-assertion, for 'to want oneself in one's own selfhood, to lock oneself in one's creatureliness as in the absolute, means to want the underground and to be affirmed in it'.³³

That tension echoes the antinomies that characterise Bulgakov's ontology. We are to be creative but not too self-creative as a necessary consequence of how the human is both a creature and a non-creature. As a result, we are a constant trouble to ourselves, 'a living antinomy, an irreconcilable duality, an

27 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 142–43.

28 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 94.

29 *Ibid.*, 144.

30 *Ibid.*, 202.

31 Some of this struggling is present in *Unfading Light*, where he writes that 'Humanity is in truth a single Adam both old and new, both first-made and reborn in Christ, and it is necessary to understand in their full significance the words of the Lord Jesus Christ that he himself is present in those who hunger and in those who thirst, in those imprisoned and in all suffering humanity. But at the same time the individualization, the contrasting of separate people as individuals with the Christ-humanity in them, remains no less real. Christ is a human being as such, the whole idea of the human, and in this sense the genus in the human being; but the latter is realized in being as an indeterminate plurality of individualities in which genus is disclosed. Still, the bases of individuality, namely of the given, and just this, are hidden in genus, are ontologically grounded in it', 236.

32 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economics*, 141.

33 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187.

incarnated contradiction.' However, it is this antinomic quality that is 'an expression of its authentic being,' and this potential within us is what is capable of divinisation.³⁴

How does this vision of humanity and the person compare to Berdiaev's account of creative freedom? Although it appears that their systems are alien to each other's, there are a number of similarities in their philosophical and theological anthropologies. There is the stress on creativity, a transcendental humanity that we are to become, the navigation of the self in the community, and the antinomic nature of humanity. However, from the above discussions of their doctrines of creation, one key difference is apparent. Although they both place a strong stress on creaturely creativity, in Bulgakov the creativity of humanity can be seen as a form of re-creation whereas in Berdiaev it is sourced more directly in the *Ungrund*. Both the means and the ends of human creativity are therefore different. In Bulgakov authentic human existence is our actualisation of our potential towards sophianicity, whereas in Berdiaev it is our own free action that draws on the primal depths of God.

Thus more so than Bulgakov, Berdiaev's philosophy is a philosophy of freedom.³⁵ In Berdiaev it is God who is the guarantee of freedom: 'if there is no God then I am the slave of the world. The existence of God is the guarantee of my independence of the world, of society, of the State.'³⁶ Without God, we remain in the world of necessity, of objectivity and objectivizing, for the me-ontic freedom of God is primordial, not parasitic. Yet this freedom also gives rise to our feelings of unease in the world, as the world is composed of two irreconcilable realities. These are the 'given world of necessity'³⁷ and the divine, present in human nature, that stands over and against the world of necessity.³⁸ Created in freedom, we are both in and of the world, existing in an 'eternal

34 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 286.

35 Ana Siljak notes that 'Berdiaev's personalism developed out of his lifelong obsession with freedom'; 'The Personalism of Nikolai Berdiaev' in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 309–26, 303.

36 Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 136.

37 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald M. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 11.

38 He writes 'God is immanent in the world and in man. The world and man are immanent in God. Everything which happens with man happens with God. There is no dualism of divine and extra-divine nature of God's absolute transcendence of the world and of man.' (Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 15).

antinomy of transcendent and immanent, of dualism and monism'.³⁹ We are conscious that 'in his essence, man is a break in the world of nature, he cannot be contained within it'.⁴⁰

This lack of unity is both our disjunction with the natural and the source of our creative action and our freedom. In *Truth and Revelation* Berdiaev talks of the transcendental human, who exists beyond the duality of subject and object, open to the divine with the 'a priori of religion'.⁴¹ That enables humanity to be open to grace, the 'divine element in man, the eternal bond between transcendental man and God'.⁴² The transcendental human is the free human: free from static concepts of being, God, nature, society, history, and civilization, amongst others. Full as we are of unresolvable paradoxes and living in a fallen world, we are to exercise our creativity and create our ethical existence, orientated towards the future even as we are involved in history and its failures. We are called on not to follow particular moral laws but to create the good, to exercise our freedom and 'co-operate with God, to create the good and produce new values'.⁴³ As the break in the natural world, we can reach through that and relate the world back to the supernatural reality that it points to. The self-contradictory, fraught nature of humanity is the spur for our creativity.

Berdiaev's thought is also personalistic: as the image and likeness of God we contain a 'Divine idea which his freedom may realize or destroy',⁴⁴ we are persons as we contain that image. This personalism grounds Berdiaev's ethics. Personality is 'eternal, identical and unique' as well as 'permanently in a process of creative change', its content is 'best revealed in love'.⁴⁵ This love presupposes another personality to which our personality must relate, and enables an I-Thou relationship that aspires towards communion. That community (*sobornost*) is founded on an ethics which begins 'by opposing the final socialization of man which destroys the freedom of spirit and conscience'⁴⁶ grounded in the love of God.

Therefore, our individual creativity opens the infinite up into the finite and points towards God: to being infinite, free, creative, and loving, focused on the

39 Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 15.

40 Ibid., 60.

41 Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 17.

42 Ibid., 23.

43 Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 44.

44 Ibid., 53.

45 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, trans. George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 122, 128, 146.

46 Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 58.

concrete and individual. Love, as the content of freedom, leads us to an individuality of the new Adam, not the old freedom of individualism. It calls us to imitate Christ, as both divine and human, who as Absolute Man instantiated a new anthropology that humanity can participate in, redeeming and saving human nature.⁴⁷ Berdiaev's ethics underline the priority of the supernatural, indicating 'a set of values outside of the empirical world of necessity [...] giving the individual a place from which to critique what exists and from which to pursue the possibility of reform and transformation'.⁴⁸

Authenticity and Creativity

Over the course of this essay I have explored how both Bulgakov and Berdiaev could understand authenticity. As an existential philosopher, Berdiaev is easier to place in this conversation. However, through Bulgakov's use of concepts such as creativity, freedom, and the antinomic quality of human existence, his thought can be explored with reference to authenticity. Whilst not a philosopher or theologian of authenticity, Bulgakov does not shy away from discussions of how one is, or is not, to make oneself. There is enough in his thought that can stand as a contrast or as way in which to further explore Berdiaev's more existentialist mandate, to create the authentic self. Indeed, the differences sourced in their accounts of creation and creativity are ones that can be used to navigate a self-creation that may be able to avoid the more existentialist pitfalls of subjectivity and self-affirmation, as it espouses a creativity that is not self-creation.

Thus far, the fullest examination of both Berdiaev and Bulgakov's thought together is Zwahlen's analysis, focused on the doctrine of creation. Both Bulgakov and Berdiaev have second first principles that enable them to avoid par-

47 As Bodea points out, 'it is in the understanding of humanity from above, from the relatedness of humanity with God that the authenticity and recognition of the dignity of the human person stems. The height of this dignity of humanity, and the meaningfulness of humanity, was revealed in its fullness in Christ. That is why Berdyaev calls Christology the true anthropology' (Raul-Ovidiu Bodea, 'The Task of Authenticity: Martin Heidegger and Nikolai Berdyaev in Dialogue' in *Ex Patribus Lux: Essays on Orthodox Theological Anthropology and Georges Florovsky's Theology*, eds. Nikolaos Asproulis & Olga Sevastyanova (Volos: Volos Academy Publications. 2021) 58). Siljak also sees that 'the person, then, is the partly Divine, partly natural creature who contains within himself pure, unlimited creative potential, who must be free in order to fulfil his divine, creative reality'; 'The Personalism of Nikolai Berdiaev', 315.

48 Siljak, 'The Personalism of Nikolai Berdiaev', 310.

ticular metaphysical problems, even as they create others.⁴⁹ Whilst attentive to the issues of Sophiology, Zwahlen sees that Berdiaev's less stable metaphysical system entails that his personalist work is more troubled. God's freedom is limited by the *Ungrund* and thus the freedom of humanity is similarly restricted.⁵⁰ This then impacts the image of God, whereas Bulgakov's personalism is fundamentally better grounded, as his Sophiology allows for 'an autonomous good creation out of nothing to be able to be created'.⁵¹

That system can support the image of God, for both thinkers see that the image of God is that by which we are to be measured. Bulgakov's structure and system enables him to put forward a more concrete understanding of human authenticity. She argues that the 'famous, controversial, and dreaded sophiology is not about drowning human persons in an indifferent cosmos';⁵² instead it is an anthropocentric system that underscores the image of God. She further argues that Bulgakov's vision of the world is not as dualistic as Berdiaev's, as Bulgakov seeks to change the world rather than reach beyond it—although this is only possible because the supernatural is so diffused within the world.

It is this aspect of Bulgakov that complicates the positive vision of his account of human creativity and becoming. To become ourselves in Bulgakov's theology is to become the cosmos, to become Sophia. The more stable ontological framework that Bulgakov provides is based on an antinomic ontology, and thus we are still separated from God as Absolute. Even with, and perhaps because of, the antinomies, bifurcations, human becoming is fundamentally conformation rather than freedom. Berdiaev remarked on this, and Gavriilyuk notes his objection that 'the idea that rational creatures freely assent to their being created by God makes sense only if Bulgakov accepts Berdiaev's postulate that freedom is uncreated [...] Bulgakov forceably [in the *Bride of the Lamb*] rejected the idea of uncreated freedom as entailing cosmic dualism'.⁵³ In the

49 Slesinski thus notes that 'at the heart of Bulgakov's sophiological conception is his intuition of the inherent correlativity of the divine and human worlds, Robert Slesinski 'Sergius Bulgakov in Exile: The Flowering of a Systematic Theologian' in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 480–94, 481.

50 Regula Zwahlen, *Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes. Anthropologien der Menschenwürde bei Nikolaj A. Berdjaev und Sergej N. Bulgakov* (Münster: LIT, 2010), 365.

51 Ibid.

52 Zwahlen, 'Different concepts of personality,' 185.

53 Paul Gavriilyuk, 'Bulgakov's Account of Creation: Neglected Aspects, Critics and Contemporary Relevance', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 2015, 17/4. 450–63, 458.

Philosophy of Economy Bulgakov sees freedom as a gift from God to honour not just humankind but to enshrine the individual,⁵⁴ and yet with Bulgakov's understanding of Sophia, creaturely and otherwise, we can only really become the world, and Bulgakov's continued use of the world-soul to refer to Sophia underscores this. For it is mere, flawed re-creation, utilising the stuff of a Sophia-suffused world.⁵⁵ Although it is more stable, it also runs the risks of pantheism and of being absorbed into the *natura naturans*.⁵⁶

Although Bulgakov presents, then, a far more stable, and perhaps coherent, ontology, viewing his understanding of authentic human existence through these particular lenses brings out the limits of his navigation of creaturely creativity. Bulgakov may change the world and be more positive towards the world, but the stuff of the world is, fundamentally, God. Even with what Gavriilyuk describes as Bulgakov's more successful kenoticism (2005, 253), it may not quite exorcise the spectre of Spinoza that haunts German Idealism.

The question remains whether Berdiaev's unbridled and primordial freedom is a *better* principle to hold than Bulgakov's more complex understanding of freedom. It is not clear that that is the case. Making that freedom the

54 'God as the perfect and absolute Individual, as Freedom itself, wished in his love to honor man with his image, that is, freedom, and therefore freedom is included in the plan of the universe as its foundation' (Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 202).

55 Gavriilyuk does seek to defend Bulgakov from pantheism, stressing instead that the mediating figure of Sophia allows some flexibility here. Yet as May states, 'The theological and philosophical first principle that motivates the need for an 'intermediary figure' to unite two 'opposing notions' already undermines the Christian doctrine of creation and the ontological relationship that it establishes between God and the world. Put simply, God cannot be opposed to the world in the manner that Bulgakov assumes, unless God and the world are inhabiting common ontological ground. In other words, in Bulgakov's scheme God is being subsumed under the same mode of being as other created beings.' (Richard May, 'Between God and the world: a critical appraisal of the sophiology of Sergius Bulgakov' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2021) 74, 67–84, 78).

56 Richard May's analysis of Bulgakov's Sophiology argues that despite his desire to avoid the German Idealist collapse of God and the world, his use of antinomies does not succeed, for 'in true Idealist style Bulgakov merely demonstrates that what appears to be dialectically opposed is in fact one and the same thing. We are therefore left with an Absolute becoming itself in another that in the end is revealed to be no other at all.' ('Between God and the world', 76–7). Gallaher also notes that the antinomies are not truly antinomic but the same 'simply stated twice but in a different form' (Brandon Gallaher, 'There is Freedom: The Dialectic of Freedom and Necessity in the Trinitarian Theologies of Sergii Bulgakov, Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar,' Ph. D. thesis., Regent's Park College, Oxford, 2011, 107).

foundational metaphysical principle results in Berdiaev's own sleights of hand: qualifying nothingness into something worryingly substantial at times, and upholding that substantive void as the ideal for humanity. In making freedom ultimate, which he separates from nature, Berdiaev sacrifices the love that Bulgakov makes the key aspect of the supernatural in the natural. His freedom requires a stark dichotomy, as he sees that 'the attempts which have been made to base freedom upon naturalistic metaphysics have always been superficial'.⁵⁷ This makes him a powerful critique of atheistic existentialism, but also raises concerns about how God relates to the world. It results, as Pattison comments, in an 'extreme dualism in which the creativity of freedom and spirit are consistently threatened from the side of the material world'.⁵⁸

Conclusion and Possibilities

To resolve the complications of both of these visions, perhaps, in the grand tradition of Hegel, the other great German Idealist, himself, a mediation can be found between these two visions of authentic human existence and their metaphysical foundations. Doing so also sets a laudable goal for both philosophy and theology: to think anew what the fullness of human existence is, how to continuously negotiate freedom and obedience, creativity and limitation, and to see that it is a process of love that these dichotomies are continuously resolved and unresolved.

Therefore, with that in mind, we can think about the further possibilities of Bulgakov's thought. For Bulgakov's sophiology and his understanding of the God-world relationship remain as concepts to be drawn on even as they are to be carefully navigated. Bulgakov's wider project does present a more concrete account of how we become more truly human, and what are to become more human towards. It presents a clearer account of human becoming than that of Berdiaev's, which is more attentive to what, other than freedom, should structure and determine our relationships to others. Bulgakov's particular account of personalism can also be brought into conversation with other, contemporary personalists, whom Berdiaev associated with and which were associated with the philosophies of existence in France. Bulgakov can thus be seen as advancing a particular personalist ethics that resonates with the questions raised by these other contemporary personalists.

57 Berdiaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. O. F. Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), 117.

58 George Pattison, *Thinking about God in an Age of Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.

Secondly, another aspect of Bulgakov's authenticity that can be a source of further exploration is his use of labour and asceticism. There is now renewed focus on spiritual practice, formation, and asceticism in relation to religion and society. Bulgakov's thought provides an understanding of ascetic authenticity that does not devote itself just to self-formation, but explores how that can and should be realised in community, grounded as it is in the church and in the perichoretic Godmanhood. There can be a revisioning of authenticity—not just as self-assertion from nothing, but as an ascetic practice that incorporates the church and the world. The seeds sown in the *Philosophy of Economy* may, and indeed should, sprout in further and farther fields than originally conceived.