



Barbara Hallensleben,  
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# BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations

 **Aschendorff**  
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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.



## EPIPHANIA

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in Zusammenarbeit mit  
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# Is It All the Greeks' Fault? Reconsidering the Byzantine Legacy in Sergius Bulgakov's *By the Walls of Cherson*

*Nikos Kouremenos*

## 1. Introduction

Fr. Sergius Bulgakov is a prominent figure in the history of twentieth-century Orthodox theology, principally for two reasons: i) his further development of theological reflections on divine wisdom initially expressed by Russian thinkers such as Soloviev and Florenskii, broadly known as Sophiology,<sup>1</sup> and ii) his proposal for a pilot initiative concerning a limited intercommunion between Anglicans and Orthodox within the annual meetings of St. Sergius and St. Alban Fellowship<sup>2</sup>—fruit of his active engagement in the field of inter-Christian dialogue and the ecumenical movement, though still in its infancy. Nevertheless, only little scholarly attention has hitherto been paid to

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- 1 In this regard, see Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Loskii, and Berdiaev* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press 2006). Cf. also Karel Sládek, "Sophiology as a Theological Discipline according to Solovyov, Bulgakov and Florensky," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 77 (2017) 109–16. For a critical approach to Bulgakov's Sophiology, see Richard May, "Between God and the world: A critical appraisal of the sophiology of Sergius Bulgakov," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74, no. 1 (2021): 67–84.
  - 2 On Bulgakov's proposal of a partial intercommunion between Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans, to which Fr. Georges Florovsky was strongly opposed, see Brandon Gallaher, "Great and Full of Grace: Partial Intercommunion and Sophiology in Sergei Bulgakov" in *Church and World: Essays in Honor of Michael Plekon*, ed. William C. Mills (Rollisford: Orthodox Research Institute, 2013), 69–121; Sergei V. Nikolaev, "Spiritual Unity: The Role of Religious Authority in the Disputes between Sergii Bulgakov and G. Florovsky concerning Intercommunion," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no 1/2 (2005): 101–23.

one of his lesser-known essays, titled “By the Walls of Cherson,”<sup>3</sup> which has been called, not inaptly, a “Catholic temptation” in his spiritual and intellectual paths.<sup>4</sup>

Four years after his ordination as a priest (June, 1918) and a few months before his irrevocable exile from his ancestral land (December, 1922), while the consequences of the October Revolution profoundly shattered Russia, Fr. Sergius was temporarily settled in Crimea. It was there that he would compose an essay in the form of a multipart dialogue in which his troubled inner world and his critical assessment of the collapsing imperial and Slavophile worldview are uneasily reflected. Be that as it may, the uncertainty of the emerging new reality for Russian society led him to reappraise the pope as a factor of consistency safeguarding the smooth running of the Church. The very history of the transmission and diffusion of said text is of relevance, given that it remained unpublished as a manuscript, almost disowned, in the personal archive of Fr. Sergius, since his student, Leo Zander, typed it up in the 1960s. In this version, the essay enjoyed a limited circulation,<sup>5</sup> up to the early 1990s, when it was published, first in Russian,<sup>6</sup> while a few years later a French<sup>7</sup> and an Italian<sup>8</sup>

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- 3 The studies dedicated *ad hoc* to this Bulgakov’s essay that I was able to identify are the following: Filippo Cucinotta, “L’VIII Concilio ecumenico: l’eccelesiologia ecumenica di S. Bulgakov”, in *La Chiesa tra teologia e scienze umane: una sola complessa realtà*, ed. Rosaria La Delfa (Rome: Città nuova, 2005), 217–60; Agostino Marchetto, “Dalle mura di Chersoneso al pozzo di Giacobbe: Evoluzione del pensiero di Sergii Bulgakov sul primato del vescovo di Roma,” *Apollinaris* 73, no. 1/4 (2000): 603–14; Myroslaw Tatoryn, “Between Patriarch and Pope: the theological struggle of Sergei Bulgakov,” in *In God’s Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S. J.*, ed. J. Skira (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 137–59. Barbara Hallensleben, “Vom griechischen Russland zur Universalen Kirche: Sergij N. Bulgakov” in *Russische Religionsphilosophie und Theologie um 1900*, ed. Karl Pinggera (Marburg: Elwert 2005), 109–20.
  - 4 See the introduction to the French translation by Bernard Marchadier, “Les remparts de Chersonèse ou la ‘tentation catholique’ d’un théologien orthodoxe,” in Serge Boulgakov, *Sous les remparts de Chersonèse* (Geneva: Ad solem, 1999), 5–19.
  - 5 In this typewritten form, the text was used in a thesis by Stanislaw Świerkosz, *L’église visible selon Serge Bulgakov: structure hiérarchique et sacramentale*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 211 (Rome: Pontificium Istitutum Studiorum Orientalium Studiorum, 1980). I am not aware of any earlier use of this essay.
  - 6 S. N. Bulgakov, “U sten Khersonisa,” *Simvol* 25 (1991), 169–331.
  - 7 Serge Boulgakov, *Sous les remparts de Chersonèse* (Geneva: Ad solem, 1999). In what follows, I cite from this French translation.
  - 8 Sergej N. Boulgakov, *Presso le mura di Chersoneso: per una teologia della cultura* (Rome: Lipa, 1998).

translation appeared, contributing to its dissemination to and reception by a broader audience.

One of the central ideas of “By the Walls of Cherson” could be summarized as follows: the reception of the Christian faith *manu graeca* had a devastating impact on Russia’s spiritual development. Byzantine Christianity endowed the new converts not only with the Great Schism between East and West but also with a controversial rhetoric alienating Russia from the Universal Church. Furthermore, Byzantium handed down the political theory of Caesaropapism and the Church’s subsequent subjection to the imperial authority. As a result, a *sui generis* ecclesial nationalism or nationalistic ecclesiology was born that sent the Russian Church into a spiraling crisis and a deadlock. The source of all this evil, according to Bulgakov, was the fact that the Russian Church had adopted the Byzantine mentality. How much factual truth can be found in these approaches? How original was Bulgakov’s anti-Byzantine attitude and in what way does this differ from similar ideas expressed by previous Russian religious thinkers, such as Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900)? How different did Slavophiles on the one hand and Bulgakov in “By the Walls of Cherson” on the other assess the Byzantine tradition in respect to Russian history and culture? Did Bulgakov’s rejection of the “Catholic temptation” lead him eventually to reconsider his criticism of the Byzantine heritage? These are some of the issues I will attempt to discuss in this paper, examining mainly but not exclusively the influence Slavophiles and Soloviev exercised on Bulgakov’s negative perception of Byzantium.

## 2. A Multipart Dialogue on the Destiny of the Russian Church

A Refugee, a lay Theologian, an erudite Hieromonk, and a parish Priest are the four personages engaged in a conversation during a full-moon night in front of the ruins of the ancient Tauric city of Cherson. The selection of characters and the very style of a debate should come as no surprise to the reader of the Bulgakovian corpus. Two of them, namely the Refugee and the lay Theologian, are also to be found in the work “At the Feast of the Gods: Contemporary Dialogues,” written a few years earlier, in 1918,<sup>9</sup> an essay expressing, as Rowan Williams put it, a strong sense of tragedy and unclarity about the future and criticizing the lack of dynamism and decisiveness in the recent Council of the

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9 Sergius Bulgakov, “At the Feast of the Gods: Contemporary Dialogues,” *Slavonic Review* 1, no. 1 (1922), 172–83; 1 no. 2 (1922) 391–400; 1, no. 3 (1923), 604–22.

Russian Church (1917–1918).<sup>10</sup> The general idea of both essays is the well-known phrase of Dostoyevsky's: "the Russian Church is paralysed," used as an epigraph by Bulgakov for the fifth dialogue of his essay "At the Feast of the Gods."<sup>11</sup> In the same essay, one can find the fundamental references to the Byzantine tradition that would be more comprehensively developed in the "By the Walls of Cherson." It is worth pointing out that according to Fr. Sergius, the impact of the Russian Revolution upon the historical course of the Orthodox Church is of crucial importance. The resignation of Tsar Nicholas marked the end of autocracy, which was a legacy of the Byzantine worldview and mentality and eventually signified the dawn of a new, post-Constantine era. Indeed, through the literary persona of the Refugee, with which Bulgakov expresses his personal views in both essays, one reads:

Personally, I consider we have actually crossed the boundary of historical Orthodoxy and that church history has reached a new epoch, as different from the preceding one as, say, the pre-Constantine epoch is from the one before it. The Constantine era ended for Byzantium in 1453, and for the entire Orthodox Church on the 2/15 March 1917.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the "By the Walls of Cherson," one should not be surprised by the dialogue's setting. It is not exclusively the physical presence of Bulgakov in Crimea at that very moment that conditioned that choice. The symbolic meaning for Russian culture carried by this territory is reflected throughout the entire essay. The crucial importance of the Byzantine city of Cherson in the historical understanding and interpretation of the Christianization of Rus' has come to the forefront of scholarly research in recent years.<sup>13</sup> According to the most reliable medieval sources, such as the *Primary Chronicle*, it was there that the baptism of Vladimir took place in 988. While returning to Kiev, the prince of Rus' brought along Chersonite clergy to effectuate the evangelization of his people; even the first bishop of the city of Novgorod at the time of Vladimir's conversion, Joachim, originated from Cherson. As far as the ecclesiastical or-

10 Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 164.

11 Bulgakov, "At the Feast of the Gods," 604.

12 *Ibid.*, 611–12.

13 Significant in this perspective is the study by Alex M. Feldman, "How and Why Vladimir Besieged Cherson," *Byzantinoslavica* 73, no. 1–2 (2015), 145–70, in which he attempted to deconstruct more traditional narratives glorifying Prince Vladimir's conversion.

ganization of the early Kievan church and the related jurisdictional issues are concerned, a range of different theories have been expressed over the decades, which, however, remain beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>14</sup> Instead, particular focus will be placed on the reception of Vladimir's conversion and the Christianization of Rus' by the Byzantine missionaries along with the consequences which ensured the alleged attachment of Russian Christianity to the Byzantine tradition, according to the views of modern religious thought, as they are depicted in Bulgakov's work "By the Walls of Cherson." Codifying the Byzantine influences upon Russian culture, Fr. John Meyendorff distinguishes three consistent elements: the Roman political tradition, the Greek literary heritage, and the Orthodox Christian faith.<sup>15</sup> In this specific essay, Bulgakov deals with the first and the third and it is thus these that will be discussed here: Byzantine political theology and the Eastern Orthodox version of the Christian faith.

Against the background of the collapse of the Russian imperial ideology and the very structures of the Russian Church due to the dramatic events of the Bolshevik revolution, the two main characters engaging in dialogue, namely the Lay Theologian and the Refugee, are arguing about who should be considered responsible for that development. While the Lay Theologian, reflecting the Slavophile view, attributes the responsibility to the reforms of Peter the Great and Russia's forced Westernization, the Refugee, more or less expressing Bulgakov's personal opinion, not being satisfied by such an explanation, seeks the origins of said crisis in the distant past, back to the very conversion of the Rus' to Christianity. Cherson, in that sense, as the place of the spiritual and historical birth of Rus', is crucial for Bulgakov's attempt to understand the situation in his contemporary Russia. According to the Refugee, conversion to Christianity signified not only a rejection of their pagan/barbarian past and the acceptance of a new religious faith but, more decisively, the entrance of Russia to the European family of nations. Becoming Christian in the ninth century was interpreted by Bulgakov in the first quarter of the twentieth as becoming European. Moreover, since the Great Schism between East and West had not occurred at the time of Vladimir's conversion, the "Russian" people's baptism signifies for the Refugee their entrance not to a particular local church but to the Universal Church.

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14 By way of indication, see the study by Andrzej Poppe, "The Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure of Kyivan Rus' to 1300," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 21, no. 3/4 (1997), 311–92.

15 John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia: A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 10–28.

At this point, Bulgakov, through the character of the Refugee, identifies the crisis of Cherson with the Byzantine heritage in Russia. Due to the Byzantine influence, the form of Christianity established in Kiev resulted in the separation of Russia from the rest of the world. Byzantium is linked with ecclesial particularism and separatist tendencies towards the Universal Church. To better clarify this view, the Refugee speaks about a crisis of principles:

La crise des principes de Chersonèse est la crise des principes de Byzance ou, plus exactement, de l'Orthodoxie byzantine en tant que force spirituelle, historique et culturelle [...] En même temps qu'à cette heure fatale et terrible de l'Histoire elle recevait des Grecs la religion chrétienne, la Russie héritait de toute l'étroitesse et du repliement sur soi de Byzance et se voyait séparée de l'ensemble de l'Europe occidentale, et chrétienne, par une véritable muraille de Chine [...] Ici, à Chersonèse, la Russie a été placée sous une cloche de verre et condamnée à la solitude et à la séparation.<sup>16</sup>

It is necessary to stress, at this point, that the idea of Russia's separation from the Universal Church due to the Byzantine heritage of the former is a concept initially found in the philosopher Vladimir Soloviev's well-known book *La Russie et l'église universelle*, published in 1889. Soloviev's anti-Byzantine position was expressed through his contestation of the very Christian quality of the Byzantine Empire. Indeed, the Russian philosopher accused Byzantium of superficial religiosity. According to Soloviev, the Byzantines, emphasizing rituals, forgot to transform the social and political structures of public life according to Christian values and principles. As a consequence, they built an Empire that was more pagan than Christian. Returning to Bulgakov's essay, the reader can find traces of an anti-Byzantine attitude based principally on beliefs according to which certain negative behavioral traits are supposed to be linked with certain national features. Seeking to exempt Russians from any responsibility, due to their lack of sophistication, the Refugee blames the Byzantines—or Greeks as he prefers to call them—for the direction that Christianity took in Russia:

[...] les sauvages « Rus » ne purent qu'imiter maladroitement les fastes extérieurs du rite byzantin – si somptueux et si beau – et se montrèrent absolument incapables d'assimiler la culture grecque, en adoptant malgré eux les fleurs dans la liturgie. De plus, les Grecs s'avèrent des pédagogues incapables, indifférents, paresseux et,

<sup>16</sup> Bulgakov, *Sous les remparts*, 29–31.



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surtout, après au gain. Ce qui les intéressait, c'étaient le pouvoir et les revenus, non pas les âmes et leur éducation chrétienne.<sup>17</sup>

The Refugee's harsh criticism towards the Greek clergy is not limited only to the period of the conversion and formation of a Christian state in Kiev. It is also extended to the entire course of Russian history, including the period of ecclesiastical and jurisdictional dependence from the Patriarchate of Constantinople and even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. The Refugee even questions the role of the Eastern Patriarchates in ecclesiastical affairs in modern times, going so far as to wonder what the future would have held for Russia had the Latin clergy been the ones who undertook the Christianization of the land:

Oui, les Grecs nous ont donné les richesses fabuleuses de leur génie avec le rite liturgique, mais ils ne nous ont pas appris à l'apprécier, et n'étaient pas en état de le faire. Des évêques et des prêtres grecs furent dépêchés en Russie et pendant plusieurs siècles la Russie fut un diocèse byzantin qui avait pour pape le patriarche de Byzance – car c'est bien sûr à une papauté byzantine (qui, d'ailleurs rampait devant le pouvoir impérial) qu'avaient essayé d'aboutir les prétentions de Photius et consorts. Si, au lieu des Grecs, nous avions eu, par exemple, les « Latins », avec leur zèle, leur savoir-faire et leur énergie, notre christianisation aurait bien entendu reçu d'autres traits et la Russie aurait peut-être été véritablement un pays chrétien et civilisé. Mais les Grecs n'en étaient pas capables. Ils sont restés des étrangers en Russie et avec les invasions tatares le lien avec Byzance s'est affaibli, jusqu'à ce que nous parvenions enfin à nous en affranchir. Après la chute de Byzance les patriarches d'Orient, et en particulier le patriarche de Constantinople, se transformèrent en véritables quémandeurs d'aumônes, prêts à tout pour de l'argent, et jouèrent parfois dans les affaires de la Russie un rôle fort affligeant et ambigu (par exemple pendant la crise du Raskol).<sup>18</sup>

### 3. The Temptation of Caesaropapism

According to the Refugee's literary persona, the greatest sin of Byzantium was neither greed nor the indifference or whatever negative feature of the Greek clergy. In this regard, one can note Soloviev's influence on Bulgakov regarding the Byzantine heritage. Both religious philosophers consider Caesaropapism,

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17 Boulgakov, *Sous les remparts*, 31.

18 *Ibid.*, 32.

the subordination of the Church to the secular power, to be the most significant Byzantine defect transmitted to Russian culture. Bulgakov discerns not only the concept of *translatio imperii* from the Byzantine to the Muscovite Russian principality after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 but also a *translatio potestatis* from the Byzantine emperor to the Russian tsar:

Quant au tsar, il adopta dans les faits tous les traits fondamentaux du despotisme ecclésial byzantin. Certes, il n'y eut pas chez les tsars de ces hérétiques qui furent si nombreux sur le trône de Byzance—les souverains russes étaient pour cela trop ignorants et trop primitifs, et ils se bornèrent à la correction des livres anciens et aux disputes sur les vieux rites. Mais ils disposaient de la *potestas jurisdictionis* pour toutes les questions d'administration de l'Église. [...] De fait, ils étaient les chefs de l'Église russe. Bien plus : sur toutes les questions ecclésiales, même en matière de canonisation des saints, ils manifestaient leur souveraineté, comme chacun s'en souvient bien.<sup>19</sup>

In practical terms, this concept entailed the transplantation of the Eusebian model of the Church's subordination to the state from the Eastern Roman Empire to the Muscovite State and later to the Russian Empire. In this regard, as the Byzantine Emperors were considered to be the Heads not only of the Byzantine Church but also of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the broader sense, in a similar way, Russian tsars were supposed to function as the supreme authority in the ecclesiastic affairs of all the Eastern Orthodox Churches:

De même que les empereurs byzantins étaient à la tête non seulement de l'Église byzantine mais de l'ensemble de l'Église d'Orient, de même les tsars russes se montrèrent dans les faits les vecteurs de l'unité non seulement de l'Église russe mais de toutes les Églises orthodoxes.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, it is evident that the role assumed by the tsar as the absolute leader of the Orthodox Church was not a modern innovation but a faithful continuation of the Byzantine model. From Constantinople to Moscow and then to Petrograd, Bulgakov sees the Constantinian period of the Church, in which the Eusebian paradigm in governing ecclesiastic affairs predominated and was eventually abruptly interrupted by the Bolshevik revolution:

<sup>19</sup> Bulgakov, *Sous les remparts*, 55–56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

[...] c'était le tsar qui gouvernait l'Église; *de jure et de facto*, il était le chef de l'Église russe – que dis-je, de l'ensemble de l'Église orthodoxe – et en exprimait l'unité. En ce sens, il était l'héritier et le continuateur direct des autocrates byzantins et, dans l'histoire de l'Église, c'est en droite ligne que se succèdent Byzance, Moscou et Petrograd, formant une époque historique unique de césaropapisme indiscutable, déclaré et décidé où le vecteur de l'unité de l'Église a été l'empereur.<sup>21</sup>

It may be of interest to mention, in this context, the first person who attempted in a systematic way to formulate a political theology in Russia, namely Vladimir Soloviev. The religious philosopher based his approach regarding the relationship between Church and state upon a Christological dimension.<sup>22</sup> Reassuming Soloviev's thought, the perfect union of the divine and the human, dogmatically expressed in Chalcedon, reflects Christianity's social and public life, an intimate connection between the Church, representing the divine, and the state, representing the human element. Consequently, the Church should take precedence over the state, for the divine is anterior and superior to the human. Any concept, therefore, seeking to subordinate the Church to the state, as, for example, the Eusebian model does, is for Soloviev a distortion based on pagan principles and undoubtedly leads to heresy.<sup>23</sup> This approach expressed in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth century can be interpreted as a reaction to the official imperial ideology and the exploitation of the Orthodox Church for nationalistic purposes. In this regard, Bulgakov's criticism of the model of Caesaropapism differs from that of Soloviev, for it came at a crucial moment when the Eusebian model had already collapsed, and the future of the Russian church was still obscure.

#### 4. Westernizers' Attitude Towards Byzantium

Tracing the roots of Bulgakov's negative predisposition towards Byzantium in his work "By the Walls of Cherson," one should turn one's attention to the rich literary production of the Russian intelligentsia during the nineteenth century. In fact, it was in that period that while seeking an identity for the Russian nation and the specific feature of Russian civilization in relation to the

21 Boulgakov, *Sous les remparts*, 58.

22 On this regard, see Emmanuel Tawil, "Les Relations Église-État dans *La Russie Et L'Église Universelle* de Vladimir Soloviev," *L'Année Canonique* 51, no. 1 (2009), 307–32.

23 See, Vladimir Soloviev, *La Russie et l'église universelle* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Parisienne Albert Savine, 1889), xlvi–xlvi.

rest of the world and particularly Western Europe, the interest among Russian intellectuals concerning the influence of the Byzantine tradition upon the formation of the Russian culture and Russianness was reinvigorated. The debate between Westernizers and Slavophiles on the interpretation of the past, the understanding of the present and the future perspectives of the Russian nation, also entailed some value judgments regarding the Byzantine legacy for Russian culture.<sup>24</sup> The cases of Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856) and Aleksey Khomiakov (1804–1860), as representative examples of a Westernizer and a Slavophile respectively, would shed light on the broader cultural and intellectual context that shaped Bulgakov's thinking.

In the first place, the philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev, considered the forerunner of the Westernizers movement in Russian intellectual circles,<sup>25</sup> was aggressive enough regarding the Byzantine legacy's impact on Russian culture. In his work "Première lettre philosophique" (First Philosophical Letter), initially written in French, on December 1, 1829, before being published in Russian a few years later, in 1836, in the Muscovite journal *Telescope*, proclaimed in an almost provocative way the essential, inevitable, and apparently irremediable inferiority of the Russian nation.<sup>26</sup> In his pessimistic view, Chaadaev identifies Russia's cultural isolation and its estrangement from Western Europe with its Byzantine legacy. Indeed, the ties of Russian civilization with the Eastern Christendom were seen as a fatal misfortune for the Russian people:

[...] poussés par une destinée fatale, nous allions chercher dans la *misérable Byzance*, objet du profond mépris de ces peuples, le code moral qui devait faire notre éducation. Un moment auparavant, un esprit ambitieux avait enlevé cette famille à la fraternité universelle.<sup>27</sup>

24 On the ideological controversy between Westernizers and Slavophiles in nineteenth-century Russia, see the classical study by Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in the Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

25 Gary M. Hamburg, "Petr Chaadaev and the Slavophile-Westernizer Debate," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Caryl Emerson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 111–32.

26 Regarding the First Philosophical Letter and the intellectual background of its composition, see Pierre Gonneau, "En réponse à Karamzin ... La première *Lettre philosophique* de Čaadaev comme réplique à la préface de l'*Histoire de l'État russe*", *Revue des études slaves* 82, no. 2/3 (2012), 783–92.

27 Ivan A. Gagarin, ed., *Œuvres choisies de Pierre Tchadaïef publiées pour la première fois* (Paris/Leipzig: Librairie A. Franck, 1862), 29.

The aforementioned “ambitious spirit” who cut Eastern Christianity from communion with the Universal Church should be identified as the Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius. It is an uncritical and unquestioning adoption of the Roman Catholic argumentation, according to which it was Photius’ ambition that was to blame for the ninth-century schism between Rome and Constantinople.<sup>28</sup> In any case, what impresses in Chaadaev’s argumentation is the disparaging reference to Byzantium.

Although promoted a heated debate in literate circles in Russia, the First Philosophical Letter’s publication in Russian bore dramatic consequences for its author’s reputation. *Telescope* was suspended, its editor was exiled, while Chaadaev was declared insane and put under police supervision. Under these circumstances and to defend himself, a year later he published his work *Apolo-gie d’un fou*. Of particular interest, however, was the reaction of the great Russian writer and poet Alexander Pushkin, who, despite his disagreement with Chaadaev’s pessimism, assessed Byzantine tradition in an equally disparaging light:

Vous dites que la source où nous sommes allé puiser le christianisme était impure, que Byzance était méprisable et méprisée etc. – hé, mon ami ! Jésus Christ lui-même n’était-il pas né juif et Jérusalem n’était-elle pas la fable des nations ? L’évangile en est-il moins admirable ? Nous avons pris des Grecs l’évangile et les traditions, et non l’esprit de puérilité et de controverse. Les mœurs de Byzance n’ont jamais été celles de Kiev.<sup>29</sup>

While objecting to the inferiority complex of the Russian nation emerging from Chaadaev’s approach, Pushkin shared with his friend his unfavorable opinion of Byzantium. The brilliant Russian poet attributes to the “Greeks” a spirit of puerility and controversy, which was not transmitted to the Russians through the adoption of the Byzantine form of Christianity. Advocating a moral superiority of Kiev compared to Constantinople, Pushkin tends to neutralize Chaadaev’s primary argument against Byzantine tradition. The common denominator of the two intellectuals nevertheless remains the depreciation of the Byzantine culture. Needless to say, their perception of Byzantium relied

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28 See, for example, the study by abbé Jean-Nicholas Jager, *Histoire de Photius, patriarche de Constantinople: auteur du schisme des Grecs, d’après les monuments originaux, la plupart encore inconnus* (Paris: Vatou, 1845).

29 See Tatiana Wolff, ed., *Pushkin on Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 470.

much on the quite widespread assessments expressed by prominent figures of Enlightenment historiography such as Edward Gibbon and Montesquieu concerning the constant and continuous decline of the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>30</sup>

### 5. Slavophiles' Attitudes Towards Byzantium

If the Westernizers' attitude towards the Byzantine heritage was determined by the prejudices bequeathed to the nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals from the historiographic tradition of the Enlightenment, as has been shown in the previous section, the Slavophile's predisposition to Byzantium, although based on different presuppositions, did not differ much. The renowned historian and Byzantinist of the twentieth century Dmitry Obolensky stressed the similarities between Westernizers' and Slavophiles' approach to Byzantium, namely their similar Russia-centered bias, their almost identical penchant for judgments of value, and their ambiguity.<sup>31</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps the most representative advocate of the Slavophile movement, Alexei Khomiakov, wrote that "in our opinion, to speak of the Byzantine Empire with disdain means to disclose one's own ignorance,"<sup>32</sup> thereby providing an indirect response to Chaadaev's derogatory assessment. Having said that, one should not expect Khomiakov to be a fervent advocate of Byzantine tradition. His position towards Byzantium was rather muddled. To begin with, the prominent Slavophile suggested that the political life of Byzantium did not correspond to the grandeur of the spiritual one.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, in his essay "O starom i novom" (On the Old and the New), which represents one of the earliest testimonies of the Slavophile movement, published in 1839, Khomiakov pointed out that even though the doctrinal purity of Christian faith was preserved in Byzantium,

30 See Przemysław Marciniak and Dion C. Smythe, "Introduction," in their edited volume *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

31 Dimitri Obolensky, "Modern Russian Attitudes to Byzantium," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 15 (1966): 64.

32 Alexei Khomiakov, "Golos greka v zashchitu Vizantii," in Alexei Khomiakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. III, Moscow: Universitetskaya tipografiya, 1900), 366, as cited in Alexander A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 324–1453*, vol. I (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 33.

33 Aleksei Khomiakov, "Zapiski o vsemirnoi istorii, part III," in Alexei Khomiakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. VII (Moscow: Universitetskaya tipografiya, 1906), 50.

the social implications of the evangelical doctrine scarcely applied.<sup>34</sup> As abbé Pierre Barron noted, Khomiakov was convinced that Byzantium received from ancient Rome both the worship of the State and absolutism as an ideal way of governance.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Nikolai Berdiaev's remarks on the perception of Byzantium by the Slavophiles movement are eminently enlightening. The religious philosopher observes that one of the main Slavophile principles is the distinction between Russian and the Byzantine Orthodoxy. Although the Eastern Orthodox faith was received by the Russian people through Byzantine missionaries, there are, however, several particular features belonging particularly to the so-called "Russian soul":

Mais l'âme russe est infiniment distincte de l'âme byzantine : dans l'âme russe il n'y a pas la malignité byzantine, l'obséquiosité byzantine devant les puissants, la culte de l'étatisme, la scolastique, la tristesse byzantine, la cruauté et la morosité byzantines<sup>36</sup>

As one can readily perceive, the adjective *Byzantine* also carries for Slavophiles and partially for Berdyaev negative and pejorative connotations. As has been shown, Westernizers tended to criticize the Byzantine heritage for the regress and the separation of Russia from other Western European nations. Slavophiles, on the contrary, adopted a different approach. They suggested that the grain of Christian faith planted by the Byzantines in the fertile Russian soil was able to bear the unique fruit of Christian principles. In this way, the democratic spirit, the thirst for catholicity (*sobornost*) or the predominance of the unity of love over the unity of authority had shaped Russian Orthodoxy as the purest form of Christianity.

## 6. Interpreting Prince Vladimir's Conversion: from Soloviev to Florovsky

Supposing one accepts that the debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers in the middle of the nineteenth century established the framework for shedding

34 Aleksei Khomiakov, "O starom i novom" , in Alexei Khomiakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol III (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografia, 1900), 23.

35 Pierre Barron, *Un théologien laïc orthodoxe russe au XIXe siècle Alexis Stépanovitch Khomiakov (1804–1860): son ecclésiologie—exposé et critique*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 127 (Rome: Pontificum Istitutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1940), 128.

36 Nicolas Berdiaev, *Khomiakov* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1988), 16.

light on the concepts expressed in Bulgakov's aforementioned essay, then the immediate and undoubted influence on Fr. Sergius should be sought in Vladimir Soloviev. It is not only the temporal proximity between the two religious thinkers but rather their content, argumentation, and the pro-Roman Catholic disposition that justify such a remark. In other words, one should legitimately suggest whether Bulgakov wrote this essay in the spirit of Soloviev. In his essay "Byzantium and Russia," published in 1896, Vladimir Soloviev offers an idealized description of Vladimir's conversion to the Christian faith.<sup>37</sup> The Russian philosopher identifies the radical change in the mentality of the Kievan prince in the way the latter took a stand against the practice of the death penalty. Vladimir's Christian consciousness prevented him from embracing the death penalty for felons and criminals. Moreover, Soloviev ingeniously contrasted the behavior of the Russian ruler with the exhortations expressed by the Byzantine clergy in favor of the execution of convicted felons.

It is worth noting, at this point, a couple of interesting observations regarding Soloviev's positions. First, the uncritical adoption of hagiographical motives concerning Vladimir's conversion and subsequently his idealized behavior as a Christian ruler, as shaped and transmitted in medieval chronicles. It remains extraordinarily surprising that Soloviev challenges neither the credibility of the written sources nor the motives of their writers as one might expect of a well-educated Russian scholar of his caliber in the nineteenth century. Secondly, he underestimates, implicitly though quite clearly, the qualitative value of Byzantine Christianity. According to his view, the Byzantine bishops sent to Kiev were not able to influence with their preaching the behavior of Vladimir and infuse him with the moral doctrines of the gospel.

A key aspect of Soloviev's criticism of Byzantium was the question of capital punishment. According to him, a Christian or Christianized society that has accepted the redemptive message of the gospel, preaching the values of forgiveness and reconciliation, could abandon the punitive and disgraceful penalty of death for even the worst criminals. Soloviev's sensitivity in this respect was determined by his Christian identity and his personal experience. In 1881, during a public lecture, he proposed granting mercy to Tsar Alexander II's assassins. Soloviev's sincere, honest but naive conviction concerning the need for complete Christian forgiveness marked the end of his professorship and led

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37 Vladimir Soloviev, "Vyzantinizm i rossia," *Vestnike evropi* 31 (1896): 342–59, 787–808. I base my following remarks on Chapter III of Soloviev's essay.



him to exile in Saint Petersburg.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is quite evident that his strict and unequivocal commitment to Christian principles was not without consequences for his own life and his professional and spiritual advancement too. This may explain Soloviev's particular emphasis on the rejection of the death penalty while assessing the degree of authenticity and integrity of Christian principles in Byzantium.

A different approach in this respect was formulated by Fr. Georges Florovsky in his now monumental work *The Ways of Russian Theology*.<sup>39</sup> The prominent theologian stresses that the conversion of Kievan Rus' to Christianity was more of a dynamic operation than a static action that took place in a fixed moment, namely at Prince Vladimir's baptism. Extending his thought on the influences upon a pre-Vladimirian diffusion of Christianity in Rus', Florovsky suggests a double non-Byzantine impact; the Bulgaria of Tsar Symeon on the one hand and the kingdom of Great Moravia on the other. Thus, he continues, the most important and decisive Byzantine influence upon the medieval kingdom of Rus' was indirect, coming through the missionary activity of the brothers Cyril and Methodius. Tellingly, Florovsky referred, with a certain degree of probability, to a competitive conflict in ancient Kiev between impacts and elements emanating from the Bulgarian Christianity and others derived directly from the Byzantine realm,<sup>40</sup>

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38 On these events, see Manon de Courten, "The Prophet Intervenes: Solov'ëv's Lectures after the Murder of Tsar Alexandrer II," in *Vladimir Solov'ëv: Reconciler and Polemicist*, ed. Wil van den Bercken, Manon de Courten, and Evert van der Zweerde (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 297–312. As Paul Valliere notes, these events marked a turning point in Soloviev's intellectual paths, as it was then that he began to reassess the concept of theocracy and turn to the West and the Roman Catholic Church with a positive perspective. See, Paul Valliere, "Vladimir Soloviev: Faith, philosophy, and law" in *Law and The Christian Tradition in Modern Russian*, ed. Paul Valliere—Randall A. Poole (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 200–01.

39 This work first appeared in Russian as *Puti russkogo bogoslovia*, Paris: YMCA Press 1937. Several decades later, a second revised edition was published in two volumes in English translation; see *The Ways of Russian Theology*, trans. Robert L. Nichols, ed. Richard S. Haugh (Belmont Mass: Nordland Publishing 1978 and 1987 respectively). On this work, see the chapter "Georgii Florovkyi and The Ways of Russian Theology" by Kåre Johan Mjør in his book *Reformulating Russia: The Cultural and Intellectual Historiography of Russian First-Wave Émigré Writers* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 153–201. Cf. also Paul Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russians Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159–71.

40 Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, vol. I, 5.

For medieval Kievan Rus', receiving Christianity was thus not a one-dimensional procedure that was directly and exclusively connected to the Byzantine Christian tradition. Moreover, Christianization did not result in a severance of Kiev from the rest of the European context, as Soloviev suggested and Bulgakov later faithfully repeated in a rather unhistorical manner. Besides, Florovsky pointed out that during the tenth century, Byzantium was the only state possessing a genuine spiritual and intellectual culture within the whole "European" family.<sup>41</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Bulgakov's anti-Byzantine attitude in his essay "By the Walls of Cherson" seems to depend to a high degree on the concept of his great master, Vladimir Soloviev. Nevertheless, Bulgakov's approach is not based on particular or external aspects of Byzantine civilization such as the death penalty or the institution of slavery. Contrary to Soloviev, the Russian thinker attempts to reconsider the spiritual history of the Russian Church and the Russian people, highlighting that the current crisis of Russian culture has its roots in the origins of its Christian existence. For this reason, he placed the narrative in the geographical context of the Crimean Peninsula. It was in Cherson that the conversion of Prince Vladimir to Christianity took place. Bulgakov referred in this respect to the spiritual and historical birth of the Russian Church, which was grafted into the Universal Church, given that the definitive schism between Western and Eastern Christianity had yet to occur.

Two factors appear to determine the dispraise of the Byzantine heritage to the thought of both religious philosophers: the prejudices towards Byzantium and its legacy inherited by the intellectual processes of the Enlightenment and an idealized view of the Russian nation in accordance with the principles of nineteenth-century Romanticism. The appropriation of Byzantine tradition by the Imperial Russian propaganda for secular purposes also played an essential role in this respect. However, needless to underline, these attitudes reflect the intellectual tendencies of the period in which they were produced. After the renaissance of Byzantine studies in the course of the twentieth century, shedding more light on Byzantine–Russian relations in a more historical–critical approach—it might suffice to mention the names of John Meyendorff, Dimitri Obolenski or Alexander Soloviev in this regard—one can easily discern the one-sided and unhistorical feature of these anti-Byzantine tendencies.

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41 Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, vol. I., 2.