



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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Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Politics of Personhood

Nathaniel Wood

Among the many enduring aspects of Sergii Bulgakov's theology, one of the most important is his integration of the doctrine of *theosis* with political theology. There has always been at least an implicit connection between the two within Orthodoxy, as in the various formulations of church–state *symphonia*, with their focus on formal institutional cooperation between church and empire, Bulgakov stands out as one of the first Orthodox theologians—following on the heels of Vladimir Soloviev—to reflect in more explicit terms on how an Orthodox logic of deification might provide guiding principles for Christian political action in changing modern contexts, including democracy. Although Bulgakov was interested in church–state relations and took various positions on the issue throughout his career,¹ the real heart of his political theology, what gives it continued relevance, is the ethical task standing behind it: namely, to provide theoretical grounding and material protection for the dignity and freedom of the human person.

Bulgakov stands on the front end of the broad stream of “personalist” thought prominent in Orthodox theology of the 20th century. One of the characteristic moves of Orthodox personalists has been to posit an essential link between personhood and *theosis*. Not only does personhood become the main category through which deification is understood, but one of the main roles of *theosis* is to give an ontological foundation for the absolute value of the singular person—the person's irreducible uniqueness, irreplaceability, and freedom from subordination to some impersonal order or whole—while also differentiating the person, *ek*-statically oriented towards communion, from the

1 On the historical development of his understanding of theocracy, monarchy, and democracy, see Regula M. Zwahlen, “Sergii Bulgakov's Reinvention of Theocracy for a Democratic Age,” *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2020), 175–94.

self-enclosed individual. These are themes that are most popularly associated with the work of John Zizioulas; yet for Bulgakov, despite the vast differences between his Sophiology and the neo-patristic theology of personalists like Zizioulas, the turn to *theosis* was driven by a similar commitment to personal freedom and irreducibility. Whereas Zizioulas says little about the *politics* of personhood (differing sharply in this regard from his fellow Greek personalist Christos Yannaras²), Bulgakov's concern for the person is inseparable from his involvement in the political struggles of his time. In offering a theoretical defense of the person rooted in *theosis*, Bulgakov intended to justify the political and economic defense of human dignity against attacks from both right and left, while also pointing to the more perfect fulfillment of personhood beyond the sphere of worldly politics, in divine-human communion. Thus, his philosophical embrace of *theosis* affirmed this seemingly otherworldly doctrine into the basis of a politics of personal flourishing. Moreover, insofar as deification is accomplished in the person of Christ incarnate, the God-Man, both *theosis* and its politics have an essentially Chalcedonian shape; the politics of *theosis* is a Chalcedonian politics of personhood. This political-theological linking of personhood and *theosis* opens possibilities for Orthodox politics beyond tired reiterations of *symphonia*, possibilities that can inform Christian approaches to liberal democracy. This chapter will briefly examine some of the contours of a Bulgakovian political theology with focus on personhood and Chalcedonian Christology in relation to liberalism.

Progress, Personhood, and Theosis

Bulgakov's personalist impulses preceded his reembrace of Orthodoxy and the start of his theological career, being a catalyst for his transition away from his early Marxism. Like many others at the time, Bulgakov approached the question of personhood in connection to theories of progress, reiterating, with more philosophical precision, aspects of the critiques that had been offered half a century earlier by Russian Westernizers like Alexander Herzen.³ In his contribution to the 1902 volume *Problems of Idealism*, for instance, he condemns the impersonalism of positivist theories of progress and argues instead for a model

2 A helpful short summary of Yannaras's political theology is Jonathan Cole, "Personhood, Relational Ontology, and the Trinitarian Politics of Eastern Orthodox Thinker Christos Yannaras," *Political Theology* 34 (2017): 1–14.

3 Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore and The Russian People and Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

of progress centered on the human person: the true aim of progress must be the “creation of the conditions for the free development of the person,” which he considers morally axiomatic.⁴ Soon, Bulgakov would begin to affirm this commitment in explicitly Christian terms, as in his essay “An Urgent Task,” written at the time of the 1905 revolution, which describes the free development of persons as the “absolute ideal” of Christian politics. This was to be the guiding principle of his Union of Christian Politics, to be implemented in the political and economic liberation of the person from Russia’s “centralist, autocratic despotism” through a combination of democratic self-government, civil rights, and socialist economics.⁵

Bulgakov’s turn to *theosis* would grow out of this commitment to the liberation of the person, motivated, in part, by his disillusionment with positivism. Deification would make up for what he considered lacking in positivist ideas of progress: namely, a metaphysics of personhood. Describing his disenchantment with Marxism in 1906, he cites the failure of positivism to provide an ontological basis for the person as “single, irreplaceable, and absolutely unique.” Positivism suffers from a “theoretical disregard for the person,” a refusal to confront the singular person in his or her concreteness; indeed, the “very problem of personhood is altogether absent” from positivism,⁷ which instead relies on a crude, deterministic “sociologism” that dissolves the concrete person into “humanity” as an abstract collective, reducing him or her to little more than a “ripple on the wave of society.”⁸ In other words, positivism is the objectification of the person. Thus, while Bulgakov could praise positivist socialists for their “faithful and courageous defense of oppressed people, [and of] the laboring classes,”⁹ he parted company from them on the deeper meaning of liberation.

4 Sergei Bulgakov, “Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress,” in *Problems of Idealism*, ed. Pavel Novgorodtsev, English edition trans. and ed. by Randall A. Poole (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 104.

5 Sergei Bulgakov, “An Urgent Task,” in *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890–1924*, eds. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

6 Sergei Bulgakov, *Karl Marx as a Religious Type: His Relation to the Religion of Anthropotheism of L. Feuerbach*, trans. Luba Barna, ed. Virgil R. Lang (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland Publishing, 1979), 51.

7 Sergij Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma)*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020).

8 Sergii Bulgakov, “The Soul of Socialism,” in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 259.

9 Bulgakov, “Urgent Task,” 138.

Certainly, he thought that many of the social reforms they advocated were necessary for creating the conditions of personal development: e. g., he argues that the “battle against poverty,” against exploitation, etc., “is a battle for the rights of the human spirit.”¹⁰ However, positivism itself could not account for that spirit, having instead a one-sided focus on external improvement of social conditions. At its worst, Bulgakov feared, positivism ends up *instrumentalizing* the person, subordinating personhood to the development of the collectivized “humanity” awaiting perfection in the future. Such is his basic critique of progress: cast in positivist terms, it makes an idol out of a dead logical abstraction, which demands the sacrifice of living persons.¹¹

Insofar as it resisted this objectification and instrumentalization of the singular person, Bulgakov’s political theology is, in a broad sense, a “liberalizing” one. The socialist impulse had to be coupled with the defense of what might be called various “rights of personality,” including broadly liberal rights such as freedom of speech, of conscience, of association, and so forth—all crucial for free personal development but which the positivists, in their neglect of personhood, tended to ignore or treat only as means to an end, and thus subject to restriction. However, Bulgakov’s political theology, even in its most liberal moments, is by no means liberal without qualification. For one thing, Bulgakov’s “person” is not the abstract individual subject often associated with liberalism, nor are his rights of personality based in subjective self-assertion. If Bulgakov’s personalism is on the one hand “liberalizing,” it simultaneously challenges at least certain iterations of liberal theory.

If politics is about the free development of the person, this raises the metaphysical question: towards *what* is the person developing? Bulgakov would turn to *theosis* for the answer, mainly under Soloviev’s influence. Soloviev had also devoted much of his intellectual output to formulating a metaphysics and a political theology centered on the “absolute significance of human personality,”¹² which he grounded in the person’s “capacity for deification.”¹³ Bulgakov carried forward the fundamentals of that project, embracing deification as the basis for the rights of the person. However, as for Soloviev, his turn to *theosis* is

10 Sergii Bulgakov, “The Economic Ideal,” in Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 43.

11 Bulgakov, “Basic Problems.”

12 Vladimir Soloviev, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. Nathalie Duddington, ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 211.

13 Vladimir Soloviev, “A Note in Defense of Dostoevsky against the Charge of a ‘New’ Christianity,” in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics by V. S. Soloviev*, trans. and ed. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 202.

contrasted explicitly with the immanent *self-deification* of humanity, the seizing of a false absoluteness without reference to God—false because, enclosed within itself, humanity remains trapped in conditional, transitory existence.¹⁴ One form of this “mangodhood” is the Feuerbachian type, the “man-god of the deified predicate, human nature,” the idolatrous “humanity” mentioned above. But there is also the mangodhood of the self-enclosed individual subject, an error he associates, in its preeminent philosophical expression, with Fichte.¹⁵ This latter is the “Luciferian” man-god, the closed self-consciousness that absorbs the non-self into itself as its property, leaving no space for encounter with another *I*, and thus no *we*—a “windowless” self, “impenetrably locked,” like Leibniz’s monad.¹⁶ In ethical-religious terms, this is the sin of individual egoism, the refusal of communion, which Khomiakov had condemned in his writings on ecclesial *sobornost*,¹⁷ and which Soloviev had denounced in his critique of self-deification.¹⁸ The path of egoism ends in the same place as positivist sociology: in the *objectification* of the (other) person, in the transformation of the (other) person into an instrument of self-realization. In this way, the two sides of mangodhood collude with each other towards the debasement, the de-personalization, of the human being.

Theosis, the real self-transcendence of humanity, the real union of the human and the divine, is Bulgakov’s way past these two faces of the man-god and the answer to the question “towards what is the person developing?” Personal development leads human persons outside themselves; its end is none other than participation in the divine *we*, the triune communion of divine persons, and the realization of a creaturely communion in the divine likeness (the church in its cosmic significance). Moreover, as with Soloviev, Bulgakov understands that such personhood has been realized definitively within humanity in the incarnate God-Man, the one who harmonizes the human and divine wills

14 Vladimir Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine-Humanity*, trans. Peter Zouboff, revised by Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995), 18.

15 See the “Excursus on Fichte” in Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, 207–36. The quoted text is from page 233.

16 Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, 230. The theme of the Luciferian, empty ego reappears, in a more explicitly theological key, in Bulgakov’s various discussions of Satan throughout *Jacob’s Ladder: On Angels*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010).

17 See, among others, the collected texts of Khomiakov in *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim and Robert Bird (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998).

18 E. g., throughout *Lectures on Divine-Humanity*.

and into whose deified body all are called. *Theosis* thus gives a definite Christological shape to social progress: its goal is neither abstract “humanity” nor empty individuality, but the specific person of Christ. Thus, at least as early as 1905, Bulgakov had begun to speak of historical progress as a “process of the God-Man” and to tie political theology to Chalcedonian Christology.¹⁹ History is the progressive realization, in Christ, of the divine *we* in creation—that is to say, of deification.

It is here that possible tensions start to appear between Bulgakov’s politics of the person and political liberalism, since the Christological shape of personal development cannot fit within the liberal individualist framework. Deification has a social dimension, because the God who has promised to “be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) is tri-hypostatic. The image of the tri-hypostatic God is in humanity “only to the extent that humanity’s human, creaturely nature can contain it,” Bulgakov argues in *The Tragedy of Philosophy*. Because human persons are finite and mono-hypostatic, they can be an image of God’s tri-unity only by going outside of themselves “in the plural infinity of society, in the human *we*.” Therefore, the tri-hypostatic God “furnishes the Archetype not only of the nature of an individual human being, but also of human community.”²⁰ Elsewhere Bulgakov articulates a similar idea in relation to the notion of All-Unity he had adopted from Soloviev, which is a projection of Khomiakov’s idea of ecclesial *sobornost’* in the world’s foundation in God. All-Unity frames the ground of the created order as a cosmic harmony-in-diversity the nature of which is kenotic love. Drawing on Maximus the Confessor’s theology of the divine prototypes,²¹ Bulgakov posits a unique *logos* for every creature preexisting within the content that is “eternally spoken by the Logos in the depths of Divinity”; the content of creation is an extra-divine repetition of the content of the Father’s Word. Eternally differentiated within the Word, the prototypes exist, not in a state of exclusiveness or discord, but in the ontological peace of an eternally-actualized society of love, what Bulgakov calls a “universal cosmic *sobornost*.”²² Again, however, this likeness to the divine can exist only insofar as the created world can embody it. In the act of creation, the world of the divine prototypes enters the milieu of becoming, and the *sobornost’* of being is

19 Bulgakov, “Urgent Task,” 142.

20 Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, 152–53.

21 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 126. In fn 6 on this page, Bulgakov suggests that Maximus’s doctrine of the *logoi* anticipated his own thought, that it was “essentially a sophiology.”

22 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 104.

“potentialized” insofar as creatures are spatially and temporally divided along the lines of their finitude, so that what is eternally actual in the Word must be *actualized* in and through this division, as the God “inwardly overcomes” creaturely separateness by enticing creatures towards the sacrifice of kenotic love. Again, deification, as the realization of the divine likeness in the world, is accomplished through the building of community.

Within this framework, “sin” becomes synonymous with egoism, with the isolated positing of the self outside of communion with other selves, binding the creature to its finite separateness. “It can be said that the whole life of that which is evil in the world is built according to the categories of the *I*’s self-love, an *I* rent asunder from the *we* and knowing the *thou* only as its own mirror.”²³ As other persons harden in my consciousness into alien objects, into hostile threats to my individual selfhood, egoism fractures the empirical reality of creation along the lines of difference, transforming difference into division and discord, veiling creation’s foundation in sobornal peace with the illusory primacy of universal conflict. Therefore, if personal development is understood as progress towards Christ and the perfect personality that Christ has realized in creation, then it entails an ascetic renunciation of egoistic attachment to one’s self-enclosed, self-sufficient individuality to grow towards an ever-deepening communion with the world. To perfect *oneself* is to perfect society, to regenerate it in the likeness of the Christological *sobornost*’ of all things.

Personhood, Liberal Democracy, and the Church

This way of linking personhood to *theosis*, hence to communion, has significant implications for how one might think theologically about liberal democracy. Deification is a social phenomenon; the perfection of the person is the perfection of relations between persons. It is no surprise, then, that Bulgakov often denounces the “atomization of society,” since social atomism runs counter to the whole vision of personal development he defends.²⁴ Any Bulgakovian politics of personhood would need some response to the problem of atomism; the question is whether liberalism is equipped to provide one. At the *theoretical* level, it is not clear that it is so equipped, even if, at the level of practice, liberalism has made tremendous strides in securing many of those rights of personality Bulgakov had desired for the Russian people (freedom of conscience, speech, and so forth). In his critique of secular socialism, Bulgakov challenged

23 Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, 151–52.

24 Bulgakov, “Soul of Socialism,” 261.

not so much the implementation of socialist economic policy but rather socialism's "soul," its attempt to pass itself off as a comprehensive account of human nature and social relations, becoming a rival pseudo-theology.²⁵ Contemporary critics of liberalism, such as John Milbank, have likewise depicted the "soul" of liberalism as that of a rival (heretical) theology.²⁶

Bulgakov would certainly share this wariness of liberal democracy's threat of becoming a pseudo-church, with the false *sobornost'* of social contract. To the extent that liberal theory tends to treat atomism and self-interest (and, in the Hobbesian strain, universal conflict) not as sin but as the natural condition of humanity, and to the extent that it frames rights within a framework of external contract between these fundamentally separate and self-interested individuals, liberalism risks *reinforcing* the sin of egoism, and the sphere of personal freedom it secures risks cultivating a freedom as the empty satisfaction of private desire. Liberalism might at once have both done a great deal to liberate human persons from external oppression *and*, by not directing the development of personal freedom towards its proper end in divine-human communion, created new opportunities for spiritual bondage.

What this suggests is that the liberal democratic community, at the level of its own self-understanding, is insufficient for fostering the sort of personal development foundational to Bulgakov's Christian politics. There is, at the very least, a tension between them, and the liberal principles of individual freedom and rights would need a theological corrective and supplement. The true idea of personal freedom is to be found not in liberal contractual society but in a different kind of community: the church. Bulgakov came to see the church as the authentic basis of social development fairly early in his evolution beyond Marxism. In "An Urgent Task," for instance, immediately after calling on Christians to cooperate with secular liberation movements, he proclaims that the true idea of personal freedom is not found in democratic or socialist principles but in "the ideals of anarchic communism we find in the first Christian communes," that is, the *sobornost'* of the church.²⁷ The church, in a sense, *is* the deification of the person, the creaturely likeness of divine triunity, as a society organized not around the contractual preservation of egoistic self-interest but its free renunciation in sobornal love. Only here does human personality reach

25 This is Bulgakov's critique in "The Soul of Socialism."

26 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006); also John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

27 Bulgakov, "Urgent Task," 158.

the height of its development, become filled with absolute content, and evade the grasp of non-being, as an irreplaceable and inextinguishable member of the whole. For this reason, Bulgakov's politics of personhood calls for a distinctly *ecclesial* social theory, a theory of the church as the foundation and goal of every human social impulse (however distorted by sin), what he calls a "Christian sociology." In Bulgakov's view, "it is only the Church that possesses the principle of true social order, in which the personal and the collective, freedom and social service can be given equal weight and unified harmoniously. It is itself this very principle—living *sobornost*."²⁸

Thus, Bulgakov, while rejecting the clerical domination of the state by the institutional church, also rejects a strict secularist separation between the ecclesial and the political. Instead, he advocates for a "Christianizing" or "chur-ching" of society, an extension of the church's sobornal principles into every nook and cranny of the social order.²⁹ Social progress involves moving beyond mere liberal rights to the transformation of the social and political spheres in the direction of freedom-as-love. "Social life is to be organized according to the postulates of Christian love," he argues. "We must seek for a state of things in which the Church may penetrate as with inward power the whole of human life."³⁰ The final endpoint of progress, he argues, is that the secular state and society will be "overcome and dissolved in ecclesial life."³¹

Chalcedon and Politics

All this is to say that the logic of a Bulgakovian political theology moves from a commitment to the absolute value of the human person, through deification, to ecclesiology—and finally arrives at the theoretical question of church–state relations. If secular society, as he suggests, is destined to be dissolved into ecclesial society, it raises the question of how the Christian community should relate, in the sphere of political action, to the liberal order here and now. Here it is crucial to turn back to Chalcedonian Christology, which, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere, becomes in a Bulgakovian key (as earlier in a Solovievian) a framework for thinking about the relationship between the *ecclesia* and

28 Bulgakov, "Soul of Socialism," 264.

29 *Ibid.*, 256.

30 Sergii Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology," in Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 282.

31 Bulgakov, "Soul of Socialism," 264.

liberal politics.³² In short, if deification is understood to be a collective incarnation of Christ's personality in and as the communion of created beings, then the doctrine of incarnation offers a model for the "churching" of secular society. The political task of "churching," of "sobornizing," of extending the incarnation into society, should be treated as a continuation of a single incarnational process, a single process of free cooperation between the human and the divine, begun in Mary's womb. Christian politics carries forward Christ's own work of deifying his own particular human nature, his own victory over the Luciferian temptation of egoism. If this is the case, then the manner by which the church overcomes the anti-sobornal forces of the secular order should correspond to the manner in which Christ assumed the humanity of a man from Nazareth, conformed it to his divine personality, and made it into an agent of divine activity. It is chiefly in this sense that Bulgakov's politics of personhood, as a politics of *theosis*, culminates in a *Chalcedonian* politics—or, as Bulgakov might say, a *neo-Chalcedonian* politics, one that attends seriously to the dynamic interplay between the divine and the human within Christ's personal consciousness.³³

Bulgakov's incarnational Christology offers an important qualification to Vladimir Lossky's statement that Christ's human nature "is a deified nature that is permeated by the divine from the moment of the Incarnation."³⁴ While of course affirming the divinity of the Christ child, Bulgakov views the incarnation not as something fully accomplished in a single moment, like conception or birth, but as a "ceaselessly continuing process of the attainment of the divine in the human and the human in light of the divine," carried out across Christ's whole earthly life. Building on Soloviev's insight that Christ's *kenosis* of divinity makes possible an *attainment* of that divinity in which his humanity, through its own *kenosis* of egoism, freely cooperates, Bulgakov writes that the Son of God "comes down from heaven' and abandons, as it were, the divine life. His

32 Nathaniel Wood, "I Have Overcome the World': The Church, the Liberal State, and Christ's Two Natures in the Russian Politics of *Theosis*," in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*, ed. George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

33 For Bulgakov's embrace of the term "neo-Chalcedonian," see, e. g., Constantin Andronikof, "Afterword: Philosophy versus Theology in the Works of Father Sergius Bulgakov (with Particular Reference to the Eucharistic Writings)," in *The Holy Grail and the Eucharist*, ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson, N. Y.: Lindisfarne, 1997), 143.

34 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (Crestwood, N. Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 146.

divine nature retains only the potential of glory, which must be actualized anew.”³⁵ It is actualized “measure to measure” from the manger to the cross.³⁶

In other words, the incarnation is accomplished jointly with Christ's ascetic struggle to deify his humanity. Christ's divinity is now expressed—and is now known even in Christ's own personal self-consciousness—through his humanity. Once again, the capacity of the creature to receive and reveal the divine comes into play in Bulgakov's theology; the accomplishment of the incarnation depends on the humanity's power to accept divinity into itself without destroying itself, the power to reveal divinity in and as the human. “The divine-humanity consists precisely in such a *correlativeness* of the divine and the human,” Bulgakov writes; the divine does not “exceed” human capacity.³⁷ In the process of incarnation, Christ “actualizes His divinity for Himself only in inseparable union with the human nature, *as a function of [his humanity's] receptivity*,” which is to say, “only to the extent of the deification of His humanity.”³⁸

The incarnation, then, is a display of divine *restraint* as much as one of divine power—or rather, power through restraint, the power to redeem humanity, to mend the fractures of egoism, from within humanity's own freedom. What does this mean for political theology? In the first place, as the fountainhead of Christian politics, this Chalcedonian “inward overcoming” of egoism would rule out any sort of Eutychian political theology in which the church would simply swallow up the secular, dominating it. This is why Bulgakov would come to realize that the church in the modern world should no longer try to impose its will on the state or society externally or from above, as in theocracies of old, but— here Bulgakov is pushing forward Soloviev's notion of “free theocracy”—should influence society from within, “in a democratic way.”³⁹ Understood in a Chalcedonian key, a Christian politics that strives to “church” a liberal democratic society would not do so in a way that violently exceeds that society's receptivity to ecclesial *sobornost'*. Instead, practicing kenotic restraint, even a Christ-like submersion within the limits of limit democracy, the church would strive to deify democracy from within, nudging it gradually towards clearer expressions of sobornicity. This would mean that, instead of a stance of rejection, the Bulgakovian position is more one of *ambivalence*. It recognizes

35 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 224.

36 *Ibid.*, 229.

37 *Ibid.*, 251.

38 *Ibid.*, 256.

39 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, trans. Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 163.

the dual character of liberalism as, on the one hand, an external safeguard of the sphere of personal freedom and dignity but also, on the other hand, as a potential rival pseudo-church offering its own competing vision of freedom and dignity that misdirects the development of persons away from their proper end. The Chalcedonian response to this tension, it seems, is that of creative dialogue, not just with liberalism but also within it—that is, developing the liberal tradition in more authentically Christian directions, working to further unfold liberalism’s commitment to freedom and dignity while also challenging the aspirations to redefine the human being and the impulses towards atomization. It is to imagine possibilities for the liberal order one inhabits to be reformed, little by little, in ways that recognize human persons as more than empty and aimless individuals, and in ways that more fully accept the responsibilities of neighbor-love, making this human “flesh” of society more receptive to the divine influence that is drawing creation towards universal *sobornost’*—while recognizing that *sobornost’* itself cannot be implemented through the force of coercive law, but only through the freedom of interpersonal bonds of affection.

Conclusion

Bulgakov thus pointed to potential new paths for Orthodox political theology: political theology centered on the dignity of the human person growing towards sobornal love, and on the incarnational union of the divine and human that makes such growth possible. The task falls to others to follow those paths. The greatest progress towards the sort of Christian engagement with liberalism Bulgakov’s theology supports has been made, I suggest, by his contemporary, and fellow heir of Soloviev, S. L. Frank. It is appropriate to end with the Johannine Christological metaphor that structures much of Frank’s politics, and which also describes Bulgakov’s own: light shining in darkness. The ambivalence of liberal democracy is this: that however much it is darkened by self-interest and egoism, it “can and must receive the rays of Christ’s truth” and be illuminated by the light of that ecclesial love in which human personality is deified. Yet within history, liberal society, “like the moon, can shine only with a dim, reflected light, can [...] only indirectly reflect the influence” of divine light.⁴⁰ Liberal society will never be the church, and human persons cannot find deification in it; but it can protect and promote the divine significance of the person to greater or lesser degrees. The summons of Bulgakov’s political

40 S. L. Frank, *The Light Shines in Darkness: An Essay in Christian Ethics and Social Philosophy*, trans. Boris Jakim (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989), 221.

theology is to take up this personalist task in response to the distortions and degradations of personhood in our time.

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