



Barbara Hallensleben,
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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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Rethinking the Language of Economics as a Systematic Christian Response to Economic and Ecological Crises in the Thought of Sergii Bulgakov

Tikhon Vasilyev

Greta Thunberg, in her speech at the United Nations in 2019, voiced the problems that have worried humanity for over a decade. Thinkers of Greta's parents' and grandparents' generation had already called on politicians and economists to change the existing system of the world economy—not only unfair in the distribution of wealth, but also causing serious environmental crises for the entirety of the planet.

In my paper, I would like to analyse Bulgakov's sophiological interpretation of the economy and compare it with how the problems of economics and ecology were approached by some later thinkers. To do this, I first need to resolve the issue of methodology: how one can read Bulgakov's sophiology in general and his economic theology in particular. Secondly, after making necessary methodological remarks I will focus on the sophianic interpretation of economics by Bulgakov. Thirdly and finally, I will turn to the questions raised by economists, philosophers, sociologists, and theologians dealing with the global ecological and economic crisis, relating their thought to the vision of Bulgakov.

A great number of papers dedicated to the analysis of Bulgakov's sociological and economic views have been published recently in Russian.¹ However,

1 Natalia Makasheva, 'Sergei Bulgakov: towards Christian political economy,' *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'* = Social Sciences and Modernity 3 (1994): 27–36; N. Matveeva, S. N. Bulgakov as a sociologist. *Analysis of social problems, ideas and processes* (Moscow: Infra-M, 2018); G. Kovaleva, 'Ideas of spirituality in the philosophy of cosmism S. N. Bulgakov,' *Voprosy kul'turologi* = Questions of Cultural Studies 2 (2013): 33–37; D. Stozhko, K. Stozhko, 'The Political Economy of S. N. Bulgakov (to the 150th anniversary of his birth),' *Ekonomicheskaya istoriya* = Russian Journal of Economic History 17:2 (2021): 178–90; M. Eloyan, S. N. Bulgakov: *the sophiology and sophianity of economy* (Moscow: Moscow State University, 2005); see also Barbara Hallensleben,

apart from the excellent book by Rowan Williams² and the Introduction to the English translation of the *Philosophy of Economy* by Catherine Evtukhov,³ one can hardly think of any other recent publications dealing with this aspect of Bulgakov's heritage in English. This article represents an attempt at least partially to fill this gap.

1. Bulgakov's Theological Metalanguage

It is impossible to make sense of Bulgakov's sophiology without understanding what kind of logic lies behind it. That is why it is necessary to consider the question of methodology before we approach the subject of Bulgakov's economic theology, which is in fact an incarnation of his sophiology. In this section I argue that sophiology is Bulgakov's theological 'metalanguage,' which he applied to different spheres of theology as well as to economics.

One of the criteria we can use to define a new theological language is the introduction of a new discourse, in other words when a theological talk is appropriated in a non-theological discourse but with an ultimate theological purpose.⁴ This can be said about Bulgakov's economic theology.

The terms 'performance' and 'performative' come from analytic philosophy or, to be more precise, from J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts. Russian philosopher Upravitelev applies them to his analysis of the works of Bulgakov. A performative utterance (for instance, 'this meeting is now adjourned') does not describe reality as do other utterances but is an action or a speech act. It is not a description but the creation of reality. A performative utterance enforces the recipient; it causes him or her to enter the reality created by the utterance. It forms the subject of its existence. Upravitelev argues that Bulgakov's deliberations on the economy or religion become the method constructing the

Regula M. Zwahlen, *Sergij Bulgakovs Philosophie der Wirtschaft im interdisziplinären Gespräch* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2014) with contributions from Nataliia Makasheva, Hans G. Nutzinger, Matthias Mayer, Karen Horn, Anne Reichold, Lisa Herzog, Guido Vergauwen, Josephien van Kessel, Gerhard Schwarz und Alexander Lorch.

- 2 Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).
- 3 Catherine Evtuhov, 'Introduction' in Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* (2000).
- 4 See for example Florenskii's mathematical appendix in his *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* and Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, where, in his own words, philosophy is used for theological purposes.

subject of economics or religious action.⁵ Bulgakov's texts are not descriptive or explanatory. They establish an ideal; they set a goal and call for change and action. The reality described in Bulgakov's texts is created through the reading of those texts, which are both prescriptive and performative.

Having stated our definition of a theological language and having pointed out the performative function of Bulgakov's texts, we are able to put forward our own argument concerning the understanding of Sophia as a metalanguage in Bulgakov's theology. For the purposes of this paper, I define theological metalanguage as a new and idiosyncratic language introduced by the author. It relies on emerging terms whose meaning is not universally accepted. Initially, this new language is meaningful only to the author, but may later be appropriated by the following generations, and its terms contribute to the set of established ones.⁶

The performative function of sophiology can be seen as the distinctive feature of the metalanguage of Sophia. Thus, Bulgakov's economic theology is performative in its essence.

Indeed, Bulgakov writes concerning the essence of sophiology, and we can see here a clear statement of its performative function:

The real point at issue [that is, of sophiology] is that of the Christian vocation as it is related to the very nature of Christianity; it is the problem of a dogmatic *metanoia*, nothing less than a change and a renewal of human hearts.⁷

Bulgakov maintains: "I admit and consider obligatory for my theology all the doctrines of the Church."⁸ And elsewhere: "My sophiology is a theological doctrine which has been only mine so far [...] I have never had the idea to charge anyone who opposes sophiology with heresy or unfaithfulness to Orthodoxy." Bulgakov speaks of a "sophianic interpretation of the doctrines of the Church"⁹

5 Alexander Upravitelev, *Konstruirovanie sub"ektnosti v antropologii S. N. Bulgakova* (Barnaul: Izdatelstvo Altayskogo Universiteta, 2001), 121.

6 T. Vasilyev, *Christian Angelology in Pseudo-Dionysius and Sergius Bulgakov*, DPhil thesis (University of Oxford, 2019), 10–11.

7 Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God: An Outline of sophiology* [1937], trans. revised by Christopher Bamford from that of Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke and Xenia Braikevitch (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 13.

8 Sergei Bulgakov, "Dokladnaya zapiska predstavennaya v oktubre 1935 Ego Vysokopeosviaschenstvu Mitropolitu Evlogiyu professorom prot. Sergiem Bulgakovym," in *O Sofii Premudrosti Bozhiey* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1935), 30.

9 Bulgakov (1935) "Dokladnaya zapiska," 50.

and claims to be fully Orthodox: “I confess all the true doctrines of Orthodoxy. My sophiology relates by no means to the content of those doctrines, but only to their theological interpretation.”¹⁰

2. Sophianic Interpretation of Economics

In the light of the theme of this paper the question arises: how can this interpretation of Bulgakov be useful for us and what does he try to achieve through the application of his metalanguage to economics? One can agree with Nicholas Sakharov, who writes:

“The work of salvation, the work by which God in Christ restores wholeness to the universe, is a work that relates at every point—to the physical world, to the human body, to the material environment. This is something which again comes to light very clearly in the work of Bulgakov. As an economist and as a former Marxist, Bulgakov never loses sight of the practicalities of these relations—between human beings themselves, and then between human beings and the things amongst which they live.”¹¹

Therefore, the economy is not some kind of separate sphere of life unimportant for salvation. Rather, the economy should be salutary for the body, for the soul, for the whole person.

According to Bulgakov, one of his immediate tasks in writing the *Philosophy of Economy* was, quite surprisingly, the interpretation of the Christian patristic heritage. He wanted to present “the religious ontology, cosmology and anthropology of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and others” in the light of modern philosophical thinking. In contrast to materialism and idealism, Bulgakov develops the idea of “religious materialism.” Part of this general plan was the substantiation of the “ontology of the economic process.”¹² Making a “diagnosis” of his contemporary economy, Bulgakov notes that “economic

10 Bulgakov (1935) “Dokladnaya zapiska,” 51; N. Vaganova observes that in *The Burning Bush* (1927) and in other later works “everything is defined through Sophia: ‘man is created Sophia,’ ‘the revelation of the Holy Trinity in the world is Sophia,’ ‘the world is created Wisdom,’ ‘hypostasis is a noetic ray of Sophia,’ etc.” (Vaganova, N. *Sophiologia Protoiereya Sergiya Bulgakova* [The Sophiology of Archpriest Sergiy Bulgakov] (Moscow: PSTGU, 2011), 328) (Emphasis N.Vaganova’s.).

11 Nikolai Sakharov, “Essential Bulgakov: His Ideas about Sophia, the Trinity, and Christ,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 173.

12 Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*. Trans., ed., and with an introduction by Evtuhov, Catherine (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, ca. 2000), 38.

materialism” should not be “denied, but overcome from within, explained in its limitations as a philosophical ‘abstract principle,’ in which one side of the truth is sold as the whole truth.”¹³

Bulgakov distinguishes two types of historical eras according to the type of a person’s attitude to material wealth:

the era of asceticism (Buddhism, Franciscanism), when contempt for wealth is commendable; and the modern era that loves and believes in wealth, when life becomes an economic process.¹⁴

Speaking about the economic theory of his day, Bulgakov makes the following important observation, which is in many ways relevant even today: “In practice, economists are Marxists, even if they hate Marxism.”¹⁵

Bulgakov links the economy with the concept of life as such while providing a preliminary definition of the economy. According to him, “life is the principle of freedom and organicism.”¹⁶ The whole world process is a contradiction between a mechanism, a thing, and an organism or life. The economy thus turns out to be a struggle for life. The economy, according to Bulgakov, is not a well-honed mechanism for extracting wealth from nature and the organization of material life. On the contrary, it is aimed at overcoming the mechanism in itself, as the beginning of necessity. Its task is to expand the realm of cosmic freedom, to transform a mechanism into an organism.

Therefore, on the one hand, the economy is actualized in man’s defensive-offensive attitude to nature.¹⁷ On the other hand, Bulgakov refuses to separate and oppose nature and spirit. This division and opposition carry death.¹⁸

In all of Bulgakov’s above arguments, two fundamental ideas of Schelling are refracted: 1) the identity of the subject and the object 2) an understanding of nature as a living growing organism.¹⁹ Schelling’s philosophy is the starting point for Bulgakov’s constructs. The universe is presented, in the light of the philosophy of identity, as a ladder of steps or “potentials,” as an evolutionary development, the general content of which is the revelation of the spirit.²⁰ In

13 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 39.

14 *Ibid.*, 40.

15 *Ibid.*, 41.

16 *Ibid.*, 70.

17 *Ibid.*, 74.

18 *Ibid.*, 84.

19 *Ibid.*, 83.

20 *Ibid.*, 85.

Bulgakov's understanding, Schelling's philosophy is an interpretation of Christian anthropology:

Schelling expressed one of the most fundamental truths of Christianity in the philosophical language of his time. For Christianity is equally far from materialism and subjective idealism; it removes the contradiction between flesh and spirit in its teaching of man as *spirit incarnate*, the living unity of both.²¹

From Schelling Bulgakov also borrows the doctrine of the "world soul." The "world soul" is the highest unity of spirit and flesh, possessing the qualities of a universal (transcendental) subject, a universal spirit, and a universal object, the mother's womb of all creation.²²

Individual human beings partake in this higher unity of the world soul. Various aspects of unity: embracing the spirit and matter of human nature, the unity of created nature, the unity of creation and the Creator are of paramount importance in Bulgakov's vision. When Bulgakov gives a sophiological definition of the economy, he answers the following fundamental questions: "How is economy possible? What are its a priori premises or preconditions? What is the philosophical significance of the essential functions of the economic process?"²³

One might ask: what did Bulgakov mean by the sophianic nature of the economy? Above all, the sophianic nature of the economy is revealed in its teleological nature: "Economic activity overcomes the divisions in nature, and its ultimate goal—outside of economy proper—is to return the world to life in Sophia."²⁴ The beginning of the economy is also outside this world. Man is the natural ruler of the world and the vehicle of sophianism:

Thus economic activity and investigation ('science'), the labor on a real and ideal object, began in an Edenic state, when the metaphysical essence of man's relation to the world was still unharmed, when he did not fear death or hunger, for the tree of life was accessible to him: the labor of cognition and action could here be performed only in a spirit of love toward God's creation. In this sense we can speak of

21 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 87–88 (Bulgakov's italics).

22 *Ibid.*, 88.

23 *Ibid.*, 94.

24 *Ibid.*, 153.

the Edenic economy as the selfless loving effort of man to apprehend and to perfect nature, to reveal its sophic character.²⁵

3. Bulgakov's Thought in Conversation with Modern Thinkers

In the 1970s, environmental problems came to the forefront of political debate, with philosophers and politicians discussing them publicly. It was in this decade that terms such as “deep ecology” and “ecological ethics” emerged. While the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted in 1992, it was only in 2015 that the Paris Agreement was signed—the first ever legally binding document on climate change under this convention. The main point of this agreement is that new technologies will be gradually introduced worldwide to minimize CO2 emissions into the environment, in an attempt to reduce the risks associated with the main problem—global warming caused by the rapidly intensifying industrial activity of the past century.

However, it is difficult to disagree with the German philosopher Vittorio Hösle, who issued a warning back in 1994:

Those who think that the ecological crisis can be dealt with the help of economic measures alone are mistaken. The ecological crisis is caused by the ‘arrows’ directing the movement towards specific values and categories, without correcting which we will never be able to start radical changes.²⁶

Hösle was right. No radical changes have been considered to date. First of all, because the goals of economic activity remain unchanged: maximizing economic growth, increasing the material well-being of economic entities. No matter how beautiful the words national governments speak about ecology, their main goal is to maximize economic growth, to increase the population's consumption and incomes, or also to increase their own incomes, if we are talking about authoritarian rulers. Such international economic actors as international financial organizations and transnational corporations have economic growth as their priority. Further, economic indicators are used by economists for calculations, mathematical modeling of economic systems, being components of fundamental economic theories. It must be said that this is currently

25 Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 154.

26 Vittorio Hösle, *Filosofia i ecologia*. [Philosophy and Ecology] (Moscow: AO “Kami”, 1994), 7.

the dominant approach, and has been in recent decades. Mathematical modeling reigns supreme here, while philosophy, with ethics and morality, not to mention theology, is extremely marginalized.

In his paper “Central Fallacies of Modern Economics” (2018), Tony Lawson, professor of Economics and Philosophy at Cambridge, argues that “the modern discipline of economics is in some disarray, short on explanatory successes, largely detached from its subject-matter, and seemingly without clear objectives or sense of direction.”²⁷ Lawson opposes mathematical modeling as the only proper or serious “scientific” way of doing economics. He wants to emancipate economics from this domination of mathematics. At the same time, he highlights that criticizing “the current mathematical modelling emphasis does not mean to adopt an anti-mathematics stance, pointing out that in social reality mathematic tools are generally inappropriate and more useful alternatives are available.”²⁸

He insists that economics should be concerned with questions of philosophy, in particular ontology, for which the Cambridge Social Ontology Group was formed. Hence, together with Tony Lawson, we can say that the main problem of modern economic theory is the methodological problem, the dehumanization of economics, the marginalization of interdisciplinary approaches, the brackets of fundamental philosophical issues. Peter Rona, from Oxford, goes further, arguing that “modern economics is an ideology presenting itself in scientific garment, but, in fact, it is promoting a particular agenda.”²⁹

We might remember Bulgakov in this respect, who says that all “economists are Marxists, even if they hate marxism” (see full quotation above). Rona questions the scientific status of economics and convincingly argues that at the core of modern economic theory lies a normative choice:

Although its prescriptions are presented in a form that mimics the form of laws of the natural sciences, it is concerned with identifying the sort of behaviour that is most conducive to achieving its ideological ends, such as maximising efficiency, understood and measured as the return on capital employed. The choice of efficiency as the foundational value and its measurement as the return on financial capital employed, may or may be a “rational”, a desirable or laudable choice, but is a normative choice, and not a science. Most importantly, its purported moral

27 Tony Lawson, “Central Fallacies of Modern Economics,” 51.

28 *Ibid.*, 60.

29 Peter Rona, “Objects of Nature and Objects of Thought,” 30.

neutrality—obtained by the claim to scientific status—is a dangerous and destructive deception.³⁰

The solution to the current crisis appears thus to have two stages. First, we need to recognize that the state of the world economy is conditioned by values, and therefore ethical, philosophical, and theological discourses should be considered in the global decision making. Only after such a recognition can we be in a position to begin to imagine a new economics. Attempts to offer answers of this kind have been made in various fields of knowledge; ideas about reforming economic theory can be said to be in the air. I do not pretend to cover all such attempts; I name only a few significant instances to set the context for a discussion of Bulgakov's thought relevant to this question.

For their part, economists are looking for ways to bring economics closer to humanitarian knowledge, including philosophy and theology. An outstanding example of this is the aforementioned research led by Tony Lawson at Cambridge. I have already mentioned another economist—Peter Rona, but would like to say a few more words about his “Economy as a Moral Science Project” at Oxford. A group of Catholic economists and theologians at Blackfriars (Oxford) are undertaking “to redefine the domain of economics so as to provide the foundation for reestablishing the spiritual nature of man when acting as economic agent.”³¹ Peter Rona argues that “free will, intentionality and moral judgement were excluded from economics,” which resulted in creating an “unsatisfactory and unjust world.” The idea that “facts can be separated from values in individual and group social action” is fundamentally wrong, but this is the foundation of modern economics. Isaiah Berlin wrote along these lines:

As any description of what is, embodies an attitude, that is, a view of it in terms of what should be: we are not contemplating a static garden; we are involved in a movement with a perceptible direction; it can be correctly or incorrectly described; but any description must embody a valuation, that is, a reference to the goals toward which the movement proceeds, and in terms of which it can be ‘understood’ ...³²

30 Peter Rona, “Objects of Nature and Objects of Thought,” 30–31.

31 Peter Rona and Laszlo Zsolnai (eds.) Preface, *Economics as a Moral Science, Virtues and Economics I*, Springer International Publishing AG (2017), v.

32 Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 130. (Peter Rona, “Postscript on Ontology and Economics,” 186).

We can see here how the language of sophiology can be helpful in such a description, as indeed it includes a valuation and a reference to the goal, the divine Sophia in Bulgakov's thought.

A few economists and political scientists have questioned the materialistic understanding of economic development. They argue that development is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It cannot be limited to GDP growth and must "include improvements not only in terms of welfare, but also of social conditions, political empowerment, the cultural foundations of self-esteem and ecological aspects."³³ Others point out that in 'the era of globality' there is an urgent need for complex and transdisciplinary approaches.³⁴

At the same time, philosophers and theologians show a tremendous interest in economic knowledge.³⁵ This interest is evidenced by the many published articles and monographs, and even the emergence of a new subject: economic theology. We can mention here the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology* (ed. Stefan Schwarzkopf, 2020) and *the Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* (ed. Paul Oslington, 2014). The value of Bulgakov's *Philosophy of Economy* for modern environmental and ecological research has been pointed out recently.³⁶

On considering all these publications, one can see how Father Sergii Bulgakov anticipated many of these problems more than a hundred years ago. An astonishing thing perhaps is that his ideas have not lost their relevance today. It would be more correct to say that his theological thought, including those aspects of it applied to economics, is more relevant than ever. It is striking how Bulgakov's Christian economic theology is resonant with more recent non-religious ethical proposals. For instance, Hans Jonas, the author of "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for Technological Age," develops the topic of environmental responsibility. He rejects the traditional ethical "anthropocentrism," which reduced the problem of moral responsibil-

33 Boda Zsolt, "Ethics of Development in the Age of Globalization," 246.

34 Francois Lepineux, and Jean-Jacques Rose, "Transdisciplinarity Governance and Common Good," 253.

35 An Orthodox perspective on economic development and bibliography can be found in: Vasilios Makrides, "Orthodox Christianity and Economic Development: A Critical Overview," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* (Paris) Année 64, no. 185 (January–March 2019): 23–43.

36 Bruce V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), Chapter 5; Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics: Reclaiming the Deep Ecology of Christian Tradition," *Religions* (2017): 8, 116.

ity solely to the relationship between people. Nature, including as the basis of human existence, is considered by Jonas to be a kind of “subject” of morality. Jonas formulated the ethical imperative of responsibility for the “technocratic age,” which had a profound influence on the development of environmental ethics: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.”³⁷ Yet, this kind of non-religious ethics can be called ‘the ethics of fear,’ which might seem effective for the purposes of pure survival while still being inferior to the Christian ethics of love, which is at the core of Bulgakov’s sophiology and is reflected in the “Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” (2016).³⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to highlight some key observations regarding the question as to how Bulgakov’s deliberations on Sophia can be helpful in tackling the ecological crisis and why it matters theologically. It seems undeniable that Bulgakov inspires Christians not to avoid economics; he urges us to take care of the created world out of love, with this in mind and in heart to translate the language of economics into the theological language. Following this, Christians should become the leaders of the ecological movement, creating and promoting the new global political paradigm. Above all, our hope is confirmed by St. Paul’s words about little yeast which “leavens the whole batch of dough” (1 Corinthians 5. 6–8). Bulgakov’s idea that “economic materialism” should be “overcome from within” means that when the new sophianic language acquires meaning in the sphere of economics, the old one will necessarily lose its power and attractiveness not only in the eyes of Christians; it can become a powerful missionary tool in converting the world to Christ.

37 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 11.

38 Cf.: “The roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical, inhering within the heart of each man.” “Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” (Crete, 2016), *Holy Council*, accessed August 18, 2023, https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council?_101_INSTANCE_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I_languageId=en_US (access 2024/01/26).