



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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Building the House of Wisdom. Editors' Introduction	11
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12520-5	

PERSONHOOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Sergii Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond	25
Rowan Williams	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12172-6	

Masks, Chimaeras, and Portmanteaux: Sergii Bulgakov and the Metaphysics of the Person	43
David Bentley Hart	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12173-3	

Bulgakov and Lot-Borodine as Shapers of Deification in the West	63
Mark McInroy	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12174-0	

" <i>Transcende te ipsum</i> ": Faith, Prayer and Name-Worship in Bulgakov's <i>Unfading Light</i>	77
Ivan Ilin	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12175-7	

The Kenotic Iconicity of Sergii Bulgakov's Divine-Humanity: Doctrinal, Anthropological, and Feminist Considerations	91
Sarah Elizabeth Livick-Moses	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12176-4	

Sergii Bulgakov's Fragile Absolute: Kenosis, Difference, and Positive Disassociation	107
Jack Louis Pappas	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12177-1	

The Authenticity of Creativity: The Philosophical and Theological Anthropologies of Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov	123
Deborah Casewell	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12178-8	
Bulgakov on Mangodhood—or, Satan after Schelling	137
Justin Shaun Coyle	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12179-5	

POLITICS, ECONOMY, AND ECOLOGY

Seven Days of <i>Narod</i> : Sergei Bulgakov’s Christian Socialist Newspaper	153
Catherine Evtuhov and Regula M. Zwahlen	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12180-1	
Is It All the Greeks’ Fault? Reconsidering the Byzantine Legacy in Sergius Bulgakov’s <i>By the Walls of Cherson</i>	177
Nikos Kouremenos	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12181-8	
“The Sophia Dispute” in the Context of Political Ontology	193
Alexei P. Kozyrev	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12182-5	
Sophiology and Personalism, Foundations of the New Political Science in the Twenty-First Century	209
Antoine Arjakovsky	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12183-2	
Sergii Bulgakov’s Chalcedonian Politics of Personhood	221
Nathaniel Wood	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12184-9	
The World as the Household of Wisdom: Political Theology and Philosophy of Economy	235
Dionysios Skliris	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12185-6	

Rethinking the Language of Economics as a Systematic Christian Response to Economic and Ecological Crises in the Thought of Sergii Bulgakov	247
Tikhon Vasilyev	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12186-3	
Bulgakov's Ecology	259
Austin Foley Holmes	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12187-0	

SOPHIOLOGY

The Reception of Palamite Theology in the Sophiology of Sergii Bulgakov	275
Liubov A. Petrova	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12188-7	
An Unfinished Dispute. How is it Possible to Criticize Bulgakov's Sophiology at the Present Time?	289
Natalia Vaganova	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12189-4	
Sophiology, Ascesis and Prophecy	301
Joshua Heath	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12190-0	
Mariology as Personalized Sophiology. Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Theology	317
Dario Colombo	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12191-7	
The Training for Dying and Death: A New Reading of Bulgakov's Sophiology	331
Paul L. Gavrilyuk	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12192-4	

 CREATION AND ONTOLOGY

Sergii Bulgakov's Early Marxism: A Narrative of Development	351
Caleb Henry	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12193-1	
<i>Creatio ex sapientia</i> in Bulgakov's <i>Unfading Light</i> : The Influence of F. W. J. Schelling	365
Taylor Ross	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12194-8	
Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology and the Problem of Human Freedom	381
Brandon Gallaher	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12195-5	
Sergii Bulgakov: Between Kenotic Theology of the Event and Trinitarian Ontology	409
Antonio Bergamo	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12196-2	
From Social Trinity to "Linguistic Trinity": Sergii Bulgakov's Contribution to Analytic Theology	419
Nikolaos Asproulis	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12197-9	
Sergii Bulgakov: From Grammar to Wisdom	435
John Milbank	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12198-6	

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Father Sergii Bulgakov’s “Karamazov’s excursus” 463
Pavel Khondzinsky
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12199-3

Ships in the Theological Night? Sergius Bulgakov and
Liberation Theology 475
Graham McGeoch
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12200-6

“Your Labor Is Not in Vain.” Sergii Bulgakov’s Sophiology as
a Key to a (Protestant) Theology of the Kingdom of God 489
Oliver Dürr
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12201-3

Sergius Bulgakov and Modern Theology 501
Paul Ladouceur
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12202-0

The Vision of Unity. The Ecumenical Thought of
Fr. Sergii Bulgakov 521
Adalberto Mainardi
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12203-7

List of Contributors 535

Sophiology, Asceticism and Prophecy

Joshua Heath

Evaluations of Bulgakov's life and work have consistently insisted upon his spiritual integrity. Memoirs from the time of his final illness and death famously record the transfiguration of his face and the manifestation of the uncreated light. He was known for his skill as a confessor and spiritual director. And then there are Alexander Schmemmann's 'three images' of Bulgakov and, perhaps chief among them, the image of Bulgakov celebrating the Divine Liturgy. Schmemmann recalls the intensity of Bulgakov's celebration, the sense that 'there was accomplished here something involving the whole created world, something of the pre-eternal, the cosmic,'¹ before going on to assert the profoundly liturgical character of Bulgakov's theology. This chimes with Bulgakov's own explicit articulation of the inspiration of theology: 'the deepest origins of the theologian's inspiration must be nourished from the altar.'² Yet for someone like Schmemmann, Bulgakov's seemingly excessive speculative tendencies cannot be so easily reconciled with his liturgical devotion.

In Fr. Sergii it was as if two people were joined together and did not fully merge: one 'experiential' [...] and the other 'scholarly' [...] It seems to me that the way to solving the 'riddle' of Fr. Sergii, his lived and creative tragedy, lies here. This tragedy ultimately consists in the fact that his system (namely his 'system,' and not the infinite richness of all that it 'systematises') does not correspond to his experience.³

1 Alexander Schmemmann, 'Tri obraza,' *Vestnik R. H. D.* 101–02 (1971): 9–24.

2 Quoted in Andrew Louth, 'Sergii Bulgakov and the Task of Theology,' *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2009), 243–57 (246).

3 Schmemmann, 'Tri obraza,' 20–21.

Notwithstanding Bulgakov's own discomfort with the description of his thought as a 'system,'⁴ we can further isolate the central tenet of his 'sophiology' as a significant source of discomfort amongst his critical readers. 'Sophiology is a question about the power and significance [...] of the divine-humanity as *the unity of God with the whole created world*.'⁵ This assertion of the unity of God and the world has been a consistent focus of critique, with the late Russian thinker Sergei Horujy summarising the primary metaphysical and moral concerns that such an assertion allegedly poses. Horujy's metaphysical critique echoes those made by Lossky and others: namely, that such a unity fails to accommodate the radical, 'ontological difference' between God and creation that is affirmed in the Christian theological doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.⁶

But more significant for our purposes is Horujy's moral critique of sophiology. The events of the twentieth century rule out a complacent picture of an abiding unity between the divine and the human, in which the history of the world unfolds according to a divine plan 'independently of any sobriety or effort.'⁷ For Horujy, Russian sophiology fails to take seriously human responsibility within history, being seduced by 'illusions and starry-eyed idealism.'⁸ By contrast, recognition of the *discontinuity* between God and creation, which for Horujy is expressed in the Essence–Energies distinction, also entails an affirmation of the necessity of human action in securing the adherence of the world to God: 'Orthodox ascesis, having attained on the basis of experience the *energetic* nature of the relation between God and the human, issues this warning from the fourth century: this relation is maintained only through steady and unwavering effort; it offers no good guarantees.'⁹ But is Horujy (and indeed, Schmemmann) right to posit such a discontinuity between sophiological theory and spiritual practice?

4 See Sergius Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), xxxviii. 'The ideas guiding this philosophising are united not in a "system" but in a certain *syzygy*, an organic articulation.'

5 S. N. Bulgakov, 'Tsentral'naia problema sofologii,' in idem, *Tikhie dumy* (Moscow: Respublika, 1996), 269.

6 Sergei S. Horujy, 'Imiaslavie i kult'ura serebrianogo veka: fenomen moskovskoi shkoly khristianskogo neoplatonizma,' in idem, *Opyty iz russkoi dukhovnoi traditsii* [Experiments from the Russian Spiritual Tradition], 296–98.

7 Sergei S. Horujy, 'Pereput'ia russkoi sofologii,' in idem, *O starom i novom* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2000), 166.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid. I suspect 'fourth century' should read 'fourteenth century,' i.e., when Palamas definitively articulated the Essence–Energies distinction.

Andrew Louth has argued for a greater continuity between Bulgakov the ‘systematiser’ or ‘sophiologist’ and Bulgakov the man of prayer. He argues not only that Bulgakov’s overall approach to theology is liturgical because it takes as its starting point ‘the human being who comes to know by standing before God in prayer, primarily liturgical prayer,’¹⁰ but also that the very structure of Bulgakov’s major dogmatic trilogy carries the shape of the anaphora of St John Chrysostom.¹¹ For Louth, we ought to understand Bulgakov’s sophiological account of the unity of creation with God (and indeed, of the unity of God with God in the ‘Divine Sophia’), as likewise emerging from his liturgical devotion: ‘for Bulgakov, to celebrate the Eucharist entails that creation belongs to God, that it is not alien to him, that to be a creature is already to be graced [...] it is this intuition that lay at the heart of his sophiology.’¹² In its *intuition* at least, for Louth, Bulgakov’s sophiology was likewise formed by his priestly life.

I want to take further this emphasis on the continuity between Bulgakov’s scholarship, on the one hand, and his devotional life, on the other. Louth has convincingly shown how Bulgakov’s immersion in the liturgy inspired his speculation. But can we see Bulgakov’s speculative thought, his writing, as itself a spiritual exercise, an act of ascesis? In order to make this case, much of this chapter will be devoted to Bulgakov’s own writing on ascesis. We will see how Bulgakov is perennially concerned with articulating a form of Christian ascesis that has at its heart a commitment to the world and its history. We will see how Bulgakov ends up joining the concept of ascesis with that of prophecy, such that authentic Christian self-transcendence becomes inseparable from an orientation toward the future. We will then briefly consider the indicators throughout Bulgakov’s corpus that he understood his own writing in such ascetic-cum-prophetic terms, with the aim of fostering a hopeful, rather than fearful, attitude within the Church toward the future.

In his ‘primer’ on sophiology for a Western audience, Bulgakov makes clear the centrality of *ascesis* to his project. ‘Sophiology contains within itself the nexus of all the dogmatic and practical problems of contemporary Christian dogmatics and asceticism.’¹³ And again in the same work: ‘we need a true Christian

10 Louth, ‘Sergii Bulgakov,’ 253.

11 Ibid., 253–54.

12 Ibid., 256–57.

13 Translation my own. Based on the forthcoming German–Russian edition of this text, prepared by the Sergii Bulgakov Centre of the University of Fribourg. English trans-

asceticism in relation to the world.¹⁴ Likewise, in his short text ‘The Central Problem of Sophiology,’ Bulgakov’s theoretical assertion of a unity between God and the world, manifest in the Divine Humanity, is inseparable from asceticism: ‘the Divine Humanity is a dogmatic summons to spiritual asceticism and creativity, to salvation from the world and salvation of the world.’¹⁵ Once we attend to the consistent ascetic emphasis of Bulgakov’s sophiology, it becomes clear that this unity between God and the world is not primarily asserted as a ‘given’ [*dan-nost’*] (although it is that), but as a ‘proposal’ [*zadannost’*] that humanity must accomplish in the face of the tragic diremption of history.

Bulgakov was pre-occupied with the nature of Christian asceticism throughout his career, from a cluster of articles on the theme in the first decade of the twentieth century, through the major dogmatic trilogy and on to his final work on the Apocalypse of John. Throughout his writings on asceticism, Bulgakov notes within asceticism what he considers a quasi-Manichean hostility to the world of history. This concern is not original to Bulgakov. For Vladimir Soloviev, a cardinal influence on Bulgakov and his fellow thinkers of the ‘Silver Age,’ the Christian ascetical tradition, with its hostility to the body, was at best a superseded moment in the development of Christianity’s self-consciousness. Its continued prominence within the life of the Church, however, was an active impediment to Christianity’s present, providential task: ‘the joining together of spirit and body.’¹⁶ We find a Solovievian position on Christian asceticism reproduced somewhat uncritically in Bulgakov’s essay ‘On the Economic Ideal’ (1903), where he asserts that ‘the ascetical view of the world is at no point more alien to contemporary consciousness than in [its] denial of history and social ethics.’¹⁷

But as late as 1944, Bulgakov will continue to have reservations about this perceived tendency in Christian asceticism. Thus, he will write that the ‘feeling of life’ is ‘lost and even denied by an *ascetically* understood Christianity with

lation: Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson, N. Y.: Lindisfarne, 1993), 21.

14 Ibid., 20.

15 Bulgakov, ‘Tsentral’naia problema,’ 270.

16 Patrick Lally Michelson, *Beyond the Monastery Walls: The Ascetic Revolution in Russian Orthodox Thought, 1814–1914* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 169.

17 S. N. Bulgakov, ‘The Economic Ideal,’ trans. Rowan Williams, in idem, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 38.

its transcendentalism.¹⁸ But the most concentrated articulation of Bulgakov's concerns with this tradition comes in his preface to *The Lamb of God* (1933). There, Bulgakov describes a conviction 'that Christ has abandoned the world and that His Kingdom, which is not of this world, will never be realized in this world.'¹⁹ This conviction has resulted in a tendency 'simply to flee—in fact or in spirit, ascetically or theologically—from this world into the desert of nihilism [...] for the world exists only to be rejected ascetically, to be relegated to fire.'²⁰ This theological-ascetical rejection of the intrinsic value of creation is a principle adversary of Bulgakov's own intellectual efforts.

The attempt to articulate an *alternative* account of Christian ascesis is therefore present from the earliest moments of Bulgakov's engagement with asceticism. The most well-known, early example of this effort is Bulgakov's essay 'On Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle,' published in the 1909 collection *Landmarks*. Commentators have rightly noted the prominence in this essay, not of the Russian 'asketizm' or 'askeza' (calques of 'asceticism'), but rather the terms 'podvig' and 'podvizhnichestvo', even in the article's title.²¹ Whilst *asketizm* will continue to be an object of varying evaluation in Bulgakov's theological career, *podvig* will consistently denote what he considers the 'authentic' form of self-transcendence to which the Christian is called. Through the essay's organizing opposition between the heroic revolutionary and the Christian ascetic, Bulgakov develops an understanding of ascesis as an exercise of situating oneself within (and not apart from) the course of human history. Unlike the heroic revolutionary, the ascetic 'does not set himself to do the job of providence,

18 Sergii Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*, trans. Mike Whitton and rev. Michael Miller (Münster: Aschendorff, 2019), 259. My emphasis.

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

20 Ibid.

21 See, for instance, Ruth Coates, 'Feuerbach, Kant, Dostoevskii: The Evolution of "Heroism" and "Asceticism" in Bulgakov's work to 1909,' in *Landmarks Revisited: The Vekhi Symposium 100 Years On*, ed. Robin Aizlewood and Ruth Coates (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 287–307. Alongside Max Weber (discussed below), an important influence on the conceptual apparatus of Bulgakov's text is Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch presents 'heroism' and 'asceticism,' not as an opposition, but as an expression of two complementary elements of the Church's life, in his *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches and Groups* (1908–1910). For a discussion of Troeltsch's text in relation to Bulgakov's essay, together with locations where Bulgakov cites Troeltsch, see Nikolai Plotnikov, 'Zametki o "Vekhah"' [Remarks on *Landmarks*], *Issledovaniia po istorii Russkoi mysli* 6 (2003): 562–71 (esp. 562–65). My thanks to Regula Zwahlen for drawing my attention to this.

and so does not link the destiny of history or humanity to his or anyone else's individual efforts.²² Instead, 'his attention is concentrated on his immediate task, his concrete obligations.'²³

Moreover, *podvizhnichestvo* is characterised not only by a reduction in scale, from the historic to the immediate, but also by a movement inwards. Whereas the efforts of the revolutionary are 'entirely expended on the struggle to improve the environment,' the Christian ascetic is engaged in 'the ethical development of personality.'²⁴ This development of personality is a matter of 'unwavering self-discipline, endurance and perseverance [...] faithful performance of one's duty, bearing of one's own cross, repudiation of self.'²⁵ Such a discipline, Bulgakov observes, is characteristic of the 'physician and the engineer, the professor and the political activist, the manufacturer and his workers' in their 'fulfilment of their duties.'²⁶ Here, Bulgakov acknowledges the influence of Max Weber's notion of 'inner-worldly asceticism' [*innerweltliche Askese*] on his own account of Christian asceticism.²⁷ Indeed, Weber's description of the worldly ascetic as one who participates 'within the institutions of the world but in opposition to them,' focusing on 'the alert, methodical control of one's own pattern of life and behaviour,'²⁸ seems apt for the 'citizen-ascetics' that populate Bulgakov's essay.²⁹ Likewise, Weber's emphasis on the ascetic as an 'instrument of God' precisely through this inward, ethical transformation³⁰ is how Bulgakov will secure the ascetic's relationship to history. For the ascetic's attention to the particular is the means by which he 'reorders his personal will' so that it is 'wholly permeated by the will of God.' The ascetic's concentration on the immediate therefore secures the participation of their individual actions within the divine, providential direction of history. The apparent indifference of the

22 S. N. Bulgakov, 'Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle,' trans. Rowan Williams, in *idem, Sergii Bulgakov*, 97.

23 *Ibid.*, 93.

24 *Ibid.*, 95.

25 *Ibid.*, 98.

26 *Ibid.*, 99.

27 *Ibid.* The influence of Weber on Bulgakov, not only with respect to the nature of 'asceticism,' but also more broadly, is discussed in Josephien van Kessel, 'From Secular Sociology to Orthodox Sophiology: Max Weber's Influence on Sergei Bulgakov's Christian Social Theory,' *Transcultural Studies* 4 (2008): 43–56.

28 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), vol. 2, 542–44.

29 Coates, 'Feuerbach, Kant, Dostoevskii,' 303.

30 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 543.

saint to the wider fortunes of world history thus belies a profound involvement in the course of those fortunes.

Despite the predominantly 'civic' characterisation of asceticism in this essay,³¹ the monk is nonetheless a presence in the text. Bulgakov gathers the qualities of the ascetic or *podvizhnik* together under the term 'obedience' [*poslushanie*], recognising the origins of this 'very fine expression' in 'monastic practice.'³² Later in the essay, Bulgakov approvingly describes 'the light that burned in the monastic houses, where the *people* have flocked across the ages, seeking moral nurture and instruction.'³³ One monastic figure whom Bulgakov identifies at multiple points in this essay is Saint Sergii of Radonezh. In particular, Saint Sergii instantiates the joining of the inward and socio-historical dimensions of asceticism: 'when Dmitri Donskoi set out with the blessing of St Sergii to fight the Tatars, this was a revolutionary action in the political sense [...] but at the same time it was, I believe, an act of Christian spiritual achievement.'³⁴ In a later watershed in Bulgakov's thinking on asceticism, Sergii of Radonezh takes centre stage, as a paradigm of the ascetic's engagement with the fate of the world. Indeed, this watershed text is a 1926 lecture on the legacy of Saint Sergii. Bulgakov begins this lecture by observing that the saint was born at a nadir in Russia's historical fortunes. 'The Lord stirred up his chosen one in the arduous time not only of our people's outward enslavement, but also of inward degeneration.'³⁵ The young monk's pursuit of the hermetic path may seem to indicate indifference to this wider historical picture. Yet, through his reform and propagation of cenobitic monasticism in Russia, Sergii 'set out upon the work of building the City of God, in which the stones are human hearts, he set out to gather souls, to create fraternity, to initiate into the Church, so that all may be one, in the image of God, in the image of the Holy Trinity.'³⁶ In this gathering together and dispersal of communities in new monasteries, Sergii became 'the spiritual gatherer of Rus,' and the centuries after the life of Sergii 'are the Sergievskaya epoch in the history of the Russian spirit and creativity.'³⁷ We find instantiated in Sergii the coincidence of an intensely inward asceti-

31 Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 63.

32 Bulgakov, 'Heroism and Spiritual Struggle,' 99.

33 Ibid., 106. On this monastic thread in the text, see Coates, 'Feuerbach, Kant, Dostoevskii,' 302–04.

34 Bulgakov, 'Heroism and Spiritual Struggle,' 98.

35 Bulgakov, 'Blagodatnye zavety prep. Sergiia russkomu bogoslovstvovaniuu,' *Put'* 5 (1926): 3–19 (11).

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 12.

cism—since above all ‘he fulfilled the ascesis of *sobornost*’ in the hiddenness of his heart, conquering self-love, sacrificially renouncing himself³⁸—and a thorough involvement in human history and culture. Sergii of Radonezh thus becomes the figure of the world-affirming ascesis that Bulgakov is concerned to secure.

Moreover, this lecture on St. Sergii of Radonezh brings Bulgakov’s thinking on asceticism together with his Trinitarian thought, articulated most fully in his works of the 1920s. It is true that the impulse to think Christian asceticism or *podvig* in Trinitarian terms predates this lecture. In *The Unfading Light* (1916), for instance, Bulgakov writes of the ascetic or saintly virtue of *tselomudrie*, whose common translation is ‘chastity’ but which can also be rendered as ‘integral wisdom’ or ‘the wisdom of the whole,’ as a realisation of the Trinitarian image in human beings:

by sacrificing their hypostasis, by going beyond themselves in love, in the likeness of the trihypostatic God, human beings find their being within themselves. For them the law of life becomes the wisdom of wholeness and the wholeness of wisdom—*tselomudrie*, which is at once the condition and consequence of love.³⁹

This Trinitarian framing of ascesis is also present in ‘Hypostasis and Hypostaseity’ (1925), where Bulgakov writes that ‘the experience of the saints, as the bearers of chastity [*tselomudrie*], is qualitatively different from the wisdom of this world [...] to the illumined eye of the ascetic, the world presents itself as the living *riza* of the Godhead, as his Word, clothed in the Holy Spirit.’⁴⁰ In these texts, ascesis takes on a Trinitarian shape because of Bulgakov’s interpretation of the *imago Dei* as an *imago Trinitatis*. This is especially clear in the passage from *The Unfading Light*, where ascesis is defined as a particular mode of the human being’s realisation of themselves as an *hypostasis* or person.

In the 1926 lecture on Saint Sergii of Radonezh, this Trinitarian shape of Christian ascesis, asserted briefly in *The Unfading Light* and ‘Hypostasis,’ is presented more fully through the phenomenological-cum-grammatical analysis of subjectivity that is most fully set out in ‘Chapters on Trinitarity’ and *The*

38 Bulgakov, ‘Blagodatnye zavety,’ 12.

39 Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light*, 319.

40 Sergii Bulgakov, ‘Hypostasis and Hypostaseity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*,’ trans. Anastassy Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (2005): 5–46 (38).

Tragedy of Philosophy, as well as in *The Philosophy of the Name*.⁴¹ In this lecture, Bulgakov abbreviates this analysis to his demonstration of the presupposition of both the second-person *You* and third-person (*S*)*he* in the first-person *I*, such that the individual, created subject is in fact a triune *We*; an image of the Trinity. What is presented in the other texts (*Tragedy* and ‘*Chapters*’) as the *given structure* of personal life is here participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: ‘does the *I* not feel itself to be a singular, absolute, self-asserting, self-loving centre of being? [...] And yet suddenly we have its humble immersion of itself into the *we*, the death of the *I* and its resurrection. *We* testifies to the extent of the self-revelation and self-consciousness of the *I* and the depth of its establishment in its reality.’⁴² Here, the degrees of ascetic achievement are nothing other than the degrees of the subject’s self-realisation as a person. Ascesis has no other goal than the full realisation—not negation—of self-consciousness. Moreover, the affinity of Saint Sergii of Radonezh with the natural world affirms what is asserted theoretically in ‘*Chapters*’ and *Tragedy*: namely, that full personhood involves a recognition of the world as one’s own proper nature. As such, in this lecture Bulgakov is able to ground his vision of ascesis as a commitment to the world and its history, through his Trinitarian account of created personhood. For the ‘sacrifice of one’s hypostasis’ or ‘going beyond oneself in love’ is a commitment to live in history, understood as the common self-determination of other hypostases and the hypostasised (if not hypostatic) natural world.

This interweaving of the Trinitarian shape of Christian ascesis, and the Christian commitment to the world and history, finds definitive expression in *The Comforter* (1936). The Trinitarian shape of Christian ascesis and, more broadly, of personhood is inevitably foregrounded here, insofar as the spiritual life is discussed within the context of pneumatology. ‘The human spirit is neither closed nor impenetrable. It is created in the image of Divine spirit, which, being one and trihypostatic, is thus “communal” and transparent.’⁴³ The realisation of this Trinitarian image is the goal of *podvig*. Indeed, in *The Comforter*, we find a more schematic distinction between *askeza* and *podvig*. Asceticism

41 I can only present this linguistic, Trinitarian account of subjectivity in highly compressed form here. Interested readers should consult the contributions of David Bentley Hart, John Milbank and Rowan Williams to this volume, as well as my own ‘Sergii Bulgakov’s Linguistic Trinity,’ *Modern Theology* 37, no. 4 (2021): 888–912, and ‘On Sergii Bulgakov’s *The Tragedy of Philosophy*,’ *Modern Theology*, 37, no. 3 (2021): 805–23.

42 Bulgakov, ‘Blagodatnye zavety,’ 8–9.

43 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 301.

as *askeza* is a *negative* discipline, a codifiable set of practices for the restraint of the appetitive ego: ‘efforts of the spiritual life [...] have a predominantly *negative* character—the character of struggle with oneself, asceticism.’⁴⁴ This struggle admits of codification because in its fallenness, the human spirit possesses a consistency across differing historical periods.⁴⁵ Therefore, the parameters and instruments of this struggle find enduring expression in such texts as the *Philokalia*, and asceticism thus understood is the particular preoccupation of monastic Christianity, although nonetheless a responsibility for all Christians. The purpose of such a discipline is to produce *humility*, which Bulgakov glosses as ‘a certain state of readiness of the human spirit for communion with God,’⁴⁶ i. e., for the ‘actualisation’ of the divine image in humanity.

Asceticism is therefore one *wing* of the wider process of self-transcendence, *podvig*, by which Christians go out of themselves into history, where the image of the Trinity is realised. The other wing of *podvig* is *creativity* [*tvorchestvo*], whose centrality to Bulgakov’s understanding of the human long predates the dogmatic trilogy. But what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Bulgakov’s treatment of the spiritual life in *The Comforter* is the pairing of ‘creativity’ with ‘audacity’ or ‘daring’ [*derznovenie*], as well as prophecy. Bulgakov’s use of *derznovenie* has scriptural warrant: it is taken from the Acts of the Apostles (an obvious object of interest in a book on the Holy Spirit), where it occasionally characterises the apostolic preaching. ‘Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out *boldly* [*s derznoveniem skazali*]’ (Acts 13: 46), whilst Peter and John, together with the other gathered disciples, ‘were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness’ (Acts 4: 31). ‘Audacity’ and ‘creativity’ become two faces of the same activity of *podvig*, as when Bulgakov writes that ‘the two paths—ascetic humility and *creative audacity*, obedience and the acceptance of responsibility—are antinomically harmonized in spiritual life.’⁴⁷

Whereas the procedures of asceticism [*askeza*] can be expressed in an abiding tradition or canon, ‘there is nothing like this in the case of creative activity and audacity: there is no tradition and no repetition; everything is unique and individual, new and original.’⁴⁸ The course of creative human action is history itself⁴⁹ and is therefore oriented towards a future that, whilst

44 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 302.

45 *Ibid.*, 312.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, 308.

48 *Ibid.*, 312.

49 ‘If one would like to have a spiritual map of this path, it is universal history.’ *Ibid.*, 313.

undetermined, nonetheless remains under the care of Providence: 'man [...] feels himself called to live in the human race with its history, in this world, where the Kingdom of God is being realised.'⁵⁰ In this determination of *podvig* as oriented toward the future, *prophecy* emerges as the fundamental figure of creative Christian action. We have already seen how 'boldness' characterises the apostolic preaching or prophecy in the Acts of the Apostles. But Bulgakov also writes, with respect to the gifts of the Holy Spirit: 'what is essential for prophesying is Christian activity, to consider history as a creative act and task. The gift of prophecy, as a general gift of Pentecost, signifies that, henceforth, Christian man makes history in an inspired and creative manner.'⁵¹ By gathering all authentic Christian action under the heading of prophecy, *The Comforter* represents the consummation of Bulgakov's endeavour to render Christian ascesis a commitment to the world and its history, as the place where 'the Kingdom of God is being realised.'

There is one other feature of Bulgakov's account of Christian ascesis that should be mentioned: its Christological (and especially cruciform) shape. Already in *The Lamb of God*, Christ is presented as a model of *podvig*, particularly in his devotion to prayer.⁵² Through his 'unceasing' prayer, Christ's consciousness as the Son of the Father is realised: 'his prayer to the Father [...] was returned to Him as His own divine consciousness.'⁵³ Further, it is through this *unity* of the Persons of the Father and the Son in the consciousness of Christ that the unity of the divine and human in the life of Jesus is also realised: 'the entire experience of His earthly life, from the beginning of His ministry to Golgotha, corresponds to this consciousness of self as the affirmation of the will of the Divine Sonhood and presents Him with growing possibilities for the self-renunciation that constitutes the very essence of the Divine love for the world, as well as of the Divine Sonhood.'⁵⁴ In terms familiar from the preceding discussion, Christ's *podvig* is a generative ('growing possibilities') process of Trinitarian self-determination that culminates in the Cross. In *The Comforter*, Bulgakov returns to this understanding of the way of the Cross as a creative undertaking, as well as an act of self-abnegation in the sense of *askeza*: 'the Cross is not only passive reception, but an active taking hold, creative self-definition

50 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 309.

51 *Ibid.*, 294.

52 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 279.

53 *Ibid.*, 280.

54 *Ibid.*, 265.

and daring [*derznovenie*].⁵⁵ As well as being the consummation of a singular process of creative, vital self-definition, the Cross also opens a future of such creativity in the spiritual life of the Church, standing as the figure of all Christian self-determination: 'Christian asceticism is a cross in the image of the Cross of Christ and the Holy Spirit only descends upon this Cross.'⁵⁶

In this understanding of the Cross as the heart of Christian creativity (or should we say signification?), we unexpectedly find a distant, Orthodox articulation (albeit less direct) of Maurice de la Taille's famous dictum that in the Incarnation, 'He [Christ] placed Himself in the order of signs.' In particular, Bulgakov's account of the Cross resonates with the ways in which twentieth-century British theology has developed the implications for creative activity of de la Taille's maxim.⁵⁷ Certainly, Bulgakov himself understood the Cross as the figure of his own writing. In the preface to *The Unfading Light*, Bulgakov presents the 'miscellanies' that make up the book as a refusal of 'flight from spiritual fate, from my historical cross.'⁵⁸ Earlier in the same preface, he describes the work as 'a creative act of the spiritual life: a book, but no longer a book, not only a book.'⁵⁹ As Bulgakov describes his writing in terms redolent of the discussion of creativity and *podvig* in *The Comforter*, he encourages his readers to interpret his work in terms of authentic Christian asceticism, as an act of his own self-determination. In yet another anticipation of his thinking on creativity and prophecy in *The Comforter*, Bulgakov articulates the ambition of *The Unfading Light* as at once an assumption of the full weight of the present and a cultivation of hope for the future: 'even if the spiritual essence is ulcerated by problems and perforated with doubts, still in its heart faith does not grow scarce and hope still shines.'⁶⁰ Indeed, Bulgakov intimates that his task in this work is an eschatological transformation of present awareness: 'all our problems with their presentiments and portents are the shadow cast by the one who

55 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 306.

56 Ibid., 305.

57 Three crucial texts in this development are David Jones' 'Art and Sacrament,' in idem, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), Rowan Williams' exposition of Augustine's account of signification, and particularly Scriptural meaning, in terms of the Cross in his 'Language Reality and Desire,' in ibid., *On Augustine* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 41–58, and, of course, Catherine Pickstock's seminal thesis that the transubstantiation is the condition of all meaning in *After Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

58 Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light*, xxxvii.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., xxxviii.

comes.⁶¹ In the light of the preface, it becomes difficult not to read Bulgakov's discussion of prophecy in *The Comforter* as self-reflective, a description of his self-understanding as a writer and thinker: 'prophesying, as creative activity and inspiration, is directed toward the future, not above but through the present, which is pregnant with the future.'⁶²

Strikingly, Bulgakov will continue to employ the genre of authorial preface to set his highly speculative works within such a prophetic frame. In the prefaces to each of the volumes in the major dogmatic trilogy, Bulgakov situates his works on the threshold of a particular vision of the world, of the *future* of the world. This is particularly true of the final volume, where he describes the events of the first half of the twentieth century as 'paling' in comparison to what is to be revealed.⁶³ But in the preface to *The Lamb of God* also, there is a summons to the Church to remember its faith in what is to come and the commitment to the world that flows from that faith.⁶⁴ The implication is that these essays, which present Bulgakov's 'sophiological' vision of the *unity* of God and creation, human history and Divine Providence, have as their goal the stimulation of a renewed engagement of the Church in the world, in view of the fulfilment of all things. In each of these prefaces, then, Bulgakov invites his readers to understand his texts in terms of the accounts of ascesis, creativity and prophecy that they contain.

For we see that the articulation of that sophiological vision is itself a *labour*, a discipline of proclaiming Christ as the 'one in whom all things cohere,' in defiance of the 'disbelief in Christ's royal ministry' that the tragedies of history provoke.⁶⁵ A concrete instance of this comes in Bulgakov's exegetical-speculative reflections on the figure of Judas. In the concluding section of those essays, Bulgakov declares his motivation in undertaking this meditation on the apostle-traitor: an effort to understand Russia's own betrayal of Christ in the Bolshevik Revolution. By interpreting Judas' betrayal as an act of misdirected *love* for Christ and *hope* for the future, thus holding open the possibility of Judas' redemption, Bulgakov likewise seeks to make Russia's apostasy a moment within the development of its religious consciousness:

61 Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light*, , xxxviii.

62 Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 296.

63 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, xvii.

64 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, xv.

65 *Ibid.*

in the rejection of Christ and his betrayal by the Russian people, we are also dealing with a religious aberration, which emerged [...] with an apocalyptic intensity of faith in the future and a genuine desire to realise it. And we can hope that this will toward the future will not be displeasing and hateful to God.⁶⁶

The essay on Judas is an effort to transform Bulgakov and his reader's perspective on both the present predicament and future destiny of Russia. So with the major trilogy, we might say that Bulgakov's sophiology, the cosmic vision of the inherence of Creation in God, the co-ordination of history and Providence, is an attempt to secure at the highest level of generality a transformation of perspective, according to which the future becomes something not to be dreaded, but longed for.

This is how we ought to understand Bulgakov's final work: his dogmatic exegesis of the Revelation to St. John. Indeed, there is a telling beauty in Bulgakov's final work being devoted to such an audacious expansion of the horizon of human history and activity. For in this work, Bulgakov is insistent on interpreting the prophecies of Revelation in millenarian or chiliastic terms, as Antoine Arjakovsky has discussed in his contribution to this volume. The dominant opinion 'that the prophecy of the first resurrection and the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth does not relate to a *new* event and revelation of the Church in earthly history,' is for Bulgakov 'outright war not only against the prophecy [...] but yet more against its fundamental meaning.'⁶⁷ Instead, Bulgakov maintains that 'the thousand-year reign is a definite era in the history of the Church with a beginning and an end.'⁶⁸ The understandable, instinctive response of readers to this text may be to see it as yet another instance of Bulgakov being 'unable to help himself' in asserting a controversial reading of a settled text. After all, was Origen's allegorical interpretation of the thousand-year reign not—as Henri de Lubac has insisted, following Newman—a crucial moment in securing a stable Christian orthodoxy?⁶⁹

But there is a difference between the self-consciousness of the early Church and that of the Church in the twentieth century. 'The first Christians had such a living recollection of Christ's presence in the world [...] they were waiting for Him and calling upon Him, they spoke and thought of His advent as something

66 Sergii Bulgakov, 'Iuda Iskariot: Apostol-Predatel' (II),' *Put'* 27 (1931): 3–42 (40).

67 Bulgakov, *Apocalypse*, 180–81.

68 *Ibid.*, 183.

69 Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit: l'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), 103–04.

that would happen the next day.⁷⁰ Whilst ‘ugly exaggerations and perversions [that] arose out of this feeling’ needed to be corrected, a need that excuses the ‘neutralisation’ of the prophecy concerning the millennium, a graver deformity in the Church’s life has taken hold. Namely, a loss of hope, an inability to join with the early Church in its prayer ‘even so, come, Lord Jesus.’⁷¹ Bulgakov’s chiliastic interpretation of the Revelation to St. John finds its justification in the restoration of the early Church’s anticipation of the future, an anticipation which for Bulgakov is the condition (and outcome) of authentic Christian asceticism. Indeed, in keeping with Bulgakov’s fondness for antinomic resolutions to theological problems, his ‘chiliastic’ interpretation of the thousand-year reign combines a valorisation of human action with an insistence on the eschaton as a second creation, or direct act of the Father upon the created order. This is consistent with the eschatology developed in *The Bride of the Lamb*, where the eschaton is at once the outcome of an immanent process—the ‘ripening’ of creation, fostered by human endeavour—and a transcendent ‘catastrophe.’⁷²

Bulgakov concludes the first and last of the volumes of his major trilogy with the prayer that closes the Revelation to St. John: ‘even so, come, Lord Jesus.’⁷³ This is the very prayer that the Church of the present cannot bring itself to say, paralysed as it is by fear of the Last Judgement and disbelief in the presence of Christ in history. This is the prayer that the Church must learn to say again: ‘it must become not only an object of particular prayerful attention, but a new spiritual orientation.’⁷⁴ Is the placement of this prayer at the *end* of these volumes a mere rhetorical flourish? Or does this placement signify that the culmination of these texts is the *restoration* of the possibility of such a prayer, the restoration of Christian hope? ‘We are concerned with nothing more nor less than a new (and at the same time primordial) feeling of life, which must be born again in Christianity, and this must be a spiritual and prayerful turning-point in the life of the Church.’⁷⁵ My contention in this chapter is that sophiology does not merely *reflect* such a feeling, justified or not, on the part of

70 Bulgakov, *Apocalypse*, 257–58.

71 *Ibid.*, 276–77.

72 On the eschaton as simultaneously ‘ripening’ and ‘catastrophe,’ see *The Bride of the Lamb*, 322. ‘The transfiguration of the world, with the coming of its “end”, is, of course, determined not only by its internal structure but also by the direct action of God upon the world, by a new creative act of God.’ See also the editors’ introduction in Bulgakov, *Apocalypse*, xi.

73 It is, of course, not the last word of the book, which is instead the apostolic blessing.

74 Bulgakov, *Apocalypse*, 277.

75 *Ibid.*

its author. Rather, taking my cue from Bulgakov's own self-understanding as a writer, we should understand both the writing and reading of Bulgakov's works as efforts in the cultivation of the second theological virtue: hope. We need only look at our own present time to see that, understood in this light, Bulgakov's sophiology is as needed now as when it was first put to paper.