



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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The Training for Dying and Death: A New Reading of Bulgakov's Sophiology

*Paul L. Gavrilyuk*¹

*The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner
is to train for dying and death.
(Plato, Phaedo 64a3–4)*

Sergii Bulgakov's vast theological system is commonly presented under the general heading of "sophiology" or the teaching about Sophia, the Wisdom of God. For the Russian theologian, sophiological teaching provided a framework for addressing the central problem of God's relation to the world by extending the Chalcedonian dogma about Christ's two natures into the general principle of Godmanhood. Without rejecting this widely accepted reading of Bulgakov, this paper proposes that the central inspiration of Bulgakov's system was a set of revelatory experiences that he had while confronting mortality in various forms. I show how the encounter with mortality and dying shaped Bulgakov's worldview from his early childhood experiences to his struggle with throat cancer towards the end of his life. My contention is that Bulgakov's central theological intuition—that all things are "in God"—stems from his earth-shattering experiences of witnessing the deaths of those close to him, which were accompanied by an equally powerful sense of the reality of eternal life and resurrection.

1 First publication: Paul Gavrilyuk, "The Training for Dying and Death: A New Reading of Bulgakov's Sophiology," in *Christian Dying: Witnesses from the Tradition*, ed. Matthew Levering and George Kalantzis (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers <https://wipfandstock.com/9781532630965/christian-dying/>, 2018), 160–78.

In order to make my case, I examine the sources that are often neglected in the discussions of Bulgakov's theology: his *Autobiographical Notes*, *Spiritual Diary*, and the essay "The Sophiology of Death."² Having established the importance of the *memento mori* theme in Bulgakov's spirituality, I consider its implications for his theological system. I reach the conclusion that eternity revealed through death is an existential axle of Bulgakov's sophiology.

Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) grew up in the family of a Russian priest who was attached to a cemetery chapel in the provincial town of Livny and whose livelihood depended upon officiating at funeral services. As a boy, Sergii would find himself regularly participating in a solemn Easter procession, singing "Christ is risen" outside the cemetery chapel amidst the old graves.³ The encounters with death and dying, sanctified by the solemnity of the Orthodox services for the departed, were a part of the young Bulgakov's everyday existence. Years later Bulgakov would write about his childhood home: "I do not recall any weddings; but I do recall numerous funerals."⁴ In this house, one by one, most members of his large extended family expired, beginning with his grandfather. As Bulgakov reminisced years later:

With his departure, death for the first time entered into my young mind (I was 12). I was, on the one hand, mystically shaken, and on the other hand, defended myself with animal self-love. Funerals in Livny were done right: it was some sort of Egypt. And first of all, there was no fear of death. The relatives, first of all women, arrived to dress the departed, to pray for him, and to help with the household chores with

2 These works were written during different periods of Bulgakov's life. The first part of *Autobiographical Notes*, entitled "My Motherland," was written in the beginning of 1938 during Bulgakov's trip to Athens; the surviving entries of the *Spiritual Diary* date to 1924–1926; finally, the first part of "The Sophiology of Death" was written in 1939, sometime after Bulgakov underwent two surgeries to treat his throat cancer in the May of the same year, while the second part comes from a diary of 1926. The editions cited here are as follows, in my own translation: "Avtobiograficheskoe," in S. N. Bulgakov: *Pro et Contra* (St. Petersburg: RKhGI, 2003), vol. 1: 63–111; *Dnevnik dukhovnyi* (Moscow: Obshchedostupnii Pravoslavnyi Universitet osnovannii Aleksandrom Menem, 2008); "Sofiologiya smerti," *Vestnik Russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia* 127 (1978), [I:] 18–41; 128 (1978), [II:] 13–32. Meanwhile, the latter two works have become available in English translation: Sergius Bulgakov, *Spiritual Diary* (Brooklyn, NY, 2022), trans. Roberto De La Noval and Mark Roosien; Sergius Bulgakov, *The Sophiology of Death. Essays on Eschatology: Personal, Political, Universal* (Eugene, OR, 2021), trans. Roberto De La Noval.

3 Bulgakov, "Avtobiograficheskoe," 69.

4 *Ibid.*, 65.

a joyous, solemn feeling. Then came the funeral in the church with the carrying of the coffin around town accompanied by the ringing of the bells, the giving of the body back to the earth, the veneration of the tomb, and prayer-filled memory. They bury well in Livny. If it is possible to speak of the sophianicity of a funeral, then it could be said that the burial was sophianic, bearing a mark of eternity, a triumph of life, and a union with nature. "Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." [Gen 3: 19, KJV]⁵

While these words reflect Bulgakov's much later interpretation of his childhood encounter with the reality of death, it is plausible that even as a child he could experience as vague calls of the heart those things that would with time grow into deeply rooted convictions: the absence of the fear of death, the awareness of the presence of God, the triumph of eternity over time, and a sense of passing into another world in order to reach a greater state of union with the cosmos.

After the death of his grandfather, "the angel of death unceasingly stood before our house,"⁶ remarked Bulgakov, reflecting on the deaths of five of his siblings, two dying in infancy, one in early childhood, one in adolescence, and one in young adulthood. Perhaps the most profound impact was that of the death of his younger brother Mikhail, of consumption:

Even now, after 40 years, my eyes are filled with tears when I recall his holy, beautiful death. Before he departed this world, he was sent like an angel to pour the treasure of his death into my soul. This was at night. It was evident that his agony had begun. All stood up, surrounded him, and my father began to read the service for those about to die (everybody felt that this was quite natural). "Is this a service for those about to die?"—asked Mikhail and began to say farewell to everybody, kissing everyone for the last time. He kissed me so [...] He particularly wanted me to be near him, when I was so full of myself, only of myself [...] He left peacefully and the mystery of death was filled with light. His hands, as the hands of those dying of consumption, were white. The sun was breaking out, my brother Lelia and I went into the garden, and my heart was filled with heavenly music, with a celebration that is made possible by tender, quiet, faithful death, which opens up the heavens and angels [...] Yes, death was our educator in this household so full of death.⁷

5 Bulgakov, "Avtobiograficheskoe," 72–73.

6 Ibid., 75.

7 Ibid., 74.

Not all deaths in Bulgakov's family caused him to humbly acquiesce in the inevitable. Bulgakov's recollection of the death of his infant brother Kos'ma was quite chilling: "I remember the night with the dead body of my infant brother at home and my mother's howling cries at night [...] This event has crept into my heart as a call and dread and awe-inspiring memory of eternity."⁸ Bulgakov noted that he had a similar experience on the occasion of his grandfather's death in his household. "Awe-inspiring memory of eternity" remained an existential constant of his subsequent confrontations with human mortality, animating and shaping his theological thought.

The loss of his five-year-old brother Nikolai was a deeply wounding and fearful experience, filling Bulgakov's household with grief and lament. Years later, in 1909, Bulgakov would have to endure the agony and death of his own three-year-old son, Ivan, similar to his parents' suffering through the death of Nikolai and other children. For Bulgakov, Ivan's death was not only a bleeding wound, a scar upon his family that would never heal completely, but also a profound epiphany of love. He describes the revelatory character of confronting Ivan's death in *The Unfading Light* (1917), a book that is generally regarded as marking a theological turn in his thinking:

My holy one, before the holy shrine of your relics, near your pure body, my white one, my light-filled boy, I have learned *how* God speaks, I understood the meaning of the words "God said!" And my heart was granted a new, previously unknown clairvoyance as the heavenly joy came upon it and together with the darkness of Godforsakenness, God came to reign in it. My heart opened itself to the pain and torment of other people and their previously foreign and closed hearts opened up to me with their pain and grief. For a single moment of my life I came to understand what it meant to love with the love of Christ, rather than with the love that was human, selfish and seeking its own. It is as if the veil that separated me from others fell and all the darkness, bitterness, hurt, anger, and suffering of their hearts was revealed to me. Unspeakably elated, ecstatic, self-forgetting, I spoke then—you remember this, my white one!—I spoke: *God said to me*, and, hearing you, with equal simplicity added, *you spoke to me too*. And God spoke to me then and you spoke to me! Presently I again see only in darkness and cold and, hence, can speak of these things only from memory, but I have learned the meaning of the words *God said*. [...]

8 Bulgakov, "Avtobiograficheskoe," 75.

Listening to the Epistle Reading [in the church] about the resurrection and about the general sudden transformation [...] I came to understand for the first time that it would happen *for certain* and *how* it would happen.⁹

As Bulgakov was praying at the deathbed of his son, something new and profound had happened. We might recall that, according to his own admission, he defended himself emotionally from the death of his grandfather with “animal self-love” and that he persevered in being “full of” himself when his dying brother Mikhail reached out to him in the last embrace of love. But in the death of Bulgakov’s son, it is as if the “the veil that separated him from others fell off” and he was given an epiphany of complete, all-consuming love for others, love that had enabled him to enter experientially into the grief and pain of others like never before. In the encounter with his son’s death, Bulgakov was also given to understand and experientially enter into the reality behind Paul’s words in 1 Cor. 15: 51–53: “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” The death of his son had lifted the veil of his self-love and given him a new, more profound taste of transfigured humanity. In light of these deeply formative and ego-shattering experiences, Bulgakov could write: “One’s Motherland is only where there is death. This is why the last word about the Motherland is about death.”¹⁰

The epiphany received in 1909 would continue shedding its light upon Bulgakov’s priestly ministry, especially his care for the dying and his sense of the participation of the saints in the Eucharistic communion. I would also suggest that this epiphany gave him peace and spiritual strength in the times of extreme adversity and accounted for the eschatological thrust of his sophiology.

Following a calling common to the six generations of his ancestors, Bulgakov became a priest in June 1918, less than a year after the Bolshevik coup d’état in Russia. The price that Bulgakov immediately paid for his ordination was the loss of a university post in Moscow for his perceived opposition to the atheist regime. During the time of the Civil War, he found himself serving at a provincial parish in Crimea not dissimilar to his father’s parish in Livny. Here Fr. Sergii would witness with great anguish how some of his parishioners would starve to death and he felt guilty for remaining alive, although he was

9 S. N. Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii* (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 18.

10 Bulgakov, “Avtobiograficheskoe,” 77.

gradually deprived of basic means of existence. But the Soviet authorities could not rest until they quashed all opposition to their power. In 1922, Bulgakov was arrested and had to watch his fellow prisoners being shot by the drunken officers of the Red Army. In early 1923, the regime expelled Bulgakov on one of the “Philosophy Steamers” along with other prominent religious thinkers and philosophers of his time. Bulgakov put the matter astringently: “As she was herself rotting in a casket, Russia expelled me as useless, having branded me with the mark of a slave.”¹¹ The experience of expulsion and deracination was both traumatic and stimulating. Not unlike Bulgakov’s encounter with death and bereavement, which was at once heartbreaking and transforming, the experience of dying to his own country was a both blow and a providential opportunity. Among many burdens of émigré life—the loss of most of his Russian-speaking audience, the challenges of leading the St. Sergii Orthodox Theological Institute against much strife and opposition, financial instability, and finally the advent of fascism and World War II—none was as emotionally draining as the permanent separation from his elder son, Fedor (1902–1991), who was left behind the Iron Curtain in 1923, never to be seen by his parents again. Bulgakov often agonized over the fate of his son, especially when for long stretches of time he did not receive any letters from him. After World War II, Fedor was able to travel abroad for the first time in order to visit his parents’ graves at Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois near Paris.

Bulgakov’s *Spiritual Diary*, which he kept from 1924 to 1926 during his first years in Paris, is a unique testament to his life with God. The main thrust of the diary is vertical, rather than horizontal. Bulgakov is primarily addressing God and his soul, as he stands *coram Deo*. He is brutally honest with himself, functioning as his own harshest judge, sometimes to the point of being quite self-effacing. He registers his human interactions, but rarely reveals many particulars. The diary is a testament to Bulgakov’s profoundly Christocentric and Mariological piety. While sophiological motifs appear, Sophia is never made an object of prayer or private adoration, as in Vladimir Soloviev. Whatever one might claim about Bulgakov’s theological “modernism,” his spiritual life was profoundly grounded in his childhood experiences of death and dying, as well as his attendance at the Orthodox services, especially those of the feasts of Easter and the Dormition of the Theotokos (an Orthodox equivalent of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, celebrated on August 15). The diary contains Bulgakov’s own Akathistos (hymn of praise) to Mary, in which he speaks of

11 Bulgakov, “Iz dnevnika,” in *Tikhie dumy*, ed. V. V. Sapov and K. M. Dolgov (Moscow: Respublika, 1996), 351.

her as “bringing consolation at the hour of death”¹² and “making death a joyous feast by her light.”¹³ Bulgakov is strikingly traditional and conventional, almost pre-modern, in his piety, especially if one considers the prominence of the *memento mori* theme in his diary. In fact, his observation that “life must be a constant dying for the Lord”¹⁴ could serve as the diary’s epigraph. The prevailing tone of the diary reminds one of the spiritual sobriety and clarity of St. John of Kronshtadt’s *My Life in Christ*. Bulgakov speaks of the love of God, of prayer, of humble acceptance of suffering, and of being mindful of God, and of his own failures with remarkable honesty and simplicity. The theosophic motifs, associated with the period when he was influenced by Pavel Florenskii, are conspicuously absent from the diary, as are sophiological speculations.

Bulgakov reflects on mortality in the context of dying and parting with the dead in several diary entries. For example, in the entry dated October 7(20), 1924, he writes:

We are created for eternity, it is not here below that we are called to live—this becomes evident when the most precious person departs for the other world but the lover remains here, in this world. How does one save love from powerlessness, how does one save the soul from despair? [One can do so] only by God and in God, only through prayer. The wings of prayer will carry us into another world, they will give us an invisible connection with the beloved, they will carry us closer and closer to him until the hour of our own call and until the light of our eyes goes out too.¹⁵

In his capacity of father confessor and parish priest, Bulgakov attended to the needs of those approaching the hour of death, following in the steps of his own father. At times he speaks of this ministry with poetic lyricism. Here, for example, is the beginning of his diary entry dated January 23 (February 5), 1925:

I witnessed a striking and touching picture of a young maiden’s departure to God. The Lord brought me to her deathbed not long before her end. Christ visited her and communed her of His Body and Blood by my sinful hand. Then her soul took flight to the Bridegroom as a bird flying into the blue abyss of the sky. And heaven appeared in that room of sorrow, the Lord was close, granting the miracle of divine

12 Bulgakov, *Dnevnik dukhovnyi*, 48.

13 *Ibid.*, 49.

14 *Ibid.*, 89.

15 *Ibid.*, 53–54.

mercy. She lay quietly, clearly and plainly, having known everything that we do not know here below. And around her everything was prayerful and solemn.¹⁶

Tending to the needs of the dying meant that for Bulgakov *memento mori* was not a solitary exercise, as it was often the case for the ascetics of the past, but an experience of entering compassionately into the sorrow of another person's encounter with death: "I was at the deathbed of a young girl dying of consumption and my soul was burning as I was overwhelmed by pity at the sight of this flower cut off from life."¹⁷ For Bulgakov this compassion was hard-earned, for it was the death of his own son Ivan that lifted up the veil of his self-love and broke down the boundaries separating his self from those of others. Death was more than a revelation of human brokenness; it was also a revelation of love, joy, and eternity. In Bulgakov's own words:

For the first time in my life I have learned by experience that death is the greatest joy that *awaits* each human being, because the Theotokos and her love, the angels, the saints, the relatives and the loved ones, and the Lord await him. This encounter is full of awe and trepidation, but it is also full of boundless joy. The desire "to depart and be with the Lord" [Phil 1:23]—these words of the apostle have become a living truth for the first time.¹⁸

Death is more than parting with this life, it is entering into the joy of the Lord, into the communion of the saints. In this context, Bulgakov speaks of love that is "strong as death" (Cant. 8:6) and, boldly asserts that "love is death and death is love," intending to convey the point that the revelation of true love becomes possible at the threshold of death.

In Bulgakov's own life, two experiences that left him hovering on the brink of death were profoundly transformative. The first occurred during his first serious illness in January 1926, when for several days, if not weeks, he burned with high fever. He described his experience in the second part of his essay "The Sophiology of Death," published posthumously. While he was feverish, Bulgakov "lost the consciousness of being in a limited place in space and time," "the consciousness of having a body that rests on a bed," and "lost awareness of the boundaries of the self, which became 'we,' a plurality into which my 'I'

16 Bulgakov, *Dnevnik dukhovnyi*, 124.

17 *Ibid.*, 10.

18 *Ibid.*, 39.

entered as an indefinite point.”¹⁹ At the same time, “my spiritual ‘I’ achieved a greater sharpness and consciousness. It was an unadorned judge of my life. I was seized by fear and trembling. It was as if my soul underwent the trials of hell in which the burning wounds of my soul were being opened up. At that time the Lord spared me and protected me from the visions of the demonic. But fever coupled with the spiritual pangs created a fiery furnace [...] This experience taught me the meaning of burning in the furnace of blazing fire without burning down” [Dan. 3: 23–27]. The transformation brought about by this hellish experience was most extraordinary:

Suddenly—after this burning—cool and consolation penetrated the fiery furnace of my heart. How can I relate this miracle of God’s mercy, of forgiveness? With all my being I felt its boundless joy and lightness. My guardian angel, who was with me ceaselessly, put this into my heart. I suddenly felt that nothing separated me from the Lord for I had been redeemed by the Lord [...] Even during confession I felt that I already had forgiveness. I had a feeling that my sins had been burned away, that they were no more.

But this mystery of forgiveness was revealed to me only in conjunction with the mystery of death, for I felt at the same time that my life had ended and that I was dying. But where was the fear of death? Only the joy of death was there, the joy of the Lord. Heavenly joy, which cannot be expressed in human language, filled all my being.²⁰

Bulgakov goes on to say that during his illness he had periods of being terrified of death primarily because he despaired of leaving his family without his care. But this feeling was a passing weakness which was soon replaced by the sense of entering into the communion of the saints and of the breaking of the boundary between the living and the dead. This experience was accompanied by an equally potent feeling of being reunited with his deceased son, Ivan, and of “the presence of God reigning over everything. I have learned forever that only God and his mercy exist, that we must live only for God, love only God, and seek only the kingdom of God, and that everything that blocks God is a delusion.”²¹ The sense of the abiding presence of God coupled with the liberation from the fear of death is present with great consistency in Bulgakov’s earlier accounts of his encounters with death and dying. The novel element in the experience

19 Bulgakov, “Sofiologija smerti,” II: 13.

20 Ibid., 14.

21 Ibid., 15.

of 1926 is that of profound assurance of forgiveness. While such experience is sanctioned by the Orthodox Church in the sacrament of confession, the matter of assurance is not generally emphasized, as it is in Pietism, Methodism, and other Christian movements. Elsewhere, Bulgakov speaks more concretely of being relieved from his fascination with the particularly dubious forms of theosophy and from the Gnostic elements in his sophiology.²² Whatever the particulars of this experience, the effect was purgative and profoundly freeing. The experience only reinforced the conviction with which Bulgakov continued to theologize *sub specie aeternitatis*.

One may also find in these experiences the wellspring of Bulgakov's remarkable tranquility in the face of the Sophia Affair, which cast a long shadow of ecclesiastical condemnation upon his theological system and threatened to subject his life's work to *damnatio memoriae*. In 1935, as the theological opposition to sophiology began to mount in the Orthodox Church, Bulgakov demonstrated extraordinary intellectual tenacity in upholding his views and developing his system with an even greater speculative depth rather than maintaining silence in order not to provoke his numerous detractors. It could be said that Bulgakov showed more tolerance towards his theological enemies than some of his close friends, who rose rather passionately to his defense. In his memoirs he attributes this attitude to his aversion to fighting and cowardice, while one might be more disposed to ascribe Bulgakov's reaction to the nobility of his spirit and gentleness.

In 1939, Bulgakov was diagnosed with throat cancer and endured a second encounter with death during his surgery. It was the experience of living through the operation and its aftermath that occasioned his writing the first part of "The Sophiology of Death" the same year. In this essay, Bulgakov's description of his near-death experience reaches a new level of sincerity and immediacy. He does not gloss over the parts of the experience that do not fit into the canons of conventional piety. His description is more direct, sober, and free from rosy sentimentality. He paints on the canvas of his soul with the assurance of a man who has glimpsed into eternity and who no longer has anything to hide either from others or from himself. It is in this essay that Bulgakov offers his most nuanced theological analysis of dying.

He had two surgeries during which his throat was cut up without a general anesthetic. Since he was conscious throughout, he could see the implements with which the cancerous growth was being removed from his body. The main physiological state that he described was that of suffocation in which he was

22 Bulgakov, Letter to G. Florovsky, 8 (21) February 1926, GFP PUL, Box 12, f. 11.

no longer capable of praying. Bulgakov was hovering on the brink of death and was exhausted by the sufferings of his body to the point of being unable to experience what he had previously experienced on several occasions, namely, the joy of death as entering into the light-filled life with God. Instead, this experience was a new revelation of co-suffering and co-dying with the crucified Christ:

Christ died our human death in order to accept through it the death of the God-man. This is why our dying, as co-dying with Him, is a revelation about Christ's death, although not a revelation about His glory. I have come to know the meaning of the apostle's words "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4: 10–12). And also, "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8: 22–23).

Pondering the matter further, Bulgakov noted that

Dying was not resolved in a death, but remained a revelation about the way of death, which, after Christ, awaits each man, whether he wishes it or not. Mortality is contained in the fallen human nature that was assumed by Christ in his mortal human being. Each illness is an awareness of mortality, its revelation, which nobody can avoid. Its measure is determined by the strength of illness, by how close it brings us to death. Objectively, I was at a hair's length from death during the first part of my illness, subjectively I was nearly completely enveloped by mortality and came to know it for this reason. I came to know my mortality as the Lord's cruciform dying in his Godforsakenness even to death, from "why have You forsaken me" to "into Your hands I command my spirit." Dying does not contain a revelation about death itself, such revelation is given only to those who have tasted death and thereby have left this world without return. Behind the threshold of death there follows a revelation of life after death as the beginning of new existence; the experience on this side of death has nothing to tell us about this reality. Dying knows nothing of the revelation of the life after death and of the resurrection.²³

23 Bulgakov, "Sofiologija smerti," I: 41.

It is remarkable that Bulgakov's last recorded and analyzed experience of confronting his mortality was a revelation of his co-dying with Christ, rather than the revelation of entering into the communion of the saints and the life with God. While the two revelatory experiences were closely related and followed one upon the other, Bulgakov sought to differentiate them as clearly as possible, for this very differentiation was not solely a matter of theoretical speculation, but the content of a divine disclosure. In the same essay he admitted that even in dying it was possible, by the grace of God, to receive a foretaste of the joy of the resurrection, as he himself had done during his purgative illness of 1926, and as he had received on other occasions when he witnessed the death of those dear to him. But in the revelatory experience of 1939 it was the sorrow of Godforsakenness, rather than the joyous foretaste of the resurrection, that was disclosed to him.

Throughout his life, Bulgakov remembered and carefully recorded his encounters with death and dying. In his childhood experiences, the predominant motif was the acceptance of the reality of death within the framework of Orthodox beliefs and practices, which his family took for granted. His grandfather's death left Bulgakov "mystically shaken," yet the experience itself was solemn and filled with a sense of God's abiding presence and even beauty. Of the siblings that he lost while he was still a child, his most vivid memory was that of the death of his younger brother, Mikhail. Strikingly, Bulgakov speaks of this experience without any lingering bitterness or rebellion; the dominant feeling is that of humbly accepting human fragility and mortality. There is also a lingering regret that this death did not break his self-centeredness. Only years later, when his own son Ivan died, did Bulgakov experience a shattering of his selfish defenses and experienced this particular loss as a revelation of compassionate love, indeed as a divine call to selfless love. In his priestly ministry, Bulgakov often attended to the needs of the dying. Again, the dominant hue of these experiences is the sorrowful joy of sending a soul to God, purified and released of its burden. The experiences of 1926 and 1939 distinguish themselves from the rest as Bulgakov's confrontations with his own mortality rather than that of others. The experience of 1926 brought about the assurance of having his sins purged in the fiery furnace of suffering. With this assurance also came a profound sense of Christ's victory over the power of death and the joy of the resurrection. The experience of 1939 enabled Bulgakov to enter into the mystery of co-dying with Christ.

The Revelatory Character of Death in Bulgakov's Sophiology

Such a profound and frequent confrontation with mortality had a deep impact on Bulgakov as a churchman and as a thinker. It would be naïve to claim that the causal connection was unidirectional, that the experiences influenced theology and not vice versa. It would be safe to assume instead that he came to interpret his experiences in light of his theological assumptions and that his theological views were in turn shaped and deepened by his experiences. One undisputable example of Bulgakov interpreting the phenomenological content of his *childhood* experience in light of his later theological views is his discussion of the “sophianic” character of death in his *Autobiographic Notes*. Obviously, as a twelve-year-old child he could not possibly think of the solemn acceptance of death received within the context of the Orthodox funeral service in terms of his later teaching about Sophia, the Wisdom of God. It is also significant that during the period when he lived through the deaths of his grandfather and his five brothers he turned away from the faith of his parents, rebelled against traditional Christianity by embracing nihilism and materialism in a Marxist form. But his fifteen-year rebellion, lasting approximately from 1888 to 1904,²⁴ does not surface in his much later recollections (1938) of how he reacted to the deaths of his relatives. Was the trauma of so many deaths in the family also a factor in his temporary loss of his childhood faith? One would search in vain for any such connection in Bulgakov's writings. His existential crisis seems to have been caused by a failed system of state-sponsored theological education rather than by the anguish of losses.

What was, then, the relationship between Bulgakov's sophiology and his experiences of death? Did such experiences factor at all into his theological thinking? What existential impulses gave birth to his thought? A commonly accepted answer to the last question is that the main driving force of his sophiological teaching is his lifelong effort to resolve the metaphysical problems surrounding cosmology, especially the problem of an intermediary between God and creation. His solution was to extend the Chalcedonian dogma of Christ's two natures into a general metaphysical principle of Godmanhood, or divine-human unity, along the lines proposed earlier by Vladimir Soloviev. This is a plausible interpretation of the central impulse behind sophiology, corroborated by ample evidence from Bulgakov's writings. Nevertheless, I would propose more controversially that the central intuition of sophiology—that all things find their eternal ground in God and that God is present in all things—

24 Bulgakov, “Avtobiograficheskoe,” 78.

also has a crucial *existential* dimension conveyed by the experiences of death and dying.

This claim becomes more plausible if we examine *how* the earth-shattering experience of his son's death is introduced in *The Unfading Light*. At the beginning of the book, Bulgakov sets out to show, in a quasi-Kantian fashion, what makes religion possible. For Bulgakov, the main factor is experiential: people reporting to have an encounter with the divine. While claims to have religious experience could be challenged on various skeptical grounds, in the final analysis the skepticism does not do justice to the world-orienting value of such experiences. As one example, Bulgakov mentions his confrontation with the reality of his son's death as a moment when his selfish ego was shattered and his heart was flooded with compassion for all who were suffering and wounded. More importantly, he received these truths not upon reflection, but as a prophetic word, as God speaking directly into his heart. In his later writings Bulgakov consistently placed a very high cognitive premium on private revelations received while facing death and dying. While he had a rich and complex mystical life, and no less complicated spiritual evolution, Bulgakov had never trifled with the concept of prophetic speech and did not appeal to direct divine speaking on other occasions. Clearly, the experience of Ivan's death was a cognitive breakthrough that directed and animated his thought, even if the final shape of his speculative system appeared as a result of much deliberation.

A different way of casting the same point would be to say that Bulgakov regarded the sense of the abiding presence of God in all of creation, eternity underlying time, to be the final truth of human existence and that any construal of the world that ignored that truth was a profound distortion. He expresses this point rather forcefully in his *Spiritual Diary*: "Only God exists!"; which is to say that the foundation of reality is eternal life with God rather than mortality and contingency. While the sense of the presence of God could be in principle available everywhere — and Bulgakov's enduring interest in "nature mysticism" could be viewed as an important aspect of the "sophianicity of the world" theme — its most concentrated revelation is granted in the experience of passing from this world, in which God's existence is often dubious, into another world, in which it is an evident and overwhelming reality. Death itself (as distinct from dying) was for Bulgakov a revelation of love and joy precisely because death marked an entrance into the communion of the saints and, more importantly, into the communion with God. For these reasons, I would submit that the world-orienting experience underlying sophiology was that of the encounter with death. Like the knight in Ingmar Bergman's film *The*

Seventh Seal, Bulgakov met death at the dawn of his life and continued to have transformative encounters with death and dying throughout his life.

In his theological investigations Bulgakov explored the dual nature of death at great length. Death was at once the end of earthly life and the beginning of the new life. As an end of this life, death had the effect of severing vital human bonds and for that reason brought sorrow, misery, and hopelessness; as a beginning of the new life, death could be joyous, peaceful, and liberating. Bulgakov's lifelong acquaintance with death supplied the experiential knowledge of both states. It was this tasted knowledge that fueled Bulgakov's theological investigations into the nature of death.

"The Sophiology of Death" was Bulgakov's second and most definitive exploration of the nature of death, written *after* his cancer surgery of 1939. In the 1930s, sometime before the experience of 1939, Bulgakov also explored a similar set of issues in the seventh chapter of his book, *The Bride of the Lamb*, which had been completely finished by 1939, but could be published only posthumously, in 1945, because of the troubles with Bulgakov's health and World War II.²⁵ The book is the last volume of his major trilogy on Godmanhood, the previous two volumes dealing with Christology (*The Lamb of God*) and pneumatology (*The Comforter*). *The Bride of the Lamb* covers the doctrine of creation, ecclesiology, and eschatology, to which the seventh chapter "On Death and the State after Death" provides an introduction.

In the introductory chapter, Bulgakov raises two central questions: What is death? and What does it mean for Christ to die? He answers the first question within the framework of the threefold division of human nature into spirit, soul, and body. Bulgakov writes that "death is a release of the soul from the bonds of the body and is a great consecration, a revelation of the spiritual world," adding that "this revelation of the spiritual world in death is a great joy and unspeakable celebration for those who were separated from it in this life but craved it, and an inexpressible terror, hardship, and turmoil for those who did not want this spiritual world, did not know it, and rejected it."²⁶ Bulgakov's numerous experiences of death and dying underlie this succinct statement of a revelatory dimension of death.

Bulgakov notes that death is a result of the original sin. Because of the original sin human life is surrounded with decay and dying from the very beginning. Yet, life is not sunken in death, does not emerge from death, as the

25 Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agntsa* (Moscow: Obshchedostupnyi pravoslavnyi universitet osnovannyi Aleksandrom Menem, 2005), 374–402.

26 *Ibid.*, 383, 384.

materialists hold; on the contrary, death is a passing state of life, it has to be understood as a passing from one form of life here below into another form, in the kingdom above. Death is a threshold between two lives.

Bulgakov questions the presupposition of traditional Christian eschatology that there could be no spiritual change in the life after death. He argues that the spirit cannot remain inactive and that the spirits of the dead remain receptive both to God and to the prayer of the living.²⁷ According to Bulgakov, the souls of the dead are capable of spiritual growth, which takes the form not only of joy and delight, but also of judgment, as the soul comes to recognize its shortcomings and failures in its earthly life. In his reflections, Bulgakov attempts to maintain a dual character of otherworldly experience, a change that presupposes a reevaluation of one's previous life and a deepening of one's orientation towards God and divine things. He emphasizes that the strongest bond that will continue to exist in the life of the age to come is that of prayer and love.²⁸ For this bond to be effectual, it has to have some bearing upon the fate of the souls in the intermediate state. Bulgakov leaves open the possibility of a profound spiritual transformation in the life of the age to come without overdetermining the precise form that such a transformation might take.

The second central question that he raises is how to understand the death of Christ. What does it mean for the Godman to die? Does such a death entail a separation of the Logos from his human nature? In *The Bride of the Lamb*, Bulgakov answers negatively, for such a separation would have implied dis-incarnation (*razvoploshchenie*), which is impossible, since the unity of Christ's divine and human natures is inseparable and endures even in death. In "The Sophiology of Death," he gives a more profound and extended answer: "The death of Christ is included in the general divine kenosis as His voluntary self-abasement and self-emptying."²⁹ For the sake of human salvation, "God accepts death freely and sacrificially."³⁰ "The revelation of the Godman for us is inevitably also a revelation of His *death* in us and we have to comprehend His measureless sacrificial love for us in His co-dying with us. This is only possible through our co-dying with Him."³¹ Here Bulgakov speaks through the prism of his experience of co-dying with Christ in 1939. It is noteworthy that the theme

27 See Paul Gavriluyuk, "Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergii Bulgakov," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (2006), 110–32.

28 Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agntsa*, 389.

29 Bulgakov, "Sofiologiya smerti," I: 18.

30 *Ibid.*, 20.

31 *Ibid.*

of Christ's co-dying with those who die is absent from *The Bride of the Lamb*, which was finished before his battle with throat cancer.

According to Bulgakov, the kenosis of the Son of God renders not only the human nature but also the divine nature of Christ accessible to death, although in different respects. The divine Logos accepts human death into himself in order to conquer death, for mortality can only be overcome by God. This overcoming is achieved through the act of self-sacrificial and self-emptying love, rather than through an omnipotent act of creation.³² God empties himself in the life of Christ by rendering the union of his nature with the lowly human nature possible. For Bulgakov kenosis consists in God's acceptance of all conditions and deprivations of human mortality, including fatigue, hunger, thirst, cold, and so on. Following an influential trope in patristic theology, Bulgakov insists that it is possible to speak of the death of the Godman. Death does not mean annihilation. Death means the acceptance of human mortality into the life of God, God's co-dying with man. The death of each individual human being is included in the death of Christ because his human nature is at once individual and universal, and includes all humanity. In the death of Christ, God temporarily withholds the power of the resurrection from human nature, while remaining God. Bulgakov insists that such withholding also happens in the case of the death of all human beings, since God could spare them from death by his power. It is in this specific sense that each human death is co-dying with Christ.

The kenosis of the crucified Christ also has a trinitarian dimension, of the Father co-suffering with the Son in sending the Son to death (Bulgakov does not seem to be concerned about the Patripassian connotations of this claim), of the Son's obedience to the salvific will of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit's kenotic withdrawal from the Son. God takes human dying into his divine nature in order to draw human nature into the life of resurrection, into eternity.

Bulgakov's reflections on divine kenosis are not always clear or consistent.³³ He is aware of the range of speculative alternatives available in German and British kenoticism. His project is to include the valid insights of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians without overturning the classical trinitarian doctrine and Chalcedonian Christology. Whether he succeeds in the latter undertaking is somewhat questionable. What cannot be doubted, however, is that in "The Sophiology of Death," Bulgakov's own experience of co-dying

32 Bulgakov, "Sofiologija smerti," II: 19.

33 See Paul Gavriilyuk, "The kenotic theology of Sergius Bulgakov," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 3 (2005), 251-69.

with Christ comes to bear upon his theology. Bulgakov's theology achieves a seamless fusion of lived mystical experience and speculative theology, which constitutes a distinguishing mark of any authentic Orthodox theology. While one might question various individual elements of Bulgakov's thinking—and he never intended his thinking to become church dogma—one cannot doubt his genuineness. The revelatory experiences of death constitute an experiential kernel of his sophiology. Philosophical theology was for Bulgakov the Christian Platonist what philosophy was for Plato: “a training for dying and death.”³⁴

Bulgakov died in 1944, about four years after completing “The Sophiology of Death.” His final agony, which brought about his death, was not something he had an opportunity or need to analyze. As he passed into the realm beyond all words, those witnessing his last moments reported different things. One witness noticed the signs of profound spiritual struggle on his face, a struggle that remained to the end. Another witness, a nun present at his deathbed, saw an expression of unutterable joy and exclaimed: “Fr. Sergii is approaching the throne of God and is being surrounded by the light of His Glory!”³⁵

34 Plato, *Phaedo* 64a4, cf. 67e.

35 Nun Elena, “Professor protoierei Sergii Bulgakov,” *Bogoslovskie trudy* 27 (1986), 101–78.