



Barbara Hallensleben,  
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# 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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in Zusammenarbeit mit  
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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	

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Rethinking the Language of Economics as a Systematic Christian Response to Economic and Ecological Crises in the Thought of Sergii Bulgakov .....	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. Gavriilyuk	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12192-4	



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 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	

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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

## Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology and the Problem of Human Freedom

*Brandon Gallaher*

### Bulgakov's Doctrine of Creation, Pantheism and *creatio ex nihilo*

Bulgakov's sophiological account of creation is one of the most obscure, contradictory and controversial parts of his work because in it he characteristically weaves together, but simultaneously holds apart, God and creation.<sup>1</sup> This blurring of the uncreated/created distinction forces us to look at the limits of orthodoxy, what constitutes on a basic level an orthodox doctrine of creation: faith in the creation of the world by God out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). Creation out of nothing is reenvisioned as a distinct form of active and creatively directed emanation out of God which ultimately can be understood as in or within God with God self-positing himself as both Creator and creation, with all creaturely being said to mirror Christ in being uncreated-created. We shall suggest, therefore, that Bulgakov's account of creation and creation out of nothing, by blurring the uncreated-created distinction, surprisingly, does not necessarily fall into pantheism, but, through elaborating it, he puts forth a position that both remains within the ambit of a doctrinally orthodox vision of creation and states a highly original radically Christocentric doctrine of the same: creation embodies a difference-in-unity of God and the created, the divine and creaturely being, uncreated and created, underwritten by God himself, without mingling, without change, indivisibly and undividedly. I call

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1 For commentary see Robert Slesinski, 'Bulgakov's Sophiological Conception of Creation,' *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 74.2 (2008), 443–54 and Paul Gavriluk, 'Bulgakov's Account of Creation: Neglected Aspects, Critics and Contemporary Relevance,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 17, no. 4 (October 2015), 450–63.

this Bulgakov's Chalcedonian ontology and this study will attempt to sketch the position in brief.

### Theological Orthodoxy and Creation Out of Nothing

However, first, there is a theological elephant in the room that needs to be acknowledged directly: pantheism. Does Bulgakov's teaching on creation risk pantheism or can we see a more benign 'panentheism' at work in sophiology? To answer this we need to return to the very notion of a Christian understanding of creation, God and the world he creates out of nothing. But what are the basic lines of an orthodox position on creation out of nothing? In its most basic form we affirm in *creatio ex nihilo* that God is *not* the world and the world is *not* God. The world was created out of nothing into being by a free act of God's will and is very good. It is not eternal, that is, it was not created out of some pre-existent matter, being co-eternal and over against God. Creaturely being is finite and temporal, in contradistinction from divine being, which is infinite and eternal. However, this doctrinal minimum does not mean 'creation out of nothing' is wholly explicated. It still remains, without a theory of or detailed Christian teaching concerning creation, which might save the appearances of faith, highly ambiguous.

It is for this reason that there exist multiple orthodox theological accounts creation out of nothing: Is creation an eternal act, being an action of the eternal God, or an eternal act in time by which time and the creaturely comes to be? What is the 'nothing' out of which creation is created by God? Is it an eternal primordial reality that somehow co-exists with God—a divine nothingness that is coextensive with the divine life of free love or a reality God does not will and which he rejects and which lives by his rejection of it? Or are we speaking when we use the term 'nothing' not of a pure potentiality, a 'not yet something' (*me on*) (or 'not-yet-being'),<sup>2</sup> but a radical blank, an 'absolute nothingness' (*ouk on*) that simply asserts that creation has no foundation in itself and is held in being at each moment by God and comes from an act of God? Lastly, is creation out of nothing a freely willed emanation from God as its first cause, with creation being an effect that, while not a distinct actuality *in* God before its coming into existence, pre-exists (in some sense) virtually in and reflects

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2 See Regula M. Zwahlen, 'Different concepts of personality: Nikolaj Berdjajev and Sergej Bulgakov,' *Studies in Eastern European Thought*, 64, no. 3–4 (November 2012), 183–204, at 189 (and espec. 189–95).

in likeness the cause from which it came?<sup>3</sup> Or, in contrast, is creation out of nothing a sort of thrusting by God's will into being of a reality from the abyss of absolute nothingness, which, since it did not exist in any sense prior to creation, nor was potentially or implicitly in God, being neither an emanation nor transformation of a pre-existing reality, has no likeness in being to the being of God, who created it?<sup>4</sup>

Christian orthodoxy generally is able to embrace these multiple ways of parsing creation out of nothing, as long as one keeps a distinction between the eternal God and his contingent creation he freely wills, the uncreated and the created. Theological controversy has more often focused on the minutiae of right teaching in Christology and Trinitarian theology as the determination of orthodoxy in the doctrine of creation, with the dangers of Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism being a distant memory, was long taken to be a given. However, the predominant strain of modern Orthodox theology,<sup>5</sup> neo-patristic synthesis, is an exception here, and, for almost a century, it has maintained, arguably in reaction to Bulgakov and sophiology, that there is only one legitimate way to understand creation out of nothing and this position is presupposed in Orthodox circles as basic. Creation out of nothing, it is alleged, always must mean a) there is between God and creation an infinite divine abyss such that creaturely being is effectively alien to divine being and in no way resembles it and we can never say that creation is created out of or from God; b) when we say God created the world and that it began to exist that this means that it might not have existed and is *radically* contingent and always threatened by an abyss of pre-creation nothingness or non-being, seen above all in death as annihilation, which it might tumble back into; and c) when God creates the world he creates an "Other" over "against" him and "outside" him, making for a sort of divine-creaturely ontological dualism.

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3 See Daniel Soars, 'Creation in Aquinas: *ex nihilo* or *ex deo*,' *New Blackfriars*, 102, no. 1102 (November 2021), 950–66.

4 See Julius J. Lipner, 'The Christian and Vedāntic Theories of Originative Causality: A Study in Transcendence and Immanence,' *Philosophy East and West* 28 (1978), 53–68, at 54, cited in Soars, 'Creation in Aquinas,' 951–52.

5 For an overview see Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: "Behold, I Make All Things New"* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 193–229.

## Bulgakov's Sophiological Account of Creation: A Reconsideration

Here I am summarizing the basic position of Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky,<sup>6</sup> but it is followed by such theological luminaries as John Zizioulas and John Meyendorff, reiterating and often creatively building on the basic position of their teachers. Florovsky and Lossky arguably developed their doctrines of creation in reaction to Bulgakov's sophiology. Bulgakov held in his sophiology that there was one Sophia in two forms related to one another in an antinomy: the uncreated and eternal divine Sophia and the created and temporal creaturely Sophia. Sophia is, as I have written elsewhere, a 'living antinomy'.<sup>7</sup> Bulgakov blurred the uncreated/created distinction by arguing that the uncreated eternal Divine Sophia (the *ousia* of God) and the created temporal Creaturely Sophia (creation but sometimes the world soul) were not ultimately two radically different realities but one reality in two different modes of being. The Creaturely Sophia or creation he held to be a special revelatory or theophanic *mode or image* of the Divine Sophia in becoming and temporality which had as its uncreated and eternal foundation that of the Divine Sophia. In this context, Bulgakov uses the term *obraz*, a key technical term, seen especially clearly in his theological aesthetics,<sup>8</sup> which can mean 'image' (sometimes, 'icon'), 'type' or 'representation' but also 'mode' or 'means of' as well as 'form'.

Let us quickly sketch the main moments of Bulgakov's complex theology/doctrine of creation. Bulgakov held that every created thing is simultaneously uncreated-created: uncreated in its guiding root or base (Bulgakov talks about 'divine seeds' or *logoi*) and creaturely in its mode of becoming or existence. This 'sketch' will be inevitably dense. We shall return to these points later in more detail and, hopefully, with somewhat more clarity. In Bulgakov's theology, we shall see multiple (ultimately spatial) metaphors for the act of creation and creation itself as a uncreated-created reality. These include creation as kenotic self-emptying and creation as limitation (a sort of divine contraction and unfolding) as well as creation as God self-positing or placing himself as 'creation' beyond himself as a divine reality.

6 For more detailed discussion see Brandon Gallaher, 'God With Us: A Contemporary Sophiological Reading of Nicaea,' in *Nicaea, Conciliarity and the Future of Christianity*, eds. Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos (New York: Fordham University Press, Forthcoming 2025).

7 Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 46 ff.

8 See Brandon Gallaher, 'Sergii Bulgakov's Theology of Beauty,' *The Wheel*, 26/27 (Summer/Fall 2021), 42–49.

Between God and creation, therefore, for Bulgakov, there is a) difference but also simultaneously continuity and even identity, for one must 'simultaneously unite, identify and distinguish creation and God's life, which in fact is possible in the doctrine of Sophia, Divine and creaturely, identical and distinct';<sup>9</sup> b) the Divine and Created Sophias, God as uncreated and creation as created, are one Sophia, a united reality so there is strictly speaking no being outside divine being or there is no extra-divine being; c) creaturely being or the Created Sophia is a divinely posited and divinely mediated form of divine being or the Divine Sophia, which is the result of God kenotically limiting himself ontologically or by God positing himself as Creator, which Bulgakov sometimes describes as God positing the world outside God as a 'creatively, initiatively directed and realized emanation—relativity as such'<sup>10</sup>; d) by creating through the means of limiting himself or acting in the mode of Creator facing himself in the mode of world/creation in self-positing, God relates to a part of himself as other than himself ontologically, whereby we can say creation exists and God is the Creator towards it; e) in limiting himself God is said to create out of nothing or create from himself (which is the same thing) but this is fundamentally a relatively new self-relation *in* himself whereby he both relates to himself as relative being or as freely self-alienated and self-sacrificed being and this relative being presupposes 'nothing' as a new divine self-relation (creation and nothing being different aspects of the divine self-relationship of Creator to creation so creation and nothing are both posited by God); f) that creaturely modality of the divine being has a self-existence and autonomy apart from God, with God freely kenotically binding himself by creation's free distinctness and potential opposition; and g) God is unable to omnipotently swamp the creaturely in its divinely mandated unique ontological self-existence in God and control it but only able to interact with it through persuasion and cooperative synergy.

As one can see, Bulgakov's understanding of creation out of nothing has as its core a divine and eternal self-relationship of God as Creator to God-self as created and temporal (though as Bulgakov talks about it as 'self-positing', it also appears to be a relatively novel self-relation). Bulgakov simply could not accept

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9 Sergii Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agntsa* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1945), 52 and see 40 [*The Bride of the Lamb*, abridged trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 44 and see 33].

10 Sergei Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii: Sozertsaniia i Umozreniia* [1917] in *Sergei Bulgakov: Pervoobraz i Obraz: Sochineniia v Dvukh Tomakh* (Moscow and St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo/Inapress, 1999), Vol. 1: 166 [*Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. and ed. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 183].

that the world could exist in any other sense than *in* God himself (or even *as* God himself) if God was infinite and eternal being. God is, for Bulgakov, ‘everywhere present and filling all things’ (as a famous Orthodox prayer to the Holy Spirit puts it) for ‘Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!’ (Psalm 139:7–8). Moreover, ‘if God is the Creator, He is the Creator from all eternity [*ot veka*: unto the ages]’ or, put differently, ‘God is the Creator and the Creator is God.’<sup>11</sup> Ontology, for Bulgakov, must follow theology and theology must follow revelation and we know nothing but God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit *as Creator* always now and ever and unto ages of ages.

I have previously argued that Bulgakov, at least in his works before his posthumously published *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), does keep open (like Barth) the abstract antinomic possibility that God might not have created and redeemed the world, might not have been Creator and Redeemer.<sup>12</sup> Even in his late work, there is some sense (though not explicit) of what might be called “levels of eternity”, not unlike Barth with the problem of election,<sup>13</sup> with God eternally self-determining himself as Creator, and so being in relation to a portion of himself as created, which implies there is at least some abstract eternal status quo ante prior to creation as an eternal act. Whatever the case may be on God eternally being Creator, Bulgakov refused to see creaturely being and the creature as fundamentally other than God-self if that meant the creature was ontologically alien to God or apart from or outside him (made from some separate source of being). The creaturely modality was a divine eternal intra-modality of temporal otherness but that temporal creaturely otherness existed not outside the eternal God but in God-self. As we shall see later, he explicitly argued that this was ‘panentheism’ and not pantheism and need not lead to the collapse of God and creation.

Florovsky and Lossky, it is not surprising, feared that Bulgakov’s doctrine of creation risked pantheism and monism by allowing ontological continuity and identity between the Creator and his creatures, the uncreated and the created. I have had these same concerns for the last twenty years but I now have changed my mind and feel one must go beyond neo-patristic synthesis and risk pantheism for the gain of an overall more inclusive and agile theology able to respond to a creation and society alienated from God and the Church.

11 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 53, 57 [*Bride*, 45, 49].

12 See Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 92–93.

13 *Ibid.*, 134–35.



This contribution forms a *qualified* retraction of my previous critiques of Bulgakov's alleged pantheism<sup>14</sup> and attempts to begin thinking through this issue theologically.

It is 'qualified' as I still have some remaining concerns, as will become apparent below, concerning Bulgakov's eschatology, which, I think, is deterministic and *runs the risk* of swamping human freedom by the triumph of God's necessary drive to be all in all. But every great theologian has tensions within their theological work as they grasp over time in multiple works towards a coherent vision when faced with theological ambigua. This need not lead to the view—exemplified by Alexander Schmemmann<sup>15</sup> but also seen in his students—

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- 14 The earliest being Brandon Gallaher, "... Tam Svoboda": Problema Bozhestvennoi Svobody i Neobkhodimosti Liubvi u K. Barta i S. Bulgakova,' in *Russkoe Bogoslovie v Evropeiskom Kontekste: S. N. Bulgakov i zapadnaia religiozno-filosofskaia mysl'*, ed. Vladimir Porus (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii institut sv. apostola Andreia, 2006), 40–81 but see also especially 'Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov'ëvan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergij Bulgakov,' *Studies in East European Thought* 64, no. 3–4 (2012), 205–25. I have now moved closer to the position long defended by my colleague Dr Regula Zwahlen. See her ground-breaking monograph: Regula M. Zwahlen, *Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes: Anthropologien der Menschenwürde bei Nikolaj A. Berdjajev und Sergej N. Bulgakov* (Vienna/Berlin: LIT, 2010), 355, n. 154 (and more broadly 350–57) and in the English summary see 'Different concepts of personality: Nikolaj Berdjajev and Sergej Bulgakov,' 189–95.
- 15 'From this experience and vision, by which he really lived with complete wholeness or integral character and without any sort of division, Fr Sergii decided to build a complete and all-encompassing theological system. And now, I do hope he forgives me, if I, having owed him so much, truly being unworthy to untie the thong of his sandal, in all good conscience say honestly that in this desire of his for a 'system' I see for him a personal *fall* of sorts. It seems to me that Fr Sergii fell here into a kind of 'temptation.' Reading his works, especially the late ones, which are the most systematic in character, I wanted often to tell him in a sort of reverie about what the good-natured doctor Samoylenko in Chekhov's 'The Duel' says to the over-confident idealist-systematician Von Koren: 'Dear Fr Sergii, the Germans have ruined you!' The Russian intelligentsia came to believe in this 'German' western 'systematic character' as the main condition for 'scientific character' but they did it in a completely Russian way: with an unrestrained enthusiastic maximalism that made it almost into a sort of idol. In the mean time, on the one hand, the concept of 'integrality' or 'complete wholeness' and, on the other hand, the concept of *systematic character* can scarcely be considered synonyms. The theology of the Fathers, for example, is integral or completely whole, 'catholic', and in this consists its eternal and imperishable value, but it is scarcely possible to deduce from it a smooth and definitive 'system.' But it actually seems to be the very opposite: the more 'integral' or 'completely whole' the experience from which thought is born, the deeper will be the vision, the less it gives way to 'systematization' and the more obviously a

that sophiology is not a logically coherent system and that we must face the inevitable breakdown of any attempt to capture Bulgakov's theology in purely systematic terms as sophiology is and was less about constructing a systematic theology than a practical, cultural and existential raid on the unspeakable best expressed in poetry and liturgy.<sup>16</sup> This type of critique of Bulgakov ignores the fact that he attempted to present a coherent theological vision, that is, he aimed to construct a theological system, even if that system was *by design* unsystematic at many points and one which constantly pointed beyond reason by utilizing antinomism as its methodology. It is a view, furthermore, that also might just as well be made towards the theology and philosophy of multiple modern thinkers whose work is infused with the paradoxical, weaving together mystical, pastoral and the artistic threads within a complex scheme of conceptual argument and architecture—such as Kierkegaard, Berdyaev, Buber, Balthasar and Weil—though for some reason Bulgakov and sophiology are considered to be exceptional in this regard. Thus, this essay will continue to attempt to 'make sense' of sophiology on its own terms while acknowledging its multiple ambiguities, some of which may be ultimately purposefully irresolvable.

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'reduction' is happening in it [in the systematization]: a simplification, a hardening and even a distortion of the experience. Maybe this is why the Orthodox East did not give rise to any dogmatic 'systems', similar to the 'Summae' of Thomas Aquinas, and did not canonize, as did some western confessions, a special category of 'symbolic books.' But in Fr Sergii there are combined, and to the very last not amalgamated, two men: one man is a 'man of experience', a seer of the mysteries of God's glory and joy, revealed in the Church, and the other man is 'a learned man', a professor who aspired not only to communicate or to explain these mysteries he had seen but also to set them forth as one might say 'without remainder' in a philosophical-theological system, translating from a 'doxological' language into a discursive language. It follows also that there is a kind of 'stylistic' failure of Fr Sergii: these two languages of his do not mix and are not converted into one language, into a sort of organic witness. The experience convinces and subdues you, shining in his writings, but often they do not convince but instead raise doubts and even objections, concerning words and definitions. And it is here, it seems to me, where lies the path to the solution of the 'riddle' of Fr Sergii, his life and creative tragedy. This tragedy, in the end, is that his system (precisely, the 'system' and not the infinite wealth of all that it is 'systematizing') does not correspond to his experience' (Alexander Schmemmann, 'Tri Obraza,' *Vestnik Russkogo Studencheskogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia*, no. 101–02 (III–IV 1971), 9–24 at 20–21).

16 Ibid., 18–19.

## Bulgakov's Sophiology: Pantheism or Panentheism?

But let us return to Bulgakov's theology of creation and unpack in detail his teaching on creation out of nothing. Here we see a very different approach to the doctrine of creation than his neo-patristic contemporaries. He too affirms, as orthodoxy dictates, creation out of nothing and the difference between God and creation, but he arrives at the same place as Lossky and Florovsky through a quite different ontology and understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*. Here he builds on the Patristic tradition, and most certainly various Neo-Platonic and Romantic sources, and argues that creation out of nothing is identical to creation out of and even in God. The claim made by his critics is that his sophiology leads to a collapse of God and creation. I myself have written that his sophiology is a 'divine love monism, a free love that must necessarily create the world to love, swallowing up creation and negating human and divine freedom'.<sup>17</sup> But is this actually the case?

What comes up repeatedly in Bulgakov's account of creation is that one must avoid the twin dangers of Monism and Dualism. The dualistic position, say of Manichaeism, would argue that there are two gods: the all-knowing Father and an evil demiurge whose creative act explains the evil in creation.<sup>18</sup> Such a position is self-negating as two gods 'mutually annul each other', for in the very idea of God is uniqueness and absoluteness.<sup>19</sup> Yet the difficulty with dualism is not just seen in Gnosticism, but in all forms of anti-cosmism, which put an 'impassable gulf' between God and the world, making the existence of the incarnation or Godmanhood impossible.<sup>20</sup> This type of ontological dualism can arguably be seen in the case of neo-patristic synthesis, where we are faced with visions of creation out of nothing that see creation not as an act of love but as the product of an ungrounded and even capricious exertion of the divine will, with creation separated by an abyss from the Creator.<sup>21</sup> Moreover,

17 Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 111.

18 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 9–11 [*Bride*, 5–7].

19 *Ibid.*, 9 [*Ibid.*, 5].

20 Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. revd. Christopher Bamford (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, [1937] 1993), 14.

21 See Georges Florovsky, 'Creation and Createdness' [1928], trans. Alexey Kostyanovsky, in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 36–38; Compare Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. The Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius (London: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976 [1944]), 92 (quoting the same passage of Met. Philaret from Florovsky in the text above), John

the world comes to be seen in dualism as a reality that is so completely alien to God that there is no point of contact in it to reach out to God—‘the Charbydis of abstract cosmism in which the world’s being loses its connectedness with divinity’<sup>22</sup>—unless God himself seizes it and it comes to seem as if it were another quasi-divine reality forever opposing God.

But more importantly still in understanding Bulgakov’s theology of creation is his critique of monism or Spinozism. He argues that the idea that the world is simply the emanation of the Absolute sacrifices plurality and results in the ‘suicide of the relative,’<sup>23</sup> which is ‘the Scylla of pantheism, in which the world is in danger of sinking into the ocean of divinity.’<sup>24</sup> To say all relative being is, simply speaking, the aggregate of modes of the Absolute is to risk falling into the position that creation is but an illusion. But is this God’s own illusion or do we end up negating the absoluteness of God himself?<sup>25</sup> Thus Bulgakov is very clear in articulating that his position is not monism and that pantheism is something that must be wholly avoided although, he argued, for pantheism, which he considered to be something entirely different.<sup>26</sup>

What Bulgakov wanted to assert is that creation is neither (*pace*, neo-patristic synthesis) radically other than God, nor need it be collapsed back into him. Creation is, in some sense, distinct, but yet dwelling *in* God. Thus, by “pantheism”, he understood ‘the truth that all is in God or of God’<sup>27</sup> or ‘the

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Meyendorff, ‘Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology,’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 27, no. 1 (1983), 27–37, John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 158–62 and ‘Christology and Existence: The Dialectic of Created and Uncreated and the Dogma of Chalcedon’ in *Synaxis: An Anthology of the Most Significant Orthodoxy Theology in Greece in the Journal ΣΥΝΑΞΗ from 1982 to 2002, Vol. I: Anthropology-Environment-Creation* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2006), 23–35 (with subsequent responses by Zizioulas and Philip Sherrard: 37–61).

22 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 41 [*Bride*, 34].

23 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 166 [*Unfading Light*, 182].

24 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 41 [*Bride*, 34].

25 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 166–67 [*Unfading Light*, 182–83].

26 See Bulgakov, ‘Ipostas’ i Ipostasnost’ (Scholia k Svetu Nevechernemu) [1925] in *Sergii Bulgakov: Pervoobraz i Obraz*: Vol. 2, 313–23, at 317 [‘Protopresbyter Sergii Bulgakov: Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to the *Unfading Light*,’ revised trans., ed. and intro. of A. F. Dobbie Bateman by Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 49, no. 1–2 (2005), 5–46, at 26–27; *Utshitel’* (Paris: YMCA, 1936), 245 [*The Comforter*, abridged trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 199–200]; *Sophia*, 71–73, 147; and *Nevesta*, 231–32, 249 [*Bride*, 212, 228].

27 See Bulgakov, ‘Ipostas,’ 317 [‘Hypostasis,’ 27] and see *Sophia*, 71–73 and 147.

world is that which is not God [*ne-Bog*] existing in God, God is that which is not the world [*ne-mir*] existing in the world. God posits the world outside of Himself, but the world possesses its Being in God.<sup>28</sup> Bulgakov, in opposing dualism, argues that one must say that there is nothing apart from God, no separate reservoir of being (divinely willed) apart from him, who is limitless, and that 'Only the divinity of the existent God *is*, and there is nothing apart from or outside of divinity.'<sup>29</sup> Put otherwise, creaturely being, the created Sophia, is a special modality of divine being or the divine Sophia. Yet this need not necessarily lead to the equally dangerous error of pantheism, because one affirms that God creates out of nothing. Creation out of nothing does not mean, as many neo-patristic writers affirm,<sup>30</sup> that there is a reality alongside, outside and apart from God; rather, it implies that the 'whole power of the world's being belongs to divinity' since 'God created the world out of Himself.'<sup>31</sup>

Creation out of nothing, if it was interpreted as creating a sort of otherness of being apart from the being of God, separated by an abyss, might run the risk of being said to complete or supplement divine being.<sup>32</sup> Absolute nothing, *ouk on*, simply does not exist in itself,<sup>33</sup> so to say something is created out of nothing is to simply say it is related or turned in being to God as Creator, from which it finds its origin and reality: 'the directedness [*obrashchennost'*: orientation/conversion] of the world toward God, for createdness is precisely this relationship.'<sup>34</sup> Alternatively, to be created is for God to turn to himself in a new non-divine modality. Absolute nothing is no thing, then, not something. It is the presupposition of God's intra-relationship to himself in a creaturely modality. Everything which exists in creation positively 'belongs to divinity', as only God exists, as there is nothing beside him; no being exists but different modalities of divine being. The divine 'receives in creation extra-divine being, otherness of being [*inobytie=Anderssein*], which precisely constitutes creation and creatureliness.'<sup>35</sup>

28 Bulgakov, *Ikona i Ikonopochitanie* [1931] in *Sergii Bulgakov: Pervoobraz i Obraz*: Vol. 2, 241–310 at 262 (my translation). [See *The Icon and Its Veneration in Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 32].

29 *Nevesta*, 51 [*Bride*, 43]; 'Only God exists and there is nothing outside of God' (*ibid.*, 128 [*ibid.*, 117]).

30 e. g. Florovsky, 'Creation and Createdness,' 36–38.

31 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 52 [*Bride*, 44].

32 See *ibid.*, 128 [*ibid.*, 117].

33 *Ibid.*, 51 [*ibid.*, 44].

34 *Ibid.*, 12 [*ibid.*, 7].

35 *Ibid.*, 128 [*ibid.*, 117 (revised translation)].

In writing of ‘extra-divine being’ as ‘otherness of being,’ I think Bulgakov was, like Karl Barth,<sup>36</sup> playing with the ideas of Hegel, or ‘Hegeling,’<sup>37</sup> as he tried to come to terms with the Christian understanding of creation out of nothing.<sup>38</sup> The Hegelian concept Bulgakov is adapting is that of *Anderssein* (otherness/otherness of being) where, for Hegel, Spirit (as what is in itself) grasps itself ‘out of itself’ as an object that is other to itself.<sup>39</sup> For Hegel, the infinite absolute idea or Spirit when it is externalized, freely self-alienated, can be said to exist as nature which has otherness of being.<sup>40</sup> In Hegel, this movement of the infinite God into otherness presupposes the logic which is thought’s autonomous self-determination of itself, grasping itself as a totality, and this requires the conceptualization of difference from what is other than itself, a radically

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- 36 See Brandon Gallaher, “A Supertemporal Continuum”: Christocentric Trinity and the Dialectical Reenvisioning of Divine Freedom in Bulgakov and Barth,’ in *Correlating Sobornost: Conversations Between Karl Barth and Russian Orthodox Theology*, eds. John C. McDowell, Scott A. Kirkland, and Ashley J. Moysé (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 95–133, at 112–30 and see Georges Florovsky on the links between Bulgakov and Barth in the archival paper of Florovsky by Paul Ladouceur, “Georges Florovsky and Russian Idealism: Two Unpublished Papers” (“The Renewal of Russian Theology—Florensky, Bulgakov, and the Others: On the Way to a Christian Philosophy”), *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 65, no. 1–2 (2021), 187–222, at 207–22, espec. 212–13.
- 37 ‘I myself have a certain weakness for Hegel and am always fond of doing a bit of “Hegeling.” As Christians we have the freedom to do this [...] I do it eclectically’ (Barth to W. Herrenbrück, 15 February 1952, cited Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 387).
- 38 But for a very critical earlier reading of Hegel (denying that Hegel’s dialectic, which is pantheist, could fathom the Christian notion of ‘creation out of nothing’) see Sergii Bulgakov, *Tragediia Filosofii (Filosofia i Dogmat)* [1920–1921] in *S. N. Bulgakov: Sochineniia v Dvukh Tomakh*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 309–518, at 459–89, espec. 478–80 [*The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma)*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (New York: Angelico Press, 2020), 171–205 at 193–94].
- 39 ‘Spirit becomes the object, for it is this movement of becoming an other to itself, which is to say, of becoming an object to its own self and of sublating this otherness’ (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. and ed. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), § 36, 23).
- 40 See Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. and eds. Klaus Brinkman and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), § 18, 46 and *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. M. J. Petry (London/NY: George Allen and Unwin/Humanities Press, 1970), § 247, 205–08.

different other which is autonomous from thought: nature.<sup>41</sup> But the logic of essence which follows that of being is reciprocal in character and assumes a self-determining subject facing an other through which it *is* through being the other of its other.<sup>42</sup> To be other is to be oneself as differentiated from one's other insofar as that other is and is not, in some sense both being and nothingness in its becoming, or, to quote William Maker, 'differentiating [for Hegel] is now explicit as the truth of identity.'<sup>43</sup> To quote Hegel's *Science of Logic*:

Each is itself and its other; for this reason, each has its determinateness not in an other but within.—Each refers itself to itself only as referring itself to its other [...] Each, therefore, simply is, first, to the extent that the other is; it is what it is by virtue of the other, by virtue of its own non-being; it is only positedness. Second, it is to the extent that the other is not; it is what it is by virtue of the non-being of the other; it is reflection into itself.<sup>44</sup>

Hegel gives multiple examples of self-differentiation as the determination of identity, including 'above and under,' 'right and left' and 'father and son.' In Hegel's words: "Father" is the other of "son" and "son" the other of "father," and each is only as this other of the other; and the one determination is at the same time only with reference to the other; their being is one subsisting. The father is indeed something for itself outside this reference to the son, but then he is not "father" but a "man" in general'.<sup>45</sup>

There exists the common academic view that Hegel's logic is deterministic and the consummate identity philosophy, like a snake swallowing its tail, driving that which is derived back to its ground. In this sense, to contend Bulgakov adapted Hegel would be, for some, proof positive that Bulgakov's alleged determinism, monism and pantheism find their noxious origin in German Idealism. Rather, it might be argued, on the contrary, that Hegel's logic assumes that determination and self-identification comes through a *pluralization* of differentiation<sup>46</sup> in nature and that divine freedom always already

41 William Maker, 'Identity, Difference, and the Logic of Otherness,' in *Identity and Difference: Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 15–30, at 18.

42 Ibid., 22–23.

43 Ibid., 23.

44 Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), II. i.2, 368–69.

45 Ibid., 383.

46 Maker, 'Identity, Difference, and the Logic of Otherness,' 26–27 and see 15.

contains necessity within itself so does not necessarily have to grasp itself in and through creation.<sup>47</sup> At the close of the *Science of Logic* we are told, contrary to the view Hegel was a determinist, monist and pantheist, that the pure Idea of cognition, which was confined to subjectivity, is sublated and the last result, which is nature, free concrete existence, is the beginning of another sphere and science which is ‘absolute liberation for which there is no longer an immediate determination [...] the form of its determinateness is just as absolutely free: the externality of space and time absolutely existing for itself without subjectivity.’<sup>48</sup>

But to what end is this “Hegeling” for Bulgakov in borrowing, as I think he was arguably doing, the Hegelian concept of “otherness” of being as creation? Bulgakov is adapting Hegel’s idea of self-identity through differentiation to a) speak about creation as a freely and reciprocally determined otherness by God insofar as it is the result of a God who allows himself to become creation’s Other as Creator and freely bestows otherness on creation by giving ‘up in Himself a place for the relative by an inexpressible act of love-humility He posits it [the relative, creature] next to Himself and outside Himself, limiting Himself by His own creation’;<sup>49</sup> and b) to emphasize that all creation has a ‘non-creaturely-creaturely character’ or has sophianic divine roots (the creaturely Sophia being a mode or image of the Divine Sophia) with God as its Other/Creator.<sup>50</sup> To express this otherwise, creation, for Bulgakov, is constituted by God as the other of itself as other (other of the other) and the otherness of being of creation is its divine roots, God as other of the other of creation, sophianicity as the Creaturely Sophia which is grounded in the Divine Sophia. Likewise, God is freely constituted as Creator, known by himself as such and later for creation, by the otherness of being in himself as the Divine Sophia or divine world of ideas that is then expressed as the Creaturely Sophia. This “move” from the Divine to the Creaturely Sophia is also expressed by Bulgakov as a transition of God as being Absolute to God as being Absolute-Relative or Creator.<sup>51</sup>

When God, therefore, for Bulgakov, freely creates or so relativizes himself in Being and one speaks of ‘relative being’, it is at this point that one can speak

47 I am indebted for this observation to Prof Justin Coyle.

48 Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, II.iii.3, 752–53.

49 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 192 [see *Unfading Light*, 214–15 (my translation)]; See discussion at Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 62–63, 84–94.

50 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 128 [*Bride*, 117].

51 I am indebted for these last observations to Dr Harry Moore and for his reference to the work of William Maker.



of 'relative nothing, *me on*' which is the half-shadow, nothingness (insofar as all becoming posits nothingness), included in the state of creaturely-relative being created by God.<sup>52</sup> Bulgakov at times identifies this meonic nothingness with *prima materia*.<sup>53</sup> In other words, creation and nothing (which go together) are both creations of the God who allows himself to become relativized as Creator and creation. For the world to exist (stated positively) is to have no other ground of being except as a 'special *modality*' of divine being, which is to exist in God and only by God, and (stated negatively) therefore the world has no ground in itself, being established literally on the abyss of nothing.<sup>54</sup> Creation out of nothing, therefore, means creation comes from God (*creatio ex deo*) and exists in him and has no independent foundation. Creation, Bulgakov contends, is broader than the neo-platonic notion of emanation. It is not a 'passive overflow' like 'foam in an overflowed cup.' Rather, creation contains emanation in itself; 'creation is emanation *plus* something new that is created by the creative *let there be!*, in that creation is an active and free 'creatively, initiatively directed and realized emanation'. God as Absolute contains the relative of the world in himself: 'the world rests in the bosom of God like a child in the mother's womb.'<sup>55</sup> In summary, *creatio ex nihilo* can be interpreted as in harmony with *creatio ex deo*, for we see both a continuity with God in creation (emanation) but also real novelty (out of nothing), and, though we do not have the space to elaborate this contention here, we see various canonical writers, including Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, treating creation out of nothing as being out of God himself in a fashion not dissimilar to Bulgakov.<sup>56</sup>

52 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 52 [*Bride*, 44].

53 *Ibid.*, 75–76 [*ibid.*, 66–67].

54 *Ibid.*, 11 [*ibid.*, 7].

55 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 166–67 [*Unfading Light*, 183 (revised translation)].

56 See Daniel Heide, 'The World as Sacrament: The Eucharistic Ontology of Maximus Confessor,' PhD diss., McGill University, November 2022, especially Chapter 4 (he quotes Maximus: "it must be accepted that all things have been created *from the eternally existing God from nothing* [ἐκ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀεὶ ὄντος τὰ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος γενέσθαι]' (*Amb.* 10.41, 1188B)), Harry Wolfson, 'The Identification of *Ex Nihilo* with Emanation in Gregory of Nyssa,' *Harvard Theological Review*, 63, no. 1 (Jan. 1970), 53–60 (see Gregory of Nyssa, *De Homini Opificio*, 23, no. 4–5, PG 44 212B–C) and 'The Meaning of *Ex Nihilo* in the Church Fathers, Arabic and Hebrew Philosophy, and St Thomas,' in *Medieval Studies in Honor of Jeremiah Denis Matthias Ford*, eds. Urban T. Holmes and Alex J. Denomy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 355–70.

Bulgakov, therefore, says that creation must be understood within the reality of God or *in* God: ‘The roots of the world’s creation lie in God’s eternity.’<sup>57</sup> Creation, having divine otherness of being, is ‘as the creaturely Sophia [...] uncreated-created.’<sup>58</sup> For this reason, Bulgakov, particularly in his late writing, articulates creation as the ‘self-determination of intra-divine life’ *in* God,<sup>59</sup> using a kaleidoscope of metaphors or multiple images: a) creation is said to be ‘a self-positing of God’<sup>60</sup> in which God both ‘coposit[s] the creation’ with his own life as Divine Sophia and ‘correlate[s]’ his act of creating with his own self-determination precisely as Creator in a creaturely mode which is the Created Sophia<sup>61</sup> and so Bulgakov can claim that for God to be Creator is an eternal reality co-positing with his triunity; b) God is said to submerge himself in nothing in the form of the ‘*uncreated* forces and energies’ of the Divine Sophia,<sup>62</sup> ‘the very seeds of being’ or Maximean *logoi*, comprising the eternal divine world, entering nothingness or are said to have been ‘implanted in the meonal half-being of becoming’<sup>63</sup> and become the Creaturely Sophia, receiving ‘a creaturely, relative, limited, multiple being for themselves and the universe comes into being’;<sup>64</sup> c) God is said to create through revealing himself in creation insofar as the creaturely Sophia is ‘only a special mode [*obraz*: image/representation, form, type] of the being of the Divine Sophia, the revelation of the Divine Sophia in the creaturely Sophia’;<sup>65</sup> d) God as Trinity, the Absolute, who is an eternal movement of self-emptying and self-sacrificial love empties himself, sacrifices his own inner life by no longer possessing the world for itself and allows the world to have its own being in himself as relative, thereby making himself Absolute-Relative,<sup>66</sup> that is, ‘The creation of the world by God, the self-bifurcation of the Absolute, is the sacrifice of the Absolute for the sake of the relative [...] The voluntary sacrifice of self-sacrificing love, the Golgotha of the Absolute, is the foundation of creation’;<sup>67</sup> e) Creation is said to be ‘the imparting of the

57 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 52 [*Bride*, 44].

58 *Ibid.*, 72 [*ibid.*, 63].

59 *Ibid.*, 53 [*ibid.*, 45].

60 *Ibid.*, 54 [*ibid.*, 46].

61 *Ibid.*, 52–54, 63 [*ibid.*, 44–46, 54].

62 *Ibid.*, 72 [*ibid.*, 63].

63 *Ibid.*, 64 [*ibid.*, 55].

64 *Ibid.*, 72 [*ibid.*, 63 (revised translation)].

65 *Ibid.*, 69 [*ibid.*, 60].

66 *Ibid.*, 58 [*ibid.*, 50]; For detailed discussion on God as Absolute and Absolute-Relative see Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 70–94.

67 Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, 168 [*Unfading Light*, 185 (revised translation)].

image [*obraz*: mode] of the Divine Sophia to the creaturely Sophia' in "a prologue in heaven," whereby one might speak of a "co-being [*sobytie*: event, happening]" in Sophia<sup>68</sup> which is the eternal creation and beginning of creaturely being in God manifesting his life not only in the absoluteness of the Divine Sophia but in the becoming of the Creaturely Sophia; and f) God in creating 'releases' or 'lets be' creation from the depths of the Divine Sophia into 'self-existence' or 'self-being,' making a world out of nothing out of himself, his own divine life.<sup>69</sup> The reader will be forgiven if they are somewhat lost amidst this torrent of imagery, but, Bulgakov is, in these panentheistic matters, at the very edge of language. He is attempting, and frequently falls into contradiction and deep obscurity in the process, to articulate simultaneously how creation both is and is not God and how God is and is not creation.

### Bulgakov and the Problem of Creaturely Freedom

Now, if creaturely life is God in becoming or (stated otherwise) equally if creation somehow takes place *in God*, as there is nothing outside him, and, in some sense, all there is *is God* in different modes, and if 'God in His eternity encompasses in one supra-temporal act the fullness of being, with its spatiality and temporality,' then, from this perspective, 'God himself does not become in the world, but the world becomes in God – the genesis of the relative happens in the absolute.'<sup>70</sup> This would seem, *prima facie*, despite all of my long defense, to lead to pantheism, monism and the complete negation of all freedom of the creature, especially with the addition of Bulgakov's notion of 'sophianic determinism'<sup>71</sup> thrown into the mix. However, I want to argue that this quite eccentric panentheistic doctrine of creation, which I have attempted to analyze and hopefully clarified at least a little for the reader, appears to be the basis of Bulgakov's account of synergy and human autonomy. It is only because there is divine being which creatures have a share in at their foundation that they can be given, by God's kenotic withdrawal, a certain independence apart from God.

68 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 73 [*Bride*, 63].

69 *Ibid.*, 56 [*ibid.*, 48].

70 Sergii Bulgakov, 'Iuda Iskariot—apostol-predatel'. Chast' vtoraiia (dogmaticheskaiia),' *Put'*, 27 (1931), 3–42, at 13–14 ['Judas Iscariot—Apostle-Betrayer. Second Part (Dogmatic),' trans. T. Allan Smith, 35] (I am grateful to Prof T. Allan Smith for use of his unpublished manuscript translation).

71 Bulgakov, *Agnets Bozhii* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1933) 462 [*The Lamb of God*, abridged trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2008), 435].

Creaturely freedom exists only because the creature is founded on the divine and is uncreated-created in character.

The world is not only a thing or object in God's hands but possesses, through God's self-limitation, its own proper being, nature and life, but this 'created nature does not remain outside God, because ontologically extra-divine being does not exist at all.' Creation abides in God although it is not God and the relationship of God to his creation is not one of 'unilateral action of God towards a world lying outside of Him and alien to Him' but a *cooperation* (*vzaimodeistvie*) or synergism of Creator with his creation, which is *in* him as uncreated-created. The only way that such a synergism, with its 'mutual connectedness and dependence,' can happen is if not only God has a true 'reality and self-existence [*samobytnost*']' but creation also has such a reality but, Bulgakov contends, 'In order to become self-existent [*samobytnyi*], the world must be divine in its positive foundation.'<sup>72</sup> Thus, it is only because creation is first divine in its substratum that the 'the world maintains its self-existence in the eyes of God, although it is created from nothing,' and then, secondarily, thanks to creatureliness it also maintains its independence of being, its 'unbridgeable difference' in God's eyes. The world ostensibly has a 'genuine reality' because it is both divine in its foundation and creaturely in its temporal becoming, determined by God for himself unto the ages but only because it exists both for God, being dependent on his life and being, and for itself, in the tightest cooperation, seen at its apex in Christ himself. The creation, then, has an independent self-existent status by the 'fullness of the divine ideas-energies, which, being submerged in non-being in the divine act of creation, acquired for themselves otherness of being [*inobytie=Anderssein*] in the world.'<sup>73</sup> Bulgakov describes this creaturely otherness of being of the divine, described above, which has its own autonomy, as we have seen, as a form of kenosis.<sup>74</sup>

Yet the creature cannot fall away from God and maintain its own independent self-existence. If it tips over the abyss then it—in some sense—ceases to be, as with the Fall when man exists in a sort of state of non-existence. In Christ, through his whole divine-human life, God embraces the world, freely diminishing himself, and through free cooperation brings it back into being. This all presupposes that the creature is 'created by God for God, for participa-

72 Bulgakov, 'Iuda,' 11; *Samobytnost*' and the synonym *samobytie* (with slight differences for cognate versions) might also be rendered 'autonomy,' 'distinctiveness,' 'uniqueness,' 'self-sufficiency,' 'integrality' and 'independence' (my translation).

73 *Ibid.*, 11–13 (my translation).

74 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 69–70 [*Bride*, 60].

tion in the Divine life,<sup>75</sup> but he was, despite having an uncreated-created foundation, 'created in himself and for himself', which is to say that the 'freedom of creation in its self-existence [*samobytnost'*] is indestructible for God'.<sup>75</sup>

The world is placed by God in non-being, it originated from nothing, it has a reality that is indestructible and insuperable even for God, who does not repent of his works and does not make non-existing what was created out of the non-existing, does not return into nothingness anything of what has been created by Him. This is why each human being and every creature [alternate translation: all creation] are real by the reality of God and in this sense equally real to God. But at the same time the reality of the world and the human being is not closed and impenetrable for God, who created it after His own image.

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God is not free in relation to the world, but is bound by its nature, its stagnation, its opposition. God cannot do everything with the world that he wants, having once already given the world its self-existence [*samobytie*]. Divine omnipotence is voluntarily self-limited by the self-existence [*samobytnost'*] of the world, and in order to save the world, God himself descends into it, becomes human, i. e. unites with the world indivisibly.<sup>76</sup>

But if this is so, then God can only ever cooperate with his creature and in regards to the freedom of the creature can only persuade (never coerce) it to work with him. He cannot coerce the creature into a synergy with him. God's synergism assumes that the mode of divine action is always persuasion, not coercion: 'Divinity can act upon the person only by interacting with him on the basis of creaturely freedom. God spares the person and protects him even from His own omnipotence. He acts without coercing; that is, He persuades, limiting His power to the measure of creaturely receptivity. This is precisely *synergism*, as the form [*obraz*] of Divine Providence with regard to human beings.<sup>77</sup> God knows all the possibilities of creation, which can be enacted in creaturely freedom, as he created the world as a totality with them within it. The creature cannot surprise God by creating a new path for its freedom in the world. However, God effectively blinds himself kenotically as to which of these possibilities the creature will actualize in its freedom (including the possibility of the fall and rebellion against God himself) as its free creative contribution

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75 Bulgakov, 'Iuda,' 14 [*Judas*, 36 (Smith translation—revised)].

76 Bulgakov, 'Iuda,' 14,23 [*Judas*, 35–36, 40 (Smith translation—revised)].

77 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 253 [*Bride*, 232 (revised translation)].

and awaits the choice humanity will choose, though always coaxing it forward towards the right choice in love:

Although creation cannot be absolutely unexpected and new for God in the ontological sense, nevertheless, in empirical (“contingent”, i. e. by a free occurrence) being, it represents a new manifestation for God Himself, who is waiting to see whether man will open or not open the doors of his heart. God himself will know this only when it happens [...] Veiling His face, God remains ignorant of the actions of human freedom. Otherwise, these actions would not have their own reality, but would only be a function of a certain divine mechanism of things.<sup>78</sup>

Bulgakov’s major claim is that humanity’s freedom remains inviolable for God and that ‘*ontologically*, man cannot get rid of freedom even if he so desires, for it is the mode of the creaturely spirit.’<sup>79</sup> He even goes so far as to say (claiming it is not the reiteration of the Origenist pre-existence of souls) that humans freely co-participate with God in their own creation, saying ‘yes’ to God’s creation of them in a sort of created eternity.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Bulgakov highly reverences creaturely freedom, but there are remaining difficulties, and here lie some of my continuing reservations concerning Bulgakov’s sophiology.

What can we make of what Bulgakov called God’s ‘victory by persuasion’<sup>81</sup> or, alternatively, ‘sophianic determinism’?<sup>82</sup> Bulgakov is very clear that the freedom of the creature has definite limits to it and, in this sense, there is a definite divinely chosen end to creation. First of all, he argues that the world can never ‘take a path of development completely opposed to the paths of God and divine

78 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 259–60 [*Bride*, 238–39 (revised translation)]; see Zwahlen, ‘Different concepts of personality,’ 195.

79 *Ibid.*, 255–56 [*ibid.*, 234].

80 Bulgakov claims (drawing on Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer) that in a supra-temporal created eternity prior to temporality and not yet the eternity of God, ‘free entities, angels and humans, co-participate in their own creation and receive it by their freedom, and this participation of the human in his creation is the reflected light of his God-likeness, the image of God in him, permeating even his very origination, bestowing actuality on him [...] We together with God pronounce *I* about ourselves at our creation and by this we say *yes* in response to His creative “let there be” (*fiat*) [...] The creature not only says its free *yes* to the creative call of God to being, but it speaks in the call’s response to the concrete and definite individual acknowledgment’ (‘Iuda,’ 19–20 [*Judas*, 38 (Smith translation)]; Compare to *Agnets*, 164–66 [*Lamb*, 142–43]).

81 *Ibid.*, 456 [*Ibid.*, 429].

82 *Ibid.*, 462 [*Ibid.*, 435].

concern', as this would be complete indeterminism. Despite its 'self-existence and freedom, a general divine determinability is proper to the world as an inner law and ontological norm of its being, and this is the *Sophianity of the world*.' Creation, he argues, may be self-existent but it is not autonomous.<sup>83</sup> All of creation is moving towards its fulfilment in Christ in God so that God will be all in all, that is, the 'cosmos', 'sophianic determinism' or 'dynamic pan-Christism'.<sup>84</sup> Second of all, human freedom and creativity for Bulgakov are defined by the reality of their foundation, which is sophianic. This reality is a givenness by which freedom is defined as a mode: 'Creaturally and human freedom is not absolute, its actuality refers only to the form of the realization of the givenness [*k obrazu osushchestvleniia dannosti*], while the path and the limits are predetermined by this givenness, and this predeterminability [*predeterminirovannost'*] of creation is determined by the [fact that] "God will be all in all" [1 Cor 15:28].'<sup>85</sup> Only in God as Trinity do you encounter an absence of givenness and therefore pure freedom, which coincides with necessity.<sup>86</sup>

Strictly speaking, fallen human liberty cannot, Bulgakov says, echoing Maximus the Confessor on the gnostic versus the natural will,<sup>87</sup> even be called 'freedom'. Eventually, the creature will run out of (wrong) possibilities to choose between and enact, and will run the course of its rebellion, and naturally follow God by enacting its natural and determined path of being at one with God. It will, in some sense, cease to be free, in the creaturely sense of continuing to choose between opposed possibilities, and will be free as God is free (i. e. not 'free', as we know it). Creaturely freedom contains the possibility of its falling and rising ('the mutability [*udoboprevratnost'*] of the creature')<sup>88</sup> and as a further part of its modality of freedom 'contains in itself also the possibility of its own overcoming, of liberation from this creaturely freedom, an exit beyond it, along that side of it, towards the image of God.' Bulgakov even goes so far as to say that 'so that in a certain sense salvation too is the overcoming of freedom

83 Bulgakov ('Iuda,' 15 [*Judas*, 36 (Smith translation)]).

84 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 462–63 [*Lamb*, 435]; See discussion at Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 109 ff.

85 Bulgakov, 'Iuda,' 15 [*Judas*, 36 (Smith translation)].

86 For discussion see Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 75–76 and earlier at 46–47.

87 See Maximus the Confessor, *Opusculum 3, Maximus the Confessor*, trans. and ed. Andrew Louth (London/NY: Routledge, 1996), 192–98.

88 *Udoboprevratnost'* is a neologism of Bulgakov and translated by Smith as 'predisposition.' It is more accurately rendered literally as 'susceptibility to change' or simply 'changeability.' (Thanks to Dr Harry Moore for his insights on this term).

as mutability.<sup>89</sup> In other words, to be saved is to transcend the susceptibility to change or changability of one's freedom, going beyond the gnostic will that is variant to the natural will that follows what it was created for by God and choosing between this possibility and that possibility.

Yet Bulgakov's theology of creaturely freedom does seem to be at odds with itself. On the one hand, creation, insofar as it is freely shares in a sort of portion of divinity, cannot be involuntarily overwhelmed by grace, since God considers it inviolable as he encounters a portion of his own freedom and must limit himself. Here only talk of 'persuasion' reigns and Bulgakov frequently speaks in this vein concerning divine-human synergism. But, on the other hand, creation, for Bulgakov, is also said to be sophianic in its foundation and its ultimate freedom is *determined* by the givenness of its own nature, which is the Divine Sophia and that uncreated-created base of its nature will eventually become all in all. The creaturely will eventually become overwhelmed by its own divine roots, and it will finally attain its full sophianization as complete divinization, ceasing (it seems) to be created. No one can hold out from the love of God unto ages of ages. God will triumph even over the stoniest of hearts turned away from him: 'Freedom is not an independent power in itself; it is impotence in its opposition to Divinity.'<sup>90</sup>

Nevertheless, Bulgakov simultaneously refuses to see divinization as a de-creation, a collapse of the uncreated and the created, and the end of the free synergistic relation between God and man. Such would be the end of the 'mystery of createdness' and the synergism of God's love for creation, maintaining its self-existence as creature, and its free loving creaturely response (or not) to God: 'Creation is not abolished, is not consumed in divine fire, does not drown in the ocean of divine depths, is not annihilated before God's magnificence. It remains in its creaturely self-existence [*samobytnost'*: Jakim has 'identity'], for it is posited to being by God and it itself posits itself to being in its freedom.'<sup>91</sup>

The problem in this context of the ontology of freedom would seem to be with Bulgakov's eschatology, which will not allow him an eternal hell and an eternally rebellious creature and because of this he forces his ontology and doctrine of creaturely freedom into a deterministic groove. God cannot be 'all in all'; the divine Sophia meeting with the creaturely, if there is the remaining possibility that the creature could *eternally* turn its face away from God and that he will not be able to persuade it to cooperate with him. Bulgakov cannot counte-

89 Bulgakov, 'Iuda,' 17 [*Judas*, 37 (Smith translation)].

90 See Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 521–22 [*Bride*, 491].

91 *Ibid.*, 334 [*ibid.*, 308 (translation revised)].



nance the possibility that a creature could eternally freely reject divine love, an act which is, for him, the very definition of an eternal hell. And given that all being is divine being for Bulgakov, a creature (as uncreated-created) who eternally rejects God would eternally import hell into God. God would never be at one with himself. He would never be all in all. Bulgakov notes that Gregory of Nyssa indicates that evil 'does not have the creative power of eternity and therefore cannot extend into eternity.' It is 'incapable of infinite self-creative activity.'<sup>92</sup> In the Parousia, 'God's being is the dominant, all-conquering certainty, as "all in all"', overwhelming all militant atheism, theomachy, blasphemy, demonic possession and all rebellion against God. This is 'triumphant truth, all-conquering love, irresistibly attractive and salvific beauty' because there is nothing but God or, rather, the reality that God is everything is revealed: 'In the future age, God is the universal and absolute given: in general, there is only God, and there is nothing outside of God, against God, apart from God. This is not contradicted by the proper being of creation, since it is grounded in God and exists in Him.' But Bulgakov, perhaps realizing that he has now gone too far, remembering all his earlier talk of synergism, then describes this divine tsunami, this swamping of creation by grace as persuasion, albeit an all-conquering one (the oxymoronic, 'irresistible persuasiveness'). Once again, the creature is saved from being free as a choice between possibilities and attains divine freedom as a synthesis of freedom and necessity which Bulgakov calls 'free necessity'. Man can now never fall away from God and becomes 'set' in his will like the angels.<sup>93</sup> Yet, it might be argued, this is not divinization as dehumanization but simply humanity's natural eschatological angelization because angels, for Bulgakov, are 'co-human', and humans are co-angelic, both related to one another but different.<sup>94</sup>

Nevertheless, it is arguable that Bulgakov's theology of human freedom wishes to give human autonomy a divine, almost sacrosanct foundation in God. He wants to say that God freely limits himself at the walls of his own image in the human being and will not bypass even the creature's most stubborn rebellion. Yet the very same theology must also argue that all things, insofar as they are divine, must realize themselves only through becoming united with

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92 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 517 [*Bride*, 486].

93 See *ibid.*, 522–23 [*ibid.*, 491–92 (revised)].

94 See Bulgakov, *Lestvitsa iakovlia* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1929), 194–216 [*Jacob's Ladder: On Angels*, trans. and ed. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 139–54]; For discussion see Gleb S. Tikhon Vasilyev, *Christian Angelology in Pseudo-Dionysius and Sergius Bulgakov*, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2019.

God and to be united with God (one risks saying) one sheds, as one becomes divinized/sophianized, the creaturely, including freedom itself, in any finite sense of the term. But a Parousia that would risk the collapse of the creaturely and the divine or perhaps the dropping of all illusions that the creaturely is anything but part and parcel of the divine down to its very toes, though it may not know it, would be no real liberation of the creature. The creature, as a distinct free and finite being glorifying God, would cease to exist. The problems with Bulgakov's account of creation being uncreated-created lie less in its incipient pantheism than in the conclusions he draws about creaturely freedom given the need to uphold his eschatology, his deterministic form of universalism, now newly trendy.<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless, I have changed my mind on Bulgakov. It is no longer apparent to me that an antinomic account of creation, arguing that creation is founded on the divine, necessarily leads to sophianic determinism. Such an account holds together if one continues to maintain the principle that God eternally limits himself and potentially forever is open and even locked into an activity towards its rebellious creatures in the mode of persuasion—a divine persuasion that is non-triumphant, cross-like, refusing to conquer the creature turned away from God, but always in love turning the other cheek, as the creature slaps its Creator unto ages of ages. Upon this panentheistic vision of creation and creaturely freedom, although we do not have the space to elaborate this point here, we have a sure basis for a contemporary restatement of sophiology.

### Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology: The Logic of Panentheism

But why would Bulgakov go to such trouble to elaborate this panentheistic doctrine of creation? One could reply that he simply saw his account of creation as the most plausible articulation of creation out of nothing which did not fall into either monism/pantheism or dualism/anti-cosmism. But do we not have a clue in his own expressed Chalcedonian methodology? Bulgakov's whole Major Trilogy, *On Godmanhood*, which begins with his volume on Christ, goes on to the Spirit and ends with the creation, the Church and eschatology was, as is well known, the search for a sufficient common basis for the union of the two natures of Christ. Put otherwise, Bulgakov was searching for a principle that might account for both the suitability of the divine hypostasis in hypostatizing human nature, in becoming its own proper hypostasis, and, conversely,

95 See David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2019).

what makes human nature appropriate, ontologically capable for its assumption by the Logos.<sup>96</sup> Chalcedon, for Bulgakov, is absolutely fundamental for all of theology, not just Christology, but, he saw its negative expression in the four a-privatives of its *horos* as *preliminary*, and so awaiting its continuation in a truly positive (not simply apophatic) definition.<sup>97</sup> Apollinarius, he argued, was badly misunderstood because his account of the composition of the God-Man not only anticipated the scheme of Chalcedon but also in some ways provided intimations of the beginning of a positive definition, an answer to “how” the union might be possible.<sup>98</sup> For Apollinarius, believes Bulgakov, sensed that the union of the divine and the human natures in the Logos was not an arbitrary external act of two utterly alien realities. Rather, the basis for the descent of the Logos to man is the fact that he already eternally is in some sense human, that is, the Logos possesses an eternal heavenly humanity (being the Second Adam, the man from heaven) and it is after this image that the earthly man or first Adam was created.<sup>99</sup> The whole of Bulgakov's *The Lamb of God* (1933) can be viewed as an attempt, drawing on the intimations of Apollinarius but without falling into his errors, to express Patristic Christology positively.

Yet cannot we argue the same for the whole of *On Godmanhood* and indeed Bulgakov's whole late corpus? Is it not an attempt to express all of theology from creation through redemption to the second and glorious coming again through a new positive divine-human principle? “Sophia”, for Bulgakov, is the missing piece of the puzzle that explains not only how the divine and the human can be united in Christ but how humanity is related to its Creator and, more broadly, how God and creation are in relation. Sophia explains how we can understand the link between the uncreated and the created, as seen in creation, which is uncreated-created with the creature's freedom being founded upon the divine (as we have argued at length). In Christ, the divine and the human are capable of a ‘living identification’ in the one life of the hypostatic union precisely because there is ‘something mediating or common which serves as the unalterable foundation for their union’, which is the ‘*sophianicity* of both the Divine world, i. e., of Christ's Divine nature, and of the creaturely world, i. e., of His human nature’.<sup>100</sup> In another passage, Bulgakov argues that the human I or human hypostatic spirit ‘has a divine, uncreated origin from “God's

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96 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 89–91, 211, 220–23 [*Lamb*, 69–71, 188, 195–97].

97 *Ibid.*, 79–80, 220–21 [*ibid.*, 61–62, 195–96].

98 *Ibid.*, 9–30 [*ibid.*, 2–19].

99 *Ibid.*, 27–28 [*ibid.*, 16–17].

100 *Ibid.*, 222 [*ibid.*, 196–97].

breath.” This spirit is a spark of Divinity [*iskra Bozhestva*] which is endowed by God with a creaturely-hypostatic face in the image of the Logos and, through him, in the image of the entire Holy Trinity, insofar as the trihypostatic Face can be reflected in the creaturely consciousness of the self.<sup>101</sup>

Humanity is marked, as it were, with the image of the creaturely Sophia, which is hypostatized in him, thereby making man the ‘sophianic hypostasis of the world,’<sup>102</sup> and, through his spirit, humanity communes with the Divine essence, the Divine Sophia, and ‘is capable of being deified.’<sup>103</sup> Therefore, a mediation or third term exists between God and the creature and this third term is Sophia, insofar as ‘creaturely sophianicity is only the bridge for, or the objective possibility of, the movement of God and the creature toward one another.’<sup>104</sup> Once again, we see a correlation between the divine and creaturely worlds between the eternal and creaturely Sophias, since they are ‘identical in their foundation,’ but different in ‘their mode [*obraz*] of being.’<sup>105</sup> In the Creator and in his creation in God, ‘Sophia is the bridge that unites God and man; and it is this *unity* of Sophia that constitutes the Chalcedonian “yes”, the foundation of the Incarnation.’<sup>106</sup>

Ontology is itself Christoform insofar as it involved a perfect union in difference between God and creation. I have described this as Bulgakov’s ‘Chalcedonian ontology.’<sup>107</sup> In Christ, one has the absolute, hypostatic and unique pinnacle of a process of personal embodiment or concretion that undergirds all that is with the uncreated and created (so the Chalcedonian definition) united without mingling, without change, indivisibly and undividedly. Bulgakov’s panentheistic account of creation simply is one more version of a vision of how *in* God, the Creator and the created are ‘simultaneously unite[d] and separate[d], identif[ied] and oppos[ed]’ as ‘two modes of being: divine-absolute and creaturely-relative.’<sup>108</sup> All creaturely being bears in itself, as uncreated-created,<sup>109</sup> a trace of the reality of Jesus Christ. He is—pre-eternally—the heart of the cosmos and has a pre-eternal relationship to creation and was in it even before his

101 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 209 [*Lamb*, 186 (translation revised)].

102 *Ibid.*, 210 [*ibid.*, 187].

103 *Ibid.*, 209 [*ibid.*, 186].

104 *Ibid.*, 249 [*ibid.*, 220–21 (translation revised)].

105 Bulgakov, ‘Agnets Bozhii (Avtoreferat)’ [‘The Lamb of God (a Synopsis)’], *Put*, 41 (1933), 101–05 at 102 [*LG*, 444–45].

106 *Ibid.*, 103 [*ibid.*, 445].

107 Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity*, 91.

108 Bulgakov, *Nevesta*, 40 [*Bride*, 33].

109 *Ibid.*, 72 [*ibid.*, 63].

advent in the flesh. Creation and Incarnation, for Bulgakov, are—unto ages of ages—peculiar to the Logos, who is the ‘cosmourgic [lit. world-creating/-building: *mirozizhditel’nyi*] and incarnate hypostasis’,<sup>110</sup> God’s ‘ways of His general relation to the world’, including creation, also ‘include the Incarnation’, and ‘this Incarnation precisely of the Second hypostasis has its foundation in the pre-eternal sonhood of the Word’, for ‘The Incarnation cannot be understood in the sense that, decided in the Divine counsel, it could be the work of any other hypostasis except the Second, since it follows precisely from the personal property of this hypostasis, sonhood, both in relation to the world and in relation to God. Imprinted in the world is the Face of the Logos, who in the fullness of time descends from heaven to earth in order to be “in-humanized” [*vochelovechit’sia*] in it.’<sup>111</sup> One is reminded here of Maximus the Confessor and how the *logoi* are in the Logos and the Logos in the *logoi*, for, as Jordan Daniel Wood has argued, ‘created being itself is fully Christological’,<sup>112</sup> insofar as the *logoi* are the cosmic Incarnation of the Logos or creation is, in some sense, Incarnation, as arguably Maximus hints in places when speaking of their role in deification.<sup>113</sup> We can now see why, with Bulgakov’s Chalcedonian ontology, he could describe divine being (*ousia*) revealed eternally to God by God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the divine Sophia (*ousia*-Sophia), as eternally *Godmanhood*. The divine being, as Godmanhood, contains forever creation as humanity in union with divinity. In this sense, then, Bulgakov’s sophiology is, as he himself claimed, a positive working out of the a-privatives of the Chalcedonian definition,<sup>114</sup> touching on all doctrines (especially creation) but beginning with ontology as a tacit Christology.

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110 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 218, n. 1 [*Lamb*, 193, n. 8].

111 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 218 [*Lamb*, 193].

112 Jordan Daniel Wood, ‘Creation is Incarnation: The Metaphysical Peculiarity of the *Logoi* in Maximus the Confessor,’ *Modern Theology*, 34, no. 1 (January 2018), 82–102, at 100 and in more detail see his magisterial *The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus the Confessor* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022). See the review essay, Brandon Gallaher, ‘Going Beyond the “Calculus of the Infinite”: The Uncreated/Created Distinction and Jordan Daniel Wood’s Reading of Maximus,’ *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, forthcoming 2024.

113 See Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 1: *Amb.* 7 (PG 91.1084C–D), 104–07.

114 Bulgakov, *Agnets*, 79–80, 220–21 [*Lamb*, 61–62, 195–96].

## A Radically Christocentric Vision of Creation and Redemption

In conclusion, we can now see why Bulgakov insists on his panentheistic account of creation: it is the vehicle for a radically Christocentric vision of creation and redemption where it is absolutely inconceivable that God would not have become one with us in Jesus Christ. For every doctrine in Bulgakov speaks the name of Jesus from the nature of God being Godmanhood to creation reflecting Christ in being an uncreated-created reality in God, to the Incarnation and redemption in the Church as an extended Incarnation and divinization, whereby not only can we say God becomes all in all in the eschaton but God in Christ becomes everything for everyone. Furthermore, Bulgakov's panentheistic sophiological account of creation, if it is shorn of its deterministic eschatological excesses, remains plausible as an orthodox vision of creation. It not only keeps the distinction and unity between God and the world, but maintains the orthodox affirmation that creation is created not out of eternal matter but out of nothing, having no foundation in itself but only being founded on God. Where it is different from some other modern theologies of creation is in understanding creation as an intra-self-determination of God. This does not lead necessarily to determinism if we hold with Bulgakov that God is not free in relation to creation's opposition to him but that his omnipotence is freely limited by the self-existence of the world which exists in him. All of creation is held together in Christ for Bulgakov and the world has interest in itself as it is made to be divinized. At every point, behind every facet and curve and edge of the creaturely, we face Jesus Christ, who is the perfect hypostatic union of the uncreated and the created. The world is infinitely precious, infinitely interesting in itself from ethics to science to economics because that world is the creaturely Sophia, which is itself in a unity in difference with the Divine Sophia, without mingling, without change, indivisibly and undividedly.