



Barbara Hallensleben,
Regula M. Zwahlen,
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Pantelis Kalaitzidis (eds.)

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:
New Approaches and Interpretations

 **Aschendorff**
Verlag

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Abstract

Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) is one of the preeminent theologians of the 20th century whose work is still being discovered and explored in and for the 21st century. The famous rival of Lenin in the field of economics, was, according to Wassily Kandinsky, “one of the deepest experts on religious life” in early twentieth-century Russian art and culture. As economist, publicist, politician, and later Orthodox theologian and priest, he became a significant “global player” in both the Orthodox diaspora and the Ecumenical movement in the interwar period.

This anthology gathers the papers delivered at the international conference on the occasion of Bulgakov’s 150th birthday at the University of Fribourg in September 2021. The chapters, written by established Bulgakov specialists, including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012), as well as young researchers from different theological disciplines and ecclesial traditions, explore Bulgakov’s way of meeting the challenges in the modern world and of building bridges between East and West. The authors bring forth a wide range of new creative ways to constructively engage with Bulgakov’s theological worldview and cover topics such as personhood, ecology, political theology and Trinitarian ontology.



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Sergii Bulgakov: Between Kenotic Theology of the Event and Trinitarian Ontology

Antonio Bergamo

To approach the figure and thought of Sergii Bulgakov means to engage with both a theological method and a hermeneutical horizon of the Christian *novum* that has a generative value; it means to listen to the data by welcoming them in their overall complexity and their epistemological development.

In a global framework, we can identify the two emerging and interrelated polarities which are typical of Bulgakov's thought: the kenotic theology of the event and the Trinitarian ontology.¹

In this contribution we will try to outline the reception of his work in the Italian theological context, insisting on the main conceptual points that give it its singularity. In the first part we will try to describe the hermeneutical starting point of the Russian thinker, based on the criticisms made against him. In the second part, we will return to the reception of Bulgakov's work, based in particular on the reflection of the theologian Piero Coda, who has highlighted some of its potential. In the third part, we will outline the conceptual framework that could result from this development based on correct foundations.

1 See Piero Coda, Maria Benedetta Curi, Massimo Donà, Giulio Maspero, *Manifesto. Per una riforma del pensare* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2021); Piero Coda and Lubomir Zak, eds., *Abitando la Trinità. Per un rinnovamento dell'ontologia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998); Piero Coda, *Dalla Trinità. L'avvento di Dio tra storia e profezia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2011); Massimiliano Marianelli, *Ontologia della relazione. La "convenientia" in figure e momenti del pensiero filosofico* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2008); Massimo Donà, Piero Coda, *Dio-Trinità. Tra filosofi e teologi* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007); Giulio Maspero, *Essere e relazione. L'ontologia trinitaria di Gregorio di Nissa* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2003); Carmelo Meazza, *La scena del dato. Materiali per una ontologia trinitaria* (Rome: Inschibboleth, 2019); Maria Benedetta Curi, "Sulla storia dell'ontologia: introduzione e origini," *Sophia*, IX, no. 1 (2017), 77–86; Emanuele Pili, "L'ontologia trinitaria. Cosa 'non' è?," *Sophia*, IX, no. 1 (2017), 47–56.

1. Criticism of Bulgakov's Thought

Since the 1970s, Western Catholic theology has reserved a space and attention for the thought of Sergii Bulgakov that now seems well established, albeit not without occasional criticism or reservations.² The originality of this author's kenotic perspective is to be found in the relationship between Christology, Trinity, and ontology.

If an initial skepticism rather pointed out the limits of the apparent subjectivism attributed to the Russian theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar was the first to identify the positive aspects of his thought.³ However, if on the one hand the latter had understood the central role of relationality in the understanding of kenosis as the hermeneutical horizon of the Trinitarian event, he also pointed out the limits which, according to him, were the result of a latent Gnosticism in Bulgakov's other conceptual pole, namely, the sophiological pole.

In fact, Bulgakov's revival of the Chalcedonian perspective seems to refer to an intrinsic relationality in which—from a global vision, simultaneously from above and below—it is possible for the human subject to apprehend reality, through a kind of refraction of the view, in the light of the Trinitarian Christological event.

We therefore see how Balthasar welcomes Bulgakov's kenotic perspective while rejecting his sophiological perspective, which he interprets with reference to Russian theology, by which Bulgakov is certainly influenced, but from which he differs in the conclusions to which the maturation of his thought leads him. The reservations expressed by the Swiss theologian thus seem to have influenced the initial reception of Bulgakov's works, especially in the Italian context.

It was the Italian theologian Marcello Bordoni who came up with the intuition of a fundamental unity of these two poles, based on the event of revelation in its paschal summit.⁴ This was in 1986. He highlights a dynamic asymmetry between the three divine Persons as well as in the strong relationship they establish with creation, a dynamism of reciprocal directionality, not aggressive

2 Cf. Lubomir Zak, "La croce fonte della teologia in S. N. Bulgakov," in Gennaro Cicchese, Piero Coda, and Lubomir Zak, *Dio e il suo avvento. Luoghi, momenti, figure* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2003), 283–314; Piergiuseppe Bernardi, Ninfa Bosco, Graziano Lingua, "Storia e storiografia bulgakoviane," *Filosofia e Teologia* 2 (1992), 236–52.

3 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Teologia dei tre giorni* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1990), 45–46.

4 Marcello Bordoni, *Gesù di Nazaret Signore e Cristo. Saggio di cristologia sistematica*, vol. 3 (Rome: Herder, Università lateranense, 1986), 423.

and assimilative but diachronic. The kenotic perspective should be read not in isolation but from the hypothesis of the relation as an ontological category. This intuition seems to be the basis of the positive reception of Bulgakov's work in Italy and its singular deployment in the light of the agapic principle.

2. The Reception of Bulgakov's Thought in Italy

The reception of Bulgakov's thought in Italy will be presented in two steps. First we will deal with the progressive translation and publication of his works, before focusing on their philosophical and theological reception and on their global hermeneutics.

The first phase was the 1970s.⁵ During this decade, the publishing house Jaca Book published two collections of essays and in 1971 Dehoniane Editions published the first translation of *Il Paraclito (The Comforter)*. After a pause in the 1980s, a second phase began in which writings related to ecumenism, social commitment and religious idealism were published by Russia Cristiana, but above all by Marietti. In a third phase, in the 1990s, interest seems to shift towards a more strictly theological production. In 1990, Città Nuova published *L'Agnello di Dio (The Lamb of God)* and in 1991 Dehoniane published *La sposa dell'agnello (The Bride of the Lamb)*.⁶ With regard to the reception of his theological thought, a solid contribution has been made by Piero Coda, in particular, with *L'altro di Dio* (1998).⁷ In several essays that precede this volume,⁸ the Italian theologian proposes a global approach to the double sophiological and kenotic perspective, against the background of the Trinitarian event, which

5 Cf. Lubomir. Zak, "Visione di Dio e visione del mondo nella sofologia di S. Bulgakov," *Nuova Umanità XXI* (1999/1) 121, 129–55.

6 Sergii Bulgakov, *Il Paraclito*, trans. F. Marchese (Bologna:EDB, 1971); *ibid.*, *L'Agnello di Dio. Il mistero del Verbo incarnato*, trans. O. M. Nobile Ventura (Rome: Città Nuova, 1990); *ibid.*, *La Sposa dell'Agnello*, trans. C. Rizzi (Bologna: EDB, 1991).

7 Piero Coda, *L'altro di Dio. Rivelazione e kenosi in Sergej Bulgakov* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998).

8 Piero Coda, "Lo Spirito come 'in-mezzo-Persona' che compie l'unità nella teologia di S. Bulgakov," *Nuova Umanità IX* (1987), 52–53, 72–93; "Un' introduzione storica e metodologica alla cristologia di S. Bulgakov, in *Lateranum*, 2 (1989), 435–69; "Cristologia della kenosi e della gloria. La sintesi 'sofiologica' di S. Bulgakov. Introduzione all'edizione italiana," in S. N. Bulgakov, *L'Agnello di Dio. Il mistero del Verbo incarnato* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1990), 11–35; "Per una rivisitazione teologica della sofologia di Sergei N. Bulgakov," *Filosofia e teologia* 2 (1992), 216–35; "Trinità, sofologia e cristologia in S. Bulgakov," *Lateranum* 49 (1993), 97–142.

allows us to understand its hermeneutical circularity, as well as its fundamental limits. This elaboration is systematically explained in *L'altro di Dio*.

As for the epistemological approach, to which we shall return, it seems that the best point of reference for correctly interpreting the Russian theologian is a prior understanding of the Trinitarian mystery. The life of the three divine Persons is grasped in the tri-unity that characterizes it, as a concrete correlation between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Bulgakov's particularity is to be faithful to the Orthodox tradition, to its attention to the monarchy of the Father, while interpreting it in dialogue with the Western tradition, especially Augustine. The New Testament statement "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8) constitutes an ontological awareness of the divine being in its intimate mutual relationship and in its fulfillment outside itself. Thus, according to Coda, Bulgakov follows the solid Orthodox theological elaboration of the fifth century, present in particular in Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers: the *equidivinity* (*homousianism*) makes possible the mutual interiority of the three persons. However, Bulgakov perceives the limit of the causal character of the Aristotelian categories to which these Fathers refer. By accepting the Augustinian originality, and applying it as a corrective, the Russian theologian emphasizes the unique *ousia* at the basis of the original relationships. It is with Augustine, in fact, that the Trinity is apprehended as love, although one can reproach it—as Bulgakov himself does—with a certain impersonality. It is therefore a question of crossing the Eastern and Western viewpoints for a simultaneous reading, *essentialiter* and *personaliter*, of the Trinitarian event, based on the intimacy of God.

Piero Coda underlines that it is through this type of simultaneous reading of Bulgakov that it is possible to link the sophiological perspective and the kenotic perspective in a mutual relationship, for a global hermeneutic. This makes it possible to overcome a dissociated reading that could lead to gnostic excesses in sophiology and to an extrinsic reading of the kenotic perspective, in the relationship to the created real. For Coda, the centre of gravity of this holistic reading of Bulgakov can be found in a third perspective that acts as a backdrop, namely God as an absolute subject. If Bulgakov's debt to modern idealist philosophy, in particular Hegel, is clear, he brings out new elements that allow us to go beyond the limits and aporias of the latter.

For the Italian theologian, it is clear that, in Bulgakov's thought, the Trinitarian God is a tri-hypostatic subject. God is therefore an absolute subject in the sense that there is an intimate correlation between the divine Persons that is deployed in the dynamic of tri-hypostatic self-revelation. This dynamic implies a certain hierarchy: the monarchy of the Father, the revelatory hypostasis, and then the subordinate *taxis* of the Son and the Holy Spirit which follows from it.

The only absolute subject is self-revealed in the divine Sophia as tri-hypostatic love, defined by a kenotic dynamic that personally characterizes the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit is this hypostatic “between” and his *kenosis* consists in a kind of self-emptying.

Salvation history, the elevation of creaturely *theantropy* to the life of divine *theantropy*, unfolds according to this intimate Trinitarian logic. Bulgakov has elaborated this overall vision by revisiting the contribution of Gregory Palamas, which he puts into dialogue with the Western tradition. In this elevation, *kenosis* is the fundamental principle that illuminates the dynamics of creation and salvation: salvation and creation are works of love. There is thus a certain asymmetry between the polarities involved, which protects from extrinsic re-touching and expresses both the ontological link in the intra-trinitarian life, the gift of this life in creation and in history, and the reception, in it, of the created reality.⁹

The place where the human and the divine meet is the Incarnate Word. Through the Incarnation, the Word looks to the Father from his humanity, which presupposes the work of the Holy Spirit made possible by the fiat of Mary. The Incarnation finds its culmination in the paschal event, in which the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit’s action takes over from the personal *kenosis* of the Son and continues it through the divinization of the human being. In this sense, the Spirit is “the transparent environment in and through which the Logos is seen.”¹⁰

The human being is thus guided, in freedom, to enter into the divine life and to participate in this kenotic movement, supported by the Holy Spirit, through the renunciation of self for love. It is realized in the love that not only gives it being, but also challenges it.

Based on this simultaneous reading of the sophiological perspective and the kenotic perspective, setting out from the reality of God as an absolute Subject, a tri-personal love, Coda exposes three principles from Bulgakov’s thought. 1) The *principle of the divine tri-unity* which translates into ecclesial pluri-unity—which allows one to go beyond the Hegelian monological reductionism based on the ontological affirmation of God’s love. 2) The *principle of panentheism*, in which the immanence and transcendence of the Trinity are asymmetrically related in history and in creation. Sophiology is situated here, asking the question—as Coda points out—as to the relationship between nature and

9 Antonio Bergamo, *Essere, Tempo e Trinità. Paradigmi e percorsi ermeneutici* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2021), 117–20.

10 Sergii Bulgakov, *Il Paraclito*, 396.

person in God, between unity and multiplicity in creation, between incarnation and divinization. 3) The *principle of intra-trinitarian and historical-salvific kenosis*, which allows the articulation of the reciprocal relationship of otherness between the Creator and creation.

The approach favored by Coda can be found in various works published in Italy over the years whose purpose is to investigate one or other aspect of Bulgakov's work and thought, among them Graziano Lingua's study of Bulgakov's sophiology. The author approaches the theme of sophiology from the category of creation. Sophiology, he writes, is "a *Weltanschauung*, a Christian worldview."¹¹ In 2001, Arvydas Ramonas published a study on eschatology in Bulgakov. Bulgakov is presented as "one of the most brilliant representatives of Russian eschatological thought, the first in the religious tradition of his country to have systematically elaborated an Orthodox eschatological theology."¹² In 2004, a study by Andrea Pacini¹³ addressed the pneumatological theme in Bulgakov, with particular emphasis on its ecumenical impact.¹⁴ In these pages, the author takes up the Russian theologian's critique of the principle of causality, as well as the centrality of the category of revelation and the intratrinitarian agapic act for the purposes of a personological hermeneutic of the Trinity.

In 2006, Luigi Razzano argued that "the intuition of the aesthetic principle [...] underlies all of Bulgakov's theological thought and its understanding is revealed in the light of the category of the Sophia." Sophiology is thus that "category which interprets the intimate and ineluctable relationship of the world with its origins, in a constant process of recapitulation and synthesis between experience and eternity."¹⁵ In 2017, Graziano Lingua published a solid essay in which he compares the first Bulgakov, an attentive specialist in socio-economic issues and Marxism, with the second Bulgakov, the one of the great trilogy.¹⁶ Lingua identifies a common thread that links them. It is to be found in the

11 Graziano Lingua, *Kénosis di Dio e santità della materia. La sofologia di Sergej N. Bulgakov* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000), 189.

12 Arvydas Ramonas, *L'attesa del Regno. Eschaton e apocalisse in Sergej Bulgakov* (Rome: Mursia, 2000), 416.

13 Andrea Pacini, *Lo Spirito Santo nella Trinità. Il filioque nella prospettiva teologica di S. Bulgakov* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2004).

14 See Piero Coda, Alessandro Clemenzia, *Il Terzo persona. Per una teologia dello Spirito Santo* (Bologna EDB, 2020), 253–72.

15 Luigi Razzano, *L'estasi del bello nella sofologia di S. N. Bulgakov* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2006), 68, 76.

16 Graziano Lingua, "Una salvezza per tutti rispetta la libertà dell'uomo? Libertà, storia ed escatologia in S. Bulgakov," *Annuario filosofico*, 33 (2017), 378–408.

Russian theologian's theology of history and proves that there is indeed an intrinsic speculative continuity in him and not a radical rupture, as a classical interpretation sometimes suggests.

3. Between Kenotic Theology of the Event and Trinitarian Ontology

Piero Coda, in *L'altro di Dio*, points out that it is in the light of the paschal event, indispensable access to the Trinitarian mystery, that the interpretative horizon of reference of reality opens up, in which the human being experiences God and finds the traces of his passage as well as an openness to his advent in history.¹⁷ The relationship between the Father and the Son within the Trinity and its reflection in the light and power of the Spirit are in fact the keystone of Bulgakov's speculative system. For the Russian theologian, the cross is the hypostasis of God the Father. Following the Fathers of the Church, in particular Gregory of Nazianzus, he realizes that in the paschal event, the Father and the Spirit suffer as much as the Son, although in different ways. Thus, the relationship on the cross between Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and the Father, who lives his kenosis, is the foundation of all fatherhood.

The *kenosis* thus expresses on the one hand the dynamic of the Trinitarian life of God and on the other hand its reverberation in creation. Indeed, creation also expresses itself as the *kenosis* of God, God who is a mystery of love. Bulgakov invites us to understand in ontological terms the mystery of the unity of the three divine persons and the Trinitarian nature of the One, a love that gives itself and finds its culmination and its gateway in the paschal event.

In this framework, Coda perceives in Bulgakov the outline of a Trinitarian ontology,¹⁸ or rather of an ontology *tout court* and, consequently, of an anthropology, which emerge in the light of the proprium of the Christological and Trinitarian Revelation.

If Pavel Florenskii established the basis of a fundamental ontology on the basis of antinomy,¹⁹ Bulgakov goes one step further. He correlates the antinomy with the Chalcedonian dogma. Thus, a patristic/theological approach is taken,

17 Cf. Vincenzo Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via. Questioni e prospettive sul metodo della teologia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2019), 190–92.

18 Piero Coda, *Sergej Bulgakov* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2003), 65–66.

19 Pavel Florenskij, *La colonna e il fondamento della verità* (Milan: Rusconi, 1998), 210–11; Lubomir Zak, “P. A. Florenskij: progetto e testimonianza di una gnoseologia trinitaria,” in *La Trinità e il pensare*, ed. Piero Coda and Andreas Tapken (Rome: Città Nuova, 1997), 193–228.

not only from above or from below, but from both simultaneously. The paschal event, as a Trinitarian event, sheds light on reality in a retrospective, inaugural and prospective way. From the Christological event emerges an ontological structure that configures reality from the original creative act of God, so that the incarnation is an affirmation of the divine-human form of creation.²⁰

The Russian theologian thus overcomes the obstacle of both Hegelianism and theism. Sophia is the content of God's self-revelation in the Spirit, creation is a kenosis of love, and the created Sophia is characterized by a vocation to participate in the Trinitarian life. Bulgakov thus recovers the authentic patristic meaning of *oikonomia* as the providential order and divine government of the world. In this horizon, immanence and transcendence are interlaced: transcendence is, from the beginning, grafted into history through creation and immanence is inhabited by the divine, which makes it open to the beyond itself.

The beginnings of a Trinitarian ontology that we find in Bulgakov thus seem to be characterized by Spirit, freedom and intersubjectivity. The paschal event opens up 1) the *place of the Spirit* given and open to the participation of creatures so that they can draw on the Trinitarian life, despite an eschatological gap. 2) The *place of true freedom* grounded in the gift of self. 3) The *place of reciprocity* in interpersonal relationships. In the humanity of the Incarnate Word—who lives the dynamic of kenosis up to its paschal summit—it is the whole of humanity, the whole of the flesh which, in the flesh assumed by the Son, is joined in the light and strength of the Spirit by the love of the Father. The Risen One is the Living One who, in the Church, introduces us into the unfathomable mystery of the Father, in the light and power of the Spirit.

4. Concluding Reflections

Without pretending to be exhaustive, the brief outline of the reception of Sergii Bulgakov's works and thought in Italy offers the image of a progressive interest that has grown according to a particular approach, and whose merit can be attributed to the recognition of the *methodos* of the Russian thinker's theology.

Piero Coda's position is based on an understanding of the relationship between sophiology and *kenosis* in Trinitarian terms. While grasping the limitations of Bulgakov's reflection, it highlights its positive potential. The key to reading sophiology, he points out, works only if one adds the Christological key, even if the latter is not so obvious in Bulgakov. They can only be understood from an originally Christian perspective, as an attempt to think the on-

20 Graziano Lingua, *Una salvezza per tutti*, 387–91.

tology of the Trinitarian mystery according to a specifically Trinitarian logic: as much for what concerns the Being of God in itself (the immanent Trinity, to refer to Karl Rahner's terminology), as for what concerns the relationship between the Uncreated and the Created, made of creation and redemption/divinization in the crucified/resurrected Christ and in the Spirit of Pentecost.²¹

The overcoming of the Platonic dualism between created and uncreated *Sophia* could be overcome, according to Coda, by taking seriously the fact that creation "takes place in the Incarnate Word" and that, therefore the content of creation—as Bulgakov intuited—is nothing other than the created projection of God's unique nature, "without, however, implying a doubling of the uni-multiplicity in God (in the Word and in the Spirit) and the multiple unity of/in creation. In Christ, the unity of the Word of God becomes the hypostatic form of the multiplicity of creation, summarized and expressed in the multiplicity of human persons, which gives reality (in Christ, through the action of the Spirit, a divine reality) to the infinite richness and participatory invitation of the Uni-Trine God."²²

Bulgakov's theological method makes the Trinitarian event not only the content but also the form of the believer's opening to the whole of reality, according to a global perspective; this, while safeguarding human subjectivity in its ontological consistency, situates this subjectivity in a constitutive and emergent relationship with the One and Triune God who places in being what it is, and—through grace—accompanies reality and transcends it. The Christological axis is thus joined to the pneumatological axis in order to overcome the dichotomy between East and West, which Bulgakov had intuited. If the Christian event is read in the West with a certain primacy of the Christological, which underlines the aspects of visibility, institutionality, centrality and conceptual rationality, in the East there emerges a certain primacy of the pneumatological which highlights the mystery, communion, collegiality and apophatic symbolism.²³ The Russian theologian, who breathes with two lungs, with a double hermeneutic, proposes instead an interweaving of vertical reciprocity (that of intratrinitarian life) and horizontal reciprocity (that of the Trinitarian life that happens between human beings in reality), proposing a specific reading of the paschal event.

21 Piero Coda, *L'altro di Dio*, 150.

22 *Ibid.*, 152.

23 Piero Coda, *Il Logos e il nulla. Trinità—Religioni—Mistica* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2003), 250.

The history in which each human being lives is not closed in an intra-temporal process, it is not flatly linear, but divine-human. On the one hand, history experiences the presence of evil and its aggressiveness as an anti-sophistic force; on the other hand, each individual, open to the transcendence that breaches immanence, contributes to the positive movement of history in a human-divine synergy following a kenotic rhythm.²⁴

Moreover, as Coda suggests again, it is a question of “rereading [...] the perspective of *Sophia* with an emphasis that is not only protological, which Bulgakov tends to do, but more resolutely eschatological: thus, *Sophia* would be nothing other than creation recapitulated in Christ, through the work of the Spirit, where God becomes ‘all in all.’”²⁵

Bulgakov’s life and thought are therefore not only a formidable speculative performance, but also an exercise in *auditus temporis*, that is, in listening attentively to reality, aiming to give concrete translation to the instances of fullness of life that inhabit the human being and that mark out history according to a Trinitarian rhythm in which the gift of God becomes the source and summit of existence.

24 Graziano Lingua, *Una salvezza per tutti*, 401–07.

25 Piero Coda, *L'altro di Dio*, 153.