



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

# BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations



Aschendorff  
Verlag

Hallensleben, Zwahlen, Papanikolaou, Kalaitzidis (Eds.)  
Building the House of Wisdom  
Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations

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.



## EPIPHANIA

Herausgegeben von  
Barbara Hallensleben, Guido Vergauwen, Nikolaus Wyrwoll  
in Zusammenarbeit mit  
dem Zentrum für das Studium der Ostkirchen  
der Universität Freiburg Schweiz

Band 19

# Building the House of Wisdom

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations

Edited by  
Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen,  
Aristotle Papanikolaou, Pantelis Kalaitzidis

 **Aschendorff**  
Verlag

Münster  
2024

Publiziert mit Unterstützung  
des Schweizerischen Nationalfonds  
zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung

Publiziert von  
Aschendorff Verlag GmbH & Co. KG  
Soester Straße 13  
D-48155 Münster  
[www.aschendorff-buchverlag.de](http://www.aschendorff-buchverlag.de)

Cover:  
Aschendorff Verlag GmbH & Co. KG

Text:  
© Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen, Aristotle Papanikolaou, Pantelis Kalaitzidis

ISBN 978-3-402-12060-6 (Print)  
ISBN 978-3-402-12061-3 (E-Book PDF)  
DOI <https://doi.org/10.17438/978-3-402-12062-0>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No-Derivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND) which means that the text may be used for non-commercial purposes, provided credit is given to the author. For details go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. To create an adaptation, translation, or derivative of the original work and for commercial use, further permission is required. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) not original to the Open Access publication and further permission may be required from the rights holder.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

### PERSONHOOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### POLITICS, ECONOMY, AND ECOLOGY

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

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

## SOPHIOLOGY

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



## CREATION AND ONTOLOGY

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

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Father Sergii Bulgakov's "Karamazov's excursus" .....	463
Pavel Khondzinsky	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12199-3	
Ships in the Theological Night? Sergius Bulgakov and Liberation Theology .....	475
Graham McGeoch	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12200-6	
"Your Labor Is Not in Vain." Sergii Bulgakov's Sophiology as a Key to a (Protestant) Theology of the Kingdom of God .....	489
Oliver Dürr	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12201-3	
Sergius Bulgakov and Modern Theology .....	501
Paul Ladouceur	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12202-0	
The Vision of Unity. The Ecumenical Thought of Fr. Sergii Bulgakov .....	521
Adalberto Mainardi	
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12203-7	
List of Contributors .....	535

## “Your Labor Is Not in Vain.” Sergii Bulgakov’s Sophiology as a Key to a (Protestant) Theology of the Kingdom of God

Oliver Dürr<sup>1</sup>

### ‘Synergy’ and ‘Mediation’: Challenges for Contemporary (Protestant) Theology

This chapter examines the centrality of the notion of ‘synergy’<sup>2</sup>—i. e., the (or at least some) possibility of divine-human cooperation—in the process of shaping creation towards God’s eschatological kingdom. Modern theologies, in many cases, are critical of the concept of synergy,<sup>3</sup> but by the same token they appear to lack the metaphysical foundation to affirm what Paul makes clear in his first letter to the Corinthians: namely that “we are labourers together with God [θεοῦ γάρ ἐσμεν συνεργοί]” (1 Cor 3,9)<sup>4</sup> and that therefore our “labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15,58). The reason for theological reticence

- 
- 1 I am grateful to the Forschungsstelle Sergij Bulgakov at the University of Fribourg as well as Harris Manchester College, Oxford for providing me with the resources and support for writing this chapter.
  - 2 The term is used here specifically not in a heresiological sense, always already designating an ‘unorthodox’ position, but as a concept to be positively appropriated by contemporary theology and spirituality. I have developed a more detailed account of this in Oliver Dürr, *Homo Novus. Vollendlichkeit in Zeitalter des Transhumanismus. Beiträge zu einer Techniktheologie* (= Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia 108) (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 403–53.
  - 3 I will argue below that this statement is not true across the board. Ultimately it reflects popular and polemic interpretations, somewhat forgetful of the theological traditions taking up positively the notion of ‘synergy’ even within Protestantism (see, e. g., Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* [London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018], 127–218).
  - 4 All biblical citations are taken from the revised King James Bible, Greek quotations from Eberhard Nestle, Barbara Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 28th ed., 2014).

concerning the idea of divine-human cooperation is that many theologians find it difficult to positively relate God's work within creation to human action. Therefore, issues like creativity and prayer strike at the metaphysical 'Achilles' heel' of decidedly modern accounts of theology that is the unresolved question of 'mediation'.<sup>5</sup> By this, I mean an unclarity concerning the ontological relationship of the Creator and creation, questions of transcendence and immanence, how the Infinite and the realm of finite beings relate to one another, and finally, insecurity regarding the relationship of divine and human freedom.<sup>6</sup> This unclarity leads to torturous debates about the 'efficacy' of prayer and the weight of human 'works' in God's kingdom.

Fr. Sergii Bulgakov's (1871–1944) sophiology is a helpful approach to the ontological question of mediation and, therefore, a fruitful background for a positive account of how human beings can substantially contribute to and even freely co-create God's future in the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) shows significant consonances with the sophiological intuitions of Bulgakov and Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900) and therefore provides elementary points of departure for a (Protestant) theological metaphysics in appreciation of synergy.

### Competitive Modes of Modern Theology

There are two extreme views, ultimately incompatible with an Orthodox theological account of 'synergy': 'univocity' and 'equivocity'. Both tendencies are simplified here and construed as types that will not do justice to most modern theologians. Furthermore, they are deliberately not associated with particular names, since the aim here is not polemic but to develop the contours of a metaphysical problem and its consequences for human self-understanding.<sup>8</sup>

The first of the two view refers to a tendency to understand God's being as univocal to created being, which results in a theology that will only accept as meaningful speech about God, cast in terms that are fully intelligible to human beings. For modern (Protestant) theologians, this is further corroborated by

5 'Mediation' is used here primarily in an ontological and not a soteriological sense.

6 As will be argued below, this pertains specifically to the questions raised by the existence of Jesus Christ himself.

7 N. T. Wright provides helpful biblical-theological perspectives that account for human cooperation with God in the Spirit but circumvent the metaphysical questions (see Nicholas Thomas Wright. *History and Eschatology. Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* [London: SPCK, 2019]).

8 For a more detailed account, see Dürr, *Homo Novus*, 479–91.

the way the scriptures speak of God's actions and personal interactions with his people in history. Such an approach locates Creator and creation in an ontic continuum and consequently has them wrestling for metaphysical space in a kind of competition. Where God wants to act, he must ‘overrule’ human freedom and the autonomy of creation; wherever he does not perform such ‘miraculous’ deeds, he is considered absent. Such theology cannot picture God's transcendence in ways that substantially differ from the distance of a deist God.

The second extreme is a theology conceiving of God's being as entirely equivocal to finite being. God in his true being is ‘wholly other’—utterly different from and incomprehensible for human understanding. In an attempt to guard the ‘sovereignty’, ‘power’, and ‘transcendence’ of God, many modern theologians tend to stress the dichotomy between God and the world (i.e., Creator and creation) in such a way. This equivocal perspective—though from another angle—runs into similar ontological difficulties as the first: One can only understand God's transcendence as absence, and by the same token, God is banned from the world—rendering him again a deist God. Moreover, his self-revelation, presence, or even action within creation can only be conceptualized as a metaphysical act of violence—of a God forcefully breaking into creation.

In both extreme cases, the notion of synergy has to be considered metaphysically incoherent and cannot be consistently affirmed. Both (1) conceptualize Creator and creation as two clearly distinct entities in opposition to each other, (2) understand their respective being as mutually exclusive, and (3) see their respective wills as somehow competing. Both cases rule out from the start the metaphysical possibility of the God-Man Jesus Christ because for them, ‘God’ and ‘the world’ have become—in Soloviev's terms—abstract principles asserted in exclusivity.<sup>9</sup>

### Back to the Beginnings: an Alternative Approach

Christian theology, in its historical beginnings, on the other hand, originated from the interaction with and reflection on the life, death, and resurrection of

---

9 Wladimir Solowjow, “Kritik der Abstrakten Prinzipien [1877–1881]” in *Kritik der Abstrakten Prinzipien und Vorlesungen über das Gottmenschentum* (= Deutsche Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Wladimir Solowjew 1) (Freiburg im Breisgau: Wewel Verlag, 1978), 13–519, here: 14. Soloviev's critique of abstract principles of thought is applied here to the relationship of God and humanity in Christology. Bulgakov follows Soloviev in this critique.

Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> It was after the fact of the incarnation of the eternal Logos that the great doctrinal disputes—which culminated in the symbols of faith—tried to grapple with the reality of Divine-Humanity as experienced in first-century Palestine and then handed on to posterity. Thus Christology begins—in Bonhoeffer’s terms—with the givenness of the God-Man.<sup>11</sup> From these Christological reflections arose a different methodological approach to theology and metaphysics: If the infinite transcendent God can no longer be severed from Jesus Christ—though also not confused—then the revelation of the incarnated Logos must become the foundation for thinking through the relationship of creation and Creator in terms of a ‘non-competitive’<sup>12</sup> Christian metaphysics (to use Kathryn Tanner’s phrase).<sup>13</sup> Bulgakov saw this very clearly when he wrote about the need to both “connect” and “separate” the “divine-absolute” and the “creaturely-relative”<sup>14</sup> and suggested that this relationship can only be conceived in such a way if it is determined in terms of creation—which for him was the positive connection of Divine-Humanity that likewise sustains the ontological difference between uncreated and created nature.<sup>15</sup> The transcendence of the Creator God turns out to be a “transcendence of even the traditional

- 
- 10 See Oliver Dürr, *Auferstehung des Fleisches. Umriss einer leibhaftigen Anthropologie* (= *Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia* 91) (Münster: Aschendorff, 2020); Rowan Williams, *Resurrection. Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Press, 2nd ed., 2014).
  - 11 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christologie,” in *Theologie—Gemeinde. Vorlesungen, Briefe, Gespräche 1927 bis 1944* (= *Gesammelte Schriften* 3) (Munich: Kaiser, 1966), 166–242, here: 181: “[H]ier [in Christology, *author’s note*] steht nicht das Verhältnis eines isolierten Gottes zu einem isolierten Mensch in Christus zur Debatte, sondern das Verhältnis des vorgegebenen Gott-Menschen.”
  - 12 See Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) and Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). Williams is right to assert: “The logic of finite and infinite overall has to be repeatedly clarified for the sake of affirming both divinity and humanity in their proper integrity” (Williams, *Christ*, 120).
  - 13 Bonhoeffer writes: “Die Gegenwart Christi erzwingt den Satz: Jesus ist ganz Mensch—und sie erzwingt den anderen Satz: Jesus ist ganz Gott” (Bonhoeffer, *Christologie*, 180).
  - 14 See Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* [1945], trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 33–56.
  - 15 Bulgakov’s sophiology, in short, can be understood precisely as a non-competitive metaphysics mediated in the unity of the divine and creaturely Sophia.

metaphysical demarcations between the transcendent and the immanent."<sup>16</sup> Thus God does not at all need to distance himself from finitude and mutability, and hence it is nothing intrinsic to creatureliness that separates creation from its Creator—instead, true transcendence can allow the utmost intimacy. This becomes apparent in the life of prayer and creativity: God can be both *superior summo meo* and *interior intimo meo*. The transcendent God's infinite act of being can—in the idiom of Nicholas of Cusa—be understood as *non-aliud* to every act of finite being because in the light of the God-Man, their difference turns out to be a *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>17</sup> Jesus Christ, as the self-revelation of God, manifests the ontological relation of Creator and creation and shows it to be one of harmonious hypostatic unity in the life of love. Bonhoeffer makes this point well: Because Jesus Christ is human, he is present in space and time, and because he is divine, he is in an eternal presence. Thus, Christ can be considered the "Heart of Creation."<sup>18</sup> Around him, everything falls into place and from him flows—through the Spirit—the life that carries the mystical intuitions, spiritual experiences, and the sacramental life of the Church to this day.

### Sophiological Perspectives on Mediation and Synergy

The sophiology of Bulgakov seems to be, at its core, precisely this: An intuition of the dynamic intimacy of God and creation that—in Bulgakov's case—originated in mystical experience<sup>19</sup> and was sustained by his participation in the li-

16 David Bentley Hart, "Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God," in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2017), 167–90, here: 169–70. This is explained in more detail in David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God. Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

17 See Nikolaus von Kues, "De non-aliud" in *Nikolaus von Kues* (= Die philosophisch-theologischen Schriften 2) (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014), 443–556 and Nikolaus von Kues, "De venatione sapientiae" in *Nikolaus von Kues* (= Die philosophisch-theologischen Schriften 1) (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014), 1–190, here: 62–68, see also David Bentley Hart, "From Notes on the Concept of the Infinite in the History of Western Metaphysics" in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2017), 165–66.

18 See Williams, *Christ*.

19 I am speaking here of the three mystical experiences he had: upon the death of his son Ivan, in contemplating the Caucasian mountains and with Raffael's Sistine Madonna in Dresden (see Sergij Bulgakov. *Aus meinem Leben. Autobiographische Zeugnisse* [= Sergij Bulgakov Werke 2] [Münster: Aschendorff, 2017], 55–64 and 106–15). On this mystical context of theology, see also Michael Martin. *The Submerged Reality: Sophi-*

turgical and sacramental life of the Church and then fleshed out by the attempt to think both along with and through the dogmas of the great ecumenical councils.<sup>20</sup> Bulgakov characterized his approach as a “Chalcedonian theology” and was thinking through (as creational preconditions) the metaphysical implications of the mystery of the God-Man, which is “Divine-Humanity [...] the perfect union of Divinity and Humanity in Christ, and then in general of God and the world.”<sup>21</sup> To be sure, such talk of the “union” of divinity and humanity only confirms the greater dissimilarity (*maior dissimilitudo*) between creation and the Creator, as Bulgakov states again and again.<sup>22</sup> When reflected upon in terms of the intellect, this divine-human unity is comprehended “through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor 13,12)<sup>23</sup>—this refers to the necessary apophatic qualification of his positive metaphysics of all-unity in the life of Sophia.

---

*ology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics*. (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2015), specifically: 156–68, which spells out Bulgakov’s approach to theology in light of his mystical intuitions. I agree with Martin when he writes: “Sophianic insight—though always informed by scripture, liturgy, and the traditions of the Church—is arrived at experientially, mystically, [and] artistically” (Martin, *Reality*, 140). Nevertheless it is vital to note that Martin’s statement that Bulgakov “understands Sophia as [...] a kind of fourth hypostasis” (Martin, *Submerged Reality*, 159) applies only to Bulgakov’s very early philosophical-theological thought (see, e.g., Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith [Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012]) but does not do justice to his developed thought after his essay *Hypostasis and Hypostaticity* of 1925 (see Sergius Bulgakov, “Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to the Unfading Light [1925],” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 [2005]: 5–46).

- 20 Sophiology is, in Bulgakov’s terms, a *Weltanschauung* (see Sergij Bulgakov, “Zur Frage nach der Weisheit Gottes,” *Kyrios: Vierteljahresschrift für Kirchen- und Geistesgeschichte Osteuropas* 1 [1936], 93–101), a lens through which one perceives reality—and the process of thinking through what one sees and experiences mystically and sacramentally, based on the perspective of the great dogmas of the church, which themselves go back to the apostolic and scriptural testimony of the earliest Christians (on this see Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* [Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2016], here: 61–62, note 21), and trying to explicate the metaphysics implicated by these formulae.
- 21 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God* [1933], trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007), here: 443 and Bulgakov, *Weisheit*, 97.
- 22 Bulgakov consistently and explicitly distances himself from any pantheistic confusion of the creation with its Creator (see, e.g., Bulgakov, *Bride*, 3f.). See also Riches, *Ecce Homo*, 247.
- 23 See Bulgakov, *Bride*, 37.



The sophiological habit of returning to the historical origins of Christian theology privileges life in the real world and historical experience over abstract conceptual thought.<sup>24</sup> Only secondarily can these personal and historical experiences be discursively systematized through rational thought and imagination. Bulgakov himself stressed the importance of 'personal life' in *The Lamb of God*: The "initial dogmatic axiom of Christology is the *unity of life* of the God-Man in His Divine-human I and the manifestation of the two natures, which are joined but not combined: not only two natures but also one life."<sup>25</sup> This "life of the spirit [...] is the living and inseparable unity of person and nature so that in concreto there is no impersonal nature or natureless personality; they can be separated and even opposed only in the abstract."<sup>26</sup> Unity in the personal life of a hypostatic spirit is thus, in short, one direction in which Bulgakov speaks about the "yes" implied in the "no" of Chalcedon.<sup>27</sup> It is one way for him to transpose the antinomic and paradoxical language of two natures, two wills, and two energies into a positive discourse about unconfused union: They are all "manifestations of the life of the spirit."<sup>28</sup> Man is neither separated from God nor fused or identified with him. He is rather "united in his life with God; he is correlated with God, interacts with Him, as the creaturely Sophia with the Divine Sophia, as a creaturely hypostatic spirit with a divine hypostatic spirit."<sup>29</sup> Such interaction and correlation take place in the relational life of hypostasis<sup>30</sup>—here designating the whole person as "realized action, the specific phenomenon or ensemble of phenomena in which a set of 'natural' or generic possibilities becomes concrete."<sup>31</sup> The sophiological language of hypostatic life thus binds theology back to the creaturely world of space, time, matter, and spirit—it is an incarnational (even practical) notion seeking the unification of Creator and creation in history and experience—and this includes laboring for the kingdom. As it was at the origin of the Christian faith when the God-Man was seen, heard, and touched (see 1 John 1,1), still today, the reality of Divine-Humanity is experienced in spiritual intuition, mystical prayer, and

24 I see Bulgakov here as less of a platonic dualist than others. The focus here lies not on the tension between an ideal world above and the mutable world below, but between abstractly excarnated thinking and concretely incarnated living.

25 Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 221, emphasis added.

26 Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 77.

27 See Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 44.

28 Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 77.

29 Bulgakov, *Bride*, 226.

30 See Rowan Williams, "Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond," above p. 25 ff.

31 Williams, *Christ*, 119.

sacramental life: They all testify to the mediatedness *in vivo* of Creator and creation.

Bulgakov made clear that such divine-human life is only understandable in the light of synergism (that is, the sophiological union in the act as revealed in the God-Man).<sup>32</sup> However, synergism requires not only a non-competitive ontology but, more specifically, a non-competitive understanding of divine and human freedom. In Christology, the notion of synergy is commonly associated with the doctrine of the incarnation and the life of Jesus Christ in the union of his two wills and energies (paradigmatically in the prayer at Gethsemane).<sup>33</sup> With regard to creativity, prayer and the transformation of creation in the kingdom of God, this can be spelt out in light of Jesus' resurrection. It is no coincidence that Paul's encouragement that human "labour is not in vain in the Lord" concludes his lengthy discussion of the resurrection. It is precisely there, in 1 Cor 15, that the apostle also presents his model of synergy: "by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me [ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ [ἡ] σὺν ἐμοί]" (1 Cor 15,10; see also Gal 2,20 and Phil 2,12 f.). So, while the incarnation allows a Christian metaphysics to speak of the ontological possibility of divine-human synergy, the resurrection and subsequent outpouring of the Spirit ground theology with a cooperative theopraxis that realizes these possibilities in the act.<sup>34</sup> Through participation in the resurrection life of Jesus, humanity is graciously enabled to anticipate the kingdom of God in the free and dynamic act of life that is interpersonal love.<sup>35</sup>

For Bulgakov, both this possibility and its realization converge in Sophia, which is "the living [...] self-revelation of God in creation" and thereby the

32 See Bulgakov, *Bride*, 240. It is vital to note here that 'synergy' itself is not an exclusively sophiological notion—a positive notion of synergy is part of almost all reputable modern Orthodox theology, but not always presented sophiologically or indeed necessarily sophiological. (I would like to thank the external reviewer who brought the need for this clarification to my attention). Sophiology does, however, provide an elaborate and helpful framework for a coherent account of synergism.

33 See for example Riches, *Ecce Homo*, 128–52 and 177–91; specifically, 138–42.

34 Bonhoeffer makes a similar point: "Es ist der tote Christus, der wie Sokrates und Goethe *gedacht* werden kann. Allein der Auferstandene ermöglicht erst die Gegenwart der lebendigen Person und gibt die Voraussetzung für die Christologie, nicht mehr aufgelöst in historische Energie oder ein angeschauten Christusideal" (Bonhoeffer, *Christologie*, 180, *emphasis added*).

35 See Dürr, *Homo Novus*, 361–477.

"foundation for the unification of love for God and love for the world in the unity of the Divine Sophia and the creaturely Sophia."<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Bulgakov understands the kingdom of God as the full realization of the relationship of love between God, Man and all of creation: "God, all in all, the divine all in creaturely being, the Divine Sophia in the creaturely Sophia."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this is to be achieved precisely through free divine-human cooperation in the life of the Spirit. The theandric task of the co-creative shaping of a world in which "God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15,28) is for Bulgakov at once the "task of man's sophianization by grace"<sup>38</sup> and creation's sophianization in and through man.<sup>39</sup> Thus a Christological model of synergy is inseparably linked with the doctrines of creation and eschatological consummation—and can stress both unity and continuity. It is precisely the realization that creation is not at all alienated from the Creator simply by virtue of its finitude and mutability that leads to a new realization of the ontological liberty of created nature itself.<sup>40</sup> It needs not overcome creatureliness; rather, it mirrors the transcendent God by more fully becoming what it already is.<sup>41</sup> Because man "is irrevocably rooted in a world that has become the kingdom of God," for Bulgakov, even "the life of the future age will consist in creative activity in the world."<sup>42</sup> For this, humanity is not to be taken out of the natural world but will be eternalized in and with it:<sup>43</sup>

36 Bulgakov, *Bride*, 521.

37 Ibid., 521.

38 Ibid., 226.

39 See Sergij Bulgakov, *Philosophie der Wirtschaft. Die Welt als Wirtschaftsgeschehen* [1912] (= Sergij Bulgakov Werke 1) (Münster: Aschendorff, 2014), here: 87–125. There is significant proximity here to the eschatological vision of Soloviev (see Oliver Dürr, "Christus oder Antichrist. Zur Frage nach der Kontinuität in Vladimir Solov'ëvs Eschatologie des vollendeten Gottmenschentums," *FZPhTh* 66, no. 2 [2019], 539–58).

40 See Hart, *Impassibility*, 170.

41 "Jesus Christus, der Mensch, das bedeutet, dass Gott in die geschaffene Wirklichkeit eingeht, dass wir vor Gott Menschen sein dürfen und sollen." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik* [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010]). Of course, this thought is further qualified by the crucifixion and resurrection (see Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 140 f.; see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005] here: 144; 204 / English version: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God. Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Reginald Fuller [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959] and Günter Thomas, *Neue Schöpfung. Systematisch-theologische Untersuchungen zur Hoffnung auf das 'Leben in der zukünftigen Welt'* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagshaus, 2009], here: 352–54).

42 Bulgakov, *Bride*, 520.

43 See Bulgakov, *Bride*, 523 and Dürr, *Auferstehung*, 15–61; 127–58.

[T]he glory of resurrection [...] extend[s] to the world. [...] Therefore, although the future age is separated by the present one by a universal catastrophe of being, this catastrophe does not rupture the continuity between them. Human history is included in the life of the future age, continues beyond its proper limits, into meta-history. All that has been accomplished in human history thus acquires a new significance in the single stream of life flowing from the Lord.<sup>44</sup>

Divine-human synergy is not only the model of present human fulfillment but also its eschatological horizon.

### Bulgakov and Bonhoeffer: Sophiology as a Key to Modern Theology?

Significant parallels can be drawn between Bulgakov's sophiological model of synergy and the reflections of the late Bonhoeffer, but they can only be outlined briefly here. In his 1933 lectures on Christology, Bonhoeffer—similar to Soloviev and Bulgakov—already made clear in terms of his 'negative' or 'critical Christology' that the Chalcedonian dogma sets a limit to the human intellect.<sup>45</sup> Its characterization of the relationship of Godhood and Manhood in Jesus Christ as without confusion and without separation is to be understood as an antinomic and paradoxical statement guarding a mystery (*asylum mysterii*) that cannot be penetrated fully by conceptual reasoning.<sup>46</sup> One cannot understand it in a detached mode of theorizing that speaks of divine and human nature as if they were distinguishable things.<sup>47</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the relationship between the two is a personal one that has become a fact in Jesus Christ—and Christian theology is speaking about God *post factum Christi*.<sup>48</sup> As Rowan Williams has convincingly shown, Bonhoeffer refuses to treat "finite and infinite as comparable forms of a single reality" and thereby shows forth a "basic theological clarity about the 'Godness' of God, and thus affirms the

44 Bulgakov, *Bride*, 519.

45 See the beginning of Part II of the lectures: "Hier handelt es sich um jenen Teil der Christologie, in dem die Unbegreiflichkeit der Person Christi begreiflich gemacht werden soll. Das Begreifen jedoch soll hier darin bestehen, das Unbegreifliche stehen zu lassen. [...] Die kritische Christologie hat zum Ziel, den Raum abzustecken, innerhalb dessen das Unbegreifliche stehen gelassen werden muss." (Bonhoeffer, *Christologie*, 205).

46 Bonhoeffer, *Christologie*, 205–06.

47 See Bonhoeffer, *Christologie*, 230; see also 179–82 and 199–200.

48 See Bonhoeffer, *Christologie*, 230–31.

classical belief that God can have no territory or interest to defend over against the created order."<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer increasingly makes clear in his prison letters that any God that can be pushed out of the world by man is not, after all, the God of the Christian faith.<sup>50</sup> With this crucial understanding of the Creator's transcendence, he did not need to shy away from talking about God's intimacy with creation. In one of the last letters, he wrote:

Our relationship to God [is] not a religious relationship to a supreme Being, absolute in power and goodness, which is a spurious conception of transcendence, but a new life for others, through participation in the Being of God.<sup>51</sup> [...] [T]ranscendence consists not in tasks beyond our scope and power, but in the nearest thing to hand.<sup>52</sup> God in human form [Gott in Menschengestalt!].<sup>53</sup>

Here Bonhoeffer articulates the rudimentary approaches of a Protestant model for what above has been termed 'synergy': A human being living "for others"—following the model of Christ—becomes "der aus dem Transzendenten lebende Mensch."<sup>54</sup> He is living the life of Jesus Christ and does human things divinely,<sup>55</sup> as the God-Man did divine things humanly.<sup>56</sup>

Bonhoeffer stands here within a longer tradition of Protestants thinking constructively about the relation between divine and human action and causality.<sup>57</sup> Two standard works within the Reformed tradition can be cited to illustrate this point: First, Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) writes in his *Reformed*

49 Williams, *Christ*, 169–217, here: 197. Bonhoeffer's argument can be summarized with Williams: "If God is wholly for us in Christ, God is never seeking to displace our createdness in order to win for Godself a space in the world; thus faith can never be a matter of securing territory within the world, over against some alternative space of human action and aspiration" (Williams, *Christ*, 170).

50 See Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand*, 140–44; 179–80; 182 f.; 186 f., and 191–96.

51 Bulgakov in comparison speaks of a "living participation" of creaturely life in the divine life (Bulgakov, *Bride*, 87).

52 See also Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand*, 96.

53 Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner*, 179 = Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand*, 204. He writes: "Das Jenseitige ist nicht das unendlich Ferne, sondern das Nächste [The transcendent is not the infinitely remote, but the close at hand]" (Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand*, 200 = Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner*, 175).

54 The English translation reads: "A life based on the transcendent," which does not fully capture the German rendition.

55 See Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 325: "[I]n der Liebe leben und zunehmen heißt ja in der Versöhnung und Einheit mit Gott und dem Menschen leben, heißt das Leben Jesu Christi leben."

56 I am adapting Aaron Riches's phrase (see Riches, *Ecce Homo*, 15).

57 On this wider context, see Williams, *Christ*, 127–218.

*Dogmatics*: “In relation to God the secondary causes [i. e., within creation] can be compared to instruments [...]; in relation to their effects and products they are causes in the true sense. [...] There is no division of labor between God and his creature, but the same effect is totally the effect of the primary cause as well as totally the effect of the proximate cause.”<sup>58</sup> Secondly, Otto Weber (1902–1966) took up the same thread after Bonhoeffer and criticized competitive construals of the relationship between divine and human activity as if they belonged to the same realm of being.<sup>59</sup> Both show forth similar sensibilities with regards to the question of God’s relationship to creation.

To conclude: Bonhoeffer probably would not have approved lightly of the positive formulations and style of Bulgakov’s sophiology.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, his negative and critical approach to Christology resembles the apophatic critique of abstract principles that characterizes Bulgakov’s approach.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, Bonhoeffer’s considerations in the prison letters, qualified by his understanding of God’s transcendence, suggest the possibility of a model of Divine-Human cooperation in the “life for others” that approximates unsystematically, and from the bottom up, Bulgakov’s sophiological model of synergy. Finally, the clarity about the relationship between the infinite Creator God and his finite creation—that both Bulgakov and Bonhoeffer show—results in the courage to affirm Paul’s vision from 1 Corinthians 15: Human beings actually are God’s coworkers, and in God’s kingdom, their labor is not in vain.

58 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. John Bolt and John Vriend (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), here: 614; see also Heinrich Hepppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2nd ed., 1958), here 200–01; 209–11 and J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift. The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, Oxford 2007, 47–48.

59 See Otto Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 4th ed., 1972, vol. 1, p. 570.

60 Assessing this and more generally to which degree Bonhoeffer’s late theology is compatible with a robust, developed, Bulgakovian Sophiology would be a fruitful task for future research.

61 To be clear: This ‘negative’ approach is part of every sound theological approach and it is a strength of Protestantism to keep it alive. But this negative way should not be self-contained, or else it paradoxically enforces the Godlessness of the world and the wordlessness of God. Against such a tendency Bulgakov’s positive assertions retain an apophatic shape and Bonhoeffer’s negative approach remains dynamically open to the affirmative—in reflection and praxis.