



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.



## EPIPHANIA

Herausgegeben von  
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in Zusammenarbeit mit  
dem Zentrum für das Studium der Ostkirchen  
der Universität Freiburg Schweiz

Band 19

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 **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>



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## Sergius Bulgakov and Modern Theology

*Paul Ladouceur*

Sergius Bulgakov is a theological giant of modern Christianity. The originality, scope, and volume of his theological writings are breathtaking. As of 2023, some twenty-five books by Bulgakov (about 5,500 printed pages) have been published in English translation, covering most aspects of systematic theology. With other articles and essays already available in English, or in the translation–publication pipeline, about 8,000 pages of Bulgakov’s writings will soon be available in English.

Yet Bulgakov’s theology is little known or appreciated in theological circles, both Orthodox and Western, for three reasons. First, Bulgakov suffers from the general neglect of Orthodox theology in Western Christianity; typically, Orthodox thinkers are at best considered marginal to central theological concerns in the West. Secondly, Bulgakov wrote almost entirely in Russian, and until relatively recently, few of his major works were available in English. This has now been largely rectified with the publication of translations of most of his monographs and many minor works. Finally, key aspects of Bulgakov’s theology are infused with the theology of Divine Wisdom or sophiology, a theology contested in certain Orthodox circles, and often bewildering for non-Orthodox theologians.

This essay advances ideas for an assessment of the influence or impact of Bulgakov’s theology on Orthodox theology and, more tentatively, on broader Christian theology. Important methodological considerations surround the assessment of an author’s influence. “Influence” in intellectual history is at best a slippery concept, with no clear definition or means of measuring the “influence” of one theologian on others. Some objective indicators are available, such as an author’s recognition of another author, perhaps revealed in positive citations in publications. But often leading theologians do not provide such direct

indicators of their sources; rarely do major theologians consciously recognize the influence of other contemporary theologians.

Faced with the paucity or non-existence of such indicators, more typically influence must be assessed qualitatively, deduced from indicators such as the adoption of ideas, vocabulary, or definitions by one writer from another—but both writers may have arrived at the same conclusions or concepts independently, and may even be oblivious to the other's theology. An external observer can only note similarities in ideas, without being able to discern direct influence.

Influence or “impact” may be both positive, the conscious adoption of a theologian's ideas by others, or negative, the rejection of this theology, at least on specific issues. For example, Georges Florovsky was certainly “influenced” by Bulgakov, not in the adoption of Bulgakov's ideas (at least not overtly), but in Florovsky's struggle for much of his career against aspects of Bulgakov's theology.

In a similar vein, Dumitru Stăniloae engaged extensively with Bulgakov's theology. Stăniloae visited Paris in 1928 while working on Gregory Palamas, although there is no clear evidence that he met Bulgakov. Stăniloae learned Russian to read Bulgakov and in Stăniloae's book *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului* (Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man) (1943)<sup>1</sup> and in several other writings, he critiques aspects of Bulgakov's theology. In particular, Stăniloae distances himself from sophiology and other aspects of Bulgakov's theology such as Christology and anthropology, and considers Bulgakov's sophiology pantheistic.<sup>2</sup>

While many Orthodox theologians, such as Florovsky and Stăniloae—and non-Orthodox—report on and critique aspects of Bulgakov's theology, few actually appropriate his ideas. Simple mention of an author is insufficient to demonstrate influence, since many theological publications are historical theology, reporting on, analyzing, and critiquing the theology of others, rather than adopting, refining, or extending previous ideas to advance theological reflection. These factors come into play in the assessment of the impact of

1 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului* (Sibiu, 1943; Bucharest: Basilica, 2013).

2 See Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos*, 69, 105, 110, 118. Stăniloae's engagement with Bulgakov is understudied, but see Vasile-Ciprian Burca, “The Holy Trinity as the Source of the Unity of the Church in the Creative Theological Vision of Fr Dumitru Stăniloae,” doctoral thesis, University of Winchester, 2015, 30–42; and his unpublished paper “Wrestling with the Angel: Dumitru Stăniloae and Sergius Bulgakov.”

Bulgakov's theology on other Orthodox theologians and on wider Christian theology.

### Is Bulgakov a Major Christian Theologian?

Important aspects Bulgakov's theology may be well known, if frequently criticized, in Orthodox theological circles, but this is much less true in broader Christian circles. This is demonstrated in Bulgakov's visibility in classic surveys of modern Christian theology, such as the five discussed here.

In the thirty-two essays (none of them by an Orthodox theologian) in the *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (2004),<sup>3</sup> there are only a few passing references to Orthodox theology, mainly concerning Trinitarian theology. Almost all references to "orthodox" in the book are synonymous with "traditional" or "fundamentalist" theology. Among Orthodox theologians, only Florovsky is mentioned for his theology of redemption; Lossky and Zizioulas are relegated to brief references in footnotes, and Bulgakov is not mentioned at all.

*The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (2005) approaches modern Christian theology from three main perspectives: individual theologians; themes in theology; and "particular" theologies or ecclesial clusters in Christianity. Eleven of the forty-two chapters are devoted to individual theologians; none are Orthodox. Orthodox theology features mainly in a fine essay by Rowan Williams.<sup>4</sup> Williams focuses on Bulgakov, Lossky, and Florovsky, with briefer attention to other major figures. Except for Zizioulas, Orthodox theologians are hardly mentioned elsewhere in the book, and Lossky and Florovsky not at all. Zizioulas features in three essays, but Bulgakov only in one, with an upbeat, if isolated compliment in John Milbank's essay on Henri de Lubac, where Milbank ranks, without elaboration, de Lubac "along with Sergei Bulgakov, one of the two truly great theologians of the twentieth century."<sup>5</sup> Nor will an Orthodox theologian have a dedicated chapter in the forthcoming fourth edition of *The Modern Theologians* (2024).

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3 Gareth Jones, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004).

4 Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 3rd ed., 2005), 572–88.

5 Ford and Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians*, 88.

Orthodox theology and theologians rank significantly higher in a similar book, *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (2013).<sup>6</sup> Separate introductory surveys cover Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox theology<sup>7</sup> in the twentieth century, and ten of the fifty-two chapters are devoted to Orthodox authors: Bulgakov; Florovsky; Afanasiev; Lossky; Stăniloae; Schmemmann; Matta El-Meskeen; Emilianos Timiadis; Zizioulas; Yannaras. The selection is somewhat hit and miss; one wonders why major figures such as Berdiaev, Evdokimov, Florenskii, Meyendorff, and Ware do not merit a chapter. As in *The Modern Theologians*, Orthodox theologians figure little outside their respective chapters; Bulgakov is mentioned only in passing in the general introduction.

Orthodoxy, especially the patristic period, features reasonably well in in Alistair McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (2017).<sup>8</sup> But individual Orthodox theologians receive only passing references—except for Vladimir Lossky with four (compare Barth, with over fifty). McGrath refers to Bulgakov once, with Khomiakov, concerning *sobornost* in a discussion on catholicity in the church; sophiology is not mentioned. The related *Christian Theology Reader* edited by McGrath contains short extracts from a wide range of ancient and modern authors. The ancient Fathers of the Church are well represented, as are six modern Orthodox theologians (Lossky, Schmemmann, Zizioulas, Meyendorff, Stăniloae, George Dragas, and David Bentley Hart)—but not Bulgakov (nor Florovsky).<sup>9</sup>

This brief survey of an admittedly small sample of general theological works illustrates the problem of assessing the impact of modern Orthodox theologians, including Bulgakov. Unless the author or editor(s) has a particular interest in Orthodoxy—as is the case in *Key Theological Thinkers*—modern Orthodox authors are unlikely to feature significantly (as in the case of McGrath), or be relegated mostly to an “Orthodox chapter” (*The Modern Theologians*).

Quantitative indicators of the importance or influence of Bulgakov, and of Orthodox theology in general, produce disappointing results, but indicate that Orthodox theology, including Bulgakov, carries little weight in wider Chris-

6 Staale Kristiansen and Svein Rise, eds., *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

7 Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Orthodox Theology in the Twentieth Century,” *Key Theological Thinkers*, 53–62.

8 Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 6th ed., 2017).

9 Alistair McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 5th ed., 2017).

tian theological circles, despite a century of significant exposure to Orthodox theology in the West. Qualitative approaches may yield more positive results.

### Some Qualitative Assessments

In a 2020 essay, Paul Valliere tracks the influence of the Russian religious renaissance in modern theology in six Western theological milieux: Karl Barth and later evangelical Protestants; liberal Protestants; Anglicans; Yves Congar and Roman Catholic ecumenism; *nouvelle théologie* and *ressourcement*; and liberation theology and feminism.<sup>10</sup> Despite pockets of influence of Russian religious thought in these areas, overall impact is limited, but perhaps strongest, among Catholics and Anglicans, in key figures such as Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Louis Bouyer (a Lutheran who became Catholic), Michael Ramsay, and Rowan Williams, and more limited in some major Protestant theologians, especially Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Jaroslav Pelikan (a Lutheran who became Orthodox). Although Karl Barth was acquainted with some Russian theologians, notably Bulgakov and Florovsky, in his vast *Church Dogmatics* he does not refer at all, as Valliere wistfully notes, “to modern Orthodoxy’s greatest dogmatic theologian.”<sup>11</sup>

Valliere identifies Bulgakov’s influence especially in Paul Tillich’s adoption of “panentheism” to sum up his vision of the consummation of all things (which Bulgakov also uses for his sophiology); Rowan Williams on social and political theology and on kenotic personalism; Yves Congar on *sobornost*, hierarchy in the church, and pneumatology, especially Bulgakov’s consideration of the *filio-que* as a *theologoumenon* rather than a heresy; Henri de Lubac on synergy as the reconciliation of divine grace and human freedom; Hans Urs von Balthasar on kenotic Trinitarianism; and Louis Bouyer in his focus on God–world relations and the structure of his writings (three theological trilogies).

The impact of Russian religious thought, especially Bulgakov, is especially evident in three major twentieth-century Catholic personalities: Louis Bouyer, Thomas Merton, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Louis Bouyer (1913–2004), an important French Catholic theologian in the late twentieth century, was strongly influenced by Bulgakov, whom he met in

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10 Paul Valliere, “The Influence of Russian Religious Thought on Western Theology in the Twentieth Century,” in Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 660–76.

11 Valliere, “Russian Religious Thought,” 663.

the 1930s. Bouyer adopted sophiology as a key motif in his theology, reflected in numerous monographs. He was struck especially by Bulgakov's sophiology as an insight into God's presence in creation, largely setting aside ontological issues in sophiology to focus on its practical applications in God-world relations: "The main characteristic of divine Wisdom is that it is an eternal thought of God concerning creation as a whole."<sup>12</sup> Bouyer finds sophiology interpreted as divine presence in creation throughout Christianity, from the Old Testament to St. Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, Maximus, Aquinas, and Eckhart, then in the mystical lineage from Jakob Boehme to the German idealists, and thence to the Russians. Bouyer adopts many of Bulgakov's sophiological themes, such as uncreated/created Wisdom, and the dedication of churches to Holy Wisdom and their association with the Mother of God. Bouyer interprets sophiology basically as panentheism, as did Bulgakov himself (see below). In a glowing eulogy of Bulgakov, Bouyer cites approvingly from Bulgakov's account of his visit to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in 1923, where Bulgakov writes of Sophia as "the real unity of the world in the Logos, the co-inherence of all with all, the world of divine ideas."<sup>13</sup>

The monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton (1915–1968), in the last decade of his life, was also strongly influenced by sophiology, from the works of Soloviev, Bulgakov, Berdiaev, and Evdokimov<sup>14</sup> (although the last two cannot be considered "sophiologists"). Merton's actual acquaintance with Bulgakov's writings was likely very limited, most probably to the two books available to Merton in English, *The Orthodox Church* (1935) and especially *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (1937). Merton was struck, like Bouyer, by the sophiological perception of the divine presence in creation, conveyed in Bulgakov's notion of "Created Wisdom," which Merton perceived as the principal insight of sophiology: "[God] speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, in which his light is one fulness and one Wisdom," writes Merton in his prose poem "Hagia Sophia" (1962); "Thus he shines not on them but from within them. Such is the lov-

12 Louis Bouyer, "An Introduction to the Theme of Wisdom and Creation in the Tradition," *Le Messager orthodoxe* 98 (1985), 154. For a more extensive treatment of Bouyer's cosmology, see his *Cosmos: The World and the Glory of God* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1988). Bulgakov and John Henry Newman are the most cited theologians in this work.

13 Louis Bouyer, "La personnalité et l'œuvre de Serge Bulgakov (1871–1944)," *Nova et Vetera* 53 (1978): 144; Sergius Bulgakov, "Hagia Sophia," in James Pain, Nicolas Zernov, eds., *Sergius Bulgakov: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1976), 13.

14 See Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia, The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).



ing-kindness of Wisdom.”<sup>15</sup> For Merton, the writings of Bulgakov and Berdiaev transmit “the light of the resurrection and theirs is a theology of triumph”; they dared “to say something great and worthy of God.”<sup>16</sup> Merton united Bulgakov’s Divine Wisdom with the *logoi* of things of Maximus the Confessor, and incorporated into his perception of creation other key notions of Bulgakov, writing, for example, that the Blessed Virgin Mary “can be said to be a personal manifestation of Sophia, who in God is *Ousia* rather than Person.”<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Merton’s theopoetic assimilation of sophiology focuses, like Bouyer, not on the ontological mechanics of Divine Wisdom, but rather on the re-enchantment of creation manifesting God’s presence and glory as Creator and Sustainer of all—when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), as Bulgakov constantly reiterates. In this, Merton is also close to related notions in Schmemmann and Zizioulas, such as “the world as sacrament” and humanity as priests of creation, offering to God God’s own creation.<sup>18</sup>

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) studied Soloviev, Berdiaev, and Bulgakov. Jennifer Newsome Martin concludes that for Balthasar, Berdiaev strays “beyond the boundaries of licit theological speculation”; Soloviev gets a better rating as “a genuinely Christological thinker informed mostly deeply by Scripture and the Fathers”; but Bulgakov is “absolutely formative for Balthasar [...] Balthasar incorporates many of Bulgakov’s reflections into the heart of his own theology.” Martin summarizes Bulgakov’s themes assimilated by von Balthasar: his unusual interpretation of Christ’s descent into hell, sustained attention to the theology of Holy Saturday, interest in the universality of human salvation, Trinitarian understanding of the symbol of Ur-kenosis that includes within it the creation of the world as the exteriorization and kenotic expression of God, dyadic action of Son and the Spirit, the apocalyptic symbol of the Lamb as though slain from the book of Revelation, and the decisive turn to pneumatology.<sup>19</sup>

15 Thomas Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” in Pramuk, 303.

16 Merton’s Dairy, 25 April 1957, cited in Pramuk, 11.

17 Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” 305.

18 The first edition of Alexander Schmemmann’s *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* was entitled *The World as Sacrament* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966); John Zizioulas, “Man the Priest of Creation: A Response to the Ecological Problem,” in Andrew Walker and Costa Carras, eds., *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World: Orthodox Christianity & Society* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 178–88.

19 Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 206–07. See David Bentley Hart’s reading of Martin: “Martin and Gallaher on Bulga-

Bulgakov's sophiology also features in the Radical Orthodoxy movement. John Milbank, the most well-known exponent of Radical Orthodoxy, considers that sophiology is "perhaps the most significant theology of the two preceding centuries."<sup>20</sup> Despite this high praise, sophiology, even in its panentheistic mode, does not feature in the theological foundations of Radical Orthodoxy; neither Bulgakov nor sophiology are mentioned in the key publication *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1999).<sup>21</sup>

The remainder of this essay surveys three theological areas where Bulgakov's influence is most visible, especially in the Orthodox context.

### Panentheism

Although Bulgakov's sophiology has not found much echo among Orthodox and non-Orthodox theologians beyond historical theology, Bulgakov also placed sophiology within the philosophical notion of panentheism. To distance himself from Soloviev's subtly pantheistic philosophical-theological system, Bulgakov emphasizes God's transcendence to creation and God as Creator, while maintaining the prime panentheist affirmation that God is in creation and creation in God: nothing can exist apart from God; all created beings are constantly sustained by the divine will and hence are somehow "in God."<sup>22</sup> Even the notion that God creates *ex nihilo* is not absolute, since creation has a form of existence in God before it is actualized.<sup>23</sup>

Bulgakov's cosmology fuses panentheism and sophiology, into which he also assimilates the patristic notion of the divine energies, in a complex and not entirely coherent system that seeks to maintain an antinomic balance between God as utterly transcendent and yet radically immanent. He defines his theology as panentheist, defending it against the accusation of pantheism

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kov," *Theological Territories* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 55–64.

20 John Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon," in Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, eds., *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 45.

21 John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

22 See for example, Sergius Bulgakov, *Judas Iscariot, L'Apôtre félon* (1931) (Geneva: Syrtès, 2015), 102–04.

23 Sergius Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (1937) (Hudson NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 63–64, 72.

brought against Soloviev: "But is this not a pantheism, an impious deification of the world, leading to a kind of religious materialism? Yes, it *is* a pantheism, but an entirely pious one; or more precisely, as I prefer to call it in order to avoid ambiguity, it is a panentheism."<sup>24</sup> Bulgakov summarizes his panentheism as "the truth that all is in God or of God (panentheism),"<sup>25</sup> and: "the world is the not-God existent in God; God is the not-world existent in the world. God posits the world outside of himself, but the world possesses its being in God."<sup>26</sup>

Other modern Orthodox theologians identify themselves as panentheists, including Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Fr Andrew Louth, Alexei Nesteruk, and Christopher Knight. All participated in a symposium on panentheism in December 2001.<sup>27</sup> But rather than linking panentheism to sophiology as Bulgakov does, they associate panentheism with the *logoi* of things in Maximus the Confessor and the divine energies in Gregory Palamas, bypassing sophiology altogether. None of the four invokes Bulgakov, yet their project relating the doctrines of Maximus and Palamas to panentheism is akin to Bulgakov's affirmation that his sophiology was panentheism, not pantheism, and that it is consistent with Palamas's divine energies.

Orthodox critics of panentheism are not lacking. Georges Florovsky saw Bulgakov's panentheism as little more than Soloviev's pantheist wolf disguised

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24 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter* (1936) (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 199–200. See Brandon Gallaher, "Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov'evan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergij Bulgakov," *Studies in East European Thought*, 64 (2012), 215–18. Gallaher concludes here that Bulgakov falls into the same pantheist difficulties as Soloviev. In his contribution to this book, however, Gallaher discharges Bulgakov from the accusation of pantheism and affirms that Bulgakov "remains within the ambit of a doctrinally orthodox vision of creation." Gallaher accepts Bulgakov's own identification of his sophiology as panentheistic. See Brandon Gallaher, "Sergii Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology and the Problem of Human Freedom," 381 ff.

25 Sergius Bulgakov, "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to the *Unfading Light*" (1925), *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 49:1–2 (2005), 5–46: 27.

26 Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God* (1931) (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 32.

27 Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, eds., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004): Christopher Knight, "Theistic Naturalism and the Word Made Flesh: Complementary Approaches to the Debate on Panentheism" (48–61); Kallistos Ware, "God Immanent yet Transcendent: The Divine Energies according to Saint Gregory Palamas" (157–68); Alexei Nesteruk, "The Universe as Hypostatic Inherence in the Logos of God: Panentheism in the Eastern Orthodox Perspective" (169–83); Andrew Louth, "The Cosmic Vision of Saint Maximos the Confessor" (184–96).

in a theistic sheepskin. But rather than waging a frontal battle against Soloviev and Bulgakov, Florovsky attacked them indirectly. In his seminal 1928 essay “Creation and Createdness,” Florovsky posits the patristic doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as the true Christian theology of relations between God and the world.<sup>28</sup> Florovsky attaches creation to the divine will, but ironically, his willingness to admit, however reluctantly, that creation has some form of eternal existence in the divine will can be considered a form of panentheism. Florovsky speculates that the idea of creation existed in God’s mind from all eternity but its realization occurs in time. His solution is not entirely satisfactory, since it seems to run counter to his own categorical assertion that “Nothing created can ever be part of God,”<sup>29</sup> and involves introducing time into eternity: “God’s idea of the world, his plan and intention are without any doubt eternal, but in some sense they are not co-eternal with him, as they are ‘separated’ from his ‘essence’ by the exercise of his will.”<sup>30</sup>

Florovsky further muddles his own argument that there are two types of eternity by citations from Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, John of Damascus, and Maximus the Confessor that there was some form of eternal divine pre-contemplation of creation before its actual realization.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Bulgakov and later theologians, Florovsky is unwilling to call a spade a spade—to recognize intimations of panentheism in the ancient Fathers—but in the end his solution appears to be pantheist in all but name.

Florovsky’s main target in “Creation and Createdness” is sophiology but panentheism suffers collateral damage for being too closely interwoven with sophiology in Bulgakov and ultimately reducible, thinks Florovsky, to pantheism. Whereas Florovsky sees panentheism as a sub-species of pantheism (hence unacceptable), Bulgakov and other Orthodox theologians regard panentheism as a sub-species of theism (hence acceptable). Considering the totality of Bulgakov’s theology, with the overwhelming evidence that he was a Christian theist, it is not possible to sustain a claim that his theology was pantheistic, even if his own theological system grounded in sophiology breaks down under close analysis.

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28 Georges Florovsky, “Creation and Createdness,” in Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur, eds., *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky* (London: T&T Clark, 2019). See Paul Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially 106–11 and 145–50.

29 Florovsky, “Creation and Createdness,” 45.

30 *Ibid.*, 43.

31 *Ibid.*, 45–46.

Nicolas Lossky was another strong critic of sophiology and panentheism. In his comments on Soloviev's cosmology, Lossky speaks of its "pantheistic flavor," and he also implicitly rejects panentheism, affirming that only the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in an absolute sense resolves the question of the connection between God and the world; God does not employ "for this creation any material either in himself or outside."<sup>32</sup>

Nicolas Lossky, like Florovsky, finds that Bulgakov was unable to prevent his sophiology from slipping into pantheism: "the non-divine aspect of the world proves to be so characterless that his theory must be regarded as a peculiar variety of pantheism."<sup>33</sup> Lossky considers that the basic flaw in Bulgakov's system is that he blurs if not eradicates the ontological gulf between God and creation: "All his theories connected therewith [God and creation] contain too great an ontological approximation of the world, and especially of man, to God [...]. That is logically incompatible with the teaching about God expounded by negative theology [...]."<sup>34</sup> Lossky's specific objections to Bulgakov's panentheism overlap with his critique of sophiology: the ideas that God creates from within himself minimizes divine creativity, and that Bulgakov's argument suggests that humanity is consubstantial with God, are untenable. Lossky also concludes that panentheism is unable to give a reasonable explanation of the presence of evil in the world, the freedom of created agents, and their capacity for independent creativity.<sup>35</sup>

Panentheism is widely diffused in modern Christian theology, but it is difficult to make a connection with Bulgakov. Paul Valliere finds that from Paul Tillich's early engagement with Russian thought and his subsequent move away from it, there may nonetheless be an affiliation with Bulgakov in Tillich's expression "eschatological pan-en-theism" to characterize his understanding of the consummation of all things, a theology close to Bulgakov's.<sup>36</sup> Bulgakov may rightly be considered an Orthodox pioneer in placing his theology under the pantheist umbrella, but this does not diminish suspicions in some Orthodox quarters that his sophiology is implicitly pantheist.

32 Nicolas Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952), 128.

33 Lossky, *Russian Philosophy*, 229.

34 *Ibid.*, 228.

35 *Ibid.*, 228–31.

36 Valliere, "Russian Religious Thought," 665.

## Personalism

The Russian religious thinkers vigorously applied the notion of “person” to human existence. Their starting point was the Biblical and patristic teaching that humans are made in the image of God. Just as God exists as three Persons, so humanity exists as a multiplicity of persons. Personalism in modern Orthodox thought originated in the Slavophiles of the mid-nineteenth century, but it was the main figures of the Russian religious renaissance, in particular Florenskii, Bulgakov, and Berdiaev, who affirmed the uniqueness and hence the absolute value of the human person, applying the theological understanding of divine personhood and of love as the foundation of intra-Trinitarian relationships to human existence. Their personalism constituted a Christian response to the impersonal, positivist, reductionist, and nihilist philosophies, especially Marxism, competing for the Russian soul prior to the revolution. Olivier Clément writes: “It is, it seems to me, to the honor of Russian theology and religious philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to have realized this approach, by distancing themselves as much from individualism as from mystical and totalitarian fusions.”<sup>37</sup>

Personalist theology achieved a fuller expression in the work of the Russian thinkers in exile and in later leading Orthodox theologians such as Yannaras, Zizioulas, and Kallistos Ware. There is a remarkable continuity in the development of ideas on what it means philosophically and theologically to be a person. Olivier Clément, referring to Berdiaev, Bulgakov, and Vladimir Lossky, says: “These men conflicted with each other on other subjects. But they concur entirely concerning the person. I would not dare say: *consensus patrum*—but perhaps one should, because the Spirit is not exhausted, especially in times of distress and of lucidity.”<sup>38</sup>

Among the leading members of the Russian religious renaissance, Berdiaev is the pre-eminent philosopher of the person: “From beginning to end, Nicolas Berdiaev’s thought is a thought of the person,” writes Clément.<sup>39</sup> Both Florenskii and Bulgakov sought to express the basis of the uniqueness of the

37 Olivier Clément, “Aperçus sur la théologie de la personne dans la ‘diaspora’ russe en France,” in *Mille Ans de christianisme russe 988–1988* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1989), 303.

38 Clément, “Aperçus,” 304.

39 Olivier Clément, “Le personnalisme chrétien dans la pensée russe,” *Contacts* 40:143 (1988), 305. Berdiaev’s thinking on human personhood is found notably in *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), and *Slavery and Freedom* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1943).

person, emphasizing in particular that the person is above any rational category, making the person philosophically “incomprehensible,” not irrational, but beyond rationality, in the realm of mystery.<sup>40</sup> In *Unfading Light* (1917), Bulgakov re-iterates personalist ideas similar to Florenskii’s, and, perhaps more than other Russian theologians, Bulgakov stresses the apophatic nature of human personhood: “What is a person? What is the I? No answer can be given to this question other than with a gesture that points inward. *A person is indefinable*, for it is always being defined with everything, remaining however *above* all of its conditions or determinations.”<sup>41</sup>

Berdiaev, more than Bulgakov, stresses the distinction between person and individual as an essential aspect of a robust Orthodox theology of the human person. While in ordinary parlance “person” and “individual” are often synonymous, the theological distinction between them is a powerful affirmation of the uniqueness of the human person created in the image of the Persons of the Trinity.<sup>42</sup> Whereas “individual” emphasizes a human in isolation, the “person” must exist in relation to others.

What Florenskii, Bulgakov, and Berdiaev sought to characterize as the essence of personhood, Vladimir Lossky pithily articulated by appealing to the patristic categories of nature and person, in a formula which may be summarized as the irreducibility of person to nature: “It will be impossible for us to form a concept of the human person and we will have to content ourselves with saying: ‘person’ signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature.”<sup>43</sup>

Zizioulas reiterates this idea: “I have excluded every possibility of regarding the person as an expression or emanation of the substance or nature of man (or even of God himself as ‘nature’).”<sup>44</sup> Modern Orthodox anthropology would be inclined to say that human personhood is the highest aspect of the divine

40 Pavel Florenskii, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (1914) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59–60.

41 Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations* (1917) (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 290 (Bulgakov’s italics).

42 Berdiaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 54–58; and Berdiaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 21.

43 Vladimir Lossky, “The Theological Notion of the Human Person,” in *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird, intro. John Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 120. Lossky says much the same thing in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [1944] (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 122.

44 John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 59.

image in humanity, which Yannaras aptly characterizes as the “personal mode of existence” and “being-as-person.”<sup>45</sup>

Modern Orthodox theology of human personhood illustrates theological influence among Orthodox theologians. Few acknowledge this influence beyond occasional hints, but Aristotle Papanikolaou put the question directly to Yannaras and Zizioulas:

There are those [...] who would not necessarily agree that Lossky’s and Zizioulas’s interpretation of ‘person’ is explicitly patristic. This dispute becomes important in considering how much Zizioulas actually owes to Lossky for his theology of person. Though Zizioulas criticizes Lossky, giving the impression of radical break with his thought, the similarities in their theology of “person” raises the query of whether such similarities result from the clarity of the patristic texts or whether Lossky’s thought formed the basis for Zizioulas’s understanding of person. Such is the case with Christos Yannaras, who has also developed a theology of personhood similar to that of Lossky’s and Zizioulas’s, and who admitted to me that one of the starting points for his thought was Lossky’s theology of person. In a personal conversation with Zizioulas, he indicated to me that one of the influences for his ontology of personhood was Yannaras. In then suggesting to Zizioulas that perhaps Lossky influenced him indirectly, Zizioulas was willing to admit that may be the case, but added that the influence would be slight given the substantial differences between their theologies.<sup>46</sup>

We have here a golden chain of insight from Lossky to Yannaras to Zizioulas. Because Lossky’s personhood was mediated through Yannaras to Zizioulas, Zizioulas is likely closer to Lossky on personhood than Zizioulas himself recognizes. And this chain of insight does not begin with Lossky; Lossky did not “invent” his theology of human personhood *ex nihilo*. Rather, he drew on ideas of his predecessors and contemporaries, especially Berdiaev and Bulgakov. Lossky does not acknowledge his sources among his fellow Russian intellectuals, but analysis shows that Lossky follows the strong personalist philosophies and theologies received not only from Berdiaev and Bulgakov, but also Dostoevskii, Florenskii, Semen Frank, and Viktor Nesmelov.<sup>47</sup>

45 Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 19.

46 Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophatism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 198, n. 4.

47 Clément, “Aperçus,” *passim*.



Because of his stature in the first half of the twentieth century, Bulgakov was a key link in the chain of transmission of theological personalism from the Slavophiles through the religious renaissance to neopatristic theology. But it is difficult to extract Bulgakov's particular contribution from those of other leading personalities in this chain of transmission. Lossky provided the essential liaison between the Russians and the Greeks, even if he does not acknowledge his sources. Even less obvious is Bulgakov's influence on Yannaras, Zizioulas, and other modern Orthodox personalists such as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware—except as mediated through Lossky.

### Eschatology and Universal Salvation

Modern Orthodox thinking on the possibility of universal salvation (*apocatastasis*) occurs in three main strands. One, perhaps the strongest, found notably in theological manuals typical of “academic theology,” stresses that the four “last things” (death, judgment, heaven, and hell), revolve around divine judgment of humans for their success or failure in heeding divine commandments, followed by eternal reward (heaven) or eternal punishment (hell). This emphasizes divine justice, with an absolute barrier between the two possible eternal outcomes. A second strand, recognizing that this juridical approach to the finality of human existence downplays divine mercy and forgiveness, maintains a hope and prays that “all will be saved” despite human sinfulness, but accepts that universal salvation is not the teaching of the church, and that the historical record of the condemnation of Origen's doctrine of apocatastasis is at best ambiguous. The third strand argues that universal salvation is a doctrinal certitude. Florenskii, Bulgakov, and Berdiaev are in the “universalist” camp.

Bulgakov's eschatology, especially as developed in *The Bride of the Lamb*, is the most complete exposition in modern Orthodox theology. Cyril O'Regan writes: “Eschatology is not simply a theme in Bulgakov's writings, but at once its central energy and milieu.”<sup>48</sup> Bulgakov's eschatology revolves around universal salvation, following closely themes from Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Isaac the Syrian.

The starting point of Bulgakov's eschatology is a move away from an emphasis on a juridical view of “the last things,” focusing on divine judgment and eternal reward or eternal punishment, to a consideration of the finality of hu-

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48 Cyril O'Regan, endorsement in *The Sophiology of Death: Essays on Eschatology: Personal, Political, Universal*, trans. Roberto J. De La Noval (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

man (and cosmic) existence in relation to God's own existence, and especially divine love—a move characterized as “from predominantly forensic to ontological categories.”<sup>49</sup> For Bulgakov, a juridical approach to eschatology, grounded in “rationalism and anthropomorphism,”<sup>50</sup> reduces limitless divine love and mercy to the constraints of human legal systems, with a decided emphasis on divine justice simplistically interpreted as reward for good and punishment for evil. Bulgakov stresses instead that the eschaton represents the completion of God's creation, when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), a key phrase in Bulgakov's eschatology.<sup>51</sup>

A second key feature of Bulgakov's eschatology is that the resurrection is universal, simultaneous and permanent, since it is grounded in Christ's resurrection: “The God-man is the all-man, and his resurrection is ontologically the universal resurrection [...] the *parousia* is also the universal resurrection, and the universal resurrection is the *parousia*: the two are identical and inseparable.”<sup>52</sup>

Distinct from much Christian theology, including Orthodox theology, that the deceased are only passive subjects of after-life processes, Bulgakov argues that the deceased have an active role in their evolution after death. Divine-human collaboration (synergism) in salvation does not end with this life, but continues into the next. Bulgakov sees this synergism in the collaboration of the righteous in their own resurrection, the recomposition of the resurrected body, and self-judgment.<sup>53</sup> This judgment occurs in relation to each person's “own eternal image in Christ, that is, before Christ. And in the light of this image, he will see his own reality, and this comparison will be the judgment.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the last judgment is not so much external, as in human jurisprudence, but internal, as each sees his or her failings in relation to the ideal that God intended.

This self-judgment leads not to eternal self-condemnation, but to a process of purification as humans shed their negative qualities prior to entering divine bliss; hell is not eternal retribution for evil, but purgative and therapeutic, and

49 Paul Gavrilyuk, “Universal Salvation in the Theology of Sergius Bulgakov,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 57:1 (2006), 110–32: 115. The presentation of the highlights of Bulgakov's eschatology here is inspired by Gavrilyuk's essay.

50 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 382.

51 St. Paul's expression that God will be “all in all” occurs over thirty times in *The Bride of the Lamb*.

52 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 429.

53 Ibid., 430; 434; 446; 457.

54 Ibid., 457.

hence temporary. Bulgakov refers to his teaching as “universal purgatory,”<sup>55</sup> with awareness of divine love—“fire”—as the key agent of the purgative process.

The practitioners of neopatristic theology eschewed soteriological universalism, and indeed generally avoided eschatology beyond emphasizing, like the early Fathers, the resurrection of the body. Kallistos Ware summarizes the approaches of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Isaac the Syrian, without endorsing their views, but advocating, in keeping with earlier tradition, that the church hopes and prays “for the salvation of all.”<sup>56</sup>

David Bentley Hart inherits Bulgakov’s mantle as a strong Orthodox proponent of the theology “that all shall be saved,” the title of his powerful book on eschatology.<sup>57</sup> Hart follows much the same general arguments as Bulgakov, invoking mainly Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Isaac the Syrian as patristic authorities supporting universalism. Hart mentions Bulgakov only in passing (and Florenskii and Berdiaev not at all), although strongly praising him: “Sergei Bulgakov, the most remarkable Christian theological mind of the twentieth century, was perhaps the nearest modern Orthodox thinker in sensibility to Gregory of Nyssa (and, really, to all the greatest of the early church fathers).”<sup>58</sup>

The main thrust of Hart’s defense of universalism, like Bulgakov’s, is to demonstrate that the notion of eternal punishment for sin is incompatible with divine goodness and mercy, with divine love. Both marshal similar arguments against the eternity of hell: God created rational creatures not for punishment, but for love and bliss; the disproportion between evil committed in time and punishment for eternity; the possibility, indeed necessity, of continued human progress towards God after death; the inconceivability that with perfect knowledge and perfect freedom, any would reject God; punishment would serve no purpose if there is no possibility of redemption after death.

Both Bulgakov and Hart appeal to Isaac the Syrian in arguing against hell as a physical punishment, although the image of fire is relevant, since “the torments of hell are the burning love for God [...] the eternal source of love for Christ is revealed together with the torment caused by the failure to actualize this love in the life that has passed” (Bulgakov); “the fires of hell are nothing

55 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 3061, 375.

56 Kallistos Ware, “Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All? Origen, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Isaac the Syrian,” in *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 193–215.

57 David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2019).

58 Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 195.

but the glory of God [...] [which] will inevitably be experienced as torment by any soul that willfully seals itself against love of God and neighbor" (Hart).<sup>59</sup>

Bulgakov, consistent with Orthodox teaching, argues that purification after death is necessary before the enjoyment of the beatific vision of God (theosis). This appears close to the contemporary Catholic doctrine of purgatory, although Orthodox thinking, as expressed vigorously by St. Mark of Ephesus at the Council of Ferrara in 1439–40, does not accept notions such as purgatory being a "place," or that purification resembles physical suffering.<sup>60</sup> Bulgakov follows the Orthodox teaching of purification as a sort of "universal purgatory"—all, even recognized saints, undergo a process of purification from evil. This conception of "hell" as purification is thus temporally limited; sooner or later, hell will be "empty"—as the Orthodox Paschal liturgy celebrates Christ's freeing humanity from the bonds of death.

Bulgakov's soteriological universalism may prove to be one of his most enduring contributions to modern Christian thought. Here Bulgakov is consistent with his ecclesiological universalism: both are cut from the same cloth, a cloth reflecting light, hope and love, a seamless garment woven from the Incarnation of the Son of God who deifies all humanity and indeed all creation. Just as Bulgakov considered all humanity, all creation, as belonging to the one Church of God, so all humanity and indeed all creation will be deified as the fulfillment of God as Creator, when "God will be all in all."

## Conclusion

Eight decades after his death, Sergius Bulgakov's stature as a major Christian theologian has yet to be sufficiently recognized. This is due in part to the unavailability until recently of his major works in English. His two books *The Orthodox Church* and *The Wisdom of God*, together with a handful of shorter pieces, mainly on ecclesiology and ecumenism, that appeared in English prior to World War II were not representative of the range and depth of his theology. It was only with the publication in English translation of the major and minor trilogies, and key works such as *Unfading Light*, between 1990 and 2010 that it was possible to appreciate Bulgakov's stature as a major theologian. In some areas, such

59 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 459; Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 16. See Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 28 (Brookline, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), 141.

60 See Paul Ladouceur, "Orthodox Theologies of the Afterlife," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018), 51–72.

as *sobornost*, personalism, synergy, kenosis, even panentheism, and especially sophiology, Bulgakov represents and in some areas culminates the thinking of the Russian religious renaissance rather than expressing a unique perspective.

Several important stumbling blocks prevent a full appreciation and appropriation of Bulgakov's theology by both Orthodox and non-Orthodox theologians. One is the frequent opacity of Bulgakov's writings, and another is the at times tiresome repetition of ideas. Translations may help to smooth otherwise rough patches in Bulgakov's writing, but the unfamiliarity and complexity of the many ideas that Bulgakov brings to play may deter some Western theologians who have difficulty situating Eastern Christian notions in typical Western theological frameworks.

Perhaps more important is continuing unease with the theology of Divine Wisdom underpinning much of Bulgakov's thought. It is the same unease that affected Bulgakov's contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s—among the conservative elements of the Russian Orthodox Church, which resulted in the “sophiology affair” of the mid-1930s; among the Anglicans in the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, who never warmed to sophiology and were more at home with the more biblical, liturgical, and patristic orientations of other Orthodox, such as Florovsky, Lev Gillet, and Vladimir Lossky; and among many of his fellow Orthodox, especially his strongest critics, the Losskys (Nicolas and Vladimir, for different reasons) and Florovsky.

But just how dependent is Bulgakov's theology on sophiology? Much of his writing contains few references to sophiology, except for an occasional obeisance, often in the form of remarks on this or that theological notion as a manifestation of divine or uncreated Wisdom or of created wisdom. To tie Bulgakov's theology too closely to sophiology is to relegate Bulgakov largely to the domain of historical theology, a fascinating byway of Orthodox and Christian theology, but to which few Orthodox theologians subscribe. By way of contrast, Maximus's theology of the *logoi* of things and Palamas's divine energies receive much more enthusiastic support as approaches to understanding relations between God and creation.

Bulgakov's adherence to panentheism may have more staying power than unadorned sophiology, with its tendency to personalize Divine Wisdom as a semi-autonomous entity, amidst lingering intimations of a shadowy “fourth hypostasis,” even if Bulgakov himself explicitly rejected this in his 1924 essay “Hypostasis and Hypostasticity.” Considering Bulgakov's thought apart from the substrate of sophiology reveals the depth of his insights across a very broad range of theological issues and should continue to be pursued, as we have sought to present in this essay.