



Barbara Hallensleben,  
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Pantelis Kalaitzidis (eds.)

# BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations



Aschendorff  
Verlag

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Abstract

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

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



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in Zusammenarbeit mit  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

### PERSONHOOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### POLITICS, ECONOMY, AND ECOLOGY

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

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

## The Vision of Unity. The Ecumenical Thought of Fr. Sergii Bulgakov

*Adalberto Mainardi*

Father Sergius Bulgakov is acknowledged as one of the most important Orthodox theologians and probably one of the greatest of the twentieth century. His ecumenical thought is strictly linked to his ecclesiology. Although the latter depends on his sophiological views, nonetheless it mirrors and reacts to questions, problems, and issues that arose in the ecumenical debate. Bulgakov's insights anticipate themes and questions still crucial for Christian unity. In this paper I will try to enlighten the shaping of his ideas on the unity of the Church. First, we will consider his views on the unity of the Church in relation to the historical situation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the aftermath of the Revolution (§1), then his engagement in ecumenical bodies such as Faith and Order and the Fellowship St. Alban and St. Serge (§2); the two final paragraphs enlighten the ecumenical implication of Bulgakov's ecclesiology regarding the question of the veneration of the Mother of God and the Communion of saints (§3) and that of the sacramental boundaries of the Church (§4).

### Raising the Question of Church Unity

As a member of the local council of the Russian Orthodox Church, Bulgakov pleaded for the restoration of the patriarchate. In his conception, the Russian patriarch would be an organ of the ecumenical consciousness of the Church, and the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church a prelude of an Ecumenical Council, in which the question of the division between the Eastern and Western Churches would be posed. At that time, Bulgakov felt that the Russian Church and indeed all Christianity was "on the eve of a great dogmatic

movement”;<sup>1</sup> he understood the historical crisis of the Russian revolution as a revelation of the consequences of the Great Schism in Christianity between East and West in the eleventh century, but also as a chance for its healing.<sup>2</sup>

The task of the ecclesial consciousness expressed in the local council was to seize the *kairòs*, the call of God in human history: “If it should please Providence that the historic hour has finally come, when the nearness of the miracle of new peace in the Universal Church will be felt, then we must be ready, our loins girded and our torches burning.”<sup>3</sup> The local council, in fact, did devote a commission to the question of church unity, focused on the relations with Old Catholics and Anglicans; however Bulgakov was not one of its members.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the Revolution, as the collapse of the last Christian Empire put an end to the Constantinian era in Christianity and questioned the narrowness of the national Churches, he still felt a rapprochement between East and West was on the way:

Differences of dogma never really had any vital importance in the question, and they can and must be solved amicably, with a sincere and loving desire for mutual understanding. Neither Catholicism nor Orthodoxy are quite the same as they were. Something visible to only a few is happening here: a new sense of an ecumenical Church is coming to life. If this consciousness grows and spreads, all the endless

- 
- 1 Bulgakov alludes to the dogmatic aspects of the controversy on the Name of God on Mount Athos (1912–1913), to which he would devote his posthumous *Philosophy of Name*: Sergii Bulgakov, “Afonskoe delo,” *Russkaia mysl’* 9 (1913), 37–46; *ibid.*, *Filosofia imeni; Ikona i ikonopochitanie* (Moscow: Iskustvo—Saint Peterburg: Inapress, 1999). Cf. Antoine Nivière, *Les glorificateurs du nom. Une querelle théologique parmi les moines russes du mont Athos (1907/1914)* (Geneva: Éditions des Syrtes, 2015); Robert Slesinski, “The Enigma of the Name in the Philosophy of Language of Sergius Bulgakov,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 58 (2014), 417–40.
  - 2 Sergii N. Bulgakov, “Smysl patriarshestva v Rossi. Prilozhenie I k Deianiiu 31,” in *Dokumenty Sviashchennogo Sobora Pravoslavnoi Rossijskoi Tserkvi 1917–1918 godov. V, Deianiia Sobora s 1-go po 36-e*, ed. Aleksii Kolcherin and Aleksandr Mramornov (Moscow: Izd. Novospasskogo monastiria, 2015), 706–11.
  - 3 *Ibid.*, 711.
  - 4 Cf. Günther Schulz, “Der Ausschluß für die Vereinigung der Kirchen des Landeskonzils der Orthodoxen Kirche in Rußland 3./16.8. bis 7./20.9.1918,” *Kirche im Osten* 39 (1996), 70–100; Aleksandr I. Mramornov, “Voprosy mezhdunarodnykh i mezh tserkovnykh otnoshenii na Sviashchennom Sobore Pravoslavnoi Rossiiskoi tserkvi 1917–1918 gg.,” *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 66 (2019), 176–201 (DOI 10.24833/2071-8160-2019-3-66-176-201).

disputes, together with the vast literature on the subject, will quietly disappear. All else will fade before the irresistible longing for reunion in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Here Bulgakov was still under the influence of the prophetic vision of Soloviev's *Three Dialogues*. The unity of the Church is an undeniable fact that transcends historical limitations: Orthodoxy is not identical with Byzantinism. Even the philosophical speculations of the Slavophiles are very often biased for political reasons:

Insofar as the Church is the Church, we cannot deny its unity, although in history this unity appears more as a mysterious vocation still in becoming than as an accomplished fact. The historical, militant Church needs exterior forms of union, it looks for them. And once you possess these forms of life, it seems that the unity is something natural: on this basis, the Slavophiles started speculating about unity in love, without realizing that this unit was brought about by the iron power of the autocracy.<sup>6</sup>

Bulgakov himself at a certain point (*Diary of Jalta 1921–1922*)<sup>7</sup> cheered the idea of joining the Roman Catholic Church: although he was later bitterly disappointed by the Catholics he met in Constantinople and regarded this idea as a “temptation”, he never gave up the conviction that the question of the division of the Churches, as hopeless as it could seem to the human judgment, should be his task and his mission.<sup>8</sup> And this was perhaps the first inner step of his personal engagement in the burgeoning ecumenical movement.

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5 Sergius Bulgakov, “At the Feast of the Gods: Contemporary Dialogues. Dialogue the fifth,” *The Slavonic Review* 1/3 (1923), 616–18. Cf. Adalberto Mainardi, “Conflicting Authorities. The Byzantine Symphony and the Idea of Christian Empire in Russian Orthodox Thought at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 11, no. 2 (2018), 170–85 (DOI: 10.2478/ress-2018-0014).

6 Sergii Bulgakov, *U sten Khersonisa* (Sankt-Peterburg: Dorval, Liga, Gart, 1993), 37. Bulgakov never published these Dialogues.

7 First published by Nikita Struve: Sergii Bulgakov, “Ialtiiskii dnevnik,” *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia* 170 (1994), 28–66.

8 *Ibid.*, 53 (entry of 24 April 1922).

## Involvement in Ecumenical Bodies

Contacts with Protestants and the disinterested funding of the Orthodox Theological Institute of St. Serge by different Christian associations,<sup>9</sup> made Bulgakov gradually aware that the Holy Spirit had not denied His gifts to Western Christians and that it was not given to theologians to delimit the frontiers of the Church. In 1927 Bulgakov, together with Metropolitan Evlogii (Georgievskii), then head of the provisional administration of the Russian parishes in Western Europe, attended the first world conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne. In the January of the same year, in the cathedral city of St. Albans in Hertfordshire, there took place the first of a long series of conferences among Orthodox (mainly teachers and students of St. Serge in Paris) and Anglicans (mainly clergy and ordinands at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge). This marked the beginning of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (officially founded the following year, 1928), in which Bulgakov played a major role. As the history of these ecumenical bodies is well known,<sup>10</sup> we will focus on Bulgakov's theological contributions as a member of both.

Bulgakov's main speech in Lausanne was devoted to the ordained ministry. He looked at it through the lens of the idea of *sobornost'*, borrowed from Khomiakov, which he claimed to be untranslatable. (It means "conciliarity" and at the same time "catholicity.") The theology of ordained ministry is in fact a crucial ecumenical issue: on the one hand it concerns the question of Apostolic succession and the recognition of Anglican orders (which was then on the agenda of Orthodox–Anglican relations); on the other hand, it implies an assessment of the hierarchical structure of the Church, in dialectical contraposition with the Roman Catholic model. The point made by Bulgakov was

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- 9 Such as the Appeal for the Russian Clergy and Church Aid Fund, presided over by the bishop of Birmingham Russell Wakefield, and the Young Men's Christian Association, presided over by John Mott. See Donald A. Lowrie, *Saint Sergius in Paris: The Orthodox Theological Institute* (London: SPCK, 1954).
  - 10 Tissington Tatlow, "World Conference on Faith and Order," in Ruth Rouse, Stephan C. Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement. 1517–1948*, vol. I (London: SPCK, 1954), 405–41; Luca Ferracci, "Charles Brent and the Faith and Order Project: From Its Origins to the Lausanne Conference of 1927," in *A History of the Desire for Christian Unity. Ecumenism in the Churches, 19th–21st Century*, vol. I, *Dawn of Ecumenism*, eds. Dimitrios Filippou Salapatas, *The Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius. Orthodox and Anglican Ecumenical Relations 1927–2012* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018); Nichols Aidan, *Alban and Sergius: The Story of a Journal* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2018).

that it was necessary to subordinate canonical questions to the broader problem of the dogmatic foundations of ecclesiology. Priesthood could be properly understood dogmatically only in the context of a proper theology of the people of God, that is, in other terms, of the “sobornost’”. He said:

Priesthood within the Church is related inseparably to the laity, and the relationship is not merely that of ruler to subject: it is also a relation of mutual help and of unity within the *sobornost*. The priest requires the co-operation of the laity in the administration of the sacraments, and the laity take their share in service and sacrament through singing, responses, and prayers.<sup>11</sup>

The bishop is not above his local church, but he is the guardian of communion with the other Churches:

[The bishop] does not impose his opinion upon his church but gives authoritative expression to the voice of the whole Church: and an episcopal council expresses not the sum of the personal views of the bishops assembled (which, in that case, would have binding force) but the harmony of the views of the local churches.<sup>12</sup>

Bulgakov still looks at ecclesiology through the lens of the romantic theology of the Slavophiles: ecclesial relationships are not to be understood in terms of public law as “representative and constitutional,” but as “a spiritual reciprocity, a union in love, a oneness in thought,” that is in terms of *sobornost’*, which is “an organic rather than an organised principle.”<sup>13</sup> A new perspective, namely that of Eucharistic ecclesiology, seeing the Church as the gathering together of the local community around the bishop celebrant in the mystery of the Eucharist, would have helped assess the relationship between hierarchical and charismatic principles in the structure of the Church, a topic which Bulgakov later felt crucial to the dogmatic question underlying ecumenism as a historical and charismatic movement.

The Lausanne Conference marked the Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement.<sup>14</sup> Bulgakov considered it a sort of revelation: the movement towards the Christian unity was a historical event provoked by the Spirit,

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11 Herbert Newell Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3–21, 1927* (London-New York: George H. Doran Company, 1928), 259.

12 Ibid., 260.

13 Ibid.

14 Cf. Stefan Zankow, “Die Orthodoxe Kirche und die Bewegung für die Vereinigung der Kirchen,” *Una Sancta: Zeitschrift des Hoch-Kirchlich-Oekumenischen Bundes* 3 (1927),

the Church authority should recognise it, the theologians rethink it theologically, and the entire Church live out its consequences: "Something happened and those who took part in it are responsible for the memory of this spiritual event."<sup>15</sup> Lausanne was a spiritual experience infinitely surpassing the modest theological results of the meeting, because there "it was perceived in a new way and with a new strength that the whole Christian world believes and loves Jesus the Lord, [...] is spiritually nourished by the holy Gospel and the Word of God, with the Holy Spirit living in it."<sup>16</sup> The ecumenical movement as a spiritual experience is born on a Trinitarian foundation.

At Lausanne Bulgakov held that "the priest is above all an offerer of sacrifice."<sup>17</sup> The ecumenical question is inextricably intertwined with the participation at the one Eucharistic chalice. Whereas the movement of Faith and Order took as its starting point the doctrinal questions, the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius since its very beginning was essentially a society of common prayer. At Bulgakov's proposal (1927), its members began to celebrate on alternate days the Anglican and Orthodox Eucharist on the same altar. Bulgakov himself, however, made his most momentous and controversial proposal some years later, in June 1933, when he first proposed partial intercommunion between the Anglican and Orthodox members of the Fellowship. After a couple of years of debates inside the Fellowship, in which the divide crossed confessional borders, the final version of Bulgakov's proposal was ultimately rejected in June 1935 by the Fellowship council, with particularly strong opposition by Georges Florovsky. The history of these discussions has recently been assessed by scholars.<sup>18</sup> I will briefly summarize their results and make some observations.

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290–97; Nicolas Arseniew, "Gedanken über Lausanne", *ibid.*, 397–400; *ibid.*, "Lozanskaja konferencija," *Vestnik RSChD* 3 (1928), 1–5.

15 Sergii Bulgakov, "K voprosu o Lozannskoj konferentsii (Lozannskaia konferentsiia i entsiklika Piia XI *Mortalium animos*)," *Put'* 13 (1928), 71–82; *ibid.*, "The Papal Encyclical and the Lausanne Conference," *The Christian East* 9 (1928), 116–27.

16 Bulgakov, "K voprosu," 72.

17 Bate, ed., *Faith and Order*, 260.

18 Anastassy Brandon Gallaher, "Bulgakov and Intercommunion," *Sobornost* (2002), 9–28; *ibid.*, "Great and Full of Grace: Partial Intercommunion and Sophiology in Sergii Bulgakov," in *Church and World*, ed. William C. Mills (Rollinsford: Orthodox Research Institute, 2013), 69–121; Bryn Geffert, *Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans, Diplomacy, Theology, and the Politics of Interwar Ecumenism* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 158–83; Nichols, *Alban and Sergius*, 191–208; Salapatas, *The Fellowship*.



The theological and spiritual basis for the sharing of the Eucharistic chalice among the members of the Fellowship, according to Bulgakov, was given on the one hand by the achievement of “a substantial dogmatic agreement with one another,” “more complete than that which exists within the Anglican Church itself”; and on the other hand by the fact that a certain “spiritual communion” was already in existence, and it would have been spiritually dangerous to leave this sprout of unity fruitless: “nothing comes from nothing,” and the prophetic gesture of partial inter-communion within the Fellowship would also have facilitated dogmatic and canonical agreement. The Fellowship itself was not a canonical body, but in fact it existed, “and not without a silent blessing of both authorities—the Anglican and the Orthodox.”<sup>19</sup> Reunion would come not “through tournaments between the theologians of the East and of the West, but through a reunion before the Altar.”<sup>20</sup>

The dogmatic implications of the Athonite controversy over the Name of God (1913),<sup>21</sup> had convinced Bulgakov of the sacramental nature of the Name of Jesus, which already achieved an invisible but real union between those who invoked it with faith. Bulgakov was not thinking of achieving a partial union despite the division between the two Churches (Anglican and Orthodox), but of responding with a new “sacrament of reunion” to what he considered to be a call of the Holy Spirit. The Church had to respond to a new historical situation with a creative act, in obedience to the Holy Spirit, certainly respecting the canons, but without being held back by situations inherited from the past (i. e., the divisions of the past). The fact that at that time there already existed an “economic” intercommunion between the two Churches (in extreme cases Orthodox and Anglican laity were blessed by their bishops to partake of one another’s sacraments) was an encouraging premise.

Bulgakov’s basic idea—as it was refined in the context of common discussion—was that of a mutual episcopal ‘sacramental blessing’ of Orthodox and Anglican Fellowship members, both ordained and lay, to partake of communion at one another’s altars at Fellowship conferences. There was a fact that overcame divisions by the power of God: communion at the one cup. A dogmatic minimum was sufficient, while open questions were not such as to prevent communion. Jurisdictional and canonical questions would have to

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19 Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, Minutes, Fellowship Archives, 16 February 1934, 3.

20 Sergei Bulgakov, “By Jacob’s Well,” *Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban & St. Sergius* 22 (1933), 11, quoted in Geffert, *Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans*, 159.

21 See footnote 1.

be resolved in view of unity: nevertheless, their relevance was not underestimated, and it was therefore entrusted to the bishop (through the blessing)<sup>22</sup> to discern this seed of unity in an experience limited in space and time: it would have been an initial cell, a “sacrament of reunification”, a living epiclesis for the unity of the two Churches.

The strongest opposition to Bulgakov’s proposal on the Orthodox side came from Fr. George Florovsky, who objected that “*communio in sacris* can never be private action. It is always Catholic action, the sacrament of Catholic Unity. Realised privately it is an open contradiction.”<sup>23</sup> But objections also arose on the Anglican side.<sup>24</sup> Michael Ramsey, the future archbishop of Canterbury, felt that rushing to intercommunion could compromise the theological (and Catholic) understanding of the Eucharist as “the act of Christ in His one Body.”<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, Walter Frere deemed Bulgakov’s proposal worthy of further study, considering that confessional diversity was a richness that averted rigid narrow-mindedness.<sup>26</sup>

On the Orthodox side, in favour of intercommunion were Anton Kartashev (intercommunion was a creative act in response to a new situation), Nicolas Zernov, and Lev Zander. However, reservations prevailed. Archbishop Evlogii himself, Bulgakov’s mentor, eventually judged his proposal for intercommunion to be “completely false,” as such an issue could not possibly be applied to a single organisation without involving the entire hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> The Fellowship finally decided not to go ahead with the proposal.

Bulgakov’s scheme proved to be too radical a proposal and was eventually shelved. Still, it revealed an important ecclesiological issue. What was here at stake were in fact two ecclesiological models: a universalistic (catholic) hier-

22 Bulgakov himself wrote the blessing: “The grace divine [...] cleaveth through the laying on of hands on the priest N. for intercommunion with the Orthodox members of the Fellowship of St Albans and St Sergius. Therefore, let us pray for him that the grace of the all-Holy Spirit may come upon him. *Choir*: God, have mercy”: Gallaher, “Bulgakov and Intercommunion,” 15.

23 Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, *Report of Conference held at High Leigh, June 26–28, 1934*, Fellowship Archives, 6.

24 Cf. O. F. Clarke, “The Healing of Schism,” *The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* 25 (1934), 3–7.

25 Nichols, *Alban and Sergius*, 204.

26 Ibid.

27 *Le chemin de ma vie. Mémoires du Métropolite Euloge*. Rédigés d’après ses récits par Tatiana Manoukhina (Paris: Presse Saint Serge—Institut de théologie orthodoxe, 2005), 493.

archical model in Florovsky, and the “decentralised ecclesiology”, as Brandon Gallaher calls it, which underlaid Bulgakov’s proposal, and which implied a radical questioning of the traditional doctrine of the boundaries of the Church, as the canonical did not necessarily coincide with the pneumatical.

### The Mother of God and the Communion of Saints

The ecumenical implications of Bulgakov’s ecclesiological conception may be illustrated by his insistence on the veneration of the Mother of God, a topic which he raised in Lausanne, and which the president of the session considered quite scandalous. Bulgakov insisted that one “cannot separate the humanity of our Lord from that of His mother, the unspotted *Theotokos*.”<sup>28</sup> It was not just a matter of devotion. Church’s faith expressed in worship was at stake:

The Church has a rich and growing treasure of liturgical worship, a treasure which the Orthodox Church has guarded faithfully as an inspired well-spring of faith. She desires a great Christian unity in worship but hopes for it not so much through the common acceptance of liturgical forms as through the energy of love, drawn out by the irresistible attraction of spiritual beauty.<sup>29</sup>

As a member of the Continuation Committee, Bulgakov asked that the “Communion of Saints” should be a part of the agenda of the Conference of Faith and Order in Edinburgh (1937), including “a special question on the Blessed Virgin.” For Bulgakov this point of the programme was so important that it should “not to be swallowed in general expressions,” and he suggested a clearly ecclesiological ground for its inclusion: “The theology of the relation between the militant on earth (*the Church in Paradise and Purgatory*, that particular point, I think, is *not necessary*, perhaps is better to be *excluded as not prepared*) and the Church triumphant in Heaven. Here I propose to add: *The Communion of Saints*.”<sup>30</sup>

Bulgakov explains his conviction “that the question of the veneration of Our Lady and its importance for the Orthodox Church might be explained *not for a discussion, but for the information*, as a ‘witness to what the worship and life of the Church mean’ to the orthodox people. I have a firm conviction that

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28 Bate, ed., *Faith and Order*, 208.

29 Ibid., 208–09.

30 Letter by Bulgakov to Canon Hodgson, 10/07/1935, in Genève, WCC Archives 23.4.020/1 (autograph), emphasis in the original.

the right understanding of this side of worship of Orthodoxy would be helpful for the Protestant world. In contrary [sic] the exclusion of this point from the program may make a painful impression in the whole orthodox world, what is in any case to be avoided.”<sup>31</sup>

In his intervention at the first congress of Orthodox theology (Athens 1936), devoted to the doctrine of the Church, Bulgakov stressed the intimate link between the Church as “the leading bearer of holiness in the world,” expressing “the true divinisation of humanity,” and “her personification is the Most Holy, Most Pure Virgin Mother of God, who belongs to our world and humanity and at the same time, in her Dormition [...] already belongs to the glorified humanity of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> The Mother of God reflects the twofold nature of the Church, human and divine, which Bulgakov explained in the light of his sophiology as the mysterious union of created and uncreated Sophia.<sup>33</sup>

### The Boundaries of the Church

In 1937 Bulgakov took part in both conferences of Life and Work and Faith and Order in Edinburgh. At the latter he was one of the leading Orthodox speakers. He urged the assembly to tackle the problem of the Church, which was not included as such in the conference programme. “In dogmatics—he maintained—the chief universal problem is that of the Church—ecclesiology.”<sup>34</sup> The polemical character of the definitions of the Church coming from post-Reformation era, he observed, was “one of the chief obstacles to our finding a way of reconciliation.”<sup>35</sup> In his eyes the task of theologians was to promote a deeper understanding of the doctrine of the Church that could make clear “the difference between dogmatic definitions which are obligatory and definitions concerning doctrinal differences on other points which are often too much exaggerated.”<sup>36</sup> In no way was truth to be sacrificed, but “in all matters

31 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

32 Hamilcar S. Alivisatos, ed., *Procès-Verbaux du premier congrès de théologie orthodoxe à Athènes, 29 Novembre—6 Décembre 1936* (Athens: Pyrsos, 1939), 133–34.

33 Cf. Andrew Louth, “Father Sergii Bulgakov on the Mother of God”, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49 (2005), 145–64.

34 Leonard Hodgson, ed., *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3–18, 1937* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1938), 67.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

where we are not bound by obligatory definitions, we must look for possibilities of reconciliation.”<sup>37</sup>

As was the case in his proposal of partial intercommunion, Bulgakov takes as starting point not an abstract definition of the Church, but the reality itself of the Church as realised in the sacraments, specifically the Eucharist. As he stated in the last part of his major theological trilogy, *The Bride of the Lamb*, published posthumously, “every sacrament opens the way to the depth, to the noumenal being, and is thereby in its action indefinable and inexhaustible.”<sup>38</sup> The ontological nature of the Eucharist, in fact, questioned the very idea that the canonical boundaries of the Church delimited her mystical nature as well. In the first case, the Church, as a particular confessional organisation, has clearly circumscribed boundaries. In this case Cyprian’s sentence that outside the Church there is no salvation (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) applies. But such a definition—Bulgakov argues—“appears inapplicable in relation to the Church as the Body of Christ and to all humanity received by it, especially to the whole ecclesial world. This is expressed in the fact that the Church recognises—albeit to different degrees—the validity of the ecclesiastical sacraments, which also took place outside Orthodoxy.”<sup>39</sup> In this mysterious non-coincidence of the canonical and the mystical boundaries of the Church consisted for Bulgakov the dogmatic basis “of the present ecumenical movement, which strives to recognise and realise this actual unity of the ecclesial and to bring to fullness what is lacking in its being.”<sup>40</sup>

Bulgakov was conscious that the spirit of militant proselytism, which penetrated every confession confirming its own truth, was one of the main obstacles

37 Ibid.

38 Serge Boulgakov, *L’Épouse de L’Agneau. La création, l’homme, l’Église et la fin* (Lausanne: L’Âge d’Homme, 1984), 211–12.

39 Alivisatos, ed., *Procès-Verbaux*, 133. As early as 1926/1927, in an address given at the Orthodox & Anglo-Catholic Conference, Bulgakov devoted a careful study to the canonical and patristic tradition of the first centuries which showed the recognition of sacraments outside the Church in various degrees; this in turn implied that “non-Orthodoxy also belongs to Orthodoxy, all that is truly valuable and holy in it is also Orthodox, in spite of its un-Orthodoxy or notwithstanding it”: *Outlines of the Teaching about the Church. Address given at the Orthodox & Anglo-Catholic Conference by Father S. Boulgakoff*, December 1926/January 1927. Fellowship archives, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://fsass.org/shop/archives/fr-sergius-bulgakovs-outlines-of-the-teaching-about-the-church/> (access 2024/01/26); Sergius Bulgakov, “Outlines of the Teaching about the Church—The Church and Non-Orthodoxy,” *American Church Monthly* 30, no. 6 (1931), 411–23 and 31, no. 1 (1932), 13–26.

40 Alivisatos, ed., *Procès-Verbaux*, 133.

to the path towards Christian unity. Since every confession considers itself the One Holy Catholic Church, “ecumenism in this case naturally means an impossibility (a contradiction), or even apostasy.”<sup>41</sup> But for Bulgakov the ecumenical movement was a phenomenon dictated not by a contingent political situation, but a prophetic call rising from the depths of Christian consciousness:

The very nature of Church being, which transcends any ecclesiastical organisation, even though it lies at its foundation, can be detected and seen along with the closeness and exclusiveness of separated Church organisation and even notwithstanding it.<sup>42</sup>

Bulgakov was especially critical of the Roman Catholic stance against the ecumenical movement (particularly after *Mortalium animos* stigmatised participation in it by Catholics). A turning point in Bulgakov’s ecclesiology was his historical appraisal of the Council of Florence (1439). The historical weight of the evolution of the papacy in the West weighs on possible reconciliation in the present: Bulgakov deemed papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction as affirmed in Vatican I were the central issue for the reunification of the Church.<sup>43</sup> Later, Bulgakov himself recognised that “the Vatican Council did not give a precise definition of the episcopate, which therefore remains to be dogmatically clarified in Catholicism. It is to be hoped that this imprecision will open constructive future developments.”<sup>44</sup> One might observe here that these were precisely the developments of the doctrine of the episcopacy brought about by the second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* 21–27).

The fact that the Orthodox and the Catholics were very close to re-establishing communion, and only a different conception of their respective hierarchical structure and a different historical practice of conciliarity hindered them, was another argument that convinced Bulgakov that “the hierarchical-sacramental organisation is not an adequate or absolute phenomenon of the Church,” but a relative though legitimate historical datum, which does not extend to the noumenal level:

41 Sergii Bulgakov, “*Una Sancta*. (Osnovaniia ekumenizma),” *Put’* 58 (1938/39), 3–14 (quotation 10).

42 Ibid.

43 Sergii N. Bulgakov, “Ocherki ucheniia o Tserkvi IV. O Vatikanskom dogmate,” *Put’* 15 (1929), 39–80; 16 (1929), 19–48; see Adalberto Mainardi, “Vzgliad s Vostoka. Osmyslenie Florentiiskogo sobora (1438–1439 gg.) v russkoi istoriografii i bogoslovii XIX–XX vv.,” *Istoriia* 12/5 (2021). DOI 10.18254/S207987840015718-8.

44 Bulgakov, *L’Epouse*, 453, n. 183.

This relativisation does not at all detract from the full power and significance of the Church as a hierarchical-canonical establishment, nor does it shake the divinity of this establishment in history, but it surely testifies to a certain non-conformity of the Church as a noumenal or mystical phenomenon with its institutional one. It generally means that the power of the Church can extend, or better, cannot fail to extend beyond the institutional Church: *ecclesia extra ecclesias*.<sup>45</sup>

This was the foundation for the special being of the Church as an ecclesial reality which is not hierarchically subordinated or regulated:

This is the *Una Sancta*, as the incarnation of God always taking place and Pentecost always continuing, the effective Presence of God in the world and in man, the Divine Sophia as ‘invisible,’ that is, transcendent to the identification of the Church, whose action is visibly revealed as the Mystery being revealed.<sup>46</sup>

Here lay for Bulgakov also the foundations and at the same time the paradox of ecumenism: a new breath of the Holy Spirit, which is at work in the depth of the Church, unrestricted and unbound by the facets of Church organisation, and at the same time a patient historical and theological work to be done in obedience to call of the Spirit, a theological duty, a task and at the same time a gift which we are not allowed to refuse.

“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us (Joh 17:21).” This unity is not the unity of a hierarchical organisation, that is, only its exterior detection, but above all the unity of the life which is contained in its divine source. This unity is present in the Church as its Divine depth and strength, but at the same time it needs to be found, as a task for the historical life. This is the primary task for our time, the whetstone by which are now sharpened Christian conscience and will.<sup>47</sup>

A call and a duty still before us.

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45 Bulgakov, *L'Epouse*, 226.

46 Ibid.

47 Bulgakov, “*Una Sancta*,” 14.