

Introduction

THE THEOLOGY OF FR. Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944) is decisively and thoroughly eschatological, even apocalyptic.¹ From a purely biographical perspective² this is unsurprising: in the Bolshevik Revolution he lived through the collapse of one of the last outposts of Christendom only to see a new world rise from its ashes, one soaked in the blood of Christian martyrs and worthy of the most dramatic montages of John's Apocalypse.³ The revolution ended more than just the political, cultural, and ecclesial world Bulgakov had known for fifty years; it also closed the chapter of his life spent in his beloved Russia and sent him abroad into exile. He settled ultimately in Paris, where he died two decades later, never to see his homeland again. If the beginning of his life as a priest (ordained 1918) coincided with an event of such apocalyptic proportions, then his death came near the end of the cataclysms shaking Europe during World War II. A life lived in the midst of such violent disruptions provided regular opportunity for reflection on the inbreaking of other, more otherworldly kingdoms, be they bestial or divine.

But Bulgakov's interest in the end-times was hardly jump-started by the Bolshevik revolution: already in 1911, seven years before his ordination to the priesthood, Bulgakov was contemplating in his book *Apocalyptic and Socialism* the relationship between Jewish Messianism, Christian chiliasm

1 . English-language studies of Bulgakov's eschatology are few. For a fine introduction to Bulgakov's general eschatological thought, with criticisms, see Paul Gavrilyuk's "The Judgment of Love: The Ontological Universalism of Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944)." Cyril O'Regan situates Bulgakov's eschatology in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology in his Père Marquette lecture, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic*. A more specific contextualization of Bulgakov in the trends of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian eschatology can be found in the introduction to Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*.

2. For a brief biography of Bulgakov's life, see Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, 11–34.

3. For more on the martyrdom of Christians under the Soviet regime, see Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime 1917–1982*.

and eschatology, and the immanentized eschatology of Marxist revolutionary thought. Vladimir Solovyov (whom Bulgakov called his “philosophical guide to Christ”) had already spurred this turn to eschatology in Russian religious thought with his important final treatise, *A Short Story of the Anti-Christ*,⁴ and Bulgakov followed him down this path. Nonetheless, the push that the new Soviet reality gave Bulgakov towards more explicitly eschatological dogmatic theologizing is recognizable in a short work he wrote from Crimea in his first, “internal” exile under the Bolsheviks: *On Relics (In Connection with Their Desecration)*.⁵ In this treatise, Bulgakov responds to the Soviet practice of exposing before the eyes of the faithful the decomposed bodies of saints, with the aim of scandalizing believers who thought these holy remains could suffer no corruption. Such a practice was, in Bulgakov’s words, “fanaticism” and “the breath of the anti-Christ,” and it required in response a serious theological reflection on the Orthodox doctrine of relics. What Bulgakov proposed was a systematically explicated realized eschatology in which the saints, because of their profound sanctity, become capable of maintaining their connection with their bodily matter even beyond the grave. As such their bodies are already, in a significant sense, *resurrection bodies*, transparent to the will of these saints in heaven who procure on behalf of God answers to the prayers of the faithful. If the resurrected Christ displayed absolute control over matter in his resurrected and divinized state, so too the spirits of the saints demonstrate a power over their remains on earth to make of them sites of blessing and knowledge of God.

Realized eschatology intersects here with anthropology, the metaphysics of spirit and matter, and most importantly, Christology. This interpretive nexus for eschatology remains operative for Bulgakov throughout his theological career, although with differing emphases depending on the period and the issue in question. This bears emphasizing in light of how easy it is to focus solely on the more provocative aspects of Bulgakov’s eschatology, such as his unequivocal and extensive argumentation for universal salvation, and to lose sight of the more subtle and pervasive influence of eschatological thinking in all of his theological production. It is realized eschatology, and the real difference that Christ’s historical advent has made, that drives his entire project.

When turning to consider Bulgakov’s explicit reflections on eschatology, however, it is helpful to divide his thought into three categories: the personal, social, and the apocalyptic. These three intermingle at all stages of his writing, yet key themes can be distinguished in relation to each.

4. Solovyov, *War, Progress, and the End of History*, 159–94.

5. Bulgakov, *Relics and Miracles: Two Theological Essays*.

Beginning with the personal, we note how particular encounters with death in Bulgakov's life functioned as a revelation of the eschatological tension constantly though hiddenly present in human existence. The premature death in 1909 of Bulgakov's not yet four-year-old son, Ivashechka, tore the fabric of this father's heart, but it also proved the occasion for a revelation of God's grace that remained with him for the rest of his life. As he wrote in his 1917 work on religious philosophy, *Unfading Light*:

My holy one, at the sanctuary of your remains, beside your pure body, my fair one, my radiant boy, I found out *how* God speaks, I understood what "God spoke" means! In a new and never-before-known clairvoyance of heart, along with the torment of the cross heavenly joy came down into it, and with the darkness of divine abandonment God reigned in my soul. My heart was opened to the pain and torment of people—hearts until then strange and hence closed were exposed before it with their pain and grief. For the only time in my life I understood what it means to *love* not with a human, self-loving, and mercenary love, but with that divine love with which Christ loves us. It was as if the curtain separating me from others fell and all the gloom, bitterness, offense, animosity, and suffering in their hearts was revealed to me. And in ineffable rapture, frenzy, self-forgetfulness I said then—you will remember this, my fair one—I said: *God spoke to me*, and then hearing you I simply added that *you spoke to me too*. . . . To forget *this* and to doubt *after this* means for me to die spiritually. One can lose one's treasure, be frightened before its defense, but even unworthily cast aside and lost, it is a treasure all the same . . .⁶

Death revealed a different face to Bulgakov following his operations for throat cancer in 1940. This time it was a traumatic manifestation not of death but of *dying*. Yet any revelation of the border straddling this world and the next cannot but manifest Christ as well, the one who freely shared in the death *and* the dying of the human race. This experience provoked Bulgakov to reflect on the eschatological significance of illness, both in his own life and for all humanity. If Paul could write that Christ's death and resurrection made him the "Lord of both the living and the dead" (Rom 14:9), then in Bulgakov's *sophiology* of death, Christ becomes the Lord of both the sick and the dying. To touch death in illness is to be in communion with the Christ who "co-suffers" and "co-dies" in and with every human spirit. This point is key to Bulgakov's *sophiology*, his theological system

6. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 14–15.

structured around the vision of *Sophia*, Divine Wisdom, presented in the Scriptures and the Church's tradition. For in God's pre-eternal Wisdom, the divine plan for creation, all things are incorporated, even those facets of fallen existence that oppose God's will, such as death (Wis 1:13), because all these aspects of human life God has made his own in Christ.

According to sophiology, *God has no created opposites*; Divine Sophia (Bulgakov's name for the divine essence) is perfectly expressed, though in finite form, in Created Sophia, our creaturely world. Accordingly, the divine Son can assume the lowliness of human flesh in the incarnation of Christ so as to elevate humanity, even while remaining precisely who he is, without any alteration of the divine nature. And this coincidence of the nadir of human weakness with the plenitude of divinity means that even the darkest hours of human existence become an incognito encounter with God in Christ, the "Last Adam" who, as the prototype of eschatological humanity, is also revealed to be the "First Adam." Bulgakov's aim in his writings on personal eschatology is to disclose this oft-unrecognized theophany, to turn our face towards the bruised countenance of the Savior, engraved with divine sorrow for our wounded humanity. Christ appears to us in these moments precisely through the hiddenness of our divine abandonment, just as the Son experienced the infinite distance between himself and the Father on the cross in the absence of the Holy Spirit's consolation.⁷ It is in this most universal experience of divine abandonment, experienced in illness, dying, and in death, that each person encounters Christ in the most intimate of meetings.

The social character of Bulgakov's eschatological thought indicates his continuing intellectual struggle against Marxist secularized eschatology, now very much realized in the Soviet Union that had exiled him. Much of his earlier post-conversion writings had focused on what he (rightly) perceived as the coming eschatological crisis of Marxist revolution. In his seminal 1909 essay for the volume *Landmarks*, "Heroism and Asceticism," Bulgakov denounced the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia for its immaturity and proclivity to violent excess in the quest for heroic martyrdom.⁸ The lack of self-discipline and maturity in these figures could only lead to the perpetuation of systems of control on the bodies of others, a future Bulgakov accurately predicted in "The Foundational Antinomy of the Christian Philosophy of History." Indeed, as Vladimir Solovyov had remarked just a

7. Readers of Hans Urs von Balthasar will hear echoes of his paschal trinitarianism in these lines. This is no accident, for as Jennifer Newsome Martin has shown, Balthasar was greatly influenced by Bulgakov's sophiology. *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Reception of Russian Religious Thought*.

8. Bulgakov, "Heroism and Asceticism," 17–50.

few years before Russia's great crisis: "[i]t is quite clear to the impartial mind that revolution and spoliation are a bad school in which to learn justice."⁹

This critical perspective on revolutionary socialism never left Bulgakov the theologian, himself now a repentant Marxist. Yet in the later writings of his dogmatic period, such as in "The Soul of Socialism," he softened his tone to some degree when reflecting on this faith of "revolutionism." He contextualized this revolutionism as an inevitable dialectical response both to the Church's political conservatism throughout its history—its rejection of historical tasks in favor of a flight from the world—and to its alignment with unjust political powers. These together pushed those hungering and thirsting for justice to seek other, more violent, means of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Bulgakov's diagnosis of revolutionary utopianism as a system of disappointed and misguided Christian consciousness reflects his conviction both that the human spirit naturally desires God (who is Justice itself) and that Christian eschatological hope functions as the hidden fountainhead of revolutionary striving, even if in a truncated and perverted form. This genealogical critique, so prevalent in today's theological discourse, was a regular feature of Russian émigré analysis of Marxist thought.

But this critique also pointed to hopeful possibilities for addressing the revolutionism and secularization proceeding apace even in Bulgakov's lifetime. There is room for common cause between socialists and Christians, Bulgakov thinks, even if the atheism propelling revolutionary socialism must be repudiated at every turn. The Church can no longer live in the apocalyptic present of the earliest Christians, ignoring as they did the grave injustices in their midst (such as slavery); it must instead recognize that it possesses a historical destiny, and that this destiny is bound up with the entire human race that Christ assumed in his incarnation. The Church's task is therefore the progressive realization of the ideals of God's kingdom on earth, the "churching" of culture. Connected with this "churching" is that theological commitment that will appear most idiosyncratic to readers of Bulgakov today, namely his chiliasm, or the doctrine of a future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. As he puts it in chapter twenty of his commentary on John's Apocalypse: "God's Word contains two revelations about the end of history and of the world: the first is immanent and historical, a matter of internal maturation, and the second is transcendent and catastrophic, connected with the Parousia."¹⁰ This means that "the thousand-year reign is a definite era in the history of the Church with a beginning and

9. Vladimir Solovyev, *God, Man, and the Church*, 41.

10. Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*, 181.

an end.”¹¹ Whatever one makes of this doctrine, it is well to remember that Bulgakov’s championing of the teaching was motivated by the conviction that the Church was to play a central role in bringing history to an organic conclusion and that the synergism between God and humanity on display in Christ’s hypostatic union was not to be abolished by a one-sided act of God’s omnipotence at the end of time. God’s act in the parousia will indeed be divine and unique, a gift to the Church and the world, but it will also be a *response* to the Spirit’s mission of making Pentecost a universal reality on earth through human work in history.

This brings us to the apocalyptic side of Bulgakov’s eschatology, and especially his *dogmatic* universalism, or affirmation that by saving all rational creatures, God will in the end be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), with no remainder. Bulgakov explicitly attaches himself to the tradition of apocatastasis (“universal restoration”) first theologically articulated by Origen of Alexandria (AD ca. 184–253) and developed at length by St. Gregory of Nyssa (AD ca. 335–395). This was by no means the dominant tradition in the Orthodoxy of Bulgakov’s time, due in large part to the condemnations of Origenist eschatology in a synod connected with, but not properly belonging to, the Second Council of Constantinople in AD 553—a condemnation that in the course of the centuries came to be mistakenly attributed to the fifth ecumenical council.¹² (Gregory of Nyssa’s universalist eschatology, by contrast, has never been ecumenically condemned.) Bulgakov’s universalism was only one specimen of a growing dissatisfaction with the traditional doctrine of hell understood as eternal conscious torment, a dissatisfaction felt in multiple Christian communions over the last centuries.¹³ Yet its more immediate context was the eschatological writing of Russian Silver Age theologians, such as Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), and Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882–1937). Solovyov’s apocalyptic *Short Story of the Anti-Christ* has already been noted. His greatest contribution towards universalist thought, however, is found elsewhere, namely in his sustained Christian arguments against the death penalty, for the logic undergirding capital punishment bears a striking resemblance to the logic supporting the idea of eternal torments. Both, after all, cut off definitively the possibility of repentance for the sinner. Solovyov’s arguments against

11. *The Apocalypse of John*, 183.

12. Norman P. Tanner, for example, does not include these anathematizations in his *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, on account of historical scholarship arguing against their attribution to Constantinople II. The scholarly consensus remains that the eschatology in view in these condemnations was not that held by Origen himself but was instead representative of (not always faithful) followers of Origen centuries later.

13. See, for example, Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*.

the death penalty would reappear in modified form in Bulgakov's universalist eschatology.

Berdyayev's critique of hell was more philosophical than theological (to the degree such distinctions can be made of the writers of the Russian Religious Renaissance) and it focused on the distorted psychology and politics of fear that the doctrine of eternal torments abetted, especially for those with ecclesiastical power.¹⁴ "[T]he idea of hell is torture, and torture may force man to do anything," Berdyayev famously wrote.¹⁵ In his view, disinterested love for God becomes impossible in the face of the possibility of eternal damnation. Bulgakov was sympathetic to this perspective, but it is not a form of argumentation that drives his universalism. More akin to his thought is the theology of his mentor Fr. Pavel Florensky as expressed in the latter's book, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*. In the chapter "Gehenna," Florensky lays out the fundamental antinomy constraining theological discourse on the eschaton, that between God's omnipotence and love on one side and the freedom of the human person on the other. In a manner very similar to how Bulgakov would later frame the issue, Florensky zeroes in on the question of whether creatures can ultimately thwart God's design for them by refusing His love. If we answer yes, we deprive God of omnipotence and love, and our doctrine of God falls into incoherence. Yet if we say no, God's love for human *freedom* is undermined. The truth of God's love and power leads us to contradictory conclusions.¹⁶ Florensky, while formally abjuring any resolution to this antinomy, does in fact pursue some form of reconciliation. In his eschatological view, sinners can so deface the image of God within them such that in the final purgative separation of wheat from chaff (1 Cor 3:12–15), the image of God within them will remain, though its sinful psychological accruelement will be cast off into final darkness to suffer eternal and irreversible torments. In this way God's creation remains unscathed, untouched by human freedom exercised in sin, although the "I" that remains in such a scenario is so different from the psychological ego that Florensky's view is hard to distinguish from the idea that God simply destroys the sinner and creates a new self altogether.

Florensky was writing against the "vulgar Origenism" prevalent in his day. Bulgakov, in his turn, offered a complex biblical, philosophical, and theological argument for Origen's "larger hope" for the salvation of all. Looking back from today, it proved to be the most sophisticated and

14. For similar, more contemporary reflections on the doctrine of hell, see Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*.

15. Berdyayev, *The Destiny of Man*, 266.

16. There exist significant parallels between Florensky's view and the "hopeful universalism" of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

elaborate in the twentieth century, and indeed perhaps “the most ambitious and systematic attempt *ever* to defend Christian universalism.”¹⁷ In his posthumous work *Truth and Revelation*, Berdyaev linked Bulgakov’s legacy as a theologian with his “decisive and courageous rejection of the eternal pains of hell.”¹⁸ But Bulgakov was not always so forthright with his views on the eventual reconciliation of all with God. In his first major work of philosophical theology, *Unfading Light* (1917), Bulgakov hesitates to affirm universal salvation, even though his thinking clearly tends in this direction. At this stage, the antinomical thinking of his great tutor, Florensky, still has its grip on Bulgakov, although the hold is already loosening. By the time of his posthumously published essay “Augustinianism and Predestination” (the final excursus to *Bride of the Lamb*), he could write that “[i]t is the business of religious philosophy and theology to unite in a general conceptual framework both theses—which from the outside sound like contradictions or at least antinomies (by no means the same thing)—to unite them, therefore, as thesis and antithesis.”¹⁹

Bulgakov’s mature sophiology is just such a conceptual framework, and its fundamental christological premises receive a brilliant exposition in the eschatology of *The Bride of the Lamb*. As we have already noted, sophiology emphasizes the *correspondence* (or “co-imaging”) between divinity and humanity based on the reality of Christ’s genuine incarnation and on the image of God binding the Creator and rational creatures. This means, ultimately, that human freedom cannot function as an “opposite” existing in true (and not just apparent) tension with God’s universal salvific will. Human freedom in its perfection dazzles us in the “not my will but thine” of Gethsemane, and it is by that spiritual struggle and its culmination in Golgotha that Jesus Christ takes Adam’s place as the new head of the human race. The result is that “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom 5:20). Bulgakov’s christological maximalism is the foundation of his universal salvation; in Chalcedonian Christology Bulgakov discovers the “dogmatic way out of this antinomy of the absolute and the relative, the divine and the creaturely” (“Apocatastasis and Theodicy”).

In Christ, God takes responsibility for the freedom given to humanity in its creation, a responsibility whose misuse explains the millennia of evil the world has known and continues to suffer. Christ is undoubtedly the content of Bulgakov’s eschatology, but it is the question of theodicy, of freedom

17. McClymond, *The Devil’s Redemption*, 1009. He writes this of the *Bride of the Lamb*, but it applies to the entirety of Bulgakov’s eschatological oeuvre.

18. Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 67.

19. See chapter 8 of this volume.

and suffering, which serves as the scaffold for his universalist edifice. In his view, the unending torments of the wicked would appear as an eternal blight upon the character of God, who allowed his creatures to come to such an end. For Bulgakov, it is not simply that a sophiological Christology resolves the antinomy of human freedom and divine will; it is that a truly religious consciousness cannot reconcile itself with anything less. The image of God we express in moral resistance to the doctrine of eternal torments reflects the truth of the divine–human reconciliation visible in God’s image made flesh, Christ. And so Bulgakov insists—on the basis of ample scriptural testimony—that God will ensure creation’s final, blessed outcome, lest God damn creatures precisely in giving them the freedom He knew they would abuse. Bulgakov’s logic here is subtle and liable to misinterpretation, so let me clarify. It is not that God is guilty for the sad history of human sin; rather as the Father and Creator of finite, fallible creation (by virtue of its constitution *ex nihilo*, as St. Athanasius emphasized in *On the Incarnation*), God is ultimately *responsible* for his creatures and whatever choices they might make, whatever consequences they might bring upon themselves and the innocent earth. And this implies, necessarily, a salvation as universal as God’s love, for throwing your child into the deep end of the pool may be the only way to guarantee her growth as a swimmer, but to turn your back on her as she drowns is to abdicate parental responsibility and any claim to parental goodness or love.

Yet despite its function as a theodicy, an affirmation of universalism does not change the fact of divine silence in the face of suffering *now*. Only the eyes of faith can perceive God’s care and responsibility for his creatures today, since the mysterious working of Providence remains inscrutable to us who are caught *in media res*. As Bulgakov puts it elsewhere, “God is love, but the world is full of malice, struggle and hatred. The world is full of the immeasurable suffering of creatures. Groans and wails are borne to heaven, but heaven remains mute and without answer. Such is the kenosis of the Father’s love.”²⁰ To the unbelieving heart, however, this divine kenosis, or God’s refusal to interfere with the freedom of humans to destroy themselves, is simply a pious name for divine absence. The protest of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* still resounds today with its plaintive echoes; it is always possible to “return one’s ticket” and refuse the afterlife and its promise of eternal reconciliation if you believe the enormity of earthly suffering was too high a price to pay for universal salvation.

But in the polyphony of Dostoevsky’s theological vision, Ivan has neither the only nor the last word. The Elder Zosima also remains, inviting the

20. Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 385.

Christian to take responsibility for the sins of all, to become a co-worker with God's providence in the space divine kenosis makes possible. In Bulgakov's view, only universalism can render such cooperation with God existentially viable. Only the hope that God's love is such as to seek the last sinner, to the utter limit of damnation, can ground our faith in God's goodness *now*, in our present vale of tears. No amount of brilliant or clever theologizing can substitute for that fundamental act of faith that underlies every utterance of the word *Father* in Christian prayer; yet to believe in the Father's commitment to saving every precious child of earth makes that leap of faith a bit shorter of a distance to cross. This is the heart of Bulgakov's eschatology: the hope, grounded on the Father's character revealed in Christ, that God will in the end truly be all in all. "And hope does not disappoint, for the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5).

SAMPLE