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Between Creation and Salvation

Theosis and Theurgy

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY IS TO INVESTIGATE THE POTENTIAL OF “Christian Theurgy” as an expression and means of deification to provide the basis for a correlation of the doctrines of creation and salvation, which offers an understanding of the transfiguration of the created order. This will entail the construal of an understanding of “Christian Theurgy” as an outworking of the divine activity of creating and redeeming, the outcome of which is that God comes to be all in all (1 Cor 15:28; also Eph 1:23). This will also demonstrate the possibility of re-connecting creation and salvation from within resources of the Christian Tradition.

The ancient world envisaged deification for the individual in terms of four possible pursuits or activities, which may be labelled: educational, ethical, mystical, and ritual. The educational path is mainly associated with the pursuit of philosophy, or sometimes popular expressions of philosophy, being less elitist. This path is focused on the soul or the mind and often appeals to metaphors of light, and to concepts of enlightenment or illumination. The ethical path might be pursued in its own right but is often associated with one or more of the other pursuits, and is focused on training the human will through living out the virtues. The mystical path again has elitist and more popular manifestations, some of which include the practice of contemplation. This path is rooted in personal, spiritual experience of some kind and may also appeal to metaphors or experiences of light, which are conceptualized in terms of enlightenment or illumination. The ritual path is also mani-

festated in elite and popular forms and could include magical or liturgical practices to enable the individual to find deification for the soul. This ritual or liturgical manifestation of deification in the ancient world is known as “theurgy” (θεουργία) from the word *theos* and *energeia*, giving the meaning “divine working,” “energy” or “action.” Rituals were enacted, which were sometimes understood to be magical in nature, with the intention of invoking the action of one or more gods, specifically with the aim of uniting an individual with the divine. This union known as *henōsis* was understood to bring about the perfection of the individual or her soul.

The first surviving record of the term “theurgy” is found in the mid-second century CE work, the *Chaldean Oracles*.¹ There are also examples of the theory and practice of theurgy to be found in the philosophical works of the later Platonists such as Iamblichus. Plotinus had urged that those who wished to perform theurgy should practice contemplation, as part of the overall goal of reuniting with the divine. The school of Plotinus was evidently a school of meditation or contemplation. While Iamblichus of Calcis (in Syria), a student of Porphyry, who was a student of Plotinus, taught a more ritualized method of theurgy that involved invocation of the gods and magical ritual. Iamblichus believed that the practice of theurgy was a form of imitating the gods. In his work, *On the Egyptian Mysteries*,² he described theurgic practice as “ritualized cosmogony,” which bestowed on embodied souls the divine responsibility of creating and preserving the cosmos. Iamblichus understood that the divine cannot be comprehended through contemplation because what is transcendent is beyond reason. He argues that theurgy is a series of rituals and practices with the goal of attaining the divine essence by discovering traces of the divine in the different layers of being. Through these processes the practitioner of theurgy seeks the soul’s innate divinity as well as reunion with the divine.

It is possible to understand Christian worship as a form of theurgy. The rituals of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are understood in the writings of St. Paul as means of participating in the death and resurrection of Christ³ and in the body and blood of Christ.⁴ Such New Testament

1. *Chaldean Oracles*, the Greek text as found in Kroll, *De Oraculis Chaldaicis*.

2. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*.

3. See Rom 6:3–11.

4. 1 Cor 10:16–17.

understandings are reinforced in the developed doctrine of the Latin medieval church in the concept of the transubstantiation. The change of substance of the bread and wine understood in this doctrine suggest that when the communicant receives the sacramental elements there is an assimilation by the communicant of the divine in Christ. The Eucharist understood in terms of the change of substance or of the Real Presence may be interpreted as a kind of theurgy in the sense that it contributes to the divinization of the participants. In the Greek Orthodox tradition some scholars understand that the liturgy is a form of theurgy, such as Vladimir Lossky who refers to “theurgic actions.”⁵ Sacramental rituals and other forms of worship may be understood in a thaumaturgical way, which is a nuanced re-reception of the theory of theurgy in Christian tradition. Christian thaumaturgy seeks to understand the liturgy in terms of “miracle” or “wonder,” while excluding any magical connotation, by stressing the divine initiative and the human response of faith.

This essay will be developed over five steps. Firstly, I will outline some of the reasons for the polarization of the doctrines of creation and salvation in mainstream Western theological discourse. Secondly, I will examine Bulgakov’s theurgic understanding of creative human activity. In the third section, I will consider how Bulgakov’s understanding of theurgy can provide a basis for understanding the sacraments as instances of the deification of the cosmos. In the fourth section I will investigate the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist as instances in which created matter is used to celebrate the salvation of the cosmos. Finally, I will set out a theurgic understanding of a correlation of the doctrines of creation and salvation, and the implications, which emerge from such a correlation for the integrity of creation.

In order to construct this correlation I will use a heuristic method—correlating the doctrines of deification and creation by appealing to theurgy as a potentially mediating praxis. To achieve this I will draw on the trinitarian conceptuality of an “event of communion” found in the work of Zizioulas,⁶ and of “energetic communion” in the work of Thunberg,⁷ in order to create a theurgic correlation of the doctrines of deification and creation.

5. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 190.

6. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

7. Thunberg, *Man and Cosmos*, 143.

In his discussion of the conceptuality of *koinōnia* (communion), Zizioulas appeals to the concept of *an event of communion*⁸ to denote the dynamic quality of the communion and freedom of the Godhead, which, as he understands it, finds expression in the communion of the three divine Persons. Zizioulas uses the concept of event to explicate the relational ontology of *koinōnia*, not only in terms of the Persons of the Godhead but also in terms of the redemption of the fallen human person. Through baptism the human person is called into a new ecclesial hypostasis in the context of the communion of the church. In the light of the conceptuality of an “event of communion” the human person is to be understood as both “product” and “agent” of the praxis of theurgy. As a consequence of which, I will argue that the conceptuality of an “event of communion” has ontological and soteriological implications for the transformation of the created order.

The “energetic communion”⁹ of which Thunberg writes is an expression of the reciprocity and synergy of the human and divine in the process of deification. Through this process the individual—in the context of the body of Christ, receiving the sacraments and practising the virtues—is brought to participation in the divine *koinōnia*. The paradigm of this reciprocity or synergy is found in Christ himself, where the operations of the human and divine wills are understood to be a manifestation of the *perichōrēsis* of the two natures.¹⁰ This synergy of wills or—as Thunberg expresses it—this “energetic communion,” is the basis of the believer’s sharing in the theandric possibility, which the Incarnation offers to all humankind. This divine-human (theandric) synergy of wills is the means and goal to which the believer is called: to participate in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), to be deified. Here again the human person is to be understood as both “product” and “agent” of the praxis of theurgy.

In the first step, I will draw a thumbnail sketch of the reasons for the polarization of the doctrines of creation and salvation in mainstream Western theological discourse.

The treatment of “creation” as a distinct doctrine is perhaps first seen in the writings of Irenaeus in relation to his response to the

8. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

9. Thunberg, *Man and Cosmos*, 143.

10. See Maximus the Confessor’s exposition of the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, e.g. *Opuscula* 3; PG 91: 48D–49A.

Gnostics,¹¹ although earlier Justin Martyr had already expressed the idea of Christian understanding of “the creation.”¹² Despite Irenaeus’ positive construal of the created order and the Creator God, later writers of the early church period often construed the material “creation” in relation to the “Fall” and its consequences. An example of such construal may be seen in works of Gregory of Nyssa, who constructs his understanding of the post-lapsarian state of humanity (and the cosmos) in relation to his interpretation of the “garments of skin” (Gen 2:21).¹³ These garments of skin are put on human beings after “Fall” and are understood to indicate that what can be said empirically to be “human nature” is not the original nature as created by God. This construal of the “Fall” by Eastern writers tends to be focused on human embodiment rather than on the “will,” which leaves open the possibility of the human person conforming his/her will (under grace) to the divine will, and therefore the possibility of a theandric “synergy.” In the works of Augustine of Hippo the consequences of the “Fall” are focused on the inability of the human will and the lack of true freedom of the will.¹⁴ The consequence of these different emphasises in the interpretation of the “Fall” means that the possibility of the created order co-operating with God’s redemptive activity is on the whole excluded by those who follow the Augustinian tradition. The reception of Augustine’s works in Western theological discourse provides the basis for much of the later separation and at times polarization of the order of creation over against the order of salvation.

The treatment of creation and salvation as separate themes in scholastic theology is continued and taken a stage further by the Reformers, on the basis of justification by faith alone and the rejection of any place for “works” in the scheme of human salvation. This trend reaches a peak in Karl Barth’s rejection of natural theology¹⁵ and the construal of the doctrine of creation through the parameters of Christology.¹⁶ However, I would suggest that Barth’s christological construal of the doctrine of

11. E.g. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.10.

12. E.g. Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection* 7.

13. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. Cat.* 8, PG 45: 33C; *Or. Dom.* 5, PG 44: 1184B. See also Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 43–104.

14. E.g. Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, passim.

15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1.1: xiii.

16. *Ibid.*, vol. 3.2.

creation can also be received as a positive contribution towards correlating understandings of creation and salvation; particularly if the consequences which Barth draws from his own construal are re-received on the basis of a Johannine understanding of the place and function of the Word (Logos).¹⁷ The continuing tradition of treating creation and salvation as distinct topics in Systematic Theology leaves the impression that the divine purposes can be divided at least into two distinct phases, if not intentions. I want to suggest that this is misleading and is a distortion of the biblical witness, which leads to an under-valuing and possible exploitation of the created order.

In this second step I will examine Bulgakov's theurgic understanding of human activity. This will form the basis for a heuristic approach to correlating understandings of creation and salvation.

Bulgakov's construal of a theurgic understanding of theology emerges from the influence, which Vladimir Solovyov's work has on his thought. Solovyov held a collective and historical understanding of salvation, which he argued reached its final stage in the work of Christ. Christ's work enabled believers to grow in and achieve salvation, understood in terms of deification. Through this influence deification became a central feature of Bulgakov's theological endeavour and it is in relation to this concern for deification that he develops his understanding of theurgy. Bulgakov seeks to distinguish between a Kantian or Marxist understanding of human activity and a Christian understanding rooted in the concept and practice of "theurgy" which brings about the transformation of the world (cosmos).¹⁸ The sacramental activity of the church is Christian theurgy. But Bulgakov also suggests that the twin human enterprises of art and economics may both be understood relative to theurgy, while not being confused with theurgy proper. Both art and economics are understood to be transformative activities, but only fully and properly in relation to each other and the church's theurgy. Insofar as art and economics are pursued in this way they are understood to be aspects of "Sophia," and to express the genuine human vocation of transfiguring the material world under God.¹⁹ On this basis Bulgakov suggests that *human* creativity is an example of "theurgy" (*theou ergon*,

17. See John 1:1–3; 3:16; 14:6.

18. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 129.

19. *Ibid.*, 130.

God's work). But he distinguishes between (a) the action of God in world (even if accomplished in and through human beings), which is "theurgy" (God's action) in the strict sense; and (b) human action, accomplished by the power of divine Sophia present with it, which is *anthrōpou ergon*, a "sophiurgy" (*ergon ek sophias*). The former is understood in terms of divine condescension, and the latter in terms of human ascent. So there is a distinction between "theurgy" and "sophiurgy," and yet these are constantly mingled in his writing so that there is often ambiguity and a lack of clarity.²⁰ Theurgy in the strict sense is identified by Bulgakov as the action of God. Theurgy is premised on a soteriological understanding of pardoning and saving grace, which is entirely grounded in the divine initiative. Theurgy is understood to be inseparably connected with the incarnation, so that it is the incarnation itself extended in time and uninterruptedly in the process of its accomplishment. Theurgy is the unending action of Christ in humanity. Christ is the foundation of theurgy and he passes on a theurgic power to the church, which is realized above all in the liturgy of the Eucharist.²¹

In relation to his theurgic understanding of art and economics Bulgakov argues in *Philosophy of Economic Activity* (1912) that knowledge is not a kind of "theatrical representation" but that "*knowledge is labour*, willed and active engagement in changing the world."²² Making sense of the world is not simply to interpret it, but to make new and orderly patterns within it. On this understanding knowing is an "economic" activity, which produces and constitutes value. This production is understood within the context of a program for the "humanization" of the world, in which knowledge and transformation are held together. Thus, "In economic work, man realises this world for himself, constructs his cosmic body and becomes concretely aware of it, realises the authority primordially bestowed on him. Even in his 'housekeeping' role, man retains some reflection of the royal splendour of Adam."²³ It is in relation to such understandings that Milbank argues that Bulgakov's understanding of deification suggests that the divine creative economy is such that all human working is "a coming to know."²⁴ Inversely, coming

20. Ibid., 130.

21. Bulgakov, "Unfading Light," 156.

22. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 122.

23. Bulgakov, "Unfading Light," 151–52.

24. Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy," 35.

to know is a constant process of collective just distribution: “economy is knowledge in action; knowledge is economy in theory.”²⁵ Bulgakov’s theurgic understanding of human creativity in art and economics provides a clear basis for a heuristic approach to construing a correlation of the doctrines of creation and salvation, because “God only reaches us through the liturgical invocations latent in all human creative bringing forth of the unanticipated.”²⁶ In other words, there is a correlation between the creative and redemptive purposes, intentions and actions of God, which finds expression in human activity. God’s creation of humankind in the divine image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27) bestows on human activity a theandric reality, which continues despite the Fall. And on this basis human creative activity may be said to be theurgic.

One of the implications of this understanding of the theurgic quality of human creativity activity is, as Milbank has argued, that for Bulgakov to become divine now means constantly to shape better images of deity. The re-shaping of the understanding of divinity in the exposition of the doctrine of deification is also to be found in the Hermetic corpus.²⁷ The concept of the re-shaping of the understanding of divinity relates to how the difference or distance between the divine and the human is envisaged. Bulgakov’s understanding suggests that rather than there being a separation and distance between the divine and the human, that there is instead a closeness, and one might even say an “inter-dependence.” The divine activity in creating and redeeming the cosmos and humankind within that cosmos are to be understood in relation to the claim that God seeks to be/become “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28; Eph 1:23). Such understanding of the divine-human relation and its implications in the doctrine of deification provides further conceptual basis for the construction of a correlation of the orders of creation and salvation.

In this third step I want to draw out Bulgakov’s understanding of theurgy in order to set out the grounds for understanding the sacraments as instances in which the divine purposes of creating and redeeming suggest the deification of the cosmos.

25. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 131.

26. Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy,” 36; see also Bulgakov, “Unfading Light,” 149–59.

27. Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy,” 35. See *Asclepius* in Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, paragraphs 22–24, pp. 79–81.

In addition to his emphasis on theurgy and a theurgic understanding of creative human activity, Bulgakov was sympathetic to the Palamite revival associated with the other Russian émigrés in Paris that the praying of the Jesus Prayer itself brings about the “energetic” presence of the divine person of the Logos. This notion is predicated on the belief that “in some ineffable way the sonorous patterns and other sensorial resonances of human language have become attuned over the ages to a certain receptivity of transcendence.”²⁸ However, in Bulgakov’s view the premise for the experience of deification is not (so much) the distinction which Palamas and the neo-Palamites draw between energies and essence in the divine, but rather that human beings can become God, because God is constantly becoming human. The pre-condition of the possibility of incarnation is the eternal descent of God into the Creation as Sophia, and the eternal raising of humanity through deification.²⁹ Bulgakov follows Solovyov in identifying the humanity of God with Sophia and affirms the core meaning of Solovyov’s sophiology—God is always the God for “me,” that is, for creation. God’s being is not dependent on creation, nor is God exhausted in God’s relation to creation; God’s being, however, is such that God is the God who creates and redeems creation. This conceptualization of the divine-human or theandric relation is also a premise upon which to construct an understanding of the sacraments and the sacramental elements as instances in which the divine purposes of creating and redeeming suggest the deification of the cosmos. The theandric possibility of deification rests upon the theurgy of the liturgy, which in turn suggests the theurgic possibility of creative human activity and of the connection between this activity and knowledge. Thus the human person as both “product” and “agent” of the praxis of theurgy enables the deification of the material cosmos, which is the premise for the correlation of the orders of creation and salvation.

In this fourth step I want to draw out the understanding of the material elements used in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist as instances in which created matter is used to celebrate the salvation of the cosmos.

28. Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy,” 36; see also Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 1–19.

29. Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy,” 53.

The ritual use of water in baptism is often premised on the actual effects of the use of water on human life. Without water life as we know it cannot exist, equally a human being can drown in relatively shallow waters. Water is then a symbol of both life and death, this can be related to the metaphors of John 3 and Rom 6, and to the later construal of baptism and the baptismal font as the “womb” and “tomb” of the church. The word “font” itself relates to water: *fons, fontis*, meaning a spring, source, fountain, or well. Water also suggests washing, and relates both to physical and spiritual cleansing. The ritual use of oil at baptism and confirmation suggests many possible significations. The use of oil to soothe a wound or massage a body requires an element of touch, so that anointing is also a matter of human physicality and gesture as well as being an element in its own right. This highlights a general reality in the celebration of the sacraments that the elements are dependent upon human agency and are contextualized through the human senses and the use of gesture and language. The New Testament texts contain a number of references to being “sealed with the Spirit” which may suggest the use of oil.³⁰ In a more indirect way the use of oil may be seen to refer to the practice of anointing the king evidenced in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word “messiah” means one anointed with oil and “*christos*” (Christ) is the Greek equivalent. Thus the use of oil in Christian Initiation rites may be said to reinforce the idea of being “in Christ” and of the believer becoming an anointed one: the anointing of the baptized confirms upon each candidate the status of being a “*christos*.” The ritual laying on of hand or hands may or may not have originally suggested physical contact between the minister and the candidate. Some scholars suggest that the laying of hand(s) was a gesture of reaching out the arms and hands towards the candidates, rather than physical contact. In later rituals the laying on of hands in Confirmation became a moment of physical touch, a gesture of reassurance and friendship and fellowship, a sign of the gift the Holy Spirit or of strengthening in the Holy Spirit. The ritual meal of the Eucharist expresses the significance of eating in common and being in relation to all the others who similarly share in the meal, as well as being sustained and nurtured in life and health. As St. Paul suggests in 1 Cor 10:16–17 it is a sign of communion and fellowship.

30. E.g. 2 Cor 1:21–22; Eph 1:13, 4:30; Heb 1:9; 1 John 2:20, 27.

A significant step towards embracing new understandings of epistemology in relation to the sacraments was taken by Edward Schillebeeckx in *The Eucharist*.³¹ Schillebeeckx famously sought to re-interpret the Tridentine understanding of transubstantiation in terms of semiotics, which was based on the work of the philosopher Husserl and others after him. Since the 1960s Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva and others have developed the understandings of phenomenology and signs with which Schillebeeckx worked, and so the endeavour he began needs now to be updated in the light of such postmodern writings. However, Schillebeeckx's insights continue to make an important contribution to the possibility of sacraments: "Modern phenomenology has developed not an epistemology of the sign, but an anthropology of the symbolic act based on a view of man which is not dualistic. According to this anthropological conception, man is not, in the first instance, an enclosed interiority which later, in a second stage as it were, becomes incarnate in the world through bodiliness. The human body as such is indissolubly united with the human subjectivity."³² On this basis Schillebeeckx develops his understanding of the symbolic action of the sacraments, which he interprets as collective acts of the church community. It is noteworthy that despite being written almost forty years ago *The Eucharist* has still much to offer in the present day context. The understanding that the sacraments are known and received and done as collective acts resonates well with Derrida's notions of text and context.³³ A semiotic interpretation of the material elements of baptism and Eucharist provides rich possibilities for understanding the rites not only in terms of individual or collective human salvation, but also suggests that the use of material elements to celebrate a sharing in salvation indicates that the elements themselves are signs of a foretaste of the redemption and renewal of the cosmos itself. The human use of created matter to celebrate salvation extends to the possibility of the redemption of matter in the coming of the new heaven and new earth. The ritual use of matter and of human gesture suggests that the cosmos is not only a means of human beings becoming identified with the divine nature and purposes but that cosmos itself is being drawn into an imitation of and

31. Schillebeeckx, *Eucharist*.

32. *Ibid.*, 99.

33. See Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 34–53.

participation in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Thus the correlation of the material creation and the celebration of salvation in the sacramental use of matter and gesture suggests a continuity of purpose in the divine action(s) of creating and redeeming.

Finally I will draw out the implications for the integrity of creation, which emerge from this construal of a theurgic understanding of theosis, through which the orders of creation and salvation are brought together in correlation.

As a preliminary comment, I want to suggest that the appeal I began by making to the conceptuality of the “event of communion” and “energetic communion” as the basis for a heuristic method may provide a more secure basis for this construal of a theurgic understanding of theosis than Bulgakov’s appeal to sophiology. The conceptuality of an “event of communion” and “energetic communion” provides the basis for construing the theandric possibility of deification without recourse to the appeal to “Sophia” which Solovyov and Bulgakov make. Nonetheless, Bulgakov’s construal of theurgy and of a theurgic understanding of human creative activity remain crucial for this process of correlation of the orders of creation and salvation.

Zizioulas’ appeal to the concept of *an event of communion*³⁴ denotes the dynamic quality of the relational ontology of *koinōnia*. Such conceptualization of the divine being provides a framework for understanding the creation as “an event of communion” which may also be used to inform the integrity of creation. The church as a *locus* of the process of partaking in the event-character and relationality of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) provides the context for the material creation itself to participate in the process of transformation. The Christian praxis of theurgy which is the instantiation of this process of partaking celebrates not only the renewal of creation but also its nature as divine “gift” in creation.

The relationship between the church and creation premised on the theurgical practices of Christification, are expressed in the sacramental life of the church in baptism and Eucharist. The materiality and sacramentality of the theurgical process of christification form the basis for understanding the outcome of deification in terms of creation and re-creation.

34. Ibid., 34–53.

In Christian theurgy the material of the cosmos is received as divine gift and through human agency is transformed into signs of the recreation of the human creation as well as of the whole cosmos through participation in the divine nature (theosis). Following Bulgakov's construal of theurgy and sacramental matter it is possible to envisage the praxis of theurgy as the paradigm for human creative activity in art and economics. This theurgic human agency suggests a new paradigm for the relationship between the human creation and the cosmos, which challenges models that permit exploitation and domination. Such a paradigm would also receive the animal and material creation as divine "gift" to be celebrated and valued in its own right. The correlation of the orders of creation and salvation through the mediating praxis of theosis demonstrates a theological under-pinning for the integrity of creation, which also expects the transformation of the cosmos as it increasingly participates in the divine life.