

Reverencing the Father:  
A Review Essay Discussing  
Sergius Bulgakov's, *The Lamb of God*,  
trans. Boris Jakim (Eerdmans, 2008);  
Id., *The Comforter*,  
trans. B. Jakim (Eerdmans, 2004); and  
Id., *The Bride of the Lamb*,  
trans. B. Jakim (Eerdmans, 2002)

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Eerdmans, for most of the last decade and more, has helpfully been bringing out in English translation the works of Sergius Bulgakov. His major trilogy for which he is most famous in the annals of twentieth-century Orthodox speculative theology is comprised of treatises, respectively, dedicated to the Incarnate Word, the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity; to the Holy Spirit, the third hypostasis of the Holy Trinity; and, then, with an anthropological turn, to the Church, the Bride of the Lamb (Christ). On face value, a tract on the Father himself, the first hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, seems to be lacking. A study of these volumes – even in a cursory reading of them – reveals, in fact, that the thematic of the “Monarchy of the Father,” secondary in itself in the overall content of the trilogy, is woven throughout this multi-volume theological tapestry.

How can one substantiate this claim? In the inaugural volume of the trilogy, *The Lamb of God*<sup>1</sup> – the overriding thematic of which is clearly indicated in the subtitle, “On the Divine Humanity” (Godmanhood/Theanthropy),<sup>2</sup> common to the three volumes – after a lengthy introduction detailing the explicit Chalcedonian cast of his sophiological Christology, Bulgakov devotes his first chapter to “Divine Sophia,” in the process unfolding his “initial ontological axiom” (*iskhodnaia ontologicheskaiia aksioma*), namely, that any (divine, human, or angelic) “personal spirit ... has in itself its own *nature*,” grounding its “*limiting intuition* of itself,”<sup>3</sup> but in particular as this axiom applies to God himself. Stated more simply, the “Who” of God comes with a “What” or *nature*. In God, it is Divine Sophia that constitutes his nature. As Bulgakov himself states it, the “*Divine Sophia* is nothing other than *God’s nature*, His ousia, not only in the sense of power and depth, but also in the sense of self-revealing content.”<sup>4</sup> So understood as life and power, Divine Sophia is also no less determined to be love. Divine Sophia and Love are at one; the one as well as the other is an “all-permeating, all-concrete multi-unity as a spiritual organism.”<sup>5</sup> In underscoring the fact that “*God is Sophia*,” he is no less cogent in affirming the “ontological link of love” that binds the two, adding “that God, hypostatic love, loves Sophia and she loves God with an answering, though not hypostatic, love.”<sup>6</sup> Characterizing the divine world as being governed by the “connecting and organizing principle” (*nachalo sviazuiushchee i organizuiushchee*)<sup>7</sup> that is love, Bulgakov further remarks how it enables “dynamic self-positing” (*aktual’noe samopolaganie*)<sup>8</sup> within the Holy Trinity, specifically noting how the “Father’s love is ecstatic, fiery, causative,

<sup>1</sup> Sergii Bulgakov, *Agnets Bozhii* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1933) (henceforth AB); Eng. trans. by Boris Jakim, *The Lamb of God* (Eerdmans, 2008) (henceforth LG).

<sup>2</sup> This subtitle is not given in the English translations.

<sup>3</sup> LG, 89; AB, 112.

<sup>4</sup> LG, 102; AB, 125.

<sup>5</sup> LG, 104; AB, 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> LG, 107; AB, 130.

<sup>8</sup> LG, 98; AB, 118.

active” as the Father “lives not in Himself but in His Son’s life,”<sup>9</sup> his essential begetting of the Son being a true kenosis or self-emptying. Analogously, the sonhood of the Word is a form of kenosis in that one finds “the Son’s depleting Himself in the name of the Father.”<sup>10</sup> Expanding upon these respective kenoses, Bulgakov writes: “the sacrifice of the Father’s love consists in self-renunciation and in self-emptying in the begetting of the Son. The sacrifice of the Son’s love consists in self-depletion in the begottenness from the Father, in the acceptance of birth as begottenness.”<sup>11</sup>

Identifying love with sacrifice, one can begin to grasp the specificity of hypostatic love as evidenced in the mutual love of the Father and the Son. But God, we know, is not a dyad. How, then, does the Holy Spirit come into play? For Bulgakov, the third hypostasis of the Holy Trinity is the “joy of sacrificial love,” adding that the Spirit is the “bliss and actualization”<sup>12</sup> of the mutual love of the Father and the Son. It is precisely in the light of the divine reality of love that one can begin to understand the notion of *procession* within the Holy Trinity. In the commentary of Bulgakov, the

identity of Father and Son, their self-identification in love, is realized by a hypostatic act: the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father upon the Son (or ‘through’ the Son) ... The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is received by the Son; He is the ‘third’ person of the Holy Trinity, for He establishes the mutuality of the Father and the Son.<sup>13</sup>

He is, in fine, their mutual love, hypostatically understood.

Returning later to the theme of Divine Sophia and how it flows from an encounter with the trihypostatic God, the Holy Trinity, Bulgakov directs our attention to the prayer to the Father (the “Our Father”) that Jesus himself taught his disci-

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<sup>9</sup> LG, 98; AB, 121.

<sup>10</sup> LG, 98f; AB, 122.

<sup>11</sup> LG, 99; AB, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> LG, 100; AB, 123.