

Briefly Noted

Père Serge Boulgakov, *Ma vie dans l'Orthodoxie: Notes autobiographiques*, Irène Rovere-Sova and Mireille Rovere-Tsivikis, eds. and trans. (Geneva: Editions des Syrtes, 2015), 258 pp.

The ongoing publication of Bulgakov translations attests to the recognition of the importance of Sergius Bulgakov, without doubt the greatest Eastern Church theologian of the modern era. There have always been critics and detractors, including while he was alive, who wanted him tried for heresy, deposed from the priesthood, and barred from teaching and writing. Still today, any online search will yield virulent attacks on him for being an ecumenist, an innovator, a heretic who made Sophia, Divine Wisdom, the fourth person of the Trinity. In his life he went from being a priest's child and seminarian to being an atheist and socialist democrat to returning to the Father's house – the Church – and being himself ordained. It is an insult to history and to his texts to simply dismiss and revile him. In actuality, no matter the complexity of his writing and the contradictions and inconsistencies within it, he still produced the most creative work of any Eastern theologian in centuries. He tried to put positive, constructive responses to Chalcedon's essentially negative Christological definition, the famous a-privatives: “without confusion, change, division, separation.” He sought to talk about how the humanity of God changed everything, for the world, for human beings, and for God!

This volume is a translated selection of excerpts from Bulgakov's *Autobiographical Notes*, collected by Lev Zander and published shortly after Bulgakov's death in 1944. They contain reflections on his hometown of Livny and childhood with a priest as father, of his drift from faith and recovery, conversion back to God, of his clashes and suffering in the institutional church. There are also commentaries on his travels in the US, on his near-death experience and the later loss of his ability to speak after cancer surgery. We have as well his account of

seeing Hagia Sophia for the first time and his fascination, profoundly spiritual and emotional, with Raphael's Sistine Madonna in the Dresden State Museum – a significant moment in his conversion.

No one should think that the autobiographical writings in the earlier *A Bulgakov Anthology* or this French-language volume are intended to raise the question of canonization. These excerpts reveal Bulgakov as brilliant but also quite a human being, with sentimental attachments to home and childhood, a little overwhelmed by the size and pace of New York, Boston, and American educational institutions and parishes. The permeation of his thinking by the liturgy, the feasts of the church year and the scriptures, comes across most powerfully. Yet there is also his confrontation with the despotism of bishops and the cruelty of church people for those they define as outside their boundaries and thus their enemies. Having served in the first Duma, he knew the corruption and ineptitude of the pre-revolutionary days in Russia but also the atrocities of the revolution itself as well as of the fascists who later emerged in Europe.

If anything, these writings fill out the portrait of a brilliant thinker and a dedicated pastor with the deeper feelings of a spouse, parent, and real citizen of the world. It is no wonder that the so-called Paris school of émigré theologians he was part of was known for a humane and cultured openness and generosity to others. Fr. Sergius possessed all these admirable qualities and more, and I hope that yet further translation and publication of his works will help us appreciate this more deeply.

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