

The Role and Meaning of Miracles and Relics in the Christological Thought of Sergius Bulgakov

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Abstract

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Bulgakov's Christology (particularly in his recently translated *The Lamb of God*) is here examined for what it says about miracles and relics, including the relics of the bodies of saints and the body of Christ himself, both of which are treated by Bulgakov not as mere "corpses" but as still life-bearing bodies capable of resurrection. In addition, the category of miracle in Bulgakov is larger than healings or other manifestations of divine power: the very creation of the world is itself a miracle, and considered by Bulgakov in a teleological fashion in the context of Divine Providence. In this context, miracles are seen by Bulgakov not as violations of some material-spiritual boundary but as the singular out-working of divine purpose in the world. Miracles are given not to overwhelm or coerce people into belief, but entirely as invitations to follow Christ and share in the glorification of the Father. All this is tied into a unique and challenging discussion about the dyophysite nature of Christ and the relation in Him of His two natures, especially in their encountering death.

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At the very end of his path-breaking Christological tome, *The Lamb of God*,¹ Sergius Bulgakov dedicates a lengthy discussion to a plausibly simple and straightforward topic, namely, “the Work of Christ” (“*Delo Khristovo*”), patterned according to the most traditional theme of the “threefold office of Christ” that stresses, respectively, its “prophetic,” “priestly,” and “royal” moments. Christ the savior is variously the exemplary prophet, priest, and king, guiding the Church, the people of God, as to teaching, sanctification, and governance under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. For his part, as Bulgakov begins his elaboration on the inherent dynamics implicit within this distinction, he seems at first somewhat reluctant to embrace this threefold “abstractive” formality in discussing our Lord’s earthly ministry, which, to his mind, is simply the “*divine-human work par excellence*” (“*bogochelovecheskoe delo po preimushchestvu*”).² This initial demurrer notwithstanding, Bulgakov actually openly embraces it, not hesitating to stake out his own positions that sometimes give the appearance of being at odds with some generally held views.

Probably the chief amongst these variances regards his estimation of Christ’s miracle-working. After having elaborated upon his basic point regarding Christ’s prophetic ministry, namely, that it is first and foremost a “bearing witness to the truth” (“*vozveshchenie istiny*”) in line with the Lord’s direct words: “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth” (John 18:37),³ thereby directly identifying this ministry with his preaching, Bulgakov then raises the question as to whether Christ’s miracles or *signs* to this world are integral to this ministry. Noting that “the miracles are usually considered to belong to the domain of Christ’s ‘royal ministry’ and are viewed as manifestations of divine power over the world” and are “usually ... understood only in relation to the divine

¹ *Agnets Bozhii* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1933): 351–468; henceforth AB. The English translation was done by Boris Jakim as *The Lamb of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008): 321–441; henceforth LG.

² AB, 351; LG, 321.

³ LG, 322; AB, 352.

omnipotence,”⁴ Bulgakov markedly stakes out an opposing point of view, insisting that “such an interpretation would be tantamount to postulating a certain Divine coercion over the world or a new creative act,”⁵ specifically drawing attention to a prior study of his *On the Gospel Miracles (O chudesakh evangel'skikh)*, ending with a straightforward statement of his basic thesis, namely, that “Christ’s miracles are not works of God accomplished *over* the world but the actions of the God-Man *in* the world by God’s power,”⁶ thereby assigning their performance to Christ’s *prophetic* ministry.

For its part, this summary statement of Bulgakov’s fundamental thesis on the nature and import of miracles as given in *The Lamb of God* bears further analysis. Thus it behooves us to review his previous monographic study on the matter.⁷ Only in this way, to our mind, can the *theandric* action of Christ as such be properly appraised. Modestly calling his own investigation merely as a “chapter” in Christology, Bulgakov arguably understates the importance of his ideas. At face value, as actions of God in the world, miracles serve as proofs of God’s existence. Their actual significance, on the other hand, as Bulgakov also affirms, is far more complex as in actual religious *experience* recourse to them or pleas for them can mask an actual lack of faith and even manifest a superstitious attitude toward the world.⁸ Indeed, did not Jesus himself say: “An evil and unfaithful age is eager for a sign!” (Matt. 12:39; cf. Luke 11:29), and: “Why does this age seek a sign? I assure you no such sign will be given it!” (Mark 8:12).

On an entirely different note, Bulgakov poses an even more radical question that lies at the very heart of his sophiological inquiry: “Does not precisely this order, the marvelously arranged mechanism of the world with its causality, represent a

⁴ LG, 332; AB, 362.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ LG, 333; AB, 363.

⁷ *O chudesakh evangel'skikh* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1932); Eng. trans. by Boris Jakim, “On the Gospel miracles” in *Relics and Miracles: Two Theological Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011): 41–113; henceforth, RM. The Russian original unfortunately is at present unavailable to me.

⁸ RM, 45.