

Sergii Bulgakov's Eschatological Perspectives on Human History

Marta Samokishyn

Abstract

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Sergii Bulgakov was one of the most creative and important Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, associated with the internationally influential “Paris school” of theology based at l’Institut Saint-Serge, where so many post-revolutionary East-Slavic intellectuals found refuge and undertook creative work. After a brief biographical sketch reviewing the main contours of his life, the question of human history and its transcendental dimension is examined here through the issue of human creativity. All this is seen in Bulgakov’s discussions of the relationship between culture and eschatology. The topic of human creativity in history, which is expressed in the eschatological exclamation “Maranatha!” is of great relevance today. Bulgakov’s anthropological approach to history, the boundaries of history, the antinomic relationship between time and eternity, the tragedy of human history, and its resultant openness to eschatology, are all examined along with Bulgakov’s understanding of history’s transfiguration through the creative holiness of the Church.



*The Kingdom of God has to be won by common work,
the creative effort of mankind as well
as the creative work of God.¹*

Introduction

This paper will address the question of human history and its transcendental dimension through the issue of human creativity as seen primarily in the work of Sergii Bulgakov,² one of the foremost Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century. I will sketch out the possible implications of Bulgakov's discourse for discussions of the relationship between culture and eschatology, as a creative reconsideration of the Christian message.³ I will, moreover, examine Bulgakov's understanding of history and eschatology by way of an interpretation of human creativity. The topic of human creativity in history, which is expressed in the eschatological exclamation "Maranatha!" is of great relevance today. The reasons for this are aptly described by Bulgakov in his *Bride of the Lamb* and, to my mind, reveal his "prophetic" approach to reality.⁴ Bulgakov writes:

Precisely our epoch in the history of Christianity is destined to understand this [creative] vocation of man

¹ Sergii Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology," in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 285.

² In this paper we are following Rowan Williams's transliteration of the Russian name of Bulgakov. In *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, Williams admits that Bulgakov, even though baptized Sergei, followed "the normal Russian custom of adopting the more archaic spelling (Sergii) on his ordination" (p. 2).

³ In my paper, I am using the word "eschatology," as it was used in the twentieth century Russian Orthodox context in Paris. The word "eschatology" comes from the Greek word ἔσχατος, meaning "last things," and, in the present context, concerns the transcendental activity of humanity in the context of the Christian anticipation of the Kingdom of God, which constitutes the basis for the inner growth of humanity in God.

⁴ By "prophetic" I understand the ability of the author to combine faithfulness to the Tradition with an approach to reality that allows him to reconsider Tradition and apply it to the needs and conditions of his own age.

as emanating from his rootedness in God, as the feature of the image of God in him. Just as other truths of Christianity were understood more fully in the battle against heresy, so a crucial dogmatic question in our own time is the heresy of life in relation to Christian creative activity.⁵

Bulgakov saw one of the greatest dangers of his own time in what he called “creativity ‘in its own name,’”⁶ in which a form of “luciferian creative intoxication”⁷ is widespread. Thus, it is important to stress that the creative activity of human beings in history is directed and rooted in eschatology and therefore is, as Bulgakov states, “a further unfolding of the Chalcedonian and ditheletic dogma,”⁸ because “what was accomplished in Christ was pre-accomplished for the whole of humankind.”⁹ Hence, Bulgakov appears here as a “prophet,”¹⁰ who was able to find and answer the question of his time, being faithful to the spirit of Tradition in his creative searches. In his Autobiographical Notes, Bulgakov wrote that Christianity somehow lost its sense of the eschatological, “not in its dogma, but in fact, under the overwhelming burden of its historical heritage.”¹¹ In his writings Bulgakov was attempting to return to the eschatological quest with the help of a creative reconsideration of the rich heritage of Tradition. Iryna Rodnianskaia points out in the foreword to the Russian edition of *Sviet Nevechernii* [Unfading Light] that the reason for Bulgakov's great interest in the concept of history was his search for an answer to the tragedy of the historical reality of Russia and

⁵ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 332.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ He was also called a prophet by his spiritual daughter Joanna Reitlinger in her autobiography, which can be found in http://krotov.info/library/m/menn/3_reyling_biogr.htm. Cf. Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 29.

¹¹ Sergii Bulgakov, “Autobiographical Notes” in *Sergius Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Anthology*, eds., J. Pain and N. Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), 19.