

On the Acquisition of the Holy Spirit: Sergius Bulgakov and the Theotokos

Walter Sisto

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 32)

The pneumatology and Mariology of Sergius Bulgakov, widely believed to be the most important Russian theologian of the twentieth century, is here examined to discover the links between the Holy Spirit and the Mother of God, and the implications for the divinization of humanity, especially as we share in the sufferings of Mary and Christ, and “so complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” These connections are developed in Bulgakov’s controversial sophiology whose development and implications for both Trinitarian theology and ecumenical methodology are discussed.



Few scholars have taken note of the importance of the Mother of God in Sergius Bulgakov’s sophiology.¹ Although Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944) published only a few articles on Mary and one book *The Burning Bush*, Mary is an all-embracing figure within his thought. As Lev Zander noted, Mary is “the alpha and the omega of his entire religious understanding and perception of the world.”² Within his sophiologi-

¹ For a good introduction to Bulgakov’s Mariology see Andrew Louth, “Father Sergii Bulgakov on the Mother of God,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* (2005): 45–64.

² Lev Zander, *Bog i Mir*, vol. 2, 184 in “Introduction,” *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), xiv.

cal corpus, his reflections on Sophia begin and end with Mary: Mary is the subject of his first major theological reflection on Sophia, *The Burning Bush* (1927), as well as the subject of his final reflection on Sophia in his *The Bride of the Lamb* (1946). Mary's centrality in his thought follows from Bulgakov's Russian theological tradition that links Mary to Sophia in liturgical worship and popular devotion. Consequently Bulgakov's Sophiology, which is his attempt to explain Russian Orthodox devotion to Sophia, is also an attempt to explain Russian Orthodox devotion to Mary. Mariology is an integral facet of his Sophiology.³ Mary even plays a central role in Bulgakov's ecumenical methodology, as Bulgakov was single-handedly responsible for bringing Mary to the forefront of the *Faith and Order* dialogue.⁴ He was persistent that the veneration of Mary was the "central, though hidden nerve of the whole movement towards reconciliation among the divided confessions."⁵ Only a clear understanding of the role of Mary in salvation history can guarantee proper consideration of the hypostatic union. In particular, the dogma of the Theotokos, properly understood, guards against *de facto* heretical conceptions of Christ, e.g. Nestorianism or Monophysitism. Bulgakov insists that these heresies persist not only in non-Orthodox churches but within the Orthodox Church because many Christians fail to understand the dogma of the Theotokos.⁶ Misconceptions about Mary result in a failure to understand Christ and the Church, and therefore they create obstacles to fruitful dialogue. Only

³ The link between Mary and Sophia is a notable departure from the earlier Greek tradition that linked Christ to Sophia. As Donald Fiene's important study of Sophia in Slavic worship demonstrates, in Russia this interpretation was widespread and authoritative. This shift can be traced to the cathedrals in Kiev and Novgorod that are dedicated to Sophia, but have Marian titular feasts. Kiev's feast day is the nativity of Mary on 8 September, and Novgorod's feast day is the Dormition of Mary on 15 August: Donald M. Fiene, "What is the Appearance of Divine Sophia?" *Slavic Review* 48 (1989): 449–476.

⁴ After almost a decade of activism Bulgakov was finally permitted by *Faith and Order* to speak about Mary during the second meeting at Edinburgh.

⁵ Sergius Bulgakov, "The Question of the Veneration of the Virgin Mary, at the Edinburgh Conference," *Sobornost* 12 (1937): 24–28.

⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. T.A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 86.

after we clearly recognize the role of Mary in salvation history as the woman who gives life and humanity to Christ can authentic dialogue between divided churches begin. Mary is not only an indispensable aspect of Orthodox culture and faith, but rather places Christ firmly within human history. Christ without Mary is Christ without humanity.⁷

Bulgakov's Mariology is unique for two reasons. First he authors one of the few Orthodox systematic theologies on the Theotokos. For this reason his book *The Burning Bush* [1927] is an exceptional work. In this book Bulgakov systematizes Orthodox Marian piety and draws implications from Orthodox worship to make daring claims about the Mother of God. Bulgakov develops the dogma of the Theotokos and responds to the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Nevertheless, this book was not well received by his contemporaries. Many Orthodox theologians and ecclesial authorities, including St. John Maximovitch, criticized Bulgakov for speaking about that which there should be reverent silence.⁸ Second,

⁷ Mary is a central figure in his Sophiology because Mary is intimately involved in Godhumanhood. The hypostatic union is not simply a union between God and an amorphous/ abstract human nature, but a union with Mary's human nature. Therefore Mary provides the means for the realization of Godhumanhood. Moreover, Mary is the first disciple of Christ who at the end of her sojourn on earth is assumed bodily into heaven. Mary unlike any other human being has experienced the "dread judgment" and resurrection from the dead. In this way Mary is Godhumanhood realized. She provides humankind with a witness as to what the intimate relationship we will share with God after we have been redeemed and resurrected will entail.

⁸ St. John Maximovitch argues that Bulgakov's heresy is that he glorifies Mary beyond what is proper: Id., *The Orthodox Veneration of Mary: The Birthgiver of God* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2004), 53. Maximovitch argues that Bulgakov's vain deceit and seduction by philosophy obstructs him from teaching Orthodox Mariology in place of which he has his own version of Catholic theories of Mary as co-redemptrix, making Mary equal to Christ.

Similarly, Vladimir Lossky rejects Bulgakov's method as not properly taking into account Orthodoxy's emphasis on apophatism. He stresses that with respect to the Mother of God's glorification, we ought not to dogmatize it but keep the silence of the Church on this issue. The silence here is purposely kept by the Church because Marian piety is the realm of mystical teaching that can only be experienced and requires a "renewal of heart and mind": Rowan Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology* (Quebec: Lys Vert, 2006), 39. Lack of restraint will re-