

## Social Theory Working with Theology: the Case of Sergius Bulgakov as an Example of Living Tradition

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### Abstract

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The author reviews the life and work of Sergius Bulgakov, tracing, firstly, the influences on Bulgakov (including such figures as Nicholas Berdiaev, Vladimir Soloviev, Nicholas Afanasiev, George Fedotov, Lev Zander, and Basil Zenkovsky) and then the influence of Bulgakov on other contemporary theologians, including Paul Evdokimov, Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, Maria Skovtsova, Dimitri Klepinine, and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. In addition, some contemporary scholarship on Bulgakov – by Antoine Arjakovsky, Rowan Williams, Paul Valliere, John Milbank and others – is mentioned. In a particular way, the author reviews Bulgakov's work on eschatology, "living tradition," "social ecclesiology," the "humanity of God," and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in a "permanent Pentecost." The author concludes by mentioning the influence of the sociologist Peter L. Berger in trying, as Bulgakov did, to bring theology into dialogue with social theory.



Humanity is running out of breath and losing its strength in this hopeless conflict between the egocentricity of individualism and the sadism of communism, between the soullessness of statism and the snarlings of racism. But the Church has thus far had no answer to give; under the pressure of threatened persecution, it has settled for carrying on as one tolerated or licensed state institution among others – or it has endured, in the communist world, a truly bestial persecution at the hands of the Beast of pagan polity. Yet it is only the Church that possesses the principle of true social order, in which the personal and the collective, freedom and social service can be given equal weight and unified harmoniously. It is itself this very principle – living sobornost. That is also the dogmatic foundation of an ecclesial polity. But to this end there must be an upsurge of fresh inspiration in the members of the Church themselves, a spring of living water which satisfies the thirst of contemporary humanity, for the sake of a new relationship among nations, a new mission to the darkness of social paganism, for the awakening of a new spirit. This is not the misplaced utopianism of a “rose-tinted” Christianity that consigns the tragic character of history, with its necessary schism between good and evil, to oblivion, believing that before the ultimate separation the forces of good are bound to become fully manifest.<sup>1</sup>

Thus did Fr. Sergius Bulgakov – himself formerly a professor of political economy, a Marxist, member of the second Duma and theologian and priest – describe the situation of the Church and the world in the turbulent 1930s. Despite his break with Marxist thought and his ruthless criticism of both the Bolsheviks and Fascists, Bulgakov nevertheless remained radical in his assessment both of the challenges of the

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<sup>1</sup> “The Soul of Socialism” in Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 264. “*Dusha sotsializma*” was originally published in the journal *Novyi grad* in 1932 and 1933.

early twentieth century as well as the crucial role of the Church in meeting these. The title of the journal in which this essay, “The Soul of Socialism,” was published was *Novyi grad*, “the new city,” and it aptly summarizes his stance. Far from simply condemning the evils of modernity, he rather saw in them numerous openings for the Church and the transforming work of the Spirit. As Rowan Williams observes, it was but one of a number of essays in which Bulgakov addressed the social situation, teachings and action of the Church.

A few years later, he joined with a group of like-minded émigré intellectuals in an anthology titled *Zhivoe predanie* – “living tradition,” subtitled “Orthodoxy in the modern world” (*pravoslavie v sovremennosti*).<sup>2</sup> Not unlike an earlier anthology, *Vekhi* (Signposts), published before the Revolution, it was a manifesto of sorts, not a statement of principles or demands but rather a collection of essays which revealed a common perspective. This point of view was *openness to the modern world*, a *willingness to dialogue* with the cultures, societies and churches of the West. The view of these intellectuals was never a submission to modernity but the realization, as George Fedotov put it, that like countless Christian thinkers before them, they had to use the language of the modern world and express the gospel as citizens of it.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, they had harsh words of criticism for modernity’s ills – the brutality of unbridled capitalism as well as totalitarian state socialism and fascism. They embraced the world as God’s creation while recognizing always its need for redemption and transformation.

In his prophetic style, Nicolas Berdiaev attacked the bourgeois domestication of Christianity. Bulgakov himself argued for the dynamic nature of theology. Nicolas Afanasiev examined whether or not the canons of the Church could be changed. (They can be.) Others included Cyprian Kern’s discerning of the levitical and prophetic models of pastoral identity, George Fedotov on the Church’s being shaped by the mo-

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<sup>2</sup> (Paris: YMCA Press, 1937).

<sup>3</sup> “For a Style in Preaching,” *Sergievskie listki* (The St. Sergius Leaflets), nos. 1–2 (99–100) (1936): 15–17. Translated by Thomas E. Bird in *The Orthodox Church* (January 1973).