

## Neither Radical nor Liberal: The Ecclesial Humanism of Sergei Bulgakov

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### Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 40)

This essay surveys the political theology of Sergei Bulgakov as it has been interpreted by John Millbank, Aristotle Papanikolaou, and Nathaniel Wood. While Millbank sees Bulgakov in continuity with his own rejection of liberal secularism, Papanikolaou reads Bulgakov as supporting liberal democracy. Wood, however, offers a more nuanced and realistic interpretation. Building on Wood's analysis, this paper draws attention to the ecclesial center in Bulgakov's social vision. Bulgakov's reflections on political issues in Russia and the West during the first half of the twentieth century and his transition from "atheist socialism" to "Christian socialism" shows that his thought is neither simply anti-liberal nor straightforwardly pro-liberal and pro-democratic. Rather Bulgakov's sophiology and personalism inform a political theology based on "ecclesial humanism," a vision of the Church as the "true society" that fulfills all human vocation, and allows for an alternative conception of Christian social action in modern liberal democracies.



### *Introduction*

Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) is widely regarded as one of the most important Eastern Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> if not one of the most important theologians in the Christian Church as a whole in the modern period.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, his scholarly contributions remained largely unrecognized by Christians in the West until recently. This is due both to the fact that, toward the end of his life, his theology was subject to charges of heresy in the Orthodox Church, and because his texts were left mostly untranslated.<sup>3</sup> With many of his works now available in English and French, however, Western theologians are beginning to consider the purchase of Bulgakov's thought, especially as it pertains to political theology – a field which, at least until recently, has not received sufficient attention in Orthodox theology.<sup>4</sup> It is now evident that this neglect can be redressed by utilizing the substantial resources found in the writings of Bulgakov, who supplies “one of the most serious modern attempts at formulating an Orthodox political theology.”<sup>5</sup> He developed Russian sophiology to address modern concerns, seeking to enable Orthodox theology to engage the contemporary world.<sup>6</sup> Two

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Galadza, “Contemporary Orthodox Sacramental Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 436.

<sup>2</sup> John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 104.

<sup>3</sup> On these charges of heresy, see Rowan Williams, “Eastern Orthodox Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 575; and Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2015), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Toward an Orthodox Political Theology: The Church's Theological Foundations and Public Role in the Context of the Greek Economic Crisis,” in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges and Divergent Positions*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl, Ingeborg Gabriel, and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), 154.

<sup>5</sup> Vasilios N. Makrides, “Political Theology in Orthodox Contexts: Specificities and Particularities in Comparison with Western Latin Christianity,” in Stoeckl et al., *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 45ff; Myroslaw Tataryn, “Sergei Bulgakov: Eastern Orthodoxy Engaging the Modern World,” *Studies in Reli-*

leading contemporary political theologians, John Milbank and Aristotle Papanikolaou, have recently deployed Bulgakov's theology in support of their respective visions for Christian social action in modern Western societies. What is particularly noteworthy about their retrievals of Bulgakov is that they interpret his thought in radically divergent ways. Milbank, the most prominent of the scholars associated with the movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, perceives Bulgakov's thought as aligning with and bolstering his own opposition to the secularism he finds inherent in liberal democracy; Papanikolaou, meanwhile, argues that Bulgakov's theology inevitably terminates in an enthusiastic endorsement of liberal democracy.

The argument of this paper will follow the lead of Nathaniel Wood's recent works, which provide a more nuanced take on Bulgakov's political theology. Attending more closely than either Milbank or Papanikolaou to the relevant texts and sufficiently situating them within Bulgakov's overall corpus, Wood makes a compelling case that the political theology which emerges cannot be simply labeled either "liberal" or "anti-liberal." Bulgakov, while appreciative of the structures of liberal democracy, neither issues an uncritical endorsement of its philosophical underpinnings nor ignores the problematic features of liberal societies. Building upon Wood's analysis, this paper will contribute more explicit and sustained discussion of the ecclesial center in Bulgakov's social vision – which does not constitute a primary objective of Wood's particular project. It will be argued that Bulgakov's critical endorsement of liberal democracy is a product of his personalist politics and Christian humanism, which conceives of the Church as the "true society" that fulfills humanity from within. This complex vision – which Bulgakov refers to as "ecclesial humanism" – is

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*gion* 31 (2002): 319; Josephien H. J. van Kessel, "Bulgakov's Sophiology: Towards an Orthodox Economic Theological Engagement with the Modern World," *Studies in East European Thought* 64 (2012): 265; Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov; Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 2ff; and Nathaniel Wood, "Deifying Democracy: Liberalism and the Politics of Theosis" (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2017), 3ff.