

On Divine-Humanity: Sergius Bulgakov’s Personalist Theology as Foundation for the Christian Life

Nadia Delicata

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 423)

The article argues that Bulgakov’s radically personalist understanding of God elucidates a sophisticated personalist Christian ethics. A novel understanding of the form, end, matter and method of the Christian life can be discerned through Bulgakov’s four theological entry points evident in his great trilogy. First, an overall understanding of the Christian life as a *paideia tou kyriou*, that is, as a formation to Christ-like becoming. Divine-humanity, the end of the Christian life, is an imitation of God-Manhood. For Bulgakov, however, the principle of self-emptying that characterizes God-becoming-flesh is a revelation of God’s own personalist nature. Divine perichoresis as an emptying and filling of the immanent Trinity is revealed economically in the theology of creation, where creation is properly out of nothing to become something through the self-revelation of the Father in the Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, immanent divine being as self-revelation, or “divine Sophia,” has its creaturely counterpart in creation’s becoming a revelation of God, the “creaturely Sophia.” Yet creation also necessitates its own created hypostases to return God’s love offered to the world. The method of human flourishing is an *imitatio Dei* as becoming persons-in-relationship. However, the essence of the Christian life as a kenotic-pleromic ethic in imitation of divine perichoresis, is only possible through receiving the Holy Spirit who descends at Pentecost on all flesh, allowing humanity to seek her ultimate transcendence by actively returning to the Father his divine Love.



Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871–1944), economist, political philosopher, Orthodox priest and theologian was a product of the creative spirit of the Russian Silver Age that was extinguished before its time by the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). The radical turn of events, which for Bulgakov, culminated with his expulsion by the Bolsheviks in 1922 on one of the philosophers' ships, led to his original and highly systematic personalist theological treatises being composed in Paris while serving as dean of St. Sergius Theological Institute which he helped found.¹

This article will focus on Bulgakov's *magnum opus*, the trilogy *On Divine-Humanity*,² composed in the last decade of his life, as a groundbreaking – and, in many ways, still relatively unknown – systematic account of personalist theology.³ The intent of the article is to show how Bulgakov's radically personalist understanding of God elucidates in greater depth Christian foundational ethics, that is, the form, end, matter, and method of the Christian life. Just as the great systematician of

¹ Bulgakov was a major exponent of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Russian spiritual revival, which included such luminaries as Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Vladimir Soloviev and Pavel Florensky. For an analysis of Bulgakov's historical context as well as his position among other Russian theologians, see T. Allan Smith, "A Century of Eastern Orthodox Theology in the West," *Religious Studies and Theology* 16 (1997): 60–77.

² The first volume of *O. Bogotchelovtchestve* or *Divine-Humanity* is *Agnets Bojii* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1933), available in English translation as *Lamb of God*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). The second volume *Uteshitel'* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1936) is available in English translation as *The Comforter*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). The third volume *Nevesta Agntsa* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1945) is also available in English translation: *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

³ Cf. Lesley Chamberlain, "The Archbishop of Canterbury on Dostoevsky, 'Personalism,' and how the Story of Christ Reminds Him of Russian Ideals," *Prospect* (May 26, 2007): <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/ro-wan-williams-dostoevsky-russian-literature-personalism-interview/>. Andrew Louth also argues that Bulgakov's "theology provides a 'personalist' approach in contrast to the traditional 'cosmological' approach and the modern 'anthropological' approach (to use Balthasar's terms), but based on a notion of person as shaped by community, rather than person as individual": "Sergii Bulgakov and the Task of Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009): 243–257.

the west, Thomas Aquinas, produced a handbook for forming ministers, the *Summa Theologiae*, that synthesizes the teachings of the Fathers with Aristotle's philosophy of being through an account that grounds the theology of the Christian life (*Secunda Pars*) on an essentialist understanding of God (*Prima Pars*),⁴ so Bulgakov in his years as teacher of theology brings together the richness of the patristic tradition with German Idealism and the twentieth century philosophical turn to the "person," through grounding a theology of the Christian life on a personalist theology proper.⁵

As an eclectic philosophical movement that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, "personalism" is first and foremost a reaction to the perceived depersonalizing tendencies emerging from the Enlightenment and, in Roman Catholic circles, from the neo-Scholasticism that characterized much of nineteenth and early twentieth-century theology. While there are as many "personalist" currents as there are "personalist" thinkers – in 1947, Jacques Maritain remarked that there are at least "a dozen personalist doctrines, which at times have nothing more in common than the word 'person'" – they share in common an understanding of "the person as the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological and axiological principle of all reality."⁶ Buford even notes that the intuition of personalism appears to be universal. While personalist

⁴ In Aquinas, the fundamental principle of the Christian life is that just as God creates in freedom, so is the human, created *imago Dei*, master of his/her actions. While personalism and natural law ethics are not contradictory – in fact, recent Roman Catholic ethical reflection has attempted to include a personalist vein to its traditional natural law approach – the personalist claim of the centrality of relationship requires extensive, not mere superficial, theological explication unless it is to become a mere cliché. Sergius Bulgakov offers that sophisticated personalist systematic theology to sustain a personalist Christian ethic.

⁵ For a general summary of Bulgakov's theology see Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Gloucester, UK: Gracewing, 2005), and Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov – Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 225–371.

⁶ Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/personalism/>.