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Sergii Bulgakov, Socialism, and the Church

by Rowan Williams

Abstract

After 1907, Sergei Bulgakov would not have called himself a socialist. Yet he continued trying to understand "socialism" as a phenomenon that needed analysis in terms of its spiritual presuppositions. In "The Soul of Socialism" (1932), Bulgakov argues that socialist politics presumes an anthropology, a doctrine of the human—that is, a soul. He believed that socialism's soul was an inverted image of the soul of the Church; this conception allowed him to define the Church in a way that was neither subservient nor hostile to the modern epoch. Socialism, according to Bulgakov, is too reductive to reconcile individuals to actual, spatiotemporal existence. He saw the soul of socialism—immaterial, ahistorical, depersonalized—as a pseudo-soul, one that functioned, moreover, as a pseudo-Church. He assumed that socialism's failings could be found elsewhere, especially in capitalism, because they were downwind of the modern desire to construct a perfectly managed environment or even to effect the "end of history." Rather than jettison the insular, pseudo-Churches of modernity, however, the real Church could work alongside them, cultivating itself as an alternative community of discernment and learning. Such patience was imperative in order for the Church to fully signify and embody a network of relations—relations with God, the world, and other subjects—in which the human person is maximally free for gift, love and mutuality, and thus unwilling to accept any narrower vision of common life.



Keywords: Sergei Bulgakov, socialism, capitalism, anthropology, ecclesiology, modernity, matter, history, sophianic harmony, discernment



Sergii Bulgakov, Socialism, and the Church

Rowan Williams

Sergii Bulgakov's writings in the first dozen years of the twentieth century sketch his journey from the Marxism of his student and postgraduate years towards Christian commitment and a growing and passionate interest in Christian philosophy and theology.¹ One dimension of this, evident in these early essays, is his concern to bring his aspirations for a more open and participatory society into dialogue with the Christian tradition. His "Christian Socialist" period was confined, strictly speaking, to his abortive involvement in national politics in the middle of the decade. His deeply disillusioning experience as a deputy in the Second Duma gave him a lasting aversion to the kind of revolutionary maximalism that ignored practical and achievable reform in the name of theoretical purity and absolutist demands.² But he continued to be deeply engaged in the attempt to understand "socialism" as a phenomenon that needed analysis in terms of its spiritual and imaginative presuppositions; and he never lost his concern to find ways of articulating a viable theological foundation for some kind of Christian political witness. Throughout his life in exile, he maintained his criticisms of simple political reaction, of nostalgia for an autocratic patriarchy; his brief flirtation with a mystical monarchism in the years of the First World War and the revolutionary era does not leave much of a mark in his later writing. But it would not be accurate to think of him as continuing to

1. Especially the articles contained in his two collections, *Ot marksizma k idealizmu* [*From Marxism to Idealism*] (St Petersburg, 1903), and *Dva grada* [*Two Cities*] (Moscow, 1911). (The present essay was originally published by Volos Academy Publications, an imprint of Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Melissiatika, Volos, Greece, 2023. Republished here with the kind permission of Volos Academy.)

2. He writes in his *Avtobiograficheskie zametki* [*Autobiographical Fragments*] (Paris: YMCA Press, 1946), 80–82, about the disillusioning effect of his participation in the Duma; the experience is reflected in the magisterial essay on "*Geroizm i podvizhnichestvo*" ["*Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle*"] contributed to the symposium *Vekhi: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* [*Landmarks: A Collection of Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia*] (Moscow, 1909). There is an English translation of Bulgakov's *Vekhi* essay, with introductory commentary, in Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999), 69–112. The autobiographical notes are translated into German in Sergij Bulgakov, *Aus meinen Leben: Autobiographische Zeugnisse*, ed. Barbara Hallensleben and Regula M. Zwahlen (Münster: Aschendorf Verlag, 2017), along with other significant fragments, including "*Fünf Jahre (1917–1922)—Agonie*," 73–93, which also has some bitter comments on the Russian politics of the first decade of the century.

profess anything that he himself would have been happy to call "Christian Socialism." It is clear that "socialism" for him had come to designate not so much a political program as an "ideal type" of human self-understanding, always on the verge of becoming antithetical to the Church to the degree that it refused to ground itself in the reality of the Church—a point Bulgakov was already making in his "Christian Socialist" days.³ This essay will look in detail at his most extended later discussion of socialism, the essay on "The Soul of Socialism" (*Dusha sotsializma*) published in the émigré periodical *Novyi grad* in two parts (1932–3), and will attempt to clarify how he sees the "socialist" consciousness relating to ecclesial reality.⁴

The Soul of Socialism

Bulgakov's theological thinking had already embraced the conviction that this ecclesial reality was above all something very much more than an historical and human institution. The theme is highlighted in what can be considered his first real theological "manifesto," *Svet nevechernii* in 1917, and is stated with clarity in his writings in exile.⁵ "The Church is both created and uncreated," he wrote—rather startlingly but very characteristically—in his Hale Lecture of 1934 on "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology":⁶ ultimately it is no less than the entire creation restored to its essential nature as the self-revealing of God, creation unified in and transfigured by uncreated "Sophia," the divine Wisdom which is, for Bulgakov, the inner form of the divine life that is shared by the divine persons, the object of the selfless self-love which the divine persons eternally enact. The Church is creation fully transparent to the creator—in all its relations and activities, human and non-human. It is the moral and spiritual "shape" of all properly *human* agency; and properly human agency is whatever brings the world closer to its "sophianic" identity. "History is the self-definition and self-revelation of the human," Bulgakov writes in the essay on "The Soul of Socialism."⁷ This "self-definition" is emphatically a historical task for Christians, a task requiring decision, intelligence and energy, not a retreat towards an imagined and idealized past; but it must be distinguished from any ideas about irreversible natural progress in history. The unfolding of history brings us closer to the apocalypse, and so to the revealing of Antichrist as well as the coming-again of Christ. What develops in history is not the steady advance of Christian triumph or the control of

3. See, for example, *Dva grada*, 307.

4. English translation in Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 237–267. Bulgakov had published a sort of summary "position paper" on "Christianity and Socialism" in 1917, which opened up some of the themes of his later discussions. See *Khristianstvo i sotsializm* (Moscow: Educational Commission of the Provisional State Assembly, 1917), reprinted in S. N. Bulgakov, *Khristianskii sotsializm [Christian Socialism]*, edited and introduced by V. N. Akulinina (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1991), 205–233.

5. *Svet nevechernii. Sozertsaniia i umozreniia*. For the English edition, see Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. and ed. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), especially 354–358, 416–424.

6. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 273–286.

7. *Ibid.*, 244.

circumstances by the community of believers, but a steady growth in discernment between good and evil; the trajectory of history is not towards a guaranteed victory *within history* for the Kingdom of God, but towards a more and more intensified and purified prayer for the coming of Christ. That intensification and purification will not happen without our conscious commitment here and now to God's future, to the transparent and reconciled cosmos in which Wisdom prevails; and this is, Bulgakov argues in the Hale Lecture, the priority in the Church's approach to public and social matters. As long as history continues, the Church is "growing and ripening" in its discernment and so in its openness to its own character as sophianic; but this will not guarantee a unified and stable world.⁸ Part of Bulgakov's concern, as we shall see, is that the pressure to *secure* such a world is one of the risks that the "socialist" mindset invites.

But to return to the long essay of 1932–1933, Bulgakov begins by distinguishing between the socialism of public policy—the protection of the rights of labor, the public control of the unbridled freedom of capital—and socialism as a spiritual phenomenon. About the former he is startlingly direct, almost casual: of course the Church must support such protections and restrictions; there is nothing new about this.⁹ The new, distinctive and difficult problem is the latter, the challenge posed by socialism's "soul" rather than its "body" (this "body" being the ensemble of legal policies needed to guarantee common prosperity and security in a society). Socialism has an anthropology, a doctrine of the human, shaped by what Bulgakov calls "sociologism" and "economism." Sociologism is defined as a discourse that takes for granted the reality and even priority of collective identities (ethnic, class-based or whatever), economism as a discourse preoccupied with how humans manage and overcome their radical dependence on the natural world. Once again, these are not in themselves hostile to Jewish-Christian categories: the Bible regularly presents history in terms of personified collectivities; and the vocation of human beings to make both sense and manageable resource out of the material world is built in to the Christian view of the human role in creation. But the problem with sociologism is that it obscures the creativity of the unique person; and the risk in economism is that in a fallen human environment we lose sight of what the full sense is that has to be made of the world; by casting our economic life in the social-Darwinist terms of a struggle for existence, we identify our necessary, transformative and creative labor simply with a battle against death. Thus, ironically, economic life becomes an enslavement *to* death, because it is driven by a central fear of losing our place within a cosmos that has become intrinsically dangerous to us as humans, rather than a cosmos whose sophianic interdependence assures our life. Bulgakov counterposes Marx's narrative of a long "prehistory" that is about to come to an end in the timeless rationality and justice of the post-revolutionary world with the speculations of Nikolai Fyodorov, the wildly idiosyncratic nineteenth century Russian thinker who defined the "common task" of humanity as the resurrection of the dead—the transformation of the natural world in such a way that all the

8. *Ibid.*, 281–283, 285–286.

9. *Ibid.*, 238.

ancestors are returned to a world and a life shared with us. We may, as Bulgakov indicates, take the details of Fyodorov's ideas with a pinch of salt; but he represents a powerful symbol of what Marx denies and Christianity affirms—that history has already begun, that all its existing subjects have worth and dignity, and that our labor in the world must be directed to the maximal degree of hospitality towards this human community in its full reality, extended in time as well as space.¹⁰

Matter and Materialism

Bulgakov moves on to reflect on the ambivalence of the revolutionary psyche. On the one hand, the nihilism of revolutionary violence, the obsessive destruction of what has been inherited (including religious culture and institutions), is a sickness; but it is a sickness produced by passions and longings deeply ingrained in the human subject—the utopian strain which does indeed react to what is simply historically "given" with a sentiment of global challenge or protest.¹¹ It is the spirit that refuses to accept that "whatever is, is right," and this is in itself a creative thing. But the difficulty arises when this sentiment is fleshed out in terms of the literal destruction of real persons for the sake of an imagined future. Bulgakov observes how in some sorts of Marxist rhetoric the dream of a scientifically managed future becomes (again ironically) yet another variety of hyper-spiritualized utopianism—a choice for the unreal over the real, though in the name of a materialist reductionism.¹² The real is not good enough, and has to be replaced by what the mind approves. It echoes the comment made a few pages earlier,¹³ where he notes that the Promethean scientism that seeks to convert the entire material environment into a humanly controlled system in fact *reduces* the scope of matter itself, because it shrinks the material world to the dimension of what can be successfully managed by human minds. There is, in other words, a "materialism" whose effect is to alienate us from matter, partly by alienating us from time and narrative (Iain McGilchrist's recent monumental work on *The Matter With Things* is a formidable riposte to such a schema).¹⁴ But Bulgakov's point here is to underline the risks of any utopian program that drifts away from real identifiable jobs to be done and actual tasks to be completed, tasks that require the specific historical resources and free decisions of personal agents in the present.¹⁵ And this utopian seduction will always be a snare so long as human agents are not aware that they are always already involved in an exchange of energy and information through both historical

10. Ibid., 244–246 (on Fyodorov, cf. *ibid.*, 283–284, from the Hale Lecture).

11. Ibid., 248–249.

12. Ibid., 249.

13. Ibid., 241.

14. Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, 2 vols. (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021).

15. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 248.

and "natural" processes, an exchange whose direction is towards the maximal harmony and transparency already mentioned. They are always caught up in "sophianic" processes.

Secularism—or more accurately in Bulgakov's eyes, neo-paganism—is the *Weltanschauung* in which the goal is a totally managed environment (human and material), and in which this goal acts as an absolute formative force in present decision-making. The exhaustive rationalization of the physical world, the exhaustive account of human motivation and imagination in narrowly physicalist terms, the creation of a wholly predictable and controllable environment—all these become the encompassing constraints within which we plan and project the future. And this future is understood in bewilderingly contradictory terms—*both* as the inevitable outcome of a mechanical temporal process *and* as the vision for whose realization we must struggle and sacrifice (a paradox in the revolutionary mindset which Bulgakov had already discussed in some of his much earlier work, like the famous *Vekhi* essay of 1909).¹⁶ This unhelpful tension between determinism and "heroic" individualistic voluntarism is one of the deep dangers he identifies in the "soul" of socialism; but—strikingly—he identifies it in the logic of advanced capitalism as much as in the communist worldview.¹⁷ There is exactly the same aspiration to contain the material environment, and to chart and police the exercise of human activity in terms of its performance of determined functions; both systems lack a vocabulary for the personal, both regard actual physical reality as a potential enemy to be subdued and totally instrumentalized.

Human Labor Against Utopia

This is why Bulgakov's critique of "socialism" is not a defense either of market capitalism or of pre-modern social forms. There is a proper fidelity to and respect for what has been inherited; but allegiance to tradition is not "loyalty to immobility."¹⁸ It is the plain exercise of human memory in its proper function of attending to the past, and allowing it the dignity of having made the present possible. Things do change; social possibilities alter radically, and it is no part of the Christian calling to turn back the clock. Bulgakov distinguishes—though in characteristically complex ways—between the idea of meaningful intentional activity by human agents, with cumulative effects, and the fantasy of an "end of history" that can be attained by such activity.¹⁹ Theology allows us to make sense of this distinction; it helps us to pursue and justify purposeful historical action, while retaining a skepticism about any notion that we could guarantee an ideal future. Indeed, one way of reading Bulgakov's scheme is to see him as showing how theology refuses two opposite fantasies of *immobility*—the idealized past of the conservative, and the unimprovable future of the utopian revolutionary.

16. *Ibid.*, e.g. 85–88.

17. *Ibid.*, 262.

18. *Ibid.*, 255.

19. *Ibid.*, 257.

In contrast, we are necessarily involved in meaningful labor within history—learning how to discern what does and does not serve the sophianic Kingdom. This entails attention to the needs of the present moment and a commitment to prosaic and long-term change (a theme he discusses in detail in his *Vekhi* essay); and it also involves a willingness to learn how our previous understandings may need some rethinking while retaining a total commitment to serving the same unchanging direction of divine will in a different social climate.

Church, the Self, and Society

That climate today is above all one of *depersonalization*, Bulgakov argues, whether this is coming from "right" or "left"; and this is where the developments we associate with modernity have a genuinely mixed character.²⁰ The apparently self-evident, inherited understanding of social roles characteristic of pre-modern society has gone forever; and this means that aspects of the biblical ethic that depend for their working on the benign operation of a patriarchal system (masters being kind to slaves, for instance) cannot now be treated as definitive (once again a theme foreshadowed in *Svet*).²¹ We can recognize this without simply ignoring or condemning those inherited understandings. There is no point in castigating pre-modern discourse for being pre-modern, Bulgakov seems to imply. But this dissolution of older, "organic" social patterns, while it may have shattered some kinds of solidarity, has also made possible new perspectives on personal dignity or liberty. One aspect of modernity is the growth of a new depth of understanding of what it is in humanity that resists the totalizing pressures of functionalism and rationalism. It is yet another paradox in our current historical situation that the emergence of the "modern" self has brought both Promethean ambitions for human control over human destiny, *and* has also generated an enhanced sense of the mysterious inwardness and inaccessibility of the human subject. So the challenge for the Church is to affirm the purposiveness and creativity of the modern self—but, in so doing, also to orient that purposiveness towards the sophianic goal of creation as a whole.²² The Church, in other words, should not be wasting its energies resisting modernity as such, but must address the central *deficit* in modernity (its reductionist fantasies of control) *from within the cultural framework modernity itself has shaped*.

The Church and the Transformation of Society

However, this is not to conclude that the Church must simply adapt its perspectives and imperatives to this cultural framework. It is crucial, in Bulgakov's understanding, that the Church continue to see itself as more than a social agent among others, and that it refuses

20. Ibid., 261–263.

21. Ibid., 261 (cf. *Unfading Light*, pp. 419–420).

22. Ibid., 259–260; and cf. pp. 278–283 (from the Hale Lecture).

to be co-opted by any social or national polity as merely a contributor to "other and higher values."²³ It is a position that has something significant in common with the views outlined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his last writings. In the fragmentary chapters of his *Ethics*, still being written at the time of his arrest and imprisonment, Bonhoeffer insists that the Church should never seek to defend a position *within* any social territory or state apparatus. The Church both signifies and embodies a defining network of relations, relations with God, the world and other subjects, in which the human person is maximally free for gift, love and mutuality, and so cannot let its life be defined by any narrower vision of common life.²⁴ Bulgakov, as we have seen, goes rather further in his concern to locate our ecclesial activity within the ongoing sophianic flow of divine action. For him, the Church's job in relation to the social enterprises and ideals that surround it in a modern and pluralist world is essentially one of discerning and evaluating how far this or that social project, this or that legal reform enables (or disables) human growth towards sophianic maturity, and thus towards the eschatological communion which is sacramentally present in the Church's life. But in this interpretative and discerning role, it cannot look to be a coercive decision maker for society at large.²⁵ It has to work at the transforming of motivation and vision; it has a creative role within any social order (mere ascetical withdrawal into uncompromised purity is not a sophianic option), in that it seeks to set out a vision for the human that will steadily press towards structural changes. Thus—to go back to some of the questions raised by New Testament ethics—St Paul's injunctions to slave-owners about how they are to view their slaves will gradually dissolve the structure of slavery. And we begin to change the class-based structures of modern society not by class warfare in the usual sense but by intensifying an awareness of the mutual dependence and mutual duties of different social classes so that we stop thinking of class in terms of superiority and inferiority, control and submission—once again, a theme that Bulgakov was already adumbrating in his work before the First World War.²⁶

Bulgakov does not tackle the problem which more recent social theologies, especially the Latin American "theologies of liberation," have foregrounded: can we be certain that lasting structural change will come about if we persuade ourselves that the existing system (slavery, capitalism, legal discrimination against women ...) is being benignly administered? Is this not potentially an alibi that allows us to postpone the hard work of structural reform? But although this is not explicitly addressed, it is important to note that Bulgakov regularly deplores a purely "internalizing" response to social injustices; as we have noted, he assumes that there is work to be done both internally and externally, and his stress on transformational labor as the distinctive vocation of human beings goes some way to offset the risks of falling back into a

23. *Ibid.*, 263.

24. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, English translation edited by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), e.g. 62–64, 95–98, 339–350 (interestingly, Bonhoeffer refers on 341 to Soloviev).

25. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 264–265.

26. *Ibid.*, 265, and cf. the earlier essay on "The Economic Ideal," *ibid.*, pp. 27–53.

static conception of social order. He is not indifferent to the need for transformed structures; but he *is* skeptical of impatient programs for such transformation. "We must move away," he writes, "from a passive-quietist, conservative-as-similationist relationship to the work of society."²⁷ And this is necessary in part so as not to leave a dangerous vacuum. He has already noted the risk that secular/pagan society has the potential to become a "pseudo-Church."²⁸ What exactly does he mean by this? He is pointing to the way in which society can come to define itself as a *comprehensive moral community*, a community in which the relationships that exist with and within *this* group (ethnic, linguistic, class-based or whatever) or polity (free-market, communist or whatever) become the defining marks and boundaries of human obligation and aspiration as such. In such a setting, the one unsurpassable moral priority is to fulfil the expectations of this particular human collectivity. And if the Church has no perspective from which to ask questions about these priorities or expectations, it will not only betray its calling but tacitly collude with the claims of the collectivity to final authority. It will surrender to "other and higher values."

The point being made is directed not only against the naked political totalitarianisms of Bulgakov's era but also, as he clearly states, against the "soft totalitarianism" of managerial technocracy combined with a successful consumerizing of human leisure and culture.²⁹ The Church is called on to resist marketized and functionally reductive models of human work and human connectedness. And it will do so above all—here we may recall the emphasis of Bulgakov's Hale lecture—by maintaining its theological self-understanding, its self-definition in relation to the sophianic and eschatological reality which it both partially embodies and entirely points to. This again has significant points of convergence with Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, though the latter has a far less ambitious cosmological dimension and a less explicitly sacramental idiom. And it sets Bulgakov at odds with two kinds of Christian response to a secular or pagan modernity that have become more evident in recent decades.

The Church and Modern Challenges

In the first place, Bulgakov's skepticism about any return to pre-modern categories or disciplines is plain. The laborious, agonized, diffuse reflections of the dialogues from his initial period of exile in the Crimea show how he turned away from the Slavophil idealization of the mediaeval—or more recent—Russian past. One of the participants in the long-unpublished "Chersonese" dialogues from these years in the Crimea is a Russian parish priest who is scathing in his depiction of a morally apathetic and half-Christianised Russian peasantry—

27. *Ibid.*, 266.

28. *Ibid.*, 263.

29. *Ibid.*, 266.

much to the scandal of the Slavophil "lay theologian" who is arguing with him.³⁰ It is hard to see Bulgakov having the least sympathy with what has lately become familiar as the ideology of a *Russkii mir*, or with the mythology of a straightforwardly messianic role for the Russian people, suffering but triumphant in conflict with Godless enemies.

Secondly, we might note that, while his insistence on the need for the Church to combat a pseudo-ecclesiology of the omnicompetent state might at first sight be called on to support Christian resistance to the contemporary state's moral agenda (typically to the liberalization of legal attitudes to sexual minorities, to abortion or to assisted dying, but also, in some contexts, as the last couple of years have shown especially in the USA, to state directives about health or education), Bulgakov is not in fact all that comfortable an ally for this variety of culture wars skirmishing. He is not, of course, concerned with the culture war questions of recent decades, the problems of gender and sexuality or the beginning and end of life. He is certainly not likely to have been a "revisionist" in respect of most if not all of these contested questions. But the core of his critique would, I suspect, not be the specific moral questions involved so much as the claims (explicit and implicit) made for the absolute authority and public unchallengeability of any new liberties granted by the state. His conviction that the Church should not be trying to restore past models of social control suggests that he does not regard public battles about legislation as the most significant site for Christian activism; and his clear opposition to anything resembling coercive religious uniformity implies that he has no difficulty in envisaging a society in which the Church does not have to win such legislative battles in order to sustain its integrity and be faithful to its foundation in Christ. He takes it for granted that the Church will be living in a largely desacralized or disenchanting environment; its task is not resacralizing but fidelity, persuasion, and what he calls "social creativity," a manifest willingness to work along with others for social transformation.

Church vs. "Pseudo-Church"

But the image of the "pseudo-Church" is one that deserves some further discussion in his context. We have begun to see how Bulgakov's engagement with the idea of the "soul of socialism" is substantially a warning about the risks of accepting uncritically a scheme of underlying assumptions about human nature standing behind some kinds of social program and of regarding any social program as in itself bearing some kind of sacred and final significance. In an important sense, it is crucial for Bulgakov that socialism as a political practice *does not have a "soul" of its own*—does not have, that is to say, a metaphysical and spiritual rationale distinct from and in competition with the cosmic hope which the Church represents. If it has a "soul" other than what the Church offers, it will inevitably become a pseudo-Church. It is clear enough that the secularized apocalyptic of Marxist-Leninism

30. Bulgakov wrote *U sten Khersonisa* in 1919–1920. For recent editions, see Bulgakov, *Trudy po sotsiologii i teologii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), vol. 2: 126–133; and Serge Boulgakov, *Sous les remparts de Chersonese*, translated and edited by Bernard Marchadier (Geneva: *Ad solem*, 1999).

is a major target, as it was consistently for Bulgakov from 1905 onwards.³¹ But, just as consistently, he has sketched a critique of what results when social goals and projects of any sort acquire a definitive and unarguable character. And he believes that they can do this just as much through the exhaustive reduction of human behavior to function, or to the mechanisms of desire and gratification, as through overt totalitarianism. Technocracy generates its own absolutism. Once functions have been defined and allocated in this shrunken world, no appeal is possible. And also, in a disenchanted world, once perceived problems of injustice have been resolved to the satisfaction of an established majority, there can be no quarrel with the legal settlement prescribed; the gap between a legal liberty conceded by social authority and a universal moral judgement about that concession begins to disappear. Thus, a society may legislate, say, to permit physician-assisted suicide; it may create a new legal liberty. It may then, tacitly or not so tacitly, organize itself so that the duty to facilitate this, or even the duty not to challenge its morality, is effectively enshrined in social practice and culture and is treated as a clear moral imperative in itself, since any such challenge may then fall under the rubric of potentially offensive speech which disadvantages or marginalizes others.

I think that something like this is what Bulgakov has in mind in his rather throwaway remark about the dangers of a "pseudo-Church"—a social order from whose purely legislative and administrative determinations there is no appeal. The possibility of intelligent dissent is treated by state and/or public opinion simply as something that seeks to de-legitimize certain legal developments; it becomes harder for the critic to say (or to be heard to say), "I accept that x is legal *and* reserve the right to ask whether it is moral." The state's attempt to finalize issues, to close down moral debate, is in fact an aspect of that "end of history" mentality which Bulgakov regards as one of the characteristic temptations of the contemporary mind. And for contemporary moral and political theologians, one of the most difficult areas to negotiate is how to articulate the need for this critical space without simply buying in to a contrarian and reactionary agenda of the kind Bulgakov cautions us against. To put it provocatively (and I do not suggest that Bulgakov would have expressed his view in such terms or in relation to such topics), a provision like the legal recognition of persons who have undergone gender-modifying surgery may or may not be agreeable to a Christian anthropology; there is a serious discussion to be had in the context of Christian theology, as the issue is not crystal-clear for all Christians. But it is a mistake to suppose that, because of that uncertainty as to how Christian discourse might handle the question, a committed campaign to combat or reverse such legal recognition is the best use of Christian energy. The real and more intellectually tough issues are about the assumptions being made in the wider culture (social and legal) about the ideal uniformity of its moral judgements and the illegitimacy of debate, assumptions that would imply that when the legal issue is resolved there is nothing more for anyone to discuss. The theologian will argue that conferring certain rights to civil liberty does not foreclose such

31. The celebrated essay of 1906 on "*Karl Marks kak religioznyi tip*" ["Karl Marx as a Religious Type"] in *Dva grada*, vol. 1, 69–105, is one classic locus for Bulgakov's exploration of revolutionary Marxism as secularized apocalyptic.

debate for good and all—so that the actual issue of conceding those rights is not the all-important matter. Indeed, it may be right in some circumstances for a Christian to argue for the legal protection of persons whose actions may be questionable but whose security from persecution and violence needs to be safeguarded. There may be a risk of apparently colluding with practices that might be theologically challenged, but there is equally a risk in being too ready to deny some civic dignities or liberties to some categories of person on the grounds of theological anthropology.

A pseudo-Church is a Body of Christ without Christ. The biblical language of the Body establishes the ideal of a community in which there is mutual recognition and gratitude, and a strong awareness of the shared character of the social good. But in the Church, what most deeply defines us—and therefore what we are most deeply accountable to—is our relation to Christ, and *through* Christ to all other finite beings, not simply a pattern of human mutuality. We are creatively connected with all other beings, responsible for their growth and well-being and integrity, *because* we are all equally related to the eternal Word that is incarnate in Jesus. This universal relation guarantees universal equality and mutuality; but it also, crucially, grounds the dignity of every finite subject or substance in a relation that is prior to any relation completely internal to the finite universe. The determinative focus of relation is not one element of the created order but a reality quite outside it—for Bulgakov, the Sophia which holds together the processes of the finite world as a mirror and medium for divine love or beauty, the Wisdom that is always seeking maximal realization within that finite world. Without this external focus, what controls or determines the values and goals of the elements of the finite world will be the resolution of tensions by law, which is necessarily dependent on consensus; and the trouble with consensus is that it so readily masks the relations of power between majorities and minorities. In this connection, what unifies a community and what secures equality will in fact be one finite power among others, the power of secular government; and the legitimacy of purely secular government can come only, in the last analysis, from force. In contrast, the Church in Bulgakov's perspective is constantly in the business of shaping a "culture" in which free persons acknowledge one another because of their recognition in one another of the divine image and their awareness of the sophianic calling they share. A Church that simply deployed "counterforce" in such a context would be stepping away from its essential calling of engaged and critical witness, the continued labor of discernment and the creative formation of a sophianic culture.

The Social Call of the Church

For Bulgakov's social theology, the enemy is always the temptation to declare that history is over—whether that declaration is made by a theocratic Church or a determinedly and exclusively secular state in which public dissent is marginalized or silenced. And if history is *not* over, if all historical action contains within it the prayer of longing for the full coming of Christ and the full realization of sophianic harmony, the task of the Church here and

now is to work out which historical actions are in tune with that prayer, which actions open the world more fully to its *telos* in Wisdom. This discerning labor is not the same as a series of campaigning programs, negative or positive; it is a clarifying of possibilities, whose outworking will continue to be argued over. But in this connection, one aspect of the Church's calling may be to seek out and support some of those dissenting voices which are active outside the standoffs of political struggle. These represent the perspectives that come from humanistic learning, the arts and, for that matter, the sciences: perspectives which in diverse ways insist that our human capacity and creativity cannot be reduced to performing predetermined function, or to systems of wanting and getting. Intellectual and imaginative creativity, as well as the social creativity Bulgakov underlines, will resist the seductive finalities of secular "ecclesiologies," ideological or managerial. The conviction that humanity is answerable to more than what currently suits a majority (or a majority government) is one of the things that preserves the possibility of the kind of cultural discussion which actually changes perceptions and opens doors to reframing questions. Cultures defined by absolutism and uniformity are in fact eccentric simply *as* cultures because they foreclose the possibility of genuine learning which is at the heart of living culture. Perhaps if we wanted to characterize Bulgakov's vision for the calling of the Church in society, we could see it as a calling to be an agent precisely of *learning*, witnessing to the truth that what we know of humanity before God and in relation to the rest of creation is always capable of deepening and enhancement and so must always be hospitable as well as critical.

It may sound odd to say that a central element of the Church's job in society is to desacralize its habits of thought. But Bulgakov's argument in these texts from the early thirties seems to be that the "socialist" mindset he identifies in a range of twentieth century phenomena carries with it an implied anthropology which can all too readily be treated as possessing ultimate, "sacred" authority—a mindset in which a failure to recognize the dignity of the person, and a set of assumptions about the determined nature of economic needs and functions, and their dominant importance in culture, end up trapping us in a world in which certain particular social programs cannot rationally or morally be resisted. This is what constitutes the pseudo-religious dimension that Bulgakov sees as the "soul" of contemporary anthropology; and it is what theology and ecclesial practice must continue to resist. In one sense, what Bulgakov argues is that the only legitimate "soul" that socio-political activity can possess is the genuine ecclesial vision, the sophianic hope of the renewed cosmos. Any other kind of soul is dangerously inhuman in his eyes. The Church is called on to "ensoul" the projects of the society in which it finds itself, according to its sophianic discernment—and in so doing, gradually to displace the ersatz "soul" of modernity, its reversion to paganism (which is always the assimilation of the sacred to what is visible and powerful). The Church announces, in its sacramental (and for Bulgakov, its iconographic) life, in its active diaconal witness and in its theological self-accounting, that humanity is already connected with its entire cosmic environment in more diverse and complex ways than we could have imagined; that its capacity for contemplative joy is always in excess of any satisfactory performance of functions

prescribed by others; that its summons to mutual enrichment and nurture constantly puts our localisms and minor loyalties in question.

In Place of a Conclusion

The Church listens and discerns; and it also asks to be listened to—listened to, not obeyed; but also listened to, not merely tolerated as a private eccentricity. It assumes freedom to engage in the social conversation. Bulgakov does not offer any schematic suggestions for what that might look like; his chief concern is that the Church should not lose sight of its own cosmic and eschatological role, or dissolve this into something instrumental to national, partisan or pragmatic agendas. And I suspect he assumes that if the Church does this with adequate robustness, it will command something more than grudging tolerance in society. For one thing, it will—ideally—show what authentic relation to the sacred looks like, as opposed to the awkward, potentially repressive, potentially contradictory discourses of the sacred that are generated by secular cultures anxious about the ground on which they stand. It will clarify what it might mean to speak of "soul" in politics without sentimentality or ideological ambition. We must not, says Bulgakov, give way to "eschatological panic": "The task is to educate the man who has been partially liberated from economic captivity, and who now faces the danger of spiritual repression in the wake of his liberation from the curse—which is also, though, just as much a blessing—of slavery to labor."³² Modernity has broken out of a cycle of subsistence-based labor, and we cannot imagine simply reverting to a world in which this is the norm. Developments which may at first seem ambiguous and threatening are also pregnant with possibilities for new dimensions of creativity and new sensitivity about human mystery or dignity. Bulgakov offers us a nuanced and resourceful perspective on how the Church's future is bound up with its willingness to exemplify an anthropology capable of doing something like justice not only to human dignity but to the plain inexhaustibility, the excess, of the person-in-relation as that is uncovered precisely in the shadowed and dangerous post-Enlightenment world; it is a perspective that has not exactly dated in the nearly one hundred years since the publication of the texts we have been examining.



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32. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 266.