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SERGEY N. BULGAKOV'S CONCEPT OF HUMAN DIGNITY

Regula ZWAHLEN

Sergey N. Bulgakov's sophiology is often regarded as a concept submerging human beings in a divine cosmos, where personal dignity makes no difference. I will argue that quite the opposite is true. Bulgakov's vision meets all three conditions of a modern concept of Human Rights. Firstly, a person must be accepted in his or her autonomy and liberty. Secondly, a person must be accepted as a different, yet equivalent person. Thirdly, all human beings must be regarded as belonging to the same nature of humanity. These issues bridge the gap between Bulgakov's philosophy of economy and his theological sophiology.

Introduction

During a Christmas sermon at the time of World War II, Sergey N. Bulgakov (1871-1944) spoke the following words: 'Not because of human dignity The Lord came into this world, but to save the lost sheep, to whom He has bestowed the dignity of His image.'¹ It had become clear by then that human dignity was not a self-evident, "natural" or "rational," universal value, but a value that had to be protected by international legal standards.² While at that time the *moral* aspect of protecting individuals and nations from ideologically motivated violence and from extinction was very strongly expressed, today the discussion often focuses on the question of how far the rights of individuals may diverge from "traditional social norms." This question can be reduced to the philosophical question of why Human Rights should be justified. The current search in the Russian Orthodox Church for answers to these questions has provoked a new debate on liberal, universal, and cultural values. In this debate, liberty and morality are far too often treated as

¹ Сергей Булгаков, 'С нами Бог,' in idem, *Слова, поучения, беседы* (Париж: YMCA-Press, 1987) [Sergey Bulgakov, 'God with Us', in idem, *Sermons, Exhortations, Lectures* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1987)], p. 120.

² Hannah Arendt, "'The Rights of Man": What Are They?,' *Modern Review* 3/1 (1949), pp. 24-37.

irreconcilable enemies. I would like to introduce the Russian thinker and theologian Sergey Bulgakov into this discussion, because, as I shall argue, the core motivation of his thinking was a *justification of human dignity and liberty based on Christian teachings and morals*.

Bulgakov's teaching — especially his sophiology — is often regarded as a concept that submerges human beings in a divine natural cosmos, where personal dignity, let alone individual rights, make no difference.³ In this article, I argue that quite the opposite is true: Bulgakov's sophiology is the result of a lifelong struggle for human dignity, this being the reason for his break with Marxism,⁴ and, later, for his critique of "traditional" Russian Orthodox views. Certainly, Bulgakov was not concerned with the questions of Human Rights and *how* they should be implemented. He saw Human Rights as a logical continuation of the acknowledgement of human dignity. In a lecture delivered in 1927-28, Bulgakov argued: 'Today the principle of freedom of the person has triumphed (in a Christian understanding it corresponds to the dignity of the sons of God; in a liberal understanding to human and civil rights).'⁵ Therefore, he concentrated on the normative question of *why* human *dignity* should be assumed. Lesley Chamberlain states that the Russian philosophers 'strengthened the value of liberty rooted in Christian responsibility. [They] cultivated what would become after the 1939-45 war the politics of human rights, but they did so in a religious rather than a legal framework.'⁶ Today, the present-day philosophy of Human Rights poses this same question. In fact, Bulgakov's view meets all three conditions of the modern concept of Human Rights, as defined recently by the authors of an *Introduction to the Philosophy of*

³ For instance, according to Igor Evlampiev, Bulgakov 'finally went very far away from the idea of humanism and the vision of the absolute significance of the human person — he returned to a 'medieval world-outlook' with its vision of God's indivisible dominion of men and man's creative impotence.' Cf. Игорь И. Евлампиев, 'Религиозный идеализм С.Н. Булгакова,' in idem, *С.Н. Булгаков: pro et contra* [Igor' I. Evlampiev, 'The Religious Idealism of S.N. Bulgakov', in idem, (ed.), *S.N. Bulgakov. Pro et contra*] (St. Petersburg, 2003), p. 25.

⁴ Bulgakov (1902): 'For [Marx] the problem of the person as an individual — the indestructible core of human personality, its integral nature — does not exist.' Cf. Sergey Bulgakov, *Karl Marx as a Religious Type: His Relation to the Religion of Anthropotheism of L. Feuerbach* (Belmont Mass.: Nordland Publ., 1979), transl. by Luba Barna, p. 51.

⁵ Сергей Н. Булгаков, 'Христианская социология,' in В.В. Сапов, (ред.), *С.Н. Булгаков. Труды по социологии и теологии*, том 2 (Москва: Наука, 1997) [Sergey N. Bulgakov, 'Christian Sociology,' in V.V. Sapov, (ed.), *S.N. Bulgakov. Works on Sociology and Theology*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1997)], p. 547.

⁶ Lesley Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), p. 241.

Human Rights.⁷ But first, a few words need to be said about the reception of Bulgakov's writings in the Russian Orthodox Church today and about its discussion on Human Rights and dignity.

Bulgakov's reception in the Russian Orthodox Church today

It is not accidental that in 1937 Bulgakov was accused of heresy, by Metropolitan Sergii, not on the grounds of his cosmological views, but because of his *too anthropocentric worldview*.⁸ As today an 'anthropocentric system of values' is regarded as the foundation of a liberal, secular humanism without any limits,⁹ the verdict on Bulgakov's teachings has not been revised. In a lengthy critique of contemporary official church practice published in the autumn of 2008, some (anonymous) Russian Orthodox priests lament the state of modern Orthodox theology and its unwillingness to discuss the theological thought of the theological school of the Russian émigrés in Paris, especially the works of Bulgakov.¹⁰ It is no surprise that such controversial authors like Bulgakov are not taken into consideration in the elaboration of the new *Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching of on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights (Osnovy 2008)*.¹¹ It is helpful, though, that Patriarch Kirill, when introducing the latter document, pointed out that this document reflects a 'micro-model of Church discussion' and that it included many contradictions.¹² This is why Bulgakov's voice should be added to this

⁷ Christoph Menke, Arnd Pollmann, *Philosophie der Menschenrechte zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2007).

⁸ Metropolit Sergij von Moskau, 'Verordnung des Moskauer Patriarchats,' *Orient und Occident. Staat - Gesellschaft - Kirche. Blätter für Theologie und Soziologie, Neue Folge* (1936), no. 1, p. 2.

⁹ Kirill, Patriarch von Moskau und der Ganzen Rus', 'Die Glaubensnorm als Lebensnorm,' in idem, *Freiheit und Verantwortung im Einklang. Zeugnisse für den Aufbruch zu einer neuen Weltgemeinschaft*, (ed. by B.Hallensleben, G. Vergauwen, K. Wyrwoll, translated by Xenia Werner) (cf. Bibliography) (Freiburg: Institut für Ökumenische Studien der Universität Freiburg Schweiz, 2009), p. 32.

¹⁰ Cf. Группа Священнослужителей Н-ской Епархии, 'Церковь с большой и с маленькой буквы,' *Новая газета*, 09-06-2008 [Group of Priests at the N-skaya Eparchy, 'The Church with a Capital and with a Small Letter,' *Novaya gazeta*, 09-06-2008], 13/ 16 / 25. They name Pavel Florensky, Sergey Bulgakov and Aleksandr Men.

¹¹ *Основы учения Русской Православной Церкви о достоинстве, свободе и правах человека*, cf. <http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/>.

¹² Митрополит Смоленского и Калининградского Кирилл, *Доклад 'Об основах учения Русской Православной Церкви о достоинстве, свободе и правах человека' на Архиерейском Соборе Православной Церкви*, [Kirill, Metropolitan of Smolensk

discussion. In fact, the main issue of his early “Christian socialism” was a social concept based on a Christian view of human dignity; and his works — most of them published in Russia only in the last ten years — may even have secretly inspired some of the participants in the current discussion.

The main contradictions in the ongoing discussion are, in my opinion, to be found in the very “discourse” in which many participants often tend to repeat the old pattern of opposing ‘liberal, anthropocentric Western values’ to the ‘moral, traditional, theocentric Eastern values’, even if they are aware of this problem and want to overcome it.¹³ The same questions tormented most of the Russian religious thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century. They tried to fill the gap between anthropocentrism and theocentrism by creating the notion of “divine humanity” [богочеловечество], meaning that humankind should become divine by following the example of the first Godman, Jesus Christ. According to these thinkers (Dostoevsky, Solovyov, and many others), the very core of Christian teaching, quite obviously, consists in believing in Christ, which means that God had become man already and that, therefore, it would make no sense to focus on either God or man alone.

Religious thinkers like Bulgakov fought against both the anti-traditionalism of destructive revolutionaries and the traditionalism of dusty conservatives. In both cases, he fought in the name of human dignity, liberty, and creativity. These were, in his opinion, qualities of man, as God’s image and likeness, who develops tradition freely as a condition of social life. As a priest and teacher of dogmatic theology, Bulgakov was very concerned with the relationship between dogma (morals, obedience) and liberty.¹⁴ Bulgakov, who did not consider himself a liberal thinker at all, is today an icon of the “liberal wing” of Russian Orthodox

and Kaliningrad, Report on the Basis of the Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights], <http://www.mospat.ru/archive/41595.htm>..

¹³ Kirill (2009), p. 42.

¹⁴ In an article on *Freedom of Thought in the Orthodox Church* (1936), he wrote: ‘Is there not a contradiction between free seeking for truth and the revealed dogma dispensed by the Church? I am convinced that no such contradiction exists. The dogmatic teaching of the Church must become real in the personal thought and experience of everybody, for dogma does not only represent an abstract doctrinal statement: it is primarily a fact of our inner, mystical life — apart from that it is dead. But this personal experience is impossible without freedom of thought, and freedom of the spirit. [...] Our Orthodox Church — and this is especially true of the Russian Orthodox Church — has never been sufficiently educated for freedom.’ See the edition of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (ed.), *A Collection of Articles by Fr. Bulgakov for the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* (London, 1969), pp. 33, 36.

thinking, because *he emphasised liberty above tradition*, but he would never break the *connection* between them.¹⁵ This connection is not an abstract concept, but the *creative human being* him- or herself. Bulgakov emphasised liberty, because he encountered the deep, yet blocked fountain of Orthodox tradition, the waters of which he would have liked to spread all over the world. Therefore, he wanted to unblock the water containers, or else to build new ones.

In Bulgakov's opinion, thinking more about tradition and certain moral limits would do no harm to liberal Western Christians, just as developing freer, more joyful relations with regard to its traditions and filling them with life would be good for Russian Orthodoxy. In other words, in the situation of modernity Bulgakov preferred to focus on developing attractive Christian models of personality, society, sexuality, marriage, family, science, life and death instead of condemning isolation, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, euthanasia or even "blasphemous art," etc. He knew that a liberal policy is not about promoting the latter, but about coping reasonably with all possibilities of human social life, whether good or evil, in a way that grants to each person human dignity and freedom of choice. He sees a difference between (secular) law and (Christian) morals, two things that should not be confused. Morals are about *personal* salvation, while laws, if they incorporate the principles of Human Rights, are about *social* life. *Law* addresses the difficult task of protecting human dignity from the pure logic of perpetrators and victims: 'let he who is without sin cast the first stone [John 8:7]'.¹⁶ It could become very dangerous, if a person who did not choose the right way, would not be granted human dignity, as suggested in the first document of the Russian Orthodox Church on human dignity, published in 2006: 'It is by doing good that the human being gains dignity. Thus we distin-

¹⁵ In many of Patriarch Kirill's texts we find an emphasis on *tradition*, which he claims to be a notion *opposed* to liberty. His notion of tradition is linked with nation, the fatherland or the cultural context of Russian Orthodoxy. It follows that the Russian national tradition is opposed to so-called Western universalism. The question is not one of protecting and saving each person's life, but of protecting and saving the Russian Orthodox people. Kirill asks if 'our national civilisation will be conserved in the coming century, if it will find its place in the world community of nations and if the Orthodox people will survive.' Kirill (2009), p. 43. This question has appeared in different terms before, namely how these quite post-modern 'cultural' values are compatible with universal Christian values.

¹⁶ As Bulgakov defines it, 'Law is the protection of the life of a person from the assaults of other persons.' Bulgakov (1997), p. 537. *Osnovy* 2008 takes up this definition: 'Safeguarding the individual against the arbitrary actions of those in power and employers and against violence and humiliation in his family and collective.' Cf. *Osnovy* 2008, V.2.

guish between worth [ценность] and dignity [достоинство] of the person; worth is given, while dignity is acquired.¹⁷ The Orthodox vision of a person, as defined in these recent documents, emphasises each person's development from being God's *image* to being God's *likeness*. This is a very promising concept for a form of Christian anthropology to which Bulgakov referred as well. However, if this view is applied to state law, talk of a Christian justification of human dignity would become absurd if only saved Christians could obtain it. Obviously, this critique has been heard.¹⁸ However, if the latest document [*Osnovy* 2008] avoids the distinction between a person's *value* and a person's *dignity*, it still proclaims a distinction between *ontological dignity* and a *dignified life*: 'In Orthodoxy the dignity and ultimate worth of every human person are derived from the image of God, while dignified life is related to the notion of God's likeness achieved through God's grace by efforts to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and virtue.'¹⁹ In terms of semantics, this formulation is a step forward to an Orthodox justification of modern Human Rights policy because *dignity* has not to be "acquired", but is ontologically given.²⁰ For Bulgakov, it would be the Orthodox tradition in particular that would enrich the somewhat "dry" liberal concept of human dignity with its understanding of man as the image and likeness of a free and loving Creator of all things.

In the following, I will show how Bulgakov's teachings can justify a modern concept of Human Rights without betraying Christian belief and tradition.

The justification of Human Rights

Modern Human Rights discourse started from the assumption that *there exists no universal, culturally neutral justification of Human Rights*, yet it should be possible to find an intercultural agreement on the

¹⁷ World Russian People's Council, *Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity* (2006), <http://www.mospat.ru/index.php?page=30728>: 'Совершая добро, личность приобретает достоинство. Таким образом, мы различаем ценность и достоинство личности. Ценность — это то, что дано, достоинство — это то, что приобретается.'

¹⁸ See, for example Николай Плотников, 'Вперёд, в языческий Рим!', *Политический журнал* [Nikolay Plotnikov, 'Forward to Heathen Rome!,' *Politicheskyy zhurnal*], 15/110 (2006).

¹⁹ *Osnovy* 2008, I.2.

²⁰ See also the chapter by Heta Hurskainen in this volume.

idea of Human Rights based on a core *shared morality*.²¹ It is assumed that each culture can develop and interpret for itself a concept of Human Rights that corresponds to most of its own traditional values, provided that it is interested in peaceful coexistence and cooperation with other cultures. The advantage of this notion of *human dignity* lies in the fact that it is not a deduction based on a certain ideology or culture, but that it fulfils a certain *function*. In the wake of World War II, *human dignity*, though much older as a notion, provided a common idea of otherwise very different and differing positions, such as liberalism, socialism and Catholicism. Each position had to change or re-interpret its definition in order to apply this notion.²² For example, the experience of modern secular states that do not necessarily support Christian values helped advance liberal policies in the Catholic Church, which had resisted them for a long time. Now it became important to support human dignity, and especially the right of religious freedom and expression of faith free from state interference.²³ Furthermore, the authors of *Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Rights* claim that the “moral catastrophes” of the European wars and totalitarian regimes in the 20th century have taught the international community two main lessons. First, that the concept of human dignity had to be supported by international laws and, second, that the normative concept of human dignity had to be justified by each nation, culture, and religion individually.²⁴

This is the task to be faced today, even though the issue had already been addressed by Russian religious thinkers at the beginning of the 20th century. They were fighting against the Marxist claim that only an atheistic worldview could promote human dignity. They were also protesting against the claim that the church should be loyal to the state and justify the death penalty for terrorists.²⁵ Unfortunately, this Russian tradition of religious reflection about human dignity is not taken into consideration today. Quite a few patriotic Russian thinkers still claim

²¹ See contributions to this volume by Elena Pribytkova, Hans van der Ven, Evert van der Zweerde, including their shared reference to Jacques Maritain.

²² Menke & Pollmann (2007), pp. 73, 92, 131.

²³ The Catholic example is described by Josef Isensee, ‘Die katholische Kritik an den Menschenrechten. Der liberale Freiheitsentwurf in der Sicht der Päpste des 19. Jahrhunderts,’ in Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Robert Spaemann, (eds.), *Menschenrechte und Menschenwürde* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), pp. 138-174.

²⁴ Menke & Pollmann (2007), p. 16.

²⁵ Documented in a collection of articles *Against Death Penalty* [Против смертной казни] from 1906 (edited by Gernet / Goldovsky / Sacharovich).

that the concept of Human Rights is a “Western construction” that has nothing to do with Russian values. Nevertheless, recent official documents of the Russian Orthodox Church show an awareness and understanding of the *function* that a concept of Human Rights can fulfil to promote Christian values:

From the point of view of the Orthodox Church the political and legal institution of human rights can promote the good goals of protecting human dignity and contribute to the spiritual and ethical development of the personality. To make it possible the implementation of human rights should not come into conflict with God-established moral norms and traditional morality based on them. One’s human rights cannot be set against the values and interests of one’s homeland, community and family. The exercise of human rights should not be used to justify any encroachment on religious holy symbols things [*sic*], cultural values and the identity of a nation. Human rights cannot be used as a pretext for inflicting irretrievable damage on nature.²⁶

Such remarks still raise questions about the priority of humanity or nationality. This is symptomatic for a discussion focusing on the *implementation* of Human Rights, the *justification* of which is quite weak. The obvious uncertainties in the definition, arising from the question whether human dignity should be adjudged legally to every “image of God,” even when living in sin (consciously or unconsciously), or only to a person on his or her way to becoming “God’s likeness,” testify to a certain lack of theological reflection and justification of the notion in question. Bulgakov was quite clear on this issue:

God’s image is the ontological, inviolable basis, the original strength given to man in order to live and create. Dependent on his freedom it can grow or decrease, light up or obscure.²⁷

According to Bulgakov, the dignity of a human being resides in the *freedom* to choose. Neither the state nor the Church can take away what God has entrusted to human beings. Russian thinkers like Bulgakov often refer to Dostoevsky’s worst example of such a practice, viz. the Grand Inquisitor, who wanted to give people bread and safety at the price of their freedom. In this world, *state law* should provide the social conditions for living a dignified life, and the *Church* should teach its

²⁶ *Osnovy* 2008, III.5.

²⁷ Сергей Н. Булгаков, *Агнец Божий* (Москва: Общедоступный Православный Университет, основанный Протоиереем Александром Менем, 2000) [Sergey Bulgakov, *Agnus Dei* (Moscow: Father Alexander Men Orthodox Open University, 2000)], p. 174.

justification and the path of personal moral development to those who have freely chosen to do so:

The likeness is the image of divine creation and eternal spiritual activity. God's likeness in the human being is each man's free realisation of his own image. [...] The way of creation as becoming God's likeness is a difficult path full of temptations, demanding much concentration on all sides, but it is also a kingly, godlike path, a path of freedom.²⁸

In other words, the Last Judgement is a personal issue between God and every individual human being, and the nation-state has nothing to do with it.

With this quite lengthy introduction, I hope to have prepared the ground to present Bulgakov's treatment of the question of human dignity in the light of the modern philosophy of Human Rights.

Sergey Bulgakov and the modern concept of Human Rights

Christoph Menke and Arnd Pollmann have defined *three constitutive attributes* of a modern concept of Human Rights:

1. A human being has to be accepted as an *individual* in possession of *autonomy* and subjective freedom to live his or her own life;
2. Every human being must be accepted as *a being of equal value*;
- and
3. One must assume that there is a *common humanity* of humankind.

The author of *Philosophie nach Auschwitz* has shown that National Socialism aimed to disintegrate the moral-political category of "humanity" and to negate the "common humanity of humankind."²⁹ The defence of Human Rights, therefore, needs to be justified in terms of the equality of *all* human beings (regardless of race, health, class, religion, etc.) as a matter of principle.

Russian religious philosophers developed several normative ideas of humankind based on the view of humankind as God's image and likeness. One of the most original, but less known, of these anthropological concepts is that of Bulgakov. His anthropology relies mainly on the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rolf Zimmermann, *Philosophie nach Auschwitz; eine Neubestimmung von Moral in Politik und Gesellschaft* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2005).

doctrine of the *Holy Trinity*, the *Chalcedonian Creed* of the two natures of Christ without confusion or separation [*in duabus naturis, inconfusus, inseparabiliter*], and the teaching of man's creation in *God's image and likeness*, which, especially in Orthodox teaching, is not *lost*, but only *obscured* by man's fall. Here, Bulgakov argued, were all the conditions for a strong concept of personality, where *spirit* and *nature* are united, without confusion or separation, and where freedom means autonomy in the Kantian ontological sense, i.e. it cannot be given up, even if one would want to, since God did not create marionettes, but creative beings.

The main source of possible misunderstanding in Bulgakov's teachings is his understanding of *nature*. Vladimir Lossky, his main critic at the time of his official indictment (1937), condemned Bulgakov's mingling of person and nature. Nevertheless, Bulgakov remained convinced that Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and even Sigmund Freud, had shown one true thing, namely that nature plays a huge and determining role in human life. In his opinion, a justification of human dignity without a convincing understanding of nature could never cope with the ongoing scientific developments, which tended towards natural determinism, eugenics, and racism. That is why Bulgakov, after leaving behind Marxism (with its one-sided focus on *matter*), also broke with idealism (with its one-sided focus on *spirit*). He based his anthropological thinking on Christian, especially Orthodox teachings, where he found a holistic view of spirit, soul, and body. Bulgakov saw not only the human spirit and soul, but also human nature and the body, as worthy of being saved and protected. Bulgakov's sophiology is certainly a justification of nature, the latter *not* being a perpetrator of sin. To him, nature was God's creation, mankind's extended body, and the only place where human creativity could and should be realised.

In order to compare this to the modern concept of Human Rights, the notions of *autonomy*, *otherness*, and *humanity* in Bulgakov's concept must be examined.

1) God's image as an autonomous person

As we have seen, according to Bulgakov, the idea of man as God's image and likeness is the ontological basis of every human being. This should not be understood in the sense of a determined and complete set of properties but as an 'infinite series of different possibilities, among

which human freedom chooses.³⁰ The idea of God's image and likeness does not say much about the specific conditions of the "image" or of the "likeness" (because they are beyond a precise, cataphatic definition), but it describes the *act* of realising the given image, or becoming God's likeness in a free, autonomous way:

The image of God in man is not merely a 'resemblance' or a 'property.' It is a higher reality, a spiritual reality, an energy of God-likeness and God-likening. The union of 'image and likeness' is the realization of the image in life, the transition from statics to dynamics, from potentiality to energy. But at the same time the character of the image creates an indissoluble connection between it and the Proto-image, whose copy it is. The image in this sense is not original but derivative. Its whole reality is conditioned precisely by this connection; the image is this connection itself *in actu*. [...] This connection implies a certain inseparability of God and man, which in advance excludes deism's postulate of a radical separation between God and man (together with all of creation).³¹

Bulgakov is drawing the apparently paradoxical conclusion that it is not the freedom from God, but the inseparable connection with God that provides true autonomy to the person:

Freedom in creation is, first of all, connected with the personal principle. As *autonomous being*, the person is synonymous with freedom, as actuality or self-positing. Without this, the person does not exist. [...] The freedom of the person remains inviolable and impenetrable even for God. [...] His omnipotence does not destroy the ontological barriers, as Christ Himself says about Himself: 'I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me' (Rev. 3:20). This door is creaturely freedom, the source of the originality and reality of creation in correlation with the Creator.³²

Hence, to become God's likeness does not mean to become an identical copy of God or to merge with the divine substance, but *to act, live and create in a godlike manner* and to become God's partner in creation. It is worth noting that in Bulgakov's view, subjective autonomy is not a negative concept that must be given up, once a person becomes a Christian:³³

³⁰ Sergey Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), translated by Boris Yakim, pp. 135-136.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 226.

³³ This would be the case in Nikolay Berdyaev's concept: 'In the depth of spiritual freedom there is no formal autonomy, there is no difference between autonomy and theonomy.' Николай А. Бердяев, 'Философия свободного духа. Проблематика и апология христианства,' in *idem, Дialeктика божественного и человеческого*

Freedom is the ontological *privilege* precisely of creatures. [...] The most general precondition of freedom is spontaneity of movement, autonomy of life. [...] *Ontologically*, man cannot get rid of freedom even if he so desires, for it is the mode of the very being of the creaturely spirit. [...] If God created man in freedom, in His own image, as a son of God and a friend of God, a god according to grace, then the reality of this creation includes his freedom as creative self-determination not only in relation to the world but also in relation to God. To admit the contrary would be to introduce a contradiction in God, who would then be considered as having posited only a fictitious, illusory freedom.³⁴

Therefore, according to Bulgakov, subjective or personal autonomy is a God-given fact, it constitutes the human condition, and without it one would never be able to become and remain a Christian at all.³⁵ Autonomy is a God-given human capacity, *not* a liberal value. In 1935, when Bulgakov made these remarks, there was no *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* yet. As a consequence, the Church for him supports and promotes Human Rights not in an opportunist adaptation to the *Zeitgeist*, but because of a well-reflected Christian anthropology. While in the current social concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, subjectivity and autonomy are synonyms for the ‘fallen man outside God’, since ‘outside God, only fallen man exists [вне Бога существует лишь человек падший],’³⁶ for Bulgakov these notions defined the mode of life of God’s image and likeness. As such, man just cannot be “outside God,” even if he is fallen.

(Москва: Фолио, 2003) [Nikolay A. Berdyaev, ‘Philosophy of the Free Spirit. Problematics and Apologetics of Christianity,’ in idem, *Dialectics of the Divine and of the Human* (Moscow, 2003)], pp. 151-152.

³⁴ Bulgakov (2002), pp. 129, 132, 234, 237. Since freedom is the ontological *privilege* of creatures, God is not free in the same sense, even if He is its source: ‘In revelation, it is said not that God is freedom but that He is love. Therefore, He is higher than freedom in its indissoluble connection with necessity. [...] Love is beyond freedom and necessity, because perfect fullness belongs to divine love.’ Bulgakov (2002), p. 128.

³⁵ ‘But this salvation of man, effectuated by Christ, the new Adam, in a free act, for all humanity — this salvation must be freely accepted by each particular man.’ Sergey Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, translated by Elizabeth S. Cram (London: The Century Press, 1935), p. 129.

³⁶ *Osnovy* 2000, IV.7. In the English translation, the full text reads: ‘In the contemporary systematic understanding of civil human rights, man is treated not as the image of God, but as a self-sufficient and self-sufficing *subject*. Outside God, however, there is only the fallen man, who is rather far from being the ideal of perfection aspired to by Christians and revealed in Christ (*Ecce homo!*).’

2) The Other as hypostasis

Bulgakov tried to revitalise the Greek concept of ὑπόστασις [*hypostasis*] with the modern existentialist understanding of *person*.³⁷ These reflections are stimulated by the discourse about inter-subjective relations that Martin Bubbers's *Ich und Du* of 1923 initiated. Bulgakov justifies the *inter-subjective aspect* of man being God's image and likeness, referring to the Trinitarian dogma of three hypostases, united by one common nature, οὐσία [*ousia*]:

The dogma of the Holy Trinity consists in two basic postulates. The first affirms the triune character of the Deity, "trinity in unity" and "unity in trinity". The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are three distinct divine persons, together constitute one God. The second postulate is concerned with the consubstantiality of the Holy Trinity, which has but one substance or nature (*ousia* or *physis*, *substantia* or *natura*).³⁸

Bulgakov defines the difference between *hypostasis* and *ousia* by analogy with Aristotle's distinction between the individual and the universal, that is to say, between the individual (*this* man) and the species (man). The differences between the individual hypostases are defined by their original *properties* and their specific *relations*.³⁹ If man is the image of this Trinitarian God, Bulgakov concludes, this divine structure has to give meaning to the structure of human life as well. Hence, the personal spirit of human beings corresponds to the personal spirit of God's hypostases, and human nature corresponds to God's nature, *ousia*. The difference between God and human beings would lie in the fact that God exists in three hypostases, while to each man is given only one. That is why a man cannot exist on his/her own, but needs other persons in order to realize all his/her capacities as a *hypostasis*.⁴⁰ According to Bulgakov, the dogma of the Divine Trinity is about individuality, relations to others and a common nature. It calls for accepting and loving the other, as oneself. It is about self-realisation *and* about relating to *others*.

³⁷ Michael A. Meerson, *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology: The Love Paradigm and the Retrieval of Western Medieval Love Mysticism in Modern Russian Trinitarian Thought (from Solovoyov to Bulgakov)* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), p. 161.

³⁸ Сергей Н. Булгаков, 'Трагедия философии,' in idem, *Сочинения в двух томах*, том 1 (Москва: Наука, 1993) [Sergey N. Bulgakov, 'The Tragedy of Philosophy,' in idem, *Complete Works in Two Volumes*, vol. 1, (Moscow, 1993)], p. 23.

³⁹ Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 51-53, 116-117.

⁴⁰ Bulgakov (2000), p. 121.

In his works from the late 1920s, Bulgakov develops a “personal grammar”. A person’s self-realisation is only possible by confronting other persons. Face to face with another man, an individual experiences, in linguistic terms, its status as a *first*, *second* and *third* person, i.e. a human being is an “I”, marking off his or her individuality from others. He or she is a “Thou” in facing his/her relation to another, and a human being is a “He” when noticing the existence of many other, unknown persons. Only when one confronts “Thou” and “He,” does the “I” realize itself as an “I”. Hence, Bulgakov’s concept of personality is constituted by a dynamic self-reflection in the triangle “I-Thou-He”:

I-Thou is an encounter in the state of realisation, in which a mutual positioning, a reciprocal reflection is realised. But *I-Thou* in this encounter is unstable, dubious and unconfirmed. It becomes constant and stable only when a *He* appears: an *I-Thou* (which is another I, that I am facing directly) and a *He-Thou* (another I, which neither the first nor the second I is facing directly), meaning neither an *I*, nor a *Thou*, but one who is still connected to them and coexisting with them and who could take the position of either of them. In this sense, *He* is the guarantor of *I* and *Thou*. In the triangle *I-Thou-He* the *I* can take up each position and is always connected to *Thou* and *He*. Hence, the real subject is a certain unity, a triunity of three persons: the first, the second and the third (the secret of personal pronouns). *I* is not the only person, but the first person to which a second and a third belong. These three constitute the self-conscience, the self-positioning of an I.⁴¹

Bulgakov explains the special relation between *I* and *Thou* in a more detailed way. The unknown *I* cannot be known as an *object*. It can only be known as a *subject* that is recognised as *another*, albeit *similar I*:

There is a special way of cognition of a subject (but not of an object) by a subject: it is to go beyond the self not into one’s nature, *but beyond the self into the self, which means into the Thou*. The only organ of such a form of cognition (beyond Kant’s gnoseology) is knowledge of oneself as another. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ — this commandment has, like all biblical commandments — an ontological grounding in the nature of things. It shows above all, that your neighbour, Thou — is your own I, and that in the same way you love yourself and confirm your own I as the imperturbable foundation of your thinking, you should confirm the other I, must do so, and by doing so fulfil the law of your being and unfold your own I to its true fullness.⁴²

⁴¹ Сергей Н. Булгаков, ‘Главы о троичности,’ in idem, *Труды о троичности* (Москва: О Г И, 2001) [Sergey N. Bulgakov, ‘Chapters on the Trinity,’ in idem, *Works on the Trinity* (Moscow, 2001)], pp. 59-60.

⁴² Bulgakov (1993), pp. 410-411.

Thus, according to Bulgakov, the Trinitarian dogma justifies man's ontological need for social relations, which should be grounded on the acceptance of another person's otherness, but also on his likeness in terms of personal dignity. The aim of social action is not indistinct unity, but a unity in diversity. But Bulgakov's *I*, which in its self-knowledge includes the *Thou*, embraces not only the persons it *knows*, but also all humankind. His claim that being part of humanity can only be known in a personal way illustrates the close and inseparable connection between personality and human nature that Bulgakov wants to justify. This connection cannot be justified only by personal (hypostatic) *cognition*, but it must be ontologically given. This is where Bulgakov's concept of *consubstantiality* (which means, his concept of σοφία [*sophia*]) comes into play. It corresponds to the philosophical claim of the *common humanity of mankind*.

3) The humanity of mankind

According to Bulgakov, the interconnectedness between all human persons by birth and succession is evidence of the unity of mankind, not only in a biological, but also in a metaphysical sense. Like Marx and Feuerbach, Bulgakov sees humanity as a *species being* [*Gattungswesen*]. The term *man* is not only a nominal, abstract notion, but a real being, an ontological and a logical given and a common basis of being for all individuals. The symbol of this human being is Adam as a *man*, not as an *individual*:

It seems to me that only the acknowledgement of a prior unified humanity — a metaphysical forefather, Adam — can explain the characteristic connection of the individual and the universal in the human personality. What makes an individual human is not the individual principle but his expression of that which is common to all of humanity. Humanity is one although it has many faces. This is not a sentimental phrase but the expression of an ontological relationship.⁴³

Humanity is the potential that connects humans more than individualisation can separate them. Each man is the realization of this potential. His belonging to a universal totality is not to be comprehended as a limitation of individuality but as its completion, as the missing aspect of a universal potential that the individual in question does not realise.

⁴³ Bulgakov (2000), p. 139.

This universal potential corresponds to Bulgakov's *created Sophia*. To understand this notion, we must turn once again to his teaching of man's creation as the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God. If the term *hypostasis* was used earlier to understand the relationship of an individual to *other* individuals, the term *ousia* can help us understand the consubstantiality of *all* individuals whether they know each other or not: the humanity of mankind. In Bulgakov's opinion, this aspect of God's trinity has so far been neglected:

The first part of the dogma, that is, the doctrine of the relationship between the three hypostases with their hypostatic qualities and distinctive features, has been to a certain extent elucidated in the process of the Church's dogmatic creativity. But the other side, the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Holy Trinity, as well as the actual conception of substance or nature, has been far less developed and, apparently, almost overlooked.⁴⁴

Roughly speaking, Bulgakov develops the term as follows: *ousia*, God's nature, exists in two modes; on the one hand, it is personified by three hypostases, on the other, it exists independently as God's *contents*, which is the *divine Sophia*, or the *divine cosmos*. In the act of creation, God is *liberating* his contents as an independent being "outside" himself, or as Bulgakov puts it 'the Divine being in Sophia receives another being in the world.'⁴⁵ According to Bulgakov, *creation* is God's *first kenotic act*, because *kenosis* [κένωσις] is the theological term for God's renunciation of his absoluteness.⁴⁶ God's *incarnation* in Christ was thus the *second* kenotic act. The first kenotic act of creation corresponds to the creation of the *created Sophia ex nihilo*.⁴⁷ The created Sophia is the *world* in which man is created as God's image and likeness, as a created hypostasis. This model claims an analogical structure of God and man, i.e. the created hypostases live in the created nature [*Sophia*] *like* the divine hypostases live in the divine nature. This is why the entire created

⁴⁴ Bulgakov (1993), p. 24.

⁴⁵ Bulgakov (2002), p. 46.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii, and Berdiaev* (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p. 101; Paul L. Gavriluk, 'The Kenotic Theology of Sergius Bulgakov', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58/3 (2005), p. 251.

⁴⁷ According to Helmut Dahm, the differentiation between the divine and created Sophia corresponds to the Christian Creed on the *invisible* and the *visible* worlds (*factorem caeli et terrae, visibilibus omnium et invisibilibus*). Cf. Helmut Dahm, 'Aufstieg zur Weltgeltung,' in Helmut Dahm, Assen Ignatow, (eds.), *Geschichte der philosophischen Traditionen Osteuropas* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1996), p. 132.

cosmos should be understood as man's body (and beauty). Bulgakov uses the notion "anthropo-cosmos."

In other words, in Bulgakov's concept of man each human person corresponds to the individual and social mode of being of the divine hypostases, while human nature corresponds to the universal mode of being of the divine *ousia*. Therefore, Bulgakov's Trinitarian concept of man and of the world provides an original model, fit to explain the complex relationship between individuality, society and nature. In fact, Bulgakov's Trinitarian thinking is the result of his effort to reconcile three concerns of modernity: to justify each person's *individual dignity and autonomy* (Kant), to embed each person in fruitful *social relationships* (Orthodox *conciliarity*, or *sobornost* [соборность] or even in what Marx, in the 6th Feuerbach thesis, called the "ensemble of social relations [Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse]"⁴⁸ and to reinforce man's *creative relationship to nature* (Schelling). These issues bridge the gap between his philosophy of economy and his theological sophiology.

To summarise, a simplified model of Bulgakov's anthropology would start with the main Christian dogma that the triune God is defined as the unity of *three individual hypostases in one ousia*, one nature. Being in God's image and likeness, human beings constitute a *multitude of hypostases, united in one nature*, namely the "world." In this world, and because of their *common nature*, human beings are able and supposed to live in the same *complex and loving relationship* as the three divine hypostases without losing their *autonomous individualities*.⁴⁹ Bulgakov's Trinitarian teaching thus meets three crucial requirements of the modern Human Rights concept: autonomy, "equivalent difference," and common humanity. In his late writings about Orthodoxy and economic life, Bulgakov gave a straightforward description of his fundamental criterion for all kinds of human relations:

There is only one supreme value in the light of which economic forces must be judged. That is *freedom of personality, in law and in economy*. Then the best economic form — whatever its name, and however it combines capitalism and socialism — is that which, in any given circumstances, best assures personal liberty, protecting it from natural poverty and social slavery.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, 'Thesen über Feuerbach,' in *Marx Engels Werkausgabe*, Band 3 (Berlin [DDR]: Dietz Verlag, 1983), p.6.

⁴⁹ Besides, because of their nature being rooted in God's nature, human beings are able to live in the same complex relationship and communication with God.

⁵⁰ Bulgakov (1935), p. 201.

A professor of political economy, an Orthodox priest, and a theologian, Sergey Bulgakov was also a highly original and creative thinker. It would be a pity to forget his speculative, yet inspiring ideas about a Christian teaching on human dignity that is aware of such problems as interpersonal recognition and responsibility, as well as of humankind's relation to nature and its environment, all of which are still of actual relevance.