

REGNUM STUDIES IN GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

**ORTHODOX HANDBOOK ON ECUMENISM**  
Resources for Theological Education

“That they all may be one” (John 17:21)

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## (29) FR. SERGIUS BULGAKOV

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Sergius Nicolaevich Bulgakov (1871-1944), one of the leading Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, was actively involved in the ecumenical movement from shortly after his coming to the West in 1923 until ill health caused his premature retirement from this work in 1939. His ecumenical theology reflects a rich and challenging vision of engagement with other Christians. While Bulgakov grounds his ecumenism on Orthodoxy's claim to be the Church of Christ on earth, he forswears all triumphalism. Many of his ideas on Church unity were formative in the modern Orthodox vision of ecumenism. Other Orthodox theologians both formulated their theologies in reaction to his thought and tacitly borrowed his ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Sergius Bulgakov was born in Livny (Orel province) in Russia on 16 June 1871 to a family from the Russian clerical caste.<sup>2</sup> Like many intellectuals of his generation, Bulgakov left the Church after a religious crisis forced him to leave junior seminary abruptly. In the late 1880s and the 1890s, he studied law, economics, philology, philosophy and literature in Moscow and then pursued graduate work in political economy in Moscow and in Germany, while teaching part-time at the Moscow Technical School. In these years he was a convinced Marxist and atheist. However, after a series of religious experiences that he later saw as visions of 'Sophia' or 'Holy Wisdom', he became more and more disenchanted with Marxism as a system and as a quasi-religion. He subsequently taught political economy in Kiev (1901-6), immersed himself in philosophical idealism and was particularly influenced by Feodor Dostoyevsky and the sophiology of Vladimir Solov'ev (1853-1900). In this period, he was gradually moving closer to Orthodoxy. This took the form, for example, of his involvement in Christian socialist politics - he served as a deputy in the Second Duma (1907). By 1906, now professor of economy at Moscow's Commercial Institute and lecturer at the University of Moscow (eventually becoming professor there), Bulgakov completely rejected Marxism, which he saw as a twisted pseudo-religion. His return home to Orthodoxy and the Church was consummated in the autumn of 1908 at a remote northern skete. There, after having met the starets of the community, who received him back into the Church like the prodigal son, he sealed his conversion with participation in the Eucharist.

In the years to come his involvement with the Church became more intense. His writings from about 1917 onwards were almost entirely theological. He served as a lay delegate to the All-Russian Church Council of 1917-1918 and in June 1918, by the blessing of Patriarch Tikhon (Bellavin) of Moscow (1865-1925), Bulgakov was ordained to the priesthood. The combination of this ordination and his well-known opposition to Bolshevism eventually led Bulgakov into exile in December 1922 along with many other intellectuals whom the Bolsheviks expelled from the new U.S.S.R. He spent three years in Prague lecturing on canon law at the Russian law institute at Charles University. In 1925, Metropolitan Evlogii (Georgievskii) (1868-1946), the Russian bishop responsible for the Russian Orthodox Church in Western Europe, invited Bulgakov to become the professor of dogmatic theology at the new Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris.

Bulgakov's literary output was huge. He wrote on everything from systematic theology (several dogmatic treatises, often grouped under two 'trilogies'), iconography and Biblical commentary to political philosophy, history, sociology and law, critiques of German Idealism (which he saw as a series of forms of Trinitarian heresy) and philosophy of language. Many of these works, especially his second systematic trilogy, are centred on the

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2014) and Brandon Gallaher, 'The 'Sophiological' Origins of Vladimir Lossky's Apophaticism', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 66.3 (July 2013): 278-298.

<sup>2</sup> See Gallaher, 'Bulgakov's Ecumenical Thought', *Sobornost* 24.1 (2002): 24-55 and 'Bulgakov and intercommunion', *Sobornost* 24.2 (2002): 9-28.

highly controversial notion of 'sophiology' or theology of Holy Wisdom (actively opposed by both Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky). Bulgakov continued to teach at the Saint Sergius Institute, serving both as professor of dogmatic theology and as dean, until his death from cancer on 12 July 1944.

Bulgakov's ecumenical involvement was deep and wide. It was motivated by his apocalyptic belief that, following the rise of 'Satanic' Bolshevism, humanity was in the last times and that the Anti-Christ could only be defeated by the sacramental reunion of the Churches led by the Russian Orthodox Church - he echoes here the finale of Solove'v's 'Tale of the Anti-Christ.' His initial introduction to ecumenism was through his participation in the first congress of the Russian Christian Student Movement (RCSM), held in Pšerov, Czechoslovakia from 1-7 October 1923. The RCSM was established to bring together Russian Christian youth, initially in Russia then in the emigration, both Orthodox and also Protestants, in order to encourage them in community, a wholistic Christian vision and to counter Bolshevism. Each day of the conference was opened with a liturgy served by Bulgakov. There was also a strong eschatological sense in the participants who saw themselves as members of a post-Constantinian Church dedicated to the 'churching' of all of life and (for the Orthodox) the mission of witnessing to Orthodoxy in the West. Both the Eucharist and a strong sense of an eschatological call for reunion of the Churches became the hallmarks of Bulgakov's ecumenism. This conference was financed by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and it led Bulgakov to subsequent fruitful collaboration with John Mott (1865-1955), the Secretary General of the YMCA, and Paul B. Anderson (1894-1985), a secretary of the YMCA assigned to work with Russian refugees in Europe.

Bulgakov subsequently attended the early conferences of Faith and Order (Lausanne, 1927, and Edinburgh, 1937) and Life and Work (Oxford, 1937), movements that paved the way for the foundation of the World Council of Churches (WCC). He was one of the most important Orthodox representatives at these meetings and other ecumenical gatherings until he was obliged to cease his ecumenical involvement for health reasons in the spring of 1939. At the Lausanne and Edinburgh conferences, Bulgakov challenged the Protestant majority by advocating the veneration of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, Theotokos. He held that Mary was the mystical head of humanity in the Church, the Bride of the Lamb. He encouraged the conference delegates to name Mary in prayer because her veneration was crucial for the reunion of the Churches since she is at the heart of the very unity of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Bulgakov's contacts with Anglicanism were particularly important for his developing ecumenical theology. He participated in the First Anglo-Russian Congress at St Albans from 11 to 15 January, 1927, where he presented an important paper, 'The Church and Non-Orthodoxy'.<sup>3</sup> The ideas contained in this paper underlay Georges Florovsky's now classic essay, 'The Limits of the Church'.<sup>4</sup> Through an analysis of the Patristic canonical literature, Bulgakov contends that the sacraments of the non-Orthodox can be understood as 'of the Church', so that one cannot argue that the spiritual and canonical limits of the Orthodox Church coincide and that there is only darkness outside of Orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup> The following year, at the Second Anglo-Russian Congress (28 December 1927 to 2 January 1928), Bulgakov was one of the founders of Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, a key ecumenical organization initially dedicated to Orthodox-Anglican (and now Eastern-Western Christian) relations and one of the most important international forums for Orthodox ecumenical involvement. Bulgakov was elected vice-president of the Fellowship and attended all of its meetings until 1939.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Fr. Sergius Bulgakov's *Outlines of the Teaching About the Church: Address given at the Orthodox & Anglo-Catholic Conference*', found at <[http://www.sobornost.org/Archives\\_Bulgakov-Outlines-of-the-Teaching-about-the-Church\\_Dec1926-Jan1927.pdf](http://www.sobornost.org/Archives_Bulgakov-Outlines-of-the-Teaching-about-the-Church_Dec1926-Jan1927.pdf)> (Last accessed: 20 July 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Georges Florovsky, 'The Limits of the Church', *Church Quarterly Review* 117.233 (1933): 117-131. Recollected in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, eds. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (forthcoming T & T Clark-Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Published here: 'Ocherki ucheniia o tserkvi. (III) Tserkov' i "Inoslavie", *Put'* 4 (1926): 3-26 ('Outlines of the Teaching about the Church—The Church and Non-Orthodoxy', *American Church Monthly* 30.6 (1931): 411-423 and 31.1 (1932): 13-26 (abridged).

From the beginning the celebration on alternate mornings of the Eucharist according to the Anglican or the Orthodox rites and alternate evenings of Orthodox Vespers or Anglican Evensong structured the conference itself. It was in the context of the participation of Orthodox and Anglicans in each other's liturgy (without sacramental communion) that Bulgakov advanced a proposal for partial intercommunion between the Anglicans and the Orthodox. He first proposed partial intercommunion between the Anglican and Orthodox members of the Fellowship in June 1933. The Anglican and Orthodox members had already, he claimed, achieved 'a substantial dogmatic agreement with one another [...] more complete than that which exists within the Anglican Church itself'<sup>6</sup> and therefore 'spiritual intercommunion' already existed in shared worship (the 'sacrament of prayer')<sup>7</sup> and similar liturgical forms in the service developed for the Fellowship and the Molèben. In light of these commonalities, the Fellowship, Bulgakov argued, needed to move from the realm of ideas to concrete realization through creative catholic action. Here he was trying to formalize in sacramental terms the then widespread opinion that the Orthodox and Anglican Churches were one in doctrine, worship and polity (many Orthodox Churches then acknowledging the validity of Anglican orders) and should therefore formally re-establish communion. Moreover, at that time there existed an extensive 'economic' intercommunion between the two Churches: in cases of extremity, Orthodox and Anglican laity were often blessed by their bishops to partake of one another's sacraments.

In the Fellowship conferences of 1934 and 1935, Bulgakov refined what was an initially vague intuition. He situated his proposals within a sacramental and canonical nexus. His basic idea was for a mutual episcopal 'sacramental blessing' of Orthodox and Anglican Fellowship members, both ordained and lay, to partake of communion at one another's altars at Fellowship conferences; this would serve as a sort of seed leading to the eventual complete unity of the two Churches.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the Orthodox, the blessing or sacramental sanction would come from Met. Evlogii of the Russian exarchate under Constantinople and Evlogii would ask for a corresponding blessing from the Patriarch of Constantinople. In the case of the Anglicans, the appropriate blessing would come from the diocesan bishop or from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Anglican and Orthodox bishops alike would confer the blessing on the Fellowship priest of the other Church so that the blessing would be fully mutual. Orthodox bishops would bless Anglican priests to communicate at the Orthodox liturgy, to concelebrate with Russian priests if they so desired and to communicate Orthodox and Anglican laity in the Fellowship who wish to participate in these celebrations. Likewise, in an analogous fashion, which Bulgakov left to the Anglicans to determine, the Anglican bishop would bless the Orthodox priest to participate in intercommunion with Anglican clergy and laity. The particular sacramental blessing of Anglican laity to participate in intercommunion at Orthodox altars could take either the form of a blessing by a bishop but, more preferably, the form of Chrismation with the invocation of the Trinity by a priest. This latter rite is of course the standard Russian way of receiving converts to Orthodoxy, though Bulgakov was using it to acknowledge the tacit Orthodox ecclesial status of these Christians. The final version of Bulgakov's proposals was ultimately rejected in June 1935 by the Fellowship council (with particularly strong opposition by Florovsky)<sup>9</sup> before, however, it could be discussed in open session at the conference.

<sup>6</sup> 'General Report of the Fellowship Conference, June 1933', *Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* [=JFAS], 20 (1933): 12-16 at 12.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Zernov and Evgeny Lampert, 'The Fellowship and the Anglican-Orthodox Intercommunion', *Sobornost* 21 (May 1940): 9-15 at 11.

<sup>8</sup> See 'Partial Intercommunion'. ('Notes and Comments by Fr. S. Bulgakov for Advisory Committee and Fellowship Exec.'). Dated '3.V.1935', FASOxon in white envelope with writing 'to Deacon Stephen Platt', Summarized at A. F. Dobbie-Bateman, 'Footnotes (IX)--*In quos fines saeculorum*', *Sobornost*, 30 (December 1944): pp.6-8 at 7-8 (To be published as an appendix to my article, 'Great and full of Grace': Partial Intercommunion and Sophiology in Sergii Bulgakov' in *Festschrift for Michael Plekon* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute. 2013), 69-121.

<sup>9</sup> See Brandon Gallaher, "'Waiting for the Barbarians": Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky', *Modern Theology* 27.4 (October 2011): 659-691 and Paul Ladouceur, "'Aimons-nous les uns les autres': Serge Bulgakov et Georges Florovsky', *Contacts* 237 (Janvier-Mars 2012): 56-87.

The theology that lay behind Bulgakov's proposals was focused on the Eucharist and on presenting an 'icon' of Orthodoxy to the West. Indeed, the Orthodox were called, Bulgakov argued, in the ecumenical movement to witness perpetually to non-Orthodox concerning the uniqueness of the Orthodox Church as the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, which bears within herself the fullness of the faith. The Orthodox Church *is* the Church itself and Bulgakov rejected the so-called 'branch theory' of the Church (according to which each distinct Church is a 'branch' of the Church of Christ).<sup>10</sup> The Church, for Bulgakov, is a divine-human organism which is a spiritual reality incarnated in the world: visible and invisible, institutional and historical as well as spiritual and eternal. The invisible universal Church, *Una Sancta*, Orthodoxy as such, is, Bulgakov argued, like the ancient Jewish temple composed of two circles and all baptized Christians belong to her and are in a sense Orthodox insofar as they are Christian. In the inner circle, the holy of holies, is the visible empirical Church which coincides with the canonical family of Churches known as Eastern Orthodoxy, but in the larger circle, the court of the temple, are the other Christian confessions. These groups have to a lesser or greater degree 'a grain of Orthodoxy' insofar as they are related to the 'Orthodox' centre of the temple with its fullness of divine-human life but all Churches are alike ecclesial, tacitly Orthodox.<sup>11</sup>

Bulgakov's emphasis on ecumenism as a form of witness to the truth of Orthodoxy became (ironically under the influence of his sometime opponent Florovsky who was influenced by him) the fundamental theology for Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement. However, Bulgakov's version of this now standard position is not triumphalistic. He argues that the Orthodox need to learn from their non-Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters and become convicted and changed by these encounters. He sees Christian reunion in Orthodoxy not as a "Byzantinisation" of the non-Orthodox but the entry of the non-Orthodox more deeply into their specific identity as Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic etc. in entering into communion with the Church. Furthermore, in arguing against the majority of Orthodox in favour of intercommunion as a means to unity of the Churches, Bulgakov suggested that the means of reunion or reintegration of non-Orthodox into the Orthodox Church is not through complete theological agreement as worked out in detail by appointed committees of theologians from two Churches and approved by their respective hierarchs in a reunion council (e.g. Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445)). Rather, reunion, if it comes, will emerge through a gradual 'molecular' process that begins in common worship that presupposed a basic or essential union in faith. The example of St. Basil with the semi-Arians was often utilized in this context.<sup>12</sup> Thus sacramental reunion with the Anglicans was based on a "living minimum" of dogma (i.e. the central dogmas of the faith including Christology and Trinitarian theology) grounded in the Eucharist.<sup>13</sup> This position was in contrast to an abstract maximalism<sup>14</sup> that simply asserted the particular Eastern Orthodox teaching of the moment without attention to its age or context, and an abstract minimalism that appealed to the lowest common theological denominator.<sup>15</sup> Thus the 'living minimum' of dogma on which the entry into communion would be based was simply Orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup> Bulgakov's proposed episcopal 'sacramental blessing' for Intercommunion was therefore in the service of a gradual reuniting or reintegration of non-Orthodox Churches with Orthodoxy through acknowledging that the non-Orthodox were already in some sense Orthodox and tacit members of the Orthodox Church.

<sup>10</sup> See Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids, Mich.: T & T Clark/Eerdmans, 2002), 310 [*Nevesta Agntsa* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1945), 337] and 'The Church and Non-Orthodoxy' (1931), 419 ['Tserkov' i "Inoslavie'", 10].

<sup>11</sup> Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, [1932] 1988), 188 [*Pravoslavie: Ocherki ucheniia Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi* (Kiev: Lybid, 1991), 228].

<sup>12</sup> See Anton Kartashev, 'The Paths Towards the Reunion of the Churches', *JFAS* 26 (1934): 7-13 at 11 (This and other related articles are recollected in Michael Plekon, ed., *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time-Readings from the Eastern Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Pub. Inc., 2003)).

<sup>13</sup> Bulgakov, 'Ways to Church Reunion', *Sobornost* 2 (1935): 7-15 at 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9, 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> *The Orthodox Church*, 188 [*ibid.*, 228].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189 [*ibid.*, 228-229] and see Kartashev 'Intercommunion and Dogmatic Agreement', *Sobornost* 4 (1935): 41-48 at 43 and 46.

Christian sacraments, even if defective as in the case of the non-Orthodox, are ‘a call to universality’<sup>17</sup> being of the empirical Church, insofar as they are celebrated in it, but are *from* the invisible Church above. Echoing Augustine, Bulgakov contends that non-Orthodox sacraments from baptism to ordination are, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the nature of the schism, merely ineffective in schism although most certainly not non-existent. In short, the Church exists outside of its own walls: *ecclesia extra muros*.<sup>18</sup> What Bulgakov was doing in proposing limited intercommunion between Anglican and Orthodox was acknowledging that the baptism, orders *and* the Eucharist of the Anglicans, while sacramentally defective, were basically Orthodox realities which regained their true force in communion with the Orthodox Church. Communion was both thus the means *and* the end or crown of reunion.

Bulgakov’s ecumenical theology has not lost its power to inspire as well as to challenge. In its day, it mostly challenged, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, and therefore the essential Orthodoxy of his basic ecumenical position was lost to his contemporaries. He held that in Orthodoxy’s engagement with other Christians it must with all humility and love both witness to itself as the true Church, insofar as it embodies the fullness of the Catholic faith, and call those Christians to return to sacramental union with her.

### Bibliography

Sergius Bulgakov was an extremely prolific author over a long career, writing on theology, philosophy, economics, law, history and the social sciences. Many of his later theological writings are now available in translations in English, French, German and Italian. For a detailed bibliography of his work see Kliment Naumov, *Bibliographie Des Œuvres de Serge Boulgakov* (Paris: Institut D’Études Slaves, 1984). The Bibliography below lists only his most relevant writings relevant to ecumenism available in English.

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<sup>17</sup> Bulgakov, ‘The Church Universal’, *JFAS* 25 (1934): 10-15 at 11.

<sup>18</sup> ‘The Church and Non-Orthodoxy’ (1931), 310-314 [‘Tserkov’ i “Inoslavie”’, 337-341].

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