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The Christological Basis of Bulgakov's Ecclesiological Perspective and its Meaning for the 21st Century

Abstract

Sergius Bulgakov continues to be a contentious figure in the modern revival of Orthodox theology. His reputation continues to be damaged by the consequences of the Sophia Affair, which means that the entirety of Bulgakov's theology is yet to be fully appraised. The present article considers the development of Bulgakov's ecclesiology, emerging out of his Christology, over the course of his life. While not unrelated to his sophiology, it is not contingent on it. The paper follows the development of Bulgakov's ecclesiology, beginning with his philosophical writings, into his major contributions to the émigré journal



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Put'. Its relationship to Bulgakov's sophiology is considered in broad terms. The paper's conclusion considers what Bulgakov's ecclesiology offers to the present 21st century environment.

Keywords

Bulgakov, Christology, Ecclesiology, Sophiology, Body of Christ

1 Introduction

Few names in 20th century theology conjure up as many thoughts as Sergius Bulgakov. Recognised by those who did not adhere to his sophiology as an important theologian,¹ his sophiological project might be regarded as an example of original theological synthesis. Historical circumstances intervened and have made proper scholarly appraisal of his work has been difficult, and since, it has generally been regarded that modern Orthodox theology follows two "trends or orientations."² Bulgakov's sophiology is yet to be comprehensively appraised, but recent translations into English of his Major Trilogy have ameliorated this somewhat, introducing Bulgakov to a non-Russian audience. However, Bulgakov did leave behind a broader corpus of writings, some of which is not in itself sophiological. Studying this part of his work is part of the original contribution to theology made by this paper.

To this end, the present paper looks at the development of Bulgakov's Christology and considers it in light of his evolving ec-

¹ P. Gavrikyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 134.

² A. Schmemmann, *Russian Theology 1920-1972: An Introductory Survey*, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 16:4 (1972), p. 175.

clesiological point of view. In conclusion, it considers the present importance of Bulgakov's Christologically-centered ecclesiology. When Bulgakov left Russia in 1922, his early philosophical reflections gave way to theology. His later objective - to integrate sophiology into an Orthodox theological framework - belied the fact that he had otherwise developed an ecclesiological perspective. While much of Bulgakov's ecclesiology is related to his sophiology, a comprehensive reading of his work suggests that they do not necessarily depend on each other. This is important, because it gives insight into part of how Orthodox ecclesiology developed, and lends weight to the view that Bulgakov's ecclesiology is an important field of study. It also has the effect of more broadly aligning ecclesiology to its essential Christological centre.

In sum, the present paper considers the development of Bulgakov's ecclesiology in and its relationship to his Christology. It firstly considers Bulgakov the theologian, outlining the biographical context from which his theology emerged. Secondly, it considers the philosophical background of his Christologically-centered ecclesiology. Prior to Bulgakov's theology, he left behind a significant corpus of philosophical writings. These are important in understanding the evolution of Bulgakov's work and how his theology came about. Thirdly, this paper analyses Bulgakov's theology, which while being predominantly Christological, was also thoroughly ecclesiological. Fourthly, Bulgakov's sophiology is briefly considered in light of its Christology and ecclesiology. The conclusion helps appraise Bulgakov for the 21st century.

2 Bulgakov the Theologian

We begin with the biographical context out of which Bulgakov's writings emerged. Bulgakov's life was complex. As he related in his *Autobiographical Notes*, Bulgakov was born into a family whose clerical line could be traced back six generations.³ As a boy, he completed parochial school and entered theological seminary,⁴ however, at the age of 17 he experienced a religious crisis. The crisis persisted until about the age of 30, and during this time he was "tormented by youthful doubtstions which there was no one to answer."⁵ At this time he was ambivalent about his faith, and for a short period of time was a committed Marxist. In 1890, he entered the law faculty in Moscow State University and later studied in Germany. Bulgakov completed a Masters degree in economics in 1900.⁶

For a period of time, Bulgakov taught in Kiev, and during this time he took a special interest in Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Vladimir Soloviev.⁷ During this time he also abandoned Marxism and turned to Idealism. Bulgakov saw Marxism as materialistic and believed that it demeaned the human person.⁸ He also served as a deputy of the second State Duma under Tsar Nicho-

³ S. Bulgakov, "Autobiographical Notes", in *A Bulgakov Anthology* ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (ed.), *A Bulgakov Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1976), p. 2.

⁴ A. Gallaher, "Bulgakov's Ecumenical Thought", *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 24:1 (2002), p. 27.

⁵ S. Bulgakov, "Autobiographical Notes", in *A Bulgakov Anthology* ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (ed.), *A Bulgakov Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1976), p. 4.

⁶ S. Bulgakov, "Autobiographical Notes", in *A Bulgakov Anthology* ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (ed.), *A Bulgakov Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1976), p. 5.

⁷ S. Gallaher, "Bulgakov's Ecumenical Thought", p. 5.

⁸ S. Bulgakov, "Chto daet sovremennomy soznaniyu filosofia Vladimira Solovieva", in Sergei Bulgakov, *Ot Marksizma k Idealizmu*, (St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo "Obschestvennaya Pol'za", 1903), p. 249.

las II.⁹ The year 1908, however, was momentous, for during it Bulgakov returned to the Church after partaking of the eucharist during a visit to a *staretz*. He later recalled that he felt “pardoned and reconciled... returned as on wings within the precincts of the Church.”¹⁰ Ten years later, on the day of the Holy Spirit,¹¹ in 1918 he was ordained to the priesthood. This coincided with the restoration of the patriarchate. This moment, which marked the end of two centuries of state control over the Church, was important to Bulgakov’s acceptance of ordination.¹² This is evoked in his *Autobiographical Notes*, where he made the observation that he had accepted ordination chiefly “to celebrate the divine liturgy.”¹³

The trajectory of Bulgakov’s life, however, took a permanent turn when, after the Russian Revolution, with others he was exiled on the so-called “Philosophy Steamer”. Departing Odessa, he spent a short period of time in Constantinople, where he visited *Hagia Sophia*, the ancient Byzantine cathedral that was then a mosque. This encounter with “divine wisdom” left a deep impression, and, as is clear from later writings, had an impact on his ecclesiology. He later wrote: “St. Sophia was revealed to my mind as something absolute... This is indeed Sophia, the real unity of the world in the Logos, the co-inheritance of all in all,

⁹ C. Evtuhov, *The Cross & The Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 119.

¹⁰ S. Bulgakov, “Autobiographical Notes”, in *A Bulgakov Anthology* ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (ed.), *A Bulgakov Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1976), p. 6.

¹¹ In the Orthodox tradition the Day of the Holy Spirit is the Monday that follows Pentecost Sunday.

¹² A. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present*, (London: SPCK, 2015), p. 44.

¹³ S. Bulgakov, “Autobiographical Notes”, p. 17.

the world of divine ideas.”¹⁴ After Constantinople, Bulgakov spent three years in Prague.¹⁵

Bulgakov’s future role was secured when, in 1925, at the invitation by Metropolitan Evlogii (Georgievskii), he moved to Paris to teach dogmatics at the St. Serge Orthodox Theological Institute (St. Serge).¹⁶ He also served as its dean. In the 1930s, however, Bulgakov’s time at St. Serge was afflicted by the controversial *Sofia Affair*. While a report commissioned by Metropolitan Evlogii absolved him of guilt,¹⁷ Bulgakov’s reputation was damaged and his faculty divided. Bulgakov has a better experience with the ecumenical movement. The reality of Christian division, strikingly apparent to Russians who had emigrated, raised the prospect of reunion. Among fruitful interactions, Bulgakov successfully engaged with Anglicans at the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (FSASS).

Despite a number of setbacks, Bulgakov left behind a large corpus of writings. As will be established in this paper, while these were largely Christological, they also reflected a developing ecclesiology. Most of Bulgakov’s theology was compiled after his exile; however, the principles that underpinned it were evident as early as in his philosophical writings. Many of these were reflected in an anthology that he published in 1903, *Ot Marksizma k Idealizmu*, which broadly reflected his worldview before he returned to the Church. Bulgakov’s ecclesiology strengthened after exile, and is reflected in numerous contributions that he made to the journal *Put’*. In 1926, Bulgakov pub-

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ B. Gallaher, “Fr. Sergius Bulgakov”, in Pantelis Kalaitzidis et al. (ed.), *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education*, (Volos, Greece: Volos Academy Publications, 2014), p. 201.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

lished "*Ocherki Ucheniya o Tserkvi*" – two ecclesiological articles, the first of which asked whether the Orthodox Church has any external definition of infallibility, while the second considered the question of the nature of Orthodoxy in and its relationship to heterodoxy.

Over the 1930s, the outline of Bulgakov's ecclesiology, emerging out of Christology, crystallised. In 1930, Bulgakov wrote "*Evharisticheskiy Dogmat*", an Orthodox response to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation as well as an attempt at an Orthodox exposition of the eucharistic dogma. In 1933, he published "*Na putyakh dogmy*". In this piece, Bulgakov outlined the principles of an Orthodox dogmatic theology, affirmed the Christology of the ecumenical councils, as well as a background to his sophiology. It was ecclesologically significant in its affirmation of the importance of Christology to Orthodoxy, the "Church of the seven councils", and further established the centrality of Christology to how Christ manifests in the Church - His Body and divine organism.

Altogether, Bulgakov's Christologically-focused ecclesiology crystallised in the second half of the 1930s. In 1935, he published "*Ierarchia i tainstva*", in which he outlined the ecclesiological nature of the hierarchy of the Church and its relationship to sacrament. This affirmed the centrality of Christ, and His presence in the Church, to ecclesiology. The centrality of Christology to ecclesiology was further affirmed by his ecumenical theology. This was clear in his well-known essay "*By Jacob's Well*", published in *The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* in 1933, but in 1938, he published an important article, "*Una Sancta: Osnovaniye Ekumenizma*", which consisted of a summation of his ecumenical theology. Bulgakov laid out his sophiology in the three volumes of his Major Trilogy: *Agnets Bozhiy*, *Utshyitel'* and *Nevesta Agntsa*. As implied by the title of his last volume (trans. "Bride of the Lamb"), published posthu-

mously, was important Christologically and ecclesiologically. A full appraisal of the ecclesiology of Bulgakov's Major Trilogy is beyond the scope of this paper, however, in 1937, he nonetheless summarised his sophiology in the brief *Sophia – The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*. It will be argued in this paper that while Bulgakov's ecclesiology is related to his sophiology, his ecclesiology, in itself, did not necessarily depend on its sophiological aspect.

3 The Philosophical Background of Bulgakov's Ecclesiology

In light of the volume of writings that emerged post-emigration, it is fair to assume that a historian might be forgiven for thinking that Bulgakov's ecclesiology emerged at that time. However, beginning with his reasons for abandoning Marxist convictions, Bulgakov's thought is better regarded as having undergone an integrated, life-long process of development. In fact, the development of his theological perspective began even before he returned to the Church. The origins of Bulgakov's ecclesiology can be traced back to the time when he was interested in Soloviev. On the importance of Soloviev for his spiritual and intellectual development, he later wrote: "...though I do not share his gnostic tendencies, I regard Soloviev as having been my "philosophical guide to Christ" at the time of a change in my own world outlook... moving "From Marxism to Idealism", and... to the Church."¹⁸

¹⁸ S. Bulgakov, *Sophia – the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, (Lindisfarne Press, 1993), p. 112.

As related in the introduction to this paper, it remains the fact that much of Bulgakov's work remains untranslated, and as a consequence of this, he is often viewed without sufficient reference to his earlier work. Bulgakov, however, is best understood in light of the broader milieu of pre-Revolutionary Russian *intelligentsia*, which included the Slavophiles and Dostoyevsky. There, philosophy flowed from theology, and vice versa. Soloviev's influence on Bulgakov is clear in *Ot Marksizma k Idealizmu*. While this compilation preceded Bulgakov's return to the Church, in anticipation of his conversion, the formative principles of the ecclesiology that eventually emerged were already there.

In *Ot Marksizma k Idealizmu*, Bulgakov dedicated a chapter to Soloviev's philosophy. Its title was simple: what does Soloviev offer modern consciousness? Bulgakov answered this question with a principle that was earlier promulgated by Soloviev: "positive all-unity".¹⁹ This, Bulgakov maintained, was all about "whole knowledge, life and (...) creation."²⁰ Thus, while modernity's overarching ideals resulted in a kind of spiritual paralysis - a "crisis of Western philosophy",²¹ as he put it, Bulgakov maintained that Soloviev was unique in his ability to deal with some of the philosophical challenges of the modern era. Bulgakov observed that in doing this, Soloviev had devised a coherent worldview that paved a way for a reconciliation of the principles of "religion, metaphysics and science."²² The crisis of Western philosophy that Soloviev was dealing with, Bugakov main-

¹⁹ S. Bulgakov, *Chto daet sovremennomy soznaniyu filosofia Vladimira Solovieva*, in Sergei Bulgakov, *Ot Marksizma k Idealizmu*, (St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo "Obschestvennaya Pol'za", 1903), p. 195.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 196.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

²² *Ibidem*.

tained, began with Immanuel Kant, who broadly contended that everything that concerns metaphysics, including theology, should be subject to critical analysis.²³ However, in light of Soloviev, in addition to reason, the tool of critical analysis, Bulgakov observed that the proper explanation of metaphysics also needed to account for the existence of faith. This, altogether, supports the view that to everything there is an absolute beginning - a *Logos*. In this, he continued, the three principles of human cognition - faith, reason and experience - come together.²⁴ Thus, via Soloviev, Bulgakov concluded that while God's existence could not be rationalised, He is known in the realisation that He *is*. To the person, this is known in faith.²⁵ By necessity, this incorporates a synergy between God and man - divine-humanity,²⁶ which, according to Soloviev, explains why the world finds itself in a harmonious whole, which results in "positive all-unity". Moreover, this unity manifests as organic unity - as an organism, where multiple disparate parts form a whole without losing their particularity. For this schema, the unifying principle is nothing less than divine love itself.²⁷ In philosophical terms, this led to the conclusion that God is, in fact, the *living* God.²⁸

Altogether, Bulgakov continued that while the dogmatic implications of this philosophical formulation were not new - being in fact already present in the dogma of the ecumenical councils of the 4-7 centuries - Soloviev made an important contribution to modern philosophy, inasmuch as counterintuitively, he de-

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 203-7.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 209.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 210.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 215.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 216.

rived it “on the foundation of critical philosophy and provided it with a formulation that responds to the modern condition of philosophical thought and puts off... (the) speculative challenges of (...) philosophy.”²⁹ Thus, with this chapter, Bulgakov was able to sum up the significance of Soloviev to modernity, which, he believed to be great inasmuch as it accurately reflected axioms inherent to Christianity. Its Christological significance was pivotal to Bulgakov, and from that there was an implied ecclesiological meaning. In Bulgakov’s words:

Soloviev justifiably demonstrates that the essential content of Christianity is its teaching about Christ as the God-Man; in opposition to this, the foundational characteristics of Christian morality have been met before (for example, in the teaching on love in Buddhism)... In the doctrine of Soloviev, Christ is the only beginning of the universal organism, the positive *all*. In this organism, consequently, the unity can be discerned that produces the divine *Logos* or Christ, and the unity that is produced, receives the unified activity of the *Logos*... To the second unity which is produced Soloviev gives the biblical name *Sophia*.³⁰

Thus, via his chapter on Soloviev, Bulgakov established a background, the *weltanschauung* that justified the presence and activity of Christ in the world. Importantly, this preceded Bulgakov’s return to the fold of the Church, and was undeniably formative to the emergence of his renewed Christian conviction. However, this also demonstrates that the sketches of Bulgakov’s Christologically-focused ecclesiology were already becoming apparent. Bulgakov’s conclusion to his chapter on Soloviev makes plain the fact that at this point of his development,

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 220.

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 220-221.

at this stage of his thinking, his reasoning had started to give way to theological insight.³¹ Thus, via his earlier philosophy, Bulgakov was already affirming principles of his later theology, which emerged after his flight to Europe following the Russian Revolution and its related trials.

4 Bulgakov's Ecclesiological Perspective

Bulgakov's Christologically-derived ecclesiology formed shortly after his arrival at St. Serge. A year later, he published his two ecclesiological essays, "*Ocherki Ucheniya o Tserkvi.*" These retained the philosophical background of his earlier writing, but now, his writing had a clear theological character. Bulgakov's ecclesiological essays also reflected an in-between moment in the development of his theology, preceding the development of a more nuanced theological perspective, that emerged over the 1930s. Nevertheless, while Bulgakov's theology remained Christologically-focused, already in the 1920s, it was deeply ecclesiological. This is borne out in an analysis of his two ecclesiological essays.

In his first ecclesiological essay, Bulgakov expanded on the idea of the Church being a divine organism, asking whether Orthodoxy had any "external" concept of infallibility. In formulating this question, Bulgakov contrasted it with the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility *ex cathedra*, contrasted against the Orthodox notion of conciliarity.³² Two sources, he maintained, indicated the nature of conciliarity - firstly, the Eastern Patriar-

³¹ Ibidem, p. 238.

³² S. Bulgakov, *Ocherki Ucheniya o Tserkvi. Obladaet li pravoslavie vneshnym avtorytetom dogmaticheskoi nepogresymosti, Put' 2* (January 1926), p. 47.

chal epistle of 1849, which, without identifying any specific source of infallibility, maintained that truth as a whole is grounded in the people of the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27), and secondly, the example of Aleksey Khomiakov, who, like Soloviev, identified dogma with the notion of divine love.³³ In step with these sources, Bulgakov made clear that truth could not be defined outside the mystical reality of the Church, the divine organism, due to the fact that it fundamentally resides with God.

Thus, according to Bulgakov, anything that lays claim to being ecclesial or indeed “ecumenical” needs to hold to this particular notion of “infallibility”, inasmuch as truth is apprehended within conciliarity, in the Church, and is not defined by human limitations. Even if things known by people are the subject of divine revelation, of its own accord, resolution to an external notion of infallibility is alien to the notion of conciliarity itself.³⁴

To be sure, the examples cited by Bugakov are old from the perspective of modern Orthodox theology, and since the 19th century, Orthodox ecclesiology has progressed - as it has, for example, in the understanding of the eucharistic nature of the unity of the Church. ³⁵ Notwithstanding, by citing these examples, Bulgakov affirmed the elementary principle of Orthodox ecclesiology - that all authority, including dogma, is revealed in the Church as divine organism. Khomiakov was helpful inasmuch as he drew attention to an erroneous attitude to authority that had seeped into Orthodoxy – that, akin to Roman Catholi-

³³ Ibidem, p. 48.

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Kallistos Ware, *Sobornost and Eucharistic Ecclesiology: Aleksei Khomiakov and his successors*, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 11: 2-3 (May-August 2011), p. 218.

cism, the definition of truth and dogma is “external”, with authority not residing with a single pontiff, but with a collective body of bishops. This contrasts with authentic conciliarity, which is based on the notion of Church as Body of Christ and divine organism. Bulgakov explained the nature of this principle well in ecclesiological terms:

But life in the Church is a single, whole action, and for this reason it is always distinguished by its creative aspect, not in the sense of creating something out of nothing, but as a vital, living and consequently, free incarnation of the particulars of ecclesial consciousness. For this reason in Orthodoxy, obedience is always associated with the freedom of the sons of God, the boldness of the friends of God, without extinguishing the Spirit, without the abasement of prophecy. The Church can never be the lifeless guardian of tradition; it always demands the boldness of love (...) however the authentic sense of Church-ness is identified especially in the realisation that the authority of the Church is not external, not imposed, but indeed, is that which is loved (...) in which personal love and will find expression. This distinguishes Orthodoxy from Catholicism and Protestantism.³⁶

Thus, while Bulgakov also acknowledged differences between different confessions, he was also at pains to stress the importance of the mystical notion of the Church as divine organism. And, assuming an equality in the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, by asserting this fundamental and elementary ecclesiological position, Bulgakov identified the Church, by its very nature, with the Person of Christ. Moreover, given that this assumed the divine reality in which humans participate, in the life

³⁶ S. Bulgakov, *Ocherki Ucheniya o Tserkvi: Obladaet li pravoslavie vneshnym avtorytetom dogmaticheskoi nepogresymosti*, p. 52.

of the Church, Bulgakov's ecclesiology is closely aligned to his Christology. Bulgakov spelled out this point in the introduction to his second ecclesiological essay, which he framed in relation to the notion of Church and the question of heresy. Bulgakov maintained that:

The Church is the grace-filled life in the Holy Spirit, and the grace-filled life is salvation. For this reason there is no and there cannot be any division, not contradiction between the Church and salvation: outside the Church there is no salvation, because life in the Church is salvation... The unity of the Church obviously emerges from the teaching about it as the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, new grace-filled life, and this consciousness is revealed in Church tradition with complete clarity.³⁷

Thus, a salient point to have emerged from Bulgakov's two ecclesiological essays was a focus on the Person of Christ is also ecclesiological in nature. Ecclesiology is at one with Christology. Thus, via his early ecclesiological essays, Bulgakov strengthened and gave shape to his earlier-established philosophical position of Christ being the centre of the Church which is a spiritual organism. At this stage, Bulgakov's ecclesiological insight was limited in scope, however, it was in the 1930s that his theology made significant strides.

In 1930, Bulgakov refined his Christology with the publication of a seminal article, "*Evharisticheskiy dogmat*" over two editions of *Put'*. Despite its clear focus on eucharistic theology, its content was Christologically significant. It was also by looking at these aspects that Bulgakov's broader theological perspective took shape. Altogether, Bulgakov's article presented as an apology against the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation*,

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 3.

as well as an attempt to synthesise an Orthodox dogma of the eucharist. Referring to Thomas Aquinas, Bulgakov expounded on Roman Catholic doctrine, which was based on the specific interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy that distinguished between “substance” and “accident” - substance referring to that which something fundamentally is, accident referring to its form - how it presents.³⁸ With the Roman Catholic doctrine, the critical point was that in the eucharistic sacrament, the substance of the Holy Gifts becomes the substance of Christ’s Body and Blood without any change to the accident. While the substance of bread and wine becomes the substance of Christ’s Body and Blood,³⁹ its form remains the same.

Bulgakov responded to this with an Orthodox synthesis of the eucharistic dogma. In contrast to Roman Catholic dogma, for the Orthodox, the critical question was not whether change takes place in the substance of the bread and the wine, but in the nature of the change. No change of physical substance is required because the nature of the change is metaphysical.⁴⁰ Bulgakov reasoned antimonically - maintaining, that even if the physical substance of the bread and wine remains unchanged, the real presence of His Body and Blood is nonetheless accomplished.⁴¹ This, he maintained, is the miracle of the eucharist, which, in being mystical, is apprehended by faith.⁴² As with the need not to articulate the nature of infallibility in the Church in his first ecclesiological essay, Bulgakov did not see any need to explain the “process” of the eucharistic change. He reasoned was straightforwardly and Christologically - that merely, the

³⁸ S. Bulgakov, *Evharisticheskiy dogmat*, (February 1930), p. 10.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

real Body and Blood of Christ are in the eucharist. Its ecclesiological aspect is also clear. As with Bulgakov's reception back into the Church, it is axiomatic to the eucharist that those who partake of it are also members of the Church. Eucharistic participation is also inherent to the formation of the *ecclesia*, the Body of Christ.

Following the subject of the eucharistic dogma, the next of Bulgakov's articles from the 1930s was "*Na putyakh dogmy*", which was published in 1933. Intended as an exposition of the principles of Orthodox dogmatic theology, and as a likely background to his sophiology, Bulgakov focused on the general question of Christ that, he maintained, was posited by dogma: "Who do the people say that I am?" (Lk 9:18)⁴³ On the one hand, it is important to state from the outset that dogmatic theology has ecclesiological significance, inasmuch as it is in this milieu that the visible Church came to be. As Bulgakov observed, the Orthodox Church is often referred to as the Church of the seven ecumenical councils.⁴⁴ However, it is also the case that most of the deliberations of the ecumenical councils Christological, and it is in their corporate meaning that the significance of the ecumenical councils is apprehended. It is, Bulgakov maintained, incorrect to regard the ecumenical councils as "sacred oracles, each separately proclaiming their (dogmatic) definitions." They are, rather, part of a whole,⁴⁵ each responding in a specific way to the question posed by Christ in the Gospel of Luke. It is, as a result of this, likewise incorrect to regard the resolutions of the ecumenical councils as having equal dogmatic weight. Each was unique in respect of its specific Christological significance. The

⁴³ S. Bulgakov, *Na putyakh dogmy*, *Put'* 37 (February 1933), p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

second ecumenical council was not as important as the first; the third and fifth not as important as the fourth or sixth. The seventh ecumenical council had special significance.⁴⁶ It is, however, in the corporate meaning of the ecumenical councils that insight into Christological mystery is gleaned.

Thus, the corporate meaning of the ecumenical councils can be summed up in one purpose: to proclaim the dogma of Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man.⁴⁷ In *“Na putyakh dogmy”*, he related this as a historical journey. Originally, an answer to Christ’s question was attempted by Apollinarius, who differentiated between His divine and human natures. He also suggested how they are united.⁴⁸ Thus began the Christological debates of the subsequent centuries. Bulgakov related the paths of the Alexandrian and Antiochene Schools, each of whom proposed a thesis / antithesis to the original question. While the Alexandrians stressed the unity of the divine and the human, the Antiochenes stressed their duality.⁴⁹ Bulgakov honed in on Cyril of Alexandria, who maintained that Christ had two natures. Overall, Christological controversies raged on until a formula was agreed on at the Chalcedonian Council of 451AD, which pronounced that in Christ there is one ὑπόστασις, ἐν δύο φύσεσιν – one Person, two natures.⁵⁰ In essence, however, despite advances in Christological insight, this was still just an answer to the original question that was posed by Christ.⁵¹ But for Bulgakov, it was in the life of Christ that this answer was realised. Bulgakov explained this as follows:

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 18.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 21.

Is the unity of the two natures into one hypostasis a mechanical joining of properties, analogous to any other kind of joining, and thus an inanimate category that does not at all grasp the spiritual characteristic that abides in the natures respectively? This question we can answer with a decisive and categorical “no”. Essential for us is a personal understanding; we think in personal categories, while antiquity, as patristics, only the category of the object. We speak not of algebra or even anatomy, but of a single Person, living two lives – divine and human. Why, as the divine *hypostasis* of the *Logos*, is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity able to be human at the same time, where there is not only a formal, but an inner basis for this to be the case? In a word, before us emerges in its full scope the question of the divine-human Person and divine-human life – in other words, the question of divine humanity, the living image of which we have in the Gospel.⁵²

In general, it is axiomatic to Bulgakov that sophiology is inherently tied to dogmatic theology. However, it is a curious fact that Bulgakov did not refer to sophiology in this “*Na putyakh dogmy*”. Nevertheless, given the way in which in the above example he contemplated the notion of divine-humanity⁵³ which is inherent to his sophiology, it is likely that aside from it being a general reflection on dogmatic theology. Bulgakov’s other purpose in writing “*Na putyakh dogmy*” was to pave the way for sophiology. As discussed further in this paper, Bulgakov’s later sophiology comprised an attempt to further the dogmatic Christological synthesis that Chalcedon left unfinished.

Importantly, in “*Na putyakh dogmy*”, Bulgakov noted Chalcedon’s inherent limitation in “*Na putyakh dogmy*” - that, while it

⁵² Ibidem, p. 26.

⁵³ Ibidem.

explained *that* Christ had two natures, it did not further explain what this meant. The Chalcedonian formula was limited in that it rested on four negative adjectives – unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably, which affirmed the unity of Christ’s two natures,⁵⁴ while the sixth ecumenical council confirmed this with its affirmation of His two wills.⁵⁵ However, after that, the synthesis of Christological dogma came to a sudden halt. Notwithstanding, as will be discussed in this paper, with this insight, the Christological focus of Bulgakov’s theology was thus reinforced. Its ecclesiological corollary is that by further unravelling the Christological mystery, the nature of the Church, as divine organism and His Body, is further revealed. As with his earlier ecclesiological essays, Bulgakov’s Christology is inherently tied in to his ecclesiology. This continues to be the case as his theology developed over the 1930s.

Continuing the trend of his articles in *Put’*, the Christological aspect of Bulgakov’s ecclesiology came into focus with his article, “*Ierarchia i tainstva*”, published in 1935. In this article, Bulgakov discussed the historic origin of the Church hierarchy and considered its relationship to sacrament. However, compared with his two earlier articles, here, ecclesiological insight was direct. Bulgakov observed that while the hierarchy of the Church – bishop, priest and deacon – could be traced back to the second century,⁵⁶ its most important attribute was that it was apostolic. However, in this, “apostolic” did not just mean episcopal succession via the laying on of hands. Rather, consistent with his early ecclesiological essays, Bulgakov had in mind the fullness of the apostolic tradition according to the

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

⁵⁶ S. Bulgakov, *Ierarchia i tainstva*, *Put’* 49 (October–December 1935), p. 23.

notion of the Church as divine organism. Bulgakov maintained that theologically speaking, one of the most important attributes of the episcopacy is its ability to know itself as a divine institution - which, while manifesting in history, is a fact of divine-humanity,⁵⁷ which is mystery. Integral to Bulgakov's argument is the fact that the episcopacy is part of the *ecclesia*, the organic unity of the Church, *sobornost*, with each of the members of the Church united in one body. He also maintained that the derivation of the three ranks of the ecclesial hierarchy are derived not institutionally, but eucharistically.⁵⁸ The participation of the Church, the divine organism in the episcopacy is reflected in the ἄξιος of the faithful at the rite of episcopal ordination.⁵⁹

Continuing his line of argument, Bulgakov maintained that in contrast to the historic institutionalisation of the visible Church, the hierarchy should know itself as being part of, not "above" the Church, which remains a divine organism and the Body of Christ. The authority of the Church is eucharistic, not institutional, in nature. This is attested to by the fact that in Orthodoxy, the eucharist is a corporate act - neither bishop nor priest should ever preside alone.⁶⁰ However, the unfortunate historic reality of the Church is that episcopal authority has, in fact, mostly become institutional. In historical terms, this peaked with the instantiation of Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infal-

⁵⁷ Ibidem, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 31.

⁶⁰ Bulgakov observes that although the requisite practice for the Orthodox Church is for the eucharistic service to be conducted corporately, this was not always the case. For example, Theophan the Recluse served Divine Liturgy on a daily basis by himself. S. Bulgakov, *Ierarchia i tainstva, Put' 49* (October–December 1935), p. 34.

libility *ex cathedra*, which, as Bulgakov earlier noted, was alien to Orthodoxy. Bulgakov altogether held out hope that in modernity, the Church might reawaken to the original principle of episcopal authority, grounded in the principle of Christ as High Priest.⁶¹ Authentic ecclesiology resided in the ability of its hierarchy to apprehend that its authority is, in fact, ecclesial - its unity focused on Christ, whose Body it is. In this schema, any institutional understanding of Church was at best secondary to the life of Jesus Christ the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

As Bulgakov's theology developed during the 1930s, he also betrayed a particularly strong ecclesiological imperative in his ecumenical theology. This was a project of many years, which took place during the time in which the above-analysed articles were written. Earlier, we noted that confronting the reality of division in the Church raised the real prospect that the unity of the Church might be restored, and, in the process of encountering long-estranged Christians, this led to a need to deal with differences between confessions. Theological difference became the subject of ecumenical conferences.⁶² With little doubt, Bulgakov's most productive ecumenical encounter was with Anglicans at the FSASS.⁶³

It was, however, also in this that the Christological basis of Bulgakov's ecclesiology had been slow. By 1934, he came to believe that progress in ecumenical engagement ecumenical progress

⁶¹ Ibidem, pp. 39-40

⁶² B. Gallaher, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, in Pantelis Kalaitzidis et al. (ed.), *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education*, (Volos, Greece: Volos Academy Publications, 2014), p. 202.

⁶³ N. Zernov, *The History of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius - A Historical Memoir* by Nicolas and Militza Zernov (1979), p. 4. http://www.sobornost.org/Zernov_History-of-the-Fellowship.pdf Accessed 4-9-2019.

was slow, and he proposed that “partial intercommunion” be instantiated between Orthodox and Anglican participants of the FSASS. Although Bulgakov’s proposal was not adopted, however, it was significant in light of what it revealed about the development of his ecclesiology. Bulgakov was sceptical of the value of theological discourse in the facilitation of Church unity of the Church, and came to accept that the eucharist played an important role. The focus of Bulgakov’s vision of the unity of the Church became the reality of the Body and Blood of Christ. In “By Jacob’s Well”, he wrote that “the way towards the reunion of East and West does not lie through tournaments between the theologians of the East and of the West, but through a reunion before the Altar.”⁶⁴

To be sure, Bulgakov’s enthusiasm for ecumenical engagement was tempered by the frenetic pace of the times, but he also felt that the emphasis placed on theological discussion was not getting very far. His proposal was not accepted. However, in the November-January 1938-39 edition of *Put’*, he outlined the basis of an ecumenical theology in “*Una Sancta: Osnovaniye Eku-menizma*”. In this article, Bulgakov reiterated the fact that there were great divisions between Christians, multiple confessions or “churches”.⁶⁵ However, despite that, in theological terms, it remained a fact that the Church as divine organism and Body of Christ could only be one, Bulgakov intended to formulate a theology to sort out this paradox. Bulgakov distinguished between the “ontological” Church, which is the Church “in its essence, depth and life-force”, and the “empirical” Church, which is the

⁶⁴ S. Bulgakov, *By Jacob’s Well*, *The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 22 (December 1933), p. 17.

⁶⁵ S. Bulgakov, *Una Sancta: Osnovaniye ekumenizma*, *Put’*, (Nov 1938 – Jan 1939), p. 3.

Church as it manifests in history. Put differently, the “ontological” Church was the Church of the biblical accounts, the “spiritual organism”,⁶⁶ which manifested as love, *sobornost*, and is the image of the Holy Trinity.⁶⁷ The “empirical”, rather, is the institution of the Church that people know.

While possible, Bulgakov maintained, the “empirical” could have something in common with the “ontological” – such as the hierarchy of the Church borne of the eucharist – the reality is that in historical terms, a great “hiatus” had happened between the “ontological” and the “empirical”, between how the Church is theologically and how it manifests historically. This resulted in confessional boundaries, which in time led to the divided situation in which the ecumenical movement found itself.⁶⁸ Bulgakov asked whether this “hiatus” could be bridged. Echoing his earlier call in “By Jacob’s Well”, Bulgakov’s response was Christological and eucharistic. Like he did with his earlier articles, he asserted the power and authority of the Christological focus of the Church, because the “prophetic call of ecumenism... is averse to confessional exclusionism, and sees in its separated brothers authentic brothers in Christ, members of the Body of Christ.”⁶⁹

It is important to note that Bulgakov was not oblivious to the risk of syncretism in the where Christians of various confessions gather to engage in ecumenical dialogue.⁷⁰ However, this was not the important point. Bulgakov wanted the ecumenical movement to be at one with the “ontological” Church - the Body of Christ. It was also important, he believed, for the Orthodox to

⁶⁶ Ibidem, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 10.

know of their own departure from this,⁷¹ and recognise that the Spirit continues to act beyond their own confessional boundaries.⁷² Like he did in *“By Jacob’s Well”*, Bulgakov concluded on a eucharistic note, noting that the prayer “for the union of all” remains strong, because “the Cup of Christ remains one even if those who approach it are divided”, and “in this depth we meet and recognise each other in our unity in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.”⁷³ Thus, according to Bulgakov, it is in faithfulness to the inherent Christological focus of the Church that there is hope for it to be healed of its divided state. Like with his earlier articles, Bulgakov’s ecclesiology closely followed on from his Christology, which by the end of the 1930s became consistent in his theology.

5 Bulgakov’s Sophiology

Apart from Bulgakov’s contributions to *Put’*, Bulgakov’s sophiology was, without a doubt, theologically significant. However, it is a curious fact that Bulgakov’s articles in *Put’* hardly mention it.⁷⁴ I would like to contend that while Bulgakov’s sophiology is related to his ecclesiology, the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology, which is ubiquitous to Bulgakov’s work, is not contingent on sophiology. This, of course, does not mean

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ An exception to this is a section at the end of the second instalment of *“Evharisticheskiy dogmat”*, entitled *“Sofiologicalheskoye istolkovaniye evharisticheskogo dogmata”*, in which discusses eucharistic dogma in light of sophiology. It is noteworthy that this followed the main article, suggesting that at least at that time, it was thematically distinct. S. Bulgakov, *Evharisticheskiy dogmat, Put’* 21 (April 1930): 21-33.

that we exclude sophiology from the present analysis. It does, however, raise the prospect of studying some of Bulgakov's work apart from his sophiology. In this section of the present paper, the elementary principles of Bulgakov's sophiology will be considered, reinforcing the fact that, like in Bulgakov's other work, Christology was foundational to Bulgakov's ecclesiological point of view.

In 1937, Bulgakov published *Sophia – The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*. This was a short, summative book in which Bulgakov outlines the principles of his sophiology for English-speaking readers who had otherwise had limited access to his work. Here, Bulgakov returned to his moment in *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople and reflected on its significance to the development of his own ecclesiological point of view. "Those who have visited the church of St. Sophia.... will find themselves permanently enriched by a new apprehension of the world in God", he related, "here Plato is baptized into Christianity, for here, surely, we have the lofty realm into which souls ascend for the contemplation of ideas."⁷⁵ Bulgakov also cited numerous other churches dedicated to *Sophia*; however, on the whole, it is a fact that "Byzantine theology... has left behind no explanation of that to which its ecclesiastical architecture bears witness."⁷⁶ But, in addition to Church architecture, part of the nature of the sophiological tradition of the Church is how it has been revealed hymnologically. Reflecting the theological insight of Bulgakov's sophiology, in hymns, firstly, attention is drawn to divine sophia, which is Christological, and secondly, to creaturely sophia. Supreme creaturely sophia manifests reflected in the

⁷⁵ S. Bulgakov, *Sophia – the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, (Lindisfarne Press, 1993), p. 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Theotokos, the Mother of God. While *sophia* had clearly been known in history, understanding of it had become lost.⁷⁷ Bulgakov saw this as an opportunity for original theological synthesis, to manifest “a living tradition”.

On the one hand, given their combined interest in sophiology, Soloviev's influence on Bulgakov is clear; as noted earlier, Bulgakov wrote as much in his *Autobiographical Notes*. However, Bulgakov's own sophiological journey mirrored his own personal journey from philosopher to theologian. Later in life, Bulgakov was critical of Soloviev for being “syncretistic”.⁷⁸ In Bulgakov's earlier reflections on Soloviev, recall that in “*Na putyakh dogmy*” Bulgakov intended to continue where Chalcedon had stopped.⁷⁹ He wanted to integrate sophiology into the tradition of the Church. And, as with his other theology, Bulgakov's sophiological Christology also had an ecclesiology.

Altogether, Bulgakov maintained that sophiology comprised a “theological (...) interpretation of the world.”⁸⁰ Responding to critics, he stressed that it did not contradict Orthodox theology, however, it “brings a special interpretation to bear upon all Christian teaching and dogma.”⁸¹ Bulgakov's sophiology accepts all of the dogma of the Orthodox Church,⁸² however, it further proposes a unique way of understanding that which is “in between” the realm of God and the realm of man. In sum, Bulgakov's sophiology was a *theologumen* on the nature of divine-humanity, recovering what he believed had been lost in history. Bulgakov explained this in the following way:

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

The answer to this question has been given long ago in the Christian faith, but it has remained a dead letter; it has not, so to speak, become a living reality. This answer is contained in the fundamental dogma of Christianity concerning Divine-humanity. The creaturely world is united with the divine world in divine Sophia. Heaven stoops toward earth; the world is not only a world in itself, it is also the world in God, and God abides not only in heaven but also on earth with human beings. Our Lord says of himself: "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth." (Matt 28:18) Divine-humanity represents a dogmatic call both to spiritual ascesis and to creativity, to salvation from the world and to a salvation of the world. This is the dogmatic banner which should be henceforth unfurled with all power and all glory in the Church is Christ.

The dogma of Divine-humanity is precisely the main theme of sophiology, which in fact represents nothing other than its full dogmatic elucidation."⁸³

Altogether, the synthesis of Bulgakov's sophiology works on the principle of Christ's self-revelation in divine sophia, and recognises creation's response to God in creaturely sophia. It is about the condescension of divine love and mankind's response to that. This fact, Bulgakov continued, is reflected in the fact that churches dedicated to sophia, historically, were also dedicated to the *Theotokos*,⁸⁴ who reflected the creaturely sophianic response *par excellence*. Thus, while sophiology is principally Christological, its creaturely response is ecclesiological in that it reflects the activity of the Church as divine organism and Body of Christ. It is, to be sure, a mature exposition of the "positive all-unity" that Bulgakov observed in Soloviev in *Ot Marksizma k Idealizmu*. The entire scope of the ecclesiology of Bulgakov's

⁸³ Ibidem.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

sophiological reflections is reflected in the posthumously-published third volume of his Major Trilogy - *Nevesta Agntsa*. An analysis of the ecclesiological aspects of Bulgakov's sophiology according to his Maor Trilogy, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main insight that emerges from the study of this paper is that over the course of Bulgakov's life, he derived an ecclesiology that was inherently connected with his Christology. While it is true that Bulgakov's sophiology was important to Christology, it can also be said that some of Bulgakov's theology did not depend on it. This is important, because for most of the second half of the 20th century, modern Orthodox theology has been seen to be divided into two "trends or orientations",⁸⁵ largely as a result of a misapprehension of his sophiology. However, some of Bulgakov's theology did not in itself depend on it. This is important, because in large part, Bulgakov's legacy remains controversial.

However, I would like to propose that some of how Bulgakov is seen is misdirected, Bulgakov's Christologically-focused ecclesiology is a case in point. In this paper, the Christological focus of his ecclesiology is demonstrated as, despite having been developed over his journey from philosophy to theology, having been consistent over the course of his life. This reflects the need for scholarship to reconsider Bulgakov, a need which was rec-

⁸⁵ A. Schmemmann, *Russian Theology 1920-1972: An Introductory Survey*, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 16:4 (1972), p. 175.

ognised by Nikolai Lossky in the 1950s. His observations ring true today:

The problems discussed by Father Bulgakov are among the most complex and most difficult problems in Christian metaphysics. Each of them is open to a number of different solutions, and every solution is so interconnected with numberless other problems that it cannot be final but needs further elucidation, limitation or completion. That can only be done if many persons are able to calmly discuss the subject. Disputes about such matters can only be fruitful in an atmosphere of good will, tolerance, and spiritual discipline that holds passions in check (...).

The work of every original ecclesiastical thinker calls forth bitter disputes, and only after a certain lapse of time the positive and negative aspects of his theories are sorted out in the life of the Church. The same fate awaits the teaching of Father Sergius Bulgakov who will undoubtedly be recognized as one of the outstanding Russian theologians.⁸⁶

Lossky's observations are applicable to the Christological focus of Bulgakov's ecclesiology. Reading Bulgakov, it is clear that much of the controversy surrounding him has inhibited measured scholarly reflection on his work, and in turn, and the benefit that it affords to Orthodox theology in modernity. This has been accentuated by the scarcity of translated works. As is clear from this paper, Bulgakov engaged with patristics, and this places him in good stead for discourse with patristic scholars, whose goal is, ultimately, for theology to be alive to the present. One of the benefits of Bulgakov, therefore, is as a significant scholarly resource. Given his pioneering ecumenical activity, this is especially the case with respect to ecumenical engage-

⁸⁶ N. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952), pp. 231-232.

ment and the primary place of Christology in interconfessional discourse. Bulgakov's advocacy of a cognisance with divine reality as a basis of ecumenical engagement suggests an alternative to the prevalence of theological discussion in ecumenical engagement. As a methodological consideration, Bulgakov also suggests common order of theological synthesis – attributing primacy to Christology, from which ecclesiology necessarily follows. Bulgakov's theology, similarly, has the potential to be instructive to the interface between philosophy and theology, given that it was, to an extent, out of his philosophy that the principles of his Christology and ecclesiology ultimately emerged.

Finally, the study of Bulgakov's Christologically-focused ecclesiology implied that theological synthesis is a living process. Bulgakov did not intend to herald a divorce of the Orthodox deep commitment to patristic scholarship; rather, his stress on the need for theology to be alive recognises creation's a timeless response to the Holy Trinity in any age. Bulgakov was unique among modern Orthodox in his want for original theological synthesis; and, even if his sophiological *theologumen* is yet to be adequately appraised, it is a stark reminder that theology is every bit a process of active reflection as it is of conservative preservation. This principle remains salient today as it was a century ago.