

Sergii Bulgakov's Eschatological Perspectives on Human History

Marta Samokishyn

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 262)

Sergii Bulgakov was one of the most creative and important Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, associated with the internationally influential “Paris school” of theology based at l’Institut Saint-Serge, where so many post-revolutionary East-Slavic intellectuals found refuge and undertook creative work. After a brief biographical sketch reviewing the main contours of his life, the question of human history and its transcendental dimension is examined here through the issue of human creativity. All this is seen in Bulgakov’s discussions of the relationship between culture and eschatology. The topic of human creativity in history, which is expressed in the eschatological exclamation “Maranatha!” is of great relevance today. Bulgakov’s anthropological approach to history, the boundaries of history, the antinomic relationship between time and eternity, the tragedy of human history, and its resultant openness to eschatology, are all examined along with Bulgakov’s understanding of history’s transfiguration through the creative holiness of the Church.



*The Kingdom of God has to be won by common work,
the creative effort of mankind as well
as the creative work of God.¹*

Introduction

This paper will address the question of human history and its transcendental dimension through the issue of human creativity as seen primarily in the work of Sergii Bulgakov,² one of the foremost Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century. I will sketch out the possible implications of Bulgakov's discourse for discussions of the relationship between culture and eschatology, as a creative reconsideration of the Christian message.³ I will, moreover, examine Bulgakov's understanding of history and eschatology by way of an interpretation of human creativity. The topic of human creativity in history, which is expressed in the eschatological exclamation "Maranatha!" is of great relevance today. The reasons for this are aptly described by Bulgakov in his *Bride of the Lamb* and, to my mind, reveal his "prophetic" approach to reality.⁴ Bulgakov writes:

Precisely our epoch in the history of Christianity is destined to understand this [creative] vocation of man

¹ Sergii Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology," in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 285.

² In this paper we are following Rowan Williams's transliteration of the Russian name of Bulgakov. In *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, Williams admits that Bulgakov, even though baptized Sergei, followed "the normal Russian custom of adopting the more archaic spelling (Sergii) on his ordination" (p. 2).

³ In my paper, I am using the word "eschatology," as it was used in the twentieth century Russian Orthodox context in Paris. The word "eschatology" comes from the Greek word ἔσχατος, meaning "last things," and, in the present context, concerns the transcendental activity of humanity in the context of the Christian anticipation of the Kingdom of God, which constitutes the basis for the inner growth of humanity in God.

⁴ By "prophetic" I understand the ability of the author to combine faithfulness to the Tradition with an approach to reality that allows him to reconsider Tradition and apply it to the needs and conditions of his own age.

as emanating from his rootedness in God, as the feature of the image of God in him. Just as other truths of Christianity were understood more fully in the battle against heresy, so a crucial dogmatic question in our own time is the heresy of life in relation to Christian creative activity.⁵

Bulgakov saw one of the greatest dangers of his own time in what he called “creativity ‘in its own name,’”⁶ in which a form of “luciferian creative intoxication”⁷ is widespread. Thus, it is important to stress that the creative activity of human beings in history is directed and rooted in eschatology and therefore is, as Bulgakov states, “a further unfolding of the Chalcedonian and ditheletic dogma,”⁸ because “what was accomplished in Christ was pre-accomplished for the whole of humankind.”⁹ Hence, Bulgakov appears here as a “prophet,”¹⁰ who was able to find and answer the question of his time, being faithful to the spirit of Tradition in his creative searches. In his Autobiographical Notes, Bulgakov wrote that Christianity somehow lost its sense of the eschatological, “not in its dogma, but in fact, under the overwhelming burden of its historical heritage.”¹¹ In his writings Bulgakov was attempting to return to the eschatological quest with the help of a creative reconsideration of the rich heritage of Tradition. Iryna Rodnianskaia points out in the foreword to the Russian edition of *Sviet Nevechernii* [Unfading Light] that the reason for Bulgakov's great interest in the concept of history was his search for an answer to the tragedy of the historical reality of Russia and

⁵ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 332.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ He was also called a prophet by his spiritual daughter Joanna Reitlinger in her autobiography, which can be found in http://krotov.info/library/m/menn/3_reyling_biogr.htm. Cf. Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 29.

¹¹ Sergii Bulgakov, “Autobiographical Notes” in *Sergius Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Anthology*, eds., J. Pain and N. Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), 19.

Europe.¹² Consequently, his main desire was for the “‘Christian impulse’ to be able to act within history and for humanity to find in the heart of human history the thread of sacred history.”¹³

Bulgakov and the Paris School of Theology

The author from whose perspective we will examine the topic of human history and eschatology was not chosen arbitrarily. As an Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century, Bulgakov proposed a new approach to Orthodox theology, taking into account the human condition in his own lifetime. The questions he asked remain relevant for our time as well, perhaps with even greater force than before.¹⁴

The time to which Bulgakov belonged can be described as one of religious revival, which began from the blossoming of Russian philosophical ideas in the early nineteenth century and reached its apogee in the theology of the Paris school during the twentieth. The most important factor in the formation of this school (around l’Institut Saint-Serge) was its historical connection to the cataclysms of the twentieth century: two world wars, revolution, exile, misery and sufferings. The extensive experience of the representatives of the Paris school formed in them a broad perspective on Church life, first of all, as well as on the position of the Church in society. Being divorced from the Russian environment, Russian émigrés in Paris were able to re-appropriate creatively the Christian message within new circumstances. Ultimately, the reason for the

¹² Iryna Rodnianskaia, “Chytel I Tolmach Zamysla o Mire” [The Worshiper and Interpreter of the Plan for the World] in *Sviet Nevechernii: Sozertsanie I Umozrenie*, Sergii Bulgakov (Moskva: Isskustvo, 1999), 15.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ It is very important to admit that the twenty-first century poses its own questions which are different from and perhaps even deeper than those of the twentieth century. But at the same time we can track the transformation from modernity to post-modernity not as totally different epochs, but rather as the continuation of some of the same questions in a deeper and more forceful manner. This is where the legacy of Bulgakov becomes clearly valuable.

relevance of the Paris school today is that its theology “is not a matter of epoch, but bears the stamp of a timeless actuality.”¹⁵

Paul Valliere states that the mission of the Paris school can be described as the development of “a theology of engagement with and involvement in the secular world, to offer a sympathetic theological interpretation of secular experience and thereby to introduce into Orthodox theology a more positive and affirmative relationship between church and world.”¹⁶ The representatives of the school criticized “both modern secularism and traditional theology” for the belief of both tendencies that “the new world of modern times is godless.”¹⁷ They returned an eschatological element to theology, without any sort of pseudo-religious escape or utopian transformation of this world. Bulgakov is described as the one who, among all key theologians of the Orthodox Church of the last century, “most consciously and extensively engaged with post-Enlightenment thought.”¹⁸

Bulgakov had a broad perspective on Church life, first of all, as well as on the position of the Church in society. An essential aspect of Bulgakov's biography is his involvement with Marxist philosophy as a means for transforming Russian society.¹⁹ At that period of his life, Bulgakov was concerned about democratic socialism as the “best form of government and economic organization.”²⁰ However, the Marxist utopian understanding of positive social progress moved Bulgakov to German idealism when he saw that Marxism was not able to communicate the historical justification of the good. Bulgakov had experienced a great shift in his worldview from Marxism

¹⁵ Gorazd Kocijancic, “Soloviev's Actuality” at http://www.kud-logos.si/logos_23_2001_kocijancic1_ang.asp.

¹⁶ Paul Valliere, “Russian Religious Thought and the Future of Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 45 (2001): 232.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁸ Rowan Williams, “Eastern Orthodox Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. D.F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 504–505.

¹⁹ For Bulgakov's Marxist ideas, see *Capitalism and Agriculture and From Marxism to Idealism*.

²⁰ Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church*, 34.

to idealism. Bulgakov was trying to translate patristic notions into the language of his time.

Bulgakov suggested that theology should be able to communicate its message in the language of contemporary philosophy and thus to enter dialogue with the world. For example, Bulgakov “did not consider the doctrine of the Incarnation, as such, a sufficient Christian answer to ‘secularization’.”²¹ Instead, he saw his task as the reconsideration of traditional beliefs through the lenses of his contemporary historical and cultural situation.

Described as “a towering figure on the horizon of twentieth-century Eastern Orthodox theology,”²² Bulgakov is also “a living icon” of the last century.²³ Such a characterization of Bulgakov offers us the opportunity to recognize his faithfulness to the spirit of Eastern Christian theology, which tradition presupposes that one can theologize on the basis of one’s personal experience of communication with God. Metropolitan Evlogy said that Bulgakov’s theology was the fruit not only of his brain but also of the hard trials of his heart.²⁴ Iryna Rodnianskaia has come up with a very apt characterization of Bulgakov’s theological thought. She said that his *liubomudrie* [любомудрие],²⁵ in other words all his theological discourse, “grows from the same root as the tree of Life.”²⁶ It is precisely this aspect of the theological heritage of Bulgakov that makes him relevant in our time.

Without going into a detailed analysis of Bulgakov’s biography due to the limited scope of this paper, it is useful to

²¹ John Meyendorff, “Creation of the History of Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983): 32.

²² Paul Gavrilyuk, “Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (2006): 110.

²³ See Michael Plekon, *Living Icons*, 29–58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁵ She uses the Slavonic calque *любомудрие* in place of the word *философия* [philosophy], which certainly exists in Russian and is the standard term. This can perhaps be seen as an attempt to give Bulgakov’s creative thinking a special aura. He does not simply philosophize but exercises love of wisdom.

²⁶ Proceedings of the international theological conference “The Human Person in the Church and Society” (held in Moscow, September 17–19, 2001): http://www.sfi.ru/lib.asp?rubr_id=755&art_id=3993.

examine at least briefly some of the experiences in Bulgakov's life which might shed light on his emphasis on the eschatological. One of the reasons for Bulgakov's eschatological interest can be explained, according to Paul Gavrilyuk, by a very early experience of the confrontation with "the sacramental dimension of death."²⁷ Bulgakov was born in 1871 in the family of a provincial Russian Orthodox priest, "who made his living officiating at funerals."²⁸

Bulgakov was also under many other influences. After a period in the seminary, when he lost his faith for a while, Bulgakov developed a fascination with Marxism. That was one of the reasons he was so concerned with the meaning of human history and the notion of progress. Bulgakov's eschatological searching can be seen in his coming to understand Marxism as "an apocalyptic movement."²⁹ At the time, Bulgakov was studying law at the University of Moscow. Later he would do some lecturing in political economy at the same university and also at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, after which he returned to Moscow. In 1901, his reconciliation with the Church began, and by 1918 Bulgakov became a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church.³⁰ After the Revolution, he had to leave Russia with his family, finally settling in Paris after considerable wandering in exile (Crimea, Istanbul, Prague).

In 1925, Bulgakov became a professor and the dean of the St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris,³¹ an emerging and dynamic centre of activity whose influence was and continues to be tremendous in the theological environments of both East and West. The theology of this school was marked by a vivid longing for a reconsideration of Christianity as a life-giving relationship between God and His Church. Here one can find many influences which shaped the formation of Bulgakov. The influence of Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), and especially his

²⁷ Paul Gavrilyuk, "Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov," 111.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Charles Graves, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* (Geneva: printed privately, 1972), 1.

³¹ Michael Plekon, *Living Icons*, 39.

1914 work *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* on the later development of Bulgakov's eschatological vision was tremendous.³² Here Bulgakov began to develop "an eschatological system unmatched in its breadth by any other Russian religious thinker," in the words of Paul Gavrilyuk.³³

Bulgakov's theological heritage is tremendously rich: it consists of many monographs and articles, but it also can be felt in the influence that his theological thought has had on several generations of thinkers. Michael Plekon evaluates Bulgakov as a "faithful yet creative professor of theology whose prayer at the beginning and end of most books was, 'Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus!'"³⁴ As we will presently see, this prayer has great significance in Bulgakov's understanding of history and eschatology.

The Concept of Human History

I would like now to attend to Bulgakov's understanding of historicity and the notion of history itself. As we have seen in the introduction, the author's reconsideration of history is deeply connected to the exploration of creativity from an anthropological point view. A definition of the important notions of Bulgakov is needed first.

The author's conception of history partially derives from the particularity of his language and style, which can be described as philosophical. He applies philosophical categories to theological realities. This philosophical interest is already in evidence in Bulgakov's earlier writings. Still, his theology is deeply rooted in the Orthodox Tradition and derives from it. In my opinion, however, the philosophically oriented methodology used by the author sets up a variety of problems for the investigation of his theology. It is difficult to differentiate philosophical and theological discourse and therefore to clearly distinguish among the influences on the author.

³² Paul Gavrilyuk, "Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov," 111.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Michael Plekon, *Living Icons*, 29.

In this section, special attention will be paid to the human individual and the “multi-unity” of humanity as a subject of history. Bulgakov’s understanding of “the boundaries of history,” which define history as a movement, will lead him to the tragedy of history expressed as “constant progress.” Bulgakov’s eschatology will be an important element of his theology. It is in the light of his eschatology that we will reconsider the tragedy of history and its meaning.

The Subject of Human History: an Anthropological Approach

The definition of the subject of history and its content is the central issue in the reconsideration of human history. Humankind in the multiplicity of individuals and in the multi-unity of the human race is the subject of history. This subject is defined by the unity of humankind. For Bulgakov, it is the whole human race that constitutes this subject, even though every individual takes part in history separately.³⁵

Human creativity is one of several bases for history, and these two notions always go together in Bulgakov’s argumentation. An excellent example of this statement is the understanding of animals as those who act according to instinct, which is peculiar to their nature, and is “wisdom of the species [мудрость рода].”³⁶ This wisdom does not develop, according to Bulgakov, but rather repeats in every generation. Since they exist according to their species, they cannot have history, which, as Bulgakov says, is peculiar to the spiritual way of human existence.³⁷

The human person is the centre and subject of human history. The world, from the perspective of Bulgakov, belongs to human beings, who have dominion over it.³⁸ For Bulgakov, the world is to be humanized by man.³⁹ The author states that

³⁵ Ibid, 316.

³⁶ Bulgakov, *Agnets Bozhyi* [The Lamb of God] (Moscow: Obshechestupnyy pravoslavnyi universitet, 2000), 169. Here and in other cases where the Russian bibliographical sources are cited, the translation is mine.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 315. Cf. Gen. 1–2.

³⁹ Ibid.

the world is, in a certain sense, an image of man, that is, the world can be defined as a person's peripheral body, the very place where the soul acts.⁴⁰ Thus the world, according to Bulgakov, can be described as an "object of human creative activity."⁴¹

But within this statement, Bulgakov contributes to the antinomic understanding of the human role in history. Bulgakov indicates that the human person is called to be not only a labourer in the world, but also its master and builder.⁴² For Bulgakov, a tension between human creativity and economic activity in history will be the main point of his investigation of history. For Bulgakov the notion of "progress" obscures the beauty of the world, which was created for human beings.

Bulgakov understands history as human activity in the world in all the complexity of this activity. This means that for Bulgakov human history does not refer only to the past, as a completed reality, but is seen in its wholeness: past, present, and future. Even though the author might use this terminology in referring to historical realities, Bulgakov still deals with history as human life and existence within the limits of time.

Bulgakov distinguishes within the object of history between humankind, a multiplicity of individuals "with their independent beings and fates,"⁴³ and the multi-unity of the entire human race.⁴⁴ This distinction might appear artificial, but it is made at a conceptual level. The author is aware that individuals comprise this multi-unity.⁴⁵ The basis for this multi-unity is very important to discuss because it constitutes the background for human history. Bulgakov uses a somewhat antinomic approach to the question of the unity of humankind: "humankind is multi-unitary; it is multiple in hypostases but has one nature and, in a certain sense, one life."⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 315.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 316.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Bulgakov also uses an antinomic approach to history and its object. Although the idea of one human nature may seem somewhat Platonic, it would not be helpful to reduce Bulgakov's understanding solely to a Neo-Platonic approach. Bulgakov says that the one humanity is manifested individually and multifariously, but always in concrete human hypostases.⁴⁷ This unity of humankind can be described as "the transcendental subject [of history] and as its transcendental object."⁴⁸ The double character of human beings, as object and subject of history simultaneously, can be seen in the notion of knowledge or cognitive ability in human beings. Bulgakov writes:

This transcendental subject of humankind, which unites the whole history of the latter in the unity of Adam as a certain universal, all-human I, lies at the base of the transcendental functions of humankind. This is, first of all, the universal subject of knowledge, the transcendental gnoseological I, which in the particular cognitive acts of individuals realizes the knowledge of the human race.⁴⁹

This gnoseological argument for the unity of humankind seems to have its origin in the philosophical current of German idealism.⁵⁰

The author is, however, very realistic about a conception of history that is connected to our own human condition. He recognizes that we cannot perceive general historical time in its totality as we find ourselves in time, both in our own personal condition and that of history in general.⁵¹ As history can be an object of our experiential knowledge,⁵² Bulgakov states

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cf. Gregorios Wassen, "Fr. Bulgakov's Personalism" at <http://www.geocities.com/sbulgakovsociety>.

⁵¹ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii: Sozertsanie I Umozrenie* [Unfading Light] (Moskva: Isskustvo, 1999), 304.

⁵² Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 316.

that this implies either – on the one hand – ontological speculation, or, on the other, revelation and faith.⁵³

For Bulgakov, a concrete human being cannot be conceived independently from humankind.⁵⁴ In his understanding, every human being possesses and lives in his/her own individuality and at the same time also possesses humanity in common with others, living in antinomic tension between these two realities. Bulgakov states that the human being is “as much an individual as a social being.”⁵⁵

The existence of humankind as one human family is a very important presupposition for the understanding of human history as a whole. The human being is seen not only within the closed boundaries of his/her own being or, as Bulgakov puts it, “self-enclosed microcosm.”⁵⁶ Rather, human beings are “a part of the whole, and form a part of a mystical human organism.”⁵⁷ This mystical unity of all humankind can be discovered in the first Adam. In the second Adam, starting with the Incarnation, this mystical organism is elevated to the notion of the Church as Christ’s Body.⁵⁸ The unity of the human race is nevertheless still founded on the equality of human beings according to their spiritual essence, which is rooted in the image of God.⁵⁹

An important aspect of history, which will help to understand Bulgakov’s perception of its nature, will be its boundaries and also its relations towards the antinomic reality of time and eternity. The boundaries of history and its relations with the antinomic reality of time and eternity are central to the reality of history as Bulgakov understands it.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 345.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 346.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The Boundaries of History

Based on revelation, Bulgakov indicates that history has its beginning in creation and its end in eschatological events.⁶⁰ Thus, for Bulgakov, history is strictly bound to the limited period of time. It is not, as he says, a “bad infinity” or “negative eternity.”⁶¹ History is intrinsically connected to creation, and is seen only within the categories and limits of creation.⁶² But at the same time, it is grounded in the future age, since belonging to “this age” makes history, together with “this age,” stand “in the threshold of the ‘life of the future age.’”⁶³ Therefore, in addition to creation, history is connected to the basic antinomy of its existence: being the closed reality of this age, it is directed to its fulfillment beyond its boundaries. History is a concrete time, enclosed within strict boundaries, within which it develops in time.⁶⁴

Bulgakov concentrates on history as human activity in the world and states that history begins with the entry of original sin into the world, which coincides with humans beginning to give birth to other human beings, thereby constituting the human race. But history was given a blessing still in paradise, and history retains its roots in this original blessing:

History is directly bound to the beginning of human existence in paradise and therefore history does not remain under the influence of original sin. The manner and conditions of accomplishing the task of history depend on original sin, but the task itself does not.⁶⁵

Bulgakov remains faithful to the patristic understanding of human existence in paradise as the development of and growth

⁶⁰ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 316. Here we have to distinguish between the history of the world and the history of human beings. Human history begins on the basis of human existence and thus “presupposes the already-existing being of the world.”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 304.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 305.

in life with God. He indicates that human history could have been developed in paradise as the actualization of human creativity if not for the Fall, and this beginning of history was initially realized, even if only partially, in paradise by Adam and Eve.⁶⁶ But here Bulgakov is not always consistent.

In conclusion one might say that in the view of Bulgakov, history is a delimited period which has its beginning and its end. It is important to note that Bulgakov is not intending to generalize here or to remain simply at a surface level, even though this conception might seem to be precisely too general. His understanding of history actually went much deeper, and was connected with the theological thought of many other representatives of the Paris school.

The Antinomic Approach to Time and Eternity

As we have seen, creation is the fundamental historical category for Bulgakov. Speaking of creation, he defines its antinomic character,⁶⁷ which is found at the boundaries of time. Bulgakov says that creatures have the understanding of their simultaneously eternal and temporal existence.⁶⁸ Time, as the *πάντα ρεῖ* of existence, according to Bulgakov, can be grasped only from the perspective of eternity.⁶⁹ The author puts it in the following way: “The consciousness of temporality itself with its burning and sharpness is caused by the feeling of supra-temporality, of life not bound by time. It is born only from within a glance from eternity into time.”⁷⁰ The author

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ An exhaustive explanation of antinomy can be found in the twentieth century Russian religious thinker Pavel Florensky, who had a great influence on Bulgakov. Florensky defines antinomy thus: “If the antithesis is the source for the thesis and at the same time the thesis is the source of the antithesis, then the summation of thesis and antithesis, if it is not false, is antinomy”: Pavel Florensky, *Stolp I Utverzhdenie Istyny*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1990), 1:147. Cited in Antoine Arzhakovsky, *Zhurnal “Put’” (1925–1940). Pokoleniye Russkikh Religioznykh myslyteley v emigratsiye* [A journal ‘Put’ (1925–1940). A generation of Russian religious thinkers in emigration] (Kyiv: Feniks, 2000), 80.

⁶⁸ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 183.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

expresses a basic antinomy of human existence, which goes beyond death: "you are eternal, but you have been born for time."⁷¹

When talking about eternity and time within non-anthropological categories, Bulgakov mentions that both time and eternity are correlative as there cannot be temporality without eternity.⁷² He says that "time ... is nothing but eternity extended into being, creatively embracing nothing."⁷³ Bulgakov returns to philosophical paradigms of the understanding of time, as found in Plato, Plotinus, and Neo-Platonic thinkers.⁷⁴

Another Neo-Platonic idea, which at the same time helps us to understand history as an antinomic reality, can be found in the author's understanding of time as a realization of the eternal basis for things. Bulgakov states that concrete individuals are able to be born in time because "they have their basis in supra-temporal existence and therefore are given and are granted to time and become tasks for time."⁷⁵ It is likely that Bulgakov understands the antinomic reality of human history from the perspective of time.

For Bulgakov, time and eternity exist in the same dimension: eternity is not after, but together with time: above and under.⁷⁶ Bulgakov goes further in his understanding of time. For him, the temporality of human beings is a reflection of their state. Time has both a subjective reality (experienced by each human person in a particular way) and an objective reality.

The important aspect of life in time, which defines human creativity and makes space for it, is, according to Bulgakov, the fact that time is not "an empty passage into eternity, but is the Church's development and completion."⁷⁷ When speaking of the Church, whose boundaries go far beyond any institutional understandings, Bulgakov introduces two dimensions of

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 184.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 303.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the Church's existence: eternal and temporal.⁷⁸ Having a future, as its historical fulfillment and development, time is not an absolute reality. But nevertheless, the life of the Church is grounded in the antinomy of time and eternity, and these two realities are "practically identified in the soul of man."⁷⁹

History as Potentiality

When talking about human history, Bulgakov opens before his reader the general context of history in its "evolutional" character.⁸⁰ The basic truth about human history reveals itself in constant development, i.e., a constant state of becoming, which is already presupposed within Bulgakov's understanding of creation.⁸¹ The antinomic character of the history of the world is based on the fact that it was fully created at the beginning, but at the same time that fullness, as Bulgakov puts it, "is not a fully actualized one, but is still only potential."⁸² This potentiality is the openness and realization of the world's "laws" and energies, the opening of the heart of the world. This is one of Bulgakov's most influential notions of human history.

What is important here is the character of history as "progress," or the process of becoming. Bulgakov writes: "History is a certain state of becoming being that is included in being in a definite way: an additional creation of the world within itself, as it were."⁸³ He compares history to a human lifetime and states that history is going through a process of creation just as an individual life does.

Bulgakov defines history as the "birth of humanity, objective time, filled with births and therefore with deaths."⁸⁴ Not having included the movement of history towards meta-history in this definition, Bulgakov still describes a very important

⁷⁸ Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology," 286.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 315.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 315–16.

⁸⁴ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 303.

aspect of the understanding of history. For Bulgakov, history is seen as development, birth and growth. Later on we will see that this feature of history is precisely what leads to its tragic nature, when history is seen within its own boundaries.

As we have seen from previous investigations, history in the understanding of Bulgakov is an antinomic reality, which from one side is grounded in God as its Creator (Bulgakov writes that the world is real only “through the reality of God, because God’s strength sustains it”⁸⁵) and from another side is based on temporal existence, which presupposes a coming-to-be.⁸⁶ Consequently, we can see history’s openness to the eschaton. According to Bulgakov, history “has an eternal significance – not in its empirical shell but in its inner content,” which reaches forward towards its eschatological fulfillment.⁸⁷

***Bulgakov's Eschatological Theology:
“Already and Not Yet”***

In what follows, we will deal with Bulgakov’s understanding of eschatology as an antinomic reality and of the synergistic character of human creativity. The tragic character of history understood as progress will be examined from an eschatological perspective. We will also look at the antinomic view of eschatology as “transfigured history” and its openness to human creativity. An important place in the analysis of the eschatology of Bulgakov will be held by an investigation of the apocalyptic prayer “Come, Lord Jesus!” which is found in Revelation 22:20.⁸⁸

The Tragedy of History and its Openness to Eschatology

When speaking of human history, the notion that it is tragedy cannot be neglected. According to the words of one of Bulgakov’s evaluators, he saw tragedy as, perhaps, the main

⁸⁵ Bulgakov, *Agnets Bozhyi* [The Lamb of God], 184.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 334.

⁸⁸ All biblical citations are from *The New Revised Standard Version Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

“genre” of human history.⁸⁹ The author was always finding himself in tension between history, which presupposes “constant progress,” and the Christian worldview whose “only necessity” lies beyond the closed nature of history and looks to eschatology for its fulfillment. For Bulgakov, from the point of view of the world, Christianity is an “illness for consciousness of the world.”⁹⁰ He was not influenced by a need for eschatological escape from the world or by what he calls “poisoning with eschatological fear.”⁹¹ His theology was filled instead with the search for the distinguishing of clearly Christian values in the world, and that, to my mind, shaped his understanding of creativity as such. Bulgakov says that Christianity

with anxiety hearkens to the thunderous noise with which the tower of Babel is constructed again and in the shortcut movement of the chariot of progress it sees a symptom of the coming cataclysm, of the end, which approaches. Christianity does not believe in such progress and, furthermore, it does not desire such progress.⁹²

The problem, as Bulgakov sees it, is in the constantly tragic reality of history. Examined within its own boundaries, even within its achievements, history turns out to be a great failure. History, when it is closed in on itself, presupposes a principle of constant “progress,” which locates the sense of history in endless movement. This constant movement in history cannot be seen as its sense, because, according to Bulgakov, the sense of history lies beyond its boundaries. Progress, according to the author, is a constant movement, which does not acknowledge an end and cannot be satisfied.⁹³

⁸⁹ Iryna Rodnianskaia, “Chytitel I Tolmach Zamysla o Mire” [The Worshiper and Interpreter of the Plan for the World], 15.

⁹⁰ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 348.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 348.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 352.

One of the most interesting and basic ideas about history in Bulgakov's theology is his understanding of eschatology as the fulfillment of history and as its primary goal. As Bulgakov says, "the Apocalypse leads into eschatology, the fullness of history presumes its achievement."⁹⁴ For Bulgakov, "the end of the world in this sense is not only the inscrutable will of God which is known neither to angels nor even to the Son of Man, but it is an end to be prepared and reached by human history as well."⁹⁵ Eschatological events, as he says, "prepare and in a certain sense they include the synthesis of history, its achievement."⁹⁶ But at the same time, eschatology – that is, the end of history – does not end the life of the world. History continues, as Bulgakov suggests, by flowing into meta-history, as a new aeon.⁹⁷

*Bulgakov's Antinomic View of Eschatology
as "Transfigured History"*

Here we can very clearly see an antinomic approach to history in Bulgakov's thought. History is realized in eschatology, which is understood as not only the future events to come, but also the inner growth of humanity in God.⁹⁸ As we do not know the time of the end, we are called to pray in unending anticipation: "Come, Lord Jesus! Maranatha!" Bulgakov says that in order to be able to desire the end, we need to have "a living foretaste."⁹⁹ In Bulgakov, eschatology is seen as "transfigured history."¹⁰⁰ Bulgakov sees in history an eternal content in its temporal form.¹⁰¹ He says that the "epilogue of history shows with striking clarity how history, having passed through the Divine fire, is transfigured into the eschatological King-

⁹⁴ Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology," 281.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 286.

⁹⁷ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 316.

⁹⁸ Cf. Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 352.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 347.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

dom of God.”¹⁰² It is important to emphasize at this point that Bulgakov’s theological vision in general can be described as eschatological. For him the understanding of human history is grounded in eschatology as its fulfillment.

In Bulgakov’s antinomic take on eschatology I see a very unique approach to the question of the unity between eschatology as the future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and as the simultaneous presence of that Kingdom on the earth, here and now. He states: “All earthly things must be perceived in the light of the coming end, the eschatological culmination. This is the special music of eternity ... [b]ut it is precisely this that gives to earthly works their exclusive significance, placing them in the perspective of eternity.”¹⁰³ The antinomic tension between these two approaches to eschatology is a link between history and eschatology as the presence of Kingdom “here and now” but also “not yet.”

One of the distinctive elements of Bulgakov’s eschatology is that it expresses itself as the full realization of history in the future. This particular insight of Bulgakov’s theology might be very helpful for our understanding of history. For him, salvation should be conceived of in the categories of the end of the world, and the way to salvation is identified with the road that leads to the end of the world.¹⁰⁴ But at the same time, this road, as the author says, “must be trod by mankind, by sons of God,”¹⁰⁵ which leads us directly to the notion of human creativity. History can find its resolution in the creative efforts of human beings: “the sand of time must not simply run out – there must be creative achievements.”¹⁰⁶

“Maranatha:” Eschatological Waiting in History

The apocalyptic prayer “Come, Lord Jesus!” is an excellent example of Bulgakov’s eschatological perspective. The

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Bulgakov, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” 281.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Bulgakov, “The Spirit of Prophecy,” in *Sergii Bulgakov*, 290.

analysis of this prayer as an eschatological quest will help us to reconsider the notion of human creativity and at the same time to analyze more deeply Bulgakov's view of the eschatological longing of humanity.

Bulgakov understands the prayer "Come, Lord Jesus!" as the conclusion of the whole Bible and of the New Testament in particular. The response given to "the Spirit and the Bride" is "surely I am coming soon" (Rev. 22:17,20). This "quickness in time" of the Lord's coming was understood in the early Church to be within time. For us, who live two thousand years after Christ, Bulgakov gives a different perspective. He states that this coming "quickly" must be regarded ontologically rather than chronologically.¹⁰⁷ The author critically reflects on the waiting and expectations of the earthly Church and sees a new need nowadays to reconsider this prayer as a creative calling for the "mysterious Parousia," that is for the presence of Christ in the world even before His second coming.

For Bulgakov, the prayer "Come, Lord Jesus!" embraces an ecclesiological, Mariological, and sophiological meaning.¹⁰⁸ For him this prayer is a path to deification and takes place in the Church, especially in the Theotokos. This is a prayer of turning the world into Church with the result that "the whole world became a Church."¹⁰⁹ Bulgakov's main "theological slogan," I would say, can be expressed in the words: "let God be all in all." Bulgakov's understanding of the prayer about the second coming of Christ is connected to the realm of the Spirit and the Bride, which is to be found everywhere.¹¹⁰ He writes: "For the Spirit all the enclosures of creation can be opened and the Bride does not despise any of the stench or roughness of creatures."¹¹¹

Along with the universal meaning of this prayer, Bulgakov states with great confidence that it should also be the personal

¹⁰⁷ Bulgakov, *Apokalypsya Ioana* [The Apocalypse of John]: http://www.krotov.info/libr_min/b/bulgakovs/00_bulg.html.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

prayer of every Christian.¹¹² But at the same time the full meaning of this eschatological prayer, which illustrates the antinomic character of Bulgakov's eschatology, can be grasped only from the perspective of the whole Church, which is personalized in the Spirit and the Bride, who "prays in the Holy Spirit."¹¹³ Here we can see the synergistic and "ecclesial" character of this prayer as well as its "Marian" nature¹¹⁴ or, as Bulgakov says, "a prayer of Theotokos on behalf of all humanity."¹¹⁵

Bulgakov sees in the Church's eschatological exclamation of Christ an antinomic expression of His presence: Christ is present in the Church, but at the same time is called on to come. But, at the same time, it is important to stress that the author sees the second coming of Christ not as merely a future event or even a goal. He rather declares it a calling of all Christians: this eschatological event is "a general direction of life."¹¹⁶

This Christian prayer, which in the early Church commanded special devotion, and an understanding of eschatological expectation, was growing pale with every following generation, according to Bulgakov. He sees the state of Christianity nowadays in the same position: "the prayer of the Revelation 'come' is being unheard also today."¹¹⁷ He states that there has arrived a new epoch in the life of the Church, in which we should "learn to think and feel eschatologically."¹¹⁸

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Bulgakov is careful enough not to identify the Mother of God, as a human hypostasis, with the Church in general. He differentiates between the head of the Church, who is Christ, and the representative leader of the Church, who is the Mother of God. She can speak on behalf of all humanity because she embraces everyone with her love and because the voices of deified humanity sound in unison with hers.

¹¹⁵ Bulgakov, *Apokalypsys Ioana* [The Apocalypse of John].

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

The Meta-Historical Meaning of "Come, Lord Jesus!"

For Bulgakov, the Revelation of John is an important testimony about the meta-historical meaning of history, which is given an eschatological goal, while standing, however, still only at the threshold of the end. Thus history receives its fulfillment by means of eschatological anticipation through the creative efforts of human beings. The sense of history is thus seen by Bulgakov in its immanent-historical process, not only in a transcendent-eschatological process. This means that "the coming of Christ is being realized not only beyond history, but also through history."¹¹⁹ Therefore, the prayer "Maranatha" is no longer "a task which is beyond our strength," but rather "receives an inner conviction and interpretation" and becomes a prayer in unison with the prayer to the Holy Spirit: "come and dwell within us."¹²⁰ Through this eschatological understanding, history is seen not merely as a time of waiting for the second coming of Christ. Rather, history is seen by Bulgakov as a positive path, which has to be walked, though "with its inner appropriateness from the beginning till the end."¹²¹ History, therefore, is determined by the "readiness" and "expectation" of what is already present but still to come.

*Synergism as a Basic Category of Creativity:
Where History Meets Eschatology*

Bulgakov speaks of human creativity as history's moving force in the direction of Godmanhood. He writes:

Creative activity is not something that is merely possible or even inevitable. It is man's duty, God's will concerning him. For man is called to "do works" by the power of Christ, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. ... Creative activity has always been proper to man, for without it he would lose his humanity.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 332.

Here we see an important aspect of human creativity. It is the antinomic union of the personal character of creativity on the one hand, and, on the other, its historical or universal character, where “human creative activity is always the making of history.”¹²³ Bulgakov writes:

It follows that the entire creative activity of life, that is, the whole of human history to which God had called the human race (with the genealogy of Christ serving as the heart of this history), is accomplished by virtue of this creative inspiration with all its multiform multiplicity.¹²⁴

Thus, for Bulgakov creativity moves history toward eschatology, but at the same time does not deny history, instead serving as its inner fulfillment.

The Holiness of the Church as the full Realization of Creativity

Since the Church is seen by Bulgakov not on the level of institution, but rather as the realization of Godmanhood,¹²⁵ the conclusion can be drawn that it is precisely the Church that is the full realization of human creativity in history. Bulgakov states that “the idea of the Church in this sense is applied to the whole world in its real foundation and aim, its *entelecheia*.”¹²⁶

The Church is the meeting point of history and eschatology that is the presence of Christ in history. The Church exists in antinomic tension: it is within historical reality, but equally in the process of transfiguration. She is seen by Bulgakov as the union of temporal and eternal elements who “acts in history as a creative force.”¹²⁷

¹²³ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 332.

¹²⁴ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 215.

¹²⁵ Bulgakov, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” 280.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 334.

This transfigured life is accomplished in history and through history. On the way to the eschaton, human history becomes the history of the Church:

Human history is, first of all, the history of the Church, not only outer and institutional, in the sense of her destiny in the world, but also inner, as the spiritual force that accomplishes Divine-humanity. In this sense, Christian history is, in general, the "last times."¹²⁸

In Bulgakov's understanding, the antinomy of the already given, but not yet realized, holiness of the Church furnishes us with an excellent example of how synergism is realized at the deepest of levels. The Church is holy by virtue of Christ's holiness and therefore, when it comes to holiness, we can say that the life of the Church is both active and passive simultaneously. Bulgakov further distinguishes between the objective and the subjective aspects of the holiness of the Church.¹²⁹ For him "the Church is objectively holy by the power of the life Divine, the sanctity of God," and thus, holiness is given to the Church.¹³⁰ But this given-ness also points the way to what one might call the subjective side of the Church's holiness, which is accomplished within the realm of human freedom. While the objective reality of the Church's holiness in its given-ness is beyond discussion, the holiness of its individual members can never be presented as perfect, for only God is perfectly holy. Individual holiness, therefore, manifests a certain subjective, even relative character in comparison with the total sanctity of God alone. Bulgakov states that "the sinner who lives in the life of the Church is holy; it may even be said that the Church knows no other saints than these."¹³¹

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ See Bulgakov, *Pravoslavie: Ocherki Uchenia Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi* [Orthodoxy: Notes on the Teaching of the Orthodox Church] (Kiev: Lybid', 1991), 119.

¹³⁰ Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church and Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology*, 114.

¹³¹ Ibid., 116.

As “an inner force” within history, the Church is seen by Bulgakov as a place for the realization of salvation – the realm of divine-human reality. This reality is the moving force of history; it drives history towards its fulfillment in eschatology. Along the way, history discovers the holiness of the Church. In his Autobiographical Notes, Bulgakov says: “the Church has no continuing city on earth, but seeks one to come. Orthodoxy implies inspiration, the eros of the Church, her yearning for the Bridegroom, the feeling proper to his Bride. It is creativeness directed towards the final goal, the expectation of the End.”¹³²

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine Bulgakov’s notion of creativity as a synergistic, eschatological and teleological reality. Examining Bulgakov’s views of history and then eschatology, we could see how both of those realities manifest themselves in human creative efforts. Bulgakov’s understanding of human history and eschatology enabled him to speak of human creativity as the process of “the transfiguration of history.”

In his examination of human existence, Bulgakov defines the life of every individual as creativity and on this basis says that history is creativity as well.¹³³ History, therefore, moves by means of human creativity. The basis for human creativity can be found in God’s image and likeness and cannot be seen separately from creation. Because of this, the human being is in a way the reflection of God’s creativity. However, the grasping at absolute creativity that belongs only to God puts the human person into a diabolical state of being closed in on oneself and therefore makes synergism with God impossible. Bulgakov’s idea of Godmanhood plays an important role here. It is precisely this creativity that enables us to talk about teleological meaning of history in its eschatological fulfillment.

Bulgakov reminds us about the ultimate vocation of humanity in its transcendent efforts. For him, the fact that history appears as potentiality enables us to speak of its openness

¹³² Bulgakov, “Autobiographical Notes” in *Sergius Bulgakov: A Bulgakov Anthology*, 19.

¹³³ Bulgakov, *Sviet Nevechernii*, 305.

to the eschaton; but it is this same fact that establishes the tragedy of history when it is approached from the point of view of the expectation of progress. We have seen how eschatology functions as the realization of history and its inner fulfillment. Bulgakov's is an antinomic approach to eschatology. This is accomplished in the Church, transforming the whole world and its history into what we know as Church.

We were also able to examine the holiness of the Church as the realization of eschatology in history and an important aspect of moving toward the actualization of Godmanhood. We saw Bulgakov's understanding of how the eschatological moves within history, working through history, without negating history's importance, but allowing that history to come to fruition in God. The issue of human creative efforts that avoid both the destructive selfishness of a secularism closed in on itself on the one hand, and any flight from the world and, thus, from history on the other, is central to Bulgakov's anthropological vision.

On the whole, it should be said that Bulgakov was able to offer constructive answers to the questions raised by readers of his own era. He was able to show that synergism is the fundamental element of spiritual life, which, at the same time, requires the creative approach of the human being. This enables us to say that "every human being, in a certain sense, is an artist of his own life."¹³⁴



¹³⁴ Bulgakov, *Apokalypsya Ioana* [The Apocalypse of John].

Резюме

Сергій Булгаков – один із найбільш творчих та визначних російських православних богословів 20-го століття. Його ім'я пов'язане із всесвітньо відомою «Паризькою школою» богослов'я, заснованою в Інституті Святого Сергія, що став прихистком та місцем творчої діяльності для багатьох пореволюційних східнослов'янських мислителів. Після короткої біографічної довідки автор розглядає питання історії людства та її трансцендентального виміру крізь призму людської творчості. Усе це можна побачити у дискусіях Булгакова про взаємозв'язок культури та есхатології. Тема людської творчості в історії, виражена в есхатологічному вигуку «Мараната!», є надзвичайно важливою для сьогодення. Антропологічний підхід Булгакова до історії, до її меж, до антиномічних зв'язків між часом та вічністю, до трагедії історії людства та, як наслідок, її відкритості на есхатологію – усе це автор розглядає у світлі розуміння Булгакова переміни історії через призму творчої святости Церкви.

