

Amsterdam Lectures 2012-13:

The Ways of Modern Orthodox Theology: Part I

Lecture IV: Fr Sergii Bulgakov and the nature of theology

Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov: born in 1871 in Livny, in the Orël province about 400 km south of Moscow; lost his faith and, as a young Marxist, studied economics and law at Moscow University (1890–4); turned back to the faith; contributed, with other intellectuals rediscovering Orthodoxy, to *Vekhi* ('Landmarks', 1909). Return to Christianity marked by a number of experiences: the Caucasus in 1895, as a result of which he could not be 'reconciled to nature without God'; the Sistine Madonna in Dresden, which led him to prayer (1898); and his conversion in 1908 in a solitary hermitage deep in the forest. Became committed to the Church; took part on the Reform synod of 1917–18. 1918 ordained to the priesthood. 1922: expelled from Russia with other non-Marxist intellectuals. January 1923: experience of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. From 1925 until his death in 1944, dean of the Institut St-Serge in Paris and professor of dogmatic theology.

Nature of Theology: concern about the nature of theology a phenomenon that united Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox theologians in the 1930s—Karl Barth, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, as well as others such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Karl Rahner.

Bulgakov's paper 'Dogma and Dogmatic theology' (1937: English translation by Peter Bouteneff in *Tradition Alive*, ed. Michael Plekon [Lanham, Maryland, 2003], 67–80):

- Limited nature of dogma
- Link between dogma and prayer/liturgy: *lex credendi lex orandi*

Fr Alexander Schmemmann on Bulgakov ('Trois Images', *Le Messager Orthodoxe* 57 [1972], pp. 2–21):

Bulgakov

- as priest
- as waiting for the coming of Christ
- as celebrant of the liturgy: 'He delved down to the very depths, and one had the impression that the liturgy was being celebrated for the first time, that it had fallen down from heaven and been set up on the earth at the dawn of time'.

Bulgakov as *liturgical* theologian—not writing *about* the liturgy, but writing *out of* the liturgy. Bobrinskoy: 'the whole of his theological vision he had drawn from the bottom of the eucharistic chalice'.

Example of the 'little trilogy': *The Burning Bush* (1927; trans. Thomas Allen Smith, Grand Rapids, MI, 2009), *The Friend of the Bridegroom* (1927; trans. Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), *Jacob's Ladder* (1929; trans. Thomas Allen Smith, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010)—on the Mother of God, John the Baptist or the Forerunner, and the Angels: based on the icon of the Deesis, the Intercession.

Balthasar, *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation* (London, 1968), distinguishes between the cosmological and the anthropological approaches to theology, and what he calls the way of love, the aesthetic approach to theology.

Bulgakov fits into this paradigm quite well. The structure of the great trilogy:

- *The Lamb of God*, on the Incarnate Son (1933; trans. Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids MI, 2007)
- *The Comforter*, on the Holy Spirit (1936; trans. Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids MI, 2004), passing by means of an appendix on the Father to:
- *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945; trans. Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), in which the Church is revealed as the Bride of the Lamb, calling out with the Spirit to the coming Lord: ‘And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come! And let him that hears say, Come! Even so, come, Lord Jesus!’ (Rev. 22:17, 20).

A fundamentally liturgical structure:

- The anaphora of the *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* makes clear that our engagement with the Father takes place through the Son and the Spirit—the Son, given as the love of God the Father for us, accomplishing the mystery of salvation through the Incarnation, of which the Eucharist is the representation, itself achieved through the invocation, the *epiklesis*, of the Holy Spirit.
- Note the place of the Kingdom in the Liturgy
- Sophiology
 - The gulf between the uncreated God and creation, brought into being out of nothing, does not put creation in opposition to God, rather Wisdom constitutes a kind of μετὰζύ, ‘between’, between God and man/creation, for Wisdom is that through which God created the universe, and it is equally through wisdom that the human quest for God finds fulfilment.
 - ‘Neither heaven nor earth, but the vault of heaven above the earth... neither God nor man, but divinity, the divine veil thrown over the world’
 - Uncreated wisdom and created wisdom differ only in their being uncreated or created. Why? Because if they differed in any other way, then God would be severed from creation and creation from God.