

Sergey Bulgakov and the Spirit of Capitalism

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This English translation of Fr. Sergey Bulgakov's *The National Economy and the Religious Personality* (1909) makes available the first Orthodox Christian response to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. This piece is of ultimate importance for the contemporary understanding of Orthodox faith, its history at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the intellectual evolution of Bulgakov himself. The work in this short essay was the author's first step toward becoming "arguably the twentieth century's greatest Orthodox theologian."¹

Bulgakov and "Underdeveloped" Orthodox Thinking

Until very recently the dominant Western view, as it was established by Richard Pipes, for instance, on Eastern Christianity and especially its Russian version was

¹ This is an assessment by Georgetown University Professor Catherine Evtuhov. She pioneered recent American research into Bulgakov's life and writings. See her work *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890–1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997). Constantin Andronikov, who translated Bulgakov into French, reportedly believed he was "the greatest Orthodox theologian since Saint Gregory Palamas."

that it has been a “servant of the state.”² The emerging libertarian movement in ex-Communist Europe, especially after the mid-1980s, seemed to confirm this interpretation by its reviews of the history of Orthodox countries’ market reforms: They proceeded amidst stronger political hesitation in Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Armenia, and Georgia than in any of the region’s Catholic countries, such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia. Such interpretation has had a concurring political echo: I recall a senior NATO officer and advisor publicly arguing, in 1996, in Slovenia, that the actual limits of “Atlantic cooperation” and the EU were marked by the roofs of Catholic and Protestant churches in the landscape. In the early 1990s, the very publication of Michael Novak’s *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* highlighted the need for a similar reflection on Orthodox ethics.³ The essay published here is evidence that at the turn of the century Russian Orthodox scholars and historians were profoundly interested in the relationships between Orthodox morality and markets.

By the decade of the 1990s, except for a handful of specialists in Russian history of ideas, Sergey Bulgakov was hardly known even to Soviet and Russian intellectuals. His writings were, in fact, banned in 1922, and he became a librarian, *samizdat*, and antiquarian rarity. The first Russian (and relatively full) selection of his nontheological essays, doctoral thesis, and publications appeared in 1993, published in two volumes by the Russian Academy of Sciences. In the West, the Sergius Bulgakov Society, “an informal network and open Christian fellowship for the encouragement of the study and appreciation of the life and work of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov,” was formed and started its information campaign only a few years ago.

Not being completely aware of the rich Bulgakov heritage, the scholars of Orthodox philosophy and historiography encountered many other challenges.

On one side, the profound study of Orthodox traditions, ethics, and influence was somewhat limited to the Byzantine period and its legacy in Eastern Europe (then under the Ottoman Empire) and Russia where the church was subjected to the Crown in 1700–1701. The mid-nineteenth century Russian literary (after Pushkin) and religious (after Aleksey Khomyakov) enlightenment constituted a deep and noble opposition to the officialdom of the time. Later in the century, it

² This is the title of chapter 9 of Richard Pipes’ famous book *Russia Under the Old Regime*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 221–45, which designated well one of the relative common interpretations of the public status of Orthodox churches.

³ Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

was promptly overshadowed by the stronger and more aggressive disregard to the status quo by the emerging left and Marxist activists. However, the intellectual and political pleas of Orthodox philosophers such as Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky, Sergey Bulgakov, and others, for higher public morals, church, and state value enhancement, had faced negative reception by all parties, including the Russian Orthodox Church. At the turn of the century, it expelled or condemned most religious philosophers for one reason or another.

The rise of the Bolsheviks and the Communist domination after 1917 demanded an explanation of Russian revolution and the unprecedented oppression and totalitarianism that followed. Other influential contemporaries, such as Nikolay Berdyaev, Bulgakov's close friend of the 1890s, attributed these unfortunate developments to Russia's backwardness and religious psyche.⁴ Bulgakov himself wrote that Soviet Russia was "'de facto' the only truly 'confessional state' in the world," where "the dominant religion was the militant atheism of the Communist doctrine" and "other religions were not tolerated."⁵

However, the twentieth-century preoccupation with Russia's exceptionality—by Russian and non-Russian historians and commentators alike—has grossly underestimated the potential of its turn-of-the-century religious theorists, and of Sergey Bulgakov, for the modernization of Christian ethics and values.

In the meantime, non-Russian (independent) Orthodox churches of Judea, the Holy Land, were completely forgotten, while those of Greece and the Balkans were involved in nation-building by taking sides in wars between new nations and were speaking different languages. Russian and then other eastern European churches, although to a lesser extent and after some resistance, had obediently served their Communist states.

The emancipation of these churches from their own pasts is far from over and lags behind other intellectual endeavors. No intellectual or philosophical authority exists in the contemporary Orthodox debate on markets and morality. Typically, very interesting deliberations take place in national and media circles, but only occasionally do non-Orthodox academic and political initiatives bring together scholars and opinion leaders from these countries.

Overall, the climate for broad and influential discussion of Bulgakov's ideas about Orthodox Christianity, markets, and liberty has been far from receptive. In many respects, however, his ideas stand alone and beyond the economic

⁴ See Bulgakov's *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 1–96.

⁵ Sergey Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. trans. Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 162–63.

interpretations of his fellow religious philosophers and even anticipate many contemporary debates.

His Life and Deeds

Sergey Bulgakov was born in a priest's family in 1871, in the Orlov gubernia. Bulgakov's family is rich in church leaders, theologians, historians, and includes the father of the famous Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov as a distant relative. Following in his father's steps, the young Sergey enrolled in a priests' school but quit at the age of seventeen, and went on to study law at Moscow University where he was deeply fascinated by political economy. He quickly became a Marxist scholar and even a prominent translator of Marx's works, wrote two post graduate theses—on capitalist mode of production and capitalism and agriculture (in 1900), and was invited to discuss the capitalist mode of production with Marxist leaders of the late nineteenth century.

Bulgakov's biographers, for example, Chatrine Evtuhov in the United States and Fr. Alexander Men and others in Russia,⁶ assume that the second thesis and his discussions with Leo Tolstoy brought about the understanding that Marxist interpretations of economic phenomena are a myth rather than an adequate political economy. In the diaries of his mid-twenties, quoted by the above-mentioned authors, the young but already rather respected university and commercial gymnasium teacher repeatedly mentions feelings of "vanity" and "emptiness" as disturbing his state of mind.

It looks as if he finds a refuge in philosophical and literary criticism and in his friendship with Berdyaev. In 1901 and 1906, Bulgakov publishes two profoundly personal articles, among dozens of other important works (often published twice by different journals).

The first is on Dostoyevsky's "Ivan Karamazov as a Philosophical Type." Here, the author discusses the famous Legend of the Grand Inquisitor and comes close to the idea of the true faith as liberation from secular authority and voluntary compassion. The second is on Marx, "Karl Marx as a Religious Type."⁷

⁶ See Chatrine Evtuhov's work, the brilliant Alexander Men's biographical sketch by the restored Journal *Vehi* ("Otetz Sergey Bulgakov") in Russian: www.vehi.net/bulgakov/men.html; and Sergey Hozhyj's *Russkaya filosofia, Malyj encyclopedicheskii slovar* (Moscow, 1995), reproduced in *Vehi*: www.vehi.net/bulgakov/index.html.

⁷ Sergey Bulgakov, *Karl Marx as a Religious Type: His Relation to the Religion of Anthropotheism of L. Feuerbach*, trans. Luba Barna (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1979).

Here, Bulgakov argues, many years before it became a fashion among Marx critics, that the principle of domination over others in Marx's teaching comes from his own disregard for the individual in both senses—as a philosophical, methodological notion and as individual friends and foes in the man's turbulent life and political passions.

During this period, Bulgakov became independent from his own past, and this process is well-documented and self-reflected. Amidst religious and philosophical quests, he starts a political career in 1906, sits in the parliament (Duma), leads a faction of what we may call today Christian Democrats (or Socialists), and attempts constitution-making and a formation of another political party. It seems that his pure political vanity evaporates from Bulgakov's deeds by the time he writes the article translated here.

His next notable achievement is his third dissertation *The Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, a hefty tome—even by the standards of the time—and a unprecedented attempt to rethink the foundations of economic science.⁸ Here is how the doctoral candidate himself summarizes the principle insight of this attempt:

The economy, sufficiently broadly understood, is no sub-jugular work of a cattle but a creative activity of rational creatures who by the nature of the things materialize in it their individual beginnings, while individuality is characterized by liberty; even more than this—it must be mentioned that it is liberty; and if liberty is a creativity then individuality is the true creative principle in us, which cannot be extinguished and eliminated even in the economy.⁹

This concept was first outlined by Bulgakov in the essay translated here. The economy is a human destiny; the man is “master” (in Russian this word means both “an owner” and “a housekeeper”) of the worldly establishments; not a ruler or dictator but the one who humanizes the world. This concept, to my understanding, is compatible with the most enlightened economic thinking of the twentieth century.

Despite the fact that even as a schoolteacher Bulgakov used to explain political economy with biblical references, *The Philosophy of Economy* had opened one

⁸ Translated, edited, and with an introduction by Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁹ Sergey Bulgakov, “Philosophy of Economy, A Speech on Doctoral Thesis,” 21 September 1912, p. 4, available in Russian at: www.krotov.info/libr_min/02_b/bulgakov_s_031.html.

route before him—that of religious philosopher; it was not enough, however, and he became a priest in 1917.

The same year he published his first book in theology, *The Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, and served as a secretary of the Synod Summit, which had not meet for generations (due to persecution by the Tsarist establishment).¹⁰ The new Holy Synod that elected Patriarch Tihon, now a saint, was short-lived. Bulgakov applied for priesthood, and despite some hesitation—perhaps he was needed more as a public educator—the Patriarch granted it to him after the October coup d'état, in 1918. Fr. Sergius' service to the Church was interrupted by the already burgeoning Russian Civil War (1917–1923); an exile in Crimea; and, in 1922, a life-saving exodus to Prague and Paris via Istanbul (Konstantinopolis).

In Crimea, in spite of the war, he wrote a philosophical drama. A few months in Konstantinopolis were enough for a then-corrupt Greek Orthodox Church to disappoint Fr. Sergius Bulgakov and convert him into a believer in the revival of the Christian Church from the West, through dialogue and ecumenism.

In May 1923, he was ranked as Professor of Theology at the Prague Russian Scientific Institute. In Czechoslovakia, he was one of the founders of the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Academy (OTA), which soon was successfully funded and organized in Paris. From 1925 until the end of his days in this world, Bulgakov served as OTA's chairman, professor in dogmatic theology, and mentor of the students' association.

As a dean in Paris, Bulgakov became an even more prolific writer; some sources count over eighty essays and books written during less than twenty years. His search into sublime themes led him into outlining a doctrine of Sophiology, Wisdom of God, a speculation that troubled philosophers and religious students from Platonists and Rozenkruzers to Vladimir Solovyov. In 1934, he published a book on divine wisdom that “deserved” a condemnation by both Synods—the one in Moscow (Soviet) and another in exile in Czechoslovakia.¹¹

Opposing these acts, Nikolay Berdyaev explained and denounced them as acts repeating the behaviors of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor. It is an act of a “religion of authority, as being a temptation by the Anti-Christ, wherever and whenever it should appear.” Berdyaev wrote, “The Legend has the setting of

¹⁰ Sergey Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii. Sozertsaniia i umozreniia* [*The Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*] (Moscow: Respublika, 1994).

¹¹ See Sergey Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press, 1993).

Catholicism, but it relates not only to Catholicism, it relates also to Orthodoxy, just as it relates also to the authoritative religion of atheistic Communism.”¹²

Berdyayev’s disapproval of the Greek and Russian-Soviet Churches, although he never opened a conflict, even a rhetorical one, grew later into ardent support for theories of Christian unification.

Berdyayev, Weber, and the Future Debate

The reader now has the opportunity to examine Bulgakov’s essay, *The National Economy and Religious Personality*. It was the first and, for about fifty years, the only reply to Weber’s analysis with regard to Orthodox ethics. Only in the 1960s did scholars turn their attention to business in the Orthodox medieval world.¹³ Professors in theological academies in Communist countries carefully avoided the topic while economic historians, at best, studied the relations between religion and business for closed audiences, but most often they pretended the phenomenon did not exist.

Just a few years after Weber, Bulgakov managed to put together similar theoretical arguments and a set of historical evidence that allowed claiming origins of the capitalist spirit from Orthodox Christianity as well. For those who are familiar with later Russian “scientific” philosophers’ disregard for facts and documents, it will be a surprise as to how rich Russian historiography in the nineteenth century has been.

Weber’s book, at least in style, is a value free, scientific, and ordered analysis of texts and facts. Bulgakov is a disciplined scholar and could have been a brilliant sociologist as well, but his text is rather passionate—one that calls for action and not for pure discourse. It criticizes all contemporary attempts to vulgarize economic notions, it drafts an empirical research agenda for Russia’s economic history and religion, and it appeals to the consciousness of his contemporaries.

Later on, he will address many of these themes as a religious philosopher. It is a very different approach from most of the twentieth-century discussion and revision of issues raised by Weber. Orthodox scholars and officials did not touch these issues for about a century. In 2005, at a conference in Vienna, Rev. Irinej

¹² Nikolay Berdyayev, “The Spirit of the Great Inquisitor (Regarding the Ukaz of Metropolitan Sergei, Condemning the Theological Views of Fr. S. Bulgakov),” trans. S. Janos, *Journal Put’* 49 (October–December 1935): 72–81. URL: http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1935_404.html [Accessed 2 June 2008]

¹³ I dare recommend Traian Stoianovich, “The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant,” *Journal of Economic History* 20, no. 2 (June 1960): 234–313.

Dobrijevic, advisor to the Serbian Patriarch Pavle, presented a paper on Weber and Orthodox ethics.¹⁴ In Russia, in 2004, the Moscow Patriarchate attempted a compilation of a social doctrine that is based on the Ten Commandments and uses some of the terms defined by Bulgakov.¹⁵

The fact that Bulgakov's research agenda remained uncharted for many years does not mean that Bulgakov's argument was substandard. On the contrary, I believe he proved as early as 1910 that Orthodox ethics is compatible with the capitalist spirit. His opponents attempted to destroy both. They failed.

Concluding Remarks and Acknowledgements

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¹⁴ See Rev. Irinej Dobrijevic, “‘The Orthodox Spirit and the Ethic of Capitalism’: A Case Study on Serbia and Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church,” *Philotheos* 5 (2005): 416–24.

¹⁵ See Christopher Marsh, “Counting One’s Blessings: The Economic Values of Russian Orthodox Christians,” in *Markets, Morals & Religion*, ed. Jonathan B. Imber (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 179–89.