

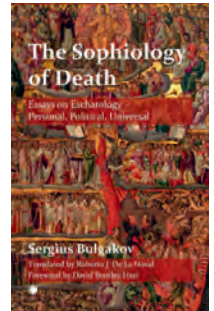
Review of Bulgakov, *The Sophiology of Death*, trans. De La Noval

Michael Plekon

Roberto J. De La Noval—a writer and professor of theology at Notre Dame University—is the translator and editor of this volume, a significant contribution to the abundant new scholarship and translation of Sergii Bulgakov’s work. Centering on Bulgakov’s writings about eschatology and the meaning of creation—and its counterpart, death—it includes many essays that are, in the words of John Behr in his endorsement for this volume, “essential for understanding Bulgakov’s approach in exploring the relationships between the Creator and creation, the uncreated and the created, and between life and death and the life of the age to come.”

The core of the collection is several essays already known in translation but essential reading if one is to come to grips with Bulgakov’s eschatology. They consider how we are tied from the beginning with the eternal life of the kingdom, with God, and examine questions of the life beyond death. The four essays that follow were originally appendices to his large trilogy’s last volume, *The Bride of the Lamb*. These last four are all new translations, not provided in the earlier translation of that work by Boris Jakim. De La Noval also includes one of the appendices of his recently published translation of Bulgakov’s last book, *The Apocalypse of John*, an entrancing meditation on the phrase at the Apocalypse’s end: “Even so, come Lord Jesus”—the phrase with which Bulgakov would conclude the introductions to most of his late books.

As De La Noval notes in his introduction, Bulgakov has never been without his critics and opponents, and is well known for the controversies that gave rise to the so-called “Sophia Affair” in 1935. De La Noval that this controversy was not essentially over the sophiological question, as is often thought, but over something of even greater theological significance: *apokatastasis*. In this matter, Bulgakov follows Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and numerous other teachers who recognized the restoration or *apokatastasis* of all, the universal resurrection and gathering in of the world and humankind at the end by a loving, forgiving creator who redeems and sanctifies. Yet this vision that God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28) was deeply problematic to many, and remains so today. It does not sit well with theological and ecclesiastical traditionalists with a deep commitment the idea of eternal punishment as God’s justice to be visited on sinners. And yet the essays translated here attest that this theological view was held by many ancient writers. In examining the theology of these ancient writers, and with the help of De La Noval’s notes and translations, we see that Bulgakov, so often accused of neglecting the fathers, of daring to go beyond the fathers, of drawing upon philosophers outside the boundaries of the Orthodox Church, of arrogantly seeking to connect people of the modern era with the past—was both clearly within the Eastern Church’s tradition of theologizing while at the same time distinctive and anomalous within it. Yet it was perhaps only with the “Russian Religious Renaissance,” as



Sergius Bulgakov, *The Sophiology of Death: Essays on Eschatology: Personal, Political, Universal*, trans. Roberto J. De La Noval, Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2021.

Nicholas Zernov called it, that Bulgakov could have developed his way of listening to the scriptures, the fathers, the tradition as well as modern philosophy and the humanities.

However, his thinking was not centered purely on eschatology. De La Noval gives us part of Bulgakov's revealing analysis of socialism (his other essay on this subject can be found in Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*). It shows Bulgakov's understanding of how the kingdom of God is inextricably tied to our history. It also reminds us that Bulgakov was, after all, a political economist—a scholar in a discipline that included issues now covered by political science, sociology and economy—before turning to theology. A political exile himself, he attended throughout his life to the events which cast their marks on our history—the Russian Revolution, the two great World Wars, waves of immigration, and the Great Depression. He responded to both the rise of state socialism and the specter of fascism.

Finally, there is the essay from which this anthology takes its title, written in 1939 but only published posthumously in 1978. It is a more comprehensive examination of death in the whole of God's plan for creation. Of special interest in it are Bulgakov's own near-death and death experiences. The first of these was the heart-wrenching death of his almost four-year-old son Ivashecka in 1909, the next his serious illness in 1926, and the last the operations for his throat cancer in 1939. It is profoundly moving to read Bulgakov's account of his intense pain and his fear facing suffering and death,

experiences so powerful that even his own faith was tested. At the end of the collection, the translator thoughtfully includes Bulgakov's directions for his own funeral services, and his homily for the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God (her falling asleep or death).

In his foreword to this new translation, David Bentley Hart notes the consistent stream of translations of Bulgakov's writings in recent years as something that neither his contemporaries nor students could have imagined or expected. For Hart, this is welcome as much as it is well deserved, for Bulgakov, in his estimation, is among the titans of modern theologians—one of the greatest theologians of any church background in the modern era. This flow of new translation and scholarship affirms what Hart sees as growing interest in Bulgakov and deeper engagement with his thinking.

The translations of Bulgakov keep coming. Having read (and reviewed) most of them, I can attest that this one, like all the others, is demanding. Bulgakov engulfs the reader with a mix of liturgical and scriptural texts—for him the primary source, tradition itself addressing us. So much for his not being traditional enough! What is amazing is the flight of his thinking into which the reader is swept up. The turns and twists are formidable. Yet, as more than one Bulgakov scholar has observed, entering his texts is often very much like hearing the chants and the beautiful texts in the liturgy. This is much of the time what we hear alongside Bulgakov's own voice. Bulgakov is being reappropriated and appreciated again, something his work richly deserves. ✱



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