The Icon as Revelation: Sergius Bulgakov's Theoretical and Practical Understanding of the Icon

by

Ernest Beau David Holland

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College and the Theology Department of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theology awarded by the University of St. Michael's College

© Copyright by Ernest Beau David Holland 2013
The Icon as Revelation: Sergius Bulgakov’s Theoretical and practical Understanding of the Icon

Ernest Beau David Holland

Master of Arts in Theology

University of St. Michael’s College

2013

Abstract

Only in relatively recent times has the icon captured the sustained attention of theologians. Following the “rediscovery” of the icon in the twentieth century, however, many significant works began to be written on the topic. At the beginning of these efforts stands the work of Sergius Bulgakov. Not confining himself to the dogmatic significance of the icon, he also interprets the iconography of the Orthodox Church throughout his treatment of more customary theological commonplaces. Following an analysis of these two movements, the paper concludes with an affirmation of the thesis: that Bulgakov utilizes icons in his theological project in a way that is consistent with the theology that he develops to support their use as sources of revelation.
Acknowledgments

As my initial foray into the wider world of scholarly research, the writing of this thesis has been a learning process, to say the least. One aspect has been especially educating: that a paper of this size is not written overnight, and that it is certainly not written alone! As it has been written in three cities in two different countries, my debts to those who have assisted me is all the greater.

I would like to thank my family for their patience and generous financial support. Though they may not always understand what I am up to, they have at least been kind enough to be there for my wife and I. To my father Matt, my grandparents Dale and Phyllis, my grandmother Nina, and my mother-in-law Helen, thanks for places to stay, warm meals, and pleasant conversation. I would especially like to thank my mother, Bonnell, who was always there to answer a phone call or go to lunch when I needed a distraction, which was more often than not.

To the folks at Regis College and the TST I will continue to be thankful for years to come. Fathers Joseph Schner and Gordon Rixon always made sure that I had work while living in Toronto and challenged me to take on a variety of responsibilities. One of these was serving as a research assistant to Sister Gill Goulding, who allowed me to help her in her own research and provided the chance to observe a theologian at work. That she has also served as one of my readers doubles my debt to her. Jaroslav Skira has served as my other reader, and to him goes the thanks for introducing me to the study of iconography. And of course I must also thank T. Allan Smith, who patiently read through the drafts of this work and several others, saving me from errors large and small. My debt to him is also doubled as this study would not have been possible without his work as a translator, for which all of us who study Bulgakov can be thankful. It was a pleasant day indeed when I discovered The Burning Bush in the library and realized that the translator was the professor of the class from which I had just come.

While at Regis College I was also given employment in the library. I could not have hoped for a better supervisor than Teresa Helik who always assigned tasks that kept me learning and thinking. Whether she knew it or not (and I suspect she did) these helped to make me aware of the great diversity of material available in the library and elsewhere. That there is an over-abundance of material in today’s academic world cannot be doubted, and navigation of it has become the chief problem besetting the would-be scholar. Mary Reynolds guided me across
these murky waters, and her ability to teach another the craft of research is one of those rare treasures tucked away in the stacks that too few have found. Like Teresa, she has been a wonderful friend to have along the journey that is graduate school. I must also thank Sue Kopp and Jeffrey Barnhardt for helping me to acquire materials after we left Toronto and headed west.

Theology and iconography are two subjects that are difficult to study outside of a lived context, and I must thank the folks at the parish of St. Silouan the Athonite for being a great example of lived theology. My thanks go out to Father Roberto, Reader Efraim, Catherine, Peter, Reader Michael, Naomi, Paul, Suzy, Sharon, Kelly, Aaron, Paulina, Tim, Misty, and all of our other brothers and sisters in Christ. I must also single out Deacon Pawel for the care that he showed to us on our spiritual journey.

Though there are many that I have not named, there is of course one more who must be mentioned. This thesis is dedicated to my wife Elise for many reasons, but mostly for just being more loving than a person could ask for. Practically speaking, she allowed us to move over two thousand miles away from friends and family and to another country mere weeks after getting married, and though it probably did not make for an ideal first setting for married life she made the most of it. In addition to always listening to me babble on about theology and iconography, she has also read through this paper many times. Her comments have helped to make it what it is, and if it is not always what it could be then perhaps I did not heed her advice as much as I should have. Of course the errors contained in it, grammatical or otherwise, are wholly mine, but I cannot imagine how many more there would be without her help.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................... v

Chapter 1: Introduction and Historical Context ................................................................. 1

  1 Historical Context ........................................................................................................... 3

Chapter 2: Theological and Theoretical Understanding of the Icon .............................. 10

  1 Sophiology, Beauty, and the Relationship between Image and Proto-image ............ 10
  2 Art .................................................................................................................................... 15
  3 The Patristic Formulation of the Icon .......................................................................... 25
  4 The Iconophile Position ............................................................................................... 29
  5 Bulgakov’s Dogmatic Understanding of the Icon ...................................................... 32

Chapter 3: Bulgakov’s Practical Observations on the Icon ........................................... 40

Chapter 4: Iconographic Interpretations ........................................................................... 49

  1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 49
  2 Christ ............................................................................................................................. 49
  3 God the Father ............................................................................................................... 50
  4 The Holy Spirit .............................................................................................................. 53
  5 The Deisis ...................................................................................................................... 54
  6 The Forerunner ............................................................................................................. 62
  7 The Mother of God .................................................................................................... 67
  8 The Last Judgment ..................................................................................................... 77

Chapter 5: Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 81

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 84

  1 Primary Bibliography ................................................................................................... 84
  2 Secondary Bibliography ............................................................................................... 85
Chapter 1
Introduction and Historical Context

Theological reflection on the icon in the twentieth-century stands as a veritable explosion of creative activity when compared with the work of previous centuries. Not since the iconoclastic disputes has the icon held the attention of theologians in such a sustained fashion. Near the genesis of this increased iconographic awareness, influencing many later thinkers and artists, lies the work of Sergius Bulgakov. He can rightly be credited as writing the first properly theological work on the icon, as his major essay on the topic dwells upon its dogmatic significance.\(^1\) Additionally, he infuses his other writings with occasional reflections on the icon, using them as springboards for his investigations or as sources from which to draw supporting evidence for his theses. Iconography, as part of the living tradition of the Church, is seen by Bulgakov to be an event of inspiration, functioning as a different medium for the same truths that more formal theological thought attempts to communicate.\(^2\) With this framework in hand, iconography even has the possibility of transmitting different theological ideas than the written word. As a valid expression of faith, these ideas take their place in the life of the Church, at times long before they are actively reflected upon by dogmatic thought.\(^3\)

When dealing with iconography, Bulgakov appears to make a division between two different ways of utilizing the tradition. On the one hand he talks about the dogmatic significance of the icon. The icon, as put forth by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, witnesses to a dogmatic truth that has been given to the Church. As will be shown, Bulgakov interprets this truth in a

---


2 Sergius Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, revised translation by Lydia Kesich, foreword by Thomas Hopko (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 142-143.

3 In truth, Bulgakov includes almost the entire life of the Church as potentially holding seeds of the faith, stating “No preestablished forms are prescribed for the tradition of the Church: the Holy Spirit that lives in her ‘bloweth where it listeth.’ In this respect, as sources of the sacred tradition, the canons, the patristic writings, the liturgical texts, and the icons are of equal value. All this – not in isolation but in its living and organic totality – expresses the truth of the Church.” Sergius Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner, translated by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 137.
different manner than the patristic witness, and in the process he finds that the icon testifies to another movement as well. It serves as a source of revealed truth, a concrete witness to realities that are often only given abstract formulation. He deals with both aspects of the icon, the dogmatic and the revelatory, devoting one essay explicitly to the former and buttressing his dogmatic theology with the latter.

After a short historical introduction regarding the “re-discovery” of the icon in the Russian Silver Age, Chapter II of this thesis will examine Bulgakov’s dogmatic understanding of the icon. The chapter begins by briefly describing the sophiological context in which this theology develops, as well as his understanding of Beauty as a transcendental principle and its place in the ideal and real worlds. This paves the way for a discussion of creativity and art, the latter of which is necessary since the icon is above all a work of art. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the patristic understanding of the icon and Bulgakov’s own contribution to the theology of the icon. Chapter III teases out some of the practical implications of his theological conception.

The discussion of these different theoretical and practical elements builds the foundation for Chapter IV: Iconographic Interpretations. Perhaps surprisingly, Bulgakov makes little use of the revelatory aspect of iconography in developing his Christology. The “hidden truths” found in some icons seem to not be needed for the area of theology that is the cornerstone of Christianity. What one finds, upon closer examination, is that he uses them primarily when dealing with the more shadowy aspects of the faith, those places where the written tradition has remained “silent” on different matters. The areas that he is most anxious to shed light upon, then, are areas that could be seen as popular expressions of the faith. In particular, Bulgakov uses icons as sources for theological investigation when discussing the places of the Mother of God, the Forerunner, and others. Further, he re-frames the majority of these subjects in light of a more complex composition, the Deisis, and brings all of these together when talking about the Last Judgment. These subjects are, for the most part, not found in Scripture, or at most only dimly hinted at.

---

This study will seek to show the relationship that exists between Bulgakov’s theological understanding of the icon and his use of them as sources of revelation, incorporating relevant criticisms of both of these movements in the process. In the end it will be demonstrated that Bulgakov utilizes icons in his theological project in a way that is consistent with the theology that he develops to support their use as sources of revelation.

1 Historical Context

In May I visited an exhibition (in Munich) of icons cleaned and restored by Russian restorers in Moscow, which the Soviets have sent to be shown in Germany. It meant a lot to me to see these works, because there for the first time I really saw things from the period of “great art” of icons, that art which has been transformed into more of an applied or industrial art form, failing to preserve the tradition.

Under the influence of this exhibition, I have modified a little my own experiments in contemporary icon painting. They may change again later, but I could not stop myself from beginning to work in the style which I had seen – not because the canon requires it but out of artistic taste. Besides you know that in the 19th and 20th centuries, the ancient canon was not followed at all, and our churches of this period are full of the same sort of pictures that one sees here in France which we call in Russia “Italian style.” It is only recently that there has been a return to the ancient canon, sometimes with blind fanaticism. You of course understand that an icon is not a picture, it is an object of veneration – what tormented me is how to make one so that it is spiritual that it does not prevent prayer, and one is not sick of it within a year – and that it should be a work of art at the same time, because it is art that we artists wish to place at the feet of Our Lord. But to follow the canon without sincerity, without having a conscience that one is following the right path – that would not give me satisfaction…

It was after the exhibition that I understood the true path of painting icons, because I had seen works by masters in this genre which I admired and whose artistic and spiritual taste I both want to emulate.5

The above reflection, penned by Sister Joanna Reitlinger in a letter to her artistic mentor Maurice Denis during late 1929, serves as a useful point of entry when discussing the

---

5 Joanna Reitlinger, to Maurice Denis, 16 November 1929, translated from the French and cited in Elizabeth Roberts, “‘A True Theologian’ – The Icon-painter Sister Joanna (Julia Nikolayevna Reitlinger) 1898-1988,” in Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity: Selected Papers of the International Conference Held in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in June 2004, edited by Wil van den Bercken and Jonathan Sutton (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 294. The passage is cited as it appears in Roberts’ translation. She explains that the typographical errors are meant to be reflective of Sr. Joanna’s original French text.
understanding of the icon in twentieth century Orthodox thought. The artistic transformation that she speaks of owed much to what can be considered nothing less than a “discovery,” or “rediscovery,” of the icon among the Russian communities at home and abroad. What had once been an integral part of Russian culture had, over the centuries, become obscured through neglect and the assimilation of foreign elements. In the years prior to Reitlinger’s letter, the ancient icons of Russia had, however, witnessed a rebirth as they came to be seen as the authentic artistic heritage of the country. This phenomenon was fueled by pioneering studies in archaeology, art-history, theology, and even philosophy. In addition, these written texts were matched by new exhibitions in museums and art galleries across the world, thereby spreading popular awareness of the icon.

To understand the discovery of the icon, it is necessary to begin by drawing attention to the archaeological expeditions that occurred in the early nineteenth century. The archaeologist K. M. Borozdin was given the task of studying and sketching monuments of Old Russian culture, as he visited cities and monasteries across the land in 1809 and 1810. As noted by Shirley Glade, these expeditions coincided with Russia’s defeat of Napoleon, and the increased wave of nationalism that swept the country as Russia began to be viewed, and to view itself, as a major “European power.” In contrast to the westernizing paradigm that had been in place since the time of Peter the Great, native Russian culture slowly began to be viewed as intrinsically valuable in its own right.

---

6 The idea of a discovery or re-discovery of the icon has found wide acceptance in contemporary Orthodox and Catholic thought. Implicit in this idea is the notion that something was lost and therefore needed to be found again. Kotkavaara, however, has critiqued the notion of discovery by pointing to the continuance of iconography in the various times of “decadence.” In this task he has drawn attention to the idealistic conceptions of the icon that generally accompany revivalist notions. Kari Kotkavaara, Progeny of the Icon: Emigré Russian Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1999).


8 Ibid., 148.

In terms of the icon, this renewed appreciation manifested itself in several ways that would bear fruit near the turn of the next century. Fueled by nationalistic fervor, several wealthy individuals began to collect icons *en masse*. The early efforts of S. P. Riabushinskii and I. S. Ostroukhov were quickly matched by those of N. P. Likhachev, P. M. Tretiakov, and others.\(^{10}\) The importance of these individual collections is that, whether by choice or by force, they would subsequently go on to form the national collections that developed pre- and post-revolution. Likhachev’s collection, for instance, consisting of over fifteen hundred icons, helped double the holdings of the Alexander III Museum’s collection.\(^{11}\) Riabushinskii and Ostroukhov, who would find their collections nationalized following the Soviet take-over,\(^{12}\) were also among the first to develop methods for cleaning the layers of soot and over-painting that had obstructed access to the original icon. Engaged in healthy competition, these two collectors helped to place the icon on scientific grounds as they sought to reveal the original image trapped beneath.\(^{13}\) Their efforts can be considered the pre-condition to the true re-discovery of the icon, since it was only as these methods developed that Russia was able to gain a true glimpse of her past.

The scientific restoration of icons quickly called into question certain conclusions that had been reached by scholars in the fields of art-history and archaeology. By basing their studies and conclusions on over-painted examples, scholars had been unable to see the true beauty of early Russian art. Instead, they had formed theories that attributed the development of Russian iconography to Italian painting. When confronted with the evidence of scientific restoration some, such as N. P. Kondakov, continued to hold these theories.\(^{14}\) Kondakov, in particular, developed a hard-line approach to the icon, one that was seen by some as refusing to allow the

---

\(^{10}\) Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon*, 163-170.


\(^{12}\) Riabushinskii’s collection would be incorporated into that of the State Historical Museum, while Ostroukhov’s was merged with the Tretiakov Gallery.

\(^{13}\) Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon*, 163-169.

Russian genius its proper place.\textsuperscript{15} Still, as the foremost art-historian of his day, his studies had a major impact on all of those around him and they would continue to play a role well into the next century.\textsuperscript{16}

Kondakov, in addition to more formal studies, also championed the cause of renewing the deplorable state of icon painting in his own day. Through writings such as Nikolai Leskov’s \textit{The Sealed Angel}, awareness had been raised regarding the precarious state of the living descendent of Russia’s ancient tradition of painting.\textsuperscript{17} In the wake of modern industrialization, the craft of icon painting was in serious danger of fading into oblivion, in part due to its inability to compete with mechanical reproductions. Another danger that it faced was poor craftsmanship, causing it to be seen as “the crudest sort of art.” Though it had survived the shift in the westernizing of public taste, it appeared unable to cope with these new threats.\textsuperscript{18} In early 1901 Kondakov was able to secure a meeting with Tsar Nicolas II and convince him of the importance of protecting Russia’s icon painters.\textsuperscript{19} This led to the founding of the Imperial Committee for the Preservation and Protection of Russian Icon Painting. One of the most successful results of this committee was the founding of schools for the teaching of painting in villages that had traditionally produced icons.\textsuperscript{20} To aid in this task, the committee also published a manual of examples that it deemed to be representative of Russia’s lost artistic heritage.

\textsuperscript{15} Even Kondakov’s English translator, who completed the work shortly after his death, voiced concerns over his unwillingness to view the Russian development in a positive light. E. H. Minns, Introduction to \textit{The Russian Icon} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), vii-viii, x. See also Glade, “A Heritage Discovered Anew,” 156.

\textsuperscript{16} For instance, when sent a questionnaire by the Kondakov Institute of Prague, Sr. Joanna Reitlinger requested a copy of the text volume of Kondakov’s posthumously published four-volume work on the icon. A later letter reveals that the institute fulfilled this request. Joanna Reitlinger, Paris, to D. A. Rosóvskii, 28 March 1932, translated from the Russian and cited in Kotkavaara, \textit{Progeny of the Icon}, Appendix II:7; Joanna Reitlinger, to D. A. Rosóvskii, 26 October 1932 (received), translated from the Russian and cited in Kotkavaara, \textit{Progeny of the Icon}, Appendix II:8.


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{20} Nichols, “The Icon and the Machine,” 138.
While the committee sought to re-train iconographers in different parts of rural Russia, another discovery of the icon was taking place elsewhere in the country. Artists and the cultural elite had seen the beauty of the icon and quickly began to imitate it or adapt it to their own uses. The role of the icon in the Russian avant-garde, for instance, was made explicit in the different manifestos that accompanied this movement. It is worth noting that the restoration techniques discussed above were first developed not by an icon painter, but by an artist, and one who would eventually be hired even by Church authorities. Following the October Revolution, artists and iconographers were able to find work making “scientific copies” of famous Russian icons for the Soviet regime and the exhibitions that they promoted abroad. For those who were in exile these copies would prove formative, as evidenced by Sr. Joanna’s letter. Her work, along with many others, would go on to lay the foundation for a true renewal of the practice of icon painting.

Coincident with forays into art history and iconography, several intellectual currents helped to shape the re-discovery of the icon. The importance of nationalism has already been mentioned, but beginning around mid-century this began to manifest itself as a specific religious-philosophical project, appropriately dubbed the Slavophile movement. Some of the Slavophile ideas, such as sobornost and integral-knowledge would go on to play a significant role in Russian thought, particularly in the works of Vladimir Soloviev and his successors.

---


22 Kotkavaara, Progeny of the Icon, 161-162.

23 Bulgakov and others give the concept of sobornost a wide variety of meanings, yet all seem to agree on the distinctly Russian character of the word. He draws attention to the fact that “sobor” can designate both “council” and “church” in Russian, and that its adjectival form “sobornaia” can be found in the Nicene Creed as a translation for the word “catholic.” In Bulgakov’s day, the concept had taken on additional meanings, primarily due to the ecclesiological thought of A. S. Khomiakov (whose thought became associated with the word, though he himself does not appear to have used it). It came to designate the universality of the Church, while simultaneously affirming the individuality of her members. Bulgakov, like Khomiakov before him, opposes this understanding of the Church to what many Orthodox thinkers perceive the Roman-Catholic alternative to consist of, namely, a top-down hierarchy with an infallible leader. Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 60-81. For the absence of the term “sobornost” in Khomiakov’s writings see, Robert Bird, General Introduction to On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader, translated by Boris Jakim and Robert Bird (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), 7-8.

24 The present understanding of integral knowledge owes much to the work of I. V. Kireyevsky, though he himself rarely used the term. He did, however, sketch the content of what others would elaborate and label as such. Primarily, the idea of integral knowledge indicates the wholeness of reality and is an attempt at overcoming what many of the Slavophiles perceived as being the narrow limits of Western thought, with its overarching emphasis on rationality. In contrast, integral knowledge attempts to get at the truth through all of the faculties of the human
In terms of aesthetics, Soloviev’s vision would go on to have a profound influence on Russian religious philosophy. His adaptation of Dostoevsky’s phrase “beauty will save the world” did much to influence the imagination of the Silver Age. By understanding beauty as “a palpable and transformative force,” he paved the way for a conception of art as “theurgy.” This task envisioned art as a creative transformation of the world, one that would seek to manifest the transcendental property of Beauty. Many Silver Age conceptions of art or the icon as more than a mere archaeological fact would make use of this notion of art as theurgy.

Perhaps the most successful at specifically framing the icon in theurgic terms was Prince E. N. Trubetskoi. In the wake of World War I and up until the revolution he delivered a series of lectures that understood the icon as a theurgic task. To this conception he also added nationalistic overtones, drawing attention to the coincidence between the strength of the Russian people in throwing off the Mongol yoke in the fourteenth century and to what he considered to be the height of medieval Russian art. In his view, the icons of this period corresponded to the purified soul of the Russian people, as they depicted the transfigured world around them. The

person, and includes non-logical modes of perception, such as ecstatic and aesthetic feelings, inner judgment (conscience), and even love. For Kireyevsky at least, this allows for a true concord between thought and faith. It goes hand-in-hand with the idea of sobornost discussed above. See N. O. Lossky, History of Russian Philosophy (New York: International Universities Press, 1951), 20-29.


26 The period generally known as the “Silver Age” of Russian culture spans roughly twenty years, beginning in the mid-1890’s up until the revolution of 1917. It was a time of great creativity in the arts, following on the heels of the Golden Age (1810’s-1830’s), the achievements of which it considered itself heir to. Gasparov states that the age as a whole can be defined by its interest in idealistic and existentialist philosophy, as well as eschatological expectations. Boris Gasparov, “Poetry of the Silver Age,” in The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-2.

27 Tarasov, Framing Russian Art, 115.

28 Ibid.

three essays that Trubetskoii delivered in the years immediately prior to the revolution would have a great influence on both iconography and theology for the rest of the century.  

Bulgakov, while not always acknowledging his sources, draws heavily on the thought of Soloviev, Trubetskoii, and others in developing his own theology of the icon. Tarasov describes the “intellectual baggage” of the Silver Age as a whole as consisting of “the work of art as objective reality (Schelling), art as a higher form of cognition (Schopenhauer), the theory of ‘empathy’ in artistic form (Dilthey and Lipps), [and] art setting itself theurgic tasks (Solov’yov).” All of these, in one way or another, factor into Bulgakov’s theological understanding of the icon. In terms of the revelatory powers of the icon, which will be discussed in Chapter IV, he adopts a similar approach to that taken by Trubetskoii, and indeed he uses some of the same examples as found in his essays, but seems to evade some of the criticisms directed at the prince by incorporating them into his larger sophiological project. To understand Bulgakov’s thought on the icon, some introduction to sophiology must be given, and it is to this that we must now turn.
Chapter 2
Theological and Theoretical Understanding of the Icon

1 Sophiology, Beauty, and the Relationship between Image and Proto-image

Behind the sophiological understanding of reality lies the desire to explain a fundamental *aporia*, that of the relationship between God and the world: God is uncreated and eternal, whereas the world is called into being out of a state of nothingness. Ontologically God is different from the world, and for many thinkers this has posed a significant problem. If He is different, how can He relate and come into contact with it? More importantly, if He comes into contact with humanity, how is it that free will is maintained in the exchange between the two planes of being? In the first centuries of Christian thought, which was shaped to a considerable extent by Middle Platonism, a bridge of sorts was posited as the mediator between the two realms: the Logos.\(^{34}\) Connecting this philosophical principle with the Gospel of John, theologians put forth the idea of Christ as the mediator between the Divine and human realms. The weakness of these theories, in light of later Christological developments, was that they lacked a clear conception of the Divinity of Christ, and he was understood to be neither God nor human, but something in between (a created god, a divinized human, etc.). In the course of the fourth century the Divinity of Christ was worked out and refined, in such a way as to safely place Christ within the Divine plane of being while simultaneously affirming his humanity. This was made clear through the four negative statements of the Chalcedonian definition: that in Christ the two natures are united unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, and inseparably. The fault that Bulgakov finds with these statements is that they are cast negatively, and not positively. Indeed, he cites various reasons, historical and theological, to explain why the Council was *unable* to pronounce the corresponding positive side.

---

of the issue.\textsuperscript{35} In order to fill this theological lacuna, a different approach was needed, one that could positively clarify the relationship between the created and uncreated realms of existence.

Though it has many forms, the basic tenet of sophiology is that there exists a connection between the two ontological planes that is rooted in the Wisdom of God. While the Logos theologians of the early Church largely identified the figure of Holy Wisdom with Christ, others connected her to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Into this ambiguity was introduced the idea that Wisdom was something else entirely. The foremost Russian thinker to begin reflecting anew on the figure of Sophia was Vladimir Soloviev, writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His thought was taken up by the next generation, and found a variety of expressions, some more philosophical and others more theological. For Bulgakov, whose sophiology is perhaps the most conformed to the teachings of Christianity, there exists not one but two Sophias: the Divine Sophia and the creaturely Sophia. The Divine Sophia is the inner life of the Trinity, and in relation to the world she is its eternal foundation. In contrast, the created Sophia is given a beginning in time and works towards an end beyond history, which is none other than identification with the Divine Sophia. The seeds of the Divine realm are sown into creation, and when they bloom the two Sophias will be one.\textsuperscript{36} The two Sophias are two sides of the same coin, and all that is found in creation has its image in the Divine life. This idea leads to another basic tenet of sophiology, that of the “humanity of God,” which states that if humans are made in the image of God, this is because God Himself possesses a human image.

Within the Divine life are contained all of the proto-images that make up the created world.\textsuperscript{37} Consequently, the world is composed entirely of images that bear a correlative relationship to the proto-images;\textsuperscript{38} there is nothing that exists which has not first existed within


\textsuperscript{36} Scripturally, this idea connects to I Corinthians 15:28 where it is said that there will come a time when God will be “all in all.”

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 64.

\textsuperscript{38} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 41.
the Divine Sophia. Bulgakov labels the distinction between the two realms as the difference between the “ideal” and the “real,” and states, “real being fixes a thing in space and time, whereas the ideal thought-image is free of this fixation and is not limited by space and time.”

Ideas are “general” and “logical” whereas things are “singular” and “alogical.” The latter are particular manifestations of the former, upon which they are ontologically dependent, and indeed represent “an intergrowing of the proto-image with matter.”

In discussing the relationship between images and their proto-images, Bulgakov finds rich support throughout the patristic witness. He draws upon the work of Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, pseudo-Dionysios, Maximos the Confessor, John of Damascus, Theodore the Studite, and Patriarch Nicephorus. Anticipating objections, Bulgakov also takes time to clarify the difference between Platonic and sophiological conceptions of the proto-image/image distinction. The error of Platonism, he states, lies in its confusion of the proto-images with God Himself. Sophiology, on the other hand, safely places the ideas of things within the realm of the Divine Sophia, and through this it is able to steer clear of making gods out the Divine ideas (polytheism).

If in the eschaton the identity between the two Sophias will be made manifest, then this same eschatological resolution also permeates the relationship between the proto-image and the image. The idea behind the thing serves as both its “foundation and goal,” as it guides it through

---


40 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 41-42.

41 Ibid., 42.

42 Ibid., 47.


45 Ibid. Bulgakov goes on to discuss how the hierarchies of angels correspond to the realm of ideas, and in fact are personal, “hypostatic essences.” See also, Bulgakov, *Icons*, 48 n. 61.
the process of becoming which characterizes creaturely existence.46 The ideas are what give an inner energy to creation, propelling it towards the realization of unity with the Divine world.

Though ideas are general, since they exist apart from space and time, they are in fact singular; conversely, things, which are singular and specific, always exist in the plural. Within the realm of becoming there exists a plurality of images that correspond to the one proto-image in which they participate.47 To recall Plato’s example, the idea of a chair gives itself to the diverse manifestations of chairs that one finds in the world. In turn, these individual occurrences act as a point of revelation for the idea itself. Thus the ideal world exists apart from the subject and possesses objective reality.48 As in more recent times, the very idea of an objective reality was challenged in Bulgakov’s own day. Taking these opposing views into account, he balances the objectivity of the Divine Sophia with the subjective notion that all images exist for someone: there is no image without a receiver.49

Within the Medieval system of theology, with its over-arching sense of an objective foundation to reality, pride of place was given to the three transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Truth and goodness, to an extent, underpin the functioning of society. Without them, we would be unable to agree on laws or morals, though of course we do find a wide range of differing views across time and space. But Beauty has long been thought to reside in the eye of the beholder. What is more, disagreements on Beauty do not lead to breakdowns in society and can be tolerated to a greater extent than disagreements regarding the other two transcendentals.

The very character of a transcendental, however, is that it exists apart from subjective ways of knowing, that it possesses an objective foundation. In Bulgakov’s sophiological vision, Beauty is nothing less than the Glory of God.50 Within the intra-Trinitarian life, he defines a

46 Ibid., 54; see also, Ibid., 47.
47 Ibid., 49.
48 Ibid., 42.
49 Ibid.
dyadic relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit, whereby together they reveal the
Father.\textsuperscript{51} If the Father creates the world through the Son, it is through the Holy Spirit that He
gives it form, clothing it in His Glory.\textsuperscript{52} The Son gives to the world the “seeds” of the ideas
found in the Divine Sophia and the Holy Spirit quickens them through their state of creaturely
becoming.\textsuperscript{53} Beauty, as an objective reality, is the “demiurge of the cosmos,” the “unceasing
force” which will bring about the transfiguration of the world and the union of the two Sophias.\textsuperscript{54}

The connection between Truth and Beauty, in a sense, mirrors this relationship as “Truth
strives to become not only intelligible, but tangible in Beauty.”\textsuperscript{55} Beauty connects with the
question of “how,” while Truth aligns itself with the question of “what.”\textsuperscript{56} Nature is spirit-
bearing insofar as it possesses this Beauty, and Bulgakov finds evidence of its objective ground
in the universal appreciation of the beauty of the natural world.\textsuperscript{57} As a “spiritual force” Beauty
possesses objectivity,\textsuperscript{58} and that it exists apart from any subjective emotion is evidenced by its
“pre-human” character, which places it beyond the realm of “good and evil.”\textsuperscript{59}

While Beauty is amoral in its ideal state, there comes a point within historical time when
it begins to acquire a “moral coefficient” and can become either good or evil.\textsuperscript{60} Beauty is neutral
until it is subjectively perceived, and it is only with humanity that this becomes possible.
Humanity is the “eye of the world,” the gate through which the whole of creation is able to know

\textsuperscript{51} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 53.
\textsuperscript{52} Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 175.
\textsuperscript{53} Sergius Bulgakov, \textit{The Comforter}, translated by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans
\textsuperscript{54} Sergii Bulgakov, “The Unfading Light (1917),” in Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology,
edited by Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 140.
\textsuperscript{55} Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 176-177.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{57} Bulgakov, \textit{The Comforter}, 202.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 203.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
its Creator. Bulgakov’s vision can appear to be overly anthropocentric, particularly when he matches the idea of humanity being a microcosm (“contracted world”) to that of the world being an anthropocosm (“world-[human]”). Humanity is nothing short of the “ontological center of the world” and, drawing on John of Damascus, he affirms that “God’s image in creation is the human form.” This is the flip side of the doctrine concerning the humanity of God. Humanity is unique in this role, and due to this serves as the “representative of all creation.”

Since humanity is a two-way bridge between God and creation, creation and God, it serves in a dual capacity. If humanity’s end resides in “knowing and seeking God,” then this is accomplished in both Truth and Beauty. Ontologically, humanity is endowed with the gift of aesthetic appreciation, and this is a two-way process. In its orientation towards creation, humanity is a creator of images. This is because there exists within humanity the ideas behind the things found in creation, and a person is able to perceive these and render them through matter.

2 Art

In turning to the subject of art, Bulgakov’s vision moves one more step away from the ethereal and towards the concrete. It is here that one is able to begin directly perceiving what until now have remained primarily abstract concepts. The same Divine Sophia that allows Beauty to possess an objective foundation also serves as the foundation for human art. In a reciprocal

---

62 Ibid., 55.
63 Ibid.
64 Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God*, 77.
65 Ibid.
66 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 176.
67 Ibid., 177.
68 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 43.
69 Ibid., 50.
70 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 177.
movement art functions as a revelation of “Beauty in the world, alongside of the beauty of nature.”\textsuperscript{71} The key difference between these two revelations of Beauty is that art is an act of human creation, whereas nature manifests Beauty in a natural sense; in its most ideal conception, art is “beauty permeated with thought.”\textsuperscript{72} The following will be dedicated to explicating this lofty understanding of art, beginning with an explanation of the general artistic process and then moving onto a discussion of creativity and the creative imperative before ending with the question of theurgy.

Thus far we have examined the image in relation to the proto-image, but at this point it is necessary to introduce a further stage into this process, one that Bulgakov labels as the “artificial icon.”\textsuperscript{73} Within his general sophiological understanding, ideas shift from a state of “ideality” to one of reality as they become specific things in the creaturely Sophia.\textsuperscript{74} In this conception, art is a retrospective process: it reintroduces the ideal into the real. To this extent, the artistic object is one that portrays the “iconic” side of things,\textsuperscript{75} the ideal that has been “liberated” from its specific appearance in time and space.\textsuperscript{76} This process, which will play a greater role in the icon proper, is termed by Bulgakov as the “iconization of things.”\textsuperscript{77} This creative expression stands as the dividing line between the artistic image and the “everyday prosaic, inartistic conception of [a thing].”\textsuperscript{78}

The goal of art is to make clear the idea that is contained within the thing, and “artistic images are but ideas which have become transparent.”\textsuperscript{79} It sees through to the proto-image,
extracts the idea, and mixes it with the real image of a thing, creatively mirroring the forms and colors of both worlds. As a combination of both the ideal and the real world, art experiences the advantages and limitations of each. It is more real than the real due to its mixture with the ideal, yet for this reason it lacks reality in the strict sense. Bulgakov uses the example of the Apples of Apelles which, though they present the viewer with the apple in its purest form, are not real. Far from being an illusion (as the birds who attempted to eat Apelles’ apples took them to be), art expresses the icon (ἐικόν) of a thing, to use the words of pseudo-Dionysios. This is both the “positive value” and “truth” of art, since it reveals the thing in its Divine foundation, the thing as it really is.

As ordinary vision perceives the base reality of a thing, art functions as “noetic seeing.” Kant stated that “things without concepts are blind and concepts without things are empty,” and Bulgakov adapts this to read that “things without proto-images are blind (naturalism) and proto-images without things are empty or abstract (schematism).” Art serves as a way of knowing the eternal ideas, and the One who stands behind them. Isolation of the ideas found in the Divine Sophia directs one to knowledge of the Trinity Itself, of whom she is the Divine life. In this way, art, like theology, possesses a cataphatic movement whereby it attempts, and is able, to come to know God. It is described by Bulgakov as a “feeling after God.” This is not limited to

---

81 Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 127.
82 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 41.
83 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 181.
84 Ibid., 180. In affirming the positive value of art, Bulgakov specifically has in mind those criticisms raised by Nietzsche. Ibid., 179-180.
85 Bulgakov’s paraphrase of what appears to be Kant’s, “Thoughts without content are void; intuitions without conceptions, blind.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn, introduction by Andrew Fiala (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), 22.
87 In contrast to those who would hold that the ideas behind the world are merely illusory, the other temptation resides in the deification of the ideas apart from a recognition God. Since art can sufficiently see and testify to the ideal world, its “temptation” lies in stopping at this point. Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 182.
88 Ibid., 189.
figurative or representational art, but all of the arts function in this way. However, the cataphatic movement of art is balanced by the apophatic, creating an antimony for the creature as nature is both shrouded and revealed to the human vision that would seek to penetrate through to the world of ideas.

With this final point we must at last introduce the being who would enact the artistic program within creation, namely, humanity. Art is only an abstract phenomenon until it encounters human creativity, since it is humanity who serves as the bridge between the ideal and the real worlds. As was briefly mentioned above, Bulgakov understands humanity as a microcosm, a “little world” through which the world at large “thinks and learns to know itself.” Humanity is able to function in this capacity since it belongs to both the Divine and creaturely realms. In their ontological foundation, humans are given a will oriented towards the Beautiful, or more plainly, the gift of “aesthetic appreciation.” In a twin movement, art both confirms the revelation of humanity as the image of God and reveals God through humanity’s creative acts. Due to its sophianic foundation, humanity, like the Divine Sophia, contains the ideas of things within itself and is able to recognize them in creation, in addition to creating artificial icons through the process discussed above.

---

89 Ibid., 181.
90 Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 127.
93 Bulgakov, *The Philosophy of Economy*, 146.
94 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 177; Serge Boulgakov, *La lumière sans déclin*, translated by Constantin Andronikof (Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1990), 323, 353-354. The other two orientations of the will are towards the good, and towards reason/wisdom.
96 Ibid., 50.
97 Ibid., 43.
Bearing the image of God, humanity is not simply given a gift but also a task: aesthetic appreciation is meant to give way to the active expression of beauty. As the representative of God in creation, humanity is capable of “[imbuing] it with beauty,”98 and bequeathing to the world its symbols.99 Bulgakov compares this gift to the parable of the talents,100 and stresses humanity’s calling to be a creator in demiurgic terms.101 This is one of the ways in which humanity, individually and collectively, is capable of exercising its freedom.102 His equation of freedom and creativity is nowhere more evident than when he states, “Christianity is freedom and, consequently, creative activity.”103 The accumulation of artistic achievements across time and space allows one to speak of art not simply as a passing phenomenon, but as “labor inherited from generation to generation in the service of beauty.”104 In many ways, these achievements parallel those made in other realms of human activity, such as in the sciences and more economic endeavors.

Bulgakov’s sophiological vision labels all creativity as “sophianic,”105 since each means of creative expression participates in the Divine Sophia.106 Noetic seeing, and the expression of this using the means of art, is only possible due to the connection that exists between the two worlds.107 This basis, however, like humanity’s establishment in the image of God, can be “perverted.” When a person seeks models not in the ideas that stand behind creation, but rather outside the Divine Sophia, art becomes twisted.108 Prior to his overtly theological work,

98 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 177.
99 Ibid., 181.
100 Bulgakov, The Comforter, 309.
102 Bulgakov, The Philosophy of Economy, 133-134.
104 Bulgakov, The Philosophy of Economy, 172.
105 Rendered as “sophic” in Evtuhov’s translation.
106 Ibid., 145.
107 Bulgakov, Icons, 114.
108 Bulgakov, The Philosophy of Economy, 146.
Bulgakow discusses this situation in different terms. He characterizes humanity’s relation to the world as one that is permeated by “magism.”

Magism, simply put, is defined as a longing for power that exists apart from love. It is humanity’s desire to exert influence upon the world, and in the economic sphere this manifests itself as a remaking of the world in response to need, a situation that arose with the fall. For the artistic sphere, the means are different, but the intent is the same whenever art attempts “to become magical” by “[acquiring] power over the world.”

In place of attempting to reveal Beauty, art becomes economy as its aim is lowered to earthly goals and ambitions. When exercised properly, though, creativity reveals not only God, but Sophia as well.

Creativity stands in the same type of relationship to the realm of ideas that has been discussed in regards to art and Beauty. While the task of the creative enterprise is still to “lay bare” the ideas behind the things, some additional limitations apply once this activity moves into the sphere of reality. Being a mixture of the ideal and the real, artistic creations are not realities in and of themselves, but only “images of realities.”

The reason for this is that humanity does not create ex nihilo, but is limited to the “re-creation of that which preexists in the metaphysical world.” Only God Himself is capable of “metaphysical originality,” and this constitutes the chief difference between human and Divine creativity. That being said, the goal of art is not lessened since it seeks to create images that are new for creation.

---

110 Ibid., 324.
111 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 114.
112 Bulgakov, “*The Unfading Light* (1917),” 140; Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 178; Bulgakov, *Icons*, 50.
113 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 178.
115 Ibid., 146.
117 Ibid., 177.
The limitation of human creation is that it is confined to the created world, yet the artist has many means at his or her disposal. Matter plays an essential role in this process, as the creation of images is wholly dependent upon it.\textsuperscript{118} Without it, noetic vision could exist (despite being perceived through the contemplation of matter), but it would be unable to be communicated to others. All of matter can potentially bring praise to the Creator, since for humanity “the world is ‘plastic,’ it can be re-created, in different modes.”\textsuperscript{119} This material newness can be directed towards goods or knowledge, but also feelings and beauty.\textsuperscript{120} All of the arts testify to the same Beauty that resides in creation when they attempt to reveal the “icons of things.”\textsuperscript{121} Taken together, these constitute the “doxology” that all of human creation sings as it seeks after God.\textsuperscript{122}

Conscious of humanity as a whole, Bulgakov pays special attention to the fact that throughout history this doxology has been able to exist outside of the Church. He affirms the rich history of pre-Christian art and recognizes it for the spiritual vision that it is.\textsuperscript{123} He is in agreement with art-historical studies of his day that place the genesis of the icon not in a Christian milieu, but rather in Egyptian and Hellenistic cultures.\textsuperscript{124} In this scheme Christianity functions not as the originator, but rather the inheritor of a long line of human labor conducted in the service of Beauty.\textsuperscript{125} This movement across time and space has its high and low points,

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 178-179.

\textsuperscript{119} Bulgakov, \textit{The Philosophy of Economy}, 142.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 43; Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 178.

\textsuperscript{122} Bulgakov, \textit{Jacob’s Ladder}, 127.

\textsuperscript{123} Bulgakov, \textit{The Orthodox Church}, 142-143.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 144. For the art historical perspective see, Kondakov, \textit{The Russian Icon}, 11-27. For a different opinion on the matter, one that sees a break between Christianity and the artistic heritage of Antiquity see, Leonide Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, \textit{The Meaning of Icons}, translated by G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 29-30.

\textsuperscript{125} Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 183.
periods when it either lives up to its ideal or strays into distortion of the ideas, and it rests to a great extent on the connection between art and religion.126

Between art and religion there occurs a natural co-existence, which centers on the inherent symbolism of art.127 If the purpose of art is to reveal the inner meaning of things, it is necessary that it “rise above the world.”128 On its own, art can only “deify” the world and make a god or gods out of it; to move beyond this perversion it stands in need of religion. Indeed, art is the “handmaid of religion,” and it depends upon religion for its vision of the ideal world, which in turn directs the artist’s choice of subjects.129 Though art functions at its highest when it is in the service of the religious cult, it has often been severed from this relationship and has attempted to assert its own self-sufficing existence.130 However, even when art consciously chooses this path it is still religious to the extent that it serves as a revelation of Beauty. This “neutrality” of art can be observed through the aesthetic appreciation of works of art produced by other religions and cultures.

While Bulgakov is clear that art needs religion, he also states that religion needs art.131 In taking the time to address this question, he has in mind the long history of iconoclasm that has existed alongside religion. The recognition of the temporality of the things of the world has led some religions to eschew material contemplation in favor of direct mental apprehension of the Divine. He reasons that since humanity has been given a will directed towards the Beautiful, it must accept art in its diverse forms.132 Beauty is recognized by humanity and then clothed with the forms of ritual. The religious cult, “which contains the synthesis of all art” accepts it in its

126 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 144.
127 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 182.
128 Ibid., 181.
129 Ibid., 182.
130 Ibid., 183.
131 Ibid., 182.
132 Ibid.
desire for Beauty. To persecute cult and ritual is to persecute art, but more gravely, it stands as a persecution directed against Beauty and therefore the Holy Spirit.

Moving from religion in general to Christianity in particular, Bulgakov gives a special place to the Holy Spirit in the creative life. His descent into the world enacts the different “ministries,” or ways of seeking after God. Bulgakov contrasts Christianity’s recognition of the Holy Spirit with what he terms the negative element found in religions such as Buddhism. In the latter, the individual seeks to escape from the world, while in Christianity the individual becomes creatively included in the world and history. This is witnessed in the canonization of saints who pursued different creative paths.

Artistic creativity is capable of transcending the natural world, yet the temptation to deify it is ever present. At its highest point art is symbolic, and at its lowest it is naturalistic. Outside of religion, art is unable to become “truly symbolic,” though it may still possess certain symbolic features. Symbolism is termed by Bulgakov as constituting “ideal realism,” meaning that, “the form given by the human artist is united (συμβάλλεω, σύμβολον), with its objective meaning, its idea.” Authentic symbolism is nothing less than the enacting of the ideal of art within creaturely reality; it is the vision of art paired with its skillful execution. In testifying to meta-historical truths, Bulgakov states that this “language” of art is akin to that used in the telling of legends. Symbolic art witnesses to what lies beyond the historical, even while incorporating corporeal elements into its vision. This ideal of art can fall into two errors, however, those of either allegorism/schematism or naturalism.

---

133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 183.
136 Ibid., 308.
137 Ibid.
139 Ibid., 180.
140 Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 73.
Behind the different stylistic aspects of art, such as naturalism, realism, sensuality, and impressionism lies the temptation to copy the objects of the phenomenal world. The goal of these different modes of art is not to reveal the realm of ideas, but rather to achieve a “complete illusion” of reality. In truth this is an impossible task, since even perfect naturalism is incapable of “[overcoming] the chasm separating the ideal image of a thing from its reality.” It can only reproduce a single occurrence of the ideal contained within the real, and in the end it only produces an image and not the thing itself. Returning to the apples of Apelles, it is clear that they will never become real enough to be able to provide nourishment for the birds. What is more, all attempts in the direction of naturalism do in fact partake of the creative impulse and impart a specific human perception of the thing. One of the most naturalistic mediums of art is the photograph, but even the images created through this medium are shot from a chosen angle and under specified conditions. In regards to practical and anatomical depictions, Bulgakov states that these simply are not art, though they may make use of artistic means. The chief difference between these and art proper lies in their end, which is practical rather than revelatory.

By revealing the Divine realm within the world, art seeks to make creation more “conformable to its true image.” In this sense, one can speak about the transfiguration of the world through art. As a cumulative human effort, art slowly chips away at the “outer shell” of the world and provides glimpses of the new reality, the point at which the two Sophias will be one and “God will be all in all.” To the degree that this is achieved, the economic process as a whole seeks to reveal the human element within nature by “humanizing” it. That this mission has

---

141 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 43; Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 144.
142 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 179.
143 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 44.
144 Ibid. Bulgakov also uses the example of drawing as applied to Kant’s 10 thalers (Prussian currency), which Jakim corrects to read 100. See, Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 296.
145 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 43-44.
146 Ibid., 45.
147 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 177.
largely been neglected, Bulgakov does not doubt, and he even states that the task itself has been framed incorrectly and in such a way as to further obscure the problem, and therefore any possible solution. 

As mentioned earlier, Dostoevsky’s enigmatic phrase “Beauty will save the world,” had a profound influence on Russian aesthetics. When Soloviev appended it to the beginning of his work on aesthetics he irrevocably tied it to the concept of “theurgy.” Properly speaking, theurgy is the action of God (θεού έργον), yet in Soloviev’s work this can at times be applied to human activity as well. In contrast, Bulgakov insists on the need to distinguish between these two forms of activity. He reasons that true theurgy cannot apply to human activity, except in those cases where God directly gifts humanity in order to accomplish His will, the supreme example being the Eucharist. Instead, human creativity is better described as “sophiurgy” (έργον εκ Σοφίας), since human creativity is only possible “thanks to the divine sophianicity that humanity bears within itself.” Sophiurgy coincides with the gift of aesthetic appreciation, and together they await the time when sophiurgy and theurgy will be one. The Holy Spirit, as the hypostasis of Beauty, works through humanity to bring about the coming transfiguration. Within the Church this is glimpsed through a specific form of artistic expression, namely, the icon.

3 The Patristic Formulation of the Icon

The large-scale dispute over the icon that took place throughout the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries has come to be known as the age of Iconoclasm. While it had roots in previous eras, it

---

150 Boulgakov, La lumière sans déclin, 339-340.
151 Ibid., 340.
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid., 340-343.
154 Ibid., 340.
155 Ibid., 353.
156 Ibid., 354.
was only in the eighth century that things began to take on an empire-wide significance. One of the chief reasons for this was the direct involvement of the emperor in the life of the Church, as he directly spoke out against the veneration of icons. As in the religious life of ancient Israel, the icon was not immune to the temptation of idolatry. In the Christian context, these abuses took the form of superstitious practices surrounding icon veneration, and the initial stages of iconoclasm are regarded by Bulgakov as an effort made by the emperor to rid the realm of these malpractices.\footnote{Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 8.} The emperor’s condemnation, however, only served as witness to a broader doubt that had arisen in the Church as a whole, one that gave birth to an “entire iconoclastic theology.”\footnote{Ibid., 9.} At the root of this theology was the idea that art was unable to witness to the revelation of God in the world, and in defending the icon the Iconophiles would eventually be forced to defend the validity of art itself.\footnote{Ibid., 40; Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 183.}

In this debate both sides drew upon support from Scripture, the patristic tradition, the liturgy, and prior decisions made at local councils.\footnote{Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 9.} Of the two sides, Bulgakov states that it was the Iconoclasts who held a more developed theological position rather than the Iconophiles. In this he stands in line with at least some of the scholarship of his day.\footnote{Bulgakov refers his reader to the work of I. D. Andreev, “Св. Тарасий патриарх константинопольский,” \textit{Богословский Вестник} 4 (1899): 177.} The response made by the Iconophiles can be divided into three main stages, before, during, and after the Council.\footnote{Ibid., 9.} In interpreting the debate, Bulgakov warns against those who would attribute the different positions solely to outside influences, such as the iconoclastic pressures put on the Christian East by Islam or the involvement of the emperors. Instead, he sees both sides as possessing valid theological arguments.\footnote{Ibid., 10.} Through these disputes he detects the “dialectic of dogma” whereby the Church clarifies her teaching on an issue. That this process was necessary indicates that one party within
the debate was necessarily wrong. As in other areas of his system, Bulgakov sympathizes with this side, and through this act allows his reader to come to a better understanding of a complex moment in Church history.

At the base of Bulgakov’s understanding of the Iconoclast position lies the assertion that the movement is not a “Christological heresy,” as it was made out to be by its opponents, but rather it fought on behalf of orthodox Christology. The Iconoclast understanding of the person of Christ, however, differed from that of the Iconophiles. Within this framework, Iconoclasm can be seen as responding to the twin questions of whether or not the portrayability of Christ is possible, and if so, what are the limits that surround the veneration of this portrayal. These questions naturally arose with the veneration of icons, and the Iconoclasts should not be viewed as intentionally setting about to stir up controversy within the Church. Bulgakov holds that answers to these questions were far from self-evident, “even if icon veneration had become accepted as something self-evident.” Further, Iconoclasm found support within the patristic witness, and it possessed a ready arsenal of sources on which to build its theological foundation.

Drawing upon 1 John 4:12 and other passages, the Iconoclasts reasoned that Christ’s “Divinity is unportrayable..., and his humanity, even if it is portrayable, cannot by itself give the image of Christ.” In their understanding, a representation would be unable to witness to the

---


165 Bulgakov, *Icons*, 10-11, especially n. 9.

166 Although Bulgakov directs this critique against a particular viewpoint, he does not cite any particular sources. Florovsky also criticizes this understanding of the controversy, and names a few individuals who held this view, though, he too does not provide direct references. Georges Florovsky, “The Iconoclastic Controversy,” in *Christianity and Culture: The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* vol. 2 (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing, 1974), 101-102.


168 Ibid., 11-13.

169 Ibid., 13.
fullness of Christ’s person since it would divide his two natures. To state that the human flesh of Christ is Christ would be to sunder the unity worked out in previous centuries and to fall back into Nestorianism. Furthermore, if the flesh of Christ is depicted as its “own hypostasis” worthy of veneration, they held that a fourth person would be added to Divinity, with the result that the Trinity would be transformed into a quaternity. Likewise, to state that the humanity and Divinity of Christ are “fused,” and therefore representable, would be to lapse into other errors, such as those held by Dioscuros, Eutyches, Severus, and to an extent Arius. This is how Bulgakov can state that the Iconoclasts were above all concerned with avoiding Christological error.

In his analysis Bulgakov divides the theology of the Iconoclasts into two categories: theological and Christological. In their attack, the Iconoclasts put forth both an apophatic (major) and a cataphatic (minor) proposition. Bulgakov states that there were two options that the Iconophiles could have taken in response, either to reject the argument as formulated by the Iconoclasts, or to attempt to answer the Christological objection even while accepting the validity of the theological objection. As will shortly be shown through a detailed re-examination, Bulgakov opts for the former path, whereas the Iconophiles of the eighth and ninth centuries chose the latter. This is the weakness of the Iconophile position, since it is unable to answer the theological argument put forth by the Iconoclasts. Instead, what one finds is a “straw-man” argument designed to describe the iconoclastic theology as a Christological heresy. Bulgakov goes so far as to say that those at Nicaea II did not even truly understand what was at stake, and simply ignored the question as it was put to them. He reasons that this failure is one of the reasons for the prolonged dispute surrounding the veneration of the icon, and in the end it was simply left unsolved, being overshadowed by more pressing theological and political issues. Despite this claim, Bulgakov still bases his own view on the premises laid down by the Iconophiles.

---


171 Bulgakov, Icons, 13.

172 Ibid., 14-15.

173 Ibid., 10.

174 Ibid., 15-16.
4  The Iconophile Position

Of the defenders of the icon, Bulgakov is most appreciative of the work of John of Damascus.¹⁷⁵ As has already been seen, he makes use of his thought in framing the image and proto-image distinction, the salient points being that humanity serves as God’s image in creation, that all images have their proto-images, and that the image is an “intergrowth” of image and idea. John of Damascus is one of the first theologians to tackle the challenge of Iconoclasm, and he does so prior to the more elaborate Iconoclast theology that later developed. The weakness of his theology, then, also serves as its strength. Though he was unable to respond directly to the criticisms laid forth in the council of 754, his theology is free from some of the erroneous commonplaces that would come to characterize later Iconophile theology. Whereas Nicaea II and its defenders resorted to straw-man tactics, Bulgakov states that John of Damascus, among a few others, had already managed to independently place the argument on a “Christological plane.”¹⁷⁶

Alone among the Iconophiles, John allows for a conception of art that functions as more than naturalism.¹⁷⁷

Although Bulgakov finds much that is positive within John’s writings, he also pinpoints some essential weaknesses in light of the developed Iconoclast theology. Foremost among these weaknesses is the Damascene’s defense of the portrayability of Divinity since he “deprives icons of ontological significance.”¹⁷⁸ The reason for this is that he seems to deny that the imageless world possesses a creaturely image. This is nowhere more evident than in his argument for icons based on the weakness of human understanding. John argues that since humans cannot perceive the bodiless world naturally, concessions must be made to this limitation, and icons offer an appropriate response. Bulgakov states that resorting to anthropomorphism out of weakness was one of the key criticisms of the Iconoclasts who argued in favor of a more “spiritual religion.”

¹⁷⁵  In terms of the pre-Nicaea II defenders of the icon, Bulgakov also mentions in passing Patriarch Germanus (rendered as Herman in Jakim’s translation). He does not elaborate upon his thought or work, and mentions it only in comparison with that of those he discusses at length. Ibid., 9-10, 16.

¹⁷⁶  Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁷⁷  Ibid., 45 n. 57.

¹⁷⁸  Ibid., 23.
John’s argument, in later light, turns out to be an argument against icon veneration, rather than for it.

A second argument given by John of Damascus that Bulgakov finds fault with is his argument regarding matter in relation to Christ. John defends icon veneration by stating that those who pray before icons do not pray to matter, but to the one represented using the means of matter. Bulgakov sees in this a reduction of the “body to nothing more than matter.” Further, when John states, in reference to Christ, that “God’s body, too, is God” he can be charged with fusing the two natures of Christ. Bulgakov chalks this up to an “ambiguity of expression” in his writing, but one that became all the more serious as the Iconoclasts developed their theology. What is more, as one of the earliest defenders of icons, John’s work will become a major source from which the Seventh Ecumenical Council would draw its arguments.

As is the case with John of Damascus, Bulgakov recognizes both positive and negative events that transpired at Nicaea II. The Council, due to its authoritative nature, serves as Bulgakov’s primary point of departure when formulating his own theology of the icon. Perhaps the most controversial element of his re-evaluation of the work of the Council lies in his claim that Nicaea II presented “only the canon of icon veneration, not the dogma of what the icon represents as a fact of dogmatic significance.” In its most unimpressive light, the Council merely legitimized what had already become a dogmatic fact in the life of the Church, without defining a new dogma as had happened at previous Councils. Structurally, Nicaea II differed from the six prior Ecumenical Councils in that it “tended to be ‘economic’ rather than dogmatic,” and in the hurried nature of its roughly month long proceedings. This also plays a role in why the Council was unable to formulate a proper dogmatic response to the Iconoclast theology that had been formulated at their council held in 754. This being the case, Bulgakov does affirm that Nicaea II had certain merits.

180 Ibid., 2.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid., 17.
In its condemnation of the Iconoclast council, the Seventh Ecumenical Council was forced to defend the revelatory properties of art. However briefly the matter was discussed, the Council determined that art must be accepted to the extent that it aids in piety.\textsuperscript{183} To this end, the Council also outlined the highest goal of art, namely, “to make icons, ἐικόνες, (\textit{i.e. to give [people] the image}) of Christ himself, our Lord and God,” and “also those of the Mother of God, of the Holy Angels, and of all the Saints.”\textsuperscript{184} In regards to the practical veneration of icons, the Council specified the difference between veneration offered to God and that offered to an icon.\textsuperscript{185} The former it identified as λατρεία, or service, and was confined to humanity’s interaction with the Creator Himself, whereas the latter was identified as τιμητική προσκύνησις, or “reverent veneration.” Bulgakov directly connects this distinction with the difference between image and proto-image.

To strengthen this last point Bulgakov clarifies that Nicaea II would have needed to objectively ground the art of the Church in what he calls the “power” of the icon. While the Council positively stressed the function of the icon as an aid to remembrance, it was unable to clearly put forth this additional doctrine.\textsuperscript{186} Instead, the Council’s teaching on the power of the icon remained dormant within theological thought.

As has been stated, the Iconoclast disputes continued well after the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The defense of the veneration of icons after this period fell primarily to two people: Theodore the Studite and Patriarch Nicephorus. Unlike those who took up the earlier defense, both of these writers were required to respond due to the serious nature of the objections that were posed.\textsuperscript{187} As he does with Germanus, Bulgakov largely discounts the contribution made by Nicephorus and primarily focuses on that put forth by Theodore.\textsuperscript{188}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 40. \\
\textsuperscript{184} Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 184. \\
\textsuperscript{185} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 89-90. \\
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 88-89. \\
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 17. \\
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 21-22. Bulgakov states that Nicephorus’ arguments are flawed by the same characteristics as Theodore’s.
\end{flushright}
To recall, the Iconoclasts developed two arguments against the veneration of icons: a theological argument and a Christological one. The theological argument, which stated that the Deity is unportrayable, is not rejected by Theodore, but is in fact accepted when applied to the Divinity of Christ. By simultaneously affirming that Christ is portrayable in his humanity, Theodore attempts to form an antimony that would hold these two characteristics together. Bulgakov states that he “sharpens” this antimony “with an even greater power than do the Iconoclasts.” The unportrayability of Divinity is paired with the portrayability of humanity, yet whereas the Iconoclasts stated that the representation of Christ would disrupt this unity by not being true to each proposition, Theodore comes to a different conclusion. Due to the “ambiguity” in his thought regarding the concept of portrayability, Theodore “without any embarrassment... [steps] over” the antimony. Instead, he argues that since Christ could be seen on earth he can therefore be depicted in his human form. Bulgakov states that this is an insufficient argument, as it does not explain how both the Divinity and humanity of Christ can be portrayed in an icon.

5 Bulgakov’s Dogmatic Understanding of the Icon

Regardless of the insufficient response given during and after the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Bulgakov states that a greater force was at work within the Church. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Nicaea II was able to affirm the veneration of icons in spite of the absence of a formal dogmatic definition. As the ninth century passed and imperial and ecclesiastical attention shifted to other matters, the theology of the icon was largely forgotten. A similar situation existed in the West, and the position of the icon even suffered losses, such as at the Council of Trent when its function as an aid to remembrance was over-emphasized in the face of

---

189 Ibid., 17-18.
190 Ibid., 19.
191 Ibid., 20.
192 Ibid., 24, 27.
193 Ibid., 26.
Protestant objections,\textsuperscript{194} which largely fell back on the Old Testament prohibition against images.\textsuperscript{195} Bulgakov sees these latter Churches as continuing the long tradition of Iconoclasm within Christianity, though unlike the Iconoclasts they have not attempted to “dogmatically” explore the question.\textsuperscript{196} These various developments in the history of the icon have left the issue in an unfinished state up to the present time.

Bulgakov’s justification for a dogmatic development of the theology of the icon resides in these dogmatic seeds that have been left untended over the centuries.\textsuperscript{197} What has been necessary to develop this theology, he reasons, has been the explication of a long standing strain within Christian theology, namely, a sophiological understanding of reality. Sophiology allows for a symbolic understanding of art, as well as an entirely different framing of the problem.\textsuperscript{198} The question of icon veneration cannot be answered without sophiology, since it is not a matter of Christology at all, as it was believed to be by both the Iconophiles and the Iconoclasts.\textsuperscript{199} As has been shown, when Christology is taken as the basis for icon veneration, only \textit{aporias} ensue. To overcome these, one must not “step over” the antimony, but rather set the problem on different ground.

According to the patristic understanding, the antimony consisted of the unportrayability of the Divinity on the one hand and the portrayability of humanity on the other. With decided reservation, Bulgakov states that this constitutes “a kind of antimony,” though he is quick to dismiss it due to the illogical proposition that it leads to, and because if taken to its logical conclusion it leads not to icon veneration, but rather to an affirmation of the Iconoclast theology that stands at odds with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{200} His reasoning for dismissing it as an

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 25, 89.
  \item \textsuperscript{195} Bulgakov, \textit{The Orthodox Church}, 139.
  \item \textsuperscript{196} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 24.
  \item \textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 2; Bulgakov, \textit{The Lamb of God}, 210-211.
  \item \textsuperscript{198} Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 185.
  \item \textsuperscript{199} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 26.
\end{itemize}
inaccurate antimony is that the two terms (theological and Christological) are “not actually situated in one and the same logical plane.” The supposed antimony attempts to address the interrelation of God and humanity, but in such a way as to blur the distinction between the created and Uncreated realms. Further, Christology is not the proper field in which the question needs to be framed to lead out of the aporias, since the “imagedness” of humanity belongs to the larger area of cosmology. Cosmology, which deals with the realm of becoming, fundamentally differs from general theology, which is apophatic in nature. The Iconoclasts’ error in posing the question this way is akin to “[putting] together yards and pounds simply because both of them are measures.” What they presented, and what the Iconophiles accepted, was not an antimony at all, but simply “a mere contradiction.” In order to make these claims, Bulgakov undertakes to explain the antimonies of both apophatic and cataphatic theology in the debate, which will clear a path toward his own formulation of the problem.

Apophatic thought, in its purest form, is the supreme negation of being. It “exists” prior to any notion of existence, since “existence too is already a relation.” This “NO” of apophasitism cannot even be considered to be God, “for God is already a correlative concept that presupposes the world.” Therefore, to place this nothingness next to any cosmological proposition is to fall into logical error. This conception of Divinity is “conceived artificially” and “is a product of metaphysical abstraction.” It stands only as negation, the Divine darkness of being, and it is not a religious concept at all since religion deals with God in His relation to the world.

“Antinomically joined” with the complete negation of being, the absolute NO, there is paired the absolute YES, the supreme affirmation of being. Whereas the negation of being exists

\footnotesize{201 Ibid., 27. Bulgakov’s emphasis removed.

202 Ibid., 36.

203 Ibid., 28.

204 Ibid.

205 Ibid.

206 Ibid.}
before and beyond all relation in an entirely abstract manner, the YES of being is “absolute
relation,” and “lives concretely.” It can be said that this YES is “God, as the absolute relation
in Himself,” Who is revealed to be “the Holy Trinity, the trihypostatic Person, the Divine
trinity.”

The function of an antimony is to join together two terms that tear themselves apart
before human reason, and Bulgakov states that we must allow it to stand as it is. To “resolve” the
antimony, which can also be framed as the relationship between the ideal and the real, by
submitting the first term to the process of becoming (whereby the ideal would become real)
would be “incorrect and impossible.” To do so would be to attempt to introduce becoming into
the Divine world, viewing the YES as something that arises within the NO, and would result in
many of the errors that philosophy (notably Plotinus, and in more recent times Hegel,
Schopenhauer, and Hartmann) and theology (Eckhart and Boehme) have fallen into throughout
the ages. This is the antimony that underpins general theology, and half of it was used by the
Iconoclasts for the first term in their false antimony.

The second term of their antimony belonged not to general theology, but to cosmology.
In regards to the Divine YES, God exists as absolute relation; this is the inner Divine life. God
also, however, exists in relation to that which is outside Himself, namely, the created world.
As is implied in its designation as created, the world does not exist independently, but only
through the hand of the Creator. Due to this fact, although the world is independent of God, it is
also a “Divine being,” imprinted with the image of Divinity. In terms of difference, however,
there is an ontological divide between that which exists from eternity and that which came into
being in time, called forth ex nihilo. The cosmological antimony, then, identifies the relationship

\[
\text{207 Ibid., 29.}
\]
\[
\text{208 Ibid.}
\]
\[
\text{209 Ibid.}
\]
\[
\text{210 Ibid., 29-30.}
\]
\[
\text{211 Ibid., 30.}
\]
\[
\text{212 Ibid.}
\]
that exists between the Creator and creation. God introduces the notion of time, and consequently becoming, into His Being in its relation to the world. In critiquing the Iconoclast position that joined the theological antimony to that of cosmology, Bulgakov definitively states that “no causal relationship can be established between them,” meaning that the first does not inevitably lead to the second, or vice versa.213

Between these two antimonies stands an ontological chasm, an “impassable abyss,” that is best characterized as the difference between the Uncreated and the created.214 To overcome this state of affairs, an additional antimony is needed, a sophiological antimony. In various ways this antimony has already been discussed when dealing with Bulgakov’s vision of Beauty, image and proto-image, and artistic creation. As it is the backbone of his systematic project, it serves as the key to understanding his re-evaluation of the Iconoclast framing of the debate. To recall, through the oneness of the two Sophias a “bridge” is erected between the Divine and created worlds, allowing for the latter to become the former, which will be the case in the eschaton when “God will be all in all.” In addition, according to Bulgakov, “the sophiological antimony is consistently and completely disclosed in the Christological one” worked out in the first six Councils of the Church, which collectively affirmed the antinomical unity of the Divinity and humanity of Christ.215 In the one person of Christ, both “distance” and “connection” are maintained in regards to the two realms/Sophias.216

It is in this specific point of union, Christ, that Bulgakov also situates an antimony particular to the icon. Within the context of sophiology, the icon is able to join together both the “portrayability and unportrayability of God.”217 In terms of the ideal-real distinction that characterizes the creaturely world, God is beyond portrayability and simultaneously within the bounds of portrayability as He submits to the processes of becoming in His relationship with

\[\text{\footnotesize 213 An inherent consequence of the philosophical and theological errors mentioned above. Ibid., 31.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 214 Ibid., 31-32.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 215 Ibid., 34.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 216 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 217 Ibid., 36.}\]
creation. Though the whole Trinity participates in this relation to the world, it is specifically the Son who comes to humanity bearing the revelation of God. He is the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), and it is on the basis of the icon of Christ that the medium can be said to represent the “visibility of the invisible.”

Sophiology further plays into this equation when dealing with the general portrayability of the human body. Bulgakov, in regards to anthropology, argues against those who would view the human person as consisting of two separate parts, i.e. of body and soul, as well as those who view matter as merely the milieu in which the psychical life takes place. Neither of these two views allows for a theory of portrayability, since they deny the fundamental tenet that the human is an “incarnate spirit, or spirit-bearing flesh.” The image of God, which resides in humanity, is comprised of both elements, and both of these are needed for a true theory of portrayability. According to Bulgakov, the recognition of the body as integrally linked to the image of God was clearly made evident in pagan art with its ideal human representations. While each aspect can be talked about separately, in reality this is only the abstraction of a union that cannot ever be pulled apart. That being the case, the spirit can be discerned through the body since the body serves as the expression of the spirit.

In the fall, however, the purity of this expression was lost and the face of humanity was replaced by “a mask of sin,” hence the Old Testament prohibition against the depiction of the human image. Into this state of affairs the Incarnation of Christ served as the means of

---

218 Ibid.
219 Ibid., 56-57.
220 Ibid., 58.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid., 59.
223 Ibid., 58-59.
224 Ibid., 59, particularly n. 82 regarding the translator’s comments on Bulgakov’s use of the words “face” and “mask.” For a theological analysis of these concepts, as well as that of countenance, see, Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, translated by Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 50-59.
restoring the “true human image” in the world.  

Whereas the Iconophiles founded the theology of the icon on the external appearance of Christ, his “natural portrayability” upon assuming flesh, Bulgakov states that this is an insufficient ground on which to base the dogma since it does not get to the heart of the matter. If the Incarnation is to be the foundation of the icon, it must be so in terms of an internal renewal of the image of God in humanity. The integrity of this renewal once again brings Bulgakov back to the doctrine of the Humanity of God, since the humanity that Christ assumed “was not alien to himself... but his own image which he, as God, has in [humanity].”

This brings us to Bulgakov’s dogmatic understanding of the icon: the one image of Christ. Due to the internal coherence that exists between the body and soul, as well as the restoration of the image of God in humanity, “Christ’s humanity is at the same time the image of his Divinity.” Divinity becomes “perfectly transparent” through his humanity, which is portrayable. Both the Iconoclasts and Iconophiles agreed on the theological premise that God is unportrayable because He is “imageless,” yet He does possess an image in Christ, and this image is human. As Christ’s person unites his Divine and human natures, so too do they come together in his one image. While each nature possesses its own image with corresponding properties of invisibility and visibility, it is only the human image that is visible to corporeal perception, and this image alone can be portrayed through the icon. Though the image of Christ is disclosed “doubly” to both the spiritual and material worlds, in truth it is one and the same image. As is the case in regards to the two natures of Christ, there exists between the two images of Christ a “certain kind of perichoresis,” or “mutual penetration.” As evidence of this, Bulgakov draws attention to the Transfiguration, in which there occurred a “clear shining of

---


226 Ibid., 62.

227 Ibid.

228 Ibid., 62-63.

229 Ibid., 63-64.

230 Ibid., 64.
Christ’s Divine image in his human image.”\textsuperscript{231} This testifies to the “oneness” of the Divine and creaturely Sophias, and to a unity and not opposition that preserves difference even while testifying to their identity.\textsuperscript{232} It is on this foundation that the theology of the icon and its practical veneration is based,\textsuperscript{233} and the point on which its various elements turn and find their orientation.

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 114.

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid., 91.
Chapter 3
Bulgakov’s Practical Observations on the Icon

Iconography, due to its practical application, spawns a variety of tangential aspects relating to the painting of images. While Bulgakov touches upon many of these elements, space permits the inclusion of only a few of them, primarily centered on the artistic task. This chapter will discuss the role of the iconographer, the place of spiritual vision, the means and consequences of this vision and its importance as a source of theological reflection, and it will end with a discussion regarding the power of the name and its role in making the icon a location for the presence of the one depicted.

All that has been said about the icon has presupposed the person of the iconographer, yet little has been said about this role up until now. Part of the reason for this is that the majority of iconographers remain anonymous, and the focus shifts from their personal creativeness to the actual image that lives within the life of the Church. However, this cannot diminish the importance of the iconographer, for without him or her there would be no icon. It is the iconographer who is tasked with recovering her “spiritual sight,” simultaneously transcending the world and resisting the temptation to deify it. The “creative inspiration” which flows from the Holy Spirit touches the iconographer, allowing him or her to perceive the realities that lie behind the images. The validity of this ministry is confirmed by the Church’s canonization of different painters throughout her history. To paint an icon requires both artistic skill and spiritual vision, a rare combination of both technical competence and the lived experience of the sacramental life. Bulgakov, like many throughout history, recognizes St. Andrei Rublev as

---

234 Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 142.
238 Ibid., 71-72; Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 143.
representing the ideal union of these two elements. In contrast, he states that those who would paint without meeting both of these requirements do not truly understand the icon.

While spiritual illumination is a requirement for all iconography, there are certain instances when the iconographer is able to go beyond the usual transmission of an already existing iconographic type and reveal something new. This is possible because art constitutes a special mode of seeing, a “noetic seeing.” What the iconographer perceives within the spiritual realm, “visions of Divinity” or “visions of God,” becomes translated into reality through the medium of iconography, though not without the expected entropy that is involved in all contemplative translation. Regardless of loss, in rare cases an iconographer is able to introduce something new into the iconographic canon. These spiritual visions serve the Church in much the same way as theology proper, functioning as a “new revelation, a source of theological ideas.” Over the ages, these icons become copied and part of the living tradition of the Church. At times these icons are wholly new compositions, but in other cases they arise through the process of copying an already existing icon. Creative perception of the model allows for “spontaneous” variation from the original, as can be seen in Rublev’s transformation of The Hospitality of Abraham. The iconographic canon functions as a system of checks and balances for the iconographer, helping to confirm that his or her creative efforts fit within the “ecclesial vision” of the Church.

---

239 Bulgakov, Icons, 99.
240 Ibid., 72 n. 100.
241 Ibid., 46, 98.
242 Ibid., 98-99; Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 143.
243 Bulgakov, Jacob’s Ladder, 146.
244 Bulgakov, Icons, 99.
245 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 142; Bulgakov, Icons, 99.
246 Ibid., 74-75, especially n. 104.
247 Ibid., 77.
The icon, due to its goal and content, makes use of certain forms and styles in order to convey the perception of both transfigured humanity and visions of Divinity. These “special characteristics” of iconography are what allow it to “[reveal] the mysteries of the spiritual world,” though Bulgakov is quick to note that they still await a formal “religio-artistic” investigation. In its origin, Christian art simply carried over the compositional principles of pagan art. The “arid and schematic” quality of Egyptian and Hellenistic art, for instance, found ready use within the growing Church. As a means of avoiding naturalism and all that “stimulates sensuality,” the icon restricted itself to the two-dimensional surface, and shifted towards a more abstract presentation of the subject. Other forms of Church art, such as sculpture, were unable to incorporate these different elements, and though three-dimensional art has a place within the Orthodox Church, it occurs rarely since it is unable to put the necessary distance between the ideal form and the natural image.

The weakness of the sculpted image, its inability to “dematerialize” the object and convey the proto-image, is the chief characteristic of iconography. As a stylistic form, it is a tool intentionally used by the artist to convey the spiritual realm, and “presupposes complete knowledge and mastery of normal form;” therefore it should not be considered a sign of “artistic

---

248 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 142-144.
250 Bulgakov, Icons, 7, 76.
251 Ibid., 76.
252 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 144.
253 Bulgakov, Icons, 77 n. 108; Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 139. Ouspensky also affirms the place of sculpture in the Orthodox Church. Leonid Ouspensky, The Theology of the Icon, vol. 2, translated by Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 35 n. 1. Both authors may have in mind the lengthy prohibition found in the Pedalion, as they reference it in other places within their respective works. Agapius and Nicodemus, The Rudder (Pedalion) of the Metaphorical Ship of the of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Orthodox Christians or All the Sacred and Divine Canons, reprint edition, translated by D. Cummings (New York: Luna Printing, 1983), 414-415.
254 Bulgakov, Icons, 76-77.
illiteracy." Within the realm of two-dimensional art, dematerialization marks the dividing line between an icon and an ordinary picture with religious content, typified by the paintings of the Renaissance. In more modern times, this stylistic feature also provides a critique of photography, since the photograph is unable to see through the natural image to the proto-image. Unlike the unwillingness of the Renaissance artist to look beyond the natural image, a photograph is technologically bound to the physical world and incapable of capturing the combination of natural and glorified characteristics of a person.

Based on the considerations of style and content, the compositional structure that the icon generally assumes is that of the portrait, either full-length or in bust. As the person of Christ is the foundation for the saints, so too the portrait is the base for all other forms that the icon takes. It is the form that is best suited to depicting the ideal within the real. This is readily apparent in the fact that a multitude of images are capable of witnessing to the one proto-image that lies behind them. As Beauty is revealed through various manifestations, so too the one spirit of a person can be seen through different portraits. The creaturely state of humanity is revealed through the different natural images that the body clothes the spirit in, allowing a person to “[manifest] an uncountable number of icons of his spirit, rolling the infinite movie reel, as it were, of his phenomenology” throughout life. The portrait underpins both the theory and the practice of the icon, and from this foundation it is capable of more historical, narrative images.

---

255 Ibid., 99 n. 134. For an agreement with this view based on theological grounds see, Ouspensky and Lossky, The Meaning of Icons, 39-40. For an opposing view from the field of art-history, contemporary with Bulgakov’s writing on the subject see, Kondakov, The Russian Icon, 44-50. Kondakov primarily bases his analysis on the improperly drawn folds of clothing found in Russian iconography, concluding that it is inferior to the Byzantine tradition that came before it.

256 Bulgakov, Icons, 77.

257 Ibid., 100.

258 Ibid., 65-66.

259 Ibid., 67.

260 Ibid.
Nicaea II, while affirming the icon as a witness of the Incarnation, also permitted their use for purposes of “narrative and remembrance.” These subjects that fall outside of portraiture, such as the life of Christ and the lives of the saints, are able to “speak by their content and are an irreplaceable means for the clear teaching of the truth of the faith.” This is particularly necessary, states Bulgakov, for those times and places where illiteracy predominates. While this is true, the icon is above all meant for prayer and cannot be “reduced” to its inherent narrative capacity. Further evidence of this can be witnessed in the different attitudes that believers adopt in regards to the highly narrative wall paintings of a church, which are not venerated. Bulgakov treats the presence of narrative imagery with the attitude that once they have been admitted, these forms and their subjects cannot be removed from the life of the Church. Indeed, they testify to the living nature of tradition. Every icon, due to both its subject and its means, is to a greater or lesser extent grounded in history. In his first dogmatic trilogy in particular, Bulgakov refers to narrative icons as “sacred-historical” depictions, juxtaposing these with another category of icons that are only tenuously grounded in history.

The second category of icons that Bulgakov distinguishes he terms as “dogmatic” compositions. The defining feature of these compositions, at least according to Bulgakov, is that they seek to portray “by a symbolic realism... the intergrowth or concretion of image and idea.” More so than sacred-historical icons, these compositions serve as a “revelation in artistic and mystical contemplation,” and their presence within the Church is in fact necessitated by the possibility of noetic vision on the part of the iconographer.

\[\text{Bulgakov, } \text{The Friend of the Bridegroom, } 129-130.\]
\[\text{Bulgakov, } \text{Icons, } 98.\]


\[\text{Bulgakov, } \text{Icons, } 98.\]
sanctification, or “holy naming,” further confirms this as it functions in the same way for both sacred-historical and dogmatic icons. Bulgakov specifically mentions the importance of icons of Sophia, and that they should not be understood as allegorical depictions, but as symbolic ones. The difference between these two terms seems to lie in the spiritual life of the iconographer, as “symbolism that is insufficiently lived and sincere becomes, wholly or in part, allegorism or schematism analogously to how realism of representation can become naturalism.”269 These errors of representation are the true “decadence in iconography,” and are “not connected with the essence of the icon but with the ineptitude of its creators.”270

The spiritual vision of an iconographer, when coupled with the forms and styles of iconography, allows the icon to become a source of revealed theology. Bulgakov places icons on the same level as both the oral tradition and the various non-biblical written traditions.271 Taken together, the patristic, liturgical, and artistic contributions of the Church constitute Tradition. Icons, particularly those that fall outside of the domain of portraiture, clearly make use of the other aspects, whether illustrating a sermon, the Creed, or different hymns. In return, these other traditions have an “obligation” to make use of the monumental work of the Church.272 Iconography helps to “confirm” areas of Church tradition that have been neglected by the written and oral word.273 In some cases, the icon even serves as the unique witness to a theological doctrine, “breaking the silence” encountered in other forms of revelation.274 Like all forms of theology, the icon is a means of both worshipping God and revealing Him in the world. That being the case, Bulgakov notes that the icon “belongs not to the center but to the periphery of the worship of God” though “it is impossible to diminish the significance of the periphery... without

---

269 Ibid.
270 Ibid.
271 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 30, 142; Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom, 137; Bulgakov, Icons, 73.
272 Ibid.
274 Bulgakov, The Bride of the Lamb, 410, 460.
crippling, impoverishing, and distorting the worship of God itself.” 275 Though icons are visual sources of theology, their efficacy relies to a great extent on another element, that of the word.

Thus far we have avoided discussing a fundamental element found on most icons, the keystone that upholds the bridge between a theoretical understanding of the icon and a more practical application of this theology. Long after the olifa varnish dries on a newly painted icon, it must enter upon its own journey into the Church and the lives of those who will pray before it. This begins with the inscription that is written on it by the iconographer, and ends with the sanctification bestowed upon it by the Church. Within the act of naming an icon all that has been discussed finds its finish, and the disparate elements finally can be seen as a whole.

Words, as much as images, are verbal icons of things, a point that is nowhere more evident than in Scripture where words reveal Christ to creation. 276 The power of the image to accomplish this same feat depends on the presence of the word. 277 Due to “human sinfulness and the limitations of its means” iconography is inherently weak and unable to separate the different appearances of the Divine within the creaturely realm. 278 However, through the word art is “sustained... by the name given to the object.” 279 It is the name that “anchors” the object “to a certain ontic point,” 280 since it is only through the word that the image is able to be correlated with its proto-image. 281 Without this “actualizing” of the image, the work of the artist only possesses a tenuous link to the original, particularly since there can be a multitude of images that

275 Bulgakov, Icons, 114.


277 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 189.

278 Ibid.

279 Ibid.

280 Bulgakov, Icons, 80.

281 Ibid., 68, 78.
witness to the one proto-image. For Bulgakov, “the name is a hieroglyph of the person” while the image is limited to the portrayal of “one of the states of this person.”

Unlike more subjectively oriented forms of art, the name of an icon is assigned irrespective of the viewer: it is assigned by the Church through the event of “ecclesial naming,” i.e. the rite of sanctification. The consecration of icons is included in the “indefinite list” of sacraments that exist within the Orthodox Church, and through which the Holy Spirit aids human activity. The correlation of the image with the proto-image is accomplished through this process, which cannot be replaced by ordinary human naming, and without it the image remains only a mere religious picture. This accounts for the qualitative difference between the two forms of art, and it holds as true for icons of Christ as it does for dogmatic icons and those of his saints.

In the rite of sanctification lies the power of the icon, whereby the artistic image becomes the place of the “proto-image’s special, gracious presence.” Nicaea II was unable to affirm this special power due to its lack of a clear understanding of the name and, subsequently, the absence of a rite of sanctification. Prior to the advent of this rite, which arose in the course of the Church’s history, there was not a qualitative difference between religious pictures and icons, but

---

282 Ibid., 80, 68.
283 Ibid., 68.
284 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 189; Bulgakov, Icons, 81. The rite of sanctification, like many aspects of Orthodoxy, admits of a variety of forms. That being the case, Bulgakov does disagree with some practices found in the various local churches, such as the denial of the need for sanctification in the Greek Pedalion. Ibid., 83 n. 116. Agapius and Nicodemus, The Rudder, 419-420.
285 Bulgakov, The Bride of the Lamb, 289; Bulgakov, Icons, 81.
286 Bulgakov, “Religion and Art,” 189; Bulgakov, Icons, 81.
287 Ibid., 85.
288 Ibid., 98.
289 Ibid., 84-85.
290 Ibid., 79, 82, 88.
rather images were judged by their content. \(^{291}\) Now, however, this division exists and limits veneration to only those images sanctified by the Church. It is sanctification, and not the form, style, or content of the image that creates an icon, though the Church has affirmed these characteristics in practice. In addition, aberrations can occur and “it is possible to have erroneous naming, or sanctification of a false image, and in general not every image is sanctifiable.” \(^{292}\)

While Bulgakov places great importance upon the role of the name in linking the proto-image to the image, he also states that a name alone is not an icon. \(^{293}\) Sanctification is dependent on representation in transmitting the one image of the depicted subject. \(^{294}\) For the believer, these two elements combine and allow for one to venerate Christ and his saints. This act, after all, is what the theology of the icon boils down to, and it is to the subjects of icons, those persons whom the believer directs his or her veneration towards, that we must now turn.

---

\(^{291}\) Ibid., 84. Bulgakov reads the Acts of Nicaea II as reflecting this state of affairs.

\(^{292}\) Ibid., 109.

\(^{293}\) Ibid., 83.

\(^{294}\) Ibid., 109.
Chapter 4
Iconographic Interpretations

1 Introduction

Thus far we have discussed only one of the two movements contained within Bulgakov’s writings on the icon. The theological base of the icon and its capacity to serve as a point of revelation gives way to reflection on that which is found in specific icons and iconographic types. Throughout his writings, Bulgakov interprets icons in a way that is consistent with his theoretical understanding of their foundation. This chapter will be devoted to the explication of these different interpretations. It will begin with the icon that makes all other icons possible, that of Christ, and will discuss representations of the other two Persons of the Trinity before moving on to the Deisis and the central persons who are found in this compositional structure.\(^{295}\) It is in this iconographic type that the relationship between Divine and creaturely realms can best be observed. The chapter will end with the icon of The Last Judgment, since it is here that the disparate teachings contained within the icons of the Church are recapitulated in the discourse related to the time when “God will be all in all.”

2 Christ

In comparison with the other iconographic types that will follow, Bulgakov finds little revealed in the diverse icons of the God-Man. The reason for this, it would seem, is that the rest of tradition is far from silent regarding the dogma of Christ. Icons, standing on the periphery of Church life,\(^ {296}\) can only witness to what has been written and said over the ages. This is particularly true regarding those events that occurred within Christ’s historical life on earth, as well as those that stand on the brink of it, such as icons of The Transfiguration, The Ascension, and some of the miracles.\(^ {297}\) Still, there are different aspects that Bulgakov does find revealed in icons of Christ, particularly those that draw out the sophianic nature of Divinity, such as the icon

---

\(^{295}\) Space does not permit a discussion of other iconographic types referred to by Bulgakov in his writings, namely, those of Sophia, the saints, and the angels.

\(^{296}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{297}\) Ibid., 80; Bulgakov, The Holy Grail and the Eucharist, 95.
The Vigilant Eye. Christ is also reflected through the images of the saints since he is the image of true humanity and they partake of this to a greater or lesser extent.

3 God the Father

In contrast to the few icons of the Son that he mentions, Bulgakov spends more time reflecting on images of God the Father. In the time between Nicaea II and today, icons of the Father appeared in the life of the Church. As a depiction that has met with a definite amount of resistance (i.e. at the Great Council of Moscow of 1666), Bulgakov seeks to give an account of their existence since he sees that they have, like the genesis of icons as a whole, been “legitimized by church practice.” Though many of his contemporaries would reach different conclusions, Bulgakov’s stance on the issue is decidedly different, unsurprisingly owing to his sophiology. Both sides in the Iconoclast dispute, as well as Bulgakov’s own general theological proposition, affirm the unportrayability of Divinity and that it is only through the Son that the Triune God is revealed to creation. In a weakened sense, on account of the obvious resort to anthropomorphic conceptions of Divinity, this can still be considered to be true when discussing images of the Father, since His representation is inherently dependent on the Son and seeks to reveal their Divine relation. An image of the Father simply brings to light that “it is only in relation to the Son, through the Son and in connection with him” that He can be portrayed, and this includes icons of the Trinity. In contrast to these relational images, of which there are several that will be discussed, there also exist images of what appear to be the Father alone.

Images of the Father as an old man, in their foundation, are not considered by Bulgakov to be representative of any one Person of the Trinity, but rather they reveal all three Persons, the “one personal trihypostatic God.” Bulgakov connects this depiction with the “Elohim” of the Old

\[\text{References:}\]

298 Bulgakov, The Lamb of God, 108. This type is also known as The Unsleeping Eye.


300 Bulgakov, Icons, 93. Ouspensky argues against this mode of “justification through custom,” stating that a custom without truth has no basis in the life of the Church. He bases this line of thinking both in the decision of the Great Council of Moscow and the writings of St. Cyprian of Carthage. Ouspensky, The Theology of the Icon, 394.
Testament. It is significant that these depictions are not generally found in the iconography of the Church, but rather in her wall paintings, which are qualitatively different due to the absence of veneration bestowed upon them by believers.

Another depiction of the Father alone occurs in certain subjects where He is shown as the Creator of the world. Here He is represented as an old man as He goes about bringing the world into existence. The absence of a Cross within the nimbus rules out an interpretation of this figure as being the Son, although in some cases it is indeed the Son who is depicted in place of the Father. Likewise, the form of an angel can stand in for the first Person of the Trinity in these images. However, when it is the Father who is shown, these icons can be interpreted as manifesting the sophiological connection between God and humanity. They show that “the image of God is sketched in [humanity] at his creation, or conversely, that the human image is an attribute of God.” Scripturally, this idea is revealed in the Old Testament visions of Ezekiel and Daniel, where God is said to be in appearance like an elder. The images, whether pictorial or verbal, in essence function as an icon of Sophia insofar as they reveal the pre-eternal Divine-Humanity of the Father.

While these solitary icons of the Father or the Trinity as an old man are understandably abstract, images that show the inter-Trinitarian relationship are far more concrete. Of the two primary images, often referred to as The Old Testament Trinity and The New Testament Trinity, the latter has received harsher criticism. This icon most often depicts the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit arranged either along the vertical axis of the painting, or with the Father and Son side

---

301 Bulgakov, Icons, 93.

302 Ibid., 93-94.

303 Ibid., 94.


305 Ouspensky, in his summary of the Great Council of Moscow, spends a considerable amount of space on the different variations of The New Testament Trinity, concluding that they violate the unportrayability of God. Overall, it is similar to his critique of solitary images of God the Father, though he adds an additional argument against those who attribute an anti-heretical intent to these images. Ouspensky, The Theology of the Icon, 395-409
by side and the Spirit hovering between them. In both icons the Spirit is represented in the form of a dove. As he does with solitary images of the Father, Bulgakov interprets this iconographic type as an attestation to the Humanity of God, and only secondly, in a weakened sense, can these icons be said to represent the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Bulgakov is careful to note that this type should not be considered as a “personal image.” Unlike John of Damascus’ argument for icons from the standpoint of human weakness, which would be an external solution to the problem of iconography, what is found in the depiction of the Father with the Son is an “internally justified resolution” to the problem since it is based on the Son’s revelation of the Father.

A more widely accepted image that includes an indirect portrayal of the Father is the icon that is commonly referred to as The Old Testament Trinity. The original compositional structure of this icon is based on the passage in Genesis 18 where Abraham and Sarah are visited by three angels. In the patristic period, these angelic visitors were interpreted as a manifestation of the Trinity. The visual representation of this scene stems from the earliest periods of the Church’s history, as evidenced by the art of the catacombs, but it received a significant re-interpretation in fifteenth century Russia with the hand of Andrei Rublev who eliminated the narrative elements of the traditional depiction The Hospitality of Abraham, leaving only the three angels and the table with its Eucharistic implications. Though the angels differ slightly in terms of personal characteristics, the emphasis of the composition falls on the unity, and not individuality, that exists between them. As each angel looks to the other, the intra-Trinitarian relationships become clear. However, with little explanation for his choice Bulgakov does designate the central angel as representing the Father. Ouspensky, on the other hand, states that this is

306 Bulgakov, Icons, 94.
307 For an overview of some of the different interpretations of this passage see, Gabriel Bunge, The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev, translated by Andrew Louth, foreword by Sergei S. Averintsev (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 45-56.
308 Ibid., 24-25.
309 Bulgakov, Icons, 95.
310 Ibid.
inaccurate and that the order proceeds according to the Creed, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Though basing himself on different grounds, Evdokimov is in agreement with Bulgakov’s designation, and as evidence he cites the explanation of the composition given by St. Stephen of Perm and an example that has the name “Father” inscribed above the central angel.

4 The Holy Spirit

In addition to portrayals of God the Father, the subject of Trinitarian images also raises the question of the portrayability of the Holy Spirit. Bulgakov reasons that unlike the Father, who does not possess a personal image due to His transcendent nature, the Holy Spirit should in theory be able to be depicted on account of his closeness to the world. That being the case, he notes that there does not exist an image of the Spirit alone within the iconographic tradition, as there does for the Father. The explanation for this, he concludes, is that the image of the Spirit in the world is none other than the saints, who shine with Divine glory. At the summit of this revelation stands the Mother of God, who becomes, to a degree, the “human form” of the “hypostasis of Beauty.”

Though deification serves as the primary revelation of the Holy Spirit within the iconographic canon, he does find minimal representation in other forms. He may be portrayed “emblematically” or “allegorically” as in icons of The Descent of the Holy Spirit where he appears as tongues of fire, or in icons of The Baptism of Christ where he takes the form of a

311 Ouspensky, The Theology of the Icon, 399-400 n. 70.

312 Paul Evdokimov, The Art of the Icon, translated by Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), 248-249. Ouspensky silently refutes Evdokimov as he goes about criticizing this example and explanation, concluding that the exception does not invalidate the rule. Ouspensky, The Theology of the Icon, 399-400 n. 70.

313 Bulgakov, Icons, 95.

314 Bulgakov also draws parallels between the absence of an icon of the Holy Spirit and the absence of a feast of the Holy Spirit, both of which he sees as evidence that history still awaits the Spirit’s complete revelation in the creaturely Sophia. Ibid., 95-96.

315 Ibid., 95.

316 Bulgakov, The Lamb of God, 272; Bulgakov, Icons, 95.
dove.\textsuperscript{317} This latter form is also found in the icon of \textit{The Annunciation}, bridging the Divine and created realms. Scripturally, the Spirit is only spoken of as a dove in the Baptism (Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:32), but iconography reveals that the “mode” of his descent is similar in both situations.\textsuperscript{318} The presence of the Holy Spirit as a dove in \textit{The Annunciation} also underlines the “overshadowing” of Mary by the Spirit.\textsuperscript{319} An indirect personal depiction of the Spirit can be found in Rublev’s \textit{Old Testament Trinity}, and the different variations of this iconographic type.\textsuperscript{320}

5 The Deisis

In turning toward the creaturely Sophia, the \textit{Deisis} serves as both the point from which to begin and the place at which to end. The reason for this is that it serves as the peak of creation, the place where divinized humanity is to be found in this life and on the brink of the next. The \textit{Deisis} is also important since it gathers together those figures whose importance Bulgakov finds revealed through the iconography of the Church: the \textit{Theotokos}, the Forerunner, and the angels. The importance of the \textit{Deisis} for Bulgakov is hard to miss, seeing as he patterns his first trilogy of theological writings on its structure. Other scholars have examined this phenomenon, though this has usually been done as part of a larger analysis of his dogmatic work.\textsuperscript{321} In keeping with our approach, the following section will examine Bulgakov’s interpretations connected to the iconographic type, and will only discuss the wider theological context as is needed for an understanding of these features.

\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 95.

\textsuperscript{318} Bulgakov, \textit{The Comforter}, 249.

\textsuperscript{319} Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 87. For Ouspensky’s criticism of these interpretations, see below.

\textsuperscript{320} Bulgakov, \textit{Icons}, 95. After identifying the Father as the central angel, Bulgakov does not go on to name the other two angels. The angel on the right is often considered to be representative of the Holy Spirit, clothed as he is in the green of nature. Evdokimov states that “there is no question” in this identification. Evdokimov, \textit{The Art of the Icon}, 348.

\textsuperscript{321} Paul Valliere, \textit{Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key} (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 309-328; Aidan Nichols, \textit{Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov}, foreword by Rowan Williams, introduction by Kallistos Ware (Herefordshire, EN: Gracewing, 2005), 240-290, particularly 269-270.
At its core, the *Deisis* is nothing less than the “icon of the Incarnation.”

The reason for this is that this icon “fully reveals the mystery of the Incarnation” by showing Christ’s connection to the two members of humanity who directly assisted in this event. The *Deisis* is not an historical representation, but rather it is a dogmatic-symbolic image. What he is seeking to explicate in his investigation of the *Deisis* is what he sees as being a dogmatic “fact,” that being “the presence of the Forerunner, alongside the Mother of God, before the throne of the Lord.” They stand before Christ in his “royal” ministry, a ministry that Bulgakov assigns to the period following his glorification. Further, he also sees dogmatic significance in the unity within the *Deisis* between the *Theotokos* and the Forerunner.

Literally, the word “deisis” (δέησις) means prayer. Historically, Bulgakov states, the origins of *The Deisis* icon are unknown, despite its depiction being highly prevalent within the Church. He references an article from *The Orthodox Theological Encyclopedia* that describes the composition of the icon and its location in the iconostasis. The citation also includes a conjecture regarding the title given to the icon, which states “one supposes that the name *Deisis* originated in the fact that, below this icon, the prayer ended with the Greek word *Deisis* (prayer), and those who did not know Greek took this to be the name of the icon.” The article also offers a second guess regarding the name, drawing attention to the place of prayer occupied by

---

323 Ibid.
324 Ibid., 129.
325 Ibid., 155.
327 Ibid.
328 Ibid.
329 Ibid., 143 n. 4. In both the original publication and the present translation, further bibliographic information is missing.
330 Ibid.
the Mother of God and the Forerunner. A modern encyclopedia article does not read too
differently from the one cited by Bulgakov.\textsuperscript{331}

Regardless of the origins of the name, the \textit{Deisis} is clearly related to the concept of prayer. The
prayers that are offered up flow from the Mother of God and John the Forerunner. However, the
question that one must ask is “what are they praying for?”\textsuperscript{332} The answer that Bulgakov gives is
that they stand before the throne of God in a position of intercession for the rest of the created
order. In this way, “the \textit{Deisis} expresses the fullness of the love of the Church for God and for
man.”\textsuperscript{333} As members of the human race, the Virgin and the Forerunner represent the prayer of
the Church in its “\textit{earthly} life.”\textsuperscript{334} This stands in contrast to a different form of the \textit{Deisis}, which
will be discussed further on in relation to the iconography of the Last Judgment, where they pray
as the “already glorified Church.”\textsuperscript{335}

The ability of the Mother of God and John the Baptist to pray for the rest of humanity is
founded on the unique place that they hold in their respective relationships with Christ. The
\textit{Deisis}, in its dogmatic-symbolic interpretation, distinguishes them from the rest of humanity.\textsuperscript{336}
Along with highlighting their proximity to Christ, the icon also points to the lack of barriers
between the three figures, “[attesting] to the superior sanctification that they have received, the
highest possible”.\textsuperscript{337} According to Bulgakov, the full version of the \textit{Deisis}, which includes
depictions of the angels along with human saints, represents the division of the different
worlds.\textsuperscript{338} In the center one finds the “spiritual heaven,” followed by the angelic and then the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{331} See for instance, Kenneth Carveley, “Deisis,” in \textit{The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity}.
\item \textsuperscript{332} Bulgakov, \textit{The Friend of the Bridegroom}, 143.
\item \textsuperscript{333} Ibid., 144.
\item \textsuperscript{334} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{336} Ibid., 130.
\item \textsuperscript{337} Ibid., 137.
\item \textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 134.
\end{itemize}
human realms of being.\textsuperscript{339} It is through the \textit{Deisis} that the “unification of the heavenly and the earthly”\textsuperscript{340} can be observed, as the Mother of God elevates her human nature toward the divine,\textsuperscript{341} and as the Forerunner reunites the angelic orders, taking Lucifer’s place at the head of their assembly.\textsuperscript{342}

The heavenly realm of the \textit{Deisis} also attests to the mystical unity that exists between the Mother of God and the Forerunner.\textsuperscript{343} One of the characteristics of their unity is their shared status as spiritual virgins.\textsuperscript{344} Both accomplished this feat, with the aid of Divinity, and restored the “lost virginity” of pre-Fall existence. This becomes, as it were, the ontological fact of “ever-virginity.” As Bulgakov’s anthropology is divided into gendered principles, “the virginity of the female essence in Mary corresponds to the virginity of the male essence in John,” thereby accounting for a complete restoration and representation of humanity in the \textit{Deisis}.\textsuperscript{345} Likewise, the Dormition of Mary is connected to the death of the Baptist through the sticheron that is sung on both feasts, a fact which Bulgakov finds to be “in conformity with the theme of the \textit{Deisis}.”\textsuperscript{346}

The mystical unity of the Virgin and the Baptist is further annunciated when contrasted with icons involving Mary’s relationships to the other saints. Bulgakov chooses two characters to discuss, both of whom are given prominence in the biblical text, but who are revealed differently in Orthodox art. The most obvious relationship that Mary has with another human being in the Scriptures is the one that she holds with her husband Joseph. Different traditions interpret the figure of Joseph and his relationship with the Virgin in different ways, but after an initial

\textsuperscript{339} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{340} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{341} Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 76.
\textsuperscript{342} Bulgakov, \textit{The Friend of the Bridegroom}, 168.
\textsuperscript{343} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{344} Ibid., 79. In contrast to Roman Catholicism, Bulgakov states that the Orthodox understanding of virginity does not consist of celibacy but of monasticism, or the “assumption of the ‘angelic’ habit and a separation from the world.” Ibid., 180-181.
\textsuperscript{345} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{346} Ibid., 130. I have been unable to identify the sticheron to which Bulgakov refers.
patristic investigation Bulgakov focuses his attention on the difference between the Orthodox and Catholic understandings of him.\textsuperscript{347} He believes that “Catholic devotion has assigned to Joseph the place that, in Orthodoxy, belongs to the Forerunner.”\textsuperscript{348} For Bulgakov, the Deisis reveals a relationship that exists eschatologically, in the “glorified state” that lies beyond historical time. In contrast to the spiritual unity found in the Deisis, iconography presents a relationship of a different tone as existing between Joseph and the Virgin in The Nativity icon. While John and Mary stand mystically united, Joseph is seen in this icon to be in a state of doubt or temptation, questioning the mystery that he finds unfolding around him.\textsuperscript{349} In this icon one finds the summit of the Old Testament Church, and not “the one who truly stands at the threshold between the Old and the New Testament.”\textsuperscript{350} Once again, the dogmatic-symbolic character of the Deisis propels the viewer beyond the confines of the sacred-historical narrative.

The other major character connected with the Virgin Mary, both in the biblical text and in the apocryphal writings of the Church, is John the Theologian. Continuing with the distinction between those of the Old Testament and those of the New, Bulgakov places John the Theologian in the latter category, while in this case he places the Forerunner in the former due to his position in the transition between the two covenants. He sees the difference between the relationships that Mary has with each John depicted iconographically in the Deisis and in icons of The Crucifixion.\textsuperscript{351} The Deisis is once again used by Bulgakov to indicate the glorified set of relationships that exist in the Kingdom of God. Like The Nativity icon, the depiction of The Crucifixion defines a sacred-historical event, where the Apostle John stands at the foot of the Cross with his newly adopted mother. Not content with reading either of these relationships individualistically, Bulgakov states that the relationship found in the Deisis indicates the heavenly Church, while the one found in The Crucifixion represents “the life of the earthly...

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid., 177-188.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{350} Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom, 184.
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid., 174.
\end{flushleft}
Both sets of relationships are real, but they take place on different ontological planes. This stark difference is highlighted by Bulgakov as he draws attention to the complete absence of any indication that the Forerunner and the Mother of God knew each other in their earthly lives.

Despite the numerous similarities between the Mother of God and the Forerunner, there also exist unique differences between them. As much as the Deisis serves as a place of unity, it also functions as a place of comparison between the two glorified members of humanity. In regards to the equality between their “power of virginity and spiritual integrity,” he gives evidence both for and against a qualitative difference. Regardless of the outcome, he states that it is a mystery due to the absence of any definitive statements by Christ. What Christ does say, however, is that the Forerunner is the greatest among humanity, thereby making a comparison between “the Forerunner and all human beings.” At this point Bulgakov states that this passage can only refer to the Virgin in her “human greatness.” In truth, the Mother of God holds the place of honor within the Deisis by being depicted on Christ’s right. Likewise, in the diverse tradition of sophianic icons, the Forerunner is never present without the Virgin, though she can be depicted outside of his company. In Bulgakov’s scheme she represents the motherhood and bridehood of the Church, whereas the Forerunner expresses the friendship of the Church. The maternal principle “contains and unites all things in itself,” while the principle embodied in the Baptist is one that “wills itself and gives itself.” Both characters are needed to express the fullness of the Church, though each has his or her own role to play. Another key difference that Bulgakov sees between these two is that while Mary leaves the world at her

---

352 Ibid.
353 Ibid., 107.
354 Ibid.
355 Ibid., 39.
356 As in the Yaroslavl and Kiev compositions. Ibid., 154.
357 Ibid., 142. For a presentation of Bulgakov’s complex understanding of gender see, Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 82-86.
358 Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom, 142.
Dormition, John remains within it. This is made clear, above all else, in the absence of the relics of the former in the world and the presence of the latter’s holy remains. Like the Persons of the Holy Trinity, both the Mother of God and the Forerunner preserve their distinct persons while existing in a state of unity. Neither person can be spoken of without the other, and Bulgakov’s understanding of the Virgin and the Forerunner is a testament to his antinomic approach.

As those closest to Christ, the Mother of God and the Forerunner serve as “representatives of the whole Church, earthly and heavenly, visible and invisible.” This holds to be true on account of the unification of principles in the persons of the Mother of God and the Friend of the Bridegroom. As was briefly mentioned, this “personification” involves the angelic orders as well. In his discussion of the possibility of iconographically depicting the angelic orders Bulgakov affirms their representation based on what he terms as their “co-humanity.” Due to the natural affinity that exists between the human and angelic realms, the Forerunner, by taking the angelic habit, is able to stand at the head of their ranks. As the personified representation of the Church, the Forerunner becomes the “Guardian Angel of the whole human race.”

Bulgakov speaks of the unity of the Mother of God and the Forerunner as being a “mystical human dyad.” In his Trinitarian thought, he stresses the importance of dyadic couplings within the Godhead. In his reflections on the Deisis, Bulgakov extends this line of thinking to humanity. Together they are “the two… gathered in [Christ’s] name.” United they are more “all-ecclesial” in their prayer than any human alone, including the solitary intercession

---

359 Ibid., 138-139. The implications of this idea will be explored below in connection with the location of the respective ministries of the Virgin and the Forerunner.

360 Ibid., 154-155.

361 Ibid., 137-138.

362 Ibid., 141.

363 Bulgakov, Jacob’s Ladder, 147; Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom, 131.

364 Ibid., 142.

365 Ibid., 144.
of the Mother of God. This feat is one of being in a state of “unitary multiplicity,” and corresponds to the manner of Trinitarian existence, one that consists of “unity in trinity and trinity in unity.”\textsuperscript{366} Along with Christ, the three main figures of the simplified \textit{Deisis} are “a representation of the mystery of the Theophany, a manifestation of the Most Holy Trinity, which lives in the Church by virtue of the Incarnation.”\textsuperscript{367}

In an effort to confirm the mystical unity that exists between the Mother of God and the Forerunner, Bulgakov also makes reference to two additional elements of tradition. In some compositions of the \textit{Deisis}, particularly when it is placed within the setting of the Last Judgment, the two sophianic members of humanity are depicted wearing crowns. Bulgakov interprets the crowns as being “a symbol of glory, as well as of glorification.”\textsuperscript{368} This type of crown, he notes, differs from those given to the martyrs and kings of the Old Testament, a useful clarification in light of the Forerunner’s manner of death. Further, he states that in the Novgorod \textit{Sophia} icon, crowns can appear on the heads of all three figures in the \textit{Deisis} row. This helps to confirm the “foundations of sophianicity” in humanity, and make clear that glorification is an ontological possibility.\textsuperscript{369} Bulgakov concludes his thoughts on crowns with the affirmation that this is one more indication of the Virgin and Forerunner’s unique, glorified position in the creaturely order.

As can be seen, the \textit{Deisis} factors prominently in Bulgakov’s thought as the “icon of the Incarnation.”\textsuperscript{370} It reveals sophianic humanity as the Mother of God and the Forerunner stand before Christ in their glorified state of being. Together they personify the whole Church, human and angelic, and intercede before Christ on behalf of creation. This aspect of the icon has long been recognized in the iconographic tradition, and Bulgakov performs a great service in explicating all of the ways that this holds true. As the \textit{Deisis} forms the model for his first dogmatic trilogy, it is understandable why he returns to it throughout his works, particularly in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{366} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{367} Ibid., 142-143.
\item \textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 137.
\item \textsuperscript{369} Ibid., 153.
\item \textsuperscript{370} Ibid., 141.
\end{itemize}
his writings on one of the characters in the tradition who is shrouded in silence but who holds a place of honor in the *Deisis*.

6 The Forerunner

The life and death of the Forerunner are well attested to in the Scriptures. The story of his birth is recounted by St. Luke, and includes the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary, and the children in their wombs (Luke 1:39-56). Later in life, John is present at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and baptism, and in fact he serves as the human instrument through which the Divine ministry is initiated. Lastly, the story of his beheading figures prominently in the gospel accounts, along with the curious question that John sends to Jesus regarding whether or not he is the Messiah. While these stories provide a basis for the Forerunner in Church tradition, over time a number of apocryphal stories have circulated regarding the events of his life, and traditions have even developed in the direction of tales concerning the discovery of his relics.

Some of the most visible sources for the different stories concerning John the Baptist are found in the iconography of the Church. *Vita* icons provide an abundant wealth of material as they frame a central image of the Baptist with all kinds of tales, Scriptural and apocryphal, which relate the sacred-historical events of his life and miracles. However, beyond the *Deisis* there are also a large number of dogmatic-symbolic icons that present a single image of the Forerunner accompanied by symbolic, non-narrative elements. These are primarily the icons that Bulgakov notices, and from which he is able to articulate a theological understanding of the Forerunner. In contrast to his work on the Virgin, Paul Valliere has noted that his vision of the Baptist is more positive in nature, and framed in such a way that it does not serve as a direct polemic

---

371 In his division of iconography concerning the Forerunner, Bulgakov specifically lists the following as falling under the canopy of sacred-historical icons: the Nativity of John, the Baptism of Christ, and the Forerunner’s decapitation. Beyond the brief mention of these iconographic subjects, Bulgakov does not return to a discussion of them, excluding the Beheading, which he interprets in dogmatic-symbolic terms, and instead when dealing with these events he draws upon other sources. Ibid., 129. For a typical list of events depicted on *vita* icons of the Forerunner see, *The ‘Painter’s Manual’ of Dionysios of Fourna*, edited by Paul Hetherington (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1989), 65-66.

372 In a footnote regarding his use of iconographic sources of the Forerunner, Bulgakov states that since chronological and historical research has yet to be conducted on the subject of the Baptist, he is confined in his interpretation to the symbolic elements present in the tradition. This state of affairs appears to continue up to the present, though much work has been accomplished. Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, 129 n. 1.
against the Catholic elevation of Joseph over John. For this reason, it is worth examining what exactly he finds shining forth in the icons of the Church.

Bulgakov’s belief in the angelic nature of the Forerunner has briefly been mentioned already, but he finds further confirmation in the iconographic tradition of the Church. In the *Deisis*, John stands before the throne of God and is therefore closer to God than the angels. His essence, according to Bulgakov’s interpretation of the gospels, is one that shines with the Divine Light. He further states that “this brings him close to the angelic world, and by virtue of his ceaseless presence before God and illumination by the Holy Spirit he is called an angel.” However, this cannot change his human nature, and instead of the angelic essence replacing the human, the two antimonically unite in the Forerunner. It is a “superhuman ministry,” combining his “angelic ministry… with perfect human sanctity.” In this way, the Forerunner parallels the place of the Virgin as being the pinnacle of creation, which is indicated in the cherubic hymn and her own place before the throne.

While the *Deisis* depicts the angelic reality of the Forerunner and his position at the head of the angelic and human orders, another iconographic feature contributes to the recognition of his angelic nature. In many icons he is depicted with wings. Many saints have been spoken of as “having lived an angelic life,” but Bulgakov notes that it is only the Baptist and Elijah who are

---


375 Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 125-126.


377 Aidan Nichols, at one point, drew attention to the fact that other saints besides the Forerunner have been depicted with wings in the Ethiopian tradition. He gives evidence of at least two saints who, due to their angelic asceticism, may be represented in this way. He uses this fact as one way to illustrate the deficiencies of Bulgakov’s argument concerning the angelic ontology of the Forerunner, arguing that the dogmatic conclusions that Bulgakov arrives at are inherently flawed by the presence of these representations (in addition to other reasons). Within Bulgakov’s own tradition, however, it seems that the presence of wings is indeed reserved for the Forerunner, the Mother of God, the angels, and Sophia, and that it is not used for human saints in general. Even if historical evidence were to be presented that proved to the contrary, it is perhaps significant that these traditions were not continued and incorporated into Russian iconography at large. See Nichols, *Wisdom from Above*, 267-268.
spoken of as being “angels in the flesh.” What he sees is an ontological reality, not simply a “symbolic or allegorical” move on the part of iconographers, and due to this union in John of the two natures he rises “equally above both worlds by virtue of this.” As mentioned, he is visibly “assigned the place occupied by the Morning Star before the Fall.” This becomes particularly clear on those icons of the Deisis that have the winged Forerunner standing at the head of all creation. While the wings speak of the Baptist’s angelic nature, another feature prevents his humanity from being overshadowed.

One of the more historical characteristics that one often encounters in icons of the Forerunner is his emaciated appearance. Bulgakov compares this portrayal of the Baptist with the texts of Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6, and Luke 7:33, all of which describe his asceticism as one in which he did not eat bread or wine, but only locusts and wild honey. To this is also added his attire of camel’s hair and a leather belt. John’s habitation in the world forms the third element of his monasticism, namely, the Judean desert. Transposing the monastic understanding of the desert that developed later into John’s own time, Bulgakov states that “the desert, as a place which is inhabited neither by man nor by the sin that inheres in him, was a pure place in which it was natural for one to be called to freedom from personal sin to preserve himself from falls.” In this environment, the Forerunner’s asceticism is practiced and perfected, and Bulgakov attaches his role as mediator between the two Testaments to his choice of ministerial location away from the Temple despite belonging to the priestly class.

Elsewhere, the emaciated body of the Forerunner is used by Bulgakov as an indication of John’s spiritual beauty. Drawing on the liturgical hymn that says of the Forerunner, “an angel he lived as one without flesh,” he makes clear that John’s humanity was not diminished in light of

______________________________

378 Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom, 130-131. Trubetskoï also notes the importance of the Forerunner’s wings, though he does not expand upon the idea to the extent that Bulgakov does. Trubetskoï, Icons, 28-29.


380 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 126.

381 Bulgakov, The Friend of the Bridegroom, 36.

382 Ibid.

383 Ibid., 37.
his angelic status. In place of the latter nature “enriching” the former, it is added to it. The beauty found in the icons of the emaciated Forerunner consists in their ability to portray a human whose body has been purged of sin through asceticism. For Bulgakov, “the angelic aspect in a human being signifies freedom from the flesh, the sinful passion, from the lusts of sensuality… It is perfect passionlessness.” While the Scriptures relate that John was an ascetic, this state of being is “proper to the future age,” and the icon distinctly portrays the eschatological reality and its pre-figured revelation in history.

Another iconographic type of the Forerunner that is rooted in time but that seeks to transcend it is that of his decapitation, or decollation. Continuing with the importance of asceticism in the ministry of the Baptist, Bulgakov sees a special significance in those icons that present him “as not yet beheaded, but with his head in his hands.” He takes this to indicate the “self-beheading” of the Forerunner, in that he voluntarily underwent the ascetical process. One could also interpret this icon to reveal the different states of the Forerunner by collapsing the temporal sequence and showing him both before and after his decapitation. In certain icons of the decapitation where the Forerunner holds his head but he is winged, Bulgakov would like to interpret the head as a reference to his angelic asceticism. Along with these ideas, he finds significance in those icons that do show the body and head of the Forerunner separated, and in these the symbolism is one of “baptism by blood.” Moreover, he also sees in this specific form of death a separation between the spirit, corresponding to the head, and the flesh, represented by the body. Bulgakov corroborates this conjecture by referencing the iconographic depiction of angels who can be depicted either with or without a body, connecting the bodiless Forerunner

---

384 Ibid., 156.
385 Ibid., 157.
386 Ibid., 38. The placement of the Forerunner’s head can also be depicted as being in a cup or on a plate. Ibid., 134.
387 Ibid., 134-135.
388 Ibid., 135.
389 Ibid., 127.
390 Ibid.
to the depictions of those angels who appear in the tradition as a head and wings, i.e. the seraphim. Again the distinction between the angelic and the human natures that are united in the Forerunner can be observed.\textsuperscript{391}

The most historical object that the Forerunner holds is his own head, yet iconographers have transmitted other traditions to the Church as well. One of these depicts John with a cup in his hand, inside of which is found the Christ child.\textsuperscript{392} Bulgakov is quick to suggest this icon as being an allegorical interpretation of John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” He is just as quick, however, to dismiss this interpretation as one that passes over the true “mystery” which the icon depicts.\textsuperscript{393} He sees this as one of the Forerunner’s special ministries. As the “first at the Divine Eucharist,” symbolized by the Child in the cup, John participates in the mystery.\textsuperscript{394} Being a Levite, he could have participated within the Old Testament sacrificial system, yet he did not, instead “saving it until his new ordination, through his decapitation, in the New Testament.” Bulgakov connects the Forerunner’s dual natures in this mystery, and these “[give] him the first, exclusive place after the Mother of God” in the Eucharistic offering.\textsuperscript{395}

A second secret ministry of the Forerunner is revealed through a different iconographic type, one that depicts him holding a cross.\textsuperscript{396} In these icons the cross can appear in either hand, though it generally appears in the Baptist’s left. Furthermore, this image is often combined with other details, such as wings, a chalice, or a sign of blessing. This last combination yields the further meaning which points to John’s priesthood and his “mediation between the old and the new grace.”\textsuperscript{397} Bulgakov notes the absence of any indication within the diverse written traditions.

\textsuperscript{391} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{392} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{393} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{394} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{395} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid.
regarding the appearance of a cross in the Forerunner’s hand. He states that it “spontaneously” appeared in iconography and that perhaps it was simply “perceived as something that belongs there.”\textsuperscript{398} The only explanation that he offers for the depiction is that it testifies to the Forerunner’s preaching in hell, where prior to Christ’s descent after the Crucifixion he prepared the way for him.\textsuperscript{399}

In regards to the iconography of the Forerunner, Bulgakov is able to draw out a lengthy analysis of him as he will be in the eschaton.\textsuperscript{400} His division of icons of the Baptist into sacred-historical and dogmatic-symbolic is useful, and helps to explain the differences that exist between his interpretation of historical events and the hidden elements of tradition. On the basis of the latter, and even in regards to some of the former, Bulgakov finds the unity of the human and angelic worlds to be of paramount importance. Due to this, the angelic world is recapitulated and led back towards the throne of Christ, as depicted in the \textit{Deisis}. As the angelic human, John alone is able to accomplish this feat, and his special place in salvation history is hinted at through the iconography of the Church. John is not alone in this, however, and though he stands at the left hand of Christ, there is one who stands at his right hand.

\section{The Mother of God}

Bulgakov begins his book devoted to the Mother of God, which constitutes book one of his trilogy of reflections on the \textit{Deisis}, with polemical intent. As has been noted by scholars, his initial argumentative tone fades as the book progresses and he moves towards a positive appropriation of his own tradition.\textsuperscript{401} On a smaller scale, Bulgakov’s polemic against the Catholic understanding of the Mother of God also takes place in the realm of artistic activity. In an early encounter with a Western depiction of the Virgin, Raphael’s \textit{Sistine Madonna} in the

\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., 136-137.

\textsuperscript{399} Ibid., 72, 129. Though this event finds expression in the iconographic tradition, Bulgakov does not utilize it in his discussion.

\textsuperscript{400} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{401} T. Allan Smith, Introduction to Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, xv.
Zwinger Gallery, Bulgakov underwent an overwhelming religious experience. Roughly twenty-five years later, when again in Prague at the beginning of his life in exile, he visited the same gallery and its famous painting. To his surprise he felt a near opposite reaction in comparison to his first encounter. He describes it as such,

The first impression was that I had not come to the right place, and that She was not in front of me. But quickly I recognize and am convinced that it is She and yet, that it really is not She, or that I am no longer he… What point is there in hiding or deceiving: I did not see the Mother of God. Here there is beauty, only wonderful human beauty, with its religious double meaning, but there is no graciousness. Can one pray before this image? This is blasphemy, an impossibility!

His revulsion to the Western depiction of the Mother of God to an extent mirrors his distaste of the Roman-Catholic dogmatic formulation of the Mother of God. In place of the earthly beauty of Raphael, Bulgakov turns towards the heavenly beauty found in the iconography of his native Church. As he begins to contemplate these icons, they come to inform his first major theological work as well as his subsequent writings.

Many of the observations that have already been made regarding her place in the Deisis, as well as those concerning the angelic nature of the Forerunner, are applied by Bulgakov to the Mother of God. For instance, like John she is often depicted with wings to indicate her pride of place at the head of creation. Likewise, observing the same type of distinction that he will later make in the second book of the first trilogy, regarding the different icons of the Forerunner, Bulgakov separates what he terms the “cosmic icons” of the Mother of God from the more historical ones. The former are dogmatic-symbolic in character and reveal the Virgin in her glorification. Indeed, the very title of Bulgakov’s first dogmatic entry takes its name from one of these icons.

---

402 Ibid., xi-xii.
403 Ibid., xviii.
The icon known as *The Burning Bush* is not, as one might suspect it to be, an icon depicting the Exodus narrative. Moses only factors into this iconographic type in a minor capacity, and instead one finds a large, central image of the Mother of God.\footnote{When narrative elements are present in the corners of the icon, the Exodus scene is often placed at the top left, though this is not unanimously the case.} Bulgakov mentions two of the ways in which this icon can be painted, either inside of two, four-pointed stars accompanied by cosmic symbols, or in a ring of fire in reference to the Exodus vision.\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 121.} The connection between the Virgin and the initial theophany of Moses is attested to in the liturgy, and Bulgakov uses the whole of Church tradition in his interpretation.\footnote{Ibid., 121 n. 7.} While he does not interpret the individual elements of this iconographic type, he does relate that they are “cosmic” insofar as they collapse the limits of creaturely nature and collect them all together.\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 267.} Like the *Deisis*, these icons reveal the Mother of God as the “personification” of the Church. Despite her glorified state of existence, though, she “does not stop being a creature connected with the entire world, which is glorified in Her and by Her.”\footnote{Ibid., 412.}

One of the ways in which the Mother of God remains in contact with the world, who unlike the Forerunner stands beyond it, is through her miraculous and wonder-working icons.\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 107.} Being the first to experience the Resurrection, the Virgin does not have any relics, and lives in a state different from that of the rest of humanity.\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, 138.} However, the fact that she did not “abandon the world” is attested to by her icons and appearances, which serve to reassure the faithful of her intercession for those who await the resurrection of the body.\footnote{Sergius Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy: Orthodox Devotions for the Church Year*, translated by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 11.} As one who “adopted the whole human race” through John the Theologian, this is particularly fitting for her.\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 141.} Furthermore, as
one who encountered the Virgin through art (regardless of its origin), Bulgakov describes wonder-working icons as being “new-testamental likenesses of the Glory seen by Ezekiel as it draws near and withdraws from the temple, appearing or stealing away from human beings.”

Through these icons, she is known to be “more loving and responsive to all” than any other human.

Among the cosmic icons of the Virgin is also found the depiction of her as The Unwedded Bride. Unlike the majority of her icons, this one portrays the Mother of God apart from her Son. In this icon and its variants, among which Bulgakov lists the icon of Tender Compassion and The Indestructible Wall, she represents the personified Church on account of her glorification. These icons also serve to highlight her “perpetual virginity,” and for this reason the accent in them falls on her individual person and not solely on her role as Mother. While the Church as a whole can be considered the Bride of Christ, the Virgin “in a special, exceptional sense… is the personal crown of the Church.” This once again underscores her place at the head of all creation as witnessed in the Deisis.

Though she can be represented without Child, the overwhelming majority of her icons do serve as a direct testimony to the Incarnation. This is due to the fact that “The Icon of the Mother of God with Child, the Logos and the creature receiving him, filled with the Holy Spirit, in unity and its indivisibility, is the full image of humankind.” Ontologically, Bulgakov sees this duality of persons as corresponding to the dual natures of Christ. To preserve each intact, both the human nature and the divine nature require “prerealization” in their respective hypostases. This reality is the real subject of the different iconographic types of the Virgin with Child, and it

---

415 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 128.
416 Ibid., 107.
417 Bulgakov, Sophia, the Wisdom of God, 123.
418 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 103.
420 Ibid., 82.
is a truth that does not fade in its power post-Incarnation. In icons of the *Theotokos* with Infant, Bulgakov sees an affirmation of the perpetual “Divine Maternity” of the Mother of God.\(^\text{422}\) Unlike the narrative portrayals of the Incarnation, these icons of the Virgin firmly fix the reality of Divine Motherhood in the minds of believers.

Despite the fact that the icons of the Virgin with Child testify to both the human and Divine aspects of the Mother of God, the emphasis in them tends to fall on her humanity. As a special type of icon they help to bring together the dual “hypostatic faces” of the creaturely Sophia.\(^\text{423}\) Along with the Forerunner, she represents the Church as being the “receptacle of the Holy Spirit.”\(^\text{424}\) In a unique sense she becomes the “pneumatophore” (Spirit-bearer) by becoming transparent to the Holy Spirit.\(^\text{425}\) For this reason, Bulgakov designates her as being a “special hypostatic centre” within the Creaturely Sophia.\(^\text{426}\) In the icon *The Virgin of the Sign*, the “hypostatic faces” of Christ and Mary are seen as one, and it is thus designated as being a “sophianic icon.”\(^\text{427}\) Bulgakov, though he attributes this last distinction to every icon of the Mother of God, places special importance on this iconographic type.

Another set of icons that explicitly refer to the sophianicity of the Virgin are those of her coronation. As mentioned above, he sees a connection between the crown that the Mother of God is given in certain icons and her glorification. As part of his polemic against the possible Catholic dogmatic formulation regarding the Assumption of Mary (a conjecture that came true within decades of Bulgakov’s death), he notes the iconographic feature of a crown in relation to both traditions.\(^\text{428}\) What is found in the Western depiction *The Coronation of the Virgin*, he notes.


\(^{423}\) Bulgakov, “Hypostasis and Hypostaticity,” 34.


\(^{425}\) Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 113. For Ouspensky’s various objections to this interpretation see, Ouspensky, *The Theology of the Icon*, 393 n. 57. He primarily challenges Bulgakov’s conception of hypostasis, arguing that if one understands the Virgin as the hypostatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit that this diminishes the hypostatic integrity of the Mother of God, reducing her to nothing more than an icon/image of the Holy Spirit.

\(^{426}\) Bulgakov, “Hypostasis and Hypostaticity,” 34.


\(^{428}\) Ibid., 72-73.
has its direct parallel in the Eastern Church, as found in the icon *It Is Worthy*. While the idea expressed in each is the same, Bulgakov prefers to locate the glorification of the Mother of God in neither of these symbolic depictions, but he instead sees a more historical event as portraying her glorification.

In contrast to some feasts of the Church, the tradition concerning the Virgin’s Dormition is transmitted largely through the liturgy and iconography. Bulgakov notes the relatively late historical development of the feast, and sees the absence of any sources prior to the fourth-century as covering the event in a “shroud of pious silence.” When the narrative finally does make its appearance, he finds it significant that it does so in the form of a legend. He states that for some things, “the language of legend alone is appropriate, which is entirely like the symbolism of iconography likewise distancing itself from naturalism.” What is found within the icon, then, is a hidden event in the life of the Mother of God. It is the moment when “she handed her spirit over to her Son who had appeared in order to receive it in glory with all of the holy angels.” Among all of humanity she is seen to be the first of the resurrected. The glorification of the Mother of God in this event, her translation into a state of “perfect divinization,” explains her presence before the throne of Christ in the *Deisis*. For this reason, the Eastern *Dormition* icon and the Western theme of the coronation are one in meaning, though the latter relies on an unnecessary resort to symbolism in order to establish this point.

If the Dormition constitutes an event on the edge of history, other events from the life of the Virgin are more grounded in the biblical and apocryphal traditions of the Church. One of the major feasts of the Church year in which the Mother of God plays a role is that of Pentecost. A common depiction of this feast, which is perhaps more accurately titled *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*, places twelve of the Apostles and Evangelists in a horseshoe shape, with an opening at the

---


431 Ibid., 73.

432 Ibid., 73.

433 Ibid., 74.
top and a cave at the bottom of the scene. Bulgakov affirms the traditional understanding of the crowned man who appears in the cave as being Cosmos, the symbolic representation of fallen humanity. However, at the top of the icon some scholars and painters would leave an empty space, as an indication of the presence of Christ. Bulgakov, though, fills the space with the depiction of Mary, corroborating this with the biblical account that mentions her as being present at the event (Acts 1:14, 2:1). In fact, he states that “in icons of the descent of the Holy Spirit the Mother of God is always depicted in the centre of the Apostles receiving her special fiery tongue,” a statement which clearly lacks unanimous support in the iconographic tradition. The interpretation that he gives to her appearance in these icons is that she needed baptism for the removal of original sin, and that Pentecost constitutes this cleansing by the Spirit. In contrast to this, Paul Evdokimov states that her presence detracts from the inner meaning of the icon by presenting a redundant double image of the Church, which occurs in both the figure of the assembled Apostles and Evangelists and the person of the Virgin. Similarly, Leonid Ouspensky draws attention to the omission of the Mother of God in the liturgical texts for the feast in his analysis of these two divergent ways of painting the icon. He is perhaps the most outspoken against the inclusion of the Mother of God in the composition, arguing against not only Bulgakov but also some of his fellow iconographers. On the practical level, it is worth

---

434 Baggley, Festival Icons, 157-159.

435 Bulgakov, The Holy Grail and the Eucharist, 45; Bulgakov, The Comforter, 249, 278, 342.

436 Though the Virgin is not mentioned by name, Bulgakov and others read the first two chapters of Acts in such a way that those present in the first are naturally present in the second. When the Mother of God is mentioned in 1:14 as a member of the group that gathered together to pray after Christ’s ascension, it is implied that she is also present at the descent of the Holy Spirit since the group continues to be spoken of in a general sense. Her presence is also confirmed liturgically by the Synaxarion of the Ascension, which speaks of her presence at Pentecost. Leonid Ouspensky, “The Iconography of the Descent of the Holy Spirit,” St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 31, n. 4 (1987): 310-313.


440 It is well known that Fr. Gregory Krug included the Virgin in at least two of his depictions of The Descent of the Holy Spirit. Barsanuphe, ed., Icônes et fresques du Père Grégoire (Marcenat: Monastère Orthodoxe Znamienié, 1999), 55, 93. Ouspensky is most likely the unnamed “iconographer and professor” that is mentioned in the book who reproved Krug for his placement of the Mother of God at the head of the Apostles. Ibid., 25.
noting that Bulgakov’s spiritual daughter, Sister Joanna Reitlinger, in several depictions chose to place the Virgin in the empty place.\footnote{B. B. Popova and N. A. Struve, 
 Художественное наследие сестры Иоанну (Ю.Н. Рейтлингер): альбом (Paris: YMCA-Press, 2006), 63, 164-165. Reitlinger’s acceptance of this form of the icon can witnessed in the length of time between the two examples cited, separated as they are by roughly fifty years (1930 and 1981, respectively).}

One last iconographic type that figures into Bulgakov’s theological reflections needs to be mentioned, and that is *The Annunciation*. Perhaps the most historically rooted of all the Marian icons that he discusses, it also proves to be one that he frequently references. Like *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*, Bulgakov takes at face value some of the more questionable features that have appeared within the iconographic tradition. One of these is the representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove descending upon the Virgin, which he sees as an obvious allusion to the Baptism of Christ.\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 87.}

As was briefly mentioned earlier, in his interpretation of this element Bulgakov makes clear that he is not speaking of “two descents, but two different modes of descent or manifestation of the power of the Spirit.”\footnote{Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 249.} He goes on to relate that at the Annunciation the mode of descent refers to Christ’s humanity, whereas the descent at the Baptism refers to his Divinity. As it is the Spirit who transmits each of these natures, Bulgakov affirms his representation as a dove. However, this is not always present in the iconographic tradition, and some would even dispute the depiction of the Holy Spirit as a dove in any icon beyond *The Baptism of Christ*.\footnote{Ouspensky, *The Theology of the Icon*, 382-383.}

While the feast of the Annunciation has a firm biblical basis, Bulgakov’s method of liturgical reflection draws his attention to a festal phenomenon: the coinciding of this feast with that of the Veneration of the Cross, an event that occurred in 1929 and formed the basis for one of his sermons.\footnote{First published as S. Boulgakoff, “Passion’s Annunciation (with ikon),” *Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 4 (1929): 22-25; re-translated by Boris Jakim in, Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy*, 87-90. I have been unable to locate Bulgakov’s source for the sketch that accompanies the original publication.} In this coincidence two disparate emotions are united, joy and sorrow.\footnote{Ibid., 87.}
Bulgakov, with his antinomic vision of reality, chooses to see in this phenomenon a unity of purpose, and one that is affirmed by the iconographic tradition of the Church. The icon of *The Annunciation of the Cross*\(^{447}\) portrays the Archangel Gabriel with an eight-ended cross appearing to the Mother of God who clutches the Divine Infant.\(^{448}\) The lengthy inscription on the icon relates a different dialogue than that found in the gospels, one that refers to the event as being a “second Annunciation.” The Mother of God speaks to the angel boldly, in comparison with some iconographic depictions of the biblical account,\(^{449}\) taking the cross in Gabriel’s hand as a sign of her Son’s coming trial. She speaks of her initial joy, and now of her great sorrow. The angel only replies by stating that “it is appropriate for the Son of man to suffer greatly, to be crucified, and to rise on the third day.”\(^{450}\) Joy and sorrow are mingled in both of their statements, and Bulgakov sees it as the “perfect icon” for the collision of the two feasts.

While Kondakov, whose work was published in an abridged English translation in 1927 (two years prior to the delivery of Bulgakov’s sermon), was quick to dismiss this iconographic type as an aberration of traditional painting, the icon itself found some appeal within émigré circles closely connected to Bulgakov.\(^{451}\) If one looks at the few surviving photographs of Mother Maria Skobtsova’s villa de Saxe chapel, for instance, *The Annunciation of the Cross* can clearly be seen hanging to the right of the iconostasis.\(^{452}\) Bought in 1932, the premises were quickly transformed into a home for those who needed it, and work on the chapel can be

\(^{447}\) Alternatively referred to as *The Annunciation of the Passion* (as in the original English publication of the sermon, as well as in, Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, 112-113).

\(^{448}\) Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy*, 87-88.


\(^{450}\) Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy*, 88.

\(^{451}\) Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, 112-113, pl. 34.

\(^{452}\) Kseniâ Igorevna Krivoseina, *Красота спасающая. Мать Мария (Скобцова): живопись, графика, вышивка*, summary in English (Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2004), 55. It is not definitively known who painted this icon, although Sergei Hackel notes that the iconostasis in the house was painted by Mother Maria herself. In her next premises at 77 rue de Lourmel, Hackel states that the chapel here was painted either by Mother Maria, Sr. Joanna, or through collaboration between the two of them. Both were accomplished iconographers. Sergei Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova 1891-1945* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 30-35.
assumed to have followed in due time, particularly since the home was outgrown by late 1934. Roughly contemporary with the establishment of this chapel, another church would find itself adorned with a magnificent rendering of the scene. In her “Autobiography” Sr. Joanna makes much of her desire at the time to transition from panel painting to wall painting. In the early 1930’s she was granted her wish, and tasked with painting the walls of the Church of St. John the Warrior in Meudon, France. While she painted the customary feasts of the Church year, as well as vivid scenes from the Apocalypse, she also took the time to include the Second Annunciation that Bulgakov had made the subject of his sermon a few years before. Bulgakov’s influence on her work is further evidenced, though not by any means confirmed, by the fact that she had in her possession, sometime between May and October of 1932, the enlarged Russian text of Kondakov’s study on icons with its critique of the subject.

Marian icons hold a special place in the life of the Church, and correspondingly they figure prominently in Bulgakov’s exposition of the veneration of the Mother of God. While his reflections on the Virgin in art seem to have begun in the Western tradition, in the end he finds much within his own Church to dwell upon. As the supremely divinized person, the Virgin holds the place of honor in Bulgakov’s vision of the creaturely Sophia. Though she stands beyond the world, as indicated by her cosmic icons, her presence continues to be felt within it through her wonder-working icons. Particularly important are the icons of her with Child, though Bulgakov draws attention to the theological importance of those that show her alone. In his reflections the Virgin also factors into several festal icons, though as has been shown some would dispute the artistic elements that he finds of value, as well as the corresponding interpretations that he gives.

---

453 It is entirely possible that the icon of The Annunciation of the Cross found at the villa de Saxe chapel was painted well before its construction, and hung on its walls only afterwards. However, the precarious state of existence that the émigrés found themselves in, the rarity of the subject, and the attention drawn to it by Bulgakov, all strongly suggest the possibility of it having been painted in Paris for the chapel.


455 A minute image of this scene can be found on the website, www.bfrz.ru.

456 On her request and acquisition of this text see the following letters: Joanna Reitlinger, Paris, to D. A. Rosóvskii, 28 March 1932, translated from the Russian and cited in Kotkavaara, Progeny of the Icon, Appendix II:7; Joanna Reitlinger, to D. A. Rosóvskii, 26 October 1932 (received), translated from the Russian and cited in Kotkavaara, Progeny of the Icon, Appendix II:8.
Bulgakov’s reading of the tradition, however, makes sense when understood within his overarching theological vision. Lastly, the true nature of his liturgical method shines forth as he attempts to make sense of the collision of two emotionally different feasts. By peering into the tradition and the lived experience of the Church, Bulgakov communicates the relevance of Marian iconography and the presence of the Mother of God to believers.

8 The Last Judgment

Once a year the Orthodox Church celebrates the Sunday of the Last Judgment as it begins to move into the penitential season of Lent. This constant reminder of the final judgment of one’s soul helps to keep the end in sight, but also in perspective. Verbally, the day necessitates a yearly sermon, while visually the Church contemplates the icon of the day, one that subjects the whole of creation to God’s universal judgment. Although it is a day admittedly bleak in tone, the artistic tradition has generally approached the theme with great imagination. As a general observation, Eastern depictions are somewhat more restrained than their Western Medieval counterparts, though they too have their share of fanciful elements. Some of the most famous examples in Russian iconography come from the Novgorodian school, one that Bulgakov attaches particular status to as the point of “highest development” in ancient iconography. If The Last Judgment encapsulates the whole of history before finally transcending it, so too does Bulgakov’s interpretation of it. In regards to his dogmatic-symbolic interpretations of the Church’s iconography, the Last Judgment binds together his different reflections. In addition, he offers a pastoral interpretation of it in one of his sermons on this most dreadful of Sundays.

The two iconographic elements that Bulgakov focuses on in his discussion of the icon are the Deisis and the soul awaiting judgment. Regarding the Deisis, this particular placement of the composition reveals the fully transfigured meaning of the arrangement. The two sophianic members of humanity, the Mother of God and the Forerunner, who have already been glorified, stand near Christ. Together they may be crowned or winged, either attribute attesting to their glorified ontological state. In place of the horizontal layout that one would find on an iconostasis,

457 Bulgakov, The Orthodox Church, 167. Trubetskoï too uses Novgorodian examples in his essays, highlighting the height of this region’s artistic achievements. Trubetskoï, Icons, 61-64.
in this icon they are intentionally placed above the non-glorified members of humanity. As has been noted, the Virgin stands on the right in the first place of honor.\(^{458}\) On Christ’s left is the Forerunner who stands at the head of both the angelic and human orders of creation.\(^{459}\) It has already been stated that Bulgakov sees this as an indication that John takes the place of Lucifer at the head of the angels, and the icon of *The Last Judgment* highlights this reality by placing Satan in the bottom corner, at furthest remove from the throne, being consumed in a lake of fire.

In the *Deisis of The Last Judgment*, the earthly prayers of Mary and John are revealed in an even greater capacity. It is only the iconographic witness, according to Bulgakov, that alerts humanity to their post-glorified intercessory ministries.\(^{460}\) As in the earthly *Deisis*, however, he is quick to differentiate the unique roles of each. He specifically describes the Mother of God’s role as one of assisting souls “along the path which she herself traveled at her falling asleep.”\(^{461}\) Furthermore, like Christ and unlike the Baptist, she stands beyond the created orders in the Christ-like relationship of a head to its body.\(^{462}\) In Bulgakov’s reading of the Incarnation, he describes Christ as possessing different ministries at different times. In this icon, he exercises his ministry as one who must pass sentence as “king” upon humanity.\(^{463}\) The cry for mercy that he is no longer able to utter is thereby taken up by the Mother of God, whom Bulgakov states is able to champion the humanness of Christ in a time when his Divinity predominates. This is aided by her status as “pneumatophore,” and in this way the Holy Spirit too is hypostatically present at the Last Judgment.\(^{464}\) These special roles aside, the Virgin and the Forerunner continue to be mystically united in their prayer before the throne.

\(^{458}\) Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God*, 121.


\(^{460}\) Ibid., 410; Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 112.

\(^{461}\) Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God*, 121.


\(^{463}\) Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 112.

\(^{464}\) Ibid., 113.
In a short homily on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, Bulgakov draws out an additional aspect found in the icon. After discussing the Gospel text connected with this feast, the “Little Apocalypse” of Matthew 24 with its parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats, he goes on to identify all of humanity as the “poor soul that is being judged.” This figure is usually placed in the center of the composition, amidst the scales of justice and awaits this event “with trepidation.” The soul waits “to be sentenced… not knowing [itself] as it were – this living possibility of heaven and hell, with all the transitions between them.” The reason for this uncertainty is due to the fact that all individuals are a shade of gray, a mixture of good and evil. Perhaps drawing upon the iconographic representation, perhaps merely seeing it as representative of the cosmic reality, he later names the individual as naked in this moment, as nakedness is the state of being without a wedding garment, understood as the distance between image and likeness. This is what hangs in the balances standing nearby. Pastorally, Bulgakov states that no one knows what the outcome of this judgment will be, and he interprets the parable as one that exhorts humanity to be spiritually watchful. Seeing the naked figure in the middle of the icon, his closing words take on extra meaning:

Thus, as long as the Lord gives us time for repentance in this our life, let His words about the Last Judgment, words terrifying for the human consciousness, be not words of terrorization but a meek summons to repentance and love. We are not given to know God's eternal judgment upon us, but our will has power over that which serves as the foundation for God's sentence. Thus, let our hearts hear that commandment upon which the law and prophets depend: Love thy Lord and thy neighbor as thyself. But as long as our hearts do not contain this love, terrifying for us will be the image of Christ's Last Judgment, and the One who is meek and humble in heart, the One who took upon Himself the torments of the cross out of love for man, this One will appear to us as a dread and pitiless Judge.

---

465 Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy*, 64. This figure forms the nucleus of Trubetskoï’s reflections as well. Trubetskoï, *Icons*, 61–64.


470 Ibid., 68.
As has been shown, the icon of *The Last Judgment*, a complex image that deals with an extra-Scriptural teaching and a domain that falls beyond established dogma, is used by Bulgakov as a source for further theological reflection. He finds in it the two pinnacles of humanity, as well as the universal human condition before the judgment of Christ. In this icon, he is able to link together many of the different interpretations that he makes regarding other icons. The icon of the Last Judgment provides a near solitary voice on a topic that the rest of Church tradition treats mostly with silence. As is his way, Bulgakov uses these starting points as “seeds” on which the theologian is free to constructively build his or her thought.\(^{471}\) In his sermon, this can be seen as well, with the object being the edification of the congregation in the face of an event that is to be met with both joy and fear.

Chapter 5
Conclusion

Bulgakov’s thoughts on the iconography of the Eastern Church are diverse and manifold, yet each aspect relates to the others to form a comprehensive understanding of the icon. Unlike some thinkers who create grand systems and promptly forget them when transitioning from a theoretical vision to a practical application of said vision, Bulgakov’s theory and practice are tightly integrated. This is particularly important since he is one of the few thinkers who has situated a theology of the icon within a larger dogmatic project. His writings appeared at a pivotal time for the icon, occurring in an era when the icon had only just been “rediscovered.” In a sea of art-historical surveys, Bulgakov’s work serves as a kind of culmination of more aesthetically-minded studies, surpassing Trubetskoï’s and Florensky’s works in terms of comprehensiveness and clarity. However, while *The Icon and Its Veneration* is widely recognized as the initial major work on the theology of the icon, due to the theological shift away from sophiology that occurred in the mid-twentieth century it has perhaps not been as readily received as those that have followed it. Indeed, whereas Bulgakov’s critics have long been accessible in English, it is only recently that English readers have gained access to his body of work in English translation and thus been able to evaluate the criticisms against his own words.

In its more theoretical and dogmatic movement, Bulgakov’s thoughts on the icon encompass a wide range of theological and historical reflection. After a brief historical summary, our investigation began with a discussion of his sophiological conception of reality. Without this Rosetta Stone justice cannot be done to his thoughts on the subject, since it is the lens through which he views the whole of reality. Within this paradigm, Beauty possesses an objective foundation, and his understanding of this is aided by the distinction between image and proto-image that he draws. These elements come together to shape a view of art and creativity that were largely abandoned in the twentieth century, one that attributes to the artistic act certain goals and functions. Whereas Romantic thought stressed the theurgic qualities of art, Bulgakov emphasizes the sophiurgic understanding of art in a way that takes into account many of the criticisms that would be raised against Romanticism. In a sense, Bulgakov accomplishes in
regards to art what some scholars have deemed to be the over-arching goal of his sophiological project: active engagement with the modern world.472

Having established the validity of art, we then moved on to a discussion of Bulgakov’s understanding of the icon. This involved an analysis of the three stages of the patristic witness, as Bulgakov attempts to understand each phase of this great debate. Interestingly, he is more sympathetic to the efforts of the Iconoclasts, even while affirming the decisions reached by the Iconophiles. He argues that neither side truly understood the icon, and he uses this state of affairs as license to begin his own sophiological investigations, which culminate in the doctrine of the one image of Christ. From this position, it was possible to begin discussing the various practical aspects of iconography.

It was found that word and image are the necessary elements of the icon, and that they find their fulfillment in the rite of the sanctification of icons. This blessing marks the beginning of the life of an icon in both the Church and the lives of believers, as it goes about transmitting the presence of the one depicted. Generally, the icons in a church are arranged in a systematic order, and our discussion attempted to mirror this event. It began with a brief analysis of representations of the Divine realm, namely, the Divine Persons. From here the patterning became more specific, taking the shape of the central section of an iconostasis. It began with a general discussion of the Deisis and the different interpretations that are common to the persons that make up this composition, before moving on to an examination of interpretations unique to the Forerunner and the Mother of God. Lastly, we concluded with an analysis of a different setting in which the Deisis occurs, that of The Last Judgment.

Our initial goal was to show the inner coherence between Bulgakov’s more theoretical understanding of the icon and his practical implementation of this theory in his dogmatic works. This has been accomplished due to the connecting idea of the icon as a point of revelation. The spiritual vision of the iconographer is capable of transmitting new revelations to theology, and these in turn become points of reflection, shaping further theological inquiry. This is clearly

evidenced in some of Bulgakov’s interpretations, such as those regarding images of God the Father, *The Annunciation of the Cross*, and *The Last Judgment*. In turn, icons witness to the unity of the one image of Christ, and lead us back into reflection on the meaning and theoretical underpinning of the icon. Though he disagrees with some aspects of early Iconophile theology, Bulgakov still bases his own understanding on the Incarnation of Christ. This is, after all, the bedrock of Christian faith and it remains so even in a sophiological understanding of creation.
1 Primary Bibliography


2 Secondary Bibliography


Nichols, Aidan. “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergii Bulgakov on Holy Images.” In Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity: Selected Papers of the


