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Introduction

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One of the authors of this issue comes to the conclusion that Sergej Bulgakov “is like an awakening giant,” a “secret whetstone of modern Orthodox theology.”¹ According to Fëdor Stepun in 1914, Bulgakov’s contribution to the Russian history of ideas would be more important than those of his contemporaries. Indeed, a deeper interest in Bulgakov seems to be wakening at present even as the general interest in “Russian religious philosophy” seems to be fading away. The renewed interest indicates the direction of Bulgakov’s reception during the last decade of research, at least in the anglo-american world, where most of Western “Bulgakovology” is taking place today. Rather than a major movement it is present as the persistent conviction of several scholars that if Christianity still wants to overcome confessional boundaries, it cannot avoid taking into account what this “most creative Russian orthodox thinker of the twentieth century”—in the words of one of his English translators—had to say. In short, the direction leads “out of a religious-philosophical ghetto into what [Bulgakov] no doubt hoped would be the main square of Orthodox theology.”²

There is a second generation of Bulgakov scholars inspired by the key figures of Rowan Williams and Paul Valliere who have promoted Bulgakov’s thought as an “engagement of Orthodox theology with the modern world.” Since William’s publication of the second Bulgakov anthology in 1999³ the translation of Bulgakov’s

¹ See Gallaher, Brandon: Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov’ëvan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergij Bulgakov. *SEET* 64, 3–4, 2012.

² Thomas Allan Smith in his introduction to Bulgakov’s *The Burning Bush*, W. M. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: 2009, p. xxiv.

³ *Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh 1999), the first *Bulgakov Anthology* (London 1976) was edited by James Pain.

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works has brought a new work of Bulgakov to the English speaking public almost every year: Two of the important pre-revolutionary works—*Philosophy of Economy* (1912) and the *Unfading Light* (1917)⁴—and both theological trilogies of the 1920s and 1930s, translated by Boris Jakim and Thomas Allan Smith, as well as other important essays from Bulgakov’s work are now available in English,⁵ and with these translations the number of dissertations concerning Sergej Bulgakov has risen significantly. Many of the younger scholars have begun to treat Bulgakov as an orthodox theologian in a discussion only incidentally related to Russia, but concerned rather with actual questions in orthodox theology. However, in continental Europe, and especially in Russia, where the study of Bulgakov in the last decade has finally ceased to be a taboo, at least on the academic level, the research still places greater emphasis on context and Bulgakov’s place within Russian history of ideas and concepts, an approach which is crucial if we are to understand the poetic and impressionistic vocabulary of this thinker. Notwithstanding these differences, all recent studies are shifting from broad overall assessments of Bulgakov’s work to explorations of specific themes in Bulgakov’s thinking. The main critical tasks are still to “save Bulgakov from pantheism” and human freedom from “sophic determinism,” but especially for theologians there seem to be good reasons to try to do so, mostly because the problems of modernity with which Bulgakov was engaged are still the same and his speculative attempts to tackle them still seem to be inspiring.

In the first thematic part of this issue, we are pleased to present five papers which according to the legend of the elephant and the blind men approach the “elephant” from very different angles. We have tried to arrange the papers in order to create a storyline beginning with the roots of Bulgakov’s intellectual journey and passing to his reception in current theological debates.

Nel Grillaert introduces us to the origins of the practice of prayer in Russian *hesychasm* and the *imjaslavie* (“glorifiers of the name”) debate in Russian orthodoxy, which are crucial for an understanding of Russian intellectual history at the beginning of the twentieth century. The military solution of the *imjaslavie* debate on Mount Athos in 1912 gave a dramatic turn to this symptom of an increasing split between official orthodox theology and “the heartbeat of the people’s religion” closely linked to the spiritual tradition of the monastery of *Optina Pustyn’*. The monastery had a special appeal to many Russian intellectuals, and Dostoevskij’s interpretation in the chapter titled “The Russian monk” in *The Brothers Karamazov* is very familiar. The reception of the spiritual pantheism of Dostoevskij’s figure *starec* Zosima cannot be underestimated, especially with regard to Bulgakov. As Grillaert shows, “the nineteenth-century hesychastic renaissance provided the breeding ground for a dramatic theological controversy in the beginning of the twentieth century”—and this should not only be related to the *imjaslavie* debate, but also to many later theological controversies in Russian orthodoxy, including the never ending charges directed against Bulgakov’s theology.

⁴ The former translated by Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven 2000), the latter by Thomas Allen Smith (Grand Rapids 2012).

⁵ Most were translated into French in the 1980s by Constantin Andronikof; a major German translation project is about to start with the publication of *Philosophie der Wirtschaft* in 2013. For these and other translations see the website of the Sergij Bulgakov Research Center at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland: <http://fns.unifr.ch/sergij-bulgakov/de/work/translation>.

Many Russian intellectuals attracted by the “orthodoxy of the heart” and disgusted by the official “theology of reason” tried to overcome this gap, gathering in circles like the “Circle of the Seekers of Christian Enlightenment.” Among them, Sergej Bulgakov and Nikolaj Berdjajev were quite prominent. The intellectual history of their relationship is the subject of *Regula Zwahlen’s* contribution which explores and compares their common concern for human dignity and social justice, their intertwined intellectual development and their different Christian concepts of personality. These different concepts face serious problems within Christian anthropology, and it is the author’s claim that Bulgakov’s system provides a better basis for further theological reflection in this area than Berdjajev’s, not least of all thanks to Bulgakov’s valuation of the bodily side of human nature and his search for a formula to overcome the gap between spirit and nature.

In this regard to “save Bulgakov from pantheism” is crucial if theologians are to take him seriously. This is the aim of *Brandon Gallaher’s* highly systematic presentation of Bulgakov’s antinomism as a reaction to Vladimir Solov’ev’s form of rationalism, monism, and determinism. Convincingly tracking four antinomies in Bulgakov’s “sophic cosmos,” Gallaher is able to highlight the serious problems of sophiology and at the same time to suggest solutions found in Bulgakov’s own thinking, in particular accepting the “risk of faith” in order “to hold heaven and earth together in a unity in difference.”

David Dunn’s paper also tries to “save Bulgakov,” namely from being identified mistakenly in academic theology with a recent current called “Radical Orthodoxy” headed by the British theologian John Milbank. Radical Orthodoxy is a critique of modern secularism on the one hand and Kantian accounts of metaphysics on the other. It attempts to return to or revive traditional doctrine and theology as the “queen of science.” Even if Milbank and Bulgakov do share some points of view, Dunn shows that there is a deep difference between them concerning the role each assigns to the church in secular culture. Bulgakov does not share Milbank’s confidence in the capacities of the institutional/visible church to transform society for the better. It is enough to recall the *imjaslavie* debate to understand why. Dunn demonstrates this by means of a luminous juxtaposition of Milbank’s and Bulgakov’s reception of St. Augustine. According to him, Bulgakov mistakenly accused Augustine of identifying the visible church with the kingdom of God. In Bulgakov’s opinion, the dominant situation of the Orthodox Church became a historic obstacle for its free development, and its real task would be to interact constructively with and permeate human culture “by the postulates of Christian love,” and not by means of domination.

Developing a similar line of interpretation *Josephien van Kessel* shows that Bulgakov’s work cannot be subsumed under the concept of ‘political theology’, but that we are in need of another terminology in order to situate his work. She argues that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben may provide a new paradigm that fits with Bulgakov’s intentions: Bulgakov’s sophiology does not concentrate on the relation of religion and politics, but on an “economic theological engagement in the tradition of *oikonomia* theology that tried to understand the world in its relation to and as part of divine *oikonomia*.” Furthermore, van Kessel argues that Bulgakov’s concern is not mainly about modernity, but about “the world as such” and the

“divine-human history” realized in this world by means of economy in the broadest sense. Bulgakov was convinced that Orthodoxy must and is able to provide a kind of “inner-wordly ethics” within a ever more secular context.

If Agamben is right that the theological imprints on the European history of ideas are deeper and longer lasting than we think, and this not only with regard to politics but the economy as well,⁶ then the study of Bulgakov will not be confined to some “theological ghetto” but will assist theology to “interact cooperatively” with other fields of study in the task of understanding and developing human culture.

Coming back to the ‘elephant metaphor’, the reader will find that there is more agreement among the authors as to what that elephant looks like than might be expected, a fact that is the sign of the fruitful exchanges among the authors in the course of preparing these materials. Hopefully this issue will awake ever more interest in this “awakening giant” of Orthodox theology, as many questions for further research still remain.

⁶ “When we undertake an archaeological research it is necessary to take into account that the genealogy of a political concept or institution may be found in a field that is different from the one in which we initially assumed we would find it (for instance, it may be found in theology and not in political science).” “Two broadly speaking political paradigms [...] derive from Christian theology: political theology, which founds the transcendence of sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which replaces this transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia*, conceived as an immanent ordering-domestic and not political in a strict sense-of both divine and human life.” Giorgio Agamben (2011). *The Kingdom and the Glory: A Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Stanford University Press, translation by Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini, p. 1, 112.