Rowan Williams

Sergii Bulgakov, Socialism, and the Church

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In recent years, our world has been experiencing unprecedented challenges. On the one hand, the coronavirus pandemic, and on the other the ever-worsening climate crisis and, today, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, compose a gloomy scenario. Situations that just a few decades or years ago would have seemed like science fiction (social distancing, lockdown and restriction of the ritual expression of ecclesiastical communities around the globe, the rise of populism at the political and ecclesiastical level, fake news and hatred rhetoric, intensity of social discrimination and degradation of human rights, but also distortion of the orthodox morality, blurring of the ecclesiastical conscience and break, already since 2018, of the unity of Orthodoxy), are phenomena that fully dominate the public sphere. The above developments cause on the one hand tectonic upheavals in the world and the daily life of the citizens, while on the other they question the very

future presence of Orthodoxy in Europe. Although the past prediction of the end of history (Francis Fukuyama) seemed to be unfulfilled at the moment, the marginal state of affairs that the globe faces today, combined with the peculiar version of the clash of civilizations (different from the one imagined by Samuel Huntington), being crystallized in the bipolarity between the unfree and authoritarian regimes on the one hand and liberal democracy on the other, they bring to the fore again the debate about the meaning of history, human responsibility for creation and the salvation of the world in its entirety.

Once again, Orthodoxy is at a critical crossroads, finding it difficult to rise to the occasion in front of these challenges, despite its rich spiritual tradition. Important theologians or official institutional representatives, from the traditional Orthodox countries, especially from Eastern Europe (e.g. Russia), make statements or take positions that express a fundamentalist understanding and interpretation of the glorious historical past but also of the present reality bringing to the surface dark expression that are inconsistent with the ecclesiastical

mode of existence. The rapid developments that are taking place, not exclusively, but par excellence in the historical body of Orthodoxy, namely in the so-called traditional orthodox countries (pandemic, climate change, Russian invasion of Ukraine, etc.), call for a fundamental reflection on the basic elements of the Orthodox or "Eastern" identity. Today the deep, critical study of the history of theology is considered as necessary as ever, aiming at the possible refinement of the theological criteria of theology and the deconstruction of historical constructions and inventions that obscure and distort the horizon in view of the coming Kingdom.

In this spirit, Volos Academy for Theological Studies, continuing the tradition of critical reflection on current theological issues, and taking into account the problems caused by Covid-19, launched since the academic year 2020-21 a series of online monthly lectures (between January and June of each year) addressed to the general public, with prominent speakers from all over the world (including Revs. Drs. Cyril Hovorun, Emmanuel Clapsis, Brandon Gallaher, John Chryssavgis, et al.), on a variety

of topics relevant for the contemporary world, with the overarching title "Time for Action." Selected papers presented in the context of these online lectures have started being published as books. This is the second publication in this new series, consisting of the text of the lecture "Sergii Bulgakov, Socialism, and the Church" by His Eminence Rowan Williams, Former Archbishop of Canterbury, presented online on June 1, 2022.

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Sergii Bulgakov's writings in the first dozen years of the twentieth century[1] sketch his journey from the Marxism of his student and postgraduate years towards Christian commitment and a growing and passionate interest in Christian philosophy and theology. One dimension of this, evident in these early essays, is his concern to bring his aspirations for a more open and participatory society into dialogue with the Christian tradition. His 'Christian Socialist' period was confined, strictly speaking, to his abortive involvement in national politics in the middle of the decade. His deeply disillusioning experience as a deputy in the Second Duma gave him a lasting aversion to the kind of revolutionary maximalism that ignored practical and achievable reform in the name of theoretical purity and absolutist demands[2]. But he continued to be deeply

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[1] Especially the articles contained in his two collections, *Ot marksizma k idealizmu* (*From Marxism to Idealism*), St Petersburg 1903, and *Dva grada* (*Two Cities*), Moscow 1911.

[2] He writes in his *Avtobiograficheski zametki* (*Autobiographical Fragments*), Paris, YMCA Press

engaged in the attempt to understand 'socialism' as a phenonemon that needed analysis in terms of its spiritual and imaginative presuppositions; and he never lost his concern to find ways of articulating a viable theological foundation for some kind of Christian political witness. Throughout his life in exile, he maintained his criticisms

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1946, pp. 80-82, about the disillusioning effect of his participation in the Duma; the experience is reflected in the magisterial essay on *'Geroizm i podvizhnichestvo'* ('Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle') contributed to the symposium *Vekhi: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* (*Landmarks: A Collection of Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia*), Moscow 1909 (there is an English translation of Bulgakov's piece, with introductory commentary, in Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark 1999, pp. 69-112). The autobiographical notes are translated into German in Sergij Bulgakov, *Aus meinen Leben: Autobiograpische Zeugnisse*, ed. Barbara Hallensleben and Regula M. Zwahlen, Münster, Aschendorf Verlag 2017, along with other significant fragments, including '*Funf Jahre (1917-1922) – Agonie*' (pp. 73-93), which also has some bitter comments on the Russian politics of the first decade of the century.

of simple political reaction, of nostalgia for an autocratic patriarchy; his brief flirtation with a mystical monarchism in the years of the First World War and the revolutionary era does not leave much of a mark in his later writing. But it would not be accurate to think of him as continuing to profess anything that he himself would have been happy to call 'Christian Socialism'. It is clear that 'socialism' for him had come to designate not so much a political programme as an 'ideal type' of human self-understanding, always on the verge of becoming antithetical to the Church to the degree that it refused to ground itself in the reality of the Church – a point Bulgakov was already making in his 'Christian Socialist' days[3]. This essay will look in detail at his most extended later discussion of socialism, the essay on 'The Soul of Socialism' (*Dusha sotsializma*) published in the émigré periodical *Novyi grad* in two parts (1932-3)[4], and

[3] See, for example, *Dva grada*, p. 307

[4] English translation in Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, pp. 237-267. Bulgakov had published a sort of summary 'position paper' on 'Christianity and Socialism' in 1917 (*Khristianstvo i Sozializm*, Moscow, Educational Commission of the

will attempt to clarify how he sees the 'socialist' consciousness relating to ecclesial reality.

Provisional State Assembly), which opened up some of the themes of his later discussions. This latter is reprinted in S. N. Bulgakov, *Khristianskii sotsializm* (*Christian Socialism*), edited and introduced by V. N. Akulinina, Novosibirsk, 'Nauka', 1991, pp. 205-233.