

# Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944): A study in the Eastern Orthodox hermeneutical perspective

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## Abstract

*This study focuses on the hermeneutical theory of the Russian Orthodox theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944). It singles out the basic principles of that theory for discussion. The following principles are considered: the nature of the Bible; the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation; tradition as a hermeneutical principle; ecclesiastical reading; the actualisation of Scripture in personal and corporate life, and the scope and limitations of scientific-critical inquiry. An understanding of these fundamental tenets of Bulgakov's hermeneutics is vital to a proper appreciation of Eastern Orthodoxy's hermeneutical approach to the Bible.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Russian Orthodox theologian Father Sergius Bulgakov is mainly known for his work on such issues as: (1) creating a Christian social philosophy, that is, articulating the Orthodox approach to alleviating adverse social and economic conditions within the Russian political and social structure; (2) religion and culture; (3) the nature and development of the Russian intelligentsia, a social class within Russian society consisting of highly-educated, cultured, and politically active intellectuals; (4) problems connected with how the church is to work out its beliefs; (5) the problem of art, especially when

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viewed as an activity which involves a distinctive way of looking at the world; (6) the response to historicism, that is, the recognition that the past is radically different from the present and that it can be grasped only in terms of its own context, the recognition of the philosophical bias to regard all knowledge and experience as subject to historical change, et cetera.

Bulgakov's main theological activity flourished after his expulsion from Russia in 1923, especially during the period in which he served as director at the Russian Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris (1925-44). His most noted and criticized idea is the concept of "Holy Sophia" – a theological construct treating God's revelation in the world (see Losskii 1936; Zander 1948; Elena 1986; for his bibliography see Nautov 1984). Bulgakov's contribution to hermeneutical theory, however, is not well recognized in theological literature. One need only read, for example, well-known Orthodox thinker Alexander Men' (1987:281) to catch a typical sampling of how true this is. Within the entire scope of his writings Men' remarks but briefly about Bulgakov's hermeneutical theory, and even at that he fallaciously condenses it to little more than a system of biblical symbolism. It is against this background, then, that this study attempts to identify and explore the main issues critical to a proper understanding of the fundamentals comprising Bulgakov's hermeneutical theory.

## **2. BULGAKOV'S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES**

Father Bulgakov's most distinctive contribution to Orthodox hermeneutics lies within a combination and blend of several closely interrelated strands. At first glance no one of these elements seems in and of itself to constitute a major tenet within his hermeneutics, but a closer examination shows that in fact each of them has profound implications for the Orthodox approach to biblical interpretation. Thus it is necessary both to identify these major components that comprise Bulgakov's hermeneutical construction and to seek to understand how they work together to create the powerful hermeneutic that construction represents.

## **2.1 The inspired nature of the Bible**

Bulgakov's biblical hermeneutical theory places the inspired nature of the Bible *at the very heart* of his theoretical construction. This is, perhaps, one of the principles that make Bulgakov's hermeneutical approach distinct from other Russian Orthodox theologians, or at least those who give to the Bible a somewhat less emphasis than being a central hermeneutical principle. In his book *The Orthodox Church*, Bulgakov (1988:18), in the context of weighing the importance of scripture against that of church tradition as the prime source of faith, writes:

... the Word of God is above all other sources of faith, especially of all tradition in all its forms. Tradition adapts itself to the different needs of different epochs; Holy Scripture, that is the voice of God addressed to man, has absolute value, though revealed under a conditioned historical form... Holy Scripture and tradition are not equal in value. First place belongs to the Word of God; the criterion of the truth of Scripture is not tradition (although tradition testifies to Scripture) but on the contrary, tradition is recognized when founded on Scripture. Tradition cannot be in disagreement with Scripture.

Bulgakov defines the Bible as the collection of books which make-up the Old and New Testaments, books that were originally written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and which may therefore be truly said to be God-breathed. Since the Bible has its origin in God, the church is to accept it as truly the word of God, communicated to its writers by his Spirit. For Bulgakov, this inspiration represents a synthesis of both human and divine elements; that is, human writers with human faculties were divinely illuminated as they partook of the divine Sophia – God's revelation in the world. These writers, moreover, were not only inspired as such by the Spirit of God, but in their task of writing Holy Scripture they also received "a direct acceptance of God's power – some kind of transubstantiation of their human nature" which enabled them to achieve what otherwise they could never have hoped to do – namely, to record what is actually the word of God

(Bulgakov 1994:324). It is this high view of the origin of Scripture, then, that prompts Bulgakov to place its God-inspired nature as his foremost hermeneutical concern.

## 2.2 The role of the Holy Spirit in understanding Scripture

As a theologian, Bulgakov does not prefer a pneumatological orientation to a christological emphasis. Nevertheless, in his ecclesiology, he most assuredly calls for attention to the Holy Spirit. He declares that “the Church is the Holy Spirit living in mankind” (1965:31). This type of formulation is remarkable for an Orthodox theologian. The well-known theologian Fr G Florovsky, for example, reflects the more commonly expressed understanding when he states that “the Church, as a whole, has her *personal centre* only in Christ; she is not an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, nor is she merely a Spirit-[centred] community, but is precisely the Body of Christ, the incarnate Lord” (1972:67). Of course, Bulgakov does not mean to suggest by the statement quoted at the beginning of this paragraph that the Church is by definition an incarnation of the Holy Spirit and that is all; but he does argue that the Church represents the immediate union of the Body of Christ both with Christ *and with the Holy Spirit*. The pneumatology here is no incidental aside, for the activity of the Holy Spirit, for Bulgakov, is a significant key to hermeneutical interpretation. To the exegete, the Holy Spirit is, *par excellence*, the supreme helper.

In his approach to understanding the Bible, Bulgakov stresses that the Bible is first and foremost a human book that bears the marks of its human authors and their times. Although the Holy Spirit directly enlightened these biblical authors, they nonetheless arranged and expressed the written message in correspondence with their own languages, individual personalities, and historical contexts. For Bulgakov, this human-historical dimension to the Bible is “*an obstacle* to its understanding; yet [its message does become] seen and understood through the work of the Spirit of God dwelling in the church.” (Bulgakov 1965:63, italics added). Thus, to understand the Bible, obscured as it is by its human dimensions, a special enlightenment is needed. Of course, in emphasizing here the human and historical constrictions upon the Scriptures, it should be pointed out that Bulgakov never goes so far as to suggest that the historical and grammatical ambiguities of the Bible or the reconstruction of its text can or should ever

be resolved by a simple appeal to the Spirit of God. Such simplicity would only leave the biblical texts open to all manner of abuse. Nevertheless, a direct illumination of the Spirit is vital even in the process of investigating the text at mere surface level (i.e., the historical-narrative level), “corrupted” and “pre-conditioned” as it is by the human channels involved in its writing. Bulgakov perhaps assumes further that any activity of the exegete is in fact in need of the help of the Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit is always involved in the interpretative process, notwithstanding that interpretation is also very much an act of human creativity.

According to Bulgakov, biblical writers not only wrote from their own human knowledge and abilities, conditioned as they were by their times and places, but also wrote under the direct influence of God-given inspiration. He argues that the biblical writers were given “a direct [infusion] of God’s power that enabled them to record the Word of God” (Bulgakov 1994:324). Because the Holy Spirit is in this way involved in its inscription, Scripture is thus of “a religious-symbolical nature, that is it has a religious reality” (Bulgakov 1994:85) that transcends its immediate socio-historical context. It is this reality which constitutes the divine nature of the Bible. The human word is transformed by God’s Spirit: “*the power of God, immersed in these [i.e. biblical] books, makes them Sacred*” (Bulgakov 1994:324; Bulgakov’s italics). This power of God, which inspired the writers of Sacred Scripture, is – all importantly – also to the reader and interpreter of Scripture “a ceaseless source of illumination” that “makes evident the *mystery of the word.*” (Bulgakov 1994:324; Bulgakov’s italics). The idea of an illumination of the inner person by the Spirit of God opens new possibilities for the interpreter in the discernment and understanding of the divine mystery hidden away in the Holy Word. To word it in Bulgakov’s terminology, the presence of this theurgy – defined as the *Act of God* within the Church – enables the spiritually minded to understand Scripture both at the level of the “letter” (the *historia*, or narrative meaning) and at the level of “mystery” or “spirit” (the *theoria*, or spiritual meaning).

Bulgakov’s argument here becomes even more understandable when considered in the light of both his anthropology and the just mentioned concept of theurgy. Drawing upon Plato’s dualistic conception of the dichotomy between idea and matter, Bulgakov offers the metaphysical hypothesis of a mediating agency – the soul, which transmits

divine power from God to man. Knowing God and acting in accordance with his will is possible, says Bulgakov, because of what he refers to as the ‘embodiment’ of spiritual energies, that is the interplay between the creative energies within man [*anthourgy* from Gr. ἀνθρώπου ἔργον) and the notion of theurgy – again, the *Act of God* in man (Θεοῦ ἔργον). It is the soul that brings these two realities together and allows for the creative union between God and man. Bulgakov emphasizes that the creative faculty within man represents a direct reflection of God’s nature. This anthropological notion derives from the dualistic conception of man as both body and soul, a conception that leads quite naturally to the idea that in the highest powers of the human spirit there lies the possibility of direct communion with the very Spirit of God himself. This, in turn, is what accounts for what seems to be the innate consciousness of God instilled within the heart of every human being. That consciousness arises out of the living image of the Infinite Being that resides within each member of the race.

By virtue of this creative agency within man, created as it is after the likeness of God, Bulgakov goes on to raise the critical question of God’s direct *participation-and-guidance* in the creative activities of man, especially in those of an aesthetic and religious nature. This direct involvement of God, for Bulgakov, is called theurgy. “Theurgy is the act of God... [in] the pouring [out] of His grace upon man.... In its essence, [it] is linked with the incarnation [of Christ]... it is, [in fact, the] continual incarnation of Christ within human kind.” (Bulgakov 1994: 320). This concept of theurgy is historically tied to the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which to Bulgakov, is an authentic account of the coming of theurgy – a divine power intended for the enabling of all operative and creative tasks. In addition, “*theurgy is [also the] divine ground to all sofīurgy* [from Gr. ἔργον ἐκ Σοφίας]” (Bulgakov 1994:320) – defined by his doctrine of sophia as “the [first] principle of the universe or the totality of divine creative energies” (1918:73). Bulgakov, then, links the concept of theurgy to epistemology in general and from there to the hermeneutical issue of biblical interpretation; for the key to the proper understanding of the Holy Bible is the “*illuminated eye*”, that is, the illuminated understanding in one who accepts that the ability to comprehend its true message is but a gift from a *theurgic* power. “All human creative efforts...,” argues Bulgakov, “[are but] inspired by the Holy Ghost” (Bulgakov 1934:16).

### **2.3 Tradition as a hermeneutical principle**

In assessing Bulgakov's hermeneutics, it would be quite inaccurate to see the nature of the Bible as the sole primary principle of interpretation. Although this concept lies foremost at the heart of Bulgakov's theoretical construction, it is still conjoint with another all important principle, namely, the authority of Church tradition as the key for understanding the Bible.

By the way of introduction here, it is worth noting that Bulgakov subscribes to an understanding of inspiration as an inner quality of the biblical books (*efficacitas*), a quality absolutely essential for their canonization (cf Bulgakov 1965:50). In his view, this inner quality, however, is of such significance and weight that any specific reader of the Bible is unable to understand and judge its full worth. Only the church as a whole possesses that largeness of capacity to fathom it and thus fix the canon of Holy Writ and pass on to posterity the right and proper understanding of it. As Bulgakov (1965:51) himself words it, "the Bible is given by the church through tradition." Since it was the church which selected the inspired writings and which initially made the distinction between the canonical books and the deuterocanonical, the Bible has become the possession of only the church *as a whole* as well. Consequently, the interpretation of the Bible is also the work of the church at large rather than of any individual interpreter or select group of exegetes. In this context Bulgakov recognizes the interdependence of scripture and tradition and from this interdependence constructs a rather involved explanation as to how it works. First, tradition is based on the Bible. It is the Bible that serves as the controlling factor in governing the content of tradition. For Bulgakov (1965:63), "It is possible to say that in sacred tradition cannot exist anything that directly contradicts sacred scripture." Second, although tradition may not contradict scripture, it is nonetheless not limited to it, for in tradition the seeds sown in scripture are brought to full maturity. "If [scripture] is the seed, than tradition is the harvest, growing on the field of human history" (1965:63). The Bible communicates the basic teachings of Christianity, but it is left to tradition to work out their implications and to extend their meaning into every area of human existence. In so doing, tradition creates a more full and complete picture as to what sacred text really means.

Bearing this in mind, one can more clearly understand Bulgakov's (1965:53) statement that "in tradition is embodied an 'epistemology' of the word of God, its formal authority." It is important, however, to see just exactly what kind of understanding Bulgakov brings to his argument here concerning the place of tradition in hermeneutical interpretation. As he speaks about tradition as the means of understanding the Bible, he distinguishes between *a direct understanding* of the Bible [Ru.: *neposredstvennoe*] derived from firsthand study of scripture by itself, and *a secondary understanding* which is constructed in the case where "the truth and the words of God are perceived not directly from the Bible, but from liturgical texts, images, sermons, etc" (1965:53). Tradition, too, of course, may serve significantly in helping form a common understanding of the word of God, but Bulgakov does not limit tradition to just this type of understanding. It seems that church tradition has its greatest impact in communicating *a direct understanding* of both what scripture meant to its writers and original readers and what scripture has come to mean in ecclesiastic-theological terms.

Bulgakov's formulation of tradition here again helps one to see more clearly how best to approach his hermeneutics in general. Church tradition, for him, is a common form of preserving the teaching of the church. "It is a living memory of the church, which contains true teaching as it has been unfolding in her history" (1965:47). The authority of this tradition is based on the fact that it is unified, continual and living (1967:47). In this sense, it is analogous to the church itself. Like the church, it is a vibrant and living entity shedding forth the light of truth, while at the same time expressing its energies in many diverse ways over time. On the one hand, tradition is inexhaustible; on the other hand, it is fixed and limited. Since scripture is the repository of the whole church, so too tradition cannot merely represent the views of any one given individual or subgroup within the church. It is the very embodiment of the church's mind as collectively expressed. Thus Bulgakov, while arguing that Orthodox believers should never ignore the results of independent investigation of the Bible, cautions that they should always test these results in the light of holy tradition.

#### **2.4 Ecclesiastical reading**

Considering the church to be of divine origin and nature, Bulgakov (1965:53) stresses that ex-pounding about the divine in general, and about divine scripture in particular, is a



responsibility that belongs to the Church alone. In fact, the possibility of entering into true dialogue with the word of God, as Bulgakov sees it, is available only within the church, for such dialogue presupposes the individual as already belonging to the church through the confession of faith, baptism and partaking of the eucharistic sacrament. Further, Bulgakov (1965:52) also argues that the word of God may be fully understood in the Orthodox temple, where “the reading of the word of God is conjoined with a special prayer for ‘hearing’ it and for the opening of spiritual sight.” Since the full unveiling and understanding of the word of God occurs only within the church, it stands to reason that the Orthodox temple, together with the great body of church doctrine, is “the hermeneutic place” where scripture speaks most effectively. Everyone participating in Orthodox worship may thus discern the true meaning of scripture if he or she “receives it, as such, from the hands of the church, [hands] which speak through the sacred tradition” (1965:51). A direct mystical revelation may not be necessarily denied to the individual student of the Bible; yet, since Christ – the living Word – has primarily revealed himself to the church, and since he indwells the church through the Holy Spirit, the church has also become the primal context in which scripture is to be truly understood. Within Bulgakov’s theological framework, the individual Christian is not an autonomous entity. True, he or she may be distinctive and unique as an image bearer of God, and true it is that this individual may be thus entitled to his or her own private views and convictions, but as a member of the Orthodox Church one cannot hold to beliefs and biblical interpretations that contradict the teachings of the church.<sup>2</sup> Those teachings have been revealed to the church as a collective body, and to the church and its hallowed tradition has been entrusted their guardianship.

## **2.5 The actualisation of scripture in personal and corporate life**

Bulgakov’s hermeneutical theory presupposes a complex set of interrelationships that hold between corporate church tradition and individual mystical experience. These suppositions become all the more apparent in any assessment of his anthropological

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<sup>2</sup> “We make full use of our private understanding, illuminated by the Spirit. We make full use of biblical commentaries and of the findings of modern research. But we submit individual opinions, whether our own or those of the scholars, to the judgment of the Church”. (Ware 1993:765).

concept of the *wholeness of man* as what may be referred to as the existential hermeneutical principle. Here, analysis of the concept will serve to show once again that, for Bulgakov, interpretive autonomy for the exegete is excluded. The doctrine of the *wholeness of man* is a central tenet within Bulgakov's larger scheme of theology. Although it affirms the significance of the individual human being, more importantly it relates the individual to the larger context of the Church and nation, within which groupings the individual is viewed as but part of the whole. This idea postulates that only within the Church, and only in accordance with the Church's teachings, is the individual person able to realize the full potential of his or her humanity. Orthodox anthropology stresses this understanding of the totality of the human being in terms of its relationships to significant others, rather than in terms of the nature of the individual in isolation from its proper social and spiritual contexts. Although not completely denying the importance of individuality, Bulgakov (as does Orthodoxy in general) emphasizes the understanding of the individual human being in terms of the *whole* – of the whole body of Christians, clergy and laity together, who are empowered by the Spirit to act together in concert as one. This is what constitutes Orthodoxy's anthropological conception of man.

As noted previously, Bulgakov does speak about a personal encounter with the word of God and about individual understanding of its meaning. Orthodox readers of the Bible can approach the word of God for them and apply scripture directly to their own lives as it speaks to them. Yet, the concept of personal encounter with the word of God does not stand for a peculiarly individual understanding; but for an "ecclesiastic understanding," because "a personal meeting is possible only in a spiritual unity with the Church" (1965:52-53). As explained above, Bulgakov's thought is presupposed by the Orthodox ecclesiological concept of the Body of Christ and by its anthropology of the *wholeness of man*, an understanding that takes the individuality of the person and places it into the context of the entirety of the church, society, nation, and mankind. It should not be surprising then that Bulgakov should say that "to understand the word of God personally from within one's self is in itself a [most] contradictory idea... it means to isolate one's self from the whole of mankind, to place the self in a direct relationship with God, [the one] who teaches us to appeal to Him not as "*My Father*", but as "*Our Father*", not substituting any individual I for the solidarity of WE" (1965:52). In putting forward

this argument as a component of a more general concept involving the mutual relationship between church and tradition, Bulgakov powerfully demonstrates Orthodoxy's clear endorsement of an ecclesiastic mode of biblical interpretation. Such a consideration is highly relevant in establishing that in Bulgakov's hermeneutics the corporate element plays the critical role as interpretative agency.

## **2.6 The scope of scientific-critical inquiry**

The practice of naturally surrendering the critical methods employed in historical and literary scholarship to what has been traditionally accepted and believed in the church, a practice so often stressed by Russian Orthodox exegetes, is called into question by Bulgakov. He forcibly states that "The church [should neither] block the ways to all available approaches for studying the Bible, particularly the means by way of scientific criticism, ...[nor should it] pre-determine the conclusions of such criticism" (Bulgakov 1965:67; cf Bulgakov 1943:139-158). Bulgakov argues that from the standpoint of historical-critical exegesis, an analytical approach that applies a philological-historical investigation to the surface elements (i.e., to the historical-narrative level) of the Old and New Testaments, "there is no difference, nor should there be any, between a literary-historical writing and, [take] for example, the Gospel [i.e., the canonical Gospels]" (Bulgakov 1994:84). On the historical-narrative level the Bible is but another compilation of literary texts, this time a repository of ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman literature and thus, Bulgakov argues, open to the rigors of scientific study like any other such texts. Nevertheless, the Bible is also "the Book of books, the eternal Symbol, coming to light only to faith, prayer and reverence" (1994:85; cf 1965:50). As thus recognized by Bulgakov, this metaphysical dimension to the Bible becomes all decisive in its epistemological considerations. On the one hand, the twofold nature of the Bible, in Bulgakov's view, presupposes that although a certain level of comprehension may be gained from the Bible by "a man without faith", its true meaning is reserved for only the religiously devout. On the other hand, because the Bible differs from other books by virtue of its God-breathed inspiration, a distinct hermeneutical approach is needed to unlock its true sense. Rather than approach Scripture by *the method of unbelief* (as would be applicable to other literary works), Bulgakov advocates *the method of reverence*. This

approach, in his view, is absolutely imperative if the spiritual riches buried within the word of God are ever to be accessed and understood (1994:87; cf 1965:57).

Because the meaning of the Bible, for Bulgakov, is “endless and absolutely immeasurable in comparison with the depth of human books,” (Bulgakov 1994:85) two, perhaps three, levels of meaning may be postulated when it comes to the reading of Sacred Scripture: the *literal*, the level at which scientific investigation may be applied; the *allegorical*, the meaning of which is hidden, but which may still be discerned by human perception without the direct help of God; and the truly *hidden* or *mystical*, which is uncovered only because of a divine enlightenment bestowed upon the reader (Bulgakov 1994:85). Thus it is that the full riches of the sacred meaning of the Bible are ultimately accessible only to the faithful, those well schooled in spiritual experience (cf Bulgakov 1994:85; 1965:52-54). As a further check against scientific-critical investigation exceeding its proper limitations, Bulgakov duly affirms that ecclesiastical principles of interpretation already establish any exegesis as being *dogmatically pre-conditioned* (1965:59). An unquestioning assent to church dogma with its foremost emphasis upon a transcendent God supernaturally involved with human kind must be the quintessential criterion if the interpreter is to bring forward an unanimity between scientific investigation of the Bible and the faithfulness of the church to its tradition.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The proper understanding of Bulgakov’s hermeneutical theory is much diminished when any one of its guiding principles becomes singled out for special attention – or even neglect – relative to the others. The principles of his hermeneutical theory are both interdependent and complimentary to one another; and they may be summarized to some degree at least as follows: *First*, the text of Scripture is the expression of the thoughts of both its divine and its human authors, and interpreters must attempt to place themselves within the authors’ “horizons” (the authors here being both the Holy Spirit and the human agents behind the literary texts) in order to experience that creative interchange with the text that leads to understanding. *Second*, the true understanding of scripture is possible only within the confines of the church, because it is there that the Spirit of God resides and because that Spirit is the only one who grants spiritual understanding of the word.

*Third*, since the church and tradition are one, and since scripture cannot be separated from the church, the true understanding of scripture is therefore only possible within the Body of Christ (the church), and in accordance with tradition. *Fourth*, and lastly, because the communal body of the church is the “hermeneutical place” where the word of God is revealed, the church’s collective judgements surpass in weight the conclusions of the individual interpreter in the understanding of God’s revelation.

These hermeneutical principles, as enunciated by Bulgakov, are by no means an exhaustive picture of either his own or the Orthodox approach to an understanding of the Bible. Yet, it is these principles that lie at the heart of Orthodox hermeneutics, and because they form the foundation of that hermeneutics, must be clearly understood by anyone wishing to gain a full grasp on how the Eastern Orthodox Church approaches the study of the Bible.

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<sup>3</sup> Abbreviation (Ru.) will be used for the literature in Russian.

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