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The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation
by Sergii Bulgakov (review)

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number of Orthodox thinkers, Russell contends that Palamas develops his views in line with Basil of Caesarea's original essence-energies distinction and does not innovate.

Chapter 7 outlines the dispute between Palamas and his interlocutors regarding divine-human communion, the hesychastic vision of light, and the nature of divine grace. The concluding chapter, chapter 8, contemplates the future place of Palamas in theological discourse in light of recent trends in scholarship. Of particular concern in this chapter is to what extent compatibility can be established between Palamas and the Western intellectual tradition, especially Thomas Aquinas. Russell seems quite optimistic despite the lack of consensus amongst the authors he reviews. Russell is particularly sanguine in affirming rather unequivocally that Palamas and Aquinas are ultimately compatible when it comes to their respective doctrines of grace, which Russell affirms on the basis of a reading of Palamas's *Letter to Athanasios of Kyzikos*. While Russell appears to be on solid ground when he seeks to dispel the idea that Palamas and Aquinas are rigidly antinomic figures, some scholars have urged caution with respect to their compatibility on grace. Most recently, Alexis Torrance has disputed the reading of the *Letter* promoted by Russell and casts doubt on Palamite-Thomist agreement on the grace of deification (*Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology* [Oxford, 2020, 180]). In short, it would seem more work is needed before something resembling a consensus will emerge.

As a history of the reception of Gregory Palamas from Byzantium through the modern era and an overview of the theological questions at issue, Russell's work is a resounding success and of great benefit to specialists and non-specialists alike. Russell provides an analytical catalog of nearly all relevant scholarship on Palamas and an up-to-date roadmap of his thought, making his monograph comparable to Paul M. Blowers's relatively recent *tour de force*, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of*

the World (Oxford, 2016). However, to carry the comparison further, there is a theological depth present in Blowers's work that is lacking in Russell's. While Blowers leaves his own indelible mark on the interpretation of Maximus, Russell tends to view the disputes over Palamite theology through the lens of literature review and historical narrative, even when considering the texts of Palamas himself. In any case, if Russell is sometimes reticent to engage rigorously, he nonetheless deftly orients the reader toward the works that do.

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Sergii Bulgakov. *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*. Edited by Barbara Hallensleben and Regula M. Zwahlen, in collaboration with Dario Colomb. Translated by Mike Whitton, revised by Michael Miller. Münster, Germany: Aschendorff Verlag, 2019. 391 pp.

The publication of this English translation of Father Sergii Bulgakov's commentary on the Apocalypse of John is a fitting capstone to the publication of Boris Jakim's translation of Bulgakov's major theological trilogy (*The Lamb of God*, *The Comforter*, and *The Bride of the Lamb*). Indeed, as Lev Zander mentions in his introduction, Bulgakov commented on this book that it "has grown so much in importance as to be, if not the fourth volume of my trilogy, then, at least, its epilogue" (xviii). It is, however, very distinct from Bulgakov's other works in that it is written as a chapter-by-chapter commentary: a very rare undertaking for an Orthodox (dogmatic) theologian! The work is based on a seminar that Bulgakov gave on the Apocalypse at St Sergius Institute in Paris in 1941, and it was at the insistence of his students that Bulgakov prepared his lecture notes for publication.

The manuscript was completed before his death in 1944, but as he would typically finalize his words only during proof-reading, the final publication in 1948, edited by Zander, retains some of the manuscript's rough, note-like, and repetitive character, especially in the final chapters. This present volume also includes beautifully printed photographs of the wall paintings of scenes from the Apocalypse done by Saint Joanna (Reitlinger), a disciple of Father Sergii, for the Chapel of Saint Basil the Great in London, set alongside verses from the Apocalypse, and accompanied by an essay, by Bronislava Popova, on Bulgakov, Sr. Joanna, and the paintings.

While laid out as a commentary, the subheading of the work makes clear that this is not going to be the kind of commentary produced by Biblical scholars. Bulgakov had read and occasionally cites the commentaries of T. Zahn, R. H. Charles, and E. B. Allo, but he considered that in such matters what could be said has already been said (though he does have pertinent comments of his own to make on exegetical and philological matters, for instance the meaning of the phrase "ages of ages," 188). Rather, Bulgakov intends this to be "an essay in dogmatic interpretation." For Bulgakov, the Apocalypse is primarily a "Christian philosophy of history, . . . bordering upon eschatology and crossing over into it" (7). "It is," he writes, "the history of the world, set out in symbols and images, in its most essential content." But, he continues, "In no way is it a history of earthly events as written and studied . . . It is a symbolic representation of these events, an intrinsic summary of them, their ontology, or in that sense a philosophy of history" (9). Without this book, Bulgakov points out, there would be no work in Scripture about the Church Militant, about the conflict being played out across history, and of the final victory. It is this, especially the last point, that gives this work of Bulgakov, written amid the horrors of the Second World War, its joyous character: its message is "do not be afraid, for this

must be" (66), and, even more, "This must be the spiritual response to testing that is worthy of a Christian: the worse, the better" (134). It is the faint-hearted who fail to realize that the Apocalypse is unique "precisely for its apocalyptic joy" (289). And, as Zander noted, this work reflects Bulgakov's own life in this period: "the more cheerless life became, the more cheerful was Father Sergii" (ii).

Several striking themes recur throughout the work and are most fully discussed in the final chapters. First, not only his insistence that eschatology is the perspective in which all Christian theology thinks (rather than being a subset of theology, devoted speculatively to the last things), and that eschatology must be distinguished from chiliasm or millennialism (see esp. 257), but that the latter must be reclaimed as an integral part of Christian theology. There are events to be played out on the earthly stage, as the victory of the lamb is universalized and the promises to the patriarchs of old regarding land are fulfilled: "those who deny or actually nullify the force and meaning of the prophecy of the millennium thereby drown history in eschatology, so to speak" (198). Second, unsurprisingly, is his interpretation of the new Jerusalem and the new creation in terms of Sophia: "all these ages of ages are the Church, which embraces all creation and in that sense is God being all in all, ontologically, historically, and, ultimately, eschatologically. This pan-ecclesialism is the sophianicity of creation, and the Church is Sophia: divine in her foundation and being created in her becoming" (206). Interestingly, "Sophia" plays no role in his interpretation of the Woman of chapter 12, though rather surprisingly does in Bulgakov's interpretation of the vision of chapters 4 and 5, where he takes the elders around the throne as heavenly beings representing Created Sophia.

And finally, Bulgakov's overwhelming sense and conviction that in the end God will indeed, as the apostle asserts, be all in all. As the last book of Scripture, the Apocalypse

looks back to, and completes, what is begun in the first, Genesis: “The beginning closes with the end, the creation of the world is crowned by its deification, the Fall is conquered by the apocatastasis. Such is the sum of revelation in *Revelation*, its force and content” (239). The denial of this, he says, is the “sin of dogmatics,” enshrined in the dogma of the Catholic Church and “raised to the level of generally accepted and mandatory theological opinion in the East.” “But,” he continues, “all the content of the Apocalypse, in its overwhelming and terrifying imagery, is a depiction of the path to apocatastasis. It is a book of revelation firstly about the earthly, temporary thousand-year kingdom, and then of the universal and ultimate reign of the saints unto the ages of ages. And he who approaches this sacred prophecy with piety of mind and heart is required with the full force of faith and hope to reply: AMEN.” (239–40).

For Bulgakov, the Apocalypse is not only about the future, it is also “a book for the future” (177). While it seems that “the doctors of the Church not only have not noticed it, but they do not want to notice it, as if they closed their eyes as if they were . . . afraid,” that the church “has not established any definitive and conclusive dogmatic or exegetical response” to the vision it contains must be taken “as if it were some *positive* response” (176–7), it is our contemporary task, Bulgakov asserts, to take the two aspects of the witness of John (for the church regards both the Gospel and the Apocalypse as being by the same writer) together, taking fully onboard the testimony given in the Apocalypse: if it is a book for the future, still veiled in various ways to us, “the times and seasons are approaching” when to dismiss it as some crude or primitive misunderstanding “will become simply impossible, insincere, inadmissible” (290). Without regaining its truly apocalyptic and eschatological awareness, Christianity will become and remain “a dangerous falsification and secularism” (250).

Without a doubt in such passages Bulgakov speaks with a prophetic voice, and a demanding one. The marginalization of the Apocalypse, such as we see happening with Eusebius at the beginning of the Christian Empire and to which we are in many ways heirs, needs to be called into question, especially now that the collusion between church and state has fallen apart in many places, while in other places it is seeing a resurgence (see especially Bulgakov’s comments on 97–8). Learning to think again in a properly apocalyptic and eschatological key will no doubt be a challenge. While this work may not have stood the test of time as a “commentary” on the Apocalypse (see, for instance, the remarkable recent commentary by Peter Leithart), it undoubtedly performs the task Bulgakov set himself, and was, in its time, ahead of its time.

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Nicholas E. Denysenko. *The People’s Faith: The Liturgy of the Faithful in Orthodoxy.* Lanham: Fortress Academic, 2018. 217 pp.

Nicholas Denysenko has become a leading voice among liturgical scholars, particularly from the Eastern Church. He has published numerous studies—on the blessing of water at Epiphany, on Chrismation, on liturgical reform after Vatican II and its impact on the Eastern Church, on architecture and liturgy, on the contemporary history of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, and an edited volume on icons and the liturgy—as well as significant articles on a range of liturgical issues. An especially fine pair in *Worship* focused on belonging as expressed in texts of the divine liturgy. It is important to note that he is a trained musician, has performed with several professional choral groups, and has been the choir director of two cathedrals.