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Abstract

Bulgakov’s comprehensive kenotic theory is a largely neglected aspect of his theology. The article situates Bulgakov’s kenoticism in the context of nineteenth–twentieth century European and Russian theology. For Bulgakov kenosis was a feature not only of the divine incarnation, but also of creation and of the inner life of the Trinity. Bulgakov distinguishes between different aspects of the divine kenosis: the suffering of compassionate and sacrificial love; the restraint of omnipotence, omniscience and other perfections; the descent into the world of temporality and becoming; the acceptance of human emotions and suffering; the identification with sinful humanity; and ultimately the experience of Godforsakenness in the incarnation. God freely limits his actions in the world by time and space. According to Bulgakov, God always acts by persuasion and never by compulsion. Incarnation for Bulgakov is a kenotic act par excellence. Critically appropriating the ideas of Thomasius and Hegel, Bulgakov argues that in the incarnation the Word retains his divine nature, but divests himself of his glory. This entails that the Son empties himself of his foreknowledge, and becomes temporarily subordinate to the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Son’s kenosis is matched by that of the Holy Spirit, who restricts his power in communicating his gifts to the world.

Introduction

Despite a considerable interest that the theology of the Russian Orthodox émigré theologian Fr Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944) continues to provoke in the West, his contribution to kenotic theory remains largely neglected, especially in Anglo-American scholarship.1 Special treatments of Bulgakov’s thought usually focus primarily upon the most controversial aspect of his theology, his so-called sophiology, and superficially, if at all, treat his kenotic theory.2 Yet, as this essay will show, kenoticism is central to Bulgakov’s trinitarian theology, his doctrine of creation, and Christology.

1 Donald G. Dawe shares my contention that most scholars of kenoticism have simply failed to register the theories of the Russian thinkers and of Bulgakov in particular. See Donald G. Dawe, The Form of a Servant (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 154–5.
2 For example, a collection of essays edited by J. D. Kornblatt and R. F. Gustafson, Russian Religious Thought (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996) completely ignores
Bulgakov had recourse to the idea of the divine self-emptying in creation for the first time in The Unfading Light (1917). In the Chapters on Trinitarianism (1928) he turned to the idea of self-giving kenotic love to express the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. He developed his kenotic Christology most extensively in the first volume of the trilogy on Godmanhood, entitled The Lamb of God (1933), and continued to expand upon all dimensions of kenoticism in the remaining two volumes, The Comforter (1936) and The Bride of the Lamb (1939, posthumously published in 1945). The result was a comprehensive theory, which remains in many ways deeply original and unparalleled in modern Orthodox theology. It should be noted that Bulgakov’s kenoticism was a part of a trend in Russian piety and religious thought. Kenotic motifs are present in the writings of Vladimir Soloviev, Fiodor Dostojevskii, Nikolai Berdiaev and Pavel Florenskii, among others. Compared to the contributions of these thinkers, Bulgakov’s kenoticism had the advantage of being more wide ranging. Unlike Berdiaev and Florenskii,
Bulgakov made a more deliberate, even if not entirely successful, attempt to reconcile his kenoticism with the Orthodox dogma.

After briefly locating Bulgakov’s proposal among the kenotic theories of his contemporaries, I will discuss the three main aspects of his kenotic thought: God’s self-emptying as a feature of the inner life of the Trinity, creation as a kenotic act, and the incarnation as the kenosis par excellence. I will then outline select arguments advanced by Metropolitan Sergius (Ivan Nikolaevich Stragorodskii, 1867–1944) and Vladimir Lossky (1903–58) against Bulgakov’s position and conclude with my own comments on Bulgakov’s kenoticism.

**The place of Bulgakov’s kenoticism among the nineteenth century kenotic theories**

With the exception of The Unfading Light, all works pertinent to the discussion of kenoticism belong to the Parisian period in Bulgakov’s life. In 1923, along with numerous other representatives of the Russian intelligentsia deemed subversive by the state, Bulgakov was deported from the Soviet Union.7 After a brief stay in Constantinople and Prague he received an invitation to teach at the newly founded Institute of St Sergius in Paris. Bulgakov spent the last two decades of his life at the Institute, first as a professor of dogmatic theology (1925–40) and later as a dean (1940–44), in many ways defining the theological character of St Sergius.

In France Bulgakov came under the influence of the works of German- and English-speaking kenotic theologians. In The Lamb of God he praises German and British kenotic theology as ‘the first movement of christological thought since the time of the ecumenical councils’.8 He mentions with approbation the works of the originator of German kenoticism, Gottfried Thomasius (1802–75).9 In several places in The Lamb of God he enters into polemic with Wolfgang Gess (1819–91).10 In part through the historical survey of A. B. Bruce, The Humiliation of Christ (1905), Bulgakov was also familiar with the works of J. H. A. Ebrard, F. Godet, J. Bovon, H. R. Mackintosh, W. W. Sanday, P. T. Forsyth, H. Rashdall and others. Bulgakov admits that he did not have access to all original works, especially those of the American theologians.11 It

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8 AB, 247.
10 AB, 254 n. 1. For a survey of the nineteenth century kenotic theories, including that of Gess, see Bruce, The Humiliation of Christ (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 144–152.
11 AB, 247.
is difficult to determine the precise extent of their influence upon Bulgakov’s thought, since he very rarely directly acknowledges his indebtedness to these thinkers in his writings.

Nevertheless, Bulgakov’s proposal can be located on the map of the Western kenotic theories fairly unambiguously. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, Bulgakov’s kenoticism was strikingly comprehensive, extending outside of the framework of the incarnation into the act of creation and even into the inner life of the Trinity. In this respect Bulgakov went beyond the views of many Protestant kenotic theologians of his time, who restricted the divine self-limitation exclusively to the incarnation, or located it even more narrowly in the particular events of the incarnation, such as Christ’s suffering, humiliation, and death. For this reason these theologians may be called ‘kenotic minimalists’. Bulgakov instead followed the philosophical speculations of German idealists Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, who saw the self-limitation of the Absolute as affecting all areas of its manifestation. In all of his theological works, Bulgakov both heavily depended upon and struggled to free his theology from the influence of German idealism, particularly Fichte’s Ich-Philosophie, Schelling’s philosophy of revelation, and Hegel’s phenomenology of the Spirit, mediated by Vladimir Soloviev.12

On the other hand, Bulgakov distanced himself from the radical kenoticiasts, such as, for example, Gess and Godet, who argued that Christ had abandoned his divinity and had broken the unity with the other persons of the Trinity in the incarnation entirely, to regain these features after his ascension.13 As far as Bulgakov was concerned, such a view would be a denial of the patristic doctrine of the incarnation, according to which the divine Logos became human, while remaining God.14 For Bulgakov, any sound

12 Especially influential were Soloviev’s Chteniia o Bogochelovecheske (Lectures on Godmanhood, 1881). See Bulgakov’s discussion and criticism of Fichte in AB, 113–14; Glavy o Troichnosti (Chapters on Trinitarianism) (Moscow: OGI, 2001), 20. Bulgakov’s metaphysics of creation heavily depends upon Schelling in SN, 156–160. Bulgakov accepted neither Hegel’s trinitarian modalism, nor his version of kenoticism.


14 ‘How are we to conceive this kenosis of the Word?’, asked Bulgakov in his outline of sophiology which appeared in English in 1937, ‘In the first place it is essential to realize that, contrary to the various kenotic theories of Protestantism, our Lord in his abasement never ceased to be God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.’ Sophia, The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology, trans. P. Thompson et al. (Hudson, N. Y.: Lindisfarne, 1993), 89. Abbreviated: Sophia. See Gorodetzky, The Humiliated Christ, 159.
theory of the kenosis had to be compatible with the Nicene creed and the Chalcedonian definition, which affirmed both the fullness of Christ’s divinity and the integrity of his humanity, as well as the indivisibility of his person. As a Russian Orthodox theologian, Bulgakov paid more than lip service to the church’s major christological dogma. He followed Vladimir Soloviev in making the idea of Godmanhood (bogochelovechestvo) the conceptual framework of his entire theological system.

Whether Bulgakov’s kenotic Christology in fact succeeds in safeguarding the full divinity of Christ is a debatable issue. It is clear, however, that Bulgakov was neither a kenotic minimalist, nor a kenotic radical in the sense specified above. Although his theory in several crucial aspects comes in tension with the patristic understanding of the Trinity and incarnation, as an Orthodox theologian he attempted to remain faithful to the central dogmatic claims of his tradition.

Kenosis in the immanent Trinity

For Bulgakov, the manifestation of God’s love for the world reflects the eternal relationship between the persons of the Trinity. While he would not endorse the Rahnerian identification of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity,15 Bulgakov emphasises that the Trinity partially reveals its inner life in creation and redemption. He maintains that since God’s love for the world is sacrificial, the love that is at the core of God’s being must also be sacrificial. God’s love may be different in direction and object – the persons of the Trinity in one case and the world in the other – but its content remains the same.16 The Father pours himself out, empties himself in begetting the Son. The Father gives himself entirely to the Son. The Father comes out of himself, finds his fulfilment in, and identifies himself with the being of the Son. The Father empties himself into the Son without in any way being limited by him because the Son shares in the same infinite and unfathomable divine nature.17

The Son, on his part, empties himself by submitting to be begotten from the Father and by being obedient to the Father.18 The love of the Father is ‘ecstatic, fiery, conceiving, active’ (AB, 121). The love of the Son, in contrast, is ‘sacrificial, self-denying humility of the Lamb of God, “destined before

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16 NA, 130 (118J), 141 (130J).
17 GT, 80, 95–97; AB, 118; U, 435; ‘Ipostas’ i ipostasnost’ in Trudy o Troichnosti, 20.
18 ‘The sacrifice of the Father’s love is self-renunciation, self-emptying in begetting the Son. The sacrifice of the Son’s love is self-exhaustion in being begotten by the Father, in accepting his birth as [a passive state of] being begotten.’ AB, 122. Further discussion of this passage see in N. Gorodetzky, The Humiliated Christ, 162.
the foundation of the world” (1 Pet 1:20)’ (AB, 122). To capture the depth of this mutual sacrifice Bulgakov speaks of the ‘supratemporal suffering’ (predvechnoe stradanie) within the Trinity, of the Father’s death to his divine self in begetting the Son, and of the Sonship as ‘supratemporal kenosis’ of the divine being (AB, 122). He qualifies these rather bold statements by saying that this suffering is not a result of external limitation, for nothing can limit the absolute being from outside, but rather is an expression of the reality of sacrificial love.

For Bulgakov, divine suffering is at the core of divine blessedness. Without the reality of sacrificial suffering, God’s bliss would resemble empty and self-centred human happiness (AB, 122). The cross for Bulgakov not only is the symbol of human salvation, but also symbolises the power of mutual self-denial of the three persons of the Trinity (GT, 97). The historical Golgotha, speculates Bulgakov, was logically preceded by the metaphysical Golgotha (AB, 260). The Son’s historical suffering in the incarnation was the result of his pretemporal decision to become incarnate and to be crucified. Bulgakov contends that such a decision, to be a real sacrifice, involved profound suffering for God. Irrespective of its validity, this insight, along with the claim that divine happiness, devoid of experiential awareness of human suffering, amounts to egoism unworthy of God, anticipates some twentieth century attempts to introduce the compassionate suffering into the inner life of God.19

Probably in opposition to Berdiaev’s claim that the tragedy of human history is reflected and ultimately experienced by the Trinity, Bulgakov denies that there is tragedy or unresolved suffering in the immanent Trinity (U, 79). Any suffering within the Trinity is triumphantly overcome by the power of God.

The Holy Spirit, according to Bulgakov, is the joy, blessedness, and triumph of the sacrificial love.20 The procession of the Holy Spirit, unlike the begetting of the Son, is not a sacrificial act (AB, 123). The Holy Spirit fully, without any limitation, proceeds from the Father and eternally rests upon the Son. The eternal kenosis of the third person of the Trinity consists in divesting himself of his hypostatic self (samost’) and serving as a ‘bond’ (sviazka) or a ‘bridge of love’ between the Father and the Son (U, 51, 213). The essential point to be grasped here is that all three persons of the Trinity become kenotically transparent to each other and lose their own selves only to find them in the

20 AB, 122; cf. U, 212.
other. In his earlier writings Bulgakov did not speak at all about the kenosis of the Spirit in the immanent Trinity and instead claimed that 'the kenosis of the Holy Spirit, strictly speaking, began with creation'.

Creation as a kenotic act

Bulgakov’s account of creation is very complex and, in some places, impenetrably obscure. The evolution of his thought on this subject deserves a special study, as he tackles this topic repeatedly and extensively in all of his major theological works. His starting point is the fundamental ontological distinction between the Creator and creature. The irreducible infinite gap that exists between God and his creatures is the central problem of Bulgakov’s metaphysics of the Godmanhood. He rejects various metaphysical proposals that attempt to bridge the gap: metaphysical monism, dualism and pantheism; Hegel’s and Schelling’s ‘panlogism’, in which the emergence of the world is a necessary stage of the self-definition and self-manifestation of the divine being, rather than a free act of a benevolent creator.

Bulgakov’s own solution is that the creator bridges the gap between himself and his creation in a voluntary act of kenosis. One can identify three distinct aspects of the divine self-emptying in creation developed by our author: (1) God freely constrains his actions in the world by time and space; (2) God limits his power and (3) gives up his foreknowledge in order to preserve human freedom. I shall treat these in the same order.

According to Bulgakov, ‘the kenosis of the Absolute in the world and for the world is the main, binding idea of theology’. Strictly speaking, the Absolute cannot create anything ‘outside of’ itself, because nothing can be external to the all-encompassing infinite being. If the world existed ‘outside of’ God, creation would become a boundary limiting the unlimited divine existence, which is logically impossible (NA, 210 (194J)). This consideration leads Bulgakov to embrace panentheism, the idea that God

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21 Sophia, 112.
23 NA, 7–12 (3–8J); SN, 157.
24 SN, 158, 174; AB, 120.
25 It should be noted that Bulgakov accords a central role in the process of mediation between God and the world to the divine and human Sophias. The intersection of Bulgakov’s sophiology with his kenoticism deserves a special study and is beyond the scope of this article. See Gorodetzky, The Humiliated Christ, 160–61.
26 NA, 251 (230J), cf. ibid., 129 (118J).
is an ‘all-embracing unity’ (vseeedinstvo) and that the world exists ‘in’ God, in the sense that God is the eternal ground of the world’s existence. God creates the world in its entirety in a single, supratemporal act (NA, 123). Bulgakov contends that sequential creation exists for creatures, whereas God is beyond the temporal unfolding of creation (NA, 131). The positing of the relative by the Absolute leads to the self-limitation of the Absolute, which is necessary to establish a relationship with the relative (U, 253). God, who transcends space and time, freely enters the world of temporality and becoming, and limits his manifestations by the conditions of time and space (NA, 123 (112J), 251 (230J)). When he reveals himself in the world, God ‘takes off’ his eternity and ‘puts on’ temporality (NA, 79 (70J)).

The second aspect of the creative kenosis is the divine self-limitation with respect to human beings. God endows human beings with free will and interacts with them always in such a way as to protect this endowment. God freely chooses to limit his omnipotence by giving human beings a degree of independence from himself. Bulgakov boldly states that human freedom remains ‘unbreakable and impenetrable for God’ (NA, 247 (226J)). The synergism of the divine and human wills entails a restraint of God’s power. Against the Augustinian tradition Bulgakov maintains that the divine grace is never irresistible or invincible. On the contrary, divine grace works only by persuasion, not by external compulsion. Using the image of Rev 3:20, Bulgakov states that God knocks at the door of human freedom, but never breaks it. Divine grace cooperates with human will, never violating it. By emphasising persuasion as the only mode of operation of the divine grace Bulgakov anticipated a similar claim often made today by process theologians.

In addition, Bulgakov maintains that God also limits his knowledge of the future in order to enable genuinely free human choices. In his eternal being God is and remains omniscient, knowing himself and all things in eternity in one supratemporal act (AB, 119; NA, 248 (227J)). This eternal and perfect knowledge must not be confused with foreknowledge. Bulgakov

27 NA, 249 (228J); U, 232. This eternal ground is one of the manifestations of the divine Sophia. For a penetrating critique of Bulgakov’s panentheism see N. O. Lossky, History of Russian Philosophy (New York: International Universities, 1951), 228–31; id., Uchenie o Sergiia Bulgakova o Vseedinstve I o bozhestvenoi Sofii (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon, 1959).
28 NA, 257 (234J); Sophia, 111. For a discussion of this issue, see Myroslaw Tataryn, ‘Sergius Bulgakov: Time for a New Look’, St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 42 (1998), 329–331.
29 U, 257. The emphasis upon persuasion as the principal means of the operation of grace was not uncommon in Greek patristic thought. See Gregory Nazianzus, Or. 31.25. I owe this reference to my colleague Michael Hollerich.
criticises the claim that God knows all things ‘before’ they come to pass for providing a misleading idea of the relationship between eternity and temporality. Eternity, Bulgakov rightly points out, cannot be ‘before’ time in a temporal sense, as the prefix ‘pre’ seems to suggest, but rather eternity is the very foundation of temporality.

God knows all things in eternity and all future possibilities. For example, God foreknew the possibility of the fall, but God did not know that the fall was bound to happen, for this would entail that God caused the fall (NA, 259 (238J)). God chooses not to know what exactly will come to pass in any temporal sequence ahead of time, because this would entail, Bulgakov believes, a strong doctrine of the divine causation of all things, which in turn would undo human freedom.30 To put it briefly, God chooses not to know future contingents in order not to determine the future and take away human freedom (NA, 258 (237J)). As the creator, God abandons his foreknowledge, but not his eternal knowledge.

Bulgakov also distinguishes between the different ways in which kenosis in creation affects each of the three persons of the Trinity. The Father limits himself by becoming utterly transcendent and withdrawing himself from creation (U, 253). The kenosis of the Son consists in the fact that he, being omnipresent in creation, descends to the level of humanity and becomes Godman in the incarnation (U, 253). The Holy Spirit, who is the power of all being, also restricts his activity in creation, accommodating his power to the state of individual creatures (U, 254). Unlike the Son, who eternally receives the fullness of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father, the creatures receive the Spirit in the form of finite gifts (U, 397). According to Bulgakov, Pentecost was the ultimate fulfilment of the Spirit’s kenosis, which began with creation and would end in the eschaton, when God would be all in all (Sophia, 112). The Holy Spirit sanctifies and transforms creation without destroying its creaturely integrity (U, 257). Finally, the Holy Spirit limits his power by allowing the sinful revolt of creatures against God (U, 262).

**Incarnation as a kenotic act par excellence**

The starting point of Bulgakov’s kenotic Christology is the exegesis of the ‘major kenotic text’ (AB, 348) of the NT, namely, Phil 2:5–11. Such a move was very natural, given the fact that this text played a crucial role in the development of patristic christology, especially that of Cyril of Alexandria, and came under further scrutiny in the works of the nineteenth century kenotic theologians, all of whom tried their hands at explicating the puzzling

30 Metropolitan Sergius’s critique of this point will be considered in the fifth section of this paper.
words about Christ’s possession of ‘the form of God’ and subsequent self-emptying and ‘taking the form of a slave’ (Phil 2:6–7). Following the patristic tradition, Bulgakov treats the kenotic hymn in conjunction with the incarnation text in John 1:14, the second article of the Nicene creed, and the Chalcedonian definition. His conclusions, however, do not represent a mere restatement of, but a significant development and in some respects a departure from the patristic interpretation.

For Bulgakov, the process of self-emptying mentioned in Phil 2:7, not only refers to the cross of Christ, but extends to all the economy of God’s taking the form of a slave, or descending to the limitations of human nature, from birth in the flesh to ascension. Bulgakov emphasises that the incarnation as a whole is an ‘uninterrupted self-emptying’.31 In harmony with his thesis that other aspects of the divine kenosis extend beyond the temporal confines of the incarnation, Bulgakov argues that the self-emptying of Phil 2:7 refers also to the ‘celestial event in the depth of the Godhead’, that is, to God’s supratemporal decision to become incarnate (AB, 243).

A crucial question for Bulgakov, as well as for the fifth-century patristic and nineteenth-century kenotic thought, was what precisely did God empty himself of? Bulgakov answers that Christ did not empty himself of his divine nature, for he remained truly God (AB, 252). Instead, the Son of God surrendered the ‘form of God’, which Bulgakov interpreted as divine life and glory: ‘God voluntarily gave up his divine glory, divested himself of it, became naked, emptied himself, became poor, and accepted a form of a slave.’32 God freely limits the fullness of his life and renounces its joy and blessedness. He enters into human life and makes it his own (AB, 249). This key distinction between the divine nature, which remains intact in order to safeguard Christ’s divinity in the incarnation, and the abandoned glory, was a common motif in the kenotic theories of the Protestant theologians from the time of Thomasius.33

As mentioned earlier, despite his openness to the theological thought of the West, Bulgakov follows an unwritten Orthodox convention of never positively acknowledging his Protestant sources directly. In fairness to Bulgakov it should be noted that he developed this basic distinction between nature and glory in a direction different from that of Thomasius. The latter distinguished between the immanent attributes of the divine nature, such

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31 AB, 265; emphasis as in the original. Cf. AB, 244.
32 AB, 244, cf. 245, 252, 291; Sophia, 89–90, 108.
33 Thomasius, in Welch, 48. Among Bulgakov’s Russian influences, V. Soloviev spoke of the incarnation in terms of the renunciation of the divine glory in his Chteniia o Bogochelovechestve.
as truth, holiness, and love, and the relative attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. According to Thomasius, in the incarnation the second person of the Trinity retained the immanent attributes and divested himself of the relative attributes, without violating the integrity of his divine nature.34

Bulgakov brings a different philosophical equipment to bear upon this difficult issue of fundamental importance to any kenotic theory. He criticises Thomasius’s distinction between the immanent and relative attributes as artificial and affirms that the kenosis must affect all divine attributes.35 In its place, Bulgakov introduces a quasi-Hegelian distinction between God-in-himself and God-for-himself. Bulgakov proposes that God’s existence ‘in himself’ corresponds to the divine nature and remains unchangeable in the incarnation. In turn, God’s existence ‘for himself’ embraces God’s relationship with his creatures and corresponds to his life and glory. Christ remains God-in-himself, but ceases to be God-for-himself.36

While on the surface these are Hegelian categories, in Bulgakov they have undergone a considerable transformation. In Hegel’s theology, God-in-himself refers to the undifferentiated potentiality of the Father’s Godhead; God-for-another refers to God’s going out of himself and revelation in the world, identified with the Son; finally, God-for-himself is God’s dialectical return into himself, characterised by the increased self-awareness and identified with the Holy Spirit. Bulgakov took pains to distance his trinitarian theology from Hegel’s questionable dialectical modalism (GT, 119). Besides, Bulgakov’s proposal inexplicably lacks Hegel’s second category, God’s existence for another and in relation to the world, without which the third category, that of God-for-himself, would be logically impossible. One may conclude that Bulgakov’s attempt to replace Thomasius’s distinction between the immanent and relative attributes with the quasi-Hegelian categories was overall unsuccessful.37

34 In Welch, 68–74. A. M. Fairbairn adopted the same distinction and spoke of unchanged ethical and abandoned physical attributes of God.
35 AB, 265 n. 2.
36 AB, 253, 257, 308.
37 Bulgakov introduces a further complication into this already complex discussion when he speaks of Christological kenosis as God’s surrender of the divine Sophia and God’s descent into the realm of creaturely Sophia (AB, 253). The divine Sophia is neither to be identified with the divine nature, nor with the divine hypostasis. She possesses ‘hypostasibility’ (ipostasnost’), i.e., the ability to become instantiated. Bulgakov coined the term ipostasnost’ in response to the criticism that the sophiologists had introduced Sophia as the fourth hypostasis into the Godhead. Bulgakov also speaks of the creaturely
More illuminating is Bulgakov’s account of what the self-emptying consisted in, based upon the NT material. Here Bulgakov remains faithful to his central claim that ‘the incarnation is a kenotic act par excellence’ (AB, 246). In his self-emptying ‘God takes up the properties of this life: temporality, becoming, gradual development, and, therefore, limitation at every separate stage until he reaches fullness’.38 The fullness of God that is present in Jesus potentially from his infancy is being gradually revealed in his earthly ministry.39

Bulgakov denies the view found in some patristic authors that the Son of God only demonstrated his human characteristics, such as emotions and physical weakness, for the sake of human beings, while these characteristics were foreign to him as God (AB, 284, 303, 315). The author affirms that Christ did not simply pretend to be ignorant of the time of the end, but truly as God emptied himself of this knowledge (AB, 384). The Son of God did not simply pretend to grow and mature, but truly grew in the spirit and in the knowledge of God, owing to his kenosis.40

The Son also became totally obedient to the will of the Father and in this sense subordinate to the Father. The Word renounced his own will and accepted that of the Father.41 Bulgakov interprets the words of Christ in John 14:28 (‘The Father is greater than I’) not in a traditional patristic way, as referring to his humanity, but rather as a fundamental characteristic of the Son’s kenotic state in the incarnation. Christ’s denial of his inherent goodness (Matt 19:17), a veritable crux interpretum for orthodox (anti-subordinationist) christology, Bulgakov interprets again, with reference not to Christ’s human nature, but rather to the Word’s free decision ‘not to be God’ for himself in his earthly ministry (AB, 264). Bulgakov finds another sign of the Son’s voluntary subordination in the fact that the Son prays to the Father, thereby acknowledging the Father as his God.42 This temporary subordination to the Father in the incarnation does not entail, Bulgakov insists, the Son’s eternal subordination. Since the Word did not abandon his divine nature, but only his glory, he continues sustaining the world by his power, even while being limited by the conditions of the incarnation (AB, 255).

According to Bulgakov, the Word incarnate also becomes temporarily subordinate to the Holy Spirit (AB, 337–9). Christ is born of the Holy Spirit

38 AB, 249, cf. AB, 260, 262, 275, 278, 291, 302.
40 AB, 292 with ref. to Lk. 2:40.
41 AB, 294, 313, 337.
42 AB, 245, 292, 309.
and accepts the descent of the Holy Spirit in baptism. In his humility the Son becomes like one of the prophets: he is led by, inspired by and grows in the Spirit (AB, 339, 355–6). Even the miracles of Christ are his kenotic acts, inasmuch as he renounces his power and accepts the power of the Father and of the Holy Spirit.43 Interpreting the words of Christ, ‘all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ (Matt 28:18), Bulgakov emphasises the point that the Son receives the authority back as something that he has renounced before (AB, 265). The statement that the sin against the Son can be forgiven and the one against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable (Matt 12:31–2) also serves for Bulgakov as an indicator of the Son’s temporal subordination to the Spirit (AB, 338).

The Son’s kenosis is matched by the corresponding kenosis of the Holy Spirit, who restricts his power and communicates himself to the incarnate Word, as he also does in creation, in the form of finite gifts (NA, 397). Thus, his descent from the Father upon the Son in baptism must be distinguished from the Spirit’s eternal procession from the Father and resting, in all of his fullness, upon the Son. Bulgakov notes that the kenosis of the Spirit in the incarnation is less complete than that of the Son, since the Holy Spirit never forsakes his glory (Sophia, 111).

Bulgakov’s account of the Son’s kenosis in his passion contains equally original, if no less idiosyncratic, insights. To begin with, the divine drama of Gethsemane plays as important a role in Bulgakov’s soteriology as Golgotha. The unity of the two wills in Christ, according to Bulgakov, is possible owing to the divine will’s self-limitation (NA, (241J)). This unity is not free from intense conflict in which human will learns obedience to God, starting from Bethlehem and ending on Golgotha. It is in Gethsemane that the interior struggle of human and divine wills in Christ reaches its apex. In this conflict Christ’s human nature freely, without compulsion, becomes obedient to his divine nature by overcoming the desires of the flesh (AB, 271).

In the night of Gethsemane Christ suffered and lived through (izzhil) the sins of all humankind (AB, 387). This experience became possible owing to the kenosis of his divine will. Had it not been for the kenosis, all sin would have been immediately destroyed by the power of God (AB, 381). In Gethsemane Christ accepts his death, submitting to the will of the Father. Unlike all other human beings for whom death is inevitable Christ has the freedom to die or not to die. He chooses to lay down his life for the salvation and deification of the world. In this sense his suffering and death are voluntary

43 AB, 265. In the same place Bulgakov argues that miracles are acts of self-limitation because they pale in comparison before the mighty acts of creation and providential care for the world.
Bulgakov also speaks of Christ’s spiritual death as happening already in Gethsemane, followed by his physical death on Golgotha (AB, 396). Being forsaken by the Father to his death, the Son experiences the equivalent of all sufferings of hell and in this sense dies spiritually. Bulgakov points out that time and intensity must not be compared literally. What is relevant is an equivalent anguish of being forsaken by God.  

Christ’s emotional and physical suffering does not affect his human nature alone, but also his divine — human hypostasis. On the cross the Son dies abandoned and forsaken not only by his disciples, but also by the Father and the Holy Spirit (AB, 344). The Father forsakes the Son by accepting his death. He withdraws his love from the Son, by letting the Son experience the ‘the abyss of death, the darkness of nonbeing with full force of Godforsakenness’ (AB, 343).

At the same time the Father participates in the suffering and death of the Son. Bulgakov is careful to clarify that this claim is distinct from the ancient Patripassianism, according to which the Father himself suffered on the cross by becoming the Son in the incarnation. In Bulgakov’s view, both the Father and the Holy Spirit suffer spiritually, without becoming incarnate. However, their compassionate suffering is no less intense than that of the Son. Bulgakov cites the words from the Good Friday sermon of Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow: ‘The love of the Father is crucifying, the love of the Son is crucified, and the love of the Holy Spirit triumphs by the power of the cross’. The Son suffers as condemned by the Father for the sins of the whole world, the Father suffers in judging the Son, and the Holy Spirit experiences the suffering of God’s sacrificial love towards the world (AB, 393).

The kenosis of the Son involves the suffering of all the three persons of the Trinity. In Bulgakov’s judgement, to deny that the Father and the Holy Spirit suffer with the Son is paramount to dividing the Trinity and undercutting its unity. Bulgakov writes about God’s experience of Godforsakenness and the suffering of the whole Trinity in the event of the cross with a keen sense of the divine drama anticipating the insights of Jürgen Moltmann.  

In addressing the subject of Christ’s death Bulgakov admits that God himself cannot die, although God can participate in human death. The Son’s

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44 ‘Sofiologia smerti’, 27.
47 V. Lossky, Spor o Sofii (Moksva: Izdatel’stvo Sviato-Vladimirskogo Bratstva, 1996), 70. Abbreviated: SS.
48 See Moltmann, The Crucified God, 235–49.
descent into hell is his continuing experience of Godforesakeness. However, in Christ’s case, death does not have the finality which it has with all human beings and is followed by resurrection (AB, 402). For Bulgakov, and this is a fairly unique feature of his kenotic theory, both resurrection and ascension belong to the final stages of the Son’s kenosis. This is so because the Son is raised from the dead not by his own divine—human power, but by the power of the Father. The process of Christ’s ascent into heaven presupposes that he has not yet reached the state in which he fully shares in the divine glory (AB, 409, 419). It is only after the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that one can speak of the completion of the Son’s kenosis and his complete reappropriation of his divine life and glory.

These are the main contours of Bulgakov’s comprehensive kenotic theory.

Metropolitan Sergius’s and Vladimir Lossky’s critique

The publication of The Lamb of God in 1933 became a catalyst for a bitter controversy regarding the orthodoxy of Bulgakov’s teachings. The main apple of discord was Bulgakov’s sophiology, although his kenoticism, as I will show, also came under fire. What exacerbated the issue was the fact that Bulgakov was not a lay religious philosopher, but a priest professing to speak on behalf of the Orthodox church. The first official condemnation (ukaz) of Bulgakov’s major sophiological ideas was issued by the Moscow patriarchate in August 1935. Two months later the archiepiscopal synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), which by that time had severed its communion with the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union, found Bulgakov’s sophiology heretical and demanded his recantation.49

Owing to a confused state of the post-revolutionary Orthodox polity, Bulgakov at the time belonged to yet another Orthodox jurisdiction, headed by the metropolitan Evlogii (Vasilii Semenovich Georgievskii, 1868–1946) in Paris.50 In this canonically chaotic situation neither the thunder from the Moscow patriarchate, nor the lightning from the ROCOR episcopate could remove Bulgakov from his priestly duties or seriously endanger his position at St Sergius’s Institute without the endorsement of the metropolitan Evlogii.


50 M. Evlogii was excommunicated by m. Sergius in 1930 and joined at first the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and then the ROCOR. In 1945, shortly before his death, he decided to reunite his Parisian group with Moscow. This union, however, was short-lived.
The latter admired Bulgakov as a theologian and trusted Bulgakov’s apology enough to spare him a church trial. As a result, Fr Sergius continued to serve as a priest until his death in 1944.

What interests us here is not the politics of this debate, but the substantive theological objections that metropolitan Sergius and Vladimir Lossky raised against Bulgakov’s kenoticism. m. Sergius headed the Russian church in a turbulent and bloody time. His policy of ‘loyalty’ to the atheistic Bolshevik state generated much controversy both in the Soviet Union and abroad. No matter how harshly historians may be disposed to judge m. Sergius’s political blunders, it is undeniable that he was a theologian of considerable stature. Given the state of the church just before the terror of 1937, it is remarkable that the aging metropolitan found the time to study the selections from Bulgakov’s writings and accorded them a thorough evaluation.

Bulgakov did not wait to write a spirited response, in turn accusing m. Sergius of dogmatic errors and complaining that his system was not given a proper hearing. Bulgakov was profoundly annoyed, claimed he was misinterpreted and proved to be deaf to the criticism, whether fair or unfair, of his opponents. Vladimir Lossky, who at the time was in Paris, felt compelled to defend the condemnation of the Moscow patriarchate and implicitly his own position in a written reply (SS, 79). As a result of this extensive exchange, Bulgakov remained unbending in his sophiological views. He continued to sharpen his ideas polemically and stratified his position politically at St Sergius Institute. In this study we will deal only with the side of the debate pertinent to Bulgakov’s kenoticism.

In his report m. Sergius characterises Bulgakov’s system as a product of ‘creative imagination’, bearing resemblance to the speculations of the ancient Gnostics. The Parisian theologian fails to exercise patristic reserve in what can be known or said about the inner life of the Trinity. Bulgakov’s Platonism, as well as his heavy reliance upon the Protestant kenoticists, also did not sit well with the metropolitan (SS, 81). Although m. Sergius does not address Bulgakov’s trinitarian kenoticism, he briefly considers Bulgakov’s application

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51 Many people felt that m. Sergius made unjustifiable concessions to the anti-Christian Soviet government. This issue was the major cause of separation between some Orthodox churches of Russian emigration and the Moscow Patriarchate.

52 It should be noted that V. Lossky was the first to write a brief negative report on Bulgakov’s sophiology and send it to m. Sergius. Subsequently A. Stavrovskii prepared a detailed survey of Bulgakov’s system for the metropolitan. See O Sofii Premudrosti Bozhiei (Paris: YMCA, 1935), 5. For the history of the debate see A. A. Arzhakovskiy, Zhurnal “Put” (Kiev: Fenix, 2000), 420–431.

53 ‘Dokladnaya zapiska m. Evlogiiu,’ in Spor o Sofii. Bulgakov also wrote another note in response to the decision of the ROCOR leaders, Dokladnaya zapiska (Paris: YMCA, 1936).
of kenotic theory to creation. Metropolitan agrees that God’s allowing of human freedom may be seen as a self-limitation of the divine will (SS, 85). However, this form of the kenosis does not affect the divine foreknowledge, which remains intact without violating human freedom. As m. Sergius points out, ‘To foresee something does not mean to will or to determine it’ (SS, 84). For Bulgakov, as we may recall, God’s knowledge of all future contingents strongly entails that God directly causes, among other things, future human actions.

Elaborating on m. Sergius’s criticism, V. Lossky explains that divine predestination applies to those acts that depend exclusively upon the will of God, such as, for example, creating the world and humanity, or making deification the ultimate goal of creaturely existence. In contrast, divine foreknowledge applies to those events that depend upon the free will of creatures, for example, the fall and the salvation of individual beings (SS, 45).

Turning to his critique of Bulgakov’s Christology, m. Sergius concedes that it is appropriate to speak of the kenosis as the Word’s acceptance of the limitations of human condition. However, Christ’s sufferings and emotions cannot be predicated directly to his divine nature, but rather to his humanity (SS, 89). Metropolitan also criticizes Bulgakov’s extrapolation of kenosis to ‘the metaphysical Golgotha’, which was, as we may recall, the Trinity’s supratemporal decision to send the Son into the world. As Lossky explains, the main problem with this idea is that it makes voluntary redemptive suffering into a process inherent in the very nature of God and, therefore, an involuntary and unavoidable act of ‘the divine suicide’ (SS, 66). In addition, the idea of the metaphysical Golgotha tends to take away from the unique soteriological significance of the historical Golgotha.

Related to this issue is what m. Sergius calls Bulgakov’s ‘replacing of the traditional-ecclesiatical Golgotha with Gethsemane’ (SS, 89). Bulgakov’s idea that Christ’s spiritual death happened in Gethsemane, when he personally experienced the depth of separation of all sinners from God, tends to overshadow the redemptive significance of his crucifixion (SS, 59, 69, 89). The metropolitan concluded that taken together Bulgakov’s ideas amount to a profound distortion of the patristic teaching on redemption.

Concluding comments
I will venture only some preliminary remarks regarding Bulgakov’s kenoticism with the hope of stimulating further discussion of his deeply original, but sadly neglected ideas.

1. Bulgakov’s system was far ahead of his time, which is partly why it gave pause to the authorities of his own church. His claim that the
intratrinitarian relations must be seen in the light of the divine sacrifice in the incarnation anticipates analogous views of the theology of the cross. However, unlike Moltmann and others, Bulgakov does not propose to abandon the traditional two-nature Christology, or the attributes of the God of classical theism.

2. Bulgakov’s differentiation between the two aspects of the divine being, temporal and eternal, unchanging and changeable, as well as his emphasis upon persuasion as the sole mode of operation of divine grace anticipate similar developments in the modern process thought. However, in contrast to some process theologians, Bulgakov’s understanding of God is irreducibly trinitarian and personal.

3. Bulgakov’s vision of creation as a kenotic act foreshadows the current discussion in the arena of theology and science, especially that of ‘humility theology’. For example, John Polkinghorne speaks of the limitation of divine omniscience, omnipotence, simple eternity, and causal status in creation in a way very similar to Bulgakov.\textsuperscript{54}

4. It would seem that if almost any divine action implies self-limitation, as it tends to do in Bulgakov’s theory, then the specific and unique sense in which Christ’s humiliation and death are kenotic acts is dissolved. In other words, if any divine action is kenosis, then no particular divine action is kenosis, after all. However, this objection may be met by distinguishing, as Bulgakov does, between the different aspects of the divine kenosis: the suffering of compassionate and sacrificial love; the restraint of omnipotence, omniscience, and other perfections; the descent into the world of temporality and becoming; the acceptance of human emotions and suffering, the identification with sinful humanity, and ultimately the experience of Godforsakenness in the incarnation.

5. As an Orthodox theologian Bulgakov often fails to exercise what may be called apophatic reserve, characteristic of patristic thought, with regard to what could be known or said about the inner life of the Trinity. He overpsychologizes his metaphysics and at times appears to know more about the relations between the persons of the Trinity than these persons know about themselves. For this reason his introduction of suffering and kenosis into the inner life of God is susceptible to the charge of anthropopathism.

6. At the same time, Bulgakov had a keen sense of the paradox of the incarnation, revealing his Orthodox sensibilities. The central question that runs like a golden thread through his theological writings is this:

How can the absolute being establish a relationship with the relative beings? How can the eternal one enter the realm of time? How can the limitless one accept the limitations of human condition? Unlike some modern theologians, he does not attempt to dissolve this paradox, but responds with a comprehensive theory of God’s voluntary and loving self-limitation. At least for this reason his theory, while it is not devoid of difficulties, deserves more scholarly attention than it has hitherto received.