UNIVERSAL SALVATION IN THE ESCHATOLOGY OF SERGIUS BULGAKOV

Abstract

Bulgakov's deeply original and controversial eschatology remains largely unexplored in modern scholarship. Following the universalist insights of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Bulgakov construed hell as a state of self-inflicted torment necessary to purify the resurrected individual from evil. His arguments against the eternity of hell are as follows: the permanence of hell entails the eternal dualism of good and evil; the grace and mercy of God cannot be permanently resisted by free creatures; perpetual punishment is not commensurable with the finite crimes committed in time; the idea of perpetual retributive punishment leads to an anthropomorphic and unworthy image of a vengeful God; the ontological and moral unity of humanity does not allow for the eternal separation of humankind into the two separate groups of the saved and of the permanently damned. This article lays out Bulgakov's vision of the universal salvation; investigates the roots of this vision in patristic thought; places Bulgakov's proposal in the context of the nineteenth-twentieth-century Russian eschatology; and offers a critical evaluation of Bulgakov's arguments against the eternity of hell.

FR. SERGIUS BULGAKOV (1871-1944) is a towering figure on the horizon of twentieth-century Eastern Orthodox theology. Despite the growing attention to various aspects of his thought among Western theologians, his universalism continues to be ignored in the surveys of modern eschatology. Yet as this article will show, Bulgakov's eschatological vision is unsurpassed in its breadth in Russian thought and rivals the theological proposals of those modern theologians who for different reasons have rejected the eternity of hell.

1 For example, Esteban Deák dedicated one chapter of his dissertation to the universalism of Berdiaev, whose works were available in English, but passed over in silence Bulgakov's contribution to the topic. See 'Apokatastasis: The Problem of Universal Salvation in Twentieth Century Theology' (PhD diss., Toronto, University of St Michael's College, 1979), ch 2
Bulgakov was preoccupied with eschatological themes throughout his life. As a child he was constantly confronted with the sacramental dimension of death: his father was a provincial Orthodox priest who made his living officiating at funerals. This childhood experience should not be overlooked in considering his highly speculative eschatology. The pursuit of the clerical path seemed natural to Bulgakov: according to his self-description, he was born a ‘Levite’ since there had been clergymen in his family for six generations. However, while attending a seminary Bulgakov lost his faith and went through a period of fascination with Marxism (1890–1905), which left an indelible mark upon his thinking.

Following a series of three conversion experiences Bulgakov gradually returned to the fold of the Orthodox Church. In his evolution from Marxism to Christian idealism he followed the paths travelled by his three prominent contemporaries: Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948), Piotr Struve (1870–1944), and Simeon Frank (1877–1950). In the essay ‘The Fundamental Problems of the Theory of Progress’ (1902) Bulgakov interpreted Russian Marxism as an apocalyptic movement, which both competed with and at the same time drew upon the resources of traditional Christian eschatology. Bulgakov discerned chiliastic aspirations in the socialist project aimed at building the just kingdom of man on earth. In his essay ‘Apocalypticism and Socialism: Religious and Philosophical Parallels’ Bulgakov argued that ‘scientific’ sociology, based upon Marx’s economic theory,
purported to predict large-scale historical developments in a way akin to biblical apocalypticism. In another essay, ‘Heroism and Asceticism’, written for the programmatic collection of essays entitled *Landmarks* (1909), he observed that in the imagination of Russian Marxists the revolutionary heroes had acquired a status similar to Christian martyrs, ascetics, and saints. Since Marxist eschatology was based upon the Hegelian theory of progress, its protagonists, Bulgakov predicted, would end up divinizing the state and attributing a messianic role to the proletariat. He condemned Russian socialism as a chiliastic movement that was doomed to fail. He lived to witness the sad fulfilment of his prophecies after the Bolshevik revolution.

In the years preceding the revolution Bulgakov came under the influence of Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), whose major work *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914) made a lasting imprint upon Bulgakov’s eschatology. When Bulgakov became a priest in 1918 he embraced an ecclesial form of Russian Orthodoxy that was looked down upon by other like-minded members of the religious intelligentsia. His ordination precipitated his banishment from the Soviet Union in 1923 along with several prominent leaders of the religious intelligentsia. After a brief stay in Prague, Bulgakov came to Paris in 1925 and continued to live in France until the end of his life in 1944.

During the last decade of his life he developed an eschatological system unmatched in its breadth by any other Russian religious thinker. Of central interest to this study is *The Bride of the Lamb* (1939), which crowned Bulgakov’s larger trilogy *On Godmanhood* with ecclesiology, theodicy, and the doctrine of last things. A year later, when two consecutive operations

12 Filosofia khoziastva, p 248
13 P Florensky, *Stolp i utverzhdene istiny* (Moscow Pravda, 1990, repr from the 1914 edn), hereafter cited as *Stolp* For the correspondence between Bulgakov and Florensky see *Arkhiv svashchennika Pavla Florensogo*, ed Andronik Trubachev, vol 4 (Tomsk Vodolei, 2001)
14 *Neviesta Agntsa* (Paris YMCA, 1945), hereafter cited as NA The first two books of this trilogy are *Agnets Bozhn* (*The Lamb of God*, 1933) and *Utieshtel’* (*The Comforter*, 1936) Of these works two are now available in excellent English translations by Boris Jakim, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI Eerdmans, 2002) and *The Comforter* (Eerdmans, 2004) All page references to *NA* are to Jakim’s translation
intended to treat throat cancer left Bulgakov temporarily without his voice, he wrote *The Sophiology of Death* (1940).\(^\text{15}\) Speaking as a man prepared to part with this life at any time, Bulgakov pondered the mystery of Godman’s death on the cross, Christ’s co-dying with every human being, and the purgative value of physical suffering. Having partially regained his voice in 1941, Bulgakov continued to lecture at the St Sergius Institute in Paris, choosing the book of Revelation as a topic for his course. His lecture notes became the material for his last book, *The Apocalypse of John* (1944), which he considered a postscript to his magnum opus, the trilogy *On Godmanhood*.\(^\text{16}\)

II. BULGAKOV’S APPROACH TO PATRISTIC ESCHATOLOGY

As might be expected from an Eastern Orthodox priest and theologian, patristic tradition was a springboard for Bulgakov’s own theological deliberations. He observes in *The Bride of the Lamb* that in pondering the final destiny of humankind patristic tradition followed two distinct trajectories: one associated with the universalist ideas of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, the other espoused by the opponents of the doctrine of universal salvation.\(^\text{17}\) It should be noted that Bulgakov’s knowledge of the relevant patristic material was largely based upon the dissertation of M. F. Oksiuk, *Eschatology of St Gregory of Nyssa* (1914), which provided a comprehensive survey of patristic views on eschatology up to the time of the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553).\(^\text{18}\)

Bulgakov recognized that the claim that all, including the fallen angels, would ultimately be saved represented a minority opinion, suspect of heresy on the grounds of its association

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\(^{17}\) ‘Problema “uslovnogo bessmertiia”’, *Put’* 52 (1936), pp. 13–14; *NA*, pp. 380–1, 500.

\(^{18}\) *Eschatologiia sv. Grigoriia Nisskogo* (Kiev, 1914; repr. 1999). See *NA*, p. 408. In my judgement, Bulgakov did not acknowledge his dependence upon Oksiuk (who later became metropolitan Makarius of Lviv) sufficiently. Bulgakov also consulted the study of V. I. Nesmelov, *Dogmaticeskaia sistema sviatogo Grigoriia Nisskogo* (St Petersburg, 1887; repr. 2000). It is unlikely that Bulgakov read J. W. Hanson’s *Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church during its First Five Hundred Years* (Boston and Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1899).
with Origen. At the same time the Russian theologian emphasized that the Church had not issued any dogmatic definition on the subject of the final outcome of the last judgement and the eternity of hell beyond what was stated in the Nicene creed. According to Bulgakov, in the absence of a conciliar definition, *consensus patrum*, even if it could be presumed to exist on this issue, was not enough to settle a dogmatic dispute. In an important article ‘Dogma and Dogmatics’ (1937), written concurrently with *The Bride of the Lamb*, Bulgakov argued that only the doctrine of the Trinity enshrined in the creed and the doctrine of the incarnation stated in the definitions of the seven ecumenical councils enjoyed the status of the dogma binding upon all members of the Orthodox Church.\(^{19}\) He relegated all other doctrinal questions, such as the veneration of the Mother of God and of the saints, sacramental theology, pneumatology, atonement theories, and eschatology, to the sphere of *theologoumena*, that is, of more or less authoritative patristic opinions.\(^{20}\) Bulgakov stressed that in the area of eschatology in particular no ecumenical council had ever condemned Gregory of Nyssa’s version of universalism.\(^{21}\) It is a matter of historical fact that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition the doctrine of eternal damnation did not achieve the level of explicit articulation that it later found in the Roman Catholic conciliar definitions and Protestant confessions.\(^{22}\) Bulgakov contrasted his

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\(^{19}\) ‘Dogmat i dogmatika’, in *Zhvoe predane. Pravoslavie v sovremennosti* (Paris YMCA, 1937), p 9. It is a separate question whether Bulgakov in practice followed his own limitation. Arguably, his sophiology is a significant modification of, even a serious departure from, the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

\(^{20}\) *Pravoslavie*, p 223.

\(^{21}\) *NA*, p 495. A version of the Origenist doctrine of apocatastasis was condemned by the local council of Constantinople in 543. Whether the bishops of the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) anathematized this aspect of Origen’s theology explicitly is a murky question. Up to the late nineteenth century it was widely assumed that this ecumenical council did condemn universalism. See J Danielou, ‘L’Apocatastase chez Saint Grégoire de Nyssse’, *Recherches de science religieuse* 30 (1940), pp 328-47; Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1991), p 190; J Sachs, ‘Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology’, *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), pp 620-1.

approach to tradition with what he called ‘dogmatic maximalism’, which in his opinion characterized scholastic theological education in pre-revolutionary Russia, based largely upon the Roman Catholic model.²³

Bulgakov’s mind was not shaped by the educational patterns prevailing in the pre-revolutionary Russian theological academy, since he did most of his studies in secular schools and never obtained an advanced degree in theology. As a theologian he was largely self-taught. Since his erudition was vast it would be wrong to call him a dilettante in academic theology, although at times serious argument gave way to flights of fancy and belletristic digressions in his prose. The breadth of his vision far surpassed the canons of academic theology of his time.

III. SELECT ASPECTS OF BULGAKOV’S ESCHATOLOGY

Many of Bulgakov’s contemporaries shared reservations about the traditional Christian belief in the eternity of hell. As early as 1914, Bulgakov’s teacher and close friend Pavel Florensky complained: ‘who does not know that nowadays a more or less vulgar Origenism—a secret conviction that the ultimate “forgiveness” will be issued by God—has crept into almost every soul?’²⁴ Although Bulgakov distanced himself from ‘vulgar Origenism’, he shared Florensky’s concern to provide an account of universalism that would be religiously and intellectually compelling.

Following Florensky, Bulgakov announced a terminological shift in eschatology from predominantly forensic to ontological categories.²⁶ The end of the world must be understood primarily as the completion of creation, as all-encompassing participation of creation in the life of God, as the transfiguration of the whole

²³ NA, p 380.
²⁴ Stolp, p. 208
²⁵ NA, p 380. Cf. Florensky, Stolp, ch ix, Berdiaev, Filosofia svobodnogo dukha (Moscow: Folio, 2003), ch ix, Ekzistential’naya dialektika bozhestvennogo i chelovecheskogo (Moskva. Folio, 2003), ch 14
cosmos, as theosis, and only secondarily as judgement. The shift from judicial theory to ontology was, for the most part, consonant with the spirit of patristic tradition, although Bulgakov himself failed to recognize this sufficiently. In fact, at one point he claimed that ‘naive moralism’ characterized early patristic reflection on the last judgement. Bulgakov found forensic categories too rationalistic and anthropomorphic, tending to reduce ‘the richness of Divine Wisdom to a manual of instructions for organizing an exemplary prison where the confinement is without end’. He warned that ‘the mysteries of God’s love cannot be measured according to the penal code’.

Besides the shift to ontological categories, the second important aspect of Bulgakov’s eschatology is its synergism. In the consummation of all things active creaturely participation in God’s plan will continue. Bulgakov’s synergism was a critical response to two one-sided views: on the one hand, N. F. Fiodorov’s (1828–1903) utopian idea that in the future humanity will develop its own scientific means to raise the dead, and, on the other hand, a traditional conception of resurrection and judgement as acts of God brought upon largely passive creatures. Bulgakov argues that the individual souls will cooperate with God in reconstituting their own bodies. God will supply the energy needed for the process. Each soul is an organizing principle which functions as a ‘seed’ from which the body grows as a plant. Bulgakov owes his development of this Pauline analogy (1 Cor. 15:44) to Origenist tradition, although he does not acknowledge this fact directly. For Origen, our bodies, like a grain of corn, fall into the earth, but implanted in them is the life-principle (ratio) which contains the essence of the body; and although the bodies die and are corrupted and scattered, nevertheless by the word of God that same life-principle which has all along been preserved in the essence of the body raises them up from the earth and restores and refashions them, just as the power which exists in a grain of wheat refashions and restores the grain, after its corruption and death, into a body with stalk and ear.

29 NA, p. 382.
32 Origen, De principiis ii.10.3. Origen: On First Principles, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), p. 141. It is very probable that λόγος σπερματικός is behind Rufinus’ ratio, which Butterworth aptly
Origen did not locate the enduring life-principle in the soul explicitly, but connected it with 'the essence of the body', perhaps echoing the Stoic doctrine of *logoi spermatikoi*. It was Gregory of Nyssa who developed Origen's idea further and proposed that the soul reconstituted its resurrected body, since it remembered and retained the form (*eidos*) of its earthly body.  

Drawing further upon Gregory of Nyssa, Bulgakov speculated that the process of reconstitution of the body occurred not just in every individual soul, but concurrently in the world soul, which enabled the resurrected bodies to form 'one common corporeality, proper to the integral Adam'. The participation of all in the world soul and common corporeality secured the ontological and moral unity of humankind. Moral unity entailed that Dostoevsky's maxim 'everyone was responsible for all' applied to the resurrection state. The ontological unity of humankind did not destroy the personal uniqueness of each individual. Bulgakov emphasized this point by distancing himself from the view of Gregory of Nyssa and some other patristic authorities that gender distinctions would be eliminated in the resurrection. Bulgakov argued that since gender was a part of the original state of humanity, not of the fallen human condition, the resurrection state would include characteristics associated with gender. The transformation did not entail the obliteration


35 *NA*, pp. 488, 516. This maxim became so common in Russian literature that it did not require an explicit reference to Dostoevsky.


37 Bulgakov emphatically rejected the claim, advocated by some ancient authors and in his time defended by Berdiaev, that the original state of humanity was androgynous. For Fr. Sergius, this was where biblical teaching parted ways with christianized Platonism. See *NA*, p. 448.
of gender differences, but only the removal of the needs of stomach and sex that kept the body in bondage in this life.\textsuperscript{38}

The resurrection will be general and permanent for all. Bulgakov rejected the view defended by some nineteenth-century theologians and his contemporaries that the damned will be utterly annihilated instead of consigned to hell.\textsuperscript{39} He argued that, on the one hand, God could not destroy his own fallen creatures, for this would indicate that he erred in creating them. On the other hand, creatures could not destroy themselves, for the power to create \textit{ex nihilo} and to destroy belonged to God alone.\textsuperscript{40} To admit that creaturely freedom was capable of such metaphysical suicide was to limit the power and goodness of God.\textsuperscript{41} He speculated that various groups of people would participate in the general resurrection differently: the saintly figures would do so actively and willingly, while the indifferent and the wicked souls would accept the resurrection as inevitable.\textsuperscript{42}

Bulgakov emphasized that the parousia, judgement, and general resurrection comprised one reality and should not be viewed as temporally consecutive events.\textsuperscript{43} In the parousia, Christ and the Holy Spirit would appear in all of their uncreated glory. If in the incarnation Christ’s divine glory was hidden and restrained, in the parousia the kenosis of the Trinity would come to its end.\textsuperscript{44} All will immediately recognize Christ as Godman.

The confrontation with the overwhelming reality of the glorified Christ will spell judgement for all humankind. Bulgakov writes: ‘The judgement and separation consist in the fact that every human being will be placed before his own eternal image in Christ, that is, before Christ. And in the light of this image, he will see his own reality, and this comparison

\textsuperscript{38} NA, p. 448  
\textsuperscript{43} NA, p. 455  
will be the judgment.'\textsuperscript{45} The judgement is not about the application of general moral norms, but about the comparison that each individual makes between his empirical identity and his true self. Such an understanding of judgement was inspired in part by the Pauline vision of the transformation of humanity in Christ: 'And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:18; NRSV). Bulgakov also follows Gregory of Nyssa in identifying the biblical 'image of God' with the ideal prototype of each person eternally existing in Christ. This ideal image serves as a point of comparison and as a goal of deification for each human being in the eschaton.\textsuperscript{46}

According to Bulgakov, divine judgement is not an externally imposed punishment. It is rather self-judgement, a deep realization of what one could achieve with the help of Christ and what one has failed to become.\textsuperscript{47} Similar to resurrection, human beings will not endure their judgement passively, but will synergistically participate in it. The emphasis upon internalization, Bulgakov is quick to point out, does not make self-judgement entirely subjective, since the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of conscience, enabling each person to see herself for what she really is and making the comparison with the eternal image of herself unavoidable and intrinsically convincing.\textsuperscript{48}

If self-knowledge in this aeon is only partial and distorted, in the resurrection there will no longer be any place left for false self-pity, spiritual blindness, or self-deception.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{46} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{De anima et resurrectione}, PG 46: 152 A; Daley, \textit{Hope}, p 86

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{NA}, pp 360, 456–8. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{De beatitudinibus} 5 ‘in some way man is his own judge, because he passes sentence on himself by judging those subject to him’. Later in the same sermon Gregory draws a picture of the last judgement in which some humans are ‘dragged down into that black darkness by their evil conscience as by an executioner’ Trans H. C Graef in \textit{St. Gregory of Nyssa} (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1954), pp. 140, 141 See Nesmëlov, \textit{Dógmatitcheskaja sistema}, p. 608. This point was also stressed by Bulgakov’s contemporary Maurice Blondel, \textit{La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946), vol 2, p 353.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{NA}, p. 461.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{NA}, p. 456
Bulgakov returns repeatedly to the insight of Isaac of Nineveh that 'the torments of hell are the burning of love for God' \(^{50}\). He elaborates on the thought of the Syrian Father in the following way.

The judgment of love is the most terrible judgment, more terrible than that of justice and wrath, than that of the law, for it includes all this but also transcends it. The judgment of love consists of a revolution in people's hearts, in which, by the action of the Holy Spirit in the resurrection, the eternal source of love for Christ is revealed together with the torment caused by the failure to actualize this love in the life that has passed. It is impossible to appear before Christ and to see Him without loving Him. In the resurrection, there is no longer any place for anti-Christianity, for enmity towards Christ, for satanic hatred of Him, just as there is no place for fear of Him as the Judge terrible in His omnipotence and the fury of His wrath \(^{51}\).

The judgement of love, Bulgakov explains, encompasses wrath because the sinners will experience God's love not only as his mercy, but also as his wrath. Love is the supreme divine attribute out of which flow all other attributes. There is no conflict in God between justice and mercy, since both of them are different aspects of love. Those who have deliberately rejected God in this life experience his love as punishing wrath, which will burn the sins of all \(^{52}\).

For the deification to become a reality, the love of God has to be reciprocated by human love. Following Isaac of Nineveh, Bulgakov maintains that the most terrible torment is caused by the sorrow and longing of unfulfilled love \(^{53}\). The souls who were

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\(^{51}\) *NA*, p 459, emphasis added.


\(^{53}\) *NA*, pp 498, 503. Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 28. 'I mean that those who have become conscious that they have sinned against love suffer greater torment from this than from any fear of punishment. The power of love works in two ways: it torments sinners, even as happens here when a friend suffers.
created for love and have rejected love are tormented by love, which constitutes the law of their inner being.\(^{54}\) One hears in Bulgakov’s interpretation an echo of elder Zosima’s words in *The Brothers Karamazov*: ‘What is hell? I think that “it is the suffering of that which can no longer be loved”’\(^{55}\). Dostoevsky’s elder goes on to say that the person who despised God’s love in this life would be incapable of loving God in the resurrection. The torment that such a person would experience would be internal and spiritual, rather than external and physical.\(^{56}\)

It is also probable that Bulgakov drew his inspiration from Origen. Speculating on various species of divine punishment in *De principiis*, Origen observed:

> When the soul is found apart from that order and connexion and harmony in which it was created by God for good action and useful experience and not at concord with itself in the connexion of its rational movements, it must be supposed to bear the penalty and torture of its own want of cohesion and to experience the punishment due to its unstable and disordered condition. But when the soul, thus torn and rent asunder, has been tried by the application of fire, it is undoubtedly wrought into a condition of stronger inward connexion and renewal.\(^{57}\)

Here Origen, like Bulgakov, emphasizes that the torment is caused by the internal conflict between what the soul has become in its revolt against God and what God had made it to be. Bulgakov also followed Origen and Gregory of Nyssa in stressing the purgative and therapeutic rather than the retributive dimension of this type of punishment.\(^{58}\)

For Bulgakov, the triumph of God’s will meant that in the resurrection rational creatures would no longer be able to choose between good and evil, but only between the different kinds of good. The progress towards evil would become impossible; only

from a friend; but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Thus I say that this is the torment of Gehenna: bitter regret.’ *Ascetic Homilies*, 141.\(^{54}\) *NA*, p. 157.

\(^{55}\) *Brat’ia Karamazovy*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. T. A. Kasatkina (Moscow: Astrel’, 2004), vol. 7, p. 451. Although Bulgakov refers to *The Karamazov Brothers* elsewhere, he does not refer to Dostoevsky in this context.

\(^{56}\) Ibid. p. 452.

\(^{57}\) *De Principiis* ii.10.5. Trans. Butterworth, p. 143.

the progress towards greater good, the passing 'from glory to glory' (2 Cor 3:17) would remain a possibility. Bulgakov insisted that such a state did not eliminate human freedom. On the contrary, freedom from evil is the greatest possible kind of freedom rational creatures can possess.

IV Arguments against the Eternity of Hell

Consistent with his view of the resurrection and the last judgement, Bulgakov stressed repeatedly that hell should be understood as a state (sostoimame) of self-inflicted torment necessary to purify the resurrected individual from evil, not as a place permanently created by God. Here it would appear that Bulgakov followed Gregory of Nyssa, who saw hell as a condition of the soul, rather than a place with a particular geographic location. Just as 'God did not make death' (Wis 1:14), he also did not bring about hell, although he had foreseen them and permitted both of them to exist. Because hell is a by-product of angelic fall and human sin, not an original creation of God, it cannot be an ontological opposite eternally existing side by side with the kingdom of God.

Bulgakov, of course, recognized that numerous biblical passages spoke of the punishment of hell as aiównos. He argued that the popular conception of eternity as an infinite duration of time was flawed. For one thing, such infinite duration would have a beginning at the point of human death. More importantly, on a forensic model, an infinite application of punishment for temporal sins is unjustly cruel. Even according to human standards, such punishment would be far greater than the crime. Thus, observed Bulgakov, the idea of infinite retributive punishment led to an anthropomorphic and unbecoming image of a vengeful and cruel deity. Besides, such eternity would be 'bad infinity', in Hegelian terms, because it would have no purpose.

59 NA, pp 478, 496
60 NA, p 502, cf Oksiiuk, Eskhatologia, pp 325-7
61 Gregory of Nyssa, De anima et resurrectione. Oksiiuk stresses this point in Eskhatologia, pp 325-7
62 NA, p 470, cf Berdiaev, O naznachenu cheloveka (Moscow Respublika, 1993), p 230
64 Apocatastasis, p 27, cf Berdiaev, The Destiny of Man, p 349
65 NA, pp 490, 494, Apokalypsis Ioanna, 130, 314. The notion of 'bad infinity' was widely deployed sensu malo in Russian philosophy of Bulgakov's time. See e.g. Florensky, Stolp, pp 245-6
Nor should eternity be understood as a moment frozen in time, for creaturely existence in eternity is dynamic, not static.\textsuperscript{66}

How should eternity properly be understood? Bulgakov points out that the adjective ‘eternal’ in the Johannine expression ‘eternal life’ indicates a divine quality of the subject described, rather than its infinite duration. This expression refers to the life in God, to the manifestation of the divine glory of Christ in time. Bulgakov asserts that ‘in the age of resurrection, all resurrected human beings, clothed in the glory of incorruptibility, will know eternal life, though in different ways, each in accordance with his state’.\textsuperscript{67}

Bulgakov proposes to revise a picture of heaven and hell permanently existing side by side. There is an asymmetry between the eternity of heaven and that of hell. To imagine the kingdom of Satan as a permanent alternative to the kingdom of God is, according to Bulgakov, to fall into unacceptable ontological dualism, verging on Manichaeism.\textsuperscript{68} According to the Christian doctrine of creation, God is not a direct cause of evil. The ontological source of evil, in contrast to good, is not eternal. Bulgakov endorses the view of Christian Platonists that evil is a perversion, a shadow, a negation of the good.\textsuperscript{69} Evil is incapable of existing independently from the good. Following Gregory of Nyssa, Bulgakov claims that evil does not have creative depth. If evil agents are left on their own, they will annihilate themselves. Infinite progress towards evil, unlike that towards good, is a metaphysical impossibility.\textsuperscript{70}

Bulgakov claims that to admit the eternal perdition of a single rational creature is to limit the wisdom and goodness of God. Creaturely freedom, no matter how obstinate and persistent in evil, cannot become a permanent barrier to the power of God’s grace. To postulate that for some rational beings repentance is completely impossible is to admit that Satan’s perverse plan has

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Apocatastasis}, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{NA}, p. 469; emphasis in the original. Cf. Origen, \textit{De principiis} i.6.1–3.
ultimately succeeded in their case. Bulgakov goes so far as to call this idea 'satanic blasphemy' against God's creation.\textsuperscript{71}

Finally, the moral unity of humankind and the ontological sharing in one corporeality do not allow for the eternal separation of all into the two separate categories of the saved and of the permanently damned.\textsuperscript{72} Those who will enjoy heaven cannot remain indifferent towards those who will be burning in hell, or worse still, rejoice over their sufferings. The bliss of the saved will remain imperfect as long as they are aware of those who suffer in hell. If hell is permanent, the righteous will continue to suffer out of compassion for the damned.\textsuperscript{73} Bulgakov shared this sensibility with many of his Western contemporaries.\textsuperscript{74}

Is it possible to reconcile Bulgakov's optimistic universalism with the traditional view of the separation between the sheep and the goats? Bulgakov believes that the separation indeed occurs, but not between the two parts of humankind, but rather in each person. He advances a paradoxical idea that all will burn in hell and experience heaven:

We must therefore conclude that the very separation into heaven and hell, into eternal bliss and eternal torments, is internal and relative. Every human being bears within himself the principle of the one and the other, depending upon the measure of his personal righteousness. Since no human being is without sin, there is no one who does not have the burning of hell within himself, even if only to a minimal degree. Conversely, there is no human being whose soul is not illuminated by the light of paradise, even if only at a single point or by a distant reflection.\textsuperscript{75}

Hence the separation between the sheep and the goats is a figure of speech that indicates a division within each human being, not the division of humanity into the two groups. Following Florensky, he returned over and over again to 1 Cor. 3:15, in which Paul, discussing the disclosure of all human actions on the day of judgement, said that even those whose works would

\textsuperscript{71} Apocatastasis, p. 27; cf. Apokalips Ioanna, p. 282.
\textsuperscript{72} This argument is inspired by Gregory of Nyssa. See Ludlow, Universal Salvation, pp. 89–95.
\textsuperscript{73} NA, p. 514; Apocatastasis, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{74} For example, F. W. Farrar called the idea that the blessed rejoiced over the sufferings of the wicked 'an abominable fancy'. See Farrar, Eternal Hope (London, 1878), p. 66; D. P. Walker, The Decline of Hell, p. 31.
be burned up would ‘be saved, but only as through fire’. Bulgakov proposed that this text should be applied to the condition of those in hell, not in purgatory, as some Roman Catholic theologians of his time did.

It should be noted that Bulgakov departed considerably from a common dismissive Eastern Orthodox stance with regard to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Although he rejected the idea of purgatory as a third place separate from heaven and hell, he recognized a deep affinity between the two traditions in a common practice of prayer for the dead. He proposed to understand the efficacy of such prayers synergistically, as influencing not only the judgement of God, but also the spiritual condition of the soul in the afterlife by enabling her to become a more willing recipient of divine grace. Since Bulgakov saw all suffering in hell as purgative and not eternal, he went so far as to call his interpretation of the Orthodox teaching a doctrine of ‘universal purgatory’ (всеобщее чистилище). Although Bulgakov never used the expression again—presumably not to alienate his predominantly Orthodox readers—in my judgement, ‘universal purgatory’ describes the gist of his teaching remarkably well.

Bulgakov envisioned the eventual restoration of Satan and the fallen angels along with all human beings. Elaborating on the biblical idea that in the resurrection all evil would be rendered powerless and Satan would be expelled, Bulgakov claimed that the complete repentance and conversion of all angelic beings, including Satan, was inevitable. In the spirit of Origen he warned that this was an esoteric doctrine that should not be divulged to the simple-minded believers, since it could blind their conscience to the reality and power of the demonic evil in this aeon. Bulgakov pictured Satan as being bitterly divided

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76 NA, pp. 462–3. Florensky regarded 1 Cor. 3:15 as the interpretative key to other biblical texts dealing with the last things. See Stolp, p. 222.
77 NA, p. 489 n. 66. Bulgakov does not name his opponents.
78 For an example of such a common polemical stance, see Florensky, Stolp, p. 233.
79 NA, p. 361.
80 NA, pp. 499–500.
81 NA, p. 361. The crucial adjective ‘universal’, present in the Russian edition of NA (p. 391), has inexplicably dropped out of Jakim’s otherwise very faithful translation.
82 NA, p. 503; cf. Origen, Contra Celsum vi.26. For a similar move in seventeenth to eighteenth-century English theology see Walker, The Decline of Hell, pp. 5–7. Several years after Bulgakov’s death the apocatastasis of the fallen
between the awareness of his angelic creaturely nature on the one hand and his false pretence to be the 'prince of this world' on the other hand Bulgakov asked 'Can Satan's battle with himself become infinite (and in this sense "eternal"), a bad infinity? Or must Satan lose his strength in this battle and at some point lay down his arms in impotence?'

Bulgakov's reply was that after Satan's expulsion from the world his resources were bound to be exhausted by this internal contradiction, the prince of darkness would give in to the power of divine love in the end. God's limitless mercy and the sacrifice offered by Christ extend even into the realm of the demonic.

Drawing upon Matt 5:29-30, Bulgakov proposed to understand the last judgement as spiritual amputation, not as death by execution. No sin could be merely forgiven by God without the accompanying purifying suffering.

One must reject every pusillanimous, sentimental hope that the evil committed by a human being can simply be forgiven, as if ignored at the tribunal of justice. God does not tolerate sin, and its simple forgiveness is ontologically impossible. Acceptance of sin would not accord with God's holiness and justice. Once committed, a sin must be lived through to the end.

Although Bulgakov did not explicitly refer to Dostoevsky in this context, it would be tempting to discern in these lines one of Dostoevsky's central ideas that the guilt of a heinous crime could not be overcome without considerable self-sacrifice and suffering. For example, the main hero of his novel Crime and Punishment, the murderer Rodion Raskolnikov, submitted himself to the authorities of his own accord because he could no longer bear the burden of his guilt. It was easier for him to spend several years doing hard labour in Siberia than to burn in the hell of his own guilty conscience. Bulgakov followed Dostoevsky and angels was advocated by Giovanni Papini, Il diabolo Appunti per una futura diabolologia (Florence Vallecchi, 1953).
the Origenist tradition in going beyond the retributive function of punishment and emphasizing the purgative value of suffering.

It is clear that by emphasizing that God takes sin very seriously Bulgakov intended to meet the objection of those who could charge him with making light of human sin. However, it is highly questionable whether the charge could best be met by claiming, as he did, that 'simple forgiveness [of sin] was ontologically impossible'. Bulgakov was certainly wrong to reduce the mystery of divine forgiveness to mere ignorance or indifference to evil. The critique of other questionable aspects of his eschatology will occupy us in the last section of this article.

V. A CRITIQUE OF BULGAKOV'S UNIVERSALISM

Bulgakov's universalism moves beyond a faithful commentary on patristic material. His development of the insights of Gregory of Nyssa and Isaac of Nineveh is in many ways daring and original. As I have repeatedly noted in this article, Bulgakov drew his inspiration in part from Florensky's ruminations on Gehenna in The Pillar and Ground of the Truth. However, he did not endorse Florensky's antinomical eschatology in its entirety. For Florensky, as later for Berdiaev and to lesser extent for Florovsky, eschatology was the realm of antinomies in the Kantian sense of the term. The recognition of the limitless character of God's love moves one to embrace universalism, whereas the recognition of creaturely freedom permanently to reject God leads to the admission of eternal hell. These two antithetical statements, proposed Florensky, could not be solved rationally. The contradiction can be dissolved in the experience of sanctification, offered to believers in and through the sacraments. Berdiaev similarly accentuated the paradoxical character of eschatology. He argued that the antinomy could be solved on a practical, rather than theoretical level. This meant that the cooperation with God in bringing about universal salvation had to become the categorical imperative and the telos of all human moral activity.

88 Origen, De principiis ii 10.6, Gregory of Nyssa, De anima et resurrectione 7
On Gregory, see Nesmelov, Dogmaticheskaia sistema, pp 610–13
For Bulgakov, in contrast, creaturely freedom, no matter how radical and far-reaching its revolt against God, could not possibly become a permanent barrier to the power and goodness of God. Because of its emphasis upon God as the source and power of being and its methodological shift from juridical to ontological categories, Bulgakov’s eschatology may be termed ontological universalism. The distinguishing characteristics of this type of universalism may be summarized as follows:

(a) Rational creatures do not endure their resurrection and judgment passively, but cooperate with God synergistically.
(b) The last judgement consists in the confrontation between each resurrected individual and his or her eternal image in Christ.
(c) The goal of divine punishment is primarily medicinal and purgative, not retributive.
(d) The ontological and moral unity of humankind makes the separation between the two parts of humanity impossible.
(e) Hence, the separation between good and evil occurs in each human being.
(f) All will undergo purgative suffering (‘universal purgatory’), and
(g) no one will endure such suffering eternally, for this would entail an ontological dualism between good and evil.
(h) After a suitable period of purgation all creation, including Satan and the fallen angels, will be restored to the union with God.

Bulgakov’s ontological universalism may also be distinguished from the so-called hopeful universalism, which found its influential twentieth-century advocates in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner. These Catholic theologians proposed that although no one could be certain that all would be saved, a Christian could and, in fact, had an obligation to hope that none would be lost. Epistemically Balthasar’s and Rahner’s proposals are more modest than Bulgakov’s. The Russian theologian saw the universal purgation that resulted in the universal restoration of all things to God neither as a paradox (antinomial eschatology), nor as a hope (hopeful universalism), but as an ontological necessity (ontological universalism).
In my judgement, the absence of epistemic modesty in matters pertaining to the eschaton is a flaw rather than a virtue of Bulgakov's theology. It would seem that Bulgakov, who praised the Eastern Orthodox Church's dogmatic minimalism, ended up embracing dogmatic maximalism instead, since in his scheme the universal restoration became certain. Recognizing the virtues of the Church's apophatic reserve with regard to the doctrine of the last things, Bulgakov himself departed from this approach in his bold speculations. Although he denounced the anthropomorphism of traditional theology, his own description of the parousia was not free from belletristic digressions and anthropomorphic fantasies, unsupported by the revelatory material enshrined in the tradition of the Church.

Berdiaev saw in Bulgakov's ontological universalism a survival of the Marxist theory of progress, which both of them had embraced in the past. According to this theory, the deterministic economic laws inexorably moved human history towards the ultimate triumph of Communism. It should be noted in fairness to Bulgakov that his metaphysical scheme is worlds apart from the man-made salvation offered in the Marxist utopia of earthly paradise. Nevertheless, Berdiaev had a point: in the final analysis Bulgakov's ontological universalism was strongly deterministic, for his scheme did not leave even a possibility for permanent and decisive creaturely rejection of God. Bulgakov could rejoin that to give creaturely freedom the ability to reject God for ever was to limit the extent of God's power and mercy. This debate accentuates the main soteriological conundrum of eschatology: the tension between the salvific intent of God's grace on the one hand and the possibility of the free human denial of God's gift of salvation on the other.

Without repeating the arguments that are typically used on both sides, I will state the objections to ontological universalism that have not sufficiently been explored in contemporary

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93 E.g. Bulgakov's speculation that the second coming of Christ will be preceded by the Parousia of the Mother of God; his idea that John the Baptist will share one throne with the repentant Satan; and his defence of millennialism. See NA, pp. 412–13; Apokalips Ioanna, ch. 20.
94 Berdiaev, 'Vozrozhdenie pravoslaviia', in Dialektika, pp. 558–9. Berdiaev's criticism was based only upon Bulgakov's earlier works, Filosofia khoziaistva and Svet nevechernii.
95 Bulgakov made this clear in his 'Osnovnye problemy teorii progressa', esp. pp. 61–3; Filosofia khoziaistva, pp. 191–212; Apokalips Ioanna, p. 314.
96 Such arguments would include the point that Bulgakov's interpretations of αἰώνιος as 'divine' and 'limited in time' are incompatible. According to most
Western discussions of eschatology. My first objection is prompted by Georges Florovsky’s comment regarding the possibility of the permanent creaturely rejection of God. ‘After all,’ observes Florovsky, ‘is “the ultimate resistance” a greater paradox, and a greater offence, than any resistance or revolt, which actually did pervert the whole order of Creation, did handicap the deed of redemption?’ To take this insight a step further, the ultimate human rejection of God’s will is no more paradoxical than the problem of the first turning of the rational will against God followed by further entrenchment in evil. The limiting question about the origin of moral evil is no less mysterious than the limiting question about the ultimate destiny of those whose will is thoroughly perverted by evil. If the first act was allowed by an omnipotent and perfectly good God, it is entirely possible that the same God would also allow the final act of rejection.

Secondly, if following Bulgakov, one construes the last judgement primarily as the rational creatures’ deep realization of the reality of God and of their own failure to become what God intended them to be, it remains to be shown how the mere awareness of God’s goodness would finally lead all to repentance and conversion. Briefly put, the knowledge of the good, no matter how perspicuous and persuasive, does not necessitate acting accordingly. Bulgakov attempts to meet this objection by postulating that in the resurrection state the weakness of will is removed and rational creatures will be capable of choosing only between the different kinds of good. But this is to raise the question whether all creatures will in fact undergo such drastic and forced change. Given Bulgakov’s insistence that divine grace works upon rational creatures always by persuasion and never by compulsion, it is difficult to see how compulsion

modern exegesis, in such expressions as, for example, πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον, κόλασις αἰώνιος, ἀλέθρος αἰώνιος, the adjective means ‘unceasing’ or ‘endless’. See e.g., H. Sasse, ‘αἰώνιος’, TDNT 1. 209; Bauckham, ‘Universalism: A Historical Survey’, p 30, but cf Deák, ‘Apokatastasis’, pp 155–7. One could also question Bulgakov’s uncritical dismissal of retributivism. Finally, the existence of such entities as the world soul and ‘integral Adam’, postulated in Bulgakov’s eschatology, is far from self-evident For a comprehensive philosophical defence of permanent hell see J. L. Walls, Hell The Logic of Damnation (Notre Dame University of Notre Dame Press, 1992)

97 ‘The Last Things and the Last Events’, p 262 Florovsky does not address Bulgakov’s universalism in this article
could be avoided, at least in the case of some especially stubborn sinners.98

Finally, if all rational beings are eventually brought into harmony with their ideal images that eternally exist in God, then the choices that each person makes in this life, as well as history as a whole, become in the last analysis irrelevant for our ultimate destiny. By investing everything in the power and goodness of God, ontological universalism offers a happy ending to any version of human history, no matter how tragic and cruel. It is important to stress that the issue whether the doctrine of eternal hell should function as a deterrent of evil actions is secondary to this objection. In fact, one may grant Bulgakov that the threat of hell is bad pedagogy.99 The main issue, however, is whether human history, shaped by human choices, has the ultimate impact upon human destiny. It seems that Bulgakov’s Platonizing universalism, despite his protestations to the contrary, offers a negative answer to this question. However, Bulgakov’s own synergism requires quite the opposite answer: the outcome of the eschaton must be the fulfilment, not the annulment of human history.100

It is understandable that Bulgakov’s message of universal salvation could bring hope to the displaced, dispossessed, and impoverished community of Russian immigrants in Paris (which in the last years of Bulgakov’s life was occupied by the Germans). The prophets of doom are superfluous in exile. However, if the eschaton, as Bulgakov believed, were brought

98 On divine persuasion in Bulgakov see my ‘Kenotic Theology of Sergius Bulgakov’, Scottish Journal of Theology 58 (2005, forthcoming) Bulgakov tries to avoid this obvious contradiction by claiming that in the resurrection God will become ‘irresistibly persuasive’ to all. However, the line between ‘irresistible persuasiveness’ and outright compulsion is thin to the point of vanishing. See NA, p 492 In this respect the phenomenon of the demonic knowledge of God presents a particularly strong case against ontological universalism. Unlike human knowledge, the demonic awareness of the divine is not plagued by uncertainty. The demons ‘believe and shudder’ (James 2:19), they know indubitably that God exists; they are capable of recognizing God even under the veil of humanity in the incarnation. Despite this knowledge, however, the demonic revolt against God is more radical than that of humans. The demons are capable of willing and doing evil for its own sake. The obstinacy that the fallen angels manifest in this aeon makes their conversion in the age to come highly improbable without divine coercion. (To state the obvious, this part of my objection assumes the existence of the fallen angels and the Devil. The justification of this assumption is beyond the scope of this paper).

99 NA, p 485

100 Apokalipsis Ioanna, p 274.
about by God in cooperation with the whole humanity, then history’s final outcome would have to reflect the triumph of God’s justice over Stalin’s gulags and Hitler’s concentration camps. Paradoxically, Bulgakov’s mature eschatological vision, unlike his earlier overtures on the chiliastic character of Marxism, was thoroughly disengaged from the apocalyptic events of his time. It is the inevitable conclusion of his system that no matter how much evil is actually committed in history, all will be saved in the end. A sympathetic critic could object that this very ahistoricity of Bulgakov’s theology provided a consolation to those whose lives were split in half by the Bolshevik revolution and crushed by the Second World War. Still, Bulgakov’s grasp of the problem of evil falls short of the profound insights of Dostoevsky and Berdiaev.

My objections notwithstanding, it is undeniable that Bulgakov’s universalism, especially his shift from juridical to ontological categories, from what he called ‘penal code theory’ to the eschatology of participation in the life of God, opens a fresh dimension that has not been sufficiently explored in Western accounts of eschatology. One hopes that as more and more of Bulgakov’s works become available in translation, his comprehensive eschatological vision will draw the attention of Western theologians that it richly deserves.

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