

LITTLE SCREWS, BIG MACHINES:
EVALUATING MILBANK'S INFATUATION WITH BULGAKOV

In the days leading up to this presentation I experimented with a number of ways to compress the broader, more speculative argument of my dissertation proposal into something that could be comprehensibly presented. These efforts were complicated by the fact that dissertations are highly specialized. So is this audience, but in different, sometimes divergent, sometimes convergent ways. I try to address any dearths in knowledge in a way that is general, but not overly broad, by limiting my sources. Milbank's architectonic and often obtuse theology is more or less compressed into one early, easily summarized article. My engagement with Bulgakov, less architectonic but no less obtuse than Milbank, avoids most of the more complicated – or “weird” – aspects of his theology by focusing on his ecclesiology and political theology. When it comes to the even more complicated and less architectonic writings of Augustine, I have opted to speak more generally and assertively than to get into all the intricate details of his writings (which can be saved for our discussion). Sadly, I am all but leaving out one very important, unpublished article by Milbank on Bulgakov because there is no way to include it without making this presentation unnecessarily long and heady. My dissertation, and so this paper in a somewhat abbreviated form, critiques John Milbank's turn to sophiology – specifically Bulgakov – in order to claim that a full turn would actually require a more substantial revision of Milbank's

own project, because the political theology of Bulgakov replicates precisely those points of Augustine's theology that Milbank critiques. My argument proceeds as follows. First, I will set Milbank's turn to Bulgakov within the context of his Radical Orthodoxy (once called Postmodern Augustinianism), focusing mostly on his early work to preserve a later comparison to Augustine. Second, I will evaluate Milbank's reading of Bulgakov to show how the latter's misreading of Augustine is actually more Augustinian than Milbank's reading. The final section will continue the claims of the second by attending to the way that Bulgakov's ecclesiology and political theology develop some Augustinian themes, which I argue may offer a corrective to some of the "excesses" of Milbank's own "Postmodern Augustinianism."

The Bulgakovian Milbank?

Milbank's early article, "An Essay Against Secular Order," is in many ways a more coherent synopsis of *Theology and Social Theory*. In it he praises Augustine's "post modernist" philosophy of history, but criticizes his acquiescence to the inevitability of Roman coercion.¹ He thinks a more consistent Augustine would have made the state melt into the hyper-narrated, red-hot fires of the church's holy ontology of peace (like the bad robot in Terminator 2). Unfortunately, he gave the state enough "wobble room" to continue to exercise pure *dominium* (power for its own sake), which now characterizes the culture of modern society.² With his face in his hands Milbank shakes his head and cries, "If only Augustine were more Hegelian!" This exclamation is the starting point for Milbank's constructive work, which, thanks to postmodern philosophy, hyper-narrates the ongoing, self-correcting "text" of the visible church over-against the coercive and violent *mythos* of an invisible modern state. The ultimate goal is a convergence

1 Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15.2 (Fall, 1987), 210.

2 Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," 214.

of charity with *Sittlichkeit*, so that culture itself becomes inescapably Christian, yielding a society where it is impossible to think any thought apart from the ongoing, self-correcting narratives of the visible church.³

Milbank sees in Russian sophiology a predecessor to himself. To condense Milbank's logorrhea with a paraphrase, he says the sophiologists fused German idealism with "the classical tradition" to defend and extend the boundaries of orthodoxy.⁴ Undoubtedly, Bulgakov and the other sophiologists echo Milbank's refusal of the difference between nature and grace, and, subsequently, the autonomy of reason.⁵ James K. A. Smith has also observed that one of the things that initially attracted Milbank to Augustine was his analogous, though inverse, relationship to Christendom. Both we and Augustine stand on different sides of Christendom; Augustine's accedes while ours recedes.⁶ Probably, the same thing attracts Milbank to Bulgakov, who saw the demise of "Third Rome" and the official end of "Holy Empire" in his lifetime. Thus, one should expect that, all else being equal, his own ecclesiology and political theology should echo John Milbank's.

It doesn't.

A Milbankian Bulgakov?

The timing of Bulgakov's ordination reflects his estimation of the visible church's ability to credibly judge society. Though he long desired ordination, he put it off until 1918, when Russian Orthodoxy could no longer be implicated in corrupt political jockeying. Bulgakov was

3 Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," 218.

4 Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy," 4-5, available at <http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers.php>. The pdf version was downloaded to maintain consistency in pagination.

5 Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy," 1.

6 James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and Paternoster, 2004), 42-49.

often a fairly strident critic of the visible church.⁷ However, this willingness should not be confused with a Hauerwasian romance with primitive Christianity and its founding narratives. In a modern society the political “asceticism” (its so-called “intratextual” indifference to the state) was no longer an option.

Without placing blame, Bulgakov actually locates the birth of secularism in a theological failure of primitive church herself. Thrust into political prominence not long after she began to realize that her “last days” would be long and indefinite, and lacking, as yet, an explicit doctrine of “social Christianity,” the church brought her old politically ascetic (or withdrawn) attitude to bear upon a new political situation, one for which, as it turned out, she was woefully ill-equipped. The church focused on individual salvation more than systemic salvation, and advised people to be content with their stations. If they were poor, be happy and avoid sin. If they were rich, do good works and give to the poor. But the ironic thing about the “dialectic of history,” he notes, is that asceticism creates wealth, and wealth eventually leads to complex economic relationships and systems of exchange like the ones we have today.⁸ So, in a manner of speaking, Bulgakov says modernity begins not with *Kant* but with *Constantine*.

Modernity is Christian theology’s bastard child. We must atone for our long indifference to its upbringing, Bulgakov says, by developing an undeveloped doctrine of a social Christianity. We feel today like parts of a greater whole that we cannot control, like little screws in a big

7 He would later refer to this as the church’s “papalism.” Bulgakov, “The Episcopate” in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, 15. Along with the Holy Roman Empire, Bulgakov declared the Byzantine Empire, Tsarist Russia and even the Soviet Union guilty of confusing political power with the kingdom of God. The editors do not indicate when Bulgakov wrote this essay, but it probably comes from the time of the Sophia affair, c. 1935. We shall see below that Bulgakov was critical of Augustine’s use of the word “invisible” to describe the true church, but this critique is also based upon a misreading of his theology.

8 Bulgakov, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” 11. This fact, he says, is a classic example of the historical phenomenon of unintended outcomes, when one action or attitude unwittingly creates the condition for its inevitable contradiction. The same fact has been observed with respect to the preaching of John Wesley, who also advocated extreme asceticism, simple living that resulted in the eventual creation of wealth. See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 157-79.

machine. Christian theology must account for each screw and simultaneously attempt to realize the ideal shape and function of that machine.⁹ Not surprisingly, Bulgakov concludes that Russian Orthodoxy is better equipped than western Christianity to do this job. But his own solution will be momentarily tabled to consider the relevance of two options he rejects. For the sake of argument, the accuracy of his characterizations will not be contested, because the point is not his opinion about any particular branch of Christianity, but about ways Christian theology might comport itself toward society. One option Bulgakov rejects is the “Protestant” withdrawal from society, a kind of accelerated repetition of some of the tendencies of the Constantinian church. It is a rejection of a Christianity that, in Cavanaugh’s language, hands the body to the state and leaves the soul to God. It is the religion of the multi-billion dollar, church-going, Sudanese oil-rigging CEO, a Christianity that has “reconciled itself with the separation of the Church from life – the state, culture and economics being included in the latter.” Thus, we can conclude that Bulgakov wants to develop an ecclesiology and political theology that engages life – state, culture, and economics – without dominating it. Church domination of life is the second rejected alternative he associates with “Roman Catholic” “clericalization” of the world as “the only social form of Christianity.”¹⁰

Bulgakov’s refusal of clericalization amounts to a proxy refusal of John Milbank’s political theology, because it is a critique, ironically, based on a misreading of Augustine, a misreading that is precisely what John Milbank would have liked Augustine to have said. Bulgakov thinks Catholic clericalization pits the *Civitas Dei*, “which is the Church as an organization,” or the visible church against the “*Civitas diabolica*,” the whole profane, “pagan”

9 Bulgakov, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” in *Orthodoxy and Modern Society*, Variable Readings in Russian Philosophy (The Variable Press [no date or location given, speech presented at the Twentieth Annual Hale Memorial Sermon, Evanston, IL, 1934]), 12.

10 Bulgakov, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” 13.

world, which can only be saved by submitting itself to the (logic of the) visible church.

Bulgakov misreads Augustine in a couple of important ways. First, he confuses the visible church with the city of God to criticize its domination of economics, culture, and politics, but Augustine never said the visible church was the city of God.¹¹ The *civitas Dei* is the invisible church, or, for the sake of clarity, a better term would be the *true church*, because it is not as if the true church were less real than the visible church. The term “invisible” only refers to the ambiguous nature of the mixed visible body. In fact, without the *caritas* of the true church holding her together, the visible church would collapse completely.¹² The difference between the two is like the difference between the wind and its effects. The wind itself cannot be seen, but the effects of the wind are obvious. Likewise, the true church manifests in a mixed visible body, but the manifestations of the visible body are not necessarily true. Bulgakov’s well-intentioned, but mistaken criticism of Augustinian “clericalization” is nonetheless a proxy critique of one of the basic tenants of Radical Orthodoxy – the superiority of the visible church over-against the so-called “secular.”

Furthermore, Bulgakov mistakenly thinks Augustine uses the term “city of the devil” to describe the world outside the church. Thus, he sees in Augustine a false antagonism between church and world, an antagonism that would supposedly justify his clericalizing agenda. With no little irony Milbank’s theology, especially his early work, does just that: it imagines the “secular” as a corrupt realm dominated by the narratives of a violent pagan *mythos*, a *mythos* that the visible church must expose and oppose with its own peaceful narratives. The church may

11 It is unclear to what extent Milbank is critical of the doctrine of the invisible church as such (sometimes he seems not to recognize that there is a difference). In “Against Secular Order” he only explicitly criticizes Augustine for maintaining an indefinite, ongoing relationship between the church and the state, a criticism which only implies a rejection of the idea of an invisible church. Nevertheless, his revision of Augustine’s political theology is a de facto rejection of the church’s invisibility for her visible domination of public discourse. Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order,” 199; *Theology and Social Theory*, 147, 382-92, 398-408, 415-22, 427-32,

12 See Sermons 264, 265, and 265D.

occasionally pillage some aspects of the secular *mythos*, but secular society *as such* has only a kind of utilitarian value, one the church may exploit, but from which it can never truly learn.¹³ Bulgakov and, to a lesser extent, Augustine are more inclined to view the world outside the church as a space where God's redemption is being worked out, than a space where God's judgment has already been passed.¹⁴

Bulgakov the Augustinian?

Bulgakov is more Augustinian than he recognizes. At this point a word must be said about the sophiological foundation of his ecclesiology and political theology. Sophia is a multifaceted, complicated, and sometimes contradictory concept, but we can avoid being bogged down by the innumerable side issues that would come with a detailed discussion of sophiology by briefly focusing, instead, not on its content but on its function. At the heart of sophiology is the basic idea, later asserted by Kathryn Tanner, that God's transcendence is not at odds with God's immanence (which brings Bulgakov closer to Barth than he realized).¹⁵ Divine Sophia

13 This idea effectively limits the omnipresence of the Spirit and denies the Logos as the foundation of the cosmos.

14 Augustine's distinction between the visible and true churches would have precluded him from seeing the world itself as a place of judgment, since the world was also inside the visible church. So, the world would be judged to the extent that the visible church would also be judged. Cf. the conclusion to *Theology and Social Theory*, "In the midst of history, the judgement of God has already happened. And either the Church enacts the vision of paradisaal community which this judgement opens out, or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity: corruptio optimi pessima," 433.

15 See Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001). The difference between Tanner and Bulgakov is that, for Tanner, the point that God and the world are noncompetitive is the founding premise of a "brief systematic theology" developed from what otherwise amounts to a mere assertion. Bulgakov, on the other hand, attempts to explain why it must be the case that God's transcendence requires the cosmos itself to be immanent to the life of the Trinity. See Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (New York: Lindisfarne, 1993), 54-81, as well as *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 3-79. It is not true, as Milbank says, that Sophia makes God and the world immanent to each other, or as he puts it, "But if creation lies within God, God must inversely lie within creation." Such a statement would be too pantheistic for Bulgakov, who would prefer to preserve God's superiority over the creation with the formula by affirming that the creation is in God, and God inhabits the creation, a formula that better preserves the dependency of the creation on God without sacrificing God's intimate relationship with creation. Milbank seems to suggest in rather more Hegelian fashion than Bulgakov that God needs the world to be God, whereas Bulgakov would say that the existence of the world as such is simply an effect of God's being as love. The upshot of this difference is that Bulgakov preserves the superiority of the Bridegroom over the Bride, whereas Milbank much more pantheistically makes the Bride and

refers to the mutually apprehended love of the Trinity itself, and creaturely sophia refers to that love as it is temporally apprehended in the cosmos, whose pinnacle is the *imago Dei*. The world is in God and God inhabits the world, which means that God loves Godself by loving the world, and the world knows itself by knowing God. Thus, according to Paul Valliere, “A more complex theology of creation thereby emerges, since the cosmos is viewed as being governed not just by the condescension of the divine...but by the heavenwards aspiration of all creatures.”¹⁶ Sophiology places *theurgy* within *theosis*. Or to put it another way, social and systemic salvation are made integral to individual salvation as the line between self and other is blurred by the irreducible desire each creature has (knowingly or not) for participation in the divine nature. The social and ascetic impulses of Christianity thus converge in sophiology.

This concept of universal, irreducible desire is Bulgakov at his most Augustinian. Creaturely sophia is basically the good bishop’s restless heart...on speed! Because Bulgakov does not think the Fall incapacitates the will for the good, he extends Augustine’s irreducible desire to the heart of the universe itself. The result of this similarity-in-difference is an ecclesiology and political theology that corrects some of Milbank’s excesses.

In the first place, preserving Augustine’s distinction between the visible and true churches,¹⁷ whereby the true manifests in the visible to those who have “eyes to see,”¹⁸ corrects Milbank’s antagonistic relationship between the visible church and the invisible state. The church’s penetrating gaze is thus turned upon herself in order to transform society. This corrective helps clarify Milbank’s ambiguous idea that the church somehow self-corrects in the

Bridegroom equals. See, “Sophiology and Theurgy,” 30, 57ff.

16 Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), 270.

17 It is not entirely clear how much Bulgakov depends upon Augustine to make this distinction. See *The Orthodox Church*, trans. rev. Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1988), 1-8, 95-99.

18 Augustine and Bulgakov are also fundamentally in agreement that the true church is the humanity of Jesus extended from heaven into the world, mediated by the Eucharist. See J. Patout Burns, “The Eucharist as the Foundation of Christian Unity in North African Theology,” *Augustinian Studies* 32.1 (2001): 1-23.

course of history. Bulgakov would rather church become attuned to internal corruptions – “pagan” practices, and not just pagan narratives – especially those that marginalize, in order to realize a Christian socialism as a revolution from within her own *sobornia* (her mystical catholicity) that spills over her walls and into the world around her. This is how the church is an example to society, by turning inward.

In the second place, Bulgakov’s political theology explains better than Milbank how a Christian might behave without compromise in a society (how one can vote without apostasy). Milbank criticizes Augustine for allowing Roman coercion of the Donatists, because, he says, it made the church subservient to the state.¹⁹ But it seems to me that the opposite is true. Calling in Rome was Augustine’s last resort to free the Donatists who would be Catholic from the external pressures their bishops and the *circumcellions* exerted to keep them from converting. We can justifiably take issue with the methods, but what is at stake here is what they represent. Rather than indicating ecclesial subservience to the state, the Catholic Church made her home empire serve her good judgments. Augustine’s response to the Donatist controversy thus approximates Sergei Bulgakov ideal relationship between the church and her society.²⁰ He advocated a “symphonic” relationship between church and state (like the two-headed eagle symbolic of Orthodoxy, rather than the state-absorbing, holy amoeba of Radical Orthodoxy). In such a relationship, the church considers itself under a state, except when the state does not submit to the laws of the church, then the church considers herself under persecution. Thus, a Christian’s behavior in a society is determined by the situation of the church in that society.

19 I wonder at this charge if Milbank does not consider himself to be a more effective rhetor than Augustine, who was met with little more than stubborn refusal to see the truth even when it was clearly and effectively presented to the Donatist bishops. See Serge Lancel, *St Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM, 2002), 275-81. Also, Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 3rd ed. (Norwich: Canterbury, 2002), 237-75.

20 See Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 206.

Such an arrangement is not opposed to the separation of church and state, which Bulgakov adamantly supported, and cares little for how the state is actually organized.²¹ What Bulgakov opposed was the separation of church from life, what he called “secularism.”

To sum up the above, and conclude with a final point, Both Milbank and Bulgakov think of the church as a gift to the world, and the reason for the world’s existence. Nevertheless, the differences in the way they conceive of this relationship are subtle, but important.²² As if from the mouth of Milbank, Bulgakov says in response to secularism, “To meet this situation we must seek for a state of things in which the Church may penetrate as with inward power the whole of human life,” a penetration that is rhetorical, but, as said above, *contra* Milbank one that begins by a turn within. However, because of the integral relationship between *theosis* and *theurgy*, the church saves the world by realizing the ideal of Christian socialism, which she can only do by learning from the world.²³ Thus, in the final place, rather than simply pitting the institutional church against the state, Bulgakov wants the church to make visible her invisible ideal by taking the best of what the world has to offer, the world where God’s redemption is also happening more “instinctively,” and incorporating it into herself.²⁴ By including the best of what modern statecraft, culture, and economics have to offer “in the grace-abounding life of the Church,” she may return the life she has taken from the world back to the world so that its “inert and dark matter” may be transformed and made obedient to the Lamb who is coming and who already lives in his Bride.

21 Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 164, as well as “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” 20.

22 Augustine also thought that the world was created so that it might realize the city of God. See *CD* 19. (N check)

23 The reader would be right to detect a hint of Schmemmann, a student of Bulgakov, in this statement. See Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s, 1973).

24 Whereas, Milbank would rather the church make the world realize how great she already is. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 105ff.