SJT 70(4): 445–462 (2017)
doi:10.1017/S0036930617000394

Sergii Bulgakov's 'Sofiologiia smerti'

T. Allan Smith
University of St. Michael's College, 81 St. Mary Street, Toronto, ON M5S 1J4
allan.smith@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This article examines S. Bulgakov's treatise 'Sofiologiia smerti' ('Sophiology of Death'), which has been relatively neglected by scholars. Death is a topic that recurs with some frequency throughout Bulgakov's writings; that it merited its own study indicates the importance that he attached to the topic. The article provides a biographical, cultural and intellectual context for the treatise, as well some comments on its literary features. Bulgakov's use of sophiology and kenotic theology to explore the process of dying and the fact of death itself come under review. His reflections on human death and dying lead Bulgakov to explore how the Son of God experienced death and the involvement of the Trinity itself in that experience. Christ becomes fully human when he dies, and his death is the pattern for all human death.

Keywords: Christ, death and dying, divine humanity, kenosis, sophiology, Trinity

Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov's treatise 'Sofiologiia smerti' ('Sophiology of Death') has been largely overlooked by scholars interested in his thought.[1] In addition to presenting a profound consideration of the phenomenon of death, it contains reflections on religious aesthetics, incorporates personal experience as a source for theological reflection, and applies kenosis and sophiology to the central theme of the treatise and its implications for christology. Bulgakov chose to set forth his thoughts on death in a literary diptych, two panels in words that depict the two distinct moments in the experience that defines humans as finite creatures: the process of dying, with its painful aura of abandonment, and death itself, which stands as the ultimate revelation of the truth about human life. As with the more familiar painted diptych, only

[1] Sergii N. Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti', in V. V. Sapov (ed.), *Tikhie Dumy* (Moscow: Respublika, 1996), pp. 275–306 (previously published in *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia* 127 (1978), pp. 18–41; 128 (1979), pp. 13–32). The only study thus far is Lilianna Kiejzik, 'Sergei Bulgakov's sophiology of death', *Studies in East European Thought* 62 (2010), pp. 55–62. For a general examination of Bulgakov's writings on death, see Jean-Claude Roberti, 'La vision de la mort dans l'oeuvre du Père Serge Boulgakov', *Colloque Serge Boulgakov*, ed. Nikita Struve (Paris: Action Chrétienne des Étudiants Russes, 1985), pp. 123–9.

when both panels are considered together does the full meaning of the treatise emerge. Most of Bulgakov's scholarly writings assume the traditional forms of essays, treatises and monographs; but he also wrote two dialogues and experimented with impressionistic styles to express his thought, so that some attention to the literary features of this treatise is warranted.[2] This article will briefly attend to these elements, but its focus will be on Bulgakov's thoughts about dying and death. The first part of this article will situate Bulgakov in the intellectual context of the early twentieth century that is relevant to his own intellectual development. This will entail a brief exposition of sophiology, his indebtedness to German idealism, and his place in the Silver Age of Russian culture.

Bulgakov constructed his sophiology on the foundations laid by Vladimir Solovyov.[3] He cleared away the lingering gnostic and mystical elements in the sophiological speculations of both Solovyov and his principal follower, Pavel Florensky, in order to make of sophiology a productive method for rethinking traditional Orthodox theological opinions and dogmas. Although in its origins heavily indebted to personal experiences of the mysterious Sophia and the eternal feminine, sophiology ultimately rests on the basic christological dogma defined at the Council of Chalcedon: that the divine and the human natures are united in the one person Jesus Christ. As Bulgakov himself states

> the central problem of Sophiology is the question about the relationship of God and the world, or what is essentially the same thing, of God and humankind. In other words, Sophiology is the question about the power and significance of Divine Humanity and moreover not only of the Godhuman as the incarnate Logos, but precisely Divine Humanity as the unity of God with the whole created world – in humankind and through humankind.[4]

Inspired by Proverbs 8, where Wisdom appears as a personified attribute of God, the sophiologists adopted the term Sophia in part to emphasise the personal character of divine nature. Within the Godhead, Sophia, or

[2] See e.g. the two dialogues *Na piru bogov* (Sofia, 1921) and the posthumously published *U sten Khersonisa* (1922) and his impressionistic study 'Iuda Iskariot Apostol-Predatel'', *Put'* 26, 27 (1931), pp. 3–60, pp. 3-42.

[3] Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995). Solovyov's main writings on Sophia are available in *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[4] Sergii Bulgakov, 'Tsentral'naia problema sofiologii', in *Tikhie Dumy*, p. 269. The text was originally published in German in 1936. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

more properly, Divine Sophia, is the name of the triune, tri-personal divine nature. Love, beauty, truth, glory and wisdom are subsumed as Divine Sophia. Creaturely Sophia is the nature of the created world, including humankind; it is Sophia in the process of becoming divinised.[5] Although sometimes Sophia seemed to be given the status of a divine person, Bulgakov repudiated this and spoke of Sophia as hypostatisedness.[6] That is, Sophia approaches the concreteness of a hypostasis without actually becoming as much. Sophiology views reality as the union of two correlative and distinct elements, so that binary language is a common feature of sophiology: God and the world, Creator and creature, divine and human, life and death; but these pairs are inseparably connected into an all-unity.

Bulgakov recognised that sophiology's emphasis on the essential unity of the Creator and the creation opened the door to pantheism, but he maintained that sophiology was better understood as panentheism.[7] Indeed, throughout his theological corpus the phrase, 'God will be all in all', appears with some frequency and can be regarded as the leitmotif of his elaboration of eschatology. Everything begins and ends in God. The Creator and the creation are distinct, but necessarily connected. The Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ is the paradigm of the connection: just as the two natures, human and divine, are united in the one person without confusion, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, so too the one reality Uncreated and created exists without confusion, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably. But the Chalcedonian definition is more than a paradigm; it also contains an underappreciated truth about the divine nature itself, suggesting that even the divine nature, which entered into union with human nature in the incarnation, is in some sense human. The term for this is *Bogochelovechestvo* – theanthropy or divine humanity – a concept he inherited from Solovyov. That is, if the human is created in the image and likeness of God, then God's own nature must be human in some way (though not in the sense of anthropomorphism).

Kenosis, which enjoyed some currency in the early decades of the twentieth century, figures prominently in Bulgakov's sophiology.[8] Far from

[5] Bulgakov's theological project is thoroughly explored by Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 227–403.

[6] He tried to clarify this in *Ipostas' i ipostasnost'* (Prague: Plamia, 1925), pp. 353–71.

[7] E.g. he states, 'This is *panentheism*, where all is in God or for God, in contradistinction or opposition to *pantheism*, that is, pan-divinity and thus the absence of divinity.' Sergii Bulgakov, *Agnets Bozhii* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1933), p. 144; ET: *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), p, 121.

[8] For kenosis in the theological works of Bulgakov, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, 'The Kenotic Theology of Sergius Bulgakov', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005), pp. 251–69.

restricting it to the self-emptying act of the Son in the incarnation, Bulgakov transposes kenosis to the immanent Trinity and each of the divine persons. The Father's sacrificial love in sending his Son to die for the sake of humankind, the Son's self-sacrifice on the cross as an act of love for the Father and the creation, and the Holy Spirit's self-limitation in the Son's experience of God-forsakenness at the moment of death are kenotic acts that reveal the true quality of the intrapersonal relations obtaining in the Trinity and that ground the kenosis of the incarnate Son of God in history.[9]

Bulgakov owed much to the German philosophical tradition of the nineteenth century. As has been noted by Gerald Frankenhäuser, Immanuel Kant and his successors subjected the topic of death to an important re-evaluation.[10] Bulgakov could not accept the view of death as the annihilation of the human being proposed by the philosophers of pessimism, Arthur Schopenhauer, Arthur Drews and Eduard von Hartmann. The Christian conviction that death has been defeated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ informed Bulgakov's more optimistic view of death. Especially relevant to the theme of death is the work of Nikolai F. Fedorov (1828–1903), who proposed as the common task of humankind the duty to resurrect the dead in order to make real in a this-worldly, though ultimately non-Christian, mechanistic-scientific way the central belief of Orthodox Christianity, the resurrection of Christ and with him of all human beings, thereby getting rid of death itself.[11] Bulgakov will explicitly deal with Fedorov's ideas in 'Sofiologiia smerti'.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the so-called Silver Age of Russian culture, Fedorov's ideas resounded favourably among leading representatives of literary and political Russia, idealist and materialist alike, who were captivated by the prospect of eliminating death altogether. Generally united in their rejection of Russian Orthodoxy's traditional doctrines concerning death and immortality and favouring a materialist-scientific conceptualisation, this group divided over the manner in which the abolition of death would be realised: either through the survival of the human collective in which the disintegrative features of the old world would be eradicated through social reform, at the expense of self-sacrificing

[9] Bulgakov offers his most sustained treatment of kenosis in *Agnets Bozhii*, pp. 240–75 (*Lamb of God*, pp. 213–47).

[10] Gerald Frankenhäuser, *Die Auffassungen von Tod und Unsterblichkeit in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie von Emmanuel Kant bis Ludwig Feuerbach* (Frankfurt a. M.: Haag + Herchen, 1991).

[11] See *Filosofiia obshchego dela: stat'i, mysli i pis'ma*, 2 vols, ed. V. A Kozhevnikov and N. Peterson (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1985); Michael Hagemeister, *Nikolaj Fedorov: Studien zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung* (Munich: Sagner, 1989).

individuals, or through the establishment of a this-worldly utopia where death is physically eliminated for each individual member and not just the species *Homo sapiens*.[12] Bulgakov too was part of the social, cultural and political upheavals associated with the Silver Age, especially on the political front; but as Russia careened towards the October 1917 revolution, he distanced himself from the anti-religious, materialist convictions that were gaining the upper hand.[13] It is possible to read his two major works from the Silver Age, *The Philosophy of Economy* (*Filosofiia khoziaistva*) and *Unfading Light* (*Svet nevechernii*), as his summative repudiation of atheistic materialism and his promotion of a Christian materialism that will become a major concern throughout his subsequent theological period from 1918 until his death in 1944.[14]

Finally, personal, mystical experiences were a significant source upon which Bulgakov drew as he created his philosophical and especially his theological works. The theoretical justification for their value as ways of knowing is given in *Unfading Light*. These experiences often arose in the contemplation of nature, but an equally important catalyst was works of religious art. In other cases, works of art serve as sources that assist in elucidating his thought, as in 'Sofiologiia smerti', where the *Isenheim Altarpiece* of Matthias Grünewald, and *The Body of the Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein the Younger function as evidence in support of his exposition on the meaning of dying and death.[15]

Bulgakov referred to the phenomenon of death throughout his writing career. Most of his reflections on death appear in his works produced in the 1930s, but a relatively sustained discussion of death can be found in *Philosophy of Economy* (1912) and *Unfading Light* (1917).[16] A discussion of death is included in his essay, 'On Holy Relics (In Response to their Desecration)', written in 1918 as a response to the Bolsheviks' unearthing of revered saints'

[12] This has been thoroughly studied in Irene Masing-Delic, *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[13] See his essay 'Intelligentsiia i religiia: O protivorechivosti sovremennogo bezreligioznogo mirovozzreniia' ('Intelligentsia and Religion: On the Contradiction of the Contemporary Areligious Worldview'), *Russkaia Mysl'* 3 (1908), pp. 72–103; reprint, S. N. Bulgakov, *Religiia i intelligentsia* (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Olega Abyshko: Satis, 2010), pp. 5–47.

[14] Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. and ed. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. and ed. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012).

[15] 'Sofiologiia smerti', pp. 288, 301–2.

[16] The most significant passages dealing with death in *Philosophy of Economy* are pp. 68–73, 142–54, 190–l; but death appears many more times throughout the book; in *Unfading Light*, pp. 192–3, 267–9, 351–4.

bodies, particularly that of St Seraphim of Sarov, and subjecting them to so-called scientific analysis with the aim of proving relics to be a deception.[17] Death also appears in the first dogmatic trilogy penned in the 1920s (*The Burning Bush, The Friend of the Bridegroom, Jacob's Ladder*), but as a theme it remains decidedly subordinate to his theological exposition of divine and creaturely Sophia.[18]

While reflection on the meaning of dying and death is by no means unexpected in a religious thinker such as Bulgakov, at least some of his enthusiasm for the topic is rooted in his biography. He himself remarks that he grew up surrounded by death: 'Death was our governess in that house; how much death there was in it ... but even in my childhood death stood close to us, without ever departing.'[19] As a 12 year-old, he saw his grandfather die at home; two younger siblings followed. The death of one of them, Kolia, he later interpreted as a harbinger of the death of his beloved son Ivan;[20] the religious impact of the latter death is recounted in *Unfading Light*.[21] In addition to the phenomenon of dying and death, the young Bulgakov was immersed in the Orthodox funeral liturgy, its texts and music and rituals, thanks to his father's duties as priest in the Livny cemetery church. But death held no dread for Bulgakov. Again, he commented after his grandfather's death: 'With his passing, death entered my childhood consciousness for the first time (I was 12); on the one hand I was mystically shaken, on the other hand, I was protected by an animal self-love. They did funerals well in Livny: it was indeed like some sort of Egypt. And above all there was no fear in the face of death.'[22]

Bulgakov addressed the theme of death in volume one of the second dogmatic trilogy on divine humanity, *The Lamb of God* (*Agnets Bozhii*) written in 1933, situating it in a broader discussion of the kenotic character of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity.[23] He looked cursorily

[17] The essay is available in *Relics and Miracles: Two Theological Essays*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), pp. 1–40; esp. 21–31.

[18] *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009); *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003); *Jacob's Ladder: On Angels*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

[19] Bulgakov, 'Moia rodina', in *Tikhie dumy*, p. 317. His reminiscences about his homeland were written in Oct. 1939, roughly contemporaneous with 'Sofiologiia smerti'.

[20] Bulgakov, 'Moia rodina', p. 317.

[21] Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii*, pp. 12–14; *Unfading Light*, pp. 14–16.

[22] Bulgakov, 'Moia rodina', p. 315.

[23] Bulgakov, *Agnets Bozhii*, pp. 340–7, 393–401, 402–8 (*Lamb of God*, pp. 310–20, 364–71, 372–9).

at death in his essay, 'The Problem of "Conditional Immortality" (From an Introduction to Eschatology)', written in 1935.[24] Two sermons from 1938, 'Siia est' blagoslovennaia subbota' ('This is the blessed Sabbath), and 'Smertiiu smert' proprav' ('Trampling down death by death'), bring to a pastoral setting the fruits of his professional activity as a dogmatic theologian reflecting on the meaning of death.[25]

Bulgakov completed 'Sofiologiia smerti' in 1939, but it would not appear in print until some forty years later.[26] Since he refers to the text in volume three of his second trilogy, *Nevesta Agntsa* (*Bride of the Lamb*), 'Sofiologiia smerti' presumably predates the larger work, but it is not exactly clear by how much.[27] In *Bride of the Lamb* Bulgakov's reflections on death comprise chapter 7, 'Death and the State beyond the Grave'. Perhaps because it was written as an independent work, 'Sofiologiia smerti' offers a more satisfying discussion of dying and death than is contained in *Bride of the Lamb*, from which it differs in a number of ways. An important feature of the treatise is that it omits the lengthy discussion of the spirit's experiences beyond the grave found in *Bride of the Lamb* and substitutes two personal reminiscences: his miraculous recovery from throat cancer in 1939 and the lingering anxiety which it occasioned, and an earlier, serious illness in 1926 that brought Bulgakov to the brink of death but filled him with a sense of peace and joy. The inclusion of personal testimonies of spiritual experiences is not surprising. In *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov commented that 'if people of faith started to tell their own story, what they have seen and come to know with ultimate reliability, a mountain would be formed under which the hill of skeptical rationalism would be buried and hidden from sight'.[28]

Bulgakov's manner of developing his argument is circuitous; themes apparently well-explicated reappear later in his discourse where they are subjected to yet another examination. Though this can be a frustrating experience for his readers, such a method allows him to present as fully as possible the complexities of a given topic with the result that one sees in a single glance, as it were, the whole problem and its resolution. This is certainly true of 'Sofiologiia smerti', whose bipartite structure both

[24] Sergii Bulgakov, 'Problema "uslovnogo bessmertiia" (Iz vvedeniia v èskhatologiiu)', *Put'* 52 (1936), pp. 3–23; and 53 (1937), pp. 3–19.

[25] Sergii Bulgakov, *Slova, poucheniia, besedy* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1987), pp. 260–5, 274–8.

[26] See n. 1 above.

[27] Sergii Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agntsa* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1945), p. 381, n. 1; ET: *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 352, n. 2. As he explains in the foreword, the book was completed in 1939 but could not be published because of the outbreak of the Second World War.

[28] Bulgakov, *Svet Nevechernii*, p. 14 (*Unfading Light*, p. 16).

complicates and illuminates the elaboration of Bulgakov's ideas. Kenosis, freedom, human nature, divine and creaturely Sophia, which appear in the first part also come up for examination in the second part of the diptych; but even in each part, these themes undergo repeated scrutiny and exposition. Kenosis, for example, which is so important for his whole argument, is first examined with respect to the second hypostasis' voluntary self-limitation in the incarnation; but Bulgakov also reflects on the kenosis of the Trinity and of each of the divine persons, on the assumption not just of human nature, but fallen human nature, and its mortality. These reappear in the second half of the treatise, but from a slightly different perspective. The first part of the treatise culminates in his reflections on the human phenomenon of dying (*umiranie*), to which he brings his own experience and his interpretation of Christ's assumption of mortal human nature in the incarnation. The second part begins with the depiction of an earlier sickness that brought him to an experience of death itself as one of radiance and joy, and then offers a theological reflection on what it meant, following the reverse order of part one. Here too he reflects on the meaning of Christ's assumption of mortality. The first part stands under the shadow of 'My God, why have you abandoned me', while over the second hover the words, 'It is accomplished'. In this, the treatise is a symbol of sophianicity, a union of two different but mutually and necessarily interconnected realms, a literary expression of Bulgakov's entire sophiological project. Towards the end of part one, Bulgakov suggests that it was thanks to his earlier near-death experience that he was able to surmount the despair of his experience of dying: 'however, if in dying itself the experience of death in its reality and fullness remains inaccessible to us, nevertheless a forewarning of such an experience is possible ... it was given to me to experience precisely this forewarning of death exemplarily some fifteen years before my final illness'.[29] The treatise as a whole thus conforms to a chiastic structure.

Bulgakov opens the treatise with his oft-reiterated conviction that God did not make death, but only permitted it to arise as a result of sin. He accepted the patristic maxim that humans were created with the possibility of immortality, *posse non mori*, and understood it as a task to be realised by the exercise of freedom. But that possibility was not realised and humans became mortal.[30] Death is now a necessary fact of human existence, and Bulgakov disallows any attempt to escape from it. Like all of creation, humankind is comprised of being and non-being, of non-creaturely and creaturely elements. Sin destroyed the stability of human existence, dividing the creaturely from the non-creaturely in humankind. Once it was separated from the non-creaturely,

[29] Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti', p. 290.
[30] Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agntsa*, pp. 378–80 (*Bride of the Lamb*, pp. 349–51).

the creaturely became mortal. But death is not omnipotent or unconditional, and in fact has already been defeated by the resurrection of Christ.

What is death? Death is not the annihilation of the human creature; rather it is the rupture of the complexity of human nature, 'the torturous removal of the spirit from the body, with the spirit surrendered to the realm of the afterlife, the body handed over to decay though preserving a vital power for resurrection and immortality'.[31] For Bulgakov a human being is composed of three parts: spirit, soul, and body. The soul serves as the vital energy of the body and in a certain sense links the spirit with the body so that it can experience the physical world. In death, the spirit leaves the body, while the soul becomes dormant, its energy rendered potential. In other words, death is not a return to non-being; it is analogous to a deep sleep.

Bulgakov wants to explore how Christ can be said to have suffered death, understood as the separation of the uncreated from the created, and what this means for humankind. For in Christ, according to the Chalcedonian doctrine, the divine and human natures are united and cannot be divided. As he puts it, 'What does this death of the Godhuman signify, the focus of death, mortality itself? How can the Godhuman die in whom God himself "is united without separation and without confusion with the human being"? ... Since his Divinity is Divine Sophia, how could it be divided from creaturely Sophia?'[32] The answer is kenosis, the voluntary self-humiliation and diminishment of divinity in the incarnation. Two pieces of tradition underlie the discussion: a verse from the liturgical treasure store of Eastern Orthodoxy, 'You were in the grave in the flesh, in hell with a soul as God, and on the throne, O Christ, with the Father and the Spirit', and Philippians 2:7–8. Christ strips himself of his divinity without losing his divine nature, an antinomy that is intelligible only by faith. Bulgakov examines the multiple meanings of kenosis as he presses his discussion forward.

The incarnation itself is the first level of kenotic meaning, entailing the Son of God's acceptance of a finite nature and making it his own. But in addition to this union of two incommensurate natures in the one person of Christ, the actual human nature assumed by Christ is burdened by sin and death; this is a second level of kenosis. For while he is personally and by nature sinless, the incarnate Son of God assumes the likeness of sinful nature, and in particular, its mortal condition. Jesus Christ cannot sin; by virtue of the incarnation, his human nature is divinised, though not fully: 'it is only the beginning and not the end of the path'.[33] The fullness of the divinisation of Christ's human

[31] Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti', p. 278.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., p. 276.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nature comes in the resurrection and glorification, when creaturely Sophia is fully penetrated by Divine Sophia, and the fullness of divine humanity has been achieved.[34] But this happens only after the experience of death. In the act of self-diminishment that the incarnation entails, Christ's divine nature accepts human mortality, it reduces itself to the state of permitting the death of the human nature with which it is united inseparably and without confusion.[35] This death of the human nature becomes Christ's own death, but in a special and distinct way. His death is violent, whereas human death after Adam is inevitable, natural. Death for Bulgakov, as we have seen, is not annihilation. Rather, the death of the human being means the destruction of its complex nature, that is, the 'disengagement of the spirit from the animated body'.[36] Death affects the spiritual and corporeal elements of the human being; it brings the painful division of spirit from body, and consigns the spirit to a realm beyond the grave full of loss, whereas the body enters a phase of physical deterioration, corruption, all the while keeping a vivifying power that facilitates resurrection, the soul.[37] A similar process happens in the death of Christ, though with an important difference: his body cannot undergo corruption, as it is already in the process of being divinised by virtue of the union of the divine and human natures, Divine Sophia and creaturely Sophia, in the incarnation. The two natures cannot be separated. The divine co-dies with the human, and in trying to explain this Bulgakov plumbs yet another depth of the meaning of kenosis, perhaps one of his most challenging insights, namely, the kenosis of the Holy Trinity. In becoming incarnate, the hypostasis of the Son accepted the limitations of human nature without losing his divinity; but he really did take on human nature and entered into a process of divinisation, which is completed only after the process of dying has been fully endured.[38] And while this act of incarnation is specific to the hypostasis of the Son, both the Father and the Holy Spirit are intimately involved in it. The kenosis of the Father consists in his sending the Son as an act of his sacrificial love, such that the Father can be said to co-suffer with the Son on the cross: 'The Son does the Father's will, and this unity of will and mutual knowledge ("no one knows the Son, only the Father, and no one knows the Father, only the Son") attests to the unity of the life and unity of suffering in the common kenosis of love, although each of them differently.'[39] The

[34] Ibid., p. 277.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., p. 278.
[37] Ibid. See *Nevesta Agntsa*, pp. 378–406 (*Bride of the Lamb*, pp. 349–76), where Bulgakov goes into some detail about the post-mortem existence of the spirit, soul and body.
[38] Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti', p. 278.
[39] Ibid., p. 279.

kenosis of the Holy Spirit, who perpetually rests on the Son and unites Father and Son in love and as their love, shares in the mission of the Son for the salvation of the world, which means sharing in his dying.[40] The key for Bulgakov is the garden of Gethsemane and the painful words of Christ from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?' These episodes reveal that Christ's mission was to suffer, as an expression of the Father's sacrificial love. Suffering is twofold: the agony of accepting the Father's will to the full and dying on the cross, and the loneliness of abandonment by God that is at the very heart of the experience of dying and death.

Bulgakov states clearly that the abandonment of the Son does not signify some sort of change in the immanent Trinity: the Son is not separated from the Father and the Holy Spirit. Rather, one must look at it economically.[41] The abandonment that lays hold of Christ on the cross is for Bulgakov the sensation of the Father's love becoming imperceptible, and the darkness of the sixth through the ninth hour is the halting of the Father's love, when He stops revealing His love of the Son to the Son, an act that is the greatest expression of the sacrificial nature of the Father's love and the Father's co-dying with the Son.[42] But the abandonment of the Son by the Father necessarily implicates the Holy Spirit, who is the hypostasis of love uniting the persons of the Trinity. Again, in the immanent Trinity, no abandonment can be conceived, but economically the Holy Spirit ceases to function as the uniting hypostasis of Father and Son, and remains only with the Father:

> The Holy Spirit, as the incarnating hypostasis, by the action of which the divine incarnation is accomplished, abides on the Son, but no longer in the deliberate role of envoy of the Father as happened at the Baptism, but in his own proper operation. The world in the Godhuman is as if separated from the Father although the Holy Spirit by His power keeps it in existence, even shaken in its foundation.[43]

Bulgakov recognises a difficulty here: how can the hypostasis of love cease to love? The abandonment of the Son by the Father expresses fully the sacrificial love of the Father for the Son, but the abandonment is realised by the Holy Spirit's ceasing to unite Father and Son in love. Here the kenosis of the Spirit reaches its climax: for the sake of love, love stops loving. It is a contradiction which forces the exuberantly cataphatic Bulgakov to admit that

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., p. 280.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., p. 281.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press

he is at a loss for words.[44] The abandonment of the Son brings to completion the Son's dying, at which point he releases himself into the Father's hands. Bulgakov seems to read, 'Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit', as a statement about the Trinity's involvement in the entire process of the Son's dying on the cross, for the Spirit whom the Son commends to the Father is the Holy Spirit who is always abiding on the Son; by releasing him as he himself returns to the Father, the Son completes the trinitarian participation in the crucifixion.[45] All three persons co-die, and co-grieve the abandonment and loss.

For Bulgakov, God's abandonment of the Godhuman in his dying signifies the kenotic self-reduction of the divine nature to the level of potency.[46] This means that the Godhuman is so kenotically diminished that only the human dimension is manifested; that total self-reduction allows the Godhuman to encounter death. Bulgakov writes:

> But the question arises, is such a measure of kenosis possible which is not already 'the division of natures'? Is such a victory of death possible beyond which there is no longer any resurrecting life and where corruption sets in? No, it is impossible, for it is said: 'you will not leave my soul in hell, and you will not let your holy one see corruption' (Acts 2:27, Psalm 15:10). Kenosis is only a *state* which can be appropriated by divine being – temporarily and transiently, as a *path* towards resurrection, but it is itself not mortal being into which divine being would be transformed. It is as if Divinity were rendered powerless in the depths of kenosis, but only until its cessation, when it is overcome. Such is the immanent dialectic of kenosis in divine humanity.[47]

The point here seems to be that when the human nature of the Godhuman dies, the divine nature has reached a threshold which it does not cross; in that instant the Godhuman experiences death as a human being, but in so doing death is robbed of its victory. He continues:

> Kenotically it [divine humanity] is accessible to dying, but the Death of the Godhuman can only be victory over death: 'trampling down death by death'. And if therefore death is impossible for the Godhuman, He

[44] 'Love, as if not loving for the sake of love, the perfecting efficacy abiding in inaction – such is the incomprehensible contradiction of the hypostatic property of the Holy Spirit. There are no words in human language to express this impossibility for Love itself to love, and there is no concept for comprehending it.' Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 282.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., p. 283.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> becomes kenotically accessible to dying. Nevertheless this dying, which is not the literal death of corruption, is that state of death in which the Lord rests in the grave. The Godhuman lives out death, having tasted it, although without surrendering to its power in keeping with His Divinity and divinised humanity. His Divine Humanity enters into the fullness of power and glory precisely through dying.[48]

Having looked at how the kenosis affects the divine and human natures in Christ's experience of death, Bulgakov turns to the kenosis of Sophia in its two aspects. Divine Sophia becomes inert while creaturely Sophia remains fully operative, though suffering and dying. Sophianic kenosis resembles the division of natures and the loss of divinity; however, this is only the path leading to the fullest reunion of the two aspects in the resurrection. He writes:

> humanity, creaturely Sophia, must have been disclosed to the depths not only in its positive force, which is inherent to it as the image of Divine Sophia, but also in Adam's nature, weakened by the fall, participating in mortality. But in union with Divine Sophia it participates in this divine nature and in this union the ultimate depth of kenosis is reached, the depth of human infirmity is revealed through the voluntary acceptance by Christ of the human fall for the sake of its restoration and salvation.[49]

Christ knows the entire bitterness and agony of death in his experience of dying; but whereas for human beings, dying entails the victory of death, for Christ dying is victory over death. His dying on the cross, the perfect and complete execution of the Father's will, means that he experiences the totality of death with its universal human victims, and has brought that ultimate desolation through resurrection to glorification.[50] We gain full access to this mystery of death only in our own death. He writes,

> The Godhuman in dying is a human being, whose Divinity is concealed even from Himself – it is concealed for us as well who are divinised through Him. In death Christ abides with us as it were on a single line – of human helplessness, suffering and the horror of those sitting in

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., pp. 283–4.

[50] 'One can say that in this fullness of death, or rather, of the dying of Christ, is included the death of every human being and of all humanity. If Christ redeems and resurrects every human being it is only because He co-dies with them and in them. From this it follows that Christ glorified and seated at the right hand of the Father even now suffers and dies with humanity, the sufferings and death of which he took into himself once for all and lived out on Golgotha.' Ibid., p. 284.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> darkness: 'you have placed me in the pit of the underworld, in darkness and the shadow of death'.[51]

At this point, he turns to his own experience of dying, which came during Holy Week of 1939. Bulgakov had to undergo two operations for throat cancer, during which he had his experience of dying.[52] The second operation took place during Holy Week, and Bulgakov consciously identified with the events of Christ's passion as he underwent surgery. Bulgakov describes the terrible pain, and above all the sense of being smothered and deprived of life's breath that resulted from the operation.[53] He felt himself on the brink of death itself, trapped between the, 'Why have you abandoned me?', and, 'He gave up his spirit', but he was nonetheless clear that this particularly vivid taste of mortality was not death, but the process of dying (*umiranie*).[54] Whereas previously he had considered death to be a joyful and liberating experience, now he was overwhelmed by gloom, darkness and frightening intellectual emptiness. He sensed God's presence, but it did not fill him with happiness. In that experience he died in and with Christ, in and with God, writing, 'I came to know Christ in my dying, his proximity to me was palpable, almost physical, but as one lying with me "an ulcerated and wounded corpse".'[55] He understood in his own person how Christ died in his humanity; he could sense the full weight of Christ's abandonment by God on the cross. Christ died a human death in order to accept the death of the Godhuman through that death.[56] In that excruciating moment a piece of art came to mind, the famous *Body of the Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein the Younger, and then a recollection of Dostoevsky's treatment of the same theme. Here the use of art to explicate an otherwise inexpressible theological or spiritual truth comes to the fore: it is not death that is depicted, writes Bulgakov, but dying, 'not the power of posthumous transfiguration which comes with resurrection and on the path towards it, but stiffened death halted in dying'.[57] The point becomes clearer by the comparison he makes with the *Isenheim Altarpiece* of Matthias Grünewald. As horrific as the tormented body of Christ on the cross appears in that work, Bulgakov maintains that Grünewald shows only a moment in the transition from life to death, with the glory of the resurrection already present, whereas in Holbein's painting, dying is still under way, death itself

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., pp. 285–90.
[53] Ibid., pp. 285–7.
[54] Ibid., p. 287.
[55] Ibid., p. 288.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

has not set in.[58] That is what Christ experienced, the dying of the human being, and for Bulgakov his own dying revealed to him how Christ's humanity died. 'Dying, accomplished in the death of the Godhuman, could only be accomplished humanly, i.e. in the God-forsakenness of the human being.'[59] One nature, the divine, became inoperative, while the other remained fully operative, only to die. Divinity withdrew into itself, as it were, and did not intervene in the dying and death of the humanity in the Godhuman. By accepting the death of the humanity in himself, Christ accepted the death of the Godhuman. For this reason, our co-dying with Christ is a revelation about Christ's death, for we enter into that same sense and reality of utter abandonment that Christ in his humanity underwent.[60] But dying is not death itself; it brings us to the brink of death, but no further. Only death can reveal anything about death, but that experience is inaccessible to the living.[61] Dying, the suffocating, claustrophobic sensation of losing contact with the living reality of human existence, is the negative side of death, distinct from it but indissolubly connected with it. As the second half of the diptych makes clear, death itself is liberating radiance.

Part two of the diptych opens with Bulgakov's depiction of his own near-death experience.[62] Sensations of intense burning heat, the dissolution of his physical body and the sharpening of his spiritual faculties accompanied his growing awareness that he was crossing over from this world to the next, that he was slowly but surely coming into the presence of God. Light and brilliance began to flood his senses, and then his guardian angel called him back to life. In that moment he felt liberated from his sins even though he was still physically ill.[63] As he wrote, 'I cannot now comprehend how it happened, but one and the same summons and command that liberated me from the life of this world simultaneously determined my return to life . . . I felt as if I were a new born child because in my life a rupture

[58] 'The crucifixion by Grünewald is only a moment in the dialectic of death, inseparably linked with the resurrection in glory that is given alongside of other depictions in the polyptych. Grünewald gives a terrible image of death in its putrescence after dying has been completed and made powerless by this. But with Holbein even if in a putrid image, one is given to feel the dying which is not already accomplished but still under way, its very force.' Ibid., p. 288.

[59] Ibid.

[60] 'Christ died our human death in order to accept the death of the Godhuman through it. For this reason in our dying, as a co-dying with Him, there is a revelation of Christ's death, although not yet of his glory.' Ibid., p. 289.

[61] Ibid., p. 290.

[62] Ibid., pp. 291–3.

[63] His description of being in a fiery furnace and coming out cleansed and peaceful is reminiscent of popular Catholic belief about purgatory.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press

had occurred, the liberating hand of death had passed through it.'[64] This experience of death revealed to him the afterlife and the joy of the coming age; it confirmed his belief that death is not final, but only a stage leading to the fullness of life. Bulgakov acknowledges that what he experienced was only a foretaste of death at most, but he accepted it as a true disclosure of death's features; it was as if the shroud concealing the life of the age to come had been pulled back. Whereas his experience of dying cut him off from all connections with people, ideas, history, in his experience of death he felt included in fullness, apocalypse, and revelation of the future age.[65]

Bulgakov then returns to a sustained examination of the meaning of Christ's dying and death. The salient point of that discussion is that the conquest or defeat of death is a divine and human work, the cooperation of divine and creaturely Sophia in the Godhuman. Were this not the case, and had God instead determined to end mortality and death in humankind by some arbitrary divine intervention, for example by destroying old Adamic humanity and creating a new humankind, God would have demonstrated the failure of creation itself and opened the door to a repetition of the fall.[66] Neither can death be defeated solely by human effort. Fedorov's common task of physically resurrecting all of our ancestors cannot succeed, says Bulgakov, because it presumes that death is primarily a physical reality, when in fact it is a spiritual one.[67] Though it affects the corporeal dimension of human life, the only way of defeating death is through an inner, spiritual act.[68] The Godhuman makes use of his creaturely Sophia or human nature in freely accepting the possibility of death – for the effect of the incarnation and the divinisation of his human nature made natural death an impossibility for him. Only by obeying the Father's will and accepting human mortality as his own condition can the Godhuman actually die. But it is precisely the human, creaturely nature which accomplishes this. By destroying death through death, the Godhuman reveals the sophianic meaning of death itself: 'It is the gate of immortality. Death is precisely the death of Christ, and

[64] Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti', p. 293. The same episode is recounted in *Lestvitsa Iakovlia*, pp. 31–3 (*Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 18–19).

[65] Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti', p. 293.

[66] Ibid., pp. 294–5, 304.

[67] He made this same point in 1906 in 'Voskresenie Khrista i sovremennoe soznanie' ('The Resurrection of Christ and Contemporary Consciousness'), where he wrote, 'for Christianity death is not a physical but a moral necessity, the consequence of sin, of the improper relationship of flesh and spirit; and the corresponding physical processes are only the external realisation of inner moral necessity'. Sergii Bulgakov, *Dva Grada: Issledovaniia o prirode obshchestvennykh idealov* (Moscow: Put', 1911), vol. 2, p. 175.

[68] Bulgakov, 'Sofiologiia smerti,' p. 303.

with it and in it death is majestic, it is disclosed in this light as a necessary but gracious and joyful event in the Sophianisation of the world.'[69] Using language which he applied elsewhere to Sophia, Bulgakov writes, 'Death has two faces: one, dark and dreadful, turned towards non-being, is dying or death properly so called . . . the other face is bright, peaceful, joyous, leading to freedom, to divine revelation and future resurrection.'[70]

In 'Sofiologiia smerti' Bulgakov makes a sharp and important distinction between death itself as a moment of revelation, and dying as the painful process of disintegration that sin has brought to all humankind. Sickness and the diseases that plague humanity are manifestations of that dying inherited from Adam and that indelibly marks all human nature. It is that same human nature that the Son of God accepted in the incarnation. As Bulgakov's treatise makes clear, Christ becomes fully human when he dies; death is the moment when he is entirely identical with every human being. And death is also the moment when human beings are fully conformed to Jesus Christ. The treatise is not an exhortation to suicide; far from it. As he states: 'The attempt violently and arbitrarily to force one's way through to death before one's time, as the destruction of the organic structure of life, carries in itself its internal condemnation and punishment (for life *is given* to us by God).'[71] Rather, the treatise aims to console and strengthen the Christian and his or her witness to the positive meaning of death without diminishing its fearfulness. This is where the importance of the chiastic structure of Bulgakov's diptych becomes evident. The torturous experience of dying, which forms the heart of the first panel, is made tolerable by the radiant reality of death in the second panel. Both are necessary for a proper Christian understanding of death.

Written on the eve of the Second World War, when dying and death would be perverted into an industrialised feature of human life, Bulgakov's treatise unfortunately remained hidden from view. It prophetically addressed some of the searing theological questions that arose after the war: how could God have allowed this horror, why did God abandon so many millions to physical extinction, can one still believe in God? Bulgakov's answer is that God died with those millions of people in pain and fear and unimaginable suffering, that God experienced their feeling of utter forsakenness, and yet like them was not annihilated but remained what God always is – life.[72] It is a strong affirmation of belief in God's permanent union with humankind

[69] Ibid., p. 304.
[70] Ibid., p. 305.
[71] Ibid., p. 306.
[72] In this regard, Bulgakov anticipates the theological discourse about the death of God that arose in earnest in the 1960s, and while taking the death of God very seriously avoids its pitfalls.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press

without confusion, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably. Bulgakov opened his treatise with a quotation from Ecclesiastes 9:10 – 'All that your hand can do, do according to your strengths, because in the grave where you will go, there is no work or meditation or knowledge or wisdom' – which represents death as the melancholic end to human life that Bulgakov strongly opposed. Instead Bulgakov accepted death as an inseparable but transitory part of life.[73] As if to emphasise that point, Bulgakov closed the treatise with Revelation 1:17–18: 'Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the living one, I was dead and lo I live for the ages of ages. Amen.' It sums up well the thrust of his argument in 'Sofiologiia smerti' and confirms Bulgakov as a hope-filled interpreter of the Christian message.

[73] 'This shows once again that death can be understood *only in the context of life*, as part of life, and not vice versa: Life cannot be submerged in the nonbeing of death. In this sense, even though death is a parasite of being, it is an act of life.' *Bride of the Lamb*, 350.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000394 Published online by Cambridge University Press