

Sergei Bulgakov’s “Sophic” Economy: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Christian Economics

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Abstract: *The demise of Communism brought with it a moral and political vacuum, and an extreme form of market capitalism has come to fill that void. Russia today finds itself wrestling with the same questions it faced in the Russian Empire’s final days: how can the blessings of economic development and modernization be attained while at the same time avoiding the sins of materialism and excess? This article examines the Christian economics of Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov, which we argue provides an alternative understanding of the economic process to the materialism of both capitalism and Marxism. Bulgakov believed that both aptly describe the fallen situation of humanity, and felt that they failed to grasp that Christianity can provide the freedom of the individual to transcend material nature and bring it back into communion with God through participation in Sophia. JEL: A12, A13, B31. Key words: Russian Orthodoxy, Marxism, capitalism, materialism.*

The Marxist movement that emerged in Russia in the late nineteenth century was a reaction to the extremes of the rapid rise of capitalism and industrialization, and aimed at nothing short of grabbing the reins of power in order to end the exploitation of “the toiling masses” and put political power in the hands of the workers. The end result of the Bolshevik Revolution, however, was a system of state capitalism, in which the state owned the means of production, exploited the workers, and—due to its inefficient planning system—left them with a low standard of living in comparison with their counterparts in the West.

The liberalization of the command economy was barely underway when the Soviet Union imploded, but its legacy confounds the process of market development to this day. Despite the significant expansion of the Russian economy during the post-Yeltsin period, much of the post-Soviet economy is still in great need of market adjustment, with the increase in the country’s GDP being brought on by the price of oil in the international market more than anything else. In many ways, the transformation of the Soviet economy from plan to market is probably a more formidable task

than developing markets from scratch, as existing enterprises are privatized and converted in market-irrational conditions and locations and with outdated and often useless manufacturing equipment. Moreover, those with an entrepreneurial spirit were routinely eliminated from Soviet society, while everyone else was constantly bombarded with an ideology that equated profit with theft. In fact, when initially launched, the introduction of market incentives seemed to most Russians to resemble the black market, and it is therefore no surprise that the whole enterprise of market reform seemed just as corrupt.

Many Russians came quickly to embrace *bizness*, however, and today on a stroll down Moscow's *Tverskaya* boulevard one will see all of the accoutrements of Western materialism and capitalism, from Benetton to Louis Vuitton, from Bentleys to solid gold cell phones. A look down the side streets, however, will exhibit the excesses of capitalism that the Marxists critiqued over a century ago—from old women selling socks to make ends meet, to beggars, the homeless, and pick-pockets. Despite its century-long detour, Russia today finds itself wrestling with the same questions it faced in the Russian Empire's final days: how can the blessings of economic development and modernization be attained while at the same time avoiding the sins of materialism and excess?

The demise of Communism brought with it a moral and political vacuum, and an extreme form of market capitalism has come to fill that void. As noted Russian economist Vladimir Mau very poignantly phrased it in an interview with *Izvestiya*, “in a period of revolution and instability, fishing in troubled waters can be a profitable pursuit” (Korop, 2004). It also leads to immoral activity, however, both on the part of business and consumers. As an initial attempt to address this situation, in 2000 the Russian Orthodox Church released the *Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church*, with an entire section devoted to labor (Marsh, 2008). In a text riddled with scriptural references, the Church sought to spell out the nature of work, idleness, pay, and the enticement of ever and ever greater wealth that becomes possible with modern forms of technology. The *Social Doctrine* was certainly a well-articulated set of principles meant to guide individuals who now had to sell their labor in a market economy, but it was quite inefficient in guiding the country's new business class and entrepreneurs. A few years later, the Church turned to Mau himself, and organized a committee to instruct the faithful on proper behavior in a free market. Their answer came in the form of a *Collection of Moral Principles and Rights of Business (khoziastovanie)*, released by the Eighth All-World Russian People's Council in February 2004. This document was

drafted to resemble the Ten Commandments, and to make the Church's position as outlined in the *Social Doctrine* more accessible to Orthodox believers, more comprehensive, and simply easier to grasp (and easy to refer to—shortly afterwards a convenient credit-card sized version was distributed). Convened at the request of Fr. Vsevolod Chaplin of the Office of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, and chaired by Vladimir Mau, this committee sought to simplify the church's teachings while also being precise. In sharp contrast to the *Social Doctrine*, the *Collection of Moral Principles* laid out ten specific guidelines regarding labor, pay, wealth, contracts, safety, deceit, and private property.

When seeking to guide the Church's faithful in navigating the new free-market economy, the Church is able to draw upon a rich Orthodox theological tradition that includes John Chrysostom, Nil Sorskii, and Sergius of Radonezh. Yet another Russian Orthodox theologian who has much to say about the excesses of capitalism is Sergei Bulgakov. Writing during the excesses of the Russian economy on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, Bulgakov critiqued both socialism and capitalism in presenting his own philosophy of economy. Many Russian clergy and religious thinkers today are again looking back at Bulgakov for guidance as they themselves see no hope in socialism and are disappointed with capitalism. Fr. Maksim Kozlov of the University Church of the Sacred Virgin Tat'iana at Moscow State University is one such figure.¹ Referring to Bulgakov, Fr. Maksim maintains that human labor which fulfills either selfish individual goals or serves only the interests of the state, will not lead to the kind of society that Russia most desperately needs. He stresses the importance of personal discipline, control over one's selfish impulses, and a vision of the self as part of a larger whole. He believes these are elements found in the teachings of the Orthodox Church in general and Bulgakov in particular, and that Russia needs to recover these teachings in order to build a new social order.

Other contemporary Orthodox thinkers share similar views. Marcus Plested, the author of a new work on the Macarian legacy and protégé of Bishop Kallistos, recently wrote in *Sourozh* that, in “our own late capitalist society” work is seen as “something to be endured (or ‘juggled’) in order to purchase the necessities and luxuries of life, in other words, to enable one to consume,” adding that “it is a sad reflection on our conception of human life that leisure also has become identified with consumption and no longer a space for self-development, for contemplation, for spiritual growth” (Plested, 2004, p. 3). While Plested's ideas are very much in

line with those of Macarius, who argued that the pursuit of wealth is a distraction from more important spiritual issues, in his critique one can also discern a taste of Bulgakov, insofar as Plested seems to be saying that labor should be seen as a gift.

Might Eastern Orthodoxy offer an alternative philosophy of economics to the extremes of Bolshevik socialism and secular capitalism? It is our contention that Sergei Bulgakov's Christian philosophy of economy presents a Christian understanding of economics that provides a much-needed corrective to the materialistic ideology that undergirds modern economic thought. In the pages that follow, we examine his critiques both of socialism and capitalism and then present his philosophy of economy as an alternative Christian understanding that can provide a check on the extreme market capitalism of contemporary society.

Critique of Economic Materialism

Born in 1871 in Livny to a poor priestly family, Sergei Bulgakov experienced firsthand the plight of the rural Russian peasant. Following in the family tradition, Sergei attended seminary at the age of fourteen in Orel. Three years later, after losing faith at the seminary, he entered a secular gymnasium to complete his studies. Evtuhov (1997, p. 25) remarks that this was the beginning of his transition to becoming an "intelligent." This transition from the seminary to atheism was not uncommon in late nineteenth century Russia. Like the great Russian philosophers Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov, who left seminary after reading Feuerbach, Bulgakov was following an all too familiar pattern in the life of Russian intellectuals.² In 1890 following in his predecessor Alexander Herzen's footsteps, Bulgakov enrolled at Moscow University to take a degree in political economy and law. He chose these fields rather than literature and philosophy because he believed that these could "more likely contribute to his country's salvation" (Evtuhov, 1997, p. 28). After graduation in 1894, he began graduate studies under the tutelage of Aleksandr Chuprov, who also had a "clerical background."

Bulgakov's studies at Moscow University coincided with the Second International—Marxism's Golden Age. He became an avid Marxist, having much in common with the thought of European Marxists in general, although Lenin described him as a "legal Marxist" (Evtuhov, 1997, p. 29).³ From 1896 to 1898 Bulgakov published several unremarkable articles, demonstrating his Marxist position (collected in Bulgakov, 1904). In 1898 he left for Western Europe to do research for his dissertation on Marxism and agriculture. In Bulgakov (1900)—his dissertation—he argued against Marx, holding that agriculture was not following the social development

called for in Marxist doctrine toward greater centralization, but rather was in a process of decentralization. Needless to say, Bulgakov's analysis was perceived to be incorrect in that it did not fall in line with preconceived communist ideology, and his dissertation was not accepted. However, through his research, Bulgakov questioned the central tenets of Marxism, and he began his drift away from the Marxist camps (Evtuhov, 1997, p. 36).

Rejecting Marxism, he turned to Kantian idealism and political liberalism as providing the bases for modern Russian society. However, his turn to liberalism saw a development of a gradual return to the Church, which he had dismissed in his youth. Bulgakov was not alone in this turn toward religion. Other members of the intelligentsia, Berdiaev, Florensky, and Frank to name but a few notables, followed this same path (Evtuhov, 1997, p. 10).

This turn to idealism by Bulgakov witnessed also a rejection of nineteenth-century positivism. During the early 1900s, Bulgakov's work demonstrated this rejection (Bulgakov, 1904). In this regard, Bulgakov can be situated in the general European rejection of positivism and a return to metaphysics at the turn of the century. Because positivism, and as we shall see economic materialism, had failed to provide the solutions to the ethical issues of the day, many of the intelligentsia turned to the question of metaphysics as a possible solution. Eventually, for Bulgakov and his cohort, this would lead many back to the Orthodox Church (Evtuhov, 1997, pp. 49–65).⁴

In the two essays "Ivan Karamazov as a Philosophical Type" (in Bulgakov, 1904) and "The Economic Ideal" (Bulgakov, 1999), Bulgakov presents his critique of positivism and the interpretation of historical development that accompanied it. In the first work, he raises the issue of ethics and metaphysics. In the second, he questions the philosophical grounding of political economy. Arguing that political economy is heteronomous rather than autonomous, he demonstrates that any political economy has a world-view undergirding it. The two extremes are hedonism, which asserts that all that exists is material, and asceticism, which denies material reality. A balance is needed between these two extreme world-views. In addition, Bulgakov questions the third leg of positivism: the utopian vision of progress. As Evtuhov (1997) has noted, for Bulgakov, "positivism ... as a code of social morality, provided a teleological vision of history as progress toward a perfect earthly society, sacrificing the present generation for those of the future" (p. 61). Bulgakov tells his students that instead of blindly accepting and following this "linear, deterministic, and purely external conception of history" they should examine their own

internal lives (p. 62). His rejection of positivism and determinism forms the basis for his critique of Marxism.

In 1907 Bulgakov wrote an interesting piece denouncing Marxism entitled *Karl Marx as a Religious Type*⁵. In it he provides one of the first statements that Marxism is in fact a secular religion. In a fascinating argument, Bulgakov demonstrates that the denial of the individual human spirit is in fact a denial of religion, which is, according to Bulgakov, Marx's chief aim in his works.

Bulgakov argues that religion is an aspect of the human condition. All human beings are religious. In fact religion serves as the highest value that a person holds. Thus no person is non-religious. This is very similar to the idea of Paul Tillich (1957) that faith is a person's "ultimate concern" (pp. 1–2).⁶ Socialism is understood as a secular faith due to the "ultimate concern" of the Marxists to inaugurate the socialist utopia. Thus, in a sense, Karl Marx becomes the spiritual father of socialism (Bulgakov, 1979, pp. 41–43).

The basic features of socialism, according to Bulgakov (1979), are "the discarding of the problem of the person and of all concern for it" and "the excessive abstraction" of the human person for humanity in general (pp. 52–53). Marx completely ignores the human person as an individual. Rather, Marx places human beings in social categories. Bulgakov states,

Marx remains quite aloof from the religious problem; he is not disturbed by the fate of an individual but is totally obsessed by what appears to be *common* to all individuals, consequently, by what is *non-individual* in them. This *non-individuality*, though not beyond the individual, is generalized by Marx in an abstract formula. At the same time, he rejects with relative ease what is left in a personality after the non-individuality has been deducted from it or, with a light heart, he compares this remainder to zero (p. 57).

Praxis becomes the solution for all problems, including metaphysical ones. Bulgakov comments that focusing on praxis as the solution to the metaphysical question is "very similar to an invitation to get dead drunk and in this way to become insensitive to the pain of one's own soul" (p. 58). Thus, Bulgakov understands that the major problem with Marx is the denial of the human being and of the human spirit; in essence, Marxism denies human freedom. Uniquely, Bulgakov ties this to the anti-religion stance of Marx himself.

Throughout the work, Bulgakov insists that Marx is not a Hegelian, but is rather a devotee to Feuerbach's anthropotheism. Marx, as a disciple

of Feuerbach, is bent on the spreading of this new gospel. In 1844 Marx published an article entitled “Toward the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right.” Bulgakov (1979) argues that in this article Marx unites Feuerbach’s philosophy with the mission of the proletariat. “The proletariat is entrusted with the mission of the historical realization of atheism, i.e., of man’s practical liberation from religion” (p. 85). Bulgakov understands this as the sole goal of Marxism. Only when human beings realize that they are not individuals, but rather are products of social forces and members of the proletariat, will they be liberated (saved) according to Marx. Furthermore, Bulgakov believes that the only impact that Marx had on European socialist thought was in the religious-philosophical area, not in economics. Thus, Marx turned socialism into a “means for battling religion” (p. 109).

Harkening back to his early work against positivism, Bulgakov’s critique of Marxism continues in his major work, *The Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* (Bulgakov, 2000). It must be stated forthrightly that Bulgakov was not against the social sciences, and economics in particular, *per se*; rather, the worldviews underlying the particular sciences were the targets of his criticism. In Bulgakov (2000), we see his critique of historical determinism and the scientism of the social sciences. He writes, “The currently popular doctrine of social determinism, which conceives human life as a mechanism of cause and effect and views history as subject to immutable laws, conflicts with our understanding of life as a ceaselessly interactive synthesis of freedom and necessity—as *creativity* or as *history*” (p. 223). Because social science groups individuals into their common characteristics, it denies history and human creativity. Furthermore, social determinism is not a conclusion reached by the social sciences, but is rather a premise of social science in order to characterize groups of people. However, the “uniformity and typicality” which sociology utilizes to group human beings is in actuality “unreal.” Sociology and the other social sciences are based on a fiction.⁷ Similarly, Marxism is based on this same fiction, which understands human beings according to a “uniformity and typicality.”

Chiefly, for political economy, this “uniformity and typicality” is *homo economicus*. Interestingly, Bulgakov (2000) understands that “in practice economists are Marxists, even if they hate Marxism” (pp. 40–41). This is due to the fact that “all constructions of the economic man, whether individual or collective, are in fact based on the image of an economic machine; hence political economy’s inevitable and total fatalism—the obverse side of its methodological determinism” (p. 256). Thus, social determinism,

based on a fiction which denies human individuality and creative freedom, produces a science that is unable to take into consideration the human being, the very subject of its study.

Consequently, economic materialism, and Marxism as a representative of it, confuses science with metaphysics. Economic materialism moves from the metaphysics of Hegel's dialectic to science, becoming the moral calculus of Jeremy Bentham and utilitarianism. Economic materialism can now explain all human activity as self-interest.⁸ Marxism moves the theory from individual self-interest to class interest (Bulgakov, 2000, pp. 268–71). In addition, by promoting a social deterministic understanding of historical progress, economic materialism suffers from “a philosophical delusion of grandeur,” for it has raised itself “to the rank of historical ontology.” According to Bulgakov (2000), Marx substituted political economy as the basis of his ontology, which for Hegel was logic. Bulgakov states, “Economic materialism wishes to be a philosophy of *history*, a materialistic interpretation of history ... whereas by its logical structure it is a sociological rather than a historical doctrine” (p. 277). The problem lies in that history and sociology by their very natures are incompatible. Sociology deals with generalities, while the subjects of history are particular individuals. Marxism and economic materialism fail as proper understandings of the nature of reality. In the end economic materialism becomes a hero cult. Ironically, it denies the individual, while giving saintly status to the thought of an individual in a socialist cult (p. 283).

Bulgakov (1999) uses a similar critique in his criticism of liberal capitalism. It is important to remember that Bulgakov labels all economists as Marxists. This is due to the fact that political economy is about economic materialism and the economic laws that derive therefrom. It is also important to remember that Bulgakov holds political economy to be heteronomous, not autonomous. Every economic system, therefore, operates within a specific world-view. For economic materialism this world-view is Epicureanism or hedonism. Bulgakov (1999) states that Epicureanism is “characterized by an extreme simplicity and crudity; it is normally associated with positivism or materialism, denying all principles in life and all reality unknown to the senses” (pp. 30–31). Epicureanism becomes associated with aestheticism in order to remove its coarseness. However, aestheticism tied with Epicureanism dismisses the higher metaphysical appreciation of beauty and descends into materiality—i.e., sensuality. Commenting on this move in liberal capitalist society, Bulgakov (1999) writes,

But enough of this bourgeois fantasizing, with its seasoning of fashionable Nietzscheanism. *There* is the perfect mirror of hedonism. In [Werner] Sombart's picture, historical development moves from feral humanity (as Soloviev described it) to swinish humanity, and at the end of this sad historical path, what we meet as its self-satisfied goal of consummation is a truly Philistine figure 'not ethical but aesthetic', with the ideals of a woman of fashion! In this civilization for hairdressers, where is there any place for bringing to birth the agonies of reflection, wrestling with the torments of conscience, the struggles ... of love and self-denial, the unremitting battle with self? Where in this universal restaurant can our poor spirit find room for its cosmic questions? Spirit is here surrendered without any pretence at a struggle to the claims of sensual gratification; its birthright is sold for a mess of pottage. And to compensate for the absence of ideals, we are offered the prospect of 'living in the midst of beauty'. The drowning of the spirit in sensuality, life without ideals, spiritual *embourgeoisement*—this is the inevitable logic of hedonism (p. 34).

This materialistic world-view of all economics denies the spiritual dimension of human being. Bulgakov (2000) writes

Each economic age has its spirit and is in turn the product of this spirit; each economic age has its particular type of 'economic man' generated by the spirit of economy, and we can declare him a 'reflex' of given economic relations only if we subscribe to that logical fetishism of which political economy becomes a victim when it regards economy—the development of the forces of production, various economic organizations, and so on—through the prism of abstract categories without regard to their historical concreteness (pp. 217–218).

Bulgakov's orthodox understanding of the human person goes back to the debates over the understanding of the three persons of the Holy Trinity in the fourth century. For the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, and Gregory Nyssa, the nature of the person can never be distinguished apart from the individual expression of that nature. Thus, there is no such thing as a human nature; rather, there are only individual human beings who share a common nature of humanness. To attempt to understand this nature apart from the individual hypostases is foolhardy and leads eventually into theological heresy. Because of his orthodoxy, again Bulgakov regards the concept of *homo economicus* as an inaccurate

portrayal of human being.⁹ It is a mythological creature that the social science community accepts de facto in its attempt to understand human “nature” as if it could be understood apart from individual human beings (Bulgakov, 1999, p. 25). Because capitalism, inasmuch as it is a product of a materialistic world-view, understands the human being only as a producer/consumer and not as a spiritual being capable of exercising her freedom apart from the laws of economy, it too must be understood as a work of the Antichrist.¹⁰

The Sophic Economy

What then is the answer that Bulgakov provides instead of economic materialism? Rosenthal (1991, pp. 65–67) argues that Bulgakov sought a solution that on the one hand would not follow the path of Protestant individualism that led to liberal capitalism¹¹ but on the other would be faithful to the ethos of Orthodox Russia, which would lead Russia into the modern world. His solution was to utilize Orthodox Christianity as the basis for understanding economics, rather than subscribing to the presuppositions of economics, which, as he argued, represented a different understanding of the human person. It must be stated forthrightly that Bulgakov was not against economics *per se*; rather, he was against the worldviews that supported the economic systems. Furthermore, because political economy did not just remain in the analysis of economic activity but served as a predictor of all human activity and sought to explain all aspects of human life, Bulgakov saw the need to question the legitimacy of this science. For what began as a social science came to masquerade as a philosophy of history (Evtuhov, 1997, pp. 184–185). Bulgakov seeks to provide a Christian basis for political economy, not simply to dismiss it.

Bulgakov’s understanding of economics is actually quite simple. He begins his discussion of political economy by noting that life is a continuous struggle between freedom and necessity, or organism versus mechanism. The struggle for life is the struggle for food and material needs. Thus, in actuality life is a constant struggle against nature—i.e., material necessity. Economy is this struggle against nature. Furthermore, “*economy is a function of death*” (Bulgakov, 2000, p. 73). The fear of death motivates humanity to defend life. Bulgakov writes, “The struggle against the antagonistic forces of nature for the purpose of defending, affirming, and broadening life, with the aim of conquering and taming these forces, becoming their *master* or *proprietor*, is in fact what—in the broadest and most preliminary fashion—we call *economy*” (p. 72). Human labor is this struggle against the forces of nature. Thus economy is labor; the basis for life itself is human labor.

Human labor is necessary to triumph over the necessity of nature. Labor in itself is a subjective-objective act that enables the joining-together of human endeavor with the mechanistic character of nature (pp. 77–78). Labor enables humanity to work with nature to conquer it and to humanize it without obliterating it. Labor transforms nature yet nature retains its essential attributes. In this regard, the primary example for Bulgakov is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. In the incarnation and resurrection of the Son of God, human flesh is divinized, yet remains flesh after the resurrection (pp. 87–88). Likewise, in the transformation of nature by human labor, it remains nature, albeit humanized.

The war between humanity and nature, however, is a result of the Fall of humanity. One of the results of the fall is that human beings must now eat by the sweat of their brow (Gen. 3:19). What was to be a natural act in creation, through the participation of human beings in offering creation back to the Creator, now becomes a matter of life and death. Human labor, instead of being directed back towards the Creator, is now directed back to the human being in order for survival.

With the fall of humanity came the fall of creation. Bulgakov refers to this as a division between the *natura naturans* into *natura naturata*. The *natura naturans*—i.e., nature in itself—is the divine Sophia, the world soul, humanity as a whole.¹² *Natura naturata* are the material things of this world. In the division of *natura naturans* into the *natura naturata*, a separation occurs in the very order of creation. Economic activity is the attempt by humanity to overcome the division between the *natura naturans* and the *natura naturata*. Humanity participates in both nature itself, the Divine Sophia, and in the material world. Humanity attempts to overcome this division in the created order by “transforming its mechanistic character once more into an organism and its lifeless products into the living forces that generated them, changing nature—which has become an object—once more into a subject-object, reestablishing the lost and forgotten unity of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.” In this way, economy becomes a “work of art, in which each product glows with its own idea, and the world as a whole turns into a cosmos—a chaos that has been conquered, tamed, and illuminated from within” (Bulgakov, 2000, p. 135). According to Bulgakov, each individual economic act participates in this transformation of nature and the recovery of the lost identity in the created order.

While the world-soul Sophia (or ideal humanity) works toward the recovery of the lost identity, it can only do this through individual human beings. Bulgakov is insistent that the individual is the only locus for the

transformation of the material world, for only individuals have a will. It is the human will that enables creativity; otherwise, the process would not be complete. Human beings must willingly participate in the economic process of material transformation. However, it is human participation in the *natura naturans*, the Divine Sophia, that enables the transformation to take place. Because human beings are the only creatures that exist in both realms of creation,¹³ they are the only means by which this transformation can occur. However, human beings as created beings can only create likenesses that pre-exist metaphysically in the Divine Sophia.¹⁴ Otherwise, “if creation takes matters into its own hands, seeking a model outside of the divine Sophia, it shapes a shadowy, satanic world alongside the given, created one.” For human beings to attempt to create from nothing, which is the Divine prerogative, is Satanism (Bulgakov, 2000, pp. 143–146).

It must be noted, however, that Bulgakov does not understand the role of the individual in the process of economics and politics as is customary in the West. Bulgakov approaches the issue of the individual and society from the Slavophile concept of *sobornost'*. While this uniquely Russian term has no English equivalent, it can roughly be translated as conciliarity, but it is best understood as the idea that human beings retain their freedom while participating in human society, and that human society is a participatory process through which human beings actualize themselves as unique hypostases.

The concept of *sobornost'* contrasts with the prominent Western understanding of human society as a social contract whereby individual human beings surrender their freedom to the social process in order to receive the protection of their individual human rights.¹⁵ The Russian concept instead allows for the retention and even expansion of the freedom of the individual in the social process, for it is in the social process that the human being is capable of actualizing her freedom. For Bulgakov the concept of *sobornost'* can be seen in his understanding of the transcendental subject of political economy: the divine Sophia. Sophia or ideal humanity is the subject of political economy, not the individual. Each individual participates in Sophia through the use of her freedom in economic acts of creativity. By participating in the ideal humanity, each individual then becomes truly human, in the context of collective humanity. Liberal capitalism, by emphasizing the rights of the individual, actually dehumanizes the person, separating the person from true participation in economic society. In this regard, liberal capitalism and the worldview underlying it are anti-Christian.¹⁶

Christianity provides the model for an understanding of the economic process. In Christianity humanity “receives his task of re-creation, of

economic activity from God” (Bulgakov, 1999, p. 149). Instead of being subject to the necessity of material creation, Christianity offers the opportunity for human beings to exercise their freedom to bring about the restoration of fallen creation. “Economic activity overcomes the divisions in nature, and its ultimate goal—outside of economy proper—is to return the world to life in Sophia” (p. 153). Christianity provides a different understanding of the economic act. Instead of being subject to the forces of nature and struggling against death, Christianity stresses labor as an act of re-creation and joy, in offering the created world back to the Creator. In this way, humanity participates in the resurrection of Christ. As Evtuhov (1997) comments,

Bulgakov’s sophic economy reiterates a very old theme of Russian Orthodoxy. Just as a person attending the Orthodox liturgy and partaking of the Eucharist experiences the cosmic drama of Christ’s Resurrection...so each man relives the Fall and Resurrection as he works in his field. His labor resurrects the soil, redeems it from the inert, lethargic sleep into which Adam plunged it with his original sin (p. 155).

Labor becomes joyful in the fulfillment of the priestly task of humanity.

Conclusion

The Christian economics of Sergei Bulgakov provides an alternative understanding of the economic process to the materialism of both capitalism and Marxism. Bulgakov did not disagree with the descriptive nature of economic materialism, for both capitalism and Marxism aptly describe the fallen situation of humanity. What he disagreed with was the prescriptive characteristics of economic materialism. Both capitalism and Marxism fail to grasp what Christianity can provide: the freedom of the individual to transcend material nature and bring it back into communion with God through participation in Sophia. Instead, Marxism in particular becomes a religion of humanity, providing for the redemption of humanity through participation in the proletariat’s march toward economic freedom. The choice was simple for Bulgakov. Humanity can follow the teachings of Marx and economic materialism, succumbing to a false gospel, a false understanding of humanity, the teachings of the Antichrist, or it can follow the teachings of Christ, which celebrates human freedom over economic necessity and the joyful transformation of creation in the Resurrection of Christ. As Rosenthal (1991) has so aptly stated, “The Gospels proclaim not freedom in and through the economy but from the economy. ‘Economism’ is the economic captivity of man, but Christianity proclaims a higher

freedom: it preaches not power, but impotence; not wealth, but poverty; not wisdom in this century of ‘economic magic’, but the holy fool” (p. 72). In other words, the human being has a choice in how he will actualize his freedom: either “he can be God’s likeness and can participate in the re-creation of Eden, or he can corrupt the earth, having become only flesh like humanity on the eve of the Flood, or he can become the devil’s tool in his fleshly and worldly separation from God” (Bulgakov, 2000, p. 221). The choice is between Christ and Antichrist. Bulgakov chose Christ, forsaking the religion of atheistic Marxism for Russian Orthodox Christianity, electing ordination to the priesthood in 1917, which he would serve out in exile to the Russian emigrant community in Paris until his death in 1944. The question yet remains of how Russians of today will choose. Socialism is so severely discredited that it is no longer a viable option, but is the “wild west” capitalism taking root in Russia today the only alternative to it? Perhaps Bulgakov’s insights might yet be tapped into by the Russian Orthodox Church and her faithful as they seek out some alternative or “third way” that can bring the blessings of free economic exchange without the sins of materialism.

Endnotes

- 1 Information on Fr. Maksim comes from Daniel (2004; 2006).
- 2 Evtuhov (1997, pp. 26–27). Dostoevsky portrays this pattern in the character of Rakitin in *The Brothers Karamazov*.
- 3 Evtuhov (1997) writes that there were two Marxist camps during these years. The first group accepted the Marxist view of social development and the collapse of capitalism while being willing to supplement it with insights from Kantianism and positivism. The other group, to which Lenin belonged, accepted Marxism as doctrine, unwilling to change or modify it. Evtuhov rightly places Bulgakov with the first group.
- 4 For a history of this change in European social thought see Hughes (1937). For Bulgakov, part of this change could be due to the influence of the work of Soloviev which he began to read during this time period. See Solovyov (1996) for his critique of positivism.
- 5 Bulgakov (1907). English version available as Bulgakov (1979).
- 6 Valliere (2000) notes this similarity as well: “On Tillich’s view modern secular ideologies cannot simply be unmasked and dismissed, as traditionalist critics might be tempted to suppose; they must be taken seriously as *faiths*, encountered in a critical dialogue about faith” (p. 236).

- 7 For a similar critique of social science, see Milbank (1990, pp. 51–146).
- 8 The linkage to rational choice theory of the Chicago School is apparent.
- 9 Rosenthal (1991) writes, “[Bulgakov] detested all philosophies based on ‘economic man’, capitalism as well as Marxism, and favored a kind of Christian socialism” (p. 61).
- 10 In an excellent review of modern neo-conservative economics in Britain, Boyle (1999, pp. 13–68) points to this same phenomenon of categorizing human beings only as “producers/consumers.”
- 11 Bulgakov was familiar with the work of Weber and Tawney.
- 12 In his later mature theological work, Bulgakov came to understand the divine Sophia as the nature of God himself. In his defense of his Sophiology, Bulgakov (1993) describes Sophia: “The tri-personal God has his own self-revelation. His nature, or *Ousia*, constitutes his intrinsic Wisdom and Glory alike, which we accordingly united under the one general term Sophia. God not only *possesses* in Sophia the principle of his self-revelation, but it is this Sophia which *is* his eternal divine life, the sum and unity of all his attributes” (p. 54, emphasis in the original). Yet, the divine Sophia is to be distinguished from the creaturely Sophia. The divine Sophia serves as the prototype by which the creaturely Sophia is made manifest. As Bulgakov states, “The created world, then, is none other than the creaturely Sophia, a principle of relative being, in process of becoming, and in composition with the non-being of ‘nothing’” (p. 72).
- 13 Bulgakov (1993) writes, “Divine Sophia as humanity, or rather as a principle within humanity, is not as yet identical with humanity. For the human being is a hypostasis, in which alone humanity, human nature, exists. Thus Sophia in itself does not as yet express the whole of humanity, which necessarily requires a hypostasis. Human beings receive this at the time of their creation by the breath of the spirit of God. This is their Ego, in which, and through which alone, their humanity lives” (p. 79).
- 14 Bulgakov (1993) states that the Fathers of the Church understood that the creation of the world was founded upon divine prototypes found in God himself. While the Fathers did not specify that the prototypes were to be found in the divine Sophia, Bulgakov locates them there (pp. 64–65).
- 15 It is fascinating that in the West, both neo-conservatives and Rawlsian liberals accept the presuppositions of the Enlightenment: the primacy of the individual and rationalism. Bulgakov (1999, pp. 237–267) rejects the Enlightenment and its children because it offers an alternative story and eschatology to Christianity. Economism and sociologism are based on paganism.

16 Bulgakov (1999, p. 160) states that to support the secular political system is to support the Beast.

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