



Diadromē

5

Διεθνές περιοδικό διεπιστημονικού
θεολογικού, φιλοσοφικού
και ανθρωπολογικού διαλόγου.

2026



BIBΛΙΟΚΡΙΣΙΕΣ

Sergij Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John. An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*, trans. M. Whitton, eds. B. Hallensleben, R. Zwahlen, rev. M. Miller, Epiphania 12. S. Bulgakov Werke 4., Aschendorff Verlag, Münster 2019, 391 pp.

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was intense academic interest in the work of the great Russian theologian in the diaspora, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. His multifaceted theological work became more widely known thanks to the English translations by B. Jakim and to a growing tendency to delve into his dogmatic thought in contemporary ecumenical theology. In this context, the book presented here, with an excellent translation by M. Whitton, is the fruit of the editors B. Hallensleben and R. Zwahlen, key figures of the “Sergii Bulgakov Research Center” at the University of Fribourg, which aims to update the Russian theologian’s rich work through translation. Specifically, it is the product of a series of hermeneutical courses by Fr. Sergius on all the chapters of the Apocalypse of John, held at the Institute of St. Sergius in Paris in 1941, and published posthumously in Russian in 1948 under the editorship of his colleague, L. Zander. According to him, Bulgakov had told him personally: “*This book is unexpected for me, its importance increased if not as the fourth volume of the ‘Trilogy’, then, in any case, as its epilogue*” (p. I). In fact, on the same page, the editors state that this famous trilogy dealt dogmatically with the concept of God-humanity, including the works: *The Lamb of God* (1933), *The Comforter* (1936), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945).

In the Introduction, the author states that the *Book of Apocalypse* can also be considered a kind of *Christian philosophy of history*, since its interpretative goal is the course of the Militant Church in the world (p. 7). In this sense, we consider that his thought moves between the historicity of the apocalyptic events, with the establishment of the Church, and the eschatology that reserves the end of history. “*It is a book for the entire world history in terms of its content and completion*”

(p. 9). However, he himself seems to favor the millenarian interpretation of history more emphatically than the eschatological one, to the point that he considers the message of Revelation to be clearly optimistic. In a dogmatic sense, Fr. Sergius argues that: “*In a word, the Revelation contains the fullness of Christology, in conjunction with triadology*” (p. 11). Also taking into account that the presented book is, according to the subtitle, *an essay in dogmatic interpretation*, I will attempt, in the limited space of a book presentation, to move critically and to highlight that the dogmatic orientation of the Russian theologian is not exclusively Christological. Indicatively, therefore, in two chapters of the *Apocalypse* that include liturgical scenes, the author also promotes his sophiological teaching, the “thorn” that negatively stigmatized his Orthodox profile, both in the ecclesiastical and academic circles of his time, but he himself never rejected it.

Specifically, in the 4th chapter, the twenty-four elders and the four animals standing doxologically around the throne of God “*represent Created Sophia, the world of heavenly prototypes*” (p. 36). Thus, the chapter’s central concern is the theoretical connection between ages and time, uncreated and created, and this “between” is not bridged by the uncreated energies of God that, according to Orthodox theology, account for creation, but by the union of created and divine Sophia. Thus, according to Bulgakov: “*this fourth chapter offers sophiology as an introduction to the history of the world, a prologue to heaven, the world before its creation on earth, pre-created in heaven*” (p. 40). However, the application of his sophiology is best seen in the 21st chapter, where the union of the bride, as heavenly Jerusalem, with the Lord is described, through sophiological language, as: “*The new Jerusalem is Divine Sophia rendering all creation transparent, shining out in created Sophia*” (p. 205). On the same page, we see that the term sophianicity denotes the perfection of created being, whose goal is theosis. It becomes clear here that the Russian theologian does not interpret the Church Christologically as the body of Christ but rather sophianically - if I may use the term. “*The Church is first of all the sophianicity of the world, Divine Sophia in created Sophia, the holy city and temple within it, the pansacrament of being. But it is also God-humanity and humankind divinised in it*” (p. 207). Therefore, the Church, as the Christological union of created and uncreated, is not the result of the will and ascetic

participation of the created in the space of the uncreated, but an a priori situation, given the Church's sophianic nature, which deifies humanity without preconditions. After all, Fr. Sergius did not hide his opposition to the metaphysical power of asceticism, even in this particular book (*Excursus III*, p. 259).

However, the book is an excellent recommendation for researchers of Bulgakov's work, and this particular edition greatly deepens his thought. We must not forget that it was written during the Second World War in France, which experienced the Nazi occupation intensely and developed resistance forces to cope with that tragic period. The book, therefore, presents a positive view of human history and a message of hope closely linked to apocalyptic literature. In fact, it includes four additional texts by the Russian theologian, presented as excurses, in which his optimistic view of the millennial interpretation of history is evident. In the second, entitled *The Eucharistic Parousia*, he further proposes a chiliastic interpretation of the divine eucharist as the Lord's permanent presence in the world after His Ascension, in accordance with His unfailing promise. At the end, the very beautiful Frescos of Sister Joanna Reitlinger, from *The Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius*, that decorate the chapel of St. Basil in London, are on display. Sister Joanna was the spiritual child of Fr. Sergius and was inspired by the *Apocalypse* to depict the church's icons in her art. The photographs of her iconography included in the book are truly impressive and adorn its cover. The personality of Fr. S. Bulgakov remains enigmatic, but publishing efforts such as this one contributes greatly to both the decoding of his thought and the dialogical character of Orthodox theology.

Fr. Dimitrios Avdelas
PhD in Theology, Thessaloniki