

The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation

*Graham McGeoch*¹

BULGAKOV, Sergii. *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2019, 311 p.

This is a beautiful book. The Sergii Bulgakov Research Centre at the University of Fribourg is to be congratulated for stepping outside of their dedicated remit of translating Sergii Bulgakov's work into German, and for grasping the opportunity to provide the first English-language translation and publication of Bulgakov's 1941 seminars at the St Sergius Institute. The work of Barbara Hallensleben and Regula M. Zwahlen in contributing to the revival of interest in Sergii Bulgakov is not be underestimated. The translation of Mike Whitton, and the revision by Michael Miller, found the perfect curators.

Sergii Bulgakov (1871-1944) is an important twentieth century Russian Orthodox theologian. His influence among Russian intelligentsia is undisputed. His contribution to Orthodox theology is widely recognized, if not always fully received. Moreover, he has deeply affected leading Western theologians and thinkers, including Rowan Williams, John Milbank and David Bentley Hart.

Bulgakov, not formally trained in theology, is now widely regarded as one of the most original and profound theologians of the twentieth century. Exiled from Russia in 1922, he finally settled in Paris where he took up the position of professor of Dogmatic Theology at St Sergius Institute. He was active in the ecumenical movement. Among his many books, perhaps his theological trilogy, *The Lamb of God* (1933), *The Comforter* (1935) and *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), best establish

¹ A minister of the Church of Scotland. He teaches Theology & Religious Studies at Faculdade Unida de Vitória, Brazil.

his reputation. The English translations only appeared in the twenty-first century.

Bulgakov told Lev Zander – who had edited and published his seminars posthumously – “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). This is the secret of *The Apocalypse of John*. Bulgakov demonstrates admirable skill and knowledge across various theological fields. His seminars touched on contemporary biblical scholarship, patristics and dogmatics as he explored chapter by chapter the Apocalypse of John. However, the value of the book does not lie in the skill, knowledge and scholarship that Bulgakov clearly demonstrates in the course of the seminar.

Instead, the book is an epilogue to Bulgakov’s own monumental contribution to dogmatics. Perhaps it is even a fourth volume, contrary to Bulgakov protestations. Of course, this judgement will fall to the perception of the reader. There is no doubting the weight of Bulgakov’s dogmatic trilogy on his exposition of the Apocalypse of John. Therefore, it is mindful to read it in that light. Central is sophiology. Bulgakov developed this term from the earlier work of Vladimir Soloviev, and it underpins his dogmatics. Indeed, it is the most widely discussed and most controversial aspect of his theology. It drew the ire of Vladimir Lossky, and has continued to be derided by some. Others, notably, Milbank view it as the golden ticket of theology to out narrate the secular.

In the *Apocalypse of John*, Bulgakov dedicates extensive space to further discussions of sophiology. He presents Chapters 4 of the Apocalypse of John as a “solemn sophiological introduction to cosmology, anthropology and philosophy of history, to eschatology” (p. 41). In addition, he describes Chapter 5 as “further completion” with Christology and Pneumatology (p. 42). It will be no surprise that his lengthy discussion of Chapters 21 and 22 – running to 50 pages – draws widely on a kind of ‘applied sophiology’.

The book itself has three distinct parts. The first part follows the seminars, a close reading of each chapter of the Apocalypse of John by Bulgakov. Lev Zander, professor of Philosophy at St Sergius Institute, collated and edited the 1941 seminar series, after Bulgakov had prepared the book manuscript based on his seminars. It was originally published

in Russian in 1948, four years after the death of Bulgakov. The second part contains four Excursus where Bulgakov elaborates mainly on themes of eschatology and philosophy of history in light of particular aspects of the Apocalypse of John.

The third and final part of the book is an annex about Wall Paintings by the icon painter Sister Joanna. Sister Joanna lived with Bulgakov and his family at St Sergius Institute in Paris and her Wall Paintings are from St Basil's House of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, London. This third part includes an introduction by Bronislava Popova, the notes from Sister Joanna, and a reconstruction of the original concept of the frescos presented through photographs, with accompanying biblical passages. Sister Joanna dedicated the frescos to Sergii Bulgakov, and was inspired by his seminars on the Apocalypse of John. Like the text of Bulgakov's seminars, Mike Whitton translates the Notes.

It is a beautiful and an important contribution to the dissemination of Bulgakov's thought in the English language. Scholars and students alike will benefit from this newly accessible translation of Bulgakov's work. Aspects of the biblical scholarship and the dogmatic interpretation is now dated, in relation to the Apocalypse of John. However, the book reveals much about Bulgakov's approach to theology and the Bible as an Orthodox theologian in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, for those looking for more descriptions and use of sophiology by Bulgakov, the book is rich in detail and discussion. It will prove to be an excellent source for Bulgakov scholarship in English.