

Father Sergius Bulgakov: Personhood, Inequality and Economics

Our society was built on the racial segmentation of personhood. Some people were full humans, guaranteed non-enslavement, secured from expropriation and given the protection of law, and some people – blacks, Natives and other nonwhites – were not. That unequal distribution of personhood was an economic reality as well. It shaped your access to employment and capital; determined whether you would be doomed to the margins of labor or given access to its elevated ranks; marked who might share in the bounty of capitalist production and who would most likely be cast out as disposable. (Jamelle Bouie, *Beyond ‘White Fragility’*)¹

These words, recently written by Jamelle Bouie, are a vivid backdrop for reflecting on the economics of Father Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944). They provide the social parameters for appreciating the insights of one of the most profound and creative Orthodox theologians of the 20th century. While Bulgakov does not pretend to solve the problem of poverty, he offers a prophetic voice for how the Church can address, in an industrialized context, the social structures that foster it. He extends the work of previous pastor theologians who recognized that social structures perpetuate social and economic disparity.

Due to the covid-19 pandemic, the killing of George Floyd and the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement, issues of systemic inequality have surfaced across the United States with unprecedented speed while eliciting continued expressions of outrage and despair that call for social change. This crisis offers the Orthodox Churches in America an opportunity to examine social and racial inequality and to articulate a comprehensive and open ended social teaching that focuses on the long and wide wake of involuntary poverty.²

¹ *The New York Times*, June 29, 2020, Section A20.

² As a consequence of the Great and Holy Council of Crete (2016), the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate has produced a useful document (2019), “For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*, 31 August 2020, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>. The document seeks to serve as a guide for how the Church can properly respond to the issues of the day. Not the least of these issues is the relationship of wealth, poverty and civil justice found in section IV. See also *The Basis of the Social Concept* (2000), *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, 20 July 2020, <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts>. While making reference to the need for “sufficient” resources for a dignified life, the document makes no reference to working conditions in the socialist system of the past or in the present where there is no analysis of the social (re) organization of labor, labor conditions and equitable compensation. See sections VII, XVI.

Wealth and poverty are the outcome of economics. The dynamics relative to the responsibility of those who possess wealth and its distribution to the poor has concerned the Church from its founding to the present. Ironically, however, there has never been a consistently unified understanding or acknowledgement regarding the causes of poverty and sharing of wealth. Neither has there been agreement for re-integrating the faceless poor into society due to the excessive attention paid to the largesse of the wealthy.³ If any agreement can be gleaned from Christian sources both East and West, it is the explicit or implicit recognition that poverty dehumanizes the human person.

Father Bulgakov's training as a Marxist economist eventually led him to disavow its anti-personalism and its suppression of human freedom. He described the Marxist *economic concept of history* as "a funeral dirge sung for the person and personal creativity."⁴ While returning to the Orthodox Church and subsequent ordination to the priesthood, Bulgakov sought to articulate a philosophy and theology of economics that refuted the Marxist concept of *homo economicus* while placing economics within the realms of Christology, sophiology and eschatology.⁵ This meant economics should not be studied either in isolation or as the basis upon which all aspects of human life depend. Rather, economics had to be placed within a theological context that eschews the extremes of hedonism and asceticism.⁶ For Bulgakov, it is the Church that navigates between these extremes along with their derivatives - luxury and involuntary poverty - and provides the concrete grounding for how economics can be used as an agent for restoring the culture and spiritual integrity of a local community and/or a nation.

Luxury and poverty are especially the enemies of culture; there may be as much spiritual poverty in the nobleman's palace as in the pauper's hovel. The spiritual decline that accompanies luxury sooner or later leads to economic decline as well, so that luxury is self-

³ For an historical overview of voluntary and involuntary poverty in pre-Christian and Christian societies see Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying, Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford University Press, 2001) pp.3-30. Also, Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic and Holy Cross Press, 2008) pp. 17-36.

⁴ See his *Karl Marx As A Religious Type (1906)*, introduced by Donald Treadgold, translated by Luba Barna, edited by Virgil Lang, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, Massachusetts, p. 52, 1979.

⁵ The most detailed discussion of the relationship between economics and theology is in Bulgakov's *The Philosophy of Economy; The World as Household (1912)*, trans., edited and with an Introduction by Catherine Evtuhov, Yale University Press, 2000. See especially pp. 123-156.

⁶ *The Economic Ideal (1903)*, in *Sergii Bulgakov; Towards a Russian Political Theology*, texts edited and introduced by Rowan Williams, T&T Clark, 1999, pp. 27-53.

condemned even from an economic point of view. The spiritual state of a nation is very far from being a matter of indifference for its economic life.⁷

The Church is also the historical and eschatological presence of the living body of Christ. It is Christ – the new Adam - who unifies a divided creation driven by the engine of sin.

... humanity becomes the body of Christ so that Christ as a person can recreate human nature, thus becoming a new Adam of whose flesh and blood humanity partakes. This unity must however be understood not mechanically but as a dynamic process over time and manifested in history, in knowledge and in economy.⁸

Broadly understood, economics takes on a sacramental quality that is an expression of the creative synergy between the divine and human. It is a creative work of art that takes nature as it is and opens it to new uses. Economics points to “limitless possibilities for the creation of culture.”⁹ One way Bulgakov sees this is through technology, whose purpose is to spiritualize matter i.e. to overcome the false dichotomy between the material and spiritual.

The triumphs of technology are nothing but the spiritualizing of matter, the annihilation of matter considered simply as such. The greatness of a nation’s wealth, the successes of technology and industry, these are the expressions of a gradual spiritualizing of matter.¹⁰

Because economics is a work of art, Father Bulgakov saw Sophia as the inspiring agent in human creativity. Together with the Logos, Sophia draws humanity, entrusted to continue the unifying work of Christ, into the continuing process of transforming creation from chaos to cosmos.¹¹

Humanity is and always remains the unifying center of the world in the eternal harmony and beauty of the cosmos created by God. The empirical world is immersed in ‘process,’ in time and space, in history, and as such is imperfect and disharmonious; yet, like humanity itself, it is never wholly separated from a higher metaphysical reality, from the divine Sophia that ever soars above the world, illuminating it through reason, through beauty, through...economy and culture.¹²

⁷ Ibid. p.49.

⁸ *The Philosophy of Economy* p. 140.

⁹ Ibid. p. 142

¹⁰ *The Economic Ideal*, p. 42.

¹¹ *The Philosophy of Economy*, p.145.

¹² Ibid. pp. 144-145.

Regardless of how one views Father Bulgakov's sophiology, it remains clear that its Christological and ecclesial underpinnings spotlight the Church as the prophetic voice that exposes social and economic disparities and calls for resolution. What is striking about Bulgakov's economics is its relationship to spiritual and consequently personal development. While social and economic poverty deprive one of the essential goods and services necessary to cultivate mental and physical health, it also negatively impacts a person's need to cultivate a relationship with the living God.

Bulgakov forcefully debunks the often romantic image given to involuntary poverty as having a spiritual advantage over the wealthy. He stresses how involuntary poverty is not only socially divisive but acts as a debilitating force that often crushes the human spirit and hinders personal development.

The hungry man needs food above all else, the cold need clothing, the homeless shelter. Poverty creates the kind of suffering that degrades man and excludes the possibility of a properly human and spiritual life. Thus the battle against poverty is a battle for the rights of the human spirit.¹³

The "battle for the rights of the human spirit" is synonymous with the battle for human freedom. Working to articulate a *via media* that avoids the anti-materialism of asceticism and the hedonism of materialism, Bulgakov draws attention to the relationship that "human value and spiritual expansion" have with acquiring the necessary material demands for living that in turn allow for the development of democracy.

...the increasing sense of human value and the spiritual expansion of personality inevitably express itself in the expansion of material demand: we have a good example of this in the whole contemporary movement towards democracy.¹⁴

The democracy Father Bulgakov prophesizes envisions an economics that does not systematize poverty but creates a culture that allows and protects the development of the person by avoiding the communitarianism of socialism and the individualism of capitalism. This is the difficult path Bulgakov sets before the Orthodox Church. This is the path that places the Church in a vulnerable position as it upholds the freedom, honor and glory of the human person.

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¹³ The Economic Ideal, p.43.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 48.