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Ecologies of Care:

Gregory of Nyssa and Sergii Bulgakov on Human Dignity and Responsibility

by Daniel Adam Lightsey

This essay aims to demonstrate how Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) and Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) possess resources for the joyful dilation of one's sense of self simply by the loving acknowledgment of an-other. For all their vital emphases on the unity of the "Whole Anthropos," I aim to show how Gregory and Bulgakov place a primacy *also* on the individual person by way of fostering pathways for all human persons to actualize freedom, self-determination, and creative potential for "personal redemptions of the soul." This *ecology of care* unfolds in both Gregory and Bulgakov's philosophical and theological conceptualizations of *love*, *freedom*, and *life*. This triple-knot of concepts is caught up in larger vision, a kind of theological aesthetic that concerns the human person's perception of and creative movement towards that transcendental horizon of *beauty*. Through discrete analyses of Gregory's abolitionist thought and Bulgakov's personalist metaphysics—each taken on their own merits for the bulk of the essay—we begin to see these portraits form a compelling collage of sorts, offering a religiously humanistic approach to the same "problem," namely, the human person.

Keywords: Gregory of Nyssa, Sergii Bulgakov, theological anthropology, human dignity, freedom, abolitionism, personalism, love, beauty

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Ecologies of Care

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Daniel Adam Lightsey

The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there.[1]

La splendeur qui ne veut rien appelle pourtant notre chant.[2]

Halfway, or thereabouts, into Henri Bosco's absorbing novel *Malicroix* (1948), the reader encounters a pivotal scene. Until this point, the tale has mostly marked the journey of a young man, a Monsieur Martial, to an estate on a remote island in the Camargue region with rarely another soul present save a taciturn shepherd, Balandran, and his dog, Brequillet. Committed to a rather opaque though perilous task, Martial—roiled by competing bloodlines in his veins though steadily gaining poise—is finally accepted by Balandran into the shepherd's distant world of wind, water, and care of the flock. By this act of loving acknowledgement, Martial feels a joyous dilation to his very person, recounting that Balandran's words of confidence bound "my future and were worth more than any solemn promise I myself might have made, … My whole life was what this wild shepherd expected from me. I was no longer alone. Someone had begun to love me in this immense solitude. … In expressing his faith, Balandran had just given himself; and in giving himself, he had enlarged me beyond myself."[3]

What I aim to demonstrate in this essay is how Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) and Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) possess resources in their written corpuses that evoke Bosco's account of the joyful dilation of one's sense of self simply by the loving acknowledgment of an-other. My desire is to show how both Gregory and Bulgakov, for all their vital emphasis on the unity of the "Whole Anthropos," place a primacy *also* on the individual person by way of fostering pathways for all human persons to actualize freedom, self-determination, and creative potential for what Bulgakov terms the

1. J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine* (New York: NYRB, 2005), 19.

2. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'effroi du beau* (Paris: CERF, 2011), 73.

3. Henri Bosco, *Malicroix,* trans. Joyce Zonana (New York: NYRB, 2020), 137–138. On the theological, literary notion of dilation as a joyous expansion of one's very self in love, see Jean-Louis Chrétien, *La Joie spacieuse: Essai sur la dilatation* (Paris: Minuit, 2007).

"personal redemptions of the soul."[4] I am calling this an ecology of care, which is built upon how both Gregory and Bulgakov develop *love*, *freedom*, and *life* in their distinct *oeuvres*.[5] This triple-knot of concepts is caught up in a larger vision, a kind of theological aesthetic that—though not greatly elaborated upon in this essay—concerns the human person's perception of and creative movement towards the *beautiful*.[6]

Why place the fourth-century Cappadocian bishop and twentieth-century Russian dogmatician in the same essay? First is to honor Nikolai Berdyaev (1974–1948), who both prized Gregory's work for stressing humanity's royal origins and nature and was an important companion of Bulgakov's.[7] Second, Bulgakov calls upon Gregory often

4. Sergii Bulgakov, "Карл Маркс как религиозный тип," in *Сочинения в Двух Томах*, ed. I. B. Rodnianskaia (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 2:246. (Henceforth "KM"). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

5. In a recent, formative essay, Rowan Williams too brings to the surface a thematic of *care* in Bulgakov: "Bulgakov in effect claims that hypostatic existence is intrinsically a form of life characterized by *care*: to exist hypostatically is to be in a relationship of 'nurture' towards the world that is encountered. To put it still more strongly, any account of subjecthood that ignores the responsibility to nurture and include the environment in the construction of human meaning is illusory and destructive," in "Sergei Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond," in *Building the House of Wisdom. Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology: New Approaches and Interpretations*, eds. Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen, Aristotle Papanikolaou and Pantelis Kalaitzidis (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2024), 36–37, emphasis original. My thanks to the anonymous reader who pointed out this important text.

6. As said, this essay does not set out to define or develop a theory of beauty or the beautiful, but a brief aside as to how it is utilized throughout may prove beneficial. By the *beautiful*—a manifold concept for both Gregory and Bulgakov—one may regard it as the attractive aspect of that transcendental horizon saturating every nook and cranny of creation proper as well as a *name* of God who never ceases in summoning all of creation to theosis: "God is good; He is Goodness itself. God is true; He is Truth itself. God is glorious, and His Glory is Beauty itself," as Sergii Bulgakov put it in his essay, "Religion and Art," in *The Church of God: An Anglo-Russian Symposium,* ed. E.L. Mascall (London: S.P.C.K. 1934), 175. For both thinkers, though they formulate it by diverse means, God *is* beauty and beautiful—oft times cast in terms of the immanent trinity's ineffably infinite life of bliss and joy; mutually beholding and being beholden, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the eternally mutual gaze of love, ever enjoying the radiant dance of perfect unity-in-difference. Thus, at least one implication of this is that beauty is not *only* a quality or property of God's relationship with the world (e.g., that God *only* creates the world beautiful, or God *simply* relates to the world eschatologically as drawing it toward beauty) nor *only* a designation of those encounters when human perception of internal and external realities escape one's grasp, those very real moments when something, someone, some experience elicit "an instinct for an order beyond the one it enacts," as Christian Wiman phrases it in his book, *Zero to the Bone: Fifty Entries Against Despair* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023), 126. The beautiful, therefore, exceeds and evades, in the final analysis, purified propositional analysis. Much more, of course, would need to be said about the nature of "ugliness" or "grotesquery" vis-à-vis beauty in distinctly Christian thought, since at the center of this religious tradition is the "God-Man" who gives himself over to be brutally tortured and executed as well as resurrected with the wounds still visible. Furthermore, the history of the use of beauty-language and thought-forms is as violent and violating as any other. However, no space will be given to developing these thematics here. Instead, for one work that does address these issues in relation with Gregory, see Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), especially 17–36, 125–250.

7. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act,* trans. Donald Lowrie (San Rafael: Semantron Press, 2009), 82. If the honorific nature of this statement seems like a bolt out of the blue, the conference to which this essay was originally given in a shorter form was in honor of the 150th birthyear of Berdyaev ("Religion, Human Dignity, and Human Rights: New Paradigms for Russia and the West," Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education, University of Florida, November 1–2, 2024). Furthermore, the conference concerned an interdisciplinary exploration of various genealogies of human rights vis-à-vis religious ideas, traditions, and institutions, specifically regarding freedom, dignity, and rights—hence the thematics of this essay. On Berdyaev and Bulgakov's philosophical relationship regarding their conceptions of the human, see the excellent work of Regula Zwahlen, *Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes: Anthropologien der Menschenwürde bei Nikolaj A. Berdjaev und Sergej N. Bulgakov* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010); cf. also

throughout his own work. And third, though the chief reason, through discrete analyses of Gregory's "abolitionist" thought and Bulgakov's personalist metaphysics—each taken on its own merits for the bulk of the essay—we begin to see these portraits form a compelling collage of sorts, offering a religiously humanistic approach to the same "problem," namely, the human person. We will begin with Gregory's pronouncements regarding the legal manumission of all slaves (argued on distinctly theological grounds) that each person may experience a prefiguring of eschatological life and bliss as they grow into that radiant Beauty which is Divine Goodness. Then, we will move to Bulgakov, who concretizes in his own way the interdependence of persons who possess the dignity and, indeed, responsibility to see in the face of the other divine beauty-in-relationality. Then, in conclusion, both Gregory and Bulgakov will be brought into more direct dialogue.

The precarity of placing two figures separated by well over a millennium of culture, language, geography, political alignment, theological and philosophical development, empires falling, states rising, *etc.*, is not lost on the author though neither is it overly much a concern for the narrow purposes of this essay. As far as a short *apologia* regarding methodology—first, what this brief essay is *not*. It is not an analysis of Bulgakov's mostly positive though at times critical reception of Gregory's thought (which, of course, would be greatly welcome).[8] Furthermore, it is *not* a straightforward comparison of certain words or concepts within these writers' respective writings nor a comparison of their theological "systems" *in toto*. What this constructive essay *is*, on the other hand, is an attempt to sketch how both Gregory and Bulgakov, initially taken as distinct signposts, build a Christian theological case for a religiously humanistic view of personhood as honoring the individual dignity of each human body and life as well as necessarily entailing a robust capacity for relationality, whether this is with companions, strangers, friends, enemies, embedded communities, and so on. And lastly, for some readers, the primacy of the human in Gregory and Bulgakov will seem like a relic of the past, one that could be critiqued as having contributed to the ecological crises of the present (and future) as well as implicated in certain utilitarian approaches towards animal and plant life. It is not my intention to assuage such fears or provide an apologetic as to the opposite. However, if simply due to intellectual uprightness, one will find diverse resources within Gregory and Bulgakov that show care for the environments humans are gifted to steward.[9]

Zwahlen's distillation of the aforementioned in "Different Concepts of Personality: Nikolaj Berdjaev and Sergej Bulgakov," *Studies in East European Thought* 64, no. 3/4 (2012): 183–204.

8. Bulgakov utilizes Gregory's thought throughout the later portion of his life—for example, see his 1914 essay "The Meaning of St. Gregory of Nyssa's Teachings about Names" on through to an appended essay to *The Bride of the Lamb* (posthumous, 1945) titled "On the Question of the Apocatastasis of the Fallen Spirits (in Connection with the Teaching of Gregory of Nyssa)," as well as many places in between. In the secondary literature, the majority of Bulgakov—Gregory couplings involve their staunch adherence to forms of universal salvation. On *apokatastasis,* see Paul Gavrilyuk, "Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov," *Journal of Theological Studies* 57, No. 1 (2006): 110–32.

9. In other words, the extreme, and certainly caricatured, notion of *why polish the brass of a sinking ship?* (i.e., the latter symbolizing the world on the way to the fires of the eschaton) certainly does not apply to Gregory or Bulgakov. For example, see Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection,* in *Ascetical Works,* trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 270. (Henceforth *OSR*). Here, Gregory's older sister, Macrina, teaches him that in the resurrection, "None of

Gregory of Nyssa

For the towering fourth century figure, one can build a case for a kind of religious humanism via any number of texts or directions in his thought. The one I choose to focus on here is his denunciations of slavery on decidedly *theological* grounds.[10] *In nuce*, Gregory's argument is that one consequence of spiritual slavery is legal slavery, which is thus in need of eradication; furthermore, the sheer hubris of one human subjecting another—both of them sharing in the dignity of imaging God's freedom as well as unified in one nature—to a life of slavery amounts to an arrogance beyond reckoning.[11] In an Easter sermon likely preached in 379, Gregory does not denounce legal slavery only on the grounds of philanthropic goodwill towards the other (although, of course, this would be commendable in and of itself), nor does Gregory only direct his comments to those seeking to live an ascetical life.[12] Instead, he addresses all households

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the beauties we see now, not only in men, but also in plants and animals, will be destroyed in the life to come." Also, to anticipate the argument below, Hans Boersma judges correctly that Gregory's argument for the abolition of slavery in the eschaton is likely due to Gregory's "conviction that the eschatological reality of freedom from sin must take shape in the social structures of this world. His anagogical theology does not render him indifferent to material and bodily concerns." See Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 159. For his part, Bulgakov writes, "God put *everything* into His creation that could be put into it. This gift of the Creator to creation, ... as a task to be realized, contains fullness and perfection to the extent they can be received by creation, which is created out of nothing and permeated by this nothing as its inner boundary. However, the creature receives the possibility of ascending to perfection, of removing boundaries, of overcoming the 'individual' as self-isolating, nonuniversal being in the ongoing sophianization of creation." Sergii Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 149, emphasis original. (Henceforth *BL*). See too later in *BL,* "the figure of the new Jerusalem signifies the transfigured and glorified world, which contains the principles of the natural world and the synthesis of human creative activity in history" (523). Cf. Sergii Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma)*, trans. Stephen Churchland (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020), 117. (Henceforth *TP.*) For a helpful discussion, see Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 88–112.

10. Bulgakov too refers to the incompatibility of human dignity and institutions of slavery. For example, in "Первохристианство и новейший социализм" (1909), Bulgakov speaks of the internal revolution of the individual that Christianity instantiates in history, a revolution that ultimately eschews any depersonalizing collective as well as overcomes, eventually, all legal and societal organizational boundaries such as the relations of master and slave. See Bulgakov, *Два града: Исследования о природе общественных идеалов,* ed. Vadim V. Sapov (St. Petersburg: Издательстбо Русского Христианского гуманитарного института, 1997), 195. My gratitude to the anonymous reviewer who pointed me to this text.

11. The scholarly literature on Gregory's anti-slavery thought is immense. For but a few works, see Trevor Dennis, "The Relationship between Greogry of Nyssa's Attack on Slavery in his Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes and his Treatise *De Hominis Opificio*," *Studia Patristica* 17.3 (1982): 1065–1072; *idem.,* "Man beyond Price: Gregory of Nyssa and Slavery," in *Heaven and Earth,* eds. Andrew Linzey and Peter J. Wexler (Wexler, Worthing: Churchman, 1986), 129–145; Daniel F. Stramara Jr., "Gregory of Nyssa: An Ardent Abolitionist?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997): 37–60; Richard Klein, *Die Haltung der Kappadokischen Bischöfe Basilius von Caesarea, Gregor von Nazianz und Gregor von Nyssa zur Sklaverei* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000); Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue,* 146–177; Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 172–211; David Bentley Hart, "The Whole Humanity: Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of his Eschatology," in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 237–252; and J. Kameron Carter, "Interlude on Christology and Race: Gregory of Nyssa as Abolitionist Intellectual," in *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229–251.

12. One often encounters in the secondary literature on Gregory's abolitionism Seneca's laudable 47th epistle, which too concerns the plight of slaves. Seneca is, however, not making any overt *theological*

within the congregation: by manumitting slaves in this present context—releasing and acknowledging them "with equal decency" as all other persons of the community, letting "the beauty of the feast blossom like a flower upon everyone"—a prefiguring of the resurrection of all persons from the grave occurs; thus, the end of spiritual slavery, progressively unfolding *in part* through the abolition of legal slavery, restores humanity to its original condition of *freedom* and *life* without death.[13]

Freedom and life are intertwined in Gregory's thought concerning humanity and the cosmos in general. "[L]ife," he preaches in his marvelous *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, "is the very center of God's plantation. Death, on the contrary, is, in and of itself, rootless and unplanted, since it has no place of its own."[14] In other words, an ecology of care, as Gregory helps build it, begins by acknowledging that life and the paths of life are characteristic of the givenness of things as they are crafted at their origin, whereas death and the ways of death, including spiritual and legal slavery, are by way of privation.[15] *Life*, for Gregory, ultimately concerns the creature's infinite ascent of desirous love to the Good, which constantly forms the pursuer of the Good by way of attracting them "to that ascent" and "*constantly expands* as one progresses in pressing on to the Good."[16] This *epektic* logic—a "stretching forth" into the divine infinite—is foundational for all of Gregory's thought, a vision of the spiritual life as an erotic summons by and to as well as participation "in the transcendent Beauty," whereby one's "desire increases in proportion to [one's] progress toward" that ever old, always new "Light."[17] And since it is constitutive of humanity's nature to be shaped by and become in some regard whatever "it determines upon, ... whatever goal the thrust [of which] its choice leads," all the while undergoing "alteration in accord with what it seeks," then proximity to the Good for the ascender opens them to take in more of Divine life and love without it ever being exhausted.[18] As Gregory's sister Macrina teaches him near the end of their captivating dialogue, *On the Soul and the Resurrection,* humanity was made in wisdom as a kind of "receptacle" for rationality, freedom, and divine goods, "a place that always becomes larger because of what is additionally poured into it. For participation in the

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claims here (for which, of course, he is not at fault, though it should be pointed out how different this is from Gregory's *theo*-logic).

13. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Sanctum Pascha,* trans. Stuart George Hall, in *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Andreas Spira and Christopher Klock (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1981), 8–9. Cf. "Faire sortir les esclaves de la honte ... préfigure la résurrection des morts," as Marguerite Harl writes in her, "L'Éloge de la fête de Pâques dans le Prologue du Sermon In Sanctum Pascha de Grégoire de Nysse," in *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa*, 91. Cf. Ramelli, *Social Justice,* 175; Hart, "The Whole Humanity," 239; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue,* 160–161—all of whom make a similar argument.

14. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs,* trans. Richard Norris Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 369. (Henceforth *HSS*).

15. *HSS,* 371.

16. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses,* trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 2:238, emphasis mine.

17. *HSS,* 171. See J. Warren Smith, "Becoming Men, Not Stones: *Epektasis* in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs,*" in *Gregory of Nyssa, In Canticum Canticorum: Analytical and Supporting Studies: Proceedings of the 13th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Rome, 17–20 September 2014),* eds. Giulio Maspero, Miguel Brugarolas, Ilaria Vigorelli (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 340–359.

18. *HSS,* 113.

divine good is such that it makes larger and more receptive that in which it exists," ever allowing one to grow in "power and size," becoming more "capable" and "spacious."[19] As one grows, one abounds in nourishment from the source of wisdom, love, and life as such. Regarding the faithful ways of life in relation to God's making of the human in his image and likeness, the keystone is the concept of *freedom*. As Gregory makes plain in his *Catechetical Orations,*

> If some necessity presided over human life, the image would have been false in that part, being alien to the archetype by [its] dissimilarity; for how would it be called the image of the kingly nature if it were under yoke to and enslaved by some necessities? Therefore what is similar to the divine in all things must by all means have self-mastery and independence by nature, so that the prize for virtue may be participation in good things.[20]

Furthermore, humanity, Gregory avers, is created with one unified nature, possessing the "form of every beauty, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that can be conceived."[21] Gregory argues that God "craft[s] the genesis of such a living thing out of an excess of love,"[22] "love for man" being "the characteristic property of the divine nature."[23] Also, humanity "was born for the enjoyment of divine good things"; therefore, the human possesses a "nature" that holds "some kinship with that of which [the human] partakes."[24] And to be able to do this, God fashioned human nature as "both independent and uncontrolled."[25] Human nature "was made godlike and blessed because it had been honored with free autonomy (as ruling oneself and being without a master is the specific property of divine blessedness), for humanity to be forcibly changed to something else through constraint would have been a removal of its dignity."[26] In responding to those who see nothing but distortion, suffering, and perishability around them, Gregory argues that this is not the origin of human persons: "For he who made man for participation in his own good things, and who fashioned in his nature the origin for all things that are good for him, ... did not rob [humanity] of the best and most honorable of good things, I mean the grace of *independence and self-determination.*"[27]

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19. *OSR,* 244–245.

20. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse: A Handbook for Catechists,* trans. Ignatius Green (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2019), 5.10. (Henceforth *CD*).

21. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God,* trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 16.11. Gregory continues, "Of all these, one is to be free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural domination, but to have self-determining deliberation regarding what we resolve."

22. *CD,* 5.3.

23. *CD,* 15.2.

24. *CD,* 5.5–6. Gregory immediately continues, "Because of this [humanity] was adorned with life and reason and wisdom and all God-befitting good things, so that through each of them [each human person] might have the desire for what is proper [to oneself]."

25. *CD,* 5.12.

26. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Mortuis,* trans. Rowan Greer, in *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2015), 108–109.

27. *CD,* 5.9, emphasis added, translation slightly modified.

By "independence" and "self-determination," Gregory means the sovereignty to enjoy and adhere to the Good as such, since "choosing" evil (understood as philosophically unsubstantial and thus parasitical) is not ultimately a free act.[28] Gregory is certainly not a kind of parodied libertarian, and thus, *real* freedom is to be found in reaching a point where one does not need to *choose* between good and evil at all. This is because the Good as such is the ultimate end of the human appetite, the radiance to which all desirous intention is ultimately aimed. This, in turn, necessitates *process* and *development* for Gregory's philosophical anthropology. To those who fear or show disgust at humanity's inherent mutability, Gregory gently reminds them in the conclusion of *On Perfection,* mutableness in the creature is not always for the worse but potentially for the nobler, the more beautiful, changing into "something more divine," exchanging "glory for glory" and "becoming greater through daily increase."[29] An ecology of care where this vision of freedom is basic sees true *perfection* as not a final arrival at a promontory of faultlessness nor deserting those associations and idiosyncrasies each person possesses, but never stopping in one's growth towards that which is more radiant.

With all of this in mind, we can approach again what is at issue and at stake in Gregory's severe condemnation of slavery. Firstly, and of great importance given some common stances towards slaves and the practices of legal slavery in antiquity, Gregory does not conceive of slavery as *natural* nor a *necessary evil*. For example, Gregory is adamant that those whom society at large looks upon as downtrodden, the "naked and homeless ... strangers and exiles," were not assigned this life "by birth"—meaning, one cannot shift obligation to the victim of misery and tribulation because it is their so-called *lot in life* (Gregory is, of course, simply reiterating some synoptic accounts, e.g., Luke 13; John 9).[30] If so for those victims of war, plague, famine, *et al.,* then even more for those persons entrapped within the structures of slavery. Indeed, Gregory is unyielding: humanity itself is responsible for splitting into the camps of slave and free. "Not nature," Gregory thunders in his exegesis of the Lord's prayer, "but [a] 'spirit of dominion' has divided humanity into slavery and masters."[31] What's more, this "spirit of dominion" serves to make humanity irrationally enslaved to itself: human self-division into "slavery" and "ownership," making the Whole Anthropos "enslaved to itself, and to be the owner of itself."[32] The farcicality, Gregory seems to suggest in his obloquy, could produce droll amusement, if not for the utterly grave and perverse nature of the absurdity.

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28. Ramelli, *Social Justice*, 184. Cf. *OSR,* 242: "since it is the nature of evil not to exist apart from choice, when all choice resides in God, evil will disappear completely because there will be nothing left to contain it."

29. Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfectione,* in *Ascetical Works,* trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 122. Cf. *OSR,* 240.

30. Gregory, *De beneficentia,* 194.

31. Quoted in Ramelli, *Social Justice,* 177. Gregory's "spirit of dominion" and Augustine of Hippo's notion of *libido dominandi,* especially as described in *de Civitate Dei* bk. 14, are worthy of further exploration.

32. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten homiliae*, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes,* trans. Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 74. (Henceforth *Eccl*).

In his justly famous fourth homily on Ecclesiastes (exegeting Eccl. 2:7, "I bought male slaves and slave girls, and I had home-born slaves too. Also many herds of cattle and sheep did I have, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem."[33]), Gregory elucidates upon the catastrophic implications of being under the sway of this "spirit of dominion." While the word count for this section of his larger homily is quite small, Gregory's unrelenting critique of slavery and those who ignorantly possess the hubris to believe they "own" another person is something fearsome to behold.[34] First, Gregory warns those who operate as if they are outside the bounds of human nature that it is a "challenge to God" when they "'assume divine power and authority' by considering themselves masters over the life and death of" other human persons, which is nothing more than an aberrantly "mistaken masquerade of government."[35] The pretense of this unfaithful will-towards-division is not of Life as such, which, as constitutive to an ecology of care, concerns the erotic pursuit of Goodness itself since human persons are "lovers of the transcendent Beauty."[36] Furthermore, the pursual of this ultimate end is normative for all patterns of life here and now.[37] Thus, one can best journey when made free of unnatural burdens, including the bondages of legal slavery.

While one should not conflate spiritual slavery with legal slavery in Gregory's thought, neither can they be neatly separated into competing spheres of concern. "All freedom," Macrina tells Gregory, "is essentially the same and identical with itself. Consequently, everything that is free is in harmony with whatever is similar to itself."[38] The context of Macrina's line of argumentation concerns freedom as consisting in virtue, and because the divine nature is the origin of virtue, each person who is truly free (and specifically free of *vice*) resides in the divine life that God may be *all in all.* To be sure, the argument is made in relation to spiritual freedom from the ignorance entailed in the devastating distortions of sin in the world. But, again, considering Gregory does not wholly bifurcate "the beautiful harmonies of Neoplatonism with the radical historicality of Christianity," all quotidian pathways toward freedom in the here and now anticipate the final restoration.[39]

Returning to his fourth homily on Ecclesiastes, Gregory roars against the would-be master: "You condemn man to slavery, when his nature is free and possesses free will, and you legislate in competition with God, overturning his law for the human species. The one made on the specific terms that he should be the owner of the earth, and

33. Translation from Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume Three, The Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 682.

34. Ramelli rightly argues that Gregory's forceful denunciations in his fourth homily on Ecclesiastes represents a "structural" argument that "emerges throughout a full range of his works," Ramelli, *Social Justice,* 178. Cf. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue,* 149.

35. Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, in *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Beatitudes,* trans. Stuart George Hall (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 30.

36. *HSS,* 183.

37. Cf. Ramelli, *Social Justice,* 175–176.

38. *OSR,* 243.

39. David Bentley Hart, "Matter, Monism, and Narrative: An Essay on the Metaphysics of *Paradise Lost*," in Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 235.

appointed to government by the Creator—him you bring under the yoke of slavery, as though defying and fighting against the divine decree."[40] Since each human person is more valuable than the entirety of the world (a logic expressed by Bulgakov below), then each person is to be perceived as an "owner of the whole cosmos."[41] Gregory continually lampoons those who think themselves "master" over another image bearer, as if one person can be a "buyer" of another:

> He who knew the nature of mankind rightly said that the whole world was not worth giving in exchange for a human soul. Whenever a human being is for sale, therefore, nothing less than the owner of the earth is led into the sale-room. Presumably, then, the property belonging to him is up for auction too. That means the earth, the islands, the sea, and all that is in them. What will the buyer pay, and what will the vendor accept, considering how much property is entailed in the deal?[42]

Indeed, for Gregory, not even God Most High can enslave humanity in such inhumane fashion, as God's gifts "are irrevocable," and therefore, "God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since ... when we had been enslaved to sin, [it was divine love that] spontaneously recalled us to freedom."[43] And this is key to Gregory's re-imagining of "subjection," witnessed most lucidly in a sermon on 1 Cor. 15:28, where St. Paul expresses that all things will be made subject to Christ, who is subject to God, the one who is "all in all." Gregory schematizes "subjection" here as Christo-eschatological: to be subject to Christ is the "complete alienation from evil," where, to be precise, the enemy *death* is blotted out, and each person rests "in a kingdom, [with] incorruptibility and blessedness living in" all.[44] This re-configuration of "subjection" is in plainer terms *friendship*, where the friend and lover of God "looks toward that divine and infinite Beauty [and] glimpses something that is always being discovered as more novel and more surprising ... and for that reason she marvels at that which is always being manifested, but she never comes to a halt in her desire to see, since what she looks forward to is in every possible way more splendid and more divine than what she has seen."[45] This dazzling, dizzying vision of the human person ever-open to ever-new growth, change, and capaciousness, "enlarging" the self in proximity to divine love,

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40. *Eccl,* 73.

41. Ramelli, *Social Justice,* 178.

42. *Eccl,* 74–75.

43. *Eccl,* 74. Moreover: "But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?" *Eccl,* 74.

44. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius*, trans. Brother Casimir, O.C.S.O., *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28 (1983): 19, 25, respectively. Gregory closes his fifteenth homily on *Song of Songs* similarly, "For it is the nature common to all ... to press forward in desire ... until that time when, since all have become one in desiring the same goal and there is no vice left in any, God may become all in all persons, in those who by their oneness are blended together with one another in the fellowship of the Good in our Lord Jesus Christ." *HSS,* 497–499.

45. *HSS,* 339. Cf. *OSR,* 240, here Macrina relays to her younger brother how the soul's journey is one that is never sated in the sense that one never grows tired of receiving more: "knowledge becomes love because what is known is, by nature, beautiful. Wanton satiety does not touch the truly beautiful. And, since the habit of loving the beautiful is never broken by satiety, the divine life, which is beautiful by nature and has from its nature a love for the beautiful, will always be activated by love."

beauty, and bliss is, again, normative for Gregory in the present. A baseline perception of the world in this manner—as Gregory stalwartly teaches throughout his sermons, letters, and treatises—helps to secure productive pathways of freedom for all persons in the here and now so that each person, like the Bride from Song of Songs, "never bring[s] her desire for the object of her vision to a halt at what has already been apprehended."[46]

Sergii Bulgakov

As a "creaturely god" and "a cryptogram of Divinity," humanity possesses "a divine, uncreated origin from 'God's breath,'" which gifts it a "spark of divinity," a share in possessing a kind of "uncreatedness," and effectively makes "man … an uncreated-created, divine-cosmic being."[47] So writes Bulgakov in his momentous work of Christology, *The Lamb of God* (1933). With such an elevated anthropology, it is perhaps not shocking that after the appearance of the work, Bulgakov was twice-charged with teaching elements "foreign" to the Orthodox faith during what became known as the "Sophia Affair," a young Vladimir Lossky demanding alacritous "anathemas" be formally composed against Bulgakov.[48] In response, Bulgakov insists that his "starting point" is simply taking seriously, and subsequently teasing out with indefatigable rigor, the "axiom of man being God's image and likeness."[49] In short, to be human is to be a "living image of the trihypostatic God in His Wisdom."[50] And constitutive to understanding the image (and likeness) is *love,* which is not meant to be a simple characteristic or quality or static factoid for categorizing the human, but *capacious*, as love is properly *expansive*.[51]

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46. *HSS,* 339.

47. Sergii Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 112, 116, 186, 143, 140, respectively. (Henceforth *LG*).

48. Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1925–1940,* trans. Jerry Ryan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 387. In January of 1936, Lossky published *Спор и Софии,* see Arjakovsky, *The Way,* 386–388. For more background, see too Arjakovsky's formative discussion in *Essai sur la Père Serge Boulgakov (1871–1944): Philosophe et théologien chrétien* (Parole et Silence: 2006), 106–120. For a very fine work in English on the "Sophia Affair," see Roberto De La Noval, "Sophiology in Suspension: The Theological Condemnations of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov" (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2020), esp. 28–42, 276–363. For some primary documentation of the formal proceedings, see "The Charges of Heresy against Sergius Bulgakov: The Majority and Minority Reports of Evlogii's Commission and the Final Report of the Bishops' Conference" in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (2005): 47–66.

49. Sergii Bulgakov, "Докладная записка Его Высокопреосвященству Митрополиту Евлогию профессора прот. Сергия Булгакова," *Путь* 50 (1936): 17. On *image and likeness* in Bulgakov, see Zwahlen, *Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes*, 293–295.

50. *LG,* 140.

51. In a long essay contribution to an ecumenical volume on revelation in the Christian tradition, Bulgakov provides some parameters for how he thinks the image of God in humanity should be approached. He critiques any reduction of the image to a singular aspect such as rationality or intellect or spirit, *et al.,* considering this stratagem an exercise in futility; instead, he holds that the image "belongs to [humanity] as a whole, … [since humanity] is a creaturely god both in the spirit and in the body, in their mutual relatedness, and also in his personal being as well as in his nature." Sergii Bulgakov, "Revelation," in *Revelation,* ed. John Baillie and Hugh Martin, trans. Oliver F. Clarke and Xenia Braikevitch (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1937), 131. Cf. *LG,* 140–141 for much of the same qualification.

In moving from the conceptual portrait of Gregory to Bulgakov and the latter's *theological* resourcing for building a religious humanism, we immediately see a thematic similarity to Gregory's positioning of life, love, freedom, and the pursuit of the beautiful.[52] Surely classifiable as a *theologian of love,* Bulgakov*,* in a 1910 essay on Vladimir Solovyov, famously revised the well-known Cartesian maxim *cogito, ergo sum* to, "One can accept the metaphysical formula: *I love, therefore I am*, because in love is the loftiest manifestation of life."[53] In a nutshell, God gifts out of an "ecstatic act of creative, self-renouncing love" to humanity a created-divine spiritual nature, replete with intellect (holistically conceived) and intentionality in order to pursue the ultimate end of life, namely, ascendency into that ever-unfolding beauty and bliss that is infinite desire, to wit, God.[54] Recalling Gregory's *epektic* logic above, all human persons, each of which bears the image and is called to the likeness of God, are "beings created by love, in love, and for love," since love "constitutes the inner law of their being."[55] An ecology of care in this Bulgakovian key perceives love, life, and freedom as interwoven, and these features are founded, as all things are in Bulgakov's so-called "later" works, on the Triune Person, who "does not love illusory abstractness and deadness, [but] all that is concrete … [having] the power of *life*."[56]

Even before his explicit theological shift, Bulgakov consistently critiques systems that excessively abstract from the concrete individual person—her singular life, personality, creativity, sufferings, etc. Encountering the storm of anthropologies that were present in *fin-de-siècle* Russian (and broader European) thought, Bulgakov's early conceptualizations regarding the priority of the human person as an individual possessing absolute dignity and irreplaceability are in large part what led him to his break with the "legal Marxism" to which he apprenticed himself in his twenties. Critiquing Marxism as a kind of alternative religious tradition in his 1906/1907 essay "Karl Marx as a Religious

52. Bulgakov's personalist thought is well-trodden territory in the scholarly literature. For but a smidgen of sourcing as regards his *theological* developments vis-à-vis his specific personalism, see first the classic study by Lev Zander, *Бог и Мир* (*Миросозерцание отца Сергия Булгакова*), 2 vol. (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1948), especially 2: 315–375. For more recent accounts, see Zwahlen, *Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes,* esp. ch. 6; *idem.,* "Different Concepts of Personality"; *idem.,* "Sergey N. Bulgakov's Concept of Human Dignity," in *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights*, eds. Alfons Brüning and Evert van der Zweerde (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 169–186; David Bentley Hart, "Masks, Chimaeras, and Portmanteaux: Sergii Bulgakov and the Metaphysics of the Person," in *Building the House of Wisdom. Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology: New Approaches and Interpretations*, eds. Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen, Aristotle Papanikolaou and Pantelis Kalaitzidis (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2024), 43–62; Michael Aksionov Meerson, "Sergei Bulgakov's Philosophy of Personality," in *Russian Religious Thought,* eds. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 139–153; *idem., The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology: The Love Paradigm and the Retrieval of Western Medieval Love Mysticism in Modern Russian Trinitarian Thought (from Solovyov to Bulgakov)* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), esp. 159–186; Joshua Heath, "Sergii Bulgakov's Linguistic Trinity," *Modern Theology* 37.4 (October 2021): 888–912.

53. "Можно принять метафизическую формулу: *amo, ergo sum,* ибо в любви – высшее проявление жизни." Sergii Bulgakov, "Природа в философии Вл. Соловьева," in *Сочинения в Двух Томах*, ed. S.S. Khoruzhii (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 1: 25–26.

54. *BL,* 115.

55. *BL*, 157.

56. Sergii Bulgakov, "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to the Unfading Light," trans. Brandan Gallaher and Irina Kukota, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (2005): 27, emphasis mine. (Henceforth "HH").

Type," Bulgakov reads Marx(ism) as formulating human persons as "algebraic signs"; he argues that there is a general "lack of attention to the concrete, living human person," which inevitably leads to a disregard for "the problem of individuality."[57] Ultimately, Bulgakov maintains that with Marxism, at least as regards the Marxism with which he was acquainted, "the absolutely indivisible core of human personality, its integral nature, does not exist."[58]

Turning towards the face of the person, Bulgakov conceives the "problem" of the individual as shaped by "religious consciousness," having most distinctly to do with humanity's correlation to God, the intuition of being charted along a transcendent-immanent continuum, not reducible to any naturalist, physicalist system of thought. Bulgakov later reasons, "The element of freedom and personhood, i.e., creativity, is irremovable from religious faith: I come forward here not as an abstract, neutral, impersonal, 'normally' organized representative of a genus but as a concrete, unrepeatable, individual person."[59] But even a decade earlier, when composing "Karl Marx as a Religious Type," Bulgakov is already intimating towards the person's "living spirit" as possessing a divine-creaturely origin and telos, and to perceive that which is "real and everlasting"[60] in this living, incarnated spirit is not to reduce her to a privatized subject within an abstract collective. Though he will need close to the next forty years to further expand these thoughts, Bulgakov recognizes that what is at stake is the "irreplaceable, absolutely unique person who only once for a moment flashes in history," summoning his readers to see how this *person* "lays claim to eternity, to absoluteness, to enduring significance."[61]

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57. "KM," 2:244. Bulgakov had begun to critique Marxism before 1906—in fact, he had begun in the late 1890s, partly due to his empirical research abroad as well as his conviction that the kind of Marxism carried out in, for example, Germany would not ultimately take root in a Russian context. Cf. the various articles and reviews collected in Sergii Bulgakov, *От марксизма к идеализму: Статьи и рецензии 1895–1903,* ed. Vadim Sapov (Moscow: AST, 2006). See too Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross & the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 28–65. For more on Bulgakov's critique of the "religious Marx," see J. R. Seiling, "From Antinomy to Sophiology: Modern Russian Religious Consciousness and Sergei Bulgakov's Critical Appropriation of German Idealism" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2008), 205–208.

58. "KM," 2:244. Bulgakov had already critiqued Marxism on these very grounds in his contribution to the watershed 1902 volume *Problems of Idealism*: "Marxism takes the formula of the free development of the person without, of course, any metaphysical content. Here the person is not a bearer of absolute tasks, endowed with a definite moral nature and capabilities, but entirely a product of historical development, changing with this development. The concept of the person, strictly speaking, is completely missing here, reduced only to the purely formal unity of the self. But in such a case, what can the formula 'free development of the person' mean? Once more, positive science knocks at the door of metaphysics." Sergii Bulgakov, "Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress," in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, ed., trans. and intro. Randall A. Poole (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 105. (Henceforth "BP.") Bulgakov would hold to his critique of Marx(ism) even into the 1930s, cf. Sergii Bulgakov, "The Soul of Socialism," in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, trans. & ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 244–245. (Henceforth "SS").

59. Sergii Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations,* trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 35. (Henceforth *UL*).

60. "KM," 2:246.

61. "KM," 2:246. Indebted greatly to Vladimir Solovyov, many Russian religious-philosophical thinkers of this era regarded the human person with such a sense of primacy. For some of the historical background, see Randall Poole's excellent, "Editor's Introduction: Philosophy and Politics in the Russian Liberation Movement," in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, 1–78. Cf. too the classic study

This impulse, in fact, is bedrock for Bulgakov throughout his entire career. As witnessed in one of his last pieces, a manuscript from 1941-1942 titled "Racism and Christianity," Bulgakov argues, "Neither the race nor the nation nor any biological collectivity constitutes an original reality ... as is the case of the person. This truth, insupportable for racism, is ... the foundation of the human being. Humanity is composed not of races but of persons who find their common source, as individuals, in the unique total person, in the new Adam, in Christ."[62] While Bulgakov holds no truck with the underlying metaphysics of Marxism that seemingly despoils the concrete person by abstracting society into a quadratic equation,[63] he despises and utterly denounces the "spiritual idolatry" of state absolutism under the diverse machinations of "Fascism," "racism," "*Führerism*," and "Bolshevism," which in various ways follow paths marked by *libido dominandi,* ultimately enslaving "the person to the state." It is telling that he associates these abominations with the false prophets and beasts of St. John's apocalypse.[64]

Clearly, therefore, immense import is afforded human dignity on theological grounds, as Bulgakov makes explicit in the conclusion of his *Tragedy of Philosophy*: "God says *you* to human beings, that He by His Word acknowledges, and, consequently, creates the human being's personhood, and the fact that He gives to the human being, to a created being, the power to approach God as *You*," and thereby God accepts the creature into

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by V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, trans. George Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), esp. 2: 469–531, 706–916. Bulgakov named Solovyov a great modern Russian "poet-philosopher": Bulgakov, "Без плана. Несколько замечаний по поводу статьи Г. И. Чулкова о поэзии Вл. Соловьева," in *Тихие Думы*, 216–233. Though he later cools in his affections, he regarded "Solovyov as having been my philosophical 'guide to Christ' at the time of a change in my own world outlook." See Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology,* trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke, and Xenia Braikevitc (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 10. (Henceforth *S.*)

62. Translation from Arjakovsky, *The Way,* 436–437. See also Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov,* 293–303, for a critique of Bulgakov's "Расизм и христианство," specifically with regards to Judaism. In short, Williams argues that Bulgakov holds "a nuanced but faintly disturbing position," 295. Cf. too Dominic Rubin, "Judaism and Russian Religious Thought," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought,* eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 349–352.

63. It should be noted that while Bulgakov heavily critiques Marxism, he does not dispute that the material, political, and economic features of life are integral to any philosophico-theological personalism: e.g., we may note that Bulgakov holds to the "the completely irrefutable fact that the growth and moral development of personhood are to a certain degree inextricably connected with material progress" ("BP," 102). And later in the same essay, "Pitiful is the person who in our time is incapable of seeing the radiance of the absolute moral ideal in the hearts of people devoting themselves to helping the proletariat in its struggle for human dignity, in the hearts of people capable of living and dying for the cause of freedom, and pitiful is the person who will not see this radiance in the dull and prosaic paragraphs of factory legislation or in the charter of a labor union, and so forth. ... Therefore, the emancipation of the peasants, the introduction of land captains, the limitation of zemstvo revenues, the municipal reform, and the censorship and university statutes are all subject to moral evaluation. Everything is either good or evil" ("BP," 113).

64. Sergii Bulgakov, *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation,* trans. Mike Whitton (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2019), 94–96, 104–106, and elsewhere. To be clear, while he explicitly names Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin in these pages, Bulgakov does not include Marx, whom he decried but for whom Bulgakov also possessed an intellectual respect. In the early 1930s, he writes, "In Marx, the spirit of anti-Christian enmity to God finds a voice of exceptional power; but this spirit is nonetheless bound up with an authentic social pathos and an authentic orientation to the future. There is something in Marx of that outpouring of the Spirit that we find in Israel's prophets, for all the atheistic trappings, the outpouring of the Spirit that conquers the heart" ("SS," 244).

the "Divine *We*."[65] Bulgakov never ceases in his enthusiasms concerning this theological point, that the trihypostatic Person "light[s] from His [own] Light innumerable myriads of spiritual suns or stars, that is, hypostases."[66] It "exceeds all thought," he rhapsodizes, the "ineffability" of such an act of "Divine love and kindness," specifically in regards to the donation of divine breath to the whole humanity at its mysterious origin, "which appears in the creation of new hypostases, created gods."[67]

In conceptualizing God's kenotic, and therefore truly transcendent, communication of *you* to all persons, Bulgakov is not, as has been pointed out by others, utilizing the *image* and *likeness* merely to point out an egalitarianism among all persons (though equal dignity among all persons is obviously present, as amply evidenced by the preceding). Instead, he is alluding to the dynamic ontological structure of spiritual persons who possess a selfhood within a nature defined by sobornost—a unified, Whole Anthropos who images as well as finds its telos in the Divine Life that is ultimately revealed "as a sobornal Person" (какъ соборную Личность),[68] incarnating lives marked by self-determination in actions of freedom and creativity.[69] Bulgakov argues that the self-determination inherent to the likening task makes the undertaking "royal, Godlike," as it is "the path of freedom."[70] *And*, the task of realizing the likeness is the "path of work," an "arduous path" for humanity that requires great enthusiasms and labors as well as even greater feats of love in overcoming the temptations that saturate such a mercurial state of "creatureliness," which "in its untested and un-overcome state is ontologically unstable," bearing "within itself a certain risk of failure, which God's love takes upon itself in its sacrificial kenosis."[71] The givenness of the image and the task to actualize the likeness find purchase in the logic of love that understands the heart of creation as, in the final analysis, purposed towards theosis.

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65. *TP,* 154, emphasis in original, translation modified. Cf. Sergii Bulgakov, *Трагедия философии*, in *Сочинения в Двух Томах*, ed. S. S. Khoruzhii (Moscow: Наука, 1993), 1:444.

66. *TP,* 153.

67. *TP,* 154.

68. Sergii Bulgakov, "Главы о Троичности," *Православная мысль* 1 (1928): 40. On the relation of the individual person and the conciliar whole, Eric Perl's note concerning Dionysius the Areopagite—Bulgakov knowing well the *Corpus Areopagiticum* (cf. *UL,* 125–128, 166, 270–271; *TP,* 140; *LG,* 72–75, 125; and elsewhere)—is instructive: "In Dionysius' metaphysics, then, there is no such thing as an individual, a being conceived as a closed, self-contained unit which extrinsically enters into relations with other beings. Because the principle of reality is pure Openness or Giving, the very identity, the being of each thing, God-in-it, is its giving to and receiving from others. Each thing, indeed, is nothing but its relations to others" due to the "ΠΕΡΙΧΏΡΗΣΗΣ," whereby "the Great Dance in which all beings are only in and through each other." See Eric Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), 80. Bulgakov certainly makes room for the individual person but eschews any form of "individualism" as "self-isolating, nonuniversal being," and, in so doing, Bulgakov attempts to aid *individuals* in their dying as a seed in order to more fully realize their *person*hood, participating sobornally in "the ongoing sophianization of creation" (*BL,* 149).

69. As Zwahlen argues, "Bulgakov behandelt den Begriff 'Ebenbild Gottes' konsequent nicht als eine Wesensgleichheit, sondern als Analogie der geistigen, personalen und dynamischen Struktur von Gott und Mensch: Diese Struktur besteht in einem Akt der Selbstbestimmung des Ich in seiner Natur" (*Das revolutionäre Ebenbild Gottes,* 293).

70. *LG,* 147.

71. *LG,* 147.

The Triune Person communes and thus communicates with created persons through the gate or mode of freedom—which, like Gregory before him, is *not* merely the capacity to choose,[72] as if God's gift of free self-determination to created persons reaches its apotheosis in the choice of the sheer varieties of bread to pick over at the supermarket. Tellingly, Bulgakov concludes the English-prepared *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (1937) with the crucial caveat: "Freedom is only a mode in which life is participated, not the content of the life itself."[73] Created persons, as creative self-determiners who possess "real, concrete ... modal freedom," are free to undertake and reject possibilities in the life of the world, free to work towards the likening task of realizing the image of God and synergistically bending the world towards its eschatological end or cultivating the lonely image of Lucifer, making hovels in the *underground* for their increasingly diminishing souls.[74] Freedom for the creature is of a different order than God's absolute self-determination and (supra)freedom, where freedom and necessity are ultimately reducible to Divine love.[75] The creature's freedom is *given* and thus *relative*, meaning it can only be antinomically understood as God's kenotic gift to creatures as "the capacity for *creative* self-determination" within the bounds, however grand, of creation.[76]

Thus, conceptualizing a straightforward dualism of freedom as between creaturely and divine choice is entirely insufficient (as well as illogical, as truly transcendent Divinity does not *choose* in the ways creatures as psychological selves do), since, in the end, true freedom "lets itself be convinced and compelled ... otherwise it would remain a motor without a drive."[77] Thus, freedom is not to be witnessed as an exercise of competition between finite and infinite wills, as if an *I* is most free when it wills against God. Wholly to the contrary, instead of being a free act, this is a disfigurement of the freedom gifted to spiritual persons, a sterile rebellion, a reduction to *drive*, which, in

72. "[F]reedom is never the irrational arbitrariness of *sic volo* but is always and invariably motivated with all the power of persuasiveness for each given moment" (*BL*, 145).

73. *S,* 148.

74. *BL,* 191. Regarding humanity's *likeness* to God, Bulgakov usually casts this in terms of a *task* to be realized, something to which all human persons are called, not only certain ascetics, zealots, monastics, holy fools, etc. Furthermore, given the nature of the *likening* task, which in the present form of the world is not realized, Bulgakov considers this "perhaps the supreme dignity of the human being," as he explains in the following passage: "The whole creation thirsts for 'deliverance' from slavery to 'vanity,' for sophianic illumination, for transfiguration in beauty, but it speaks of this with a tongue that is mute. And only the human soul, our own soul—poor, intimidated Psyche—do we know with final, intimate, certain knowledge. What can be more certain than that our present I is *not* I at all, for our eternal essence, our divine genius is quite different from our empirical person, our body, character psychology! *One can never be reconciled with oneself*, and this irreconcilability is perhaps the supreme dignity of the human being." *UL*, 248, emphasis original.

75. For some of the contemporary debates concerning freedom and necessity vis-à-vis God in Bulgakov's thought, see Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. 70–114, and David Bentley Hart, "Martin and Gallaher on Bulgakov," in *Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 55–64.

76. *LG,* 142; cf. *BL,* 192. The antinomy lies in the following: Freedom for human persons is self-determination or "spontaneity in the sense of causelessness." This is "the very essence of freedom" and it is "a divine gift of the Creator, who communicates to creatures the image of His creative activity." Yet, at the same time, "Creaturely freedom is always actualized within a determinate given; its entire content and its positive possibilities depend on this given." *BL,* 145. On the gift of freedom being a loving act of kenosis, see *BL*, 230.

77. *BL*, 145.

turn, inevitably entails derision for one's neighbor. Since real freedom *lets itself be compelled*, it is still rationally, intentionally, creatively (and *erotically,* as Gregory would have it) participating by allowing itself to be compelled in the very act of being convinced. Thus, Bulgakov, like Gregory long before him, fits snugly in the classical and ancient tradition of imagining freedom to do with the sovereignty to enjoy and adhere to one's natural end: the infinitely attractive Good of all goods.

Conclusion

To conclude, we will interweave a couple of sermons that Gregory delivered during the crisis in the late-360s with a few entries from Bulgakov's spiritual diary, which he kept while in Prague during the first few years of forced exile (1923–1925). I conclude with these because they demonstrate Gregory and Bulgakov's hand-in-hand concern for "the other," concretizing even further, and in a more intimate, interpersonal fashion, the ecology of care—that constellation of life, love, and the productive pathways of freedom.

The famine of 368 C.E. in and around Cappadocia was historically severe.[78] As witnessed from the letters and homilies of Gregory—as well as his brother Basil of Caesarea and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus—how one *saw* the poor, the alien, anyone fleeing famine and pestilence was of great importance in how he championed actively aiding them as persons. Recall Gregory's interpretation of the pleromatic *whole humanity* and the role it plays in the individual dignity afforded each person; if one person is enslaved, then all are enslaved, as humanity as such cannot be bifurcated into two abstracted entities. He beckons hearers to appreciate this logic too in a sermon on loving the poor during these acutely calamitous times: "Do not tear apart the unity of the Spirit, ... do not consider strangers those beings who partake of our nature; ... Remember who you are and on whom you contemplate: a human person like yourself, whose basic nature is no different from your own. ... Treat all therefore as one common reality."[79] Preached in an era shattered by record scarcity and starvation, Gregory's point is plain though formative. One belongs to and possesses a common nature; therefore, to look upon the poor or sick or homeless as intrinsically different than oneself is dangerously erroneous—indeed, damnable.[80] What's more, to categorize humanity as divided into two abstract entities—masters and slaves or those with food and those without—is to divide the unified Human image-bearer into competing entities, a metaphysical absurdity since the Whole Anthropos is founded upon the Person of all persons, the

78. Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 64–83.

79. Gregory of Nyssa, *De pauperibus amandis II,* trans. in Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 199–206 (201). (Henceforth *PA*.)

80. "If God sees these scenes—and I am sure He does—what fatal catastrophe, do you think, does He hold in store for those who hate the poor? Answer me!" Gregory of Nyssa, *De beneficentia,* trans. in Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, 193–199 (199). (Henceforth *B*.) While the rhetoric is harsh, it is worth remembering that the gospel according to Matthew, especially the 25th chapter, is none too dissimilar. Furthermore, this rhetoric, it is worth emphasizing for those perhaps dreading the excesses of *old-time religion* and its many *hellfires,* is not aimed at any abstract "sinner" but those specific persons who hoard food during a time of famine, especially in the face of other person(s) actively perishing from hunger in their doorway.

divine-human Christ whose Face is the visage of all faces originally made and finally restored. Gregory would have his audience commit to ways of actively seeing without evasion, a pledge that Rowan Williams describes as the "'staking' of ourselves precisely in recognition of the non-transparent thereness of others, [which is] committed to the risky business of being there with or for them in their radical difference."[81] And by practicing this kind of *staking*, by a disciplining of the gaze ever towards love, one is (and continues to be) indelibly shaped by the encounter.[82] By such growth in an ecology of care, one is continuously able in loving kindness to open avenues of freedom and life for others, aiding all in finding "the port of our rest and desire."[83] And these movements of the soul towards the *beautiful* by acts of "mercy and good deeds," Gregory goes so far as to say, work to "divinize those who practice them and impress them into the likeness of goodness."[84]

Gregory here is working within a context of catastrophe, though (or perhaps especially in such cases) what he runs to repeatedly is the immeasurable dignity, irreplaceability, and worth of the person. So too Bulgakov, who, well before the revolutions of 1917 and his exilic expulsion five years later, names the human soul as a whole cosmos. And by truly *seeing* another, not merely looking at, one can help bring up and out of the depths hidden treasures of the human soul. In a diary entry from March 3, 1925 (Old Style), Bulgakov writes, "The human soul is more precious than the world. ... What a treasury is the living human soul, what gems may lie hidden in its depths, jewels that a person [herself], as well as those around [her], do not suspect," although some are able to see this "beauty as God's creation."[85] He goes on in another entry from June of that year to characterize each human person as possessing "its own spiritual world," containing, because it has been given, "unending depths and riches."[86] These profundities can be, of course, denied or carelessly passed over by oneself or by others in our many avoidances of love, hardening the boundaries of those *immense*

81. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), 87.

82. See Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). Carnes develops a helpful taxonomy (though it should not be reduced, as Carnes points out, to a strict binary): "the gaze of love" and "the gaze of contempt." Carnes argues that the "contemptuous gaze believes that its object is fully known; it believes itself to be the master of the object" and to have power over it. By contrast, the gaze of love "delights in the one it beholds," and resists "the will to master the world" (176). For more, see Daniel Adam Lightsey, "Desirous Seeing: Sol LeWitt, Vision, and Paradox," in *Art, Desire, and God: Phenomenological Perspectives,* eds. Kevin Grove, Christopher Rios, and Taylor Nutter (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 59–70. While Bulgakov, obviously, does not use Carnes' exact taxonomy, he does have much to say regarding the "gaze of love" and the "impure gaze." For the first, see Sergii Bulgakov, *Spiritual Diary,* trans. Roberto De La Noval and Mark Roosien (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2022), 157. (Henceforth *SD*.) For the second, see Sergii Bulgakov, *The Comforter,* trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 205.

83. *PA*, 206.

84. *B,* 197. A bit later in the homily, Gregory asks, "Is it not necessary rather to let out our compassion and love for one another shine forth radiantly in action?" The proper answer is *of course*: "There is a difference between words and action as great as the difference between a painting and the reality. The Lord affirms that we will be saved, not by our words but by our actions" (*PA*, 203). Also, near the end, Gregory invokes the beautiful again: "It is beautiful for the soul to provide mercy to others" (*PA,* 206).

85. *SD*, 130.

86. *SD*, 157.

solitudes so easily fashioned by each human heart.[87] To be sure, these diverse kinds of avoidances of love are not always or even mostly vicious but often stem from a lack of attention due to the feeling of being overburdened with too many cares. As "a complex of creative potencies,"[88] persons are a mixture of being capable, incapable, capacious, fragile, experiencing many kinds of loneliness (often not by any overt intention), made more whole though often wounded and damaged by our host of associations, interrelations, perceptions, habits, each of these and more contributing to make each person so singular, so incalculably uncategorizable. And yet, when one commits to ways of seeing without evasion, Bulgakov continues in his diary, "sometimes [these depths are] revealed to the gaze of love in all their beauty."[89] The practice of truly seeing an-other forms a person's vision with a greater sense of acknowledgment of love. In the end, this kind of perception "cannot look upon [that] spiritual beauty [of another person] with indifference"—instead, persons "are ignited by love, and in this love they become assimilated to this beauty, they shine with its brightness … love makes holiness shine forth in souls."[90] Their arguments taken together, Gregory and Bulgakov provide generative spiritual resources from which an extraordinary religious humanism can take shape, an ecology of care in which the rudiments of an ontology of personhood—communion, expression, knowledge—dynamically mirrors infinite divine life and love.

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87. *Avoidances of love* is an allusion to Stanley Cavell's masterful essay, "The avoidance of love: A reading of *King Lear,*" in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 246–325.

88. *BL*, 331.

89. *SD*, 157.

90. *SD*, 158.