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# Bulgakov on Gender

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**Abstract:** This article discusses Sergei Bulgakov's theological view on gender and examines the extent to which his Trinitarian approach can be considered a response to the feminist charge of essentialism, or the view that there are properties women *qua* women or men *qua* men share which unify them, respectively. In the process, it also evaluates various charges against Bulgakov. The interpretation offered in this paper suggests that Bulgakov's theological view is essentialist in one sense, but without evidently falling prey to the commonly voiced charge of essentialism. In order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Bulgakov's view, the article outlines his Trinitarian approach along the following systematised propositions: (1) Human beings are created in the image of God. (2) All human beings share the same human nature. (3) Human nature participates in the divine nature. (4) Some human beings are male, some are female. (5) Male and female are two *hypostases* of human nature. (6) As male and female, human beings are created in the image of the *triune* God. (7) In the triune God, there are three *hypostases* of one divine nature: the Father (first *hypostasis*) revealing himself in the Son (second *hypostasis*) and in the Holy Spirit (third *hypostasis*). (8) Male human beings are created in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God (the Son); female human beings are created in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God (the Holy Spirit). (9) The fullness of the image of the triune God is present only in the duality and union of male and female human beings. (10) The relation between the two *hypostases* of human nature—male and female—reflects the relation between the two revealing *hypostases* of the divine nature, the Son and Holy Spirit, but not *vice versa*; the former are the images, the latter the proto-images. (11) As created in the image of the triune God, male and female human beings are the bearers of, and constituted by, male and female principles. (12) These male and female principles have both a spiritual and bodily form (that correspond to each other). (13) In the spiritual form, each human being consists—

unconfusedly but inseparably—of both male and female principles. (14) As a bodily (form of the male and female) principle, biological sex is secondary to, and an authentic embodiment of, the spiritual (form of the male and female) principles. The article concludes that if one takes Bulgakov's view one step further, one might reach the conclusion that gender has a two-fold nature: one theological and the other social—and both are related to sex, albeit in different ways.

**Keywords**: Bulgakov, Gender, Sex, Image of God, Trinity

## Introduction

The meaning of biological sex, or gender, has become a controversial issue not only in the secular realm—in particular, the social meaning of sex—but also in Christian theology—especially the theological meaning of sex. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the term "sex" for biological sex and "gender" for the *meaning* of sex, be it social, theological, or otherwise.[1] Building on the slogan "gender is the social meaning of sex," various interpretations of gender have been offered, and a variety of related phenomena denoted, ranging from gender roles or norms, how one ought to behave, to gender identity, the subjective experience of one's sexed embodiment or personal sense of one's gender, to gender expression, the manifestation or presentation of one's gender through behaviour.[2] This article will focus on the theological meaning of sex, that is, the meaning biological sex takes on, and is given, in theological contexts. A

[1] In my presentation of Bulgakov, however, I will for the most part follow the translators, who may at times use the terms with a different meaning. As we shall see below, Bulgakov uses the term "sex" not only to denote biological sex but also to refer to sexuality more generally, including sexual intercourse. Except perhaps for the systematic conclusion, I will have little interesting to say about the sex/gender distinction as such, and nothing about how it is used. Some use the distinction to unite sex and gender ("distinguish to unite"), others to argue that we can separate the two. The latter position is the majority position today.

[2] Sally Haslanger, to give just one prominent example, explains: "Even a quick survey of the literature reveals that a range of things have counted as 'gender' within feminist theorizing. The guiding idea is sometimes expressed with the slogan: 'gender is the social meaning of sex.' But like any slogan, this one allows for different interpretations. Some theorists use the term 'gender' to refer to the subjective experience of sexed embodiment, or a broad psychological orientation to the world ('gender identity'); others to a set of attributes or ideals that function as norms for males and females ('masculinity' and 'femininity'); others to a system of sexual symbolism; and still others to the traditional social roles of men and women" (Haslanger 2000, 37).

common, shared concern is so-called "essentialism," or the view that there are properties women *qua* women or men *qua* men share which unify them, respectively. According to one common understanding, essentialism entails the following assumptions:

(1) All women/men share at least one property.
(2) At least one of these properties is essential, that is, necessary to be a woman/man.
(3) Women/men can be defined or at least demarcated by this essential property, or by these essential properties, so that the term "woman"/"man" denotes all and only women/men.

The main worry connected with essentialism is that if there are such properties that define or at least demarcate women and men, then this will lead not only to (a) the neglect of important differences among individual women and men, respectively, but (b) also to a fixed understanding of women and men that imposes unwarranted social norms on how they ought to behave.[3] This worry, it may seem, applies as much (if not more) to the theological as to the social meaning of sex, that is, to gender not only in broader society but also in religious communities and their respective theologies, understood here as a systematic reflection of their religious convictions. For in the case of the social meaning of sex, commonly referred to as gender, the norms in question would seem to be some sort of social norms or socially sanctioned norms; in the case of the theological meaning of sex, however, these norms would appear to be some sort of divine norms or divinely sanctioned norms, implying that both would relate to norms, although the sources of these norms would differ.

In the case of a specifically Christian understanding of gender, these religious convictions are often closely connected to the biblical creation accounts presented in the first two chapters of the Bible, Genesis (Gen) 1–2, and especially in the statement that "God created humans in his image, in the image

[3] Objection (a) is at times called the particularity argument. Mari Mikkola, for instance, renders it as follows: gender essentialists "mistakenly assume that gender is constructed independently of race, class, ethnicity and nationality. If gender were separable from, for example, race and class in this manner, all women would experience womanhood in the same way. And this is clearly false" (Mikkola 2024, sect. 3.3.1). Objection (b) is at times called the normativity argument: "unitary gender notions [not only] fail to take differences amongst women into account [. . . but are also] normative. [. . .] That the definition of the term 'woman' is fixed supposedly 'operates as a policing force which generates and legitimizes certain practices, experiences, etc., and curtails and delegitimizes others'" (Mikkola 2024, sect. 3.3.2, citing Nicholson 1998, 293).

of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). For example, Sarah Coakley contends that "gender 'matters' primarily because it is about *differentiated, embodied relationship*–first and foremost to God, but also to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human's role as made in the 'image of God' (Genesis 1. 26–7)."[4] In her much-noted work on the theology of gender, Coakley warns Christian theologians against uncritically importing "a gender theory from the secular realm without a sufficiently critical *theological* assessment of it." Instead, she argues, a "robustly theological, indeed precisely *trinitarian*, perspective on gender is required".[5]

In the context of such a discussion of Gen 1:27, a more specific question arises. "Does the central statement of theological anthropology—the creation of humans in the image of God—concern humanity in general [as portrayed in Gen 1:27a: 'God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them'], or also the concrete human existence as man and woman [as portrayed in Gen 1:27b: 'male and female he created them']?" asks Barbara Hallensleben. And she goes on to say: "If this is not the case, then the distinction between the sexes is nothing more than a trick of nature to produce offspring, a 'bio-product'."[6] By this provocative statement, she calls for a theology of the sexes, or rather a theology of gender, that goes beyond the assertion that the *theological* meaning of the sexes, or gender, is simply the necessity of the sexes for *biological* (sexual) reproduction.

The Trinitarian approach to, and model of, gender developed by Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Nikolayevich Bulgakov (1871–1944), which Hallensleben herself advocates, can be regarded as a response to this challenge and a call for a theology of gender. In fact, Hallensleben suggests that, unlike

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[4] Coakley (2013, 53).

[5] Coakley (2013, 34).

[6] Hallensleben (2023, 197): "*L'affirmation centrale de l'anthropologie Théologique—la création de l'être humain à l'image de Dieu—concerne-t-elle la condition humaine en général, ou également l'existence concrète en tant qu'homme ou femme ? Si ce n'est pas le cas, alors la distinction des genres n'est qu'une astuce de la nature pour produire la descendance, un 'produit bio'.*" The original German manuscript, from which I have translated here, reads: "*Betrifft die zentrale Aussage der theologischen Anthropologie—die Erschaffung des Menschen nach dem Ebenbild Gottes—das Menschsein im Allgemeinen, oder auch die konkrete menschliche Existenz als Mann und Frau? Ist das nicht der Fall, dann ist die Unterscheidung der Geschlechter nichts als ein Trick der Natur zur Erzeugung von Nachkommenschaft, ein ‚Bio-Produkt'.*" See also Hallensleben (2024, 304): "Does the central affirmation of theological anthropology—the creation of the human being in the image of God—concern the human condition in general, or also the existence as man and woman? If the difference of gender, or at least of sex, is not concerned, it seems to be nothing but a trick of nature to produce offspring."

many other theological approaches, Bulgakov provides a genuine theology of gender, giving *theological* meaning to sex, but without thereby committing one to a narrow "essentialist" view.[7]

The aim of this article is to present, discuss, and evaluate Bulgakov's view on gender, both in its development and as a systematic contribution to theology. To this end, I will first give a short overview of the argument without textual evidence in section 1, before moving on to the condemnation of Bulgakov's argument in section 2. I will then examine the development of his approach with textual evidence in section 3, before evaluating his contribution in section 4.

## 1. A Preliminary Sketch of the Argument

Writing prior to the establishment of the distinction between sex and gender, Bulgakov developed a sophiological[8] interpretation of woman and man rooted in Trinitarian theology. Although his approach was controversial, his thought on gender had a lasting influence on Orthodoxy.[9] Bulgakov prominently discusses the topic of gender in both of his trilogies, the Little Trilogy, consisting of *The Burning Bush* (1927), *The Friend of the Bridegroom* (1927), and *Jacob's Ladder* (1929), and the Great Trilogy, consisting of *The Lamb of God* (1933), *The Comforter* (1936), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), as well as in his summary *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (1937) and early writings, including *Unfading Light* (1917) and shorter essays.[10]

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[7] Hallensleben (2023, 198): "*une définition 'essentialiste' de la nature de l'homme et de la femme*"; the German manuscript reads: "*essentialistische Wesensdefinition von Mann and Frau.*"

[8] In a rough approximation, for Bulgakov, "Sophia" denotes the divine nature insofar as it is antinomically identical with the three divine persons and at the same time must be distinguished from them. The (uncreated) Sophia is the non-hypostatic nature of God, which, however, does not exist apart from the divine persons. The created Sophia originates from God's act of creation "out of nothing", that is in this instance, not from something that would be different from the divine nature, namely, through partaking in, or rather God's "partgiving" of, the divine eternal nature. It establishes the God-likeness of all creation, albeit in a special way in humans. The created Sophia is "in the process of becoming" and is destined for perfect personalisation, which finds its completion in a community of life in and with God in unity and difference. I would like to thank Barbara Hallensleben for helping me to clarify this point.

[9] On Bulgakov's view on gender in the context of contemporary Orthodoxy, see Rich (2023, esp. 56–96).

[10] See Kozyrev (2003) and Bulgakov (2005); see also footnote 26. All cited works were originally published in Russian—with the exception of *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*, which first appeared in English translation. For the English translations used in this essay, see the bibliography.

By way of introduction, and as a foundation for the following discussion of Bulgakov's complex views that are at times ambiguous and hard to interpret and systematise, I will start with a short sketch of what I take to be Bulgakov's main line of argumentation. In its most fundamental form, Bulgakov argues that the basis of human gender—being woman and man—is to be found in the divine Trinity. His argument entails the following assertions:

(1) Human beings are created in the image of God.
(2) All human beings share the same human nature.
(3) Human nature participates in the divine nature.
(4) Some human beings are male, some are female.
(5) Male and female are two *hypostases* of human nature.
(6) As male and female, human beings are created in the image of the *triune* God.
(7) In the triune God, there are three *hypostases* of one divine nature: the Father (first *hypostasis*) revealing himself in the Son (second *hypostasis*) and in the Holy Spirit (third *hypostasis*).
(8) Male human beings are created in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God (the Son); female human beings are created in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God (the Holy Spirit).
(9) The fullness of the image of the triune God is present only in the duality and union of male and female human beings.
(10) The relation between the two *hypostases* of human nature—male and female—reflects the relation between the two revealing *hypostases* of the divine nature, the Son and Holy Spirit, but not *vice versa*; the former are the images, the latter the proto-images.
(11) As created in the image of the triune God, male and female human beings are the bearers of, and constituted by, male and female principles.
(12) These male and female principles have both a spiritual and bodily form (that correspond to each other).
(13) In the spiritual form, each human being consists—unconfusedly but inseparably—of both male and female principles.
(14) As a bodily (form of the male and female) principle, biological sex is secondary to, and an authentic embodiment of, the spiritual (form of the male and female) principles.

The term "*hypostasis*" denotes here what possesses a nature; that is, in a sense, the bearer of a nature. Nature—be it divine or human nature—does not exist

without a *hypostasis*. Nature needs to be hypostasised, on Bulgakov's view. One and the same nature can be possessed in different ways, which constitutes an "otherness", despite the sameness of the possessed nature. As we shall see below, Bulgakov makes extensive use of this terminology in discussing both the Trinity and gender. In what follows, I am interested not so much in what Bulgakov says about gender in all its aspects but more particularly in the development of this argument, which will be the focus of my paper.

**2. A Condemned Argument?**

Before turning to Bulgakov himself, a particular issue needs to be flagged at the outset. In his recent book on gender in contemporary Orthodoxy, *Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy* (2023), Bryce Rich states that Bulgakov's view of gender was condemned by the Moscow Patriarchate, suggesting that there is something fundamentally wrong with or problematic about his view. He writes:

> It was this formulation of Bulgakov's developing system of masculine and feminine principles, associated with both the Trinity and humanity, which drew official censure from Sergius (Stragorodsky), Acting Patriarchal *Locum Tenens* of the Moscow Patriarchate. In his condemnation of elements of Bulgakov's theological project, Sergius notes that Bulgakov's teaching on masculine and feminine principles in the Godhead offers a temptation to deify the sexual life [. . .]. Though Bulgakov had not gone down this path, 'what the teacher leaves unsaid, the student can finish, coming to conclusions that the teacher, with horror, had attempted to avoid.' Bulgakov's teaching, Sergius proclaims, 'has nothing in common with Church tradition and does not belong to Christ's Orthodox Church.'[11]

This passage suggests that the worry that led to Bulgakov's condemnation issued by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1935 was an implicit "divinization of sex," as Metropolitan Sergius Stragorodsky put it in the ukaz.[12] Although this appears to be the main worry, this charge is accompanied by other concerns too, as the ukaz reveals:

> Generally speaking, it is difficult to say [1] what we concretely gain in the elucidation of our thought concerning the secrets of the life of the inscrutable

[11] Rich (2023, 95), citing Vladimir Lossky, "Spor o Sofii [Controversy about Sophia]," (2006, 98).

[12] De La Noval (2020, 121).

> Divinity by means of [2] this distinction of two principles (taken from who knows where) in the simple divine substance: masculine and feminine. The risk of making similar judgments concerning God, as well as their extremely deceptive quality, is highlight[ed] by the fact that Bulgakov wants to see the image of God in the human person precisely (*imenno*) in the duality of sex (*polov*). From here it is not so far until we reach [3] the divinization of sexual life (*polovoj zhizni*) [. . .].[13]

According to this text, at least three questions emerge concerning Bulgakov's proposal: (1) What is gained by Bulgakov's theory of gender? (2) Are there two principles—male and female—in the simple divine substance? (3) Does this amount to an objectionable divinization of sex?

In his doctoral study on the condemnations of Bulgakov, in which he highlights that Bulgakov was at least "ultimately cleared of all charges by his *own* ecclesiastical authority,"[14] Roberto De La Noval recently reached the conclusion that claim (3), the main charge of a deification or divinization of sex, does not stand up to scrutiny.[15] By contrast, he argues that, on a common reading, according to which "Bulgakov would introduce sex into the Trinity,"[16] (2) is indeed the case; and that (1) is "accidentally right in content,"[17] namely, insofar as, contrary to the original charge, his approach is too traditional to be innovative, as De La Noval claims, due to "Bulgakov's unconvincing (because patriarchal) attempts to name the Son and Spirit 'masculine' and 'feminine'."[18] In order to assess these two remaining points of criticism, we now turn to Bulgakov.

### 3. The Development of the Argument

Early on in his writing, Bulgakov challenged theological tendencies seeking to separate the divine image from the sexual distinction in Gen 1:27, thus denying that the sexual duality of humankind was originally intended by God, thereby restricting sexual differentiation to the animal world. In *Unfading Light* (1917), Bulgakov states: "The fullness of the divine image in some sense is here [in Gen 1:27] placed in connection with the sexual duality of humankind."[19] With

[13] Ukaz (December 7, 1935), cited in De La Noval (2020, 126).
[14] De La Noval (2020, 7).
[15] De La Noval (2020, 120–180, esp. 174, and 366).
[16] De La Noval (2020, 178).
[17] De La Noval (2020, 178).
[18] De La Noval (2020, 367).
[19] Bulgakov (2012, 294).

reference to the second creation account in Gen 2, Bulgakov asserts that the creation of the woman is "*the completion* of the creation of humankind."[20] For Bulgakov, biological sex has a *theological* meaning: "It is necessary for Christian thought to reckon with the fact that the female sex [. . .] is glorified by the Mother of God [. . .], and the male sex is glorified by the Savior,"[21] and both, according to Bulgakov, retain their sex in their glorified body. If sex has an important theological meaning, then humans do not need to be healed or liberated *from* sex, but rather undergo a healing *of* sex, that is, of the disharmony concerning their sex as a consequence of the Fall.[22] "If the sensuality, the corporeality of the world is not a disease or only a subjective state, but an independent element of life, then sex cannot remain only inside the human being, but must be realized in the flesh too, be divided into two in it, so that having felt this division into two, the two may become 'one in the flesh.'"[23] Consequently, Bulgakov speaks of sex not only in the bodily or biological sense—sex "in the flesh"—but also in the spiritual or theological sense—"spiritual sex," as he calls it—and each individual human being, irrespective of their bodily sex, is a "mixture of male and female elements,"[24] as Bulgakov highlights: "A woman has a male principle, but in her own way, just as a man has a female principle."[25] We will revisit the nature of these male and female principles below.

From his early work *Unfading Light* onwards,[26] then, Bulgakov consistently teaches that male and female human beings are created in the image of God; that there are what he calls "male and female principles"; and that the duality

[20] Bulgakov (2012, 299).

[21] Bulgakov (2012, 299).

[22] Bulgakov (2012, 302).

[23] Bulgakov (2012, 302).

[24] Bulgakov (2012, 309).

[25] Bulgakov (2012, 310).

[26] For an overview and evaluation of earlier views, which I will not discuss in this essay, see Kozyrev (2003). In this article, Kozyrev publishes four early texts written by Bulgakov: "Muzhskoe i Zhenskoe v Bozhestve" (Male and Female in the Godhead), 343–364; "Muzhskoe i Zhenskoe" (Male and Female), 365–388; "Fragment 1," 389–390; "Fragment 2," 391–395. Thomas Allan Smith comments on these early essays: "As A. P. Kozyrev has recently shown, Bulgakov's handling of the themes of sexuality, male and female identity, and the masculine and feminine principle in the Godhead were intimately connected with his fascination with Anna Schmidt, a provincial mystic who presented herself as the incarnation of Sophia and the realization of Soloviev's sophianic mysticism, even inspiring the eroticization of Sophia in some of Soloviev's late poetry. Bulgakov wrote three articles dealing with Soloviev and Schmidt before finally breaking free of her influence in 1921" (Smith 2009, xxiii).

and union of the male and female principles expresses the fullness of God's image.[27] We may express this and the above with the following principles:

(1) Human beings are created in the image of God.
(4) Some human beings are male, some are female.
(9) The fullness of the image of (the triune) God is present only in the duality and union of male and female human beings.
(12) The(se) male and female principles have both a spiritual and bodily form (that correspond to each other).

*3.1. Little Trilogy*

In his Little Trilogy, Bulgakov furthermore establishes, in *The Friend of the Bridegroom* (1927), which appears in the same year but shortly after *The Burning*

[27] In *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, Bulgakov calls these male and female principles "essences" and in *The Burning Bush* he also speaks of the male and female "natures". As seen above, at times he also uses the term "elements". The following is a short, non-exhaustive list that shows the consistency in the teaching of the mentioned principles throughout his works: "The fullness of the divine image [. . .] is [. . .] in [. . .] the sexual duality of humankind" (Bulgakov 2012, 294); "only their union [of the male and female essence] expresses the fullness of God's image in man" (Bulgakov 2003, 38); "the Divine image in humankind was realized in fullness only in the two [Adam and Eve] of them" (Bulgakov 2009, 80); "*the fullness* of the image of God in humankind is expressed not in one but in two, in Adam and Eve, [. . .] *and in the two* [the New Adam and New Eve] in heaven and on earth the fullness of the human image, as the image of God, begins to shine" (Bulgakov 2009, 102–103); "the features of the Divine image inscribed in humankind appear as the dyunity [*sic*] of male and female" (Bulgakov 2009, 85); "the male and female principles in humankind [. . .] conditioning *the fullness* of the image of God in humankind" (Bulgakov 2010, 87); "The fullness of the image of God, of the Holy Trinity, in humankind cannot be realized in a separate human person, a single hypostasis, [. . .] is not contained in the male or female creature in their fragmentedness but presupposes their reunion" (Bulgakov 2010, 88); "The image of God in man is fully manifested precisely in the union of these two [male and female] principles" (Bulgakov 2008, 115); "Male and female, differing as two distinct images of man, bear, in their unity, the fullness of humanity and, in this humanity, the fullness of the image of God" (Bulgakov 2008, 140); "man is [. . .] this ontological *and*, which expresses the fullness [. . .] of the image of God in man. It corresponds not to just one of the hypostases, not to the male or female principle taken separately, but to their dyadic union" (Bulgakov 2004, 323); "Husband and wife, though they differ as two different exemplifications of human nature, manifest in their unity the fullness of humanity and of the image of God enshrined in it" (Bulgakov 1993, 80); "two types of persons, which together express the image of God in man, are fundamentally separate: male and female [. . .], who are created in the image of the hypostases of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Bulgakov 2002, 95); "In general, to deny the original two-gender nature of human beings, which imprints in them the fullness of the image of God (Gen. 1:27), would be to damage a whole series of dogmas of the Christian faith" (Bulgakov 2002, 441).

*Bush*, that despite their virginity, Mary and John the Forerunner have a female and male "essence", or rather principle, but that their female and male principle was not subjugated to sex, which Bulgakov sees as a consequence of sin,[28] but they "overcame the power of sex."[29] Contrary to what he said before, Bulgakov now speaks of a "liberation from sex"[30] in connection with their virginity, but it would seem that "sex" would have to be understood as (a disharmonious) sexuality rather than biological sex here; Mary and John are, after all, biologically female and male.

In *The Burning Bush* (1927), Bulgakov argues, on the one hand, that there was no sex before the Fall, now presumably referring especially, but by no means exclusively, to sexual intercourse. Rather, pre-lapsarian human nature is said to express itself as spiritual principles. These spiritual male and female principles provide the basis and foundation for the "sexual modes of human nature."[31] Bulgakov maintains that the original mode of procreation is unknown to us; all we can say is that pre-lapsarian procreation does not include sexual, or carnal, procreation and conception—and would therefore be free "from copulation, pregnancy and pain." By implication, then, conception would be a-sexual and spiritual. Moreover, Bulgakov stipulates that virginity instead of marriage would have been characteristic of the original relationship between man and woman.[32] And he maintains that Mary and—this time—Christ are liberated from sex: Mary is not a woman in the sense of sex; she is a virgin by nature; Christ is not a man in the sense of sex; he is a virgin by nature:[33] "The Lord and the Mother of God, having male and female nature, nonetheless remain free *from sex, higher than sex*, ever-virginal. Sex, on the contrary, as the condition of man and woman turned towards each other, is the lot of the whole sinful human race."[34] At one point, Bulgakov speaks of Mary in her ever-virginity as being "freed from the burden of sex."[35] Consequently, in these early works we see a shift in the theological evaluation of sex, from a positive affirmation of biological sex, calling for a healing *of* sex, to a liberation *from* sex. This apparent change might have at least partly to do with a certain ambiguity about the

[28] Bulgakov (2003, 38).
[29] Bulgakov (2003, 40).
[30] Bulgakov (2003, 38).
[31] Bulgakov (2009, 82).
[32] Bulgakov (2009, 93–94); quotation on p. 94.
[33] Bulgakov (2009, 94–95).
[34] Bulgakov (2009, 95).
[35] Bulgakov (2009, 101).

notion of sex, referring both to biological sex and sexuality, including sexual intercourse.

On the other hand, as is indicated by the wording above, Bulgakov now starts to investigate explicitly human *nature*. He reasons that although Christ assumed the fullness of human nature, he "expresses the fullness *of the image* of human nature only together with the Mother of God."[36] Stated earlier in terms of sex, Bulgakov now emphasises that both the male and female *nature* is glorified in Christ and Mary.[37] The divine image in humankind was originally realised in fullness in Adam *and* Eve: "*the fullness* of the image of God in humankind is expressed not in one but in two, in Adam and Eve."[38] Thus, the restoration needs a New Adam and a New Eve. The first Adam is the biblical Adam, the second Adam is Christ. Likewise, the first Eve is the biblical Eve, and the second Eve is Mary. There are, then, according to Bulgakov, two personal images of Sophia: Christ and Mary. Both are the personal manifestation of Sophia, although they differ—one is divine, the other creaturely—with Mary being the perfect indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a creature.[39] Bulgakov concludes that there is thus a revelation of the third divine *hypostasis* in Mary.[40] With regard to the Trinity, Bulgakov adds: "The Father reveals Himself not only in the begotten Son, but also in the Holy Spirit proceeding from Him."[41] Although there is no human image of the first *hypostasis*, the Father, there is a human image of the second *hypostasis*, the Son, namely, Christ. Bulgakov then suggests that there is also no human image of the third *hypostasis*, the Holy Spirit, but that there is a human *hypostasis*: in Mary, the "pneumatophoric human", God's image in the human is realised.[42] "The Godman [Christ] and the Pneumatophore [Mary], [. . .] displaying the revelation of the Father through the Second and Third Hypostases, also display the fullness of the Divine image in humankind or, to put it another way, of the human image in God."[43]

From these observations, Bulgakov now infers—and this is crucial for the development of his argument—that the male principle in humans is in "correlation" with the Logos, and the female principle in "correlation" with the

[36] Bulgakov (2009, 83).

[37] Bulgakov (2009, 83).

[38] Bulgakov (2009, 102).

[39] Bulgakov (2009, 80); see also Bulgakov (2009, 99). In "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity" (1925), Bulgakov stated already that Mary is "the human manifestation of the Holy Spirit" (Bulgakov 2005, 34).

[40] Bulgakov (2009, 100).

[41] Bulgakov (2009, 81).

[42] Bulgakov (2009, 81–82).

[43] Bulgakov (2009, 82).

Holy Spirit: "The male principle in humankind is found in correlation with the Logos who is born as 'a child of the male sex' [. . .]. The female principle stands in correlation with the Holy Spirit, who descends upon the Mother of God."[44] The rationale of this move is as follows: "The Son is the male principle, and this indisputably comes to light in His incarnation as a child of the male sex. The Holy Spirit is revealed by His visiting the Most Holy Virgin, in motherhood."[45] Here, in this early formulation, we see a very close link between the Son and the male principle, which could also be read as an identification: the Son *is* the male principle, and the female principle is closely linked or identified with motherhood. The latter raises the question of whether motherhood is here to be understood biologically, referring primarily to pregnancy and birth, or rather spiritually, as bringing forth or bringing into the world. Already in *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov ties the female sex to motherhood: "female sex, namely motherhood."[46] In his essay "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity" (1925), Bulgakov explains that fatherhood begets, while motherhood does not beget but bears the begotten, thereby linking fatherhood to sonhood: "Fatherhood is the will to begetting, sonhood is the will to begottenness, motherhood is not a will, but the state of begottenness in the process of accomplishment."[47] In *The Burning Bush*, Bulgakov now adds that we know fatherhood, as generation or begetting, and motherhood, as bearing or possession of the begotten, only "through the prism of sex," but not in its essence.[48] Be that as it may, Bulgakov concludes that "the features of the Divine image inscribed in humankind appear as the dyunity [*sic*] of male and female."[49]

In *Jacob's Ladder* (1929), Bulgakov distinguishes between the male and female principles as spiritual and bodily principles. As spiritual principles, they refer to a "personal quality". As bodily principles, they are connected with the physical dimension of human beings, here referred to as "sex".[50] What is more, in the spiritual form, both the male and the female principles are present in an individual, for which reason Bulgakov speaks of the "male-female or female-male spirit of a human": "by the bi-unity of the androgyne principle in the human spirit the fullness of the image of God is imprinted in it. But in humankind this bi-unity exists only as *twoness* which makes each human

[44] Bulgakov (2009, 83).
[45] Bulgakov (2009, 85).
[46] Bulgakov (2012, 299).
[47] Bulgakov (2005, 34).
[48] Bulgakov (2009, 84–85); quotation on p. 84.
[49] Bulgakov (2009, 85).
[50] Bulgakov (2010, 87).

individual not self-sufficient but looking for its completion [. . .]. Therefore *sex* is spiritual incompleteness, halfness."[51] There is consequently a primacy of the male and female as spiritual principles over bodily principles: as spiritual principles, individuals contain both male and female elements, but as bodily principles, this unity of the principles exists only in the union of male and female human beings, wherefore they are referred to each other. This priority we see also in the life to come. Departing from, or at least refining, his earlier remarks in *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov now argues that while human sex in the bodily sense will cease to exist in the afterlife, precisely because, as spiritual principles, the male and female principles have their "foundation" in, or are in the image of, the second and third *hypostases* of the triune God, there will be male and female humans in the resurrection.[52] Although the "life of bodily sex" ends with death, then, the male and female principles will remain, as well as mutual relations of spiritual love:[53] "Unless it is darkened and distorted, the male and female principle in the spirit is in no way at all reduced to sex. Male and female, created as such from the beginning, remain themselves forever, although they are freed from their garments of skin."[54] Finally, Bulgakov stresses that humans are "multi-hypostatic but of one essence," that is, many individual persons but of one human nature. Bulgakov states that in a sense "[e]ach human has the fullness of the image of God," namely, insofar as "each human possesses the fullness of nature," which all human persons share or have in common.[55] We will come back to this topic below.

In the Little Trilogy we thus see the above-mentioned principles confirmed—namely, principles (1), (4), (9), and (12)—and the following additional principles established:

(2) All human beings share the same human nature.
(6) As male and female, human beings are created in the image of the *triune* God.
(7) In the triune God, there are three *hypostases* of one divine nature: the Father (first *hypostasis*) revealing himself in the Son (second *hypostasis*) and in the Holy Spirit (third *hypostasis*).

[51] Bulgakov (2010, 88).
[52] Bulgakov (2010, 92–93).
[53] Bulgakov (2010, 92).
[54] Bulgakov (2010, 96).
[55] Bulgakov (2010, 75).

(8) Male human beings are created in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God (the Son); female human beings are created in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God (the Holy Spirit).

(11) As created in the image of the triune God, male and female human beings are the bearers of, and constituted by, male and female principles.

(14) As a bodily (form of the male and female) principle, biological sex is secondary to, and an authentic embodiment of, the spiritual (form of the male and female) principle.

*3.2. Great Trilogy*

In his Great Trilogy, in *The Lamb of God* (1933), the Trinitarian foundation of the sexes, seen above, is further specified: "just as the hypostasis of the Logos is the hypostasis of Christ, made incarnate in a male infant and reaching maturity as a 'perfect male,' so the hypostasis of the Spirit is most fully revealed for us in the Mother of God and becomes a reality."[56] Again we see the link between Christ and maleness, and Mary and femaleness. Bulgakov now states that to be created in the image of God is to be created in the image of Christ as *hypostasis* of the divine nature: in his body; in his spirit; and "in the structure of man in the union of two natures (spiritual and psycho-corporeal) in one hypostasis."[57] So the male and female principles, in both their spiritual and bodily form, or "natures", are united in one person. Bulgakov states explicitly: "Man is a *hypostasis* living in its nature,"[58] which "*participate[s]* in the divine nature."[59]

Approached from this perspective, we find in *The Lamb of God* Bulgakov's full Trinitarian account of gender: the image of the human *hypostasis* stems from the *hypostases* that *reveal* the Father, namely, the *hypostasis* of the Son and the *hypostasis* of the Holy Spirit, which are both proto-images of the human *hypostases* in their different way of hypostasising the divine nature.[60] Bulgakov states in full clarity his mature view:

> [T]he human hypostases have a double Proto-Image [. . .]: the Logos and the Holy Spirit. This also corresponds to the fact that man, created in the image of

[56] Bulgakov (2008, 115).
[57] Bulgakov (2008, 139).
[58] Bulgakov (2008, 113).
[59] Bulgakov (2008, 138).
[60] Bulgakov (2008, 140).

> God, was created as both male and female, and the context of Genesis 1:26-27 compels one to see the fullness of the image of God precisely in this bi-unity.[61]

Put differently, the male and female human *hypostases* are in the image of the second and third divine *hypostases*, who reveal the Father, respectively:

> Male and female, differing as two distinct images of man, bear, in their unity, the fullness of humanity and, in this humanity, the fullness of the image of God: they bear the imprint of the dyad of the Son and the Holy Spirit, who reveal the Father.[62]

In *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov calls the image of God in humans a "*repetition*, which on no account is identity with the Prototype; on the contrary, it is insurmountably differentiated from it, but at the same time it participates substantially in it."[63] So, there is the image and its prototype. The former is a repetition of, and participates in, the latter. In *The Lamb of God,* he uses the pair image/proto-image to describe the relation between human and divine *hypostases*, where the "image is not limited to any particular aspect or property of man but permeates his entire life":[64] his spirit, his nature, and his relation to the world. Again, Bulgakov states: "The image necessarily differs from the Proto-Image: it has the same thing but *in a different manner*."[65]

In *The Comforter* (1936), Bulgakov adds that the male and female principles are complementary and form both a duality and a unity "on the basis of the inseparability and inconfusibility of the two Divine hypostases."[66] Put differently, the male and female principles reflect and, as he expresses it here, are "parallel" to the "differentiation and unity" of the second and third divine *hypostases*.[67] We will see this topic reemerge below. Importantly, Bulgakov now interprets human beings created in the image of God *inwardly*, "in the spirit," as a polarity of the male and female principles, and *outwardly*, in their fullness, as both male *and* female, namely, in their union.[68] In their spiritual form, then, each human being is a bearer of, and constituted by, both male and female principles—and in this sense, but only in this sense, is "androgyn". In their

[61] Bulgakov (2008, 140).
[62] Bulgakov (2008, 140).
[63] Bulgakov (2012, 285).
[64] Bulgakov (2008, 140–141).
[65] Bulgakov (2008, 141).
[66] Bulakgov (2004, 186).
[67] Bulakgov (2004, 186).
[68] Bulakgov (2004, 322–323).

bodily form, indicating psycho-corporeal rather than spiritual differences, however, individual human beings are in no way androgyn but are either male or female.[69] In other words, in the spiritual form, the male and female principles are not exclusive but are present together in individual human beings. Bulgakov stresses this point when he states that "a human being in whom one of these principles would predominate to the point of the virtual absence of the other would be a spiritual freak, strictly speaking, no longer a human being."[70] With this statement, Bulgakov fences off what he calls a "sterile one-sidedness"[71] of the female or male.

The above-mentioned union, on the other hand, is complicated by two factors, on Bulgakov's view: first, by the psycho-corporeal dimension of the male and female principles; and second, by the Fall. As regards the first point, Bulgakov explains: "in man this spiritual difference is complicated by the existence of the psycho-corporeal element: the male and female principles of the spirit are realized here as man and woman."[72] As bodily principles, the male and female principles constitute man and woman as bodily beings, and as such we share the necessity for sex and sexual reproduction with animals, as Bulgakov now explains—both of which he takes to be directly willed by God, although with the difference that human sex and sexual reproduction needs to be in conformity with the spiritual male and female principles.[73] Bulgakov speaks of an "harmonization of sex and spirit" in this connection.[74] Here we see some loose ends from earlier works being tied up. As regards the second point, Bulgakov specifies that, as a consequence of the Fall, this initial harmony was destroyed and a disharmony emerged between spirit and sex:[75] "in man, *sex was*

[69] Bulakgov (2004, 186). Note, however, that the "either/or" may not be that strict, insofar as Bulgakov—using a phrase that may sound derogative today—allows for what he calls "cases of natural defectiveness, which are more common than one thinks" (Bulgakov 2004, 325). Although the employed terminology is inappropriate, Bulgakov's comment is noteworthy for it suggests that intersex conditions are indeed conceivable in Bulgakov's account.

[70] Bulakgov (2004, 186). Bulgakov seems to express a similar view already in *The Burning Bush*: "In monohypostatic humankind this dual image is disclosed as a dyunity [*sic*], as two possibilities, two images of the human essence, neither one of which expresses it separately in fullness. Humankind is not only a male or only a female principle, but contains in itself the one and the other, and besides *not as sex*, i.e., half-and-half, non-fullness, but precisely as *the fullness* of its own existence" (Bulgakov 2009, 82).

[71] Bulgakov (2004, 187, footnote 5).

[72] Bulakgov (2004, 328).

[73] Bulakgov (2004, 323–324).

[74] Bulakgov (2004, 324).

[75] Bulakgov (2004, 328).

*awakened* as a rebellious, autonomous element, an element of desire and passion which not only was not subject to the spirit but which subjected the spirit."[76]

In short, fundamentally, man and woman are "the bearers of the two [male and female] principles, which exist without separation in separate being and without confusion in joint being."[77] What is more, these principles come in two forms; Bulgakov's analysis "presupposes not only spiritual but also psycho-corporeal differences between the bearers of the male and female principles."[78] And as such, the male and female principles are in no way reducible to biological sex: "In no wise does sex exhaust the difference between the male and female principles."[79]

The main topics discussed in *The Comforter* are further elaborated in his summary of sophiology, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (1937), published between the second and final volumes of his Great Trilogy. There, Bulgakov clarifies that the duality of male and female principles "does not divide human nature, though it inwardly diversifies it and thus goes to make up its fullness."[80] Rather, man and woman, in their embodiment, are, as Bulgakov puts it, "two different exemplifications of human nature,"[81] two different ways of possessing one and the same human nature. Bulgakov speaks explicitly of a "twofold embodiment" in connection with the male and female principles.[82] Most importantly, however, Bulgakov takes up the notions of inseparability and inconfusibility from *The Comforter*, specifying the relation between male and female principles in each individual using traditional Christological language. He maintains that the male and female principles "subsist unconfusedly"; their copresence does not lead to a fusion into an undifferentiated third. And yet both are "inseparable", both in the sense that "either apart from the other does not possess human nature complete" and that "the spirit of every human being combines elements of this dual principle, though of course in different ways and in different proportions."[83] In other words, in the spiritual form, although

[76] Bulakgov (2004, 324).

[77] Bulakgov (2004, 328).

[78] Bulakgov (2004, 323).

[79] Bulakgov (2004, 325).

[80] Bulgakov (1993, 99).

[81] Bulgakov (1993, 80).

[82] Bulgakov (1993, 99): Bulgakov here also reiterates that these principles "in themselves are not to be identified simply with sex and the sexual life, for this exhibits a sinful deterioration of the relations between these two principles, a clothing of human nature in 'coats of skins'." As we have seen, Bulgakov discussed the relation between male and female principles, biological sex, and sexuality with more clarity in *The Comforter*.

[83] Bulgakov (1993, 99).

not in their embodiment, each human being consists of both male and female principles. In *Jacob's Ladder*, Bulgakov explained: "Both [male and female] principles are present in it [the human spirit] inseparably, but with the definite predominance of one of them, and both show themselves mutually supplying one another."[84]

In his opus magnum, *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), Bulgakov finally states that the creation of humans is "God's direct hypostatic participation in the communication of His image to man."[85] Commenting on Gen 1:27, Bulgakov argues that humans are created in the image and likeness[86] of God not only in regard to (a) their nature but also in regard to (b) their *hypostases—hypostasis* understood here as the person or subject having a nature:[87] like the triune God, humans fundamentally share one nature, and this shared human nature is in the image of the divine nature; and as in the triune God, there is a multiplicity of *hypostases* ([types of] persons) in humans too: "the image of God [. . .] is realized hypostatically [. . .] in two [. . .] persons, in male and female."[88] Referring to these male and female *hypostases*, Bulgakov speaks of the "hypostatic image of God."[89] There are three persons in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and two "personal features"[90] in human beings: male and female. Bulgakov thus speaks of a "*multihypostatic character* of man,"[91] meaning that God created humans as male and female. It should be noted, however, that the parallelism Bulgakov draws is not complete, insofar as the divine *hypostases* are persons, namely, the three persons of the Trinity, but the human *hypostases*

[84] Bulgakov (2010, 87).

[85] Bulgakov (2002, 67).

[86] Bulgakov comments on his use of image and likeness: "The image is the foundation and the given, as the ideal, uncreated image of creation in Sophia. The likeness is the becoming of this image, through which the image is realized in the creaturely world, ascending from potentiality to actuality" (Bulgakov 2002, 82). "The image of God *is given* to humankind, it is implanted as the irremovable foundation of its being, while the likeness is that which is realized by humankind on the basis of the image, as the *task* of its life. Humankind could not have been immediately created as a finished entity in which image and likeness, idea and reality, would correspond to each other, because then it would be God, and not by grace and assimilation, but by nature. The discrepancy of image and likeness in humankind [. . .] constitutes precisely the distinctiveness of humankind which by its hypostatic freedom realizes in itself its own personal ideal image" (Bulgakov 2012, 315–316). In other words, "[t]he likeness of God in man is man's free realization of his image" (Bulgakov 2008, 147). Thus, he concludes: "Humankind could grow, realizing in itself the likeness of God, only by the power of love" (Bulgakov 2012, 318).

[87] Bulgakov (2002, 82).

[88] Bulgakov (2002, 89).

[89] Bulgakov (2002, 89).

[90] Bulgakov (2002, 89).

[91] Bulgakov (2002, 89).

cannot, strictly speaking, refer to persons—man and woman are not *the* two human persons, or the two persons of the human nature, like the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the three persons of the Trinity—but rather to something like "types of persons", "personal features", "exemplifications of human nature", or modes of being human, namely, male and female. So, the term "*hypostasis*" is only used in an analogous, not in a univocal, way, and the resulting parallelism has its limits.

What is more, Bulgakov links males to the second divine person, the Son or Logos, and females to the third divine person, the Holy Spirit: "the male hypostasis exists in the image of the hypostasis of the Logos, while the female hypostasis exists in the image of the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit."[92] So, all humans are created in the image of God, but males are created in the image of the Son, while females are created in the image of the Holy Spirit. Human maleness and femaleness are thus linked to the second and third person of God, through whom the Father, the first person of God, reveals himself—the former by revealing the Father, the latter by accomplishing this divine self-revelation.[93] The "two [divine] hypostases differ [. . .] in their *how*, but not in their *what*."[94] For Bulgakov, although they share the same divine nature, the Son is the incarnated *hypostasis*, but the Spirit the incarnating *hypostasis*.[95] By analogy, both man and woman are human beings, sharing the same human nature, yet they differ in the way they bear or hypostasise this shared human nature, constituted by the male and female principles. "Every hypostasis is a personal *how* of the universal *what*."[96] In short, for Bulgakov, "the two hypostases that reveal God the Father in the Divine Sophia, the sophianic hypostases, are proto-images of the creaturely human hypostases. The hypostasis of the Logos is multiplied in the male hypostases [. . .]. The hypostasis of the Holy Spirit is multiplied in the female hypostases [. . .]."[97] There are, then, two hypostatic images of the trihypostatic God, male and female, and the combination of the two *hypostases* constitutes the complete image: "two types of persons [. . .] together express the image of God in man."[98] Thus, "humankind is hypostatized not by one and not by three but by two hypostases."[99]

[92] Bulgakov (2002, 90–91).
[93] Bulgakov (2002, 89–90).
[94] Bulgakov (2002, 97).
[95] Bulgakov (2002, 98).
[96] Bulgakov (2002, 260).
[97] Bulgakov (2002, 91).
[98] Bulgakov (2002, 95).
[99] Bulgakov (2002, 90).

In the Great Trilogy and other later writings we thus see the above-mentioned principles confirmed—namely, principles (1), (2), (4), (6)–(9), (11), (12), and (14)—and the following additional principles established:

(3) Human nature participates in the divine nature.
(5) Male and female are two *hypostases* of human nature.
(10) The relation between the two *hypostases* of human nature—male and female—reflects the relation between the two revealing hypostases of the divine nature, the Son and Holy Spirit, but not *vice versa*; the former are the images, the latter the proto-images.
(13) In the spiritual form, each human being consists—unconfusedly but inseparably—of both male and female principles.

## 4. Evaluating the Argument

In this final section, I would like to return to and address the remaining questions posed above. As we have seen, three questions have been raised in the context of the outlined censure of Bulgakov's view on gender, two of which have been answered in recent scholarship in a way that arguably does not recommend Bulgakov's theory of gender: (1) What is gained by Bulgakov's theory of gender? (2) Are there two principles—male and female—in the simple divine substance? I will now address them in reverse order. Before doing so, however, I need to discuss a key point that I have passed over so far, which is essential for the evaluation of the argument: the issue of a hierarchy between man and woman, especially if spelled out in terms of superiority or superordination and subordination.

### *4.1. Is the Male-female Relation Hierarchical?*

There is one important topic I have not yet discussed: the *hierarchical* nature of the male and female principles. In *The Comforter* (1936), Bulgakov gives a most detailed account of the order (*taxis*) and relationship between the divine *hypostases*, which, by implication, will have effects on the order and relationship between the human *hypostases*, namely, the male and female principles, on Bulgakov's view. In his Trinitarian theology, Bulgakov rejects spelling out the order between the divine *hypostases* in terms of origination, proposing instead an understanding in terms of self-revelation:[100] "the Father is revealed in the

[100] Bulgakov (2004, 68–69).

generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit; the Son is revealed in the generation from the Father and in the reception of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is revealed in the procession from the Father and the reposing upon the Son."[101] The order is ontological, not temporal. Bulgakov describes it as "connectedness or mutual conditionedness."[102]

In the immanent Trinity, therefore, there is no causing (in the sense of origination), but the *hypostases* are differently conditioned. Bulgakov maintains two different perspectives: (1) in the order of genesis, the Son is prior to the Holy Spirit; (2) in the order of fulfilment, or fullness, the Holy Spirit is prior to the Son. In the economic Trinity, by contrast, there is a cause in the sense of ontologically hierarchical relations of the divine *hypostases*.[103] The Father is first: "The self-revelation begins from the First hypostasis, Who, in the first position, is the self-revealing God, the subject in the divine trihypostatic self-definition."[104] The Son and Holy Spirit, the revealing *hypostases*, are "not-first", which, for Bulgakov, constitutes a mutual ontological order: "Hierarchically, they are united in the dyad of the two not-first hypostases, who have a joint, dyadic relation to the First hypostasis. [. . .] The Second hypostasis is not, in some lower and subordinate sense, first with respect to the Third hypostasis, just as the latter is not second with respect to the Second hypostasis."[105] Consequently, there cannot be any subordination between second and third *hypostases* in the triune God. Thus, Bulgakov concludes concerning the order between the *hypostases* that "the concrete interrelation of self-revelation or love presupposes a definite structure":[106] "The First hypostasis [. . .] is revealed in the *two* not-first hypostases, [. . .] in the Son by or through the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Spirit Who manifests the Son."[107] Therefore, Bulgakov stresses—and this is most important: "Although in different senses, the places of the Second and Third hypostases in the *taxis* are *reversible*."[108]

Here we encounter a notable tension in Bulgakov's Trinitarian account of gender. As De La Noval observes, "though there is no hierarchical diminution of the Spirit with respect to the Son (or Father), it is nonetheless true that in the human realm woman remains subordinate to man on account of coming from

[101] Bulgakov (2004, 69–70).
[102] Bulgakov (2004, 70).
[103] Bulgakov (2004, 71–72).
[104] Bulgakov (2004, 71).
[105] Bulgakov (2004, 71).
[106] Bulgakov (2004, 71).
[107] Bulgakov (2004, 73).
[108] Bulgakov (2004, 72).

man, according to Genesis 2 [. . .]. This contradiction in Bulgakov's thought is never resolved."[109] This tension, which has also been noted by other scholars, is evident both in his earlier work and, more importantly, in his mature work, where he speaks of a hierarchy in tension with the non-hierarchical nature of the relation between the second and third divine *hypostases*, as laid out above. In this context, Regula Zwahlen reaches the conclusion: "By emphasising a certain hierarchy [between man and woman], he seems to shy away from the radicalness of his own conception."[110]

In *Unfading Light* (1917), Bulgakov explicitly speaks of "a hierarchical distinction [that] exists between the two sexes which as a result of the fall is heightened disharmoniously."[111] He then spells out, in the context of what he calls "spiritual generation", the male principle as the initiator and the female principle as the one that finishes and accomplishes.[112] "Male and female self-consciousness each has its distinctive traits. The man is active, logical, full of initiative; the woman is instinctive, inclined to self-surrender, wise with an illogical and impersonal wisdom of simplicity and purity." He then concludes that "the sexes [. . .] are not equal but deeply different."[113] In *The Burning Bush* (1927), Bulgakov speaks of a "hierarchy of genesis",[114] namely, that Adam is from God but Eve from Adam, from which he infers a "hierarchical superiority"[115] of the male, and expresses the male and female spiritual principles as follows: the male principle is the primacy of reason and will over sense, and truth in beauty; the female principle is the primacy of sense over reason and will, and beauty in truth.[116] In *Jacob's Ladder* (1929), Bulgakov expresses the spiritual principles as follows: the male principle is the primacy of reason over the aesthetic sense and the heart, or the primacy of truth; the female principle is the primacy of the aesthetic sense and the heart over reason, or the primacy of beauty. But both the primacy of truth and the primacy of beauty are equally subordinated to the primacy of the good, as Bulgakov links the Father to the good, the Son to truth, and the Spirit to beauty.[117] In *The Lamb of God* (1933), Bulgakov presents the male principle as dominant, and the female as

[109] De La Noval (2020, 172).

[110] Zwahlen 2010, 310: "*Mit der Betonung einer gewissen Hierarchie scheint er [Bulgakov] doch vor der Radikalität seiner eigenen Konzeption zurückzuschrecken*."

[111] Bulgakov (2012, 300).

[112] Bulgakov (2012, 309).

[113] Bulgakov (2012, 310).

[114] Bulgakov (2009, 80).

[115] Bulgakov (2009, 93).

[116] Bulgakov (2009, 82).

[117] Bulgakov (2010, 87–88).

stemming from the male's rib.[118] In *The Comforter* (1936), he specifies them as "solar principle of thought, logos" and as "principle of reception, creative accomplishment, beauty."[119] And in *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (1937), Bulgakov reiterates the "primacy of reason or thought in masculine, and of heart and feeling in feminine nature."[120]

This tension between a non-hierarchical relation between the second and third divine *hypostases* and an apparently hierarchical relation between the male and female *hypostases* remains unresolved in his opus magnum, *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945).

On the one hand, Bulgakov states that in one sense—in the order of genesis—the second *hypostasis* is prior to the third *hypostasis*, which is said to depend on the second; yet in another sense—in the order of fulfilment—the third *hypostasis* is prior to the second, which is said to depend on the third:

> In the Holy Trinity, the hypostasis of the Word reveals the Father, while the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit accomplishes this revelation, manifesting His beauty or glory. In this sense, the revelation of the Third Hypostasis 'depends' on the Second, follows the Second, does not precede it (in the ontological sequence). Conversely, the revelation of the Second Hypostasis 'depends' on the Third, for without the Third the Second does not have power and life.[121]

And so, in line with the argument above, one would expect Bulgakov to suggest that there is no principal hierarchy between man and woman, and that the question of their priority depends on the perspective. But Bulgakov instead infers from the quotation above that the male *hypostasis* has primacy over the female:

> This analogy holds also with reference to the male and female hypostases, of which the male has primacy, both in the order of creation, and in being the chief: the woman is 'taken out of Man' (Gen. 2:23), but the man (the male) 'shall cleave unto his wife' (2:24) so that together 'they shall be one flesh' (2:24), that is, one humankind.[122]

[118] Bulgakov (2008, 140).
[119] Bulgakov (2004, 186).
[120] Bulgakov (1993, 99).
[121] Bulgakov (2002, 90).
[122] Bulgakov (2002, 90).

On the other hand, therefore, we see Bulgakov maintain a hierarchy between the male and female *hypostases* that is in tension with the non-hierarchical nature of the second and third *hypostases* in God, of which they are an image. Here is a clear instance of the view that the relation is hierarchical. Bulgakov writes that

> a hierarchical relationship with the primacy of the male principle also holds with regard to the hypostases in man. [. . .] [I]n the creation of the human being in the image of God, the male hypostasis is first, while the female hypostasis is derivative of the male hypostasis, or, in any case, correlative and additional, as it were, with respect to the male hypostasis. The female is created ontologically *after* the male, 'from his rib.' [. . .] And so, the hypostatic image of the male remains fundamental, guiding, for the hypostatic image of the female.[123]

If this is the case, on what grounds does Bulgakov argue for a hierarchy between man and woman? In other words, where does this hierarchy stem from? His explanation does not sit well with what he said about the Trinity in *The Comforter*. To justify the hierarchy between man and woman, he now appears to be reading this hierarchy back into the Trinitarian persons. Bulgakov presents the following reason, without differentiating different orders or perspectives, as he previously did:

> [I]n the Holy Trinity too, it is the Son who is the hypostatic image of the Father, and the Holy Spirit rests upon the Son, putting its stamp upon Him. The hypostasis of the Holy Spirit is transparent for the hypostasis of the Son; it does not manifest anything different or new, but only what is already revealed (the Holy Spirit 'reminds' one of the words of Christ). In this sense, one can say that the hypostasis of the Word is the hypostasis that has *content*, while the hypostasis of the Spirit is the hypostasis that *operates* or *accomplishes.* But the latter is nevertheless second, not first, in the pair of hypostases that reveal the Father.[124]

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[123] Bulgakov (2002, 98–99). Interestingly, Bulgakov states later that Gen 1:27–28 and Gen 2:7 refer to "man in general" and not to a particular human being; in fact, he takes Adam and Eve to appear only in Gen 3 (Bulgakov 2002, 110). Bulgakov sees the hierarchical relationship between man and woman expressed also in Eph 5:23 ("for the husband is the head of the wife") and 1 Cor 11:3–12. Biblical statements to the effect that in Christ "there is no longer male and female" (Gal 3:28) are taken by Bulgakov to refer to the common human nature, not to the different *hypostases* (Bulgakov 2002, 90 and 97–98).

[124] Bulgakov (2002, 98–99).

In other words, Bulgakov now singles out one perspective—the order of genesis—to argue for a priority of the second over the third *hypostasis*, without mentioning the alternative perspective—the order of fulfilment—anymore.

Two potential argumentative routes are foreclosed. First, if the alleged hierarchical relation between woman and man were established on the non-theological basis of the social *status quo*, then the logic of the argumentation would be reversed. Then the hierarchy would be rooted in, and a result of, the image itself, but not reflecting the proto-image, and could as such perhaps be understood as a consequence of sin and the Fall, but not as part of the original theological meaning of the male and female *hypostases*, or of what it means to be man and woman. Second, if the hierarchical relation between woman and man were established on a theological basis, with reference to Gen 2:22–23, as seen above, then this would make sense only on two presuppositions: (1) the woman is taken from the rib of "man", here understood in the sense of a male (as a common traditional reading would have it), instead of (the more common reading today) in the sense of a human being; and (2) the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, thus implying the *Filioque*, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. On these two presuppositions, then, the argument would be that, as the Holy Spirit proceeds from (the Father and) the Son, so the woman is taken from man. While (1) might indeed be assumed by Bulgakov, as seen above, (2) would be an unacceptable presupposition in Orthodox theology. Yet without (2), it is hard to see how the theological rationale could be maintained that the male and female *hypostases* are in the image of the second and third *hypostases* in God.

If this line of reasoning is fundamentally correct, two consequences will follow. First, Bulgakov is inconsistent in his insistence that there is a hierarchy between man and woman in form of a primacy of man over woman in an absolute sense. Second, by the same token, accepting the *Filioque* would seem to introduce some sort of hierarchy into both the divine *hypostases* and the human *hypostases*. Consequently, one might argue, Bulgakov's approach would make it more difficult for Catholics and other denominations who emphasise that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* to argue for a non-hierarchical relation between the male and female *hypostases*. In Bulgakov's case, as we have seen, the hierarchy is at times spelled out in terms of superiority when it comes to the relationship of man and woman. But this need not be the case. A first way of responding would start by showing that the hierarchy in question does not have to be, and in fact is not, a hierarchy of superiority or superordination and subordination, as in the proto-image both the Son and the Holy Spirit are, like

the Father, of the same nature, whether the Holy Spirit has its origin in the Father or the Father and the Son. In this way, the notion of a hierarchy would be retained, without any implication of a superiority. To put it another way, the theological notion of hierarchy is arguably not the same as the sociological notion of hierarchy.[125] Another way of responding would be to drop the terminology of a hierarchy altogether and speak of an order or relations of origin in the Trinity instead.[126] Consequently, if there is no hierarchy but only an order or relations of origin in the proto-image, then, at least insofar as the image reflects the proto-image, there will be no hierarchy but only an order or relations of origin in the image. In this case, however, this order or these relations of origin, instead of the nature of the hierarchy, would have to be spelled out further—that is, if they are taken to be constitutive not only for the proto-images but also for the images, as Bulgakov suggests. In short, in both

[125] For example, Barbara Hallensleben remarks (private correspondence): "The theological notion of hierarchy means first of all a mediating order in which a 'divine origin' is passed on. In the best possible case, all superiority and subordination is thus eradicated, in that the recipient completely realises the received from within. Passing on can then even be understood as its act of service, which enjoys the fruit in the other and sees this as its only goal." My translation of: "*Im theologischen Begriff von Hierarchie ist zunächst eine Vermittlungsordnung gemeint, in der ein ‚göttlicher Ursprung' weitergegeben wird. Im bestmöglichen Falle wird damit jede Über- und Unterordnung getilgt, indem der Empfangende das Empfangene vollständig aus sich heraus verwirklicht. Das Weitergeben kann dann sogar als sein Dienstakt verstanden werden, der sich an der Frucht im anderen erfreut und darin sein einziges Ziel sieht*."

[126] To mention just one prominent example, on a relationist model, as proposed by Thomas Aquinas, the Trinitarian "order" would be interpreted in terms of relations of origin and hence viewed as an order of (subsistent) relations. On this model, a divine person is a subsistent relation. As subsistent relations, the divine persons are distinguished by their relations of origin. Each divine person possesses the same divine nature according to a different relation of origin. Thomas Joseph White elaborates this view thus: "In God the divine persons each possess the divine essence in its fullness. Therefore, they are one in being and equal in all that pertains to the divine essence. They can be distinguished, however, according to an order of procession, wherein the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit is eternally spirated from the Father and the Son. In this order of proceeding, each person is distinguished in virtue of his relations of origin [. . .]. If the persons are distinguished only in virtue of their relations of origin, then the Father may be characterized as a subsistent relation, that is to say, he is his paternity. He is 'always' relative to the Son in all that he is, as he who eternally generates the Son, by the procession of generation. The Son is always relative to the Father as he who, as God, is always eternally derivative of the Father. The Father and the Son are always related subsistently to the Spirit as his eternal principle, while the Spirit is always relative to the Father and the Son as one wholly originate from their common spiration" (White 2022, 384). And White adds: "If one follows the Thomistic line of thinking about divine [persons] as relational, there is no hierarchy of being in God, due to the perfect equality of the three persons" (White 2022, 466, footnote 9). It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine whether Bulgakov's proposal is compatible with other models of the Trinity.

ways, then, the relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit will have to be further specified to see how the fact that the Spirit, in whose image woman is created, also proceeds from the Son, in whose image man is created, affects the relation between man and woman. For if the *Filioque* is accepted, then there is, by this very fact, a difference in the relations of origin in, or an irreversible order of, the proto-images of man and woman.

*4.2. Is There Sex in God?*

Are there two principles—male and female—in the simple divine substance? As mentioned above, on a common reading, "Bulgakov would introduce sex into the Trinity."[127] Indeed, as we have seen in the ukaz, cited above, the second main worry was that "Bulgakov wants to see the image of God in the human person precisely (*imenno*) in the duality of sex (*polov*)."[128] De La Noval summarises this line of reasoning as follows:

> If Christ is incarnate as a male, and if the Spirit must [*sic*] fully manifests in the Spirit-bearing Theotokos, then gender must—in a manner far but not completely removed from its human expression—be intrinsic to the deity.[129]

This quotation suggests that because the second *hypostasis* of God incarnated in Jesus Christ as a male and because the third *hypostasis* of God manifested most fully in the female Mary, therefore, maleness and femaleness must be, to some extent, characteristics of God himself. Put differently, if the male and female *hypostases* are created in the image of the second and third divine *hypostases*, and the former are male and female, then the latter, as their foundation, must be male and female too. In short, sex is *intrinsic* to God. Or, to put it in a more nuanced way, gender, although not expressed as biological sex, is intrinsic to God.

According to this interpretation, which, as we have seen above, can draw on some passages, particularly in his early work, the controversy regarding Bulgakov's condemnation would be about whether or not this is an orthodox view. De La Noval states accordingly:

[127] De La Noval (2020, 178).
[128] Ukaz (December 7, 1935), cited in De La Noval (2020, 126).
[129] De La Noval (2020, 175); the passage should presumably read "most fully".

> [T]he danger was never that Bulgakov would introduce sex into the Trinity; the danger is that we would be ignorant of how it is always present and therefore become inadvertently guilty of the mythologizing Bulgakov himself feared and was unjustly accused of.[130]

But whether the proposal to link the male and female human *hypostases* with the second and third divine *hypostases*, as image and proto-image, does actually commit oneself to the view that the Trinity is sexed is another and open question, to which I now turn.

Although Bulgakov admittedly states at times that the Son is the male principle or that the Holy Spirit is the female principle, I think that if Bulgakov in fact read sex into God, this would be detrimental to his approach. At least in his mature work, however, I take it there is reason to believe that this is not the case. Here is a long quotation from his opus magnum, showing his mature view on the point of contention:

> By no means is the inverse conclusion valid, the conclusion that the Logos and the Holy Spirit respectively are the male and female hypostases in divinity itself. We have no grounds and no need for such a conclusion: it would be an unnecessary anthropomorphism. The only thing we can say is that, in translation into the language of creation or with reference to man, the qualities of the Second and Third Hypostases correspond to, are analogous to, are parallel to (but by no means identical to) the male and female principles in it. This corresponds to the fundamental fact that the Son of God was humanized into the male nature, while the hypostatic descent of the Holy Spirit took place into the female nature of the Most Holy Mother of God.[131]

Here Bulgakov explicitly states that it would be wrong to assume "that the Logos and the Holy Spirit respectively are the male and female hypostases in divinity itself." So Bulgakov seems to agree with De La Noval's statement above, that if he were to introduce sex into the Trinity, this would indeed be an unnecessary mythologising form of anthropomorphism. What Bulgakov maintains, on the contrary, is only that "the qualities of the Second and Third Hypostases correspond to, are analogous to, are parallel to (but by no means identical to) the male and female principles in it." In other words, specific qualities of the second and third person of the Trinity are reflected in the human persons insofar as they are male and female. And it is in this light that

[130] De La Noval (2020, 178).
[131] Bulgakov (2002, 91).

the incarnation of the second *hypostasis* in Jesus Christ and the manifestation of the third *hypostasis* in Mary must be understood, as the final part of the quotation makes clear.

Whatever his early views might have been or suggested, on his mature view, it seems to be more likely, or at any rate more reasonable, to think of the relation between divine and human *hypostases* in terms of an analogy that works in one way but not in the other. Although the male and female *hypostases* are analogous to the second and third divine *hypostases*, they are not identical with them, nor are they in a reciprocal relation: the former are the images of the latter; the latter are the proto-images of the former. For this reason, the human sexes cannot be read into the Trinity, because the *hypostasis* of the Logos, or the Son, is not, in turn, in the image of the male *hypostasis*, nor is the *hypostasis* of the Holy Spirit in the image of the female *hypostasis*.[132] Rather, one could interpret this as an analogy of (proper) proportionality: in humans, male is (related) to female as in God the Son is (related) to the Holy Spirit (male:female::Son:Holy Spirit). Just because the male *hypostasis* is related to the female *hypostasis* as the second divine *hypostasis* is related to the third *hypostasis*, does not mean that features of the male and female *hypostases* can be transferred to the divine *hypostases*. Calling this proportionality "sex" would, in my opinion, not only fall short but also significantly weaken the approach based on this analogy.

### *4.3. Hallensleben on Bulgakov on Gender*

What, then, is gained by Bulgakov's theory of gender? Hallensleben highlights five features that recommend his approach. Before discussing these, however, I need to point out that Hallensleben would qualify premise (8) above, as she takes the human nature that participates in the divine nature to be an essential part of the analogy.[133] The qualified premise could be stated as follows:

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[132] Bulgakov (2002, 91).

[133] Hallensleben (2017, 12): "*L'homme n'est pourtant pas simplement l'image du Logos, mais de la nature divine hypostasiée dans le Logos; et la femme n'est pas l'image de l'Esprit-Saint, mais de la nature divine hypostasiée dans l'Esprit-Saint. Comme les personnes divines communiquent entre elles dans l'unique nature divine, l'homme et la femme communiquent dans la même nature humaine, créée à l'image de la Sainte Trinité*." The original German manuscript states the point thus: "*Diese Parallele ist nur zu ziehen, wenn die göttliche wie die menschliche Natur in die Lehre von der Gottebenbildlichkeit einbezogen werden: Der Mann ist nicht Abbild des Logos, sondern der im Logos hypostasierten göttlichen Natur; die Frau ist nicht Abbild des Geistes, sondern derselben im Heiligen Geist hypostasierten göttlichen Natur. Wie die drei göttlichen Personen in ein und derselben göttlichen Natur kommunizieren, so Mann und Frau in ein und derselben Menschennatur*." The German text

(8*) Since male human beings are not simply in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God, but are, as male *hypostasis* of the human nature participating in the divine nature, in the image of the divine nature hypostasised in the Son; and likewise, since female human beings are not simply in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God, but are, as female *hypostasis* of the human nature participating in the divine nature, in the image of the same divine nature hypostasised in the Holy Spirit; therefore, just as the three divine *hypostases* communicate in one and the same divine nature, so male and female human beings communicate in one and the same human nature (participating in the divine nature).

With the reformulated premise (8*), Hallensleben would emphasise that a *hypostasis* is ultimately a hypostasised nature. Therefore, the image of God in which all human beings are created concerns fundamentally the *nature* of which man and woman are *hypostases*. Man is created in the image of the Son, just as woman is created in the image of the Holy Spirit, but both are *hypostases* of the same and full human nature, just as the second and third divine persons are *hypostases* of the same and full divine nature. Premise (8*) would then also go towards explaining why all human beings, whether male or female, can be regarded as created in the *fullness* of the image of God, because each human being possesses the fullness of the human nature. Both *hypostases*—the human and the divine—are *hypostases* of the full—human or divine—nature; one and the same nature can be hypostasised differently: as Son and as Spirit, and as male and female. Although male and female human beings possess the human nature differently, they each possess the same and full human nature participating in the divine nature. Thus, Hallensleben suggests that the image should be seen not so much in relation to the *persons* of the Logos and of the Holy Spirit, insofar as 'person' is distinguished from 'nature', but rather as a personalisation of that *nature*.

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might be rendered into English as follows: "This parallel can only be drawn if both divine and human nature are included in the doctrine of the image of God: Man is not an image of the Logos, but of the divine nature hypostasised in the Logos; woman is not an image of the Spirit, but of the same divine nature hypostasised in the Holy Spirit. Just as the three divine persons communicate in one and the same divine nature, so man and woman communicate in one and the same human nature." Hallensleben (2024, 305) reads: "Of course, man is not simply the image of the Logos, but of the divine nature hypostasised in the Logos; and woman is not the image of the Holy Spirit, but of the divine nature hypostasised in the Holy Spirit."

On this basis, Hallensleben argues that Bulgakov's sophiological approach is capable of fending off interpretations of sex, according to which

(i) there is a fundamental division between woman and man, for both share the same human nature that unites them and together they are called to express it in different forms;
(ii) being a woman and being a man is denied as an objective reality, for their human nature is created and expressed in two different modes: as woman and as man, and as such it participates in the divine nature;
(iii) being human is exhausted either by being a woman or by being a man, for only in their duality do they represent (the different modes of expressing) the fullness of human nature;
(iv) their relation is to be understood as a hierarchy of subordination and superordination or superiority, for (at least on one interpretation which emphasises the different perspectives of the order of genesis and the order of fulfilment) both revealing *hypostases*, as the foundation of woman and man, are second to the one who reveals himself in them, and their relative priority depends on the perspective; and
(v) the modes of expressing being a woman and being a man easily exhaust themselves, for if as female and male humans they participate in the divine nature, there are abundant possibilities of expressing the female and male *hypostases*, especially as a spiritual principle, which is why definitions based on stereotypical role ascriptions locking man and woman into limiting roles (despite latent tendencies to the contrary in Bulgakov) fall short, "because in the duality of man and woman something of the divine mystery itself shines through."[134]

Above I have suggested that Bulgakov's argument can be summarised as follows:

(1) Human beings are created in the image of God.
(2) All human beings share the same human nature.
(3) Human nature participates in the divine nature.
(4) Some human beings are male, some are female.
(5) Male and female are two *hypostases* of human nature.

[134] Hallensleben (2017, 13). The quotation is from Hallensleben (2023, 198): "*car dans la dualité de l'homme et de la femme, un mystère divin transparaît*"; the original German manuscript, from which I have translated here, reads: "*weil in der Dualität von Mann und Frau etwas vom göttlichen Geheimnis selbst aufleuchtet*." See also Hallensleben (2024, 305).

(6) As male and female, human beings are created in the image of the *triune* God.

(7) In the triune God, there are three *hypostases* of one divine nature: the Father (first *hypostasis*) revealing himself in the Son (second *hypostasis*) and in the Holy Spirit (third *hypostasis*).

(8) Male human beings are created in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God (the Son); female human beings are created in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God (the Holy Spirit).

(8*) [Since male human beings are not simply in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God, but are, as male *hypostasis* of the human nature participating in the divine nature, in the image of the divine nature hypostasised in the Son; and likewise, since female human beings are not simply in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God, but are, as female *hypostasis* of the human nature participating in the divine nature, in the image of the same divine nature hypostasised in the Holy Spirit; therefore, just as the three divine *hypostases* communicate in one and the same divine nature, so male and female human beings communicate in one and the same human nature (participating in the divine nature).]

(9) The fullness of the image of the triune God is present only in the duality and union of male and female human beings.

(10) The relation between the two *hypostases* of human nature—male and female—reflects the relation between the two revealing hypostases of the divine nature, the Son and Holy Spirit, but not *vice versa*; the former are the images, the latter the proto-images.

(11) As created in the image of the triune God, male and female human beings are the bearers of, and constituted by, male and female principles.

(12) These male and female principles have both a spiritual and bodily form (that correspond to each other).

(13) In the spiritual form, each human being consists—unconfusedly but inseparably—of both male and female principles.

(14) As a bodily (form of the male and female) principle, biological sex is secondary to, and an authentic embodiment of, the spiritual (form of the male and female) principles.

In light of this analysis, I would now like to evaluate Hallensleben's five claims.

First, if (5) male and female (human beings) are two *hypostases* of human nature—that is, two different ways of possessing the same human nature, two "exemplifications of human nature", "personal features", or modes of being human—and (2) all human beings share the same human nature, then there is a fundamental unity—namely, their common human nature—underlying all possible differences, or different ways of expressing or communicating this shared nature. In this sense, the unity between women and men is always greater than their difference—including the differences among different individual women and men, respectively.

Second, Bulgakov gives "womanhood" and "manhood" a Trinitarian foundation and meaning. Just as the proto-image of every human being is in God, so, too, is the proto-image of every human being as male and female in God. For Bulgakov, all humans are created in the image of God and have thus, as human beings, their proto-image in God, especially in his one divine nature, in which our common human nature participates. Likewise, all humans, as male and female, have their proto-image in God, namely, in the Trinitarian persons: (6) As male and female, human beings are created in the image of the triune God. On this view, Gen 1:27 provides a link between female and male human beings and the Trinitarian persons, as their proto-image: (8) Male human beings are created in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God (the Son); female human beings are created in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God (the Holy Spirit). And precisely as such, (3) human nature participates in the divine nature. To put it differently, (8*) since male human beings are not simply in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God, but are, as male *hypostasis* of the human nature participating in the divine nature, in the image of the divine nature hypostasised in the Son; and likewise, since female human beings are not simply in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God, but are, as female *hypostasis* of the human nature participating in the divine nature, in the image of the same divine nature hypostasised in the Holy Spirit; therefore, just as the three divine *hypostases* communicate in one and the same divine nature, so male and female human beings communicate in one and the same human nature (participating in the divine nature). Being man and woman, then, is, from a theological point of view, an objective reality in humans rooted in the reality of the inner-Trinitarian life, on Bulgakov's view. It is the way in which humans are created by God, express in a different manner their human nature participating in the

divine nature, and manifest together the fullness of their image of God. There is thus an objectivity to their unity in difference.[135]

Third, in an important sense, the fullness of (1) the image of God, in which human beings are created, is not woman or man separately, but both together, on Bulgakov's view—humans as woman *and* as man, or the union of woman and man: (9) The fullness of the image of the triune God is present only in the duality and union of male and female human beings. Therefore, for Bulgakov, neither women nor men separately represent the fullness of the image of God. Two qualifications are in order here. First, according to Bulgakov, in their fundamental spiritual form, there is already a duality of female and male principles in each individual human being: (13) In the spiritual form, each human being consists—unconfusedly but inseparably—of both male and female principles. Second, for Bulgakov too, each individual human being possesses the fullness of the image of God in a different sense, namely, as possessing the fullness of the human nature participating in the divine nature. Both sides must be considered together. On the one hand, each individual human being possesses the full human nature. On the other hand, woman and man possess the human nature differently: there is more than one way of having the fullness of the human nature; the same nature is differently hypostasised in man and woman. And so, neither woman nor man can claim to exhaust what it means to be human; neither exhausts the modes of expressing human nature on their own, but only in their duality. Insofar as the human *hypostases* are different personalisations of the same complete nature, then, there is one sense in which each *hypostasis* is created in the full image of God, and another sense in which man and woman represent this fullness only in their duality. Bulgakov's remarks, I take it, are therefore not meant to convey a lack of being in the image of God in individuals, but rather that the fullness of the

[135] In this respect it might be noteworthy that, having argued for the reality of woman and man, Bulgakov then excludes the possibility of a third sex or gender, which might be associated with the Father, because, Bulgakov argues, there are only two, not three, revealing *hypostases*—that the Father reveals himself through the Son and the Holy Spirit. The *hypostasis* that reveals himself, the Father, by contrast, is not the sort of *hypostasis* in whose image humans as a *hypostasis* are created, according to Bulgakov: "the Father remains transcendent to creation" (Bulgakov 2002, 89). Given the discussions about sex and gender today, this argument will be particularly controversial and would need to be elaborated and scrutinised in more detail and, if necessary, adjusted or substantiated with further arguments. I simply wish to note this here without further comment, pointing out that this would presumably be the part of the argument that those who take the duality of woman and man itself to be restrictive, even if they can be expressed in different ways, would criticise, and those who hold on to the duality of woman and man would seek to defend.

image of the trinitarian God, who is relationship in himself, is present in the loving union and relationship of the different *hypostases* of human nature, of man and woman.[136]

Given the contemporary debate about gender, the fourth and fifth claims will be particularly controversial, but perhaps also most relevant.[137] Fourth, as shown above, the question of whether a hierarchy emerges from Bulgakov's approach is difficult to answer, for various reasons. Firstly, the question arises as to whether the hierarchy in question actually implies a superiority or superordination and subordination. While we have seen tendencies in Bulgakov to affirm this in relation to man and woman, this must be denied in relation to the Trinity. Secondly, from a systematic point of view, the issue is further complicated by the question of the *Filioque*, which would imply a difference in their relations of origin in, or an irreversible order of, at least the proto-images of the Son and the Spirit, which in turn raises the question of the relations of origin between, or an irreversible order of, man and woman as created in their image. Thirdly, even in Bulgakov's own work there is a notable tension regarding this question. If one upholds the distinction between what Bulgakov calls the order of genesis and the order of fulfilment, then any hierarchy between woman and man inferred from the relation between the second and third persons of the Trinity will depend on the perspective: in the order of genesis, the second person is prior to the third person of God, but in the order of fulfilment, the third person is prior to the second person of God. Fourthly, precisely as such, however, Bulgakov's proposal is formal rather than material, and would potentially need to be fleshed out materially: (10) The relation between the two *hypostases* of human nature—male and female—reflects the relation between the two revealing hypostases of the divine nature,

[136] Nor does this imply any disregard for ever-virgins or, more generally, for people who do not enter into such a union of love between man and woman. As seen above, Bulgakov repeatedly names the ever-virgins Christ and Mary as exemplars of what it means to be human, of man and woman, respectively. The point here is rather that although Christ has assumed the fullness of the human nature, he expresses the fullness *of the image of* human nature only together with Mary. If there is duality of human *hypostases* representing two of the three *hypostases* in God, then although each *hypostasis* has the full nature it hypostasises, it does not exhaust the ways of hypostasising that nature. But the fullness of the image of God consists in the fullness of the hypostasised human nature (participating in the divine nature), not only insofar as a *hypostasis* possesses the full nature, but also insofar as it extends to the fullness of the *hypostases* of that nature. This does not imply that each person needs to enter a union of love to become complete; both man and woman possess the complete human nature. But then as individuals, they do not represent the fullness of the image of human nature.

[137] For another controversial claim that I will not discuss here, see footnote 135.

the Son and Holy Spirit, but not *vice versa*; the former are the images, the latter the proto-images. What exactly does this statement mean or imply for the relation between man and woman? Bulgakov's own fleshing out of the formal proposal, to view the male principle as a primacy of reason over sense and the female principle as a primacy of sense over reason and the like, will probably not do, and would be rightly rejected in the contemporary debate.

*4.4. Is Bulgakov a Gender Essentialist?*

Hallensleben's fifth claim, that the modes of expressing being a woman and being a man are in a sense inexhaustible, brings us finally back to the question I started with—namely, gender essentialism. For I would like to discuss it in connection with the related worry concerning gender essentialism outlined above, that if there are properties that define or at least demarcate women and men, this will lead not only to (a) the neglect of important differences among individual women and men but also (b) to a fixed understanding of women and men that imposes unwarranted social norms on how they ought to behave. Does Bulgakov fall prey to these common feminist charges against gender essentialism?

On the one hand, Bulgakov's proposal may be considered a form of gender essentialism. As one commentator puts it: "In his descriptions of the double Proto-Image of humanity, Bulgakov seems to essentialize sexual difference by identifying a 'masculine' principle with the Logos and a 'feminine' one with the Holy Spirit."[138] The argument for a property that defines or at least demarcates women and men proceeds as follows. (8) Male human beings are created in the image of the second *hypostasis* of God (the Son); female human beings are created in the image of the third *hypostasis* of God (the Holy Spirit). Moreover, Bulgakov argues that (11) as created in the image of the triune God, male and female human beings are the bearers of, and constituted by, male and female principles, and (12) these male and female principles have both a spiritual and bodily form (that correspond to each other). (14) As a bodily (form of the male and female) principle, biological sex is secondary to, and an authentic embodiment of, a spiritual (form of the male and female) principle. And given the discussion of the reality of woman and man above, the linking of these female and male principles or *hypostases* with the third and second persons of the Trinity would seem to imply an essentialist, or realist, interpretation of

[138] Livick-Moses (2024, 101).

woman and man constituted by these principles: the female and male principles are real, not socially constructed; they constitute the essence of woman and man, who are created in the image of God precisely as woman and man. Formally, Bulgakov's proposal of a property essential to man and woman, respectively, which defines or at least demarcates them, could be stated as follows:

> ($M_{f1}$) A man is a human being (created) in the image of the second person of the Trinity.
> ($M_{f2}$) A man is a human being constituted by a male principle.

Or following Hallensleben:

> ($M_{f1*}$) A man is a human being (created) in the image of the divine nature hypostasised in the second person of the Trinity.

And likewise:

> ($W_{f1}$) A woman is a human being (created) in the image of the third person of the Trinity.
> ($W_{f2}$) A woman is a human being constituted by a female principle.

Or following Hallensleben:

> ($W_{f1*}$) A woman is a human being (created) in the image of the divine nature hypostasised in the third person of the Trinity.

Here a two-fold difficulty arises. The first order of business would then be to explain in turn—in the case of $M_{f1}$ and $W_{f1}$—what exactly it means to be (created) in the image of the second and the third person of the Trinity and—in the case of $M_{f2}$ and $W_{f2}$—what a male and female principle is. The first suggestion, $M_{f1}$ and $W_{f1}$, faces the difficulty of seeking to explain the more familiar with the less familiar. To put the objection in the words of Kathryn Tanner: "Because God is not very comprehensible to us, and certainly not fully so, discussion of the Trinity, all by itself, seems of little help in better understanding human relationships: what is difficult to understand—the proper character of human society—is explicated with reference to what is

surely only more obscure—the character of divine community."[139] The second suggestion, $M_{f2}$ and $W_{f2}$, faces the additional difficulty that, from a contemporary perspective, it would be problematic to follow Bulgakov in his material formulation of his formally essentialist view, for example:

> ($M_{m2}$) The male principle is a primacy of reason over sense.
> ($W_{m2}$) The female principle is a primacy of sense over reason.

While it might be easier to determine the bodily principles—biological sex—interpreted here as the manifestation and embodiment of the spiritual principles, it is less clear how to spell out these spiritual principles—which are in a sense prior to, and the foundation of, the bodily principles and include elements that would be considered part of one's gender identity today. What is more, Bulgakov leaves open the important question of how the duality of spiritual principles in each individual can give rise to and constitute a specific and determined biological sex. No explanation is offered as to how the following two statements fit together. On the one hand, each person is said to be a bearer of, and constituted by, both male and female principles in their spiritual form. On the other hand, in their bodily form, indicating psycho-corporeal rather than spiritual differences, each individual human being is then, in virtue of and constituted by these same spiritual principles, said to be either biologically male or female. How is this biological embodiment determined? In particular, how exactly is this duality of spiritual principles, aimed to ward off a one-sided understanding of what it means to be a woman or a man, the foundation of the unity of the bodily principle in each individual? Is it simply a case of one spiritual principle predominating over and outweighing the other?[140] And what accounts for the singularity of sex if there is a duality of female and male spiritual principles in each human being? In any case, at least regarding the spiritual principles, the formal definition as such will not in a straightforward sense enable one to spell out the essential properties of man and woman (in a spiritual rather than bodily sense). The same difficulty applies to Bulgakov's alternative suggestion linking the Son with Truth and the Holy

[139] Tanner (2012, 378).

[140] For example, Zwahlen suggests: "Every human being is given both principles, with the male principle taking precedence in man and the female principle in woman." The original reads: "*Jedem Menschen seien beide Prinzipien gegeben, wobei im Mann das männliche, in der Frau das weibliche den Vorrang habe*" (Zwahlen 2010, 309).

Spirit with Beauty—or to any such Trinitarian appropriations, from which the other material proposals above are presumably derived:

> ($M_{m2*}$) The male principle is a primacy of Truth over Beauty.
> ($W_{m2*}$) The female principle is a primacy of Beauty over Truth.

If one wants to develop his approach further, I take it that here Bulgakov's proposal would need at least further elaboration and, depending on whether one considers this to be necessary or at least advantageous or, on the contrary, disadvantageous, perhaps an alternative fleshing out of the material dimension of his formal-theological proposal.

On the other hand, unlike other essentialist views, Bulgakov's proposal is at least formally open to a view that fends off a material determination of the spiritual principles in the sense of pinpointing that every woman needs the—materially rather than formally—intrinsic property $x$ or every man needs the—materially rather than formally—intrinsic property $y$ in order to be a woman or man, especially with his claim that in individual persons we find both elements of the male and female principles (in the spiritual sense, although not in the bodily sense). So at least regarding the essentialist worry (a), that any essentialist proposal denies important differences among women and men, there is much room for individual difference among different women and individual differences among different men, both because the essentialist property is formal rather than material and because each individual originates from a plurality of spiritual principles. But in this case, one may question how it is possible to distinguish the spiritual principles (in their material dimension) in the first place without first determining them not only in a formal but also in a material sense. That is, can we make use of these spiritual principles without any specification of their characteristics? Nonetheless, in Bulgakov's view, one would probably have to deny the feminist charge (a) that "all women would experience womanhood in the same way."[141]

Regarding the essentialist worry (b), that any essentialist proposal will necessarily result in a fixed understanding of women and men that imposes unwarranted social norms on how they ought to behave, we may add that if the manifestations and expressions of the female and male principles are manifold, although for Bulgakov less in their embodiment as biological sex than in their spiritual, or gender-related, dimension, then both stereotypical descriptions of

[141] Mikkola (2024, sect. 3.3.1); see footnote 3.

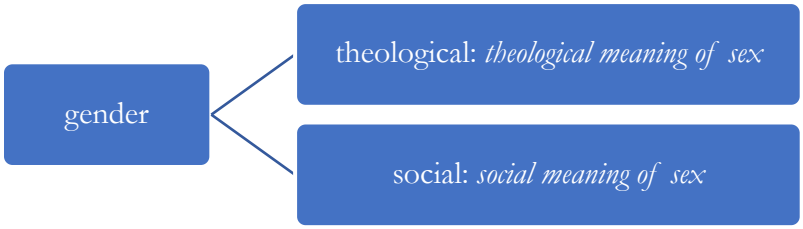
women and men and norms associated with stereotypical female and male behaviour will fall short. This is why Hallensleben emphasises in her fifth claim that if we want to appropriate Bulgakov's view, we should understand that, first, human nature participates in the divine nature and that, second, man is in the image of the divine nature (in which he participates) hypostasised in the Son, and woman is in the image of the divine nature (in which she participates) hypostasised in the Holy Spirit. In her view, if there are abundant possibilities in God, not of the *hypostases* of the divine nature, which are three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but of the enunciations or modes of expression of the Trinitarian persons in creation, and human nature participates in the divine nature, as man and woman, then it is reasonable to assume that there will be abundant possibilities in humans too, not so much of the *hypostases* of human nature—man and woman—but of the modes of expression of their being man and woman—which would also further substantiate the rebuttal of charge (a). Therefore, the argument goes, the theological meaning of sex, that is, gender, is by no means arbitrary, because it is rooted in the Trinitarian relations, but rather open to a variety of expressions. And so, the norms associated with "womanhood" and "manhood" are also not arbitrary—they are ultimately rooted in the proto-image and as such objective. But neither should they be restricting the various legitimate modes of expression of one's being man and being woman, that is, be limiting in a narrow sense, to which critics of essentialism rightly object. Whether these possibilities are actually inexhaustible, as Hallensleben suggests,[142] or only manifold or abundant, as stated here, is another question. In any case, in Bulgakov's view, it is at least debatable whether and in what sense the feminist charge (b) applies, that the notion of woman or man simply "serves to coerce individuals into behavior aimed to exhibit such meaning", or that it unduly "operates as a policing force which generates and legitimizes certain practices, experiences, etc., and curtails and delegitimizes others."[143] For according to the view under discussion, there is a wide variety—although not an arbitrary one—of legitimate gender expressions.

### *4.5. What Nature Does Gender Have in Bulgakov?*

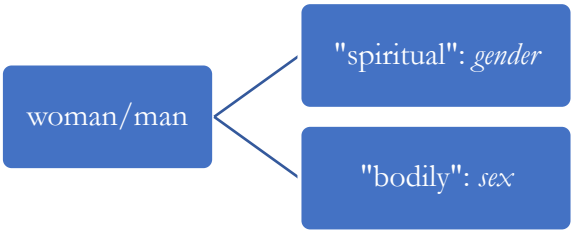
By way of conclusion, I would like to attempt to establish a tentative connection between gender in Bulgakov and gender as the social meaning of sex. If we

[142] Hallensleben (2023): "*inépuisables*"; the German manuscript reads: "*unerschöpflich*."
[143] Nicholson (1998, 293); see footnote 3.

understand "gender" to refer to the meaning of sex, then we could stipulate, following Bulgakov, although moving beyond him, that on his Trinitarian approach a *Doppelgestalt* or biformity—that is, a twofold nature, sense, or form—of gender emerges: one theological and the other social.




Gender in the first sense, what one might call "theological gender", refers to the *theological* meaning of sex and more specifically to the identity of man and woman as given and intended by God: the identity God knows and wills for man and woman by creating them in the image of the Son and Holy Spirit, respectively. As humans, we are in the image of God, with males being specifically in the image of the Son and females being specifically in the image of the Holy Spirit. The theological meaning of sex includes but explicitly goes *beyond the merely biological*. For Bulgakov suggests that being male and female has a twofold dimension—one spiritual, the other bodily. Theological gender involves, as the theological meaning of *sex*, the bodily form of the female and male principles but, as the theological *meaning* of sex, goes beyond the bodily. And since, for Bulgakov, the spiritual form of these principles has priority over the bodily form, the spiritual principles go towards providing a theological meaning of sex by providing the foundation of biological sex as the authentic manifestation of the spiritual principles in a bodily form.



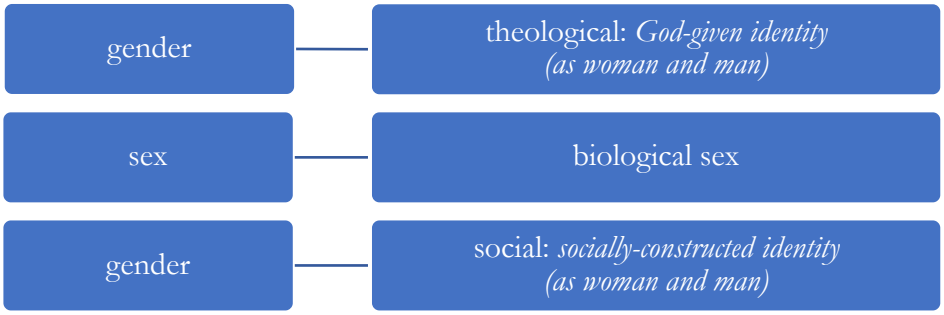

Given this outline, I would like to suggest that, while what Bulgakov calls the "bodily" dimension of being female and male refers to our biological sex, the "spiritual" dimension has more to do with what we would today call gender rather than sex. As seen above, there is a primacy of the male and female as spiritual principles over bodily principles. In their spiritual form, each human

being is a bearer of, and constituted by, both male and female principles; in their bodily form, indicating psycho-corporeal rather than spiritual differences, however, individual human beings are either male or female. And Bulgakov adds, as quoted above: "In no wise does sex exhaust the difference between the male and female principles."[144] The spiritual principles are the foundation of the biological sexes, and for Bulgakov they remain as a lasting identity even if we were to lose our biological sex. Our God-given identity as woman and man, then, has more to do with this "spiritual" gender identity than with our "bodily" sexed identity; the "spiritual" identity is more fundamental than our "bodily" sex, which results from and corresponds to these very spiritual principles. In this limited sense, therefore, there is a priority of gender over sex. In fact, one could even go so far as to claim that biological sex is itself gendered, on Bulgakov's view, in the sense that it results from theological gender. Consequently, in this narrow sense, gender would be prior to, and the foundation of, biological sex, which could in turn be viewed as the embodiment of gender in this sense, without thereby losing its connection to biological sex, for bodily sex results from, and corresponds to, these spiritual principles, on Bulgakov's view. But sex thus constituted has not only a theological but arguably also a social meaning.

Gender in the second sense, what one might call "social gender", refers to the *social* meaning of sex in a given society—a meaning which is thus dependent on a social context. Put differently, the manifestation and embodiment of theological gender—namely, biological sex—would in the social context gain various social or cultural meanings. Our identity as woman or man would then be formed not only by the spiritual and bodily principles—or theological gender and sex—but also by the social meaning of sex, specifically the societal and cultural norms and expectations in relation to sex. As an example, one could even go so far as to argue that Bulgakov himself at times reads back certain features of social gender into theological gender, thus collapsing to an extent the distinction between social and theological gender. Bulgakov's material determination of gender in hierarchical terms, for instance, might be viewed as being due primarily to the then prevalent social gender norms rather than theological gender—in particular, the idea that man has a "hierarchical superiority" over woman. Such a claim would also be testimony to the fact that social gender—the social meaning of sex—is, at least to some extent, negotiable. It is entrusted to our human creativity to formulate and reformulate these

[144] Bulakgov (2004, 325).

norms. While social gender as the social meaning of sex is in principle comprehensible and at least to some degree, if not individually then at least collectively, entrusted to us and remains subject to change, gender in the theological sense referring to our God-given identity as woman and man would be rooted in the mystery of the Trinity, and hence not fully comprehensible to us and beyond our control and determination. We might thus have an impetus and critical corrective to revisit and change the social meaning of sex and related social norms and expectations in appropriate ways. Consequently, the following scheme emerges:




Ostensibly, drawing a distinction between gender in the theological and social sense along these lines might look like a reintroduction of gender essentialism in the narrow sense, combined with an imposition of divine rather than merely social norms. Consequently, there would appear to emerge an objective standard, theological gender, against which gender in the social sense can or, to make it even stronger, ought to be judged. As pointed out at the beginning, this would seem to reinforce and intensify the common feminist concerns and charges against gender essentialism.

There are, however, arguably two different ways of understanding this twofold nature of gender, or the distinction between theological and social gender. The first paves the way for what many might regard as an ideologization, or a further ideologization, of the current debate. On this view, the gender norms of social gender would be judged against the gender norms of theological gender the way individuals are often judged against the current social gender norms. The approach thus employs the distinction to determine what it means to be woman and man in a rigid and fixed manner, by appeal not to socially but divinely sanctioned norms. If one can determine the theological gender, then one can determine how one ought to behave, in a divinely normed and sanctioned manner.

By contrast, the second way would uphold the distinction between theological and social gender as a critical corrective—a corrective that is neither arbitrary nor definitively determinable by humans. The second approach argues that collapsing the distinction is in fact potentially dangerous, because maintaining the distinction will show that any given social meaning of sex is one of a multiplicity of possible meanings, none of which will fully represent the original divine meaning. Theological gender is meant to safeguard the manifold ways of expressing one's being a woman or man, without thereby making it arbitrary. Contrary to the first way, the second way emphasises that we cannot definitively determine and exhaustively describe theological gender. The social meaning of sex is not arbitrary, however, for as created in the image of God we are called to imitate and creatively approximate the proto-image, which will bring us ever closer to who we, individually and collectively, truly are and to finding appropriate ways of expressing and communicating our shared human nature. In short, although the theological gender, as such, is not exhaustively comprehensible and definitively determinable by us, any socially sanctioned norm has nonetheless a critical corrective in our God-given identity as woman and man.[145]

## Conclusion

The starting point of this paper was the question of whether "the central statement of theological anthropology—the creation of humans in the image of God—concerns humanity in general, or also the concrete human existence as man and woman," and Hallensleben's call for a theology of the sexes, or rather a theology of gender. The *theological* meaning of the sexes, Hallensleben stipulates, cannot simply be their *biological* necessity for (sexual) reproduction.

In response to this call, this article has examined Bulgakov's multi-layered, evolving, contested and, as we have seen, not entirely tension-free view on gender, looking particularly at his formal characterisation of maleness and

[145] Note that the claim that humans cannot exhaustively determine the theological dimension of gender, which only God comprehends, does not mean that we cannot ever fuller approximate the proto-image. Thus, from a theological perspective, being woman and man finds various concretisations in the history of salvation, in revelation, in the Bible and tradition (in the best sense of the word), in the liturgy, in communion and especially in the saints, who go towards making the fullness of ways of being woman and man visible, in line with their identity given by God which they are called to live out in their time and context, in ways that are neither arbitrary, for gender is known and willed by God, nor narrowly limited, for there are ways only God has imagined.

femaleness. Throughout, Bulgakov clearly assumes the duality of man and woman, with all the ramifications for the contemporary debate, albeit in a surprising and at least in part nuanced way. Bulgakov's proposal undoubtedly has its shortcomings, including a questionable material determination of his Trinitarian approach. But it also has striking features worth considering in developing theological models of gender. The aim was not to endorse his view, but rather to explore his influential approach and assess some of its theological strengths and weaknesses.

We have seen that in Bulgakov, woman and man are given a theological meaning, as they are linked to the Trinity. Just as the divine nature is hypostasised in the Son and Holy Spirit revealing the Father, so the human nature is hypostasised in man and woman. Man and woman are created in the image of God, with man being in the image of the Son and woman in the image of the Holy Spirit. What is more, Bulgakov interprets man and woman not primarily as sexual but as spiritual principles, going beyond the biological. Since the male and female principles, constituting male and female human beings, are primarily spiritual and only secondarily bodily principles, biological sex is seen as secondary to, and an authentic manifestation of, spiritual principles, which provide the theological foundation of sex. Crudely put, in a way there is a priority of gender over sex, in the sense that the theological meaning of man and woman is prior to its biological manifestation, and as such, each human being has elements of both masculinity and femininity in the spiritual sense. Therefore, to the extent that the male and female principles are analogously linked and likened to the second and third persons of the Trinity, they have a theological meaning, including but going beyond the biological. And as embodied, these male and female principles can have a variety of authentic gender expressions, as expressions of love.[146]

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[146] I thank Barbara Hallensleben, Lydia Schumacher, Kseniya Babkova, and Regula Zwahlen for commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

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