

Christianity and the Jewish Question

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The relationship of Christianity and Judaism was a perennial theme for Sergii Bulgakov, from his 1906 essay on the antisemitism of Karl Marx, to his horror at the destruction he attributed to the Jewish leadership of the Bolshevik revolution, to his polemic against Nazi ideologues, to his final and decisive eschatological conclusions.

For Bulgakov, the “Jewish question,” whether or not connected to particular historical circumstances, was always first and foremost a religious question—and a specifically Christian one. While in this he was not original in Christian thought, his conviction that the “chosen people” represent the “axis of world history” was in tension with the narrative more common in the Orthodox Christian circles that relegates the “Old Israel” to its historical, pre-incarnation role and identifies eschatological yearnings with the “New Israel” emancipated from the old tribe. His philosophy is, however, part of a throughline in Russian religious thought from Vladimir Solovyev to Vasily Rozanov, Pavel Florensky, and Nikolai Berdyaev. Bulgakov was part of the tradition that, while opposing the tendency in Christianity to separate itself decisively and even squeamishly from “all things Jewish,” still passionately believed in the conversion of Old Israel as the crux of the history of salvation. However, among his fellow travelers, Bulgakov

was the only one who insisted that the role of chosen people remained with the Jews, whether or not they recognized and accepted Jesus as the Messiah. To Bulgakov, Jewish historical resistance to assimilation and Jewish confessional stance in the face of several millennia of cruel persecution, even to the point of annihilation, was empirical proof that the Jewish mission is unique and quite apart from the rest of humanity. In this he took a different stand than such thinkers as Boris Pasternak, for whom clinging to Jewish identity was a tragic mistake, a resistance, and an affront to Christian universalism.

In his early essay on Karl Marx’s antisemitism, Bulgakov notes the “blind and one-dimensional rationality” of Marx’s perception of the Jew as solely an economic type. Bulgakov reacts viscerally to the fact that, in rejecting the religious component of Jewish identity, Marx also rejects the “collective national persona” of the Jews as the “axis of the whole of world history.” Bulgakov never retreated from his conviction. Throughout the years, he maintained that the essence of God’s choosing of Israel does not change, that the covenant is not subject to revision. There is no end to the mission of Israel. For Bulgakov, the manifest indestructibility of the Jewish identity despite millennia of persecution proved this.

In 1915 he wrote a short essay entitled "Zion," which considers the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The occasion for this essay was the forcible evacuation of the Jews from the frontier areas of the western Russian Empire as part of the retreat of the Russian army from the advancing Germans. The horrors of antisemitism, both in the war zone and in the areas where Jewish refugees were resettled, as well as political changes in the Middle East, reignited debate about the necessity of a permanent home for the people who had been exiles for the better part of two millennia and yet had managed to retain their national and religious identity. Again, while Bulgakov acknowledges the importance of restoring civil rights and freedoms to the people traditionally oppressed and segregated in the diaspora, still the essence of the creation of a Jewish state for him is primarily a religious question. Notably, he does not write about the *conversion* of Israel, but about the restoration and "purification" of the Jewish religious consciousness, unfettered by cultural and ethnic trappings. It would likely be a great disappointment to him to learn that the State of Israel has since come to fruition as a decisively secular entity, with religion relegated to "professionals" who are mostly unconcerned with the political and civil life of their country. Bulgakov was greatly concerned with the "new spiritual birth" of Israel as a keystone in the eschatological yearnings of the entire world. Beginning with this early essay, he repeated again and again in his writings on the "Jewish question" the words of the Apostle Paul: "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25–26). This

is the crux of the eschatological mission of Israel: its sojourn in the world is wholly religious, it is ontologically inseparable from witnessing to God, and therefore its continuing existence is part of God's soteriological plan for as long as history continues.

It is worth noting here that in the 1,900 years that have passed since Paul wrote his epistles, the context and the content of the first century's "Christian-Jewish problem" has been transformed by millenia of enmity and persecution. And herein also lies the problem with Bulgakov's "Judeology." Like most Christian thinkers, he examines the "Jewish problem" through the Christian narrative of the "small remnant" of the "faithful Israel" that has accepted Christ as the Messiah, and the "apostate Israel" that hasn't. This is strikingly clear in the 1942 sermon "The Destiny of Israel as the Cross of the Theotokos," in which he portrays the Theotokos as participating in her son's torment on the cross by virtue of being Jewish and sharing in the anguish and suffering of her people in their ongoing denial of Christ. The language of the sermon is especially disturbing in that it adopts rhetorical patterns used since the Middle Ages in the Christian "case against the Jews," a case also laid out in stark clarity in the the Orthodox hymnody for Holy Week. In essence, as Rowan Williams incisively argues, Bulgakov remains wholly within this particular Christian narrative in spite of his wholehearted compassion toward the Jewish suffering and his unequivocal condemnation of antisemitic persecutions. Repeatedly he appears to blame the Jews for their own misfortunes, all the while condemning the persecutions. Williams notes, "Bulgakov nowhere raises the question of whether Christian language itself contributes to the 'Jewish problem.'"¹

¹ Rowan Williams, "Bulgakov and Anti-Semitism," in Rowan Williams, *Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 296.

What follows within the same narrative is that the eschatological mission of Israel is therefore fully subservient to the Christian mission. It is unclear how well Bulgakov was familiar with the post-Christian theology and mysticism of Judaism, but nowhere does he refer to it, limiting his references to Jewish theology to the Christian canon of the Old Testament. In one of the early papers, he summarily dismisses “Talmudic wisdom” as the nadir of the Jewish theological thought. And herein lies the controversy within his own corpus of writings. Bulgakov simultaneously proclaims the *autonomy* of the Jewish destiny and its interpenetration with the destinies of the Christian world. Williams states, “The general picture is clear: the real identity of Israel is constituted by its relation to the Church; the resolution of its historical ‘tragedy’ lies in the acceptance of its history as defined in Christian terms; and, most problematic of all, the corruption of Israel by secularization and assimilation is one of the most significant roots of the attack on the Church by totalitarian modernity.”² The last represents the most abstract and yet perhaps the key point in Bulgakov’s wrestling with the Jewish destiny: he sees Israel as the quintessential steward of humanity’s covenant with God, by whose faithfulness or apostasy the world stays or falls away.

Sympathetic readers of Bulgakov’s corpus of the writings on the “Jewish question” tend to sidestep the period following the Bolshevik revolution of 1920, when he appeared to succumb fully to the White Russian narrative about the ostensibly anti-Christian, vengeful Jewish leadership of the revolution and the Jews’ bloody persecution of all things Russian. Dominic Rubin, in his unflinching analysis, attempts to make sense of this period, tracing the development of Bulga-

kov’s post-1905-revolution conservatism, monarchism, and endorsement of the “Holy Russia” narrative.³ Yet Bulgakov’s 1922 “Yalta Diaries” paint a characteristically more nuanced picture. While Bulgakov does condemn what he calls the “relentless Semitic mockery and insolence” so painfully familiar as the cliché Russian antisemitic trope, he immediately follows with a reminder of the final destiny of Israel: “there will come the promised time when [Israel] will begin its salvation, and again its apostles to the universe will bear the apostolic sermon to the ends of the earth.”⁴ And he follows with, “We Russians are not suited for this role, we are lazy, weak, timid, and feminine. This task requires Jewish insolubility, which at present is manifested in the historically unprecedented *insolence* of the Russian revolution and especially Bolshevism, yet will then manifest itself with apostolic zeal.”⁵

In these brief diary notes, we see in a nutshell the main motifs repeated again and again through the entire corpus of Bulgakov’s theopolitical thinking. First, a faith in the special destiny of the Russian people in the history of universal Christianity; second, a deep conviction that Russia *by itself* is unable to fulfil this destiny and needs the mystical companionship and collaboration of Israel; and third, that the essence of the chosenness of Israel determines that its secularization, any form of its forgetting its religious responsibility and purpose, leads not just to apostasy, but to anti-Christian violence. These motifs resurface with dogmatic assertion and a troubling lack of nuance in Bulgakov’s next known collection of texts, created in the years when debates over the “Jewish question” took a truly tragic and nearly final turn in Europe.

² *Ibid.*, 297–98.

³ Dominic Rubin, “Bulgakov and the Sacred Blood of Jewry”, in Rubin, *Holy Russia, Sacred Israel: Jewish-Christian Encounters in Russian Religious Thought* (Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2010), n.p.

⁴ Sergii Bulgakov, *Христианство и еврейский вопрос* (Paris, YMCA-Press, 1991), 169. Translations mine.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

The three-part essay “Racism and Christianity” is a clear exposition of the theological significance of Israel as the keystone of the human relationship with God. It begins with Bulgakov’s polemic against one of the chief Nazi ideologues, Alfred Rosenberg. While acknowledging the sociopolitical roots of Nazism, Bulgakov is primarily interested in its religious content as a powerful modern heresy. He argues that German Nazism is not a form of neo-paganism, but rather a bona fide anti-Christianity, pointing not only to its attack on the person of Christ as revealed in church tradition but also to its attempt to supplant Israel as the “chosen nation.” For Bulgakov, there is no alternative to Israel’s destiny. He diagnoses Nazi antisemitism first and foremost as the manifestation of deep envy originating in an intuitive recognition of Israel’s “primacy” in the world. He states that by supplanting Jewish messianism with Germanic Aryan messianism, Nazism reveals itself a fraud. Again and again he rallies against the lies and the *guile* of antisemitic Christian propaganda, stressing the Jewishness of Christ, of the Mother of God, and of the apostles, and emphasizing that this Jewishness is not a historical irrelevancy, but is essential to the entire Christian soteriology.

Nevertheless, in his zeal to ascertain the unwavering and irreplaceable mission and destiny of Israel in the universal story of salvation, he again falls into the trap of placing certain demands on the Jews that serve his understanding of their *utilitarian* role in the Christian story, disrespectful of their autonomy. One of those demands is the Jewish commitment to ‘otherness’ and rejection of assimilation. Interestingly, Bulgakov is quite oblivious to the paradox of simultaneously demanding the steadfastness

of the Jewish identity as an insoluble body in all diasporic contexts, and in the same breath despising what he considers the unappealing features of Jewry (he thinks nothing of reiterating centuries-old antisemitic stereotypes about Jewish mercenary greed, or the imitative character of Jewish art) and, worse, declaring that this steadfast identity in an overwhelmingly Christian context places Israel in a relationship of opposition and animosity toward Christ and Christianity.

And here we are forced to acknowledge that in spite of Bulgakov’s call for justice toward Israel, of his passionate rejection of the persecution of the Jews despite the “crimes of Israel,” of his commitment to the “ideal eschatological Israel,” he still operates within the fetters of the same stereotypical framework as his predecessors Vladimir Solovyev and Vassily Rozanov and his friend Pavel Florensky. In spite of being incomparably more benevolent toward the Jews than any of the aforementioned thinkers, he nevertheless outlines the same narrative: Israel *as a whole* has rejected Christ and committed apostasy, its sojourn in the world is irrevocably colored by this historical tragedy, which continues to maintain its grip, and its primary challenge is “this struggle within itself which will be over only when it exhausts itself in the time when there will come the ‘salvation of the entire Israel’ promised by Apostle Paul.”⁶ “The house of Jewry remains ‘empty’ to this day, and with few exceptions it is not filled with the repentant and jubilatory cry, ‘Hosanna in the highest, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”⁷ Bulgakov’s alternative to the Nazi ideological yearning for the destruction of Israel as an eschatological competitor is Christian loving benevolence toward Israel as not only a sojourner but the mystical “key” to

⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁷ Ibid., 91.

the Kingdom of God. Here we again encounter the contradiction of his simultaneous emphasis on Jewish religious autonomy and ultimate denial of it, since this autonomy must be temporary, exercised only for as long as it serves the larger Christian eschatological plan. This attitude represents a more serious problem than some recent writers have allowed. It is almost as if the only reason for resisting antisemitism and imploring for “Christian love for the Jewry” is Israel’s *utility* in the eschatological mystery. This motif repeats itself in variations in the last chapter of “Racism and Christianity,” in the 1942 article “Persecutions of Jewry,” surprisingly reinforced by the unfolding realities of the horrific persecutions of which Bulgakov, who spent his last years in the occupied Paris, was well aware. Bulgakov’s passionate belief that the ultimate “spiritual resurrection of Israel” is in its conversion to Christ leads him to a troubling reading of contemporary events. He speculates that the all-encompassing Nazi persecution of Jews is a form of martyrdom that will lead to the Jews’ transformation:

[Jewry] loses earthly well-being, the kingdom of this world with its power. Its fate becomes martyrdom, cross-bearing, which however does not yet happen with Christ and in his name. Yet let us believe that it is the call and training for it.⁸

This reference to Jewish dominance in all spheres of life, culture, banking, and so forth—which is described a few pages prior as the expression of the power, fraternity, and energy of Jewry—shows just how strong was the myth of an international Jewish cabal even among the most independent European intellectuals. Moreover, Bulgakov’s use of the term “training”



in this context is rather shocking. He goes on:

The exceptional tragedy of Israel is a necessary way of salvation both for itself, *the entire Israel* (Rom. 11:26), and also for all the tongues “in the full number” (25). We cannot know the times and terms of the fulfillment of the “inscrutable ways of God” (33), but we can and must discern the internal significance, power and meaning of what is unfolding. And we cannot fail to understand the internal logic of what is happening before our eyes.⁹

This attempt to make sense of the horrors of the unprecedented, all-out destruction of European Jewry follows naturally from both Bulgakov’s apocalyptic mindset and his sophiological beliefs. If the fate of Israel is part of the eternal and unaltered plan of God, then there must be wisdom and purpose to the world’s assault on Is-

In Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* (1938), the figure of the crucified Christ wearing a prayer shawl is surrounded by scenes of the persecution of European Jews. Art Institute of Chicago.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

rael on an apocalyptic scale. Therefore Bulgakov implores Christians to exercise Christian love toward the Jews *in spite of the latter's assumed animosity toward Christ*, an animosity which he considers unquestionable, again adopting the classic Christian caricature of the Jews as the "natural" enemies of Christ. Still, this is a "special" kind of love, bound to the eschatological mission of Israel and therefore hardly selfless.

This "utilitarian" eschatological approach is especially striking in Bulgakov's text entitled "The Fate of Russia, Germanism, and Jewry." The sexual imagery of German "masculinity" and Russian "femininity" and the erotic undercurrent of the wars in which Germany attempted to enslave and dominate Russia are quite typical of a certain strain of Russian philosophical thought. This subject, fascinating and fanciful as it is, is outside the scope of this article. What is interesting is Bulgakov's analysis of the *active* role of Jewry in Russian history, as opposed to Russia's traditional—and feminine—passivity (see the aforementioned excerpt from the "Yalta Diaries"). Bulgakov does not shy from condemning the preeminence of secularized yet "naturally anti-Christian" Jews in the Bolshevik forces, and asserts that Jews should repent for their role in the Russian revolution and the persecution of the Church.¹⁰ These acts would lead, he says, to cleansing and to the resurrection of the mystical brotherhood in which the spiritual calling of the Russian people and the "axial" destiny of Jewry would join in the "new force . . . of Judeo-Christianity."¹¹

In spite of his own accurate analysis of the atheist yearnings and nihilism of the Russian intelligentsia as well as the Russian tendency to *pugachevshchina*¹² and rioting, he nevertheless in-

sists that the Russian revolution and Bolshevism were essentially a Jewish pogrom against the Russian people and that its violent anti-Christianity was Jewish in essence. And yet, he wrote, the emergence of Nazism and the violent antisemitism and physical annihilation of Israel that was its core purpose, followed by its war against Russia, presented Russians with an opportunity to overcome their instinct for revenge against the Jews. This idea ultimately resolved both the tragic conflict of the godless Russian revolution and the apostasy of Jewish anti-Christianity. Bulgakov speaks of the "holy remnant" of both nations inextricably bound in their destiny. "Obviously none of the historical nations is called in the same degree to religious creativity as the Russian nation, and, of course, there is no other nation elected by God himself other than Israel, which has been given 'the Law and the prophets.'"¹³

What do we make of Bulgakov's insistence on the ultimate Christological destiny of Israel, and of his lack of interest in considering the religious *persona* of Jewry outside of this construct, which he derives from the Pauline prophecies? Certainly, it belongs to the tradition to which he is inextricably bound, the narrative that tends to conscript the Jews to their predetermined role in the canon. But then, this is the lens through which Bulgakov views *all* nations and *all* destinies. His perspective is macrocosmic; there is no detail and no nuance, which is perhaps why, in spite of interacting with many real, breathing Jews, from his fellow travelers on the refugee ship to the convert religious philosophers like Mikhail Gershenzon, Lev Sheshtov, and Simeon Frank to the wards of his spiritual daughter Mother Maria Skobtsova in occupied Paris, he still philosophizes about "Jewry" as a

¹⁰ Ibid, 122.

¹¹ Ibid., 140.

¹² The Russian term *pugachevshchina*, after the eighteenth century Russian Cossack insurrectionist Yemelyan Pugachev, is used to denote ostensible Russian tendency toward exceptionally cruel rebellious discontent.

¹³ Bulgakov, *Христианство и еврейский вопрос*, 140.

¹⁴ Rubin, "Bulgakov and the Sacred Blood of Jewry," 100.

philosophical construct with uniform traits and behaviors. This is a form of myopia which handicaps his ability to view people for who they *are*, not who they are supposed to be.

Rubin finds a convincing explanation for Bulgakov's "thirty-thousand-feet" view of the "Jewish question" in a telling excerpt from his *Autobiographical Fragments*: "I never had an interest in or a taste for the concrete, for reality, that is the nature of my weakness and what is characteristic of me. Events were always perceived by me in the form of threads of sound and color of a certain shade and intensity, but I didn't have the ability or the taste to decompose them into something concrete."¹⁴ This is a significant witness, explaining not only the abstractions of Bulgakov's "Judeo-Christian" fusion narrative, but also the grating theological exercises examining the putative crimes and punishment of the Jews against the background of the ongoing Holocaust.

And yet it would be remiss to not credit Bulgakov, exceptional among Orthodox thinkers, with attempting in the middle of the Holocaust to create a theology of post-Holocaust Christianity. For all its problems, for all its adherence to stereotypes that are difficult for a modern Western reader to contend with, Bulgakov's devotion to wrestling with the issue that assumed apocalyptic status in his lifetime, and especially his sym-

pathetic attitude toward the "otherness" of Israel, stand in contrast to the habitual Orthodox mindset. The question of how familiar Bulgakov was with the brilliant German Jewish philosophers of the nineteenth century, with the Hasidic mystics, or with the German Jewish intellectuals of his own day is unclear from the corpus of his writing on the "Jewish question." However, the very fact that he wrestles with the same issues as those thinkers—secularization, assimilation, eschatological destiny, and the interrelations and interdependency of Judaism and Christianity—presents a fruitful ground for continuing dialogue.

As in other matters, the relevance of Bulgakov's writings does not fade with time, even as we wrestle with them nowadays. Ultimately, and perhaps most valuably, Bulgakov internalizes the "Jewish question" as a Christian one: *What kind of Jew am I? Am I Saul or Paul?* Theologically, this question eclipses the problem of Christian antisemitism or, rather, transcends it, turning it into the challenge of *metanoia*. Within this introspection, antisemitism loses its very essence, for anyone who encounters the living God becomes a Jew "by adoption." Whether or not this approach withstands the challenge of Bulgakov's historical context is up for debate, but its ultimate significance, both theological and ascetic, cannot be overstated. ✱



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