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The Angelology of Sergius Bulgakov

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Abstract

The Angelology of Sergius Bulgakov

Contemporary angelology is primarily an apologetic response to the negation of the existence of the angelic reality by liberal Protestantism. Bulgakov's teaching about angels, on the other hand, arose as an indispensable part of the theological system. The orthodox author defines angels as created ideas of reality. As with Plato, every thing has its own idea, so with Bulgakov it has its own angel. The angels are therefore closely related to the earthly world and are its guardians, leading the world to the realization of the meaning given to it. Angels are also closely related to God because it is their nature to be filled with divine life. Thus, they constitute "Jacob's ladder" — the reality that connects the world with God.

Keywords: angels, angelology, sophiology, Bulgakov

Abstrakt

Angelologia Sergiusza Bułgakowa

Angelologia współczesna jest przede wszystkim odpowiedzią apologetyczną na negację rzeczywistości anielskiej przez liberalny protestantyzm. Nauka o aniołach Bułgakowa powstała natomiast jako niezbędna część systemu teologicznego. Prawosławny autor definiuje aniołów jako stworzone idee rzeczywistości. Podobnie jak u Platona każda rzecz posiada swoją ideę, tak u Bułgakowa ma swojego anioła. Aniołowie są więc ściśle powiązani ze światem ziemskim i są jego opiekunami, prowadząc go do realizacji nadanego mu sensu. Aniołowie są także ściśle związani z Bogiem, ich naturą bowiem jest być wypełnionym boskim życiem. W ten sposób stanowią „drabinę Jakubową” (Rdz 28, 12–13) — rzeczywistość łączącą świat z Bogiem.

Słowa kluczowe: aniołowie, angelologia, sofologia, Bułgakow

Contemporary angelology is primarily an apologetic response to the negation of the existence (“demythologization”) of angelic reality by liberal Protestantism.¹ On the other hand, the teaching about angels of the modern Orthodox theologian, Sergius Bulgakov, arose as an indispensable part of the theological system. This makes it original. For this reason, it seems interesting and useful to present it in the form of an article. The publication will present basic information about angels, gathered from the key works of Bulgakov. Detailed topics, e.g. the theme of John the Baptist as a man–angel, will not be taken into account.²

With such assumptions, the most logical presentation of the subject seems to be as follows: first, a brief introduction to the sophiological structure of the reality of God and the world, and then the place of angels in this system. The next step is to describe the relationship of angels to God and to specific persons of the Holy Trinity. Then the relationship of angels to people will be discussed, especially in its particular aspect, which is the service of the guardian angel. Having a general picture of the angelic world and its relation to the earthly world, it will be possible to show the details of the angels’ life. At the very end, the situation of Satan and the demons will be briefly explained.

1. Divine Sophia and Creaturely Sophia

One should start therefore with a short introduction to the concept of God’s Wisdom (sophiology) by Sergius Bulgakov, which is necessary to

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- ¹ In scholastic theology, the treatise on angels was part of the treatise on God the Creator. This is the case, for example, in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*. Prima, q. 50–64, 106–114). Contemporary angelologies, on the other hand, are closely related to anthropology and are apologetic and polemical towards liberal Protestantism (cf. R. S. Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers 2017, p. 63). Examples of such studies are: M. Flick, Z. Alszeghy, *Fondamenti di una antropologia teologica*, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Firenze 1970, p. 509–731; J. Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission. According to the Fathers of the church*, transl. D. Heimann, MD: Christian Classics Inc., Westminster 1982; K. Rahner, *Angels*, in: *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, Seabury Press, New York 1975, p. 4–13.
 - ² This thread is discussed in the book: S. Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, transl. B. Jakim, Ed. William Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan/Cambridge UK 2003, p. 156–170.

understand his teaching about angels. Let the starting point be the Trinity dogma of the Council of Constantinople (381), which described the reality of the Triune God as *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* (one substance, three persons). While the concept of “person” is an existential term, “substance” is a strictly philosophical one. On the one hand, it allows to describe precisely the unity of God, but on the other hand, it does not fully develop the symbolism of the common life of three divine persons. The Bible does not use that term. In the Scriptures an analogous content is expressed by the concept of God’s Wisdom (Sofia). In Bulgakov’s sophiology, there are therefore three persons in God and one Sofia (God’s life).³

Bulgakov compares God’s relationship to Sofia to the relationship between the spirit and the body in man. The human spirit cannot exist without the body. Likewise, the body cannot exist without spirit, because the body is more than just a collection of bones and tissues. The body is an expression of the spirit, its individuality and its life. The Wisdom of God can be understood analogously, that is, as the “body” of God, the glory or life of God. It is not, of course, a body of matter, but a reality in which God expresses his life in the Holy Trinity.⁴ The Absolute reveals Himself to people as a three-person God, and He does so in His Sofia-Glory.⁵

Sofia is also the prototype of creation because there is nothing in the created world that is not in the divine world. The being of this world is only a reflection of God’s being. So God’s Wisdom existed before the creation of the world as a project of it (Prov 8:22–23).⁶ Bulgakov describes this eternal wisdom as divine Sofia. In it, as a revelation of the Logos, there are ideas of everything that is in the world. It is an all-inclusive unity. God entrusts this fullness to creation. The fullness of ideal forms is reflected in creation. So all species and kinds are not something new that would not be in God’s Wisdom. In this way was born the created Sofia, which is a reflection of the divine Sofia and the beginning of the world.⁷

3 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God—an Outline of Sophiology*, transl. F. Clarke, X. Braikevitc, Lindisfarne 1993, p. 25–26.

4 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God*, p. 56–58.

5 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God*, p. 61.

6 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God*, p. 65–66.

7 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God*, p. 69–70.

The world thus has in some sense a divine character, based on identity between divine Sofia in God and in creation (created Sofia). Wisdom in creation is ontologically identical to its prototype, Wisdom in God. This concept, however, differs from pantheism because the world is not God, and God's power is revealed in it through Sofia (God's life). In other words, although the world in God has its foundation and existence, it has received from God a principle that allows it to exist on its own — created Sofia. The created world is nothing but created Sofia in the process of becoming, she is the principle of relative being. God creates in himself “nothingness,” that is, a space for a being other than Himself. This “nothingness” is not emptiness, however, but has a certain potential. That is why the Scriptures say that God created the world *ex nihilo*.⁸ In combination with this nothingness, Sofia passes into the dynamics of becoming, she becomes a created Sofia, and the world gains its separateness. Although the positive principle on which the world is based belongs to

8 Bulgakov notes that there are three types of negation in Greek: a *privativum*, *ou* and *me*. A *privativum* means the indeterminacy of what is abolished through negation, the lack of definition. *Me* negation is a state of potentiality, of invisibility [of secretiveness], which should be described as not yet, or not anymore. *Ou*, on the other hand, has specific content and indicates the lack of a given, specific feature: not this, not this one. Therefore, logically, *ou* takes an intermediate place between a *privativum* and *me*. It approaches the first, *a*, in the firmness of its negation, but differs from it in the limited scope of the negation. It differs from *me* in the firmness of negation, in comparison with which *me* means only something indefinite, but it comes close to it in its positivity (though negative): *ou* is always interdependent with the proposition, like shadow with light.

On the basis of these Greek negations, Bulgakov distinguishes between three kinds of nothingness. The first, related to a *privativum*, concerns the apophaticity of the God-Absolute. The other two, *ou* and *me*, refer to creation: the first corresponds to the complete negation of being — nothingness, the second only to its secretiveness and indeterminacy — something. To *me* belongs all wealth and all fullness of being, though potential and undisclosed being. *Me on* is pregnancy, *ouk on* is sterility. In order for something to arise from non-existence, *ouk on* must become *me on*, overcome his emptiness, free itself from its sterility. This transformation of *ouk on* into *me on* consists in the creation of the general matter. Then, the whole world arises from it. That is why the Church teaches that God created the world “out of nothing” (cf. S. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light. Contemplations and Speculations*, transl. T. A. Smith, Ed. William Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge UK 2012, p. 188–189, 460).

God's being, the world as such retains its existence and identity different from God's.⁹

There is no such metaphysical necessity that God has to create the world in order to develop or fulfill Himself. God creates the world in excess of His free love. God's self-sufficiency is fully realized in the consubstantiality of his Deity and in a three-person life. In this sense, God does not need the world. However, God's love that creates the world is not accidental, so that the world may or may not have been created. The motive for creation is a free "necessity," which is an excess of God's love, which, wishing to express itself beyond the limits of its own being, must find another being. This being is a created world, the center of which is man.

2. Angels in the relationship between God and the world

Where are the angels in such a structure of the relationship between God and the world? Bulgakov gives the answer by pointing to Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." It is about all created reality, and therefore also about angels. Bulgakov links the latter with the word "heaven." Thus there are created: a world of incorporeal spirits (rational heaven), and earth as the foundation of a world centered on man. Both worlds are positively related to each other, which is expressed by the conjunction "and."¹⁰

"In the beginning, God created heaven and earth" (Genesis 1:1). This "beginning," according to Bulgakov, should be understood in a sophiological, not chronological way. *En arche* means the principle of creation, which is God's Wisdom (Sofia). Sofia has always been in God. The principle of creation is not a different principle, but the same principle directed towards the world, it is created Wisdom. It includes the entire

⁹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder. On Angels*, transl. Thomas Allan Smith, Ed. William Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, Michigan 2010, p. 22. Another fragment of the Holy Scriptures confirming, according to Bulgakov, a very close relationship between the world of angels and people are the mysterious words of the Apocalypse: "And he measured its wall one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which is also the angel's measurement" (21, 17) (cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder. On Angels*, p. 36, 141, 161). According to Slesinski, they are for an Orthodox theologian the key to his angelology (cf. R. S. Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, p. 59).

angelic and human world.¹¹ In Sofia, the only principle of reality, the first patterns (*paradeigmata*) of all creatures are engraved. These ideas of the world are realized in the created world in two ways: in heaven — spiritually, without a body, and on earth — bodily. Divine Wisdom is the basis of both worlds, each of which has its own specificity.¹²

So “heaven and earth” are two ways of being a creature: ideal and real. The condition of the initial and universal potency is the earth, created by God before the concrete acts (“days”) of creation: it is the potency of the world’s being, which nevertheless contains all the elements of the world. The holy angels, on the other hand, are the hypostatic plan of creation: they are its ideas.¹³ It is extremely important that the world of angels is given to us as complete and finished in the instant creation of this world. The creation of this world does not go beyond this act, so we can conclude that the number of angels is finite, defined and limited.¹⁴

The angelic world is the “heavenly mirror” of the earthly world, that is, all the ideas of the latter are present in the angelic world and are realized in its presence. In this way, the angelic world is the intermediary between God and the world, that is, Jacob’s ladder (cf. Gen 28:12–13), on which the angels descend to earth and ascend to heaven. It is the equivalent of the Platonic world of ideas. This, however, was identified by the philosopher with God, while in Bulgakov world of ideas is the angelic world in relation to being.¹⁵

The angelic world was created for the earthly world to serve, and to protect the latter. Angels are the guardians of the forces of nature, plants and animals. The elemental life of the world, in its blind instinct, is protected and guided by the hypostatic awareness of angels, who can be seen as the helmsmen of creation.¹⁶ In relation to man, they play the role of guardian angels of individual people, but also of nations, empires,

¹¹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 29–30.

¹² Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 31.

¹³ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, transl. B. Jakim, Ed. William Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan/Cambridge UK 2008, p. 127.

¹⁴ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, transl. B. Jakim, Ed. William Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan/Cambridge UK 2002, p. 105.

¹⁵ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 34.

¹⁶ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 197–198.

churches, and human families (this is shown above all by the Apocalypse). The entire world, therefore, is an object of angelic service.¹⁷

The angels have their indispensable part in history of the world. The Apocalypse of St. John shows them as executors of God's will for the world (not only for people). Bulgakov will even say that this is not a human story, but an angelic-human story. The angels retain this special role in the ending of the story as well. Here the Apocalypse should be juxtaposed with the eschatology of the Gospels. It is the angels represented as reapers who separate the grains from the chaff on the Day of Judgment (cf. Mt 13:39, 41).¹⁸ A similar picture is found in the parable of the net (cf. Mt 13:49–50). Elsewhere it speaks of the Son of Man who will come in the glory of the Father with His angels and render to each one according to his deeds (cf. Mt 16:27; Mk 8:38). In the Epistles of Paul: “The Lord Jesus will come down from heaven in flames of fire, with angels, heralds of his power” (2 Thess 1:7), “with the voice of an archangel” (1 Thess 4:16). Then the gate that separates the angelic and human worlds will fall. Heavenly Jerusalem is the world of angels and people. It is shown in Revelation 21:17: “And he measured its wall one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which is also the angel's measurement.” This unity between the angelic and human worlds will become fully manifest at the end of the story.¹⁹

Within their world, angels are divided into choirs. This teaching is outlined in the epistles of Paul (Rom 8:38; Eph 1:21, 3:10; Col 4: 9). The Church, however, takes it mainly from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite *On Heavenly Hierarchies*. In this work, nine angel choirs are distinguished: cherubim, seraphim, Thrones, Lords, Powers, Authorities, Principalities, Archangels, Angels. However, this does not mean different degrees of holiness, as each choir has its own type of spiritual perfection. Hierarchical differentiation is thus based on the individual ontological differences between these incorporeal beings.²⁰

¹⁷ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 23–24.

¹⁸ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 460.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 58–59.

²⁰ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, p. 312.

3. Angels in relation to the Holy Trinity

Angels, although called to serve the world and inseparably connected with it, are directed not only to the world, but also to God. A question arises, closely related to the question of the division into choirs: does this division reflect the three-personality in God? Do all angelic states have the seal of the entire Trinity, or does the action of specific divine hypostases have a greater impact on specific angelic states?

The angels are made in the image of God, which necessarily includes the three-personality of God. There is no unambiguous answer in the teaching of the Church as to whether this image is reflected in its entirety, or whether individual hierarchies express rather one of the divine hypostases. Bulgakov is inclined to the latter possibility. The numerical system itself, in his opinion, suggests such a solution: $9 = 3 \times 3$. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the threefold creation of the angelic council as serving individual divine hypostases. Sofia is not just a revelation of the Second Hypostasis, but of all three. Likewise, the angelic world is not only defined by the hypostasis of the Word. In this case, one divine hypostasis in particular is reflected in the individual angelic hypostases or hierarchies.²¹

What is this relation to a specific hypostasis? This is illustrated by the scene of Abraham's meeting with the three angels (Genesis 18). The image of three angels at the table on the icon by Andrew Rublev, whom the East recognizes as a saint, has become an icon of the Holy Trinity in the Orthodox Church. The icon of the archangels Michael and Gabriel, holding a medallion with the image of the Savior, and between them, slightly above, a third, nameless angel placed, can be interpreted similarly. This last angel could correspond to the First Hypostasis, while the other two to the remaining persons. The angelic council is thus directed to the world in the archangels Michael and Gabriel, while the third primeval angel remains unknown.²²

One can therefore assume the existence of angels which refer to the Father's Hypostasis and are immersed in the Divine as Mystery and Si-

²¹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 79–80.

²² Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 80–81.

lence.²³ These angels are not called to serve the world, but are the foundation of the entire angelic world and are intermediaries in revealing God's secrets to other angels. They are supercelestial, supernal, but in the same time created for the world because they are the eve of creation. They are an apophatic element of the angelic world. They are darkness in which light will appear, analogous to the earth, which already contains the seeds of everything that will arise in six days.²⁴

In the second group, there are angels reflecting the hypostasis of the Word (Logos). They constitute the created image of the world, its ideal and logical basis. It is the meaning of the earthly world outlined before its final creation. There is nothing in the world that is not in the world of ideas represented by the angels of the Second Hypostasis. The meaning of the world that the Logos contains is outlined in these hierarchies—the world of created ideas. As in the world of Platonic ideas, with the aforementioned difference that Plato identified them with the Deity himself, but here we are talking about the angelic world. According to Bulgakov, Plato's genius was that he discovered the necessity to base the world on something heavenly, things on ideas. In this way he transposed into philosophical thinking the pagan concept of many gods with which the world is filled. Paganism made ideas, or angelic hierarchy, equal to the gods. In Bulgakov's angelology, these ideas appear neither as gods nor as abstract schemas, but as personal beings, angels of the Word.²⁵

Finally, there is the hierarchy of the Third Hypostasis. The Holy Spirit envelops everything in Beauty. He is the force that gives existence to an ideal being. He is "let there be" to all that arose in the six days of creation. Beauty is a living manifestation of Truth. The angels of the Third Hypostasis belong to the realm of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. Their task is to make ideas come true, and this in turn is the highest work of art (this applies to the inorganic world as well as plants, animals and people).

²³ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, p. 140.

²⁴ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 81–82. When Bulgakov is speaking of the angels of the First Hypostasis as apophatic darkness, he means non-existence in the sense of *me on* (see footnote above, as well as: S. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, p. 188–189).

²⁵ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 82–83.

Truth manifests itself in Beauty, which is its life force. The angels of the Holy Spirit clothe creatures with Beauty, loving them.²⁶

4. Guardian angels

Having sketched the basic structure of an angelic council and the role of angels in creation, it is worth taking a look at a topic that affects every human being very personally, namely guardian angels. The Scriptures testify that even the smallest ones are not deprived of their own guardian angel (cf. Mt 18:10). In the beginning, it is worth asking: when does a person receive his heavenly guardian? The opinions of the Fathers of the Church are divided, some say at birth (Tertullian, Origen), some say at baptism. Bulgakov claims that at birth, while in baptism, this relationship becomes closer and more experiential because the barrier of original sin, which severely disturbed the connection between the human and the angelic worlds, is lifted.²⁷

There is a kinship between man and his or her guardian angel.²⁸ Bulgakov will say about the guardian angel and man: “it is one and the same individuality living in two worlds, in heaven and on earth.”²⁹ The relationship between the guardian angel and the man assigned to him does not, however, eliminate the differences between them. What in the angelic being is given in the form of a spiritually fulfilled person who lives in the full view of God, in man is only a seed that can grow.³⁰

Besides, the human world is not a repetition of the angelic world. A repetition would be boring and pointless and offensive to the genius of divine creative thought. On the one hand, the angelic and human worlds interpenetrate each other and are one in Sofia. On the other hand, their specificity does not disappear, nor does they fuse. Human nature can only live in the human hypostasis and cannot receive the angelic hy-

²⁶ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 84.

²⁷ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 39–40.

²⁸ This kinship is based on the close relationship between the angelic and human worlds. Bulgakov will say that “angels are co-human, and men co-angelic” (S. Bulgakov, *Apokalipsis Ioanna*, YMCA Press, Paris 1948, p. 237; cf. R. S. Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, p. 59).

²⁹ S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 41.

³⁰ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 41–42.

postasis because the hypostasis of the immaterial spirit cannot embrace the life of the incarnate spirit within itself—it cannot assume “flesh.”³¹ Everything in the earthly world exists for itself, while having its idea in heaven. Without losing ontological unity, it shares its being through the bond of “friendship.” The being of the incorporeal spiritual world of angels can only be understood in its connection with creation, with the world of people of which they are servants.³² There is an ontological interdependence here. Thus, the guardian angels, belonging to the hierarchy of the angelic world and uniting with it in various ways, constitute the basis of Jacob’s ladder that connects heaven to earth.³³

Having a guardian angel corresponds to the dialogical ontological structure of man (cf. Song of Songs). One is made for love and can only be realized in relation to another. The self of man does not belong to him or her singly, but as if he or she comes out of himself or herself and can experience himself or herself by returning to himself or herself. The self exists as if it existed twice, where the other twin is for it a general postulate of love. This can be satisfied by one or more human beings, depending on the period of life. In addition to human friends, a person receives a spiritual friend. This personal friend is precisely the guardian angel.³⁴

The guardian angel speaks to his human friend through silence. He only looks at the human soul and that is enough for this silent conversation. If a man surrenders himself or herself to the influence of this being, then the guardian angel with his very existence and presence stimulates man to what is best and awakens deeply hidden forces in him or her. Bulgakov compares the relationship between the guardian angel and human entrusted to him to a mother and a child. Just as a mother

³¹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, p. 186.

³² Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 447.

³³ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 42–43.

³⁴ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 6. “When the noise of life subsides and its dissonant voices fall silent, when the soul is washed in quiet and filled with silence, [...] Then does it feel bending over it with inexpressible love a being, so near, so tender, so calm, so loving, so faithful, so mild, so affectionate, so bright—that joy, peace, blessedness, things unknown on earth, bubble up in the soul. It feels then its non-solitude, and rushes to meet the unknown and near friend. For the soul will come to know that friend about whom its whole life it dreamt and for whom it pined, seeking to flow together with the other to the end, to surrender to him wholeheartedly, to find its other I in him” (S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 11).

follows the child's every step, both towards light and darkness, so the guardian angel always watches over man. This effort requires constant creativity in working on difficult material in a world tainted by sin and without violating its freedom.³⁵

The Orthodox theologian strongly emphasizes the creativity of angels. They cannot be seen as static figures who passively obey God's orders for centuries. Each spiritual service does not come from outside, it is not imposed, but from within, by nature, from the vocation of the servant. The task of the guardian angel is not to stand next to the man entrusted to him, but to participate in the creation of the world. The guardian angel shares the fate of man, looks for his or her reciprocity. This creative freedom of an angel is therefore related to the history of the world, not to its ontology.³⁶ The guardian angel is a friend who loves man and lives with him or her.³⁷

The question arises about the relationship of the guardian angel to man after the death of the latter. Bulgakov claims that the guardian angel stands at the bedside of the dying person and receives his soul. This is evidenced by the words: "Poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace" (Lk 16:22). The angel, according to Orthodox eschatology, guides the deceased through all "customs" towards a new life. Thus, the friendship between the guardian angel and the man entrusted him is not interrupted, but becomes a further strengthening on the way to eternity.³⁸ After the death of a man, if he has not attained full sanctity, an unfinished or broken task is repaired by an angel. Such a role of the guardian angel is indicated by numerous passages of the Holy Scriptures concerning the participation of angels in God's judg-

³⁵ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 12–13.

³⁶ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 236.

³⁷ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 13–14.

³⁸ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 71–72. In general, the moment of death is, according to Bulgakov, a moment of special connection with the spiritual world. Temporarily tearing a person away from the body, death opens the gates of the spiritual world for him or her, placing him or her in the face of the obvious existence of the spiritual world and God. Spiritual literature offers many testimonies of people who see the spiritual world, angels and demons, at the time of death (cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 359).

ment, who will separate the grains from the chaff, where the good deeds of man would be the seed, and the sins would be the chaff.³⁹

5. The life of angels

After outlining the ontological structure of angels and their place in the whole of creation, it is worth looking at the details of the life of angels, which Sergius Bulgakov deduced from the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the Church.

Although not the entire angelic world in its hierarchies is directed to the earthly world and destined to serve it (the exception are angels of the First Hypostasis), it is a congregation (council) and in this sense it is co-human. Angels are “rays of Divinity, creaturely hypostatized,”⁴⁰ the created glory of God and the reflection of the uncreated Glory. What does it mean? Just as a fish lives in water and a bird in the air, so it is in the nature of the angel to live not by itself, that is, not by its own nature, but by divine life. In this sense, it can be said that angels do not have their nature because their nature is to be “secondary lights.” For angels, it is difficult to distinguish what belongs to their nature and what they receive by grace. Their nature is transparent to God. This is evidenced by the fact that angelophanies are often theophanies at the same time.⁴¹

All the above argument does not imply a lack of individuality in angels. The kingdom of angels is a council because there is not one nature for many hypostases. Each angel is a separate species.⁴² Therefore, they have their individual existence, firstly thanks to an individual hypostatic face, secondly, because each of them is only one of the rays of divine Wisdom, and not its fullness. Sofia itself is indivisible, but admits dynamic multiplicity in created revelation. The being of an angel is a ray descending from one sun. It is inseparable from the others, and they all constitute a council. The distinction between angels can also be found

³⁹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 75.

⁴¹ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 74–75.

⁴² Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 120.

in their various services to the elements of the world, nations, kingdoms or individuals.⁴³

Angels are immortal. They were made that way from the very beginning. Contrary to the man for whom immortality was a possibility before original sin — *posse non mori*, angels were made immortal not only in potency, but in their nature — *non posse mori*. Even Satan was not put to death after his backsliding from God. His fall is a kind of spiritual dying, but it does not mean breaking a life or tearing apart a being, as in humans, where body and soul are separated.⁴⁴

Like man, angels need food. As incorporeal beings, they do not depend on material food that is necessary for man. But because they are creatures, they do not possess the power of their own immortality. For them, there must be food, which is “angelic bread,” spiritual communion, the Divine Eucharist, which gives life to the world (Jn 6:33). Accordingly, it should not be considered that the angels participate in the Divine Eucharist as servants, but that they also receive communion, but in a spiritual way.⁴⁵

When it comes to the communication of angels with each other, Bulgakov claims that angels have their own language. This is evidenced, for example, by the Hymn to Love (1 Cor 13,1): “Though I command languages both human and angelic — if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing.” The mere juxtaposition of human and angelic languages on one level proves that language is understood here as an external word, not an internal word. The Orthodox theologian claims that there is one internal language for all creation — the word through which everything was made (John 1:1–3). Words in different languages (external) have the inner word as a common content. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be able to translate content from one language to another. The language of angels is different from the human language, but it is a difference at the level of the external word. This is evidenced by the fact that in the Scriptures the songs of the angels are expressed in human language (cf. Is 6; Lk 2). Since angels are incorporeal, their language is more direct and intuitive, for words are not embodied here

43 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 76–77, 79.

44 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 103–104.

45 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 105–106.

in the external form what is necessary in human language. There is no point in further delving into the characteristics of the angelic language, it is important that the angels speak, that is, use the word, and this is a way of their mutual enlightenment and of giving glory to God. It can be said that the angelic language contains an ideal prototype of the human language.⁴⁶

The main activity of angels is contemplating and praising God. This praise should not be understood statically as contemplation of an unchanging object once depicted, but dynamically as a deepening knowledge of the Trinity in Oneself and of the Trinity in creation. This knowledge, as evidenced by the Scriptures, covers the angelic and human world, and men are also called to angelic praise (cf. Rev 5:13; Ps 103, 142; Daniel 3:58). The basic content of this praise is to know God. However, there is a difference between angelic and human knowledge. First, it deals with the issue of perception, where the intuitive cognition of angels has a great advantage over discursive human cognition. Besides, angelic knowledge is disinterested, characteristic of art. On the other hand, getting to know the world by man, who is forced to work in the sweat of his or her brow and fight for survival, is tainted with self-interest. This does not mean that human cognition cannot renounce its pragmatism and rise to the level of disinterested and free angelic cognition. However, this is exceptional because the wings on which it rises to such contemplation are often tied together. For in his cognition, man is “not only contemplator—the artist, free seeker of truth, but also a master who is at the same time a slave.”⁴⁷ This last feature means that the perception of the world and God often do not merge into one, as in the case of angels, but the world begins to obscure God.⁴⁸

The praise of God by angels is not limited to knowing and praising, but is connected with a creative response to God’s greatness. Angels are living mirrors of the Uncreated Light. All their activity, both cognitive and creative, can be called angelic singing. This praise of God includes not only each angel’s personal addressing to God, but also creates the principle of their common relationship, the conciliarity. It is not only

⁴⁶ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 116–117.

⁴⁷ S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 122.

⁴⁸ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 121–122.

a prayer, but a mutual creative inspiration, which in human reality is called art.⁴⁹ Angelic praise is the contemplation of not only Truth, but Beauty as well. Hence, it can be defined as art in the proper sense of the word, that is, the creative embodiment of the idea of truth in the form of beauty. This is angelic song.⁵⁰

This singing is like the liturgy of the temple, and all creation is invited to it. As in the liturgy, it is not only word and sound that participate in it, but also gesture and color, form and smell. This is well expressed in the song of the three young men. With the angels at the head, all creation is enumerated: sun and moon, blue stars, rain and dew, all winds, fire and heat, nights and days, light and darkness, ice and frost, lightning and clouds, earth, mountains and hills, sea and rivers, whales and all animals that live in the water, all birds of heaven, animals and all cattle with the sons of men (Dan 5:58–82). All these beings praise the Lord with color, light, flicker, form, sound, transparency, smell, tangibility. They also have their counterparts among the angels responsible for particular elements. This is how angelic praise appears as art.⁵¹

Bulgakov also asks himself about the gender of angels. Angels are not a tribe like humans, but a council (they were created in one moment), so they do not know multiplication.⁵² Moreover, as non-corporeal beings, they cannot be ascribed sex differences related to sexual intercourse in the manner of humanity, especially after original sin. However, there is a difference between the male and female principle, which is not corporeal but spiritual.⁵³ The male principle is characterized by the primacy of reason and thought over beauty and passionate action. In the feminine principle, this hierarchy is the opposite and signifies the primacy of the heart and beauty over the mind.⁵⁴ Moreover, what is male and female in man is justified by the personal qualities of the Second (Log-

49 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 118–119.

50 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 122–124.

51 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 127–128.

52 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, p. 332.

53 In essence, sex is not rejected even in monasticism, where there is a distinction between monks and nuns. Hence, even being in the “image of an angel” in monasticism does not invalidate an individual from being male or female (cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, p. 326).

54 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 87.

os-Reason) and the Third Person (intangible Beauty) of the Holy Trinity. This means, however, that the male and female principle in man is not the result of original sin and will not disappear after the resurrection, but is a heavenly reality and will be able to fully reveal itself in that state.⁵⁵ In a relationship, angels do not have a sex, but, as is known from human nature, a female and a male principle, which are the characteristics of their love.⁵⁶ Especially since the angelic world is characterized by a threefold way of being, corresponding to the individual hypostases of the Holy Trinity. Thus, the male and female principle may correspond to the distinction between Second and Third Person angels.⁵⁷

The division into the male and female principle is also revealed in the life and action of the guardian angels. According to Bulgakov, the guardian angel is of the opposite sex to the man assigned him to “protect.” The orthodox theologian justifies that the guardian angel’s service is to cooperate with man so that he or she becomes himself or herself. This task will be better served by mutual complementation than by self-repetition. The male spirit seeks to find itself creatively in a tangible revelation in the other. The female spirit, for its creative emotional essence, requires more light of mind to govern it. Each soul desires to reveal itself in the other. Thus, the male spirit of man needs more an angel of the Third Person of the Trinity to inspire and comfort him. On the other hand, the female spirit, full of life and beauty, will be realized more with the angel of the Logos.⁵⁸

6. Satan and the fallen angels

Finally, one need to outline the subject of fallen angels. Also in the angelic world, which is governed by the laws of love, freedom was necessary. The created freedom is characterized by instability, which explains the fall of angels and man. This instability, however, does not require a fall. The possibility of a fall, without being the necessity of a creature, can be reduced or even reduced to a potential state through spiritual growth

⁵⁵ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, p. 313.

⁵⁷ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 95.

⁵⁸ Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 97–98.

and the ever greater self-determination of creature. This was the case with the angels who sided with God. They were upgraded from *posse non peccare* to *non posse peccare*.⁵⁹

Satan was also perfect, not only as a creature, but also in fulfilling the creative plan. Before his fall, he was the tallest cherub. Self-determination in freedom, for Lucifer and the other angels, occurs in a temporal reality,⁶⁰ that is, not “in the beginning.” The manner and reason for the fall are unknown. However, as for the manner, one can guess that since angels are free from the ignorance and errors inherent in man, their fall away must have been pure opposition to God. Also, the greater simplicity of the angelic nature than the human nature made the separation from the Creator more radical. Finally, the time of the angels, which is more concentrated than the slow human history, ruled out in angels an intermediate state of unbelief as is possible with a man who is “on the way.”⁶¹ On the other hand, the main motive for the fall seems to be the desire to become equal to God—pride.⁶²

According to the Scriptures, God was opposed by Satan and his angels. The angelic world, however, is not a family, like the human world, that is, sin could not pass onto other angels, just as it did pass from Adam to other people through one nature. So the fall of the first angel spreads to other angels through bad example. According to Bulgakov, the words from Revelation (12:4) about the dragon whose “tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and hurled them to the ground” mean angels whom Satan had drawn to his side by scandalous example and slander against other angels. The angels constitute a council and are linked together by bonds of love. Rebellion against love means isolating yourself from the council and losing these relationships. The loss of the bonds of love through rebellion creates an even greater division in the council than in the family, where are the blood ties. This is why the “war” of the angels (Rev. 12) is all the more terrible and has no analogy in human history.⁶³

59 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, p. 295–296.

60 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 154.

61 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, p. 312–313.

62 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 110–111.

63 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 112–113.

Since, as it was said before, angels are rays of divinity, hypostased by creation, it is not in the nature of the angel to live oneself, that is, one's own nature, but the divine life. This, in turn, raises the question of the life of the devil and fallen angels. After all, they still live, even though they have fallen away from God. Their life, however, is not independent and established ontologically. It is a parasitic life that preys on man and the earthly world. It is not for nothing that Satan has been called "the prince of this world." Only here does it find support for its functioning.⁶⁴ Bulgakov describes the final fate of Satan as follows: "Outside this parasitism when the prince of this world will be driven forth, no nature or proper life will remain in the demons but only an empty hypostatic mask, lacking independent nature, with its one thirst (hellish fire, second death, fiery lake, unsleeping worn — all these images speak of a burning without combustion, a thirst without slaking)."⁶⁵

Bulgakov claims that belief in the conversion of Satan can be justified. When Satan will be expelled from this world during *parousia*, his metaphysical emptiness will be exposed and he will no longer be able to deceive anyone, not even himself. At the same time, Satan will not cease to be God's creation because it would mean annihilation for him, and God does not annihilate His creatures. After being expelled from this world, fallen angels may experience some kind of purification. They will see that freedom, not rooted in being, neither of God nor created, is emptiness, negative being, bottomless boredom. A being that rejects other creatures and the Creator, exposes its ontological superficiality. Although such a being is capable not only of repeating itself, but to some extent also of deepening, this deepening is not infinite, and finally brings creature to an exhaustion: satanism is exhausting itself. Being thrown out of the world, Satan comes to new knowledge about himself, and this can become the beginning of his repentance.⁶⁶

64 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 158–159.

65 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *Jacob's Ladder*, p. 74.

66 Cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 508–509, 512.

Conclusion

In this way, the basic features of Sergei Bulgakov's angelology were shown. This concept is worth presenting because it is a fairly broad study of the subject of angels and is part of a complete theological system. This angelology was based on the appropriately modified cosmology of Plato. As in the Platonic conception, every thing in the world has its own idea in heaven, in Bulgakov's it has its own angel. According to the orthodox theologian these ideas are therefore not logical patterns, but persons and belong to the created reality — "heaven" (Genesis 1:1). Therefore, the angelic and human worlds are in a close ontological relationship. Angels also have a specific nature, the essence of which is to live a divine life. So they can be defined as rays of the Divine, hypostased by creation. This means that they are the connecting element between God and the earthly world — Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12-13).

The subject of Bulgakov's angelology is not exhausted in this article. There remain numerous detailed threads to be developed, such as the topic of John the Baptist as an angel, mentioned at the beginning, but also the issue of the guardian angel in Mary's life or the role of angels in Christ's mission. These issues may become the subject of further publications.

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