**Symphonia in the Secular or How to Be Orthodox When You Lose Your Empire**

*David James Dunn*

Vigen Guroian has observed that “diasporic” Orthodoxy struggles to know how to be church in a modern, secular, and democratic context. Thus, he calls for developing the richness of our past political philosophy into a modern social ethic, one that resists the dual temptations of accommodationism and sectarianism.76 This essay partly responds to that call by developing symphonia into an ecclesial ethic of provisional accommodationism and situational sectarianism.77 Under symphonia, the church related to the empire by sometimes supporting and sometimes opposing it. My thesis is that in a secular situation, symphonia must go from being a defunct political ideal to an ecclesiology of conditional engagement, not simply with the state, but, with secular society itself, on the basis of its proleptic realization of the kingdom of God.

I develop this thesis, first, by arguing that this political philosophy was a faithful, albeit imperfect, response to embody the kingdom of God in the world. In the course of this analysis, I criticize modern western and Orthodox scholars who have looked upon symphonia, either with hubristic derision or pious nostalgia, as suffering from a shared failure of imagination. In the second place, contrary to that trend, I argue that Fr. Sergei Bulgakov rightly tried to develop symphonia into a modern theory of culture (even if his sophiology suffers from a number of other conceptual problems). His sophiology amounts to an historicization of Athanasius’ Logos, which enabled him to conceive of a world that realizes its conformity to the kingdom of God over time, and thus proleptically manifests its eschatological destiny in the course of human events, with or without the direct involvement of the institutional church. Thus, in conclusion, if, as Fr. Schmemann said, the kingdom is the “content” of the church, then the church not only has permission but a mandate constructively to engage the secular, insofar as


77 Because this essay synopsizes my constructive theological dissertation, the following development of symphonia into such an ecclesial ethic will be in the form of a broad outline.
it conforms to the revealed content of that kingdom, and to resist the secular, withdrawing into its own ecclesial “otherness,” insofar as the secular rebels against the church’s own eschatological ideal. 78

Symphonia in a Secular Context?

Historically speaking, we Orthodox like empires. Or, if we do not like them, at least we know what to do with them. In an imperial context, the church is supposed to be guided by the “symphonic” ideal. Though symphonia was one of many political theologies operative in Byzantium, it is the ideal of church-state relations. More like an ethos than a clearly defined doctrine, symphonia sought to balance civic and ecclesiastical affairs in a single Christian society. According to Emperor Justinian, who is most often credited with putting this ethos into words (in his Sixth Novella), the church and the empire are “two great gifts” from God that, when properly working together, promote a “general harmony…upon the human race.” 79

The political ideal the Orthodox Church has inherited thus presumes both autocracy and “official” Christianity. Our “problem” is that, in the West, we live in societies that are formally democratic and secular. Under the “symphonic” ideal, as Fr. John McGuckin has indicated, the church was to the emperor as the prophet Nathan was to David. 80 Sometimes it authorized him. At other times it rebuked him. But how can the church today rebuke an emperor who does not exist? How can we guide a state that does not have to listen to us?

79 In John Meyendorff, Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450-680 A.D. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 209. When most historians talk about symphonia, they almost invariably quote this Novella. Thus, I am following academic convention. However, this Novella is not necessarily the best resource for understanding Byzantine political theology. As Meyendorff points out elsewhere, the passage in question is actually part of a rather mundane preamble to a document dealing with priestly discipline, so Justinian is not so much addressing the entire church as the clerical part of it. The balance he specifically seeks in this document is between the imperium and the priesthood. The history of Byzantium itself is a better resource for seeing this “symphonic” balance at work, particularly in the iconoclastic and unionist controversies. See J. Meyendorff, The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press: 1982), 48-49.
That could be why, when most scholars talk about *symphonia* in a modern western context, they tend to do one of two things. The first option is to dismiss it. The great Protestant historian, Philip Schaff, derided Byzantine political theology as *caesaropapist*, a term that gained wide currency.\(^{81}\) This term suggested that, as the Pope allegedly ruled the church in the West, the emperor ruled the church in the East (implying that true Christian freedom lay in Protestantism). Thankfully, modern scholars realize that to claim *caesaropapism* as the norm, rather than a corruption of the true “symphonic” norm, requires a highly prejudicial reading of the historic evidence. But that does not mean that a dismissive attitude toward *symphonia* is necessarily abandoned.

Modern reactions to *symphonia* usually fall somewhere along a conceptual range represented by Zoe Knox and Stanley Harakas. Knox writes about developing church-state relations in modern Russia. While the context of her study is different than ours, she does dismiss *symphonia* as being incompatible with western ideals. It is, it seems, nothing more than a pious but failed experiment.\(^{82}\) On the other side, Orthodox theologians often view *symphonia* more positively. Thus, Stanley Harakas says that it can be a guide for modern church-state relations, particularly among so-called “diasporic” Orthodoxy. He seems to look upon *symphonia* with a kind of pious nostalgia.\(^{83}\) Yet both perspectives – Knox and Harakas – are united in the way they confine *symphonia* to the political. Knox thinks it is incompatible with the modern state, whereas Harakas thinks it can help guide our political activism.

Both perspectives suffer from a similar failure of imagination. They do not go beyond seeing *symphonia* as a political doctrine in a formally Christian state when, in fact, *symphonia* was a broader ecclesial ethos deriving from the eschatological hope of the church. Both early resistance to the empire and the church’s later baptism of it were informed and motivated by eschatology. Prior to Constantine, the church thought of itself as the proleptic embodiment of the kingdom of God. It was not the kingdom itself but a “foretaste” of the life to come. The

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\(^{82}\) Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 105-7.

\(^{83}\) Harakas rightly appreciates the complex subtleties of the implementation of this ideal in the past, and, to his credit, he talks in a limited way about applying symphonia today. Stanley Harakas, *Living the Faith: The Praxis of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1993), 351-53.
church strove to be in the present what God would one day make it in the future. The increase of the influence of the church after Constantine did not alter this mission; it only expanded its scope. Now, so far as it was able, the church would make the world itself into a prolepsis of the kingdom as well. Symphonia was the name given to this eschatological mission. The “harmony” sought between the affairs of the church and the state was proof that both were properly working together to make contemporary social life a more perfect icon of the kingdom of God.

Symphonia as a Modern Theory of Culture

When it came to symphonia, Sergei Bulgakov did not suffer from the same imaginative limitations as many contemporary thinkers. He stands in a line of Russian intellectuals who tried to resurrect symphonia from its imperial and Byzantine past in order to develop it into a modern theory of culture for a reforming, and later diasporic, church. Living in Parisian exile, he realized that the absence of an empire did not impede the work of the church, for it also meant the absence of collusion between unscrupulous politicians and ecclesiastics. He thus suggested that, in a formally secular context, the church could still fulfill its “symphonic” mission, transforming society into an icon of the kingdom, not through the enforcement of the state but through “the interior energies of the Church,” not “outside, from above, but from within, from below, from the people and by the people.”

The theory of culture Bulgakov tried to develop goes by the name of sophiology – a highly speculative venture that tries to draw out the social and ecclesiological implications of a non-competitive relationship between God and the world. In many ways, this speculative exercise is just an attempt to adapt and expand Byzantine symphonia, particularly when it comes to its practical implications. Bulgakov seems to link sophiology and symphonia in an essay entitled, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” which was intended to present Orthodox Christian sociology to a non-Orthodox audience. That he identifies symphonia with sophiology becomes apparent when he juxtaposes “western” to Orthodox ways of relating church to culture. Western Christianity, he argued, tends to operate between two extremes. On one side, there is Protestantism, which privatizes religion, and effectively hands the public over to Gog and Magog. On the other side is

Catholicism, which tries to dominate and clericalize life. Neither is inherently wrong. The Protestant social ethic, he says, is a kind of sectarian embodiment of early Christian indifference toward the state to focus on one’s individual relationship with Christ, and Catholic triumphalism is an honest attempt to conform the public to the church’s vision of the kingdom. Though we might rightly take issue with the simplistic nature of these descriptions, they are important for the alternative Bulgakov next proposes. Not surprisingly, Bulgakov believes his own tradition combines the best of both extremes into an organic whole he calls “social Christianity.” Like symphonia, social Christianity also seems to be an ethos of provisionally constructive engagement with society, tempered by a situational sectarianism. “The Orthodox Church,” he says, “has preserved as an outstanding characteristic the asceticism of the primitive Church, supplemented by the conception of Holy Empire.”

Thus, as the “symphonic” ideal of Byzantium presumed conditional ecclesial support of the state insofar as the state conformed to the church’s own vision of the kingdom, Bulgakov’s “social Christianity” possesses a comparable vision of a church that tries to sanctify the world (like the Catholics) but is also willing to withdraw from it (like the Protestants). The balance this social teaching tries to achieve between the church and the world is the ecclesiological “upshot” of Bulgakov’s sophiology – its practical effects. Thus, he goes on explicitly to identify this updated symphonia with sophiology when he describes it as a theory about the “self–revelation of God” in God’s “Wisdom.”

Bulgakov’s entire theological project is too massive to be presented in the context of this essay, nor would it be entirely relevant. His sophiological doctrines of God, creation, etc., comprised the theoretical framework intended to perpetuate a viable, culturally engaged church in modern society. In noting that Bulgakov understood sophiology to stand within the symphonia tradition, my intent is not to recommend every aspect of his thought. I myself believe that Sophia is a superfluous theological category which in many ways works against Bulgakov’s stated intent to elaborate on divine-human unity, and that, more often than not, is conceptual spackling that he uses to fill holes in his thought. Nonetheless, within Sophia are some insights about the church-world limen from which we can learn. In particular, Bulgakov

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86 Bulgakov, “Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology,” in Sergei Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 278.

87 Bulgakov, “Social Teaching,” 279.
rightly uses his Sophia metaphor to make God’s self-revelation a process that takes place in history and culminates in the eschaton – a process which legitimizes the world to the church by making it the site of God’s ongoing revelation. To see how this is the case, while avoiding some of Bulgakov’s esoterica, it is helpful to look at his understanding of history in light of the more accepted theology of Athanasius.

Essentially, Sophia is an historicization of Athanasius’ concept of the Logos. In On the Incarnation, Athanasius tried to develop a rationale not only for why but how God could become human, which he did by positing an original correspondence between the two on the basis of the presence of the Logos in creation. Thus, says Athanasius,

All things derive from the Word their light and movement and life, as the Gentile authors themselves say, “In Him we live and move and have our being.” Very well then. That being so, it is by no means unbecoming that the Word should dwell in man. So if, as we say, the Word has used that in which He is as the means of His self-manifestation, what is there ridiculous in that? He could not have used it had He not been present in it; but we have already admitted that He is present both in the whole and in the parts. What, then, is there incredible in His manifesting Himself through that in which He is? By His own power He enters completely into each and all, and orders them throughout ungrudgingly … Does not the mind of man pervade his entire being, and yet find expression through one part only, namely the tongue? Does anybody say on that account that Mind has degraded itself? Of course not. Very well, then, no more is it degrading for the Word, Who pervades all things, to have appeared in a human body. For, as I said before, if it were unfitting for Him thus to indwell the part, it would be equally so for Him to exist within the whole. 88

Both Bulgakov and Athanasius agree that God can enter creation because God is always already present in it, upholding it as its former and sustainer. 89 Yet, Bulgakov, possessing a greater historical consciousness

89 Bulgakov saw himself continuing the insights of Athanasius, minus the identification of Wisdom with the Word, which he believed subordinated the Logos to the Father in the subordination of the world to God. S. Bulgakov, The Comforter, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 25 (note 21)ff. In my opinion, such subordinationism is
than Athanasius, realized that the Incarnation could not simply have happened once in the past, but must in some sense continue into the present. The Incarnation takes place in the perfect tense. This, because the world is not a basically unchanging deposit but a process. It is a story, and like any story, the meaning of the whole is not clear until the final period on the final page. Athanasius realized that the Incarnation had continuing effects on individuals, in particular the overcoming of the fear of death, but he did not account for its “cosmic significance,” insofar as he did not go beyond individual humans to see how the work of Christ in the crucifixion and resurrection redeems the systems of which humans are apart. Bulgakov rightly saw that Christ saves us not only from personal but corporate sin. Therefore, though the work of the Word is fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection, it is not yet completed until the whole world is divinized in the kingdom of God.

The world thus strives toward its eschatological perfection in two ways. First, it is being divinized unconsciously, outside the church, by the power of the Spirit. For Bulgakov, Lady Wisdom – I would say the Logos – is the ideal content of creation, unfolding itself in time, culminating in the kingdom of God. As the Word of God reveals aspects of itself in history, we glimpse prolepses of this world’s future perfection. Thus, as Miroslaw Tataryn has remarked, “history matters,” because in history we glimpse the continuation of the revelation of God in the Word. Relatedly, in the second place, the world is being divinized consciously by the power of the Spirit in the church itself. This conscious cosmic theosis is the church because both the church and the world are us. If we are being saved, then the world in us is being saved. Because the church is in the world and the world is in the church, the sanctification of the bride of Christ in its adoration of the Bridegroom is the sanctification of the world through it.

**Symphonia as an Ecclesiology for the Narthex**

The unfolding content of the Logos in history in the divinization of the cosmos can help us see how the “balance” of *symphonia* can operate not as a political doctrine, but an ecclesiology. Absent a formally...
Christian state, *symphonia* can only take place in the church. Fr. Alexander Schmemann rightly called the kingdom of God the “content” and “meaning” of the church. If that is true, then, insofar as the kingdom of God proleptically realizes itself in the world, the world becomes the content of the church, too. This gives the secular a certain provisional legitimacy like that which the church once bequeathed to the emperor, balancing the church between accommodationist and sectarian impulses. The church has a mandate to engage secular culture, in a constructive way, as an expression of its fundamental commitment to the kingdom of God.

It is becoming fashionable in some circles to counterpose the church to the secular as its alleged “enemy.” This is the “sectarian” temptation to which Guroian referred. Historically, Orthodoxy has rejected such perspectives because it has always granted a place to culture within itself. This is fortunate because, the fact is, we are formed by both. We, the people of God, are also secular, shaped by the shopping malls as well as Eucharist, baptized into Christ as well as nation. We pretend to be influenced only by the church to our own peril. Our challenge is not to cauterize the secular in ourselves or to separate ourselves from it but to be – as the early church was – a foretaste of the life to come within the secular. This requires accepting, embracing, and nurturing aspects of modern culture that approach the peace of the kingdom of God. Acting as midwife to a groaning creation (see Romans 8:22), our commitment to the kingdom of God places the center of the church outside itself, in a mandate – or a commission – to aid this world in its second birth.

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94 In referring to the sectarian temptation, I also have in mind an essay by James Gustafson, in which he warned against a false opposition between the resources of the church and the wisdom of the world, worked out ecclesiologically in people like Stanley Hauerwas. See J. Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985).
95 I am not suggesting that modern democracy – which in America is more like a plutocracy – or that a global economy is the kingdom of God. My point is that they may bear partial witness to it. The church must avoid naive and paternalistic “knee-jerk” reactions to globalization (paternalistic in that they ignore the fact that many of the “oppressed” freely and even enthusiastically enter into the global market to improve their lives, and naive in the belief that globalization can be stopped). The spread of the global economy is like nuclear energy, able to save lives (as in the case of cancer treatment) or destroy them. On the motives of those who enter the global economy, see E. F. Fischer, and P. Benson, *Broccoli and Desire: Global Connections and Maya Struggles in Postwar Guatemala* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
This same commitment also requires bearing witness against a world that is, for many, anything but a prolepsis of the kingdom, but is, more often than not, a hellish nightmare. Both impulses – constructive embrace and critical witness – derive from the same eschatological impulse that motivated the early, as well as the Byzantine, church. It is this commitment to the kingdom of God that will also keep us from the sin of accommodationism, against which Guroian warned. Like the early Christian martyrs, or those who suffered at the hands of the iconoclasts, our partial embodiment of our eschatological hope enables a withdrawal into our own particularity to be a “chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” (1 Peter 2:9). The kingdom of God is the content of the church as well as the world, but Jesus Christ is the content of the kingdom. Insofar as we are the body of Christ, we can have some measure of confidence in our capacity to know the difference between a world that is laboring to give birth to its own renewal, and a world that fights against its own future. The presence of Christ in our midsts reminds us that this world will one day be a place where the last are first, where the naked are clothed, where the poor are fed, and where tax collectors and prostitutes have their dignity. Anything else requires our resistance.

Like our Byzantine forebears, we stand between withdrawal, on the one hand, and embrace, on the other. Yet, unlike them, these scales cannot be balanced in any kind of “official” way. The balance of symphonia must happen within ourselves, in particular within the local church. I have said, symphonia today can only be an ecclesiology. Of course, I have not presented an entire ecclesiology, but a part of it, in outline. If we can liken a doctrine of the church to a temple, symphonia is an ecclesiology for the narthex. Like the narthex, symphonia is about being church in a limenal space. Only, in this case, the space is us. Like the narthex, we are both church and world at once. Attending to the presence of the kingdom of God in the world de-centers the church, emptying it kenotically into its mission. Departing from the narthex, we are sent – like the migrant workers (Matthew 9:37) – into the world to nurture the green shoots of the kingdom of God within it. Yet, it is precisely this eschatological priority that enables us to withdraw again into our own particularity, witnessing against a world (which may be to witness against ourselves) that is in many way still captive to the powers

96 I am indebted to many conversations with Nathan Kerr for this idea of ecclesial kenosis, though I do not entirely agree with what I take to be all of the implications he draws from identifying the church with its mission. See N. R. Kerr, Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).
of sin and death. We are able to bear such witness because a church dis-embodied into the world is yet the body of Christ and a foretaste of the life to come.