“I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD”

THE CHURCH, THE LIBERAL STATE, AND CHRIST’S TWO NATURES IN THE RUSSIAN POLITICS OF THEOSIS

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In his recent book The Mystical as Political, Aristotle Papanikolaou has drawn attention to the thought of the Russian Orthodox philosopher-theologians Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900) and Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944) as an indispensable resource for Christian theologians working out the political implications of the doctrine of theosis, or deification, in liberal democratic contexts.¹ Their writings present what is arguably the most significant attempt yet to develop a “politics of theosis” in Orthodoxy, the tradition most closely associated with the doctrine. As Papanikolaou shows, examinations of theosis in connection to political theology have often tended to set the doctrine in opposition to the liberal democratic politics of the modern West. Papanikolaou cites John Milbank as a major example of this trend, while figures like Soloviev and Bulgakov are noteworthy exceptions to it. The latter two thinkers endorse what is essentially a Christian liberalism, justified on the basis of a distinctively theological conception of the human person as a being created for communion with God. They could at times offer strikingly optimistic appraisals of liberal democratic societies. Bulgakov, for example, would go as far as to call the United States, with its commitment to liberal values, “the regime most favorable to the Church, most normal for it.”²

At the same time, such glowing remarks exist alongside much more sobering assessments of liberalism. In the vein of contemporary antiliberal political theologians such as Milbank, Soloviev and Bulgakov often treat
secular politics as a heresy that denies the transcendent end of the human person and the human community. The Church, as the locus of true community, therefore stands at odds, at least in some ways, with the liberal democratic state. It is “only the Church that possesses the principle of true social order,” Bulgakov tells us, and so the secular order must in the end be “overcome and dissolved in ecclesial life.”

How, then, can these two sides of their thought be reconciled? How can the Church resist the “heresy” of secular politics while also acknowledging that the liberal democratic state is “the regime most favorable” to its mission?

In what follows, I argue that Soloviev and Bulgakov resolve this tension through the theme of “inward overcoming” that runs throughout their work, and that is ultimately rooted in their treatments of the union of Christ’s divine and human natures. Both thinkers understand the incarnation as an inward overcoming of humanity’s alienation from God: the kenotic immersion of God into the depths of human consciousness in order to raise it up and deify humanity from within, by its own free activity. This approach to the incarnation stands behind a Christological politics focused similarly on the Church’s inward overcoming of the secular order. The resulting political theology does not posit a strict opposition between the Church and the liberal democratic state that necessitates the Church’s complete withdrawal from democratic politics into some sort of ecclesiocentric “counter-politics,” nor does it defer to secular social theory as an adequate and complete description of supposedly immanent, “purely natural” laws of human social relations. The Russian politics of theosis celebrates liberal democracy as a genuine advancement toward a free, creative, dignified humanity whose full development will be realized only in divine-humanity, theosis, the collective incarnation of Christ in society; yet it also recognizes the innate danger of secular society to slide toward an exclusive, atheistic humanism that cuts this development short. In the politics of theosis, the Church, imitating Christ, immerses itself within the structures of liberal democracy in order to raise it up to a higher purpose from within, giving it new theological significance as a free instrument of the world’s deification, without abandoning the liberal commitment to human freedom or reverting to a theocratic privileging of the Church. What we are left with is a Christian politics that affirms some of the core insights of contemporary antiliberal critique, but that ultimately rejects the more strictly oppositional stance associated with someone like Milbank and re-
sists the twin dangers of ecclesiastical triumphalism over the liberal state and ecclesiastical withdrawal from the state.

It should be made clear, finally, that the following argument does not attempt to align the Russian politics of theosis straightforwardly with American-style liberal democracy. Despite Bulgakov’s occasional praise for the American system, the Russian liberal tradition has its own distinct history that is sometimes very different from the American tradition. Nevertheless, the basic political-theological motifs that Soloviev and Bulgakov developed can be applied to the American context, and I have done my best in this essay to present their political theology in broadly applicable terms.

The Incarnation as a Political Task

While the twentieth century witnessed a spectacular revival of original Orthodox reflection on the doctrine of deification and its implications for our understanding of the human person, the specifically political dimensions of the doctrine have received far less attention from Orthodox theologians; when theosis has been explored in connection to political theology, it has tended to be set in opposition to the liberal democratic politics of the West. For the tradition of Russian Orthodox thought represented by Soloviev and Bulgakov, however, the doctrine was always inescapably political. Political challenges drove their turn to theosis, particularly the need to find a third way between the false dichotomy of tsarist theocracy and the positivism and materialism of the secular intelligentsia, both of which Soloviev and Bulgakov believed to be incompatible with the Christian humanism on which a successful political order must be based. Thus, the theological recovery of the particular human person as a bearer of “absolute, divine significance,” as one in whom the whole created order will realize its proper communion with the transcendent God, a theme that has become central to contemporary Orthodox theology, is at its origin bound up with political theology—and not just any political theology, but one marked by an openness toward at least some forms of liberal democracy.

We can find evidence of that openness already in Soloviev’s early works of the 1870s and 1880s, a time when he still held out hope for the viability of an institutional Christian theocracy. The “free theocracy” that Soloviev advocated reimagined Orthodoxy’s theocratic heritage along more liberal, even if not quite democratic, lines, affirming key liberal commitments like
the freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and the absolute dignity of the individual. If by the 1890s he had abandoned hope for the realization of a genuine theocracy in history, he remained committed to a vision of politics rooted in the promise of theosis as divine-human communion, which had begun to look very much like a full-fledged Christian liberalism in his most important later work, *The Justification of the Good*, published in 1897. Several of Soloviev’s successors, including Bulgakov and S. L. Frank, would carry forward the liberal aspects of his thought, crafting their own “free theocratic” systems that were explicitly and unapologetically theological and yet remarkably receptive to the influence of Western liberal democratic thought. Thus Bulgakov, caught up in the spirit of the Revolution of 1905, could express hope in his political pamphlet *An Urgent Task* for a “worldwide United States,” arguing that the most hospitable form of government for a Christian politics is not tsarist autocracy but “the federative democratic republic, as the English dissidents who emigrated to America understood so well in their time.” It was thirty years later, in a book written for Western audiences, that he would restate the same sentiment by identifying the American system as the one “most favorable” to the Church’s mission.

As I noted above, however, such statements do not indicate an uncritical endorsement of liberalism. For these Russian thinkers, liberalism was never an end itself, but was always subordinate to an all-embracing cosmic vision of divine-human communion, centered on the person and work of Christ. While that vision could in some cases lend provisional support to certain features of liberal democracy as instruments of the Church’s mission, certain other aspects of the liberal tradition stand in tension with a politics of theosis.

Take, for example, these thinkers’ denial of a division between nature and grace, or between creation and deification. In same spirit as Milbank and other recent critics of liberalism, the Russians reject the notion of a “pure nature” that is not intrinsically oriented toward participation in God. For them, then, creation reveals itself only in the light of the incarnation, because creation is predestined to become God’s glorified and deified body, in which God will be “all in all.” The “cosmic” incarnation of Christ, the historical realization of universal “God-manhood” or “divine-humanity” (*bogochelovechestvo*), is thus “the inner foundation of creation, its *entelechy.*” Such is the promise of the Christian gospel, which imposes on its human
recipients a religious task: to assist created nature in the unfolding of its inner ontological momentum (resisted by the forces of sin), to labor in history to extend the incarnation into every corner of the world, to “regard all things” in light of Christ and to allow Christ to “become incarnate in all things.”

Here one can see the basic “theocratic” character of the Russian politics of *theosis*. Created nature’s intrinsic orientation toward transcendence calls into question any sphere of human activity—whether economic, political, scientific, or any other—that becomes closed in on the autonomous pursuit of its own immanent ends. The promise and task of deification must possess an “all-embracing, central significance”; it must serve as the organizing principle of all human activity. “There must be nothing that is in principle ‘secular,’” as Bulgakov argues, nothing that is neutral or indifferent to the historical realization of divine-human communion. Both the economy and the state exist to serve a higher goal that is given to them from beyond themselves—by the Church, which, as Christ’s collective body, is also the telos of world history. Thus the Church, Soloviev argues, must “subordinate secular society to itself by raising it up to itself, by spiritualizing it, by making the secular element its instrument and means” for incarnating Christ in all things.

Certainly, if Christ’s earthly body is his Church, then to speak of incarnating Christ in all things requires us to speak in a certain sense of the “churching” of society. In this sense, the Russians share Milbank’s desire for a political theology that is “first and foremost an ecclesiology, and only an account of other societies to the extent that the Church defines itself, in its practice, in continuity or discontinuity with these societies.” More so than Milbank, the Russians affirm a tremendous degree of continuity between the politics of the Church and the politics of liberal democracy, especially with respect to liberalism’s safeguarding of the free development of human personality. Nevertheless, they are also aware of a profound discontinuity between the Church and the secular state, because for them, the secular state is founded on a false anthropology: namely, the Feuerbachian heresy of “mangodhood” (*chelovekobozhestvo*), the immanent self-deification of humanity, a parodic reversal of Christ’s Godmanhood. Without a theological corrective, a liberal democracy that remains strictly secular, even while securing a space for free human development, is incapable of directing that development toward its proper divine-human end. Instead, to the
extent that liberalism encourages the human will and human social activity to remain turned in on themselves and to fail to recognize a goal transcendent to themselves, the liberal democratic state confronts the Church as a rival pseudotheocracy, a competing pseudospiritual society rooted in mangodhood. Consider, for example, Bulgakov’s critique of the secular democratic state in his 1917 book *Unfading Light*. There he argues that with the advent of secularism, the state does not cease to be “theocratic” but merely shifts its sacred foundation from the transcendent will of God to the immanent will of the people. “For the democratic religion of deified humanity, the state is the highest form of life—a pseudo-church,” he argues. “Even more than that: humanity, organized in a state, is an earthly god.”

Unsurprisingly then, like Milbank, the Russians sought to develop a distinctive “Christian sociology” to counter secular accounts of society. Soloviev had begun this project already in his earliest works, such as *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge* (completed in 1874), in which he located the “principle of social union” within the sacramental life of ecclesial society. Bulgakov followed Soloviev on this point, and in his 1932 essay, “The Soul of Socialism,” writes that

Christianity too recognizes that there is a real human unity-in-plurality—the *Body of Christ*, which consists of distinct, individual living members (1 Cor. 12.12–27)—i.e. personalities; and in this dogma concerning the Church there is sufficient basis for developing the principles of a Christian sociology.

Bulgakov then immediately identifies “this dogma” as the Slavophile doctrine of the Church’s *sobornost*, the free, harmonious “all-togetherness” of Christians united by their mutual love for each other and their common love for the same transcendent values. The social unity of *sobornost*, in which alone human personality can freely and fully develop in all its potential, is founded on the principle of mutual self-renunciation. “All members of society must set a limit to their exclusive self-assertion and must adopt the point of view of self-denial,” Soloviev argues. “They must renounce and sacrifice their exclusive will.” This kenotic stance sets ecclesial society at odds with political liberalism, whose founding mythologies give ontological priority to the self-assertion of the individual will. The Church, on the other hand, is founded on the sacraments, whose fundamental feature is humanity’s receptivity to a divine grace that humanity does
not possess of itself. In this way, Soloviev suggests, the sacraments re-
mind us that the foundations of a true social order must be “divinely-human
and not humanly-divine,” or put differently, must be located in human-
ity’s kenotic openness to God’s kenotic descent rather than in the tem-
ptation of human egoism to seize absoluteness for itself from within itself.19
For the Russians, this turn to transcendence is necessary if human per-
sons are to enact a genuinely social unity, a unity based in the interpenetration
of all by all rather than on the coercive power of an externalized legal
authority erected to manage the competing wills of self-interested individuals.

The Church thus exists in a state of theopolitical rivalry with every po-
itical order founded on the heresy of mangodhood and its denial of tran-
scendence, and it is the political task of the Church to “overcome” this
heresy. But, as I stated above, their acknowledgment of this rivalry does
not lead either Soloviev or Bulgakov to the more wholesale antiliberalism
seen in figures like Milbank. As I have suggested, their ability to hold to-
gether their negative and positive appraisals of liberal politics stems from
their Christology, where the “overcoming” motif finds its more fundamen-
tal theological meaning. In the hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures,
Christ overcame the egoistic self-assertion of humanity, by which human
beings had alienated themselves from God, deifying his humanity by unit-
ing it to himself. In the original incarnation event, Christ won this victory
in the “true center of the universe, i.e., in Himself,” but history still awaits
the communication of this victory to “the circumference of the world, i.e.,
in the collective whole of humanity.”20 If the Church in history is Christ’s
collective body in process, then the manner in which it “overcomes” the
secular order and incarnates Christ in human society must correspond to
that original overcoming accomplished in Christ’s own person. Because the
deification of the world organically “grows out of the God-man,”21 the
Church’s relationship to secular society must conform to the manner in
which Christ, as God, united himself to his own humanity, raised it up to
himself, and made it into an instrument of divine action in history. The
politics of theosis must therefore be a Christological politics, a politics that
spans the time between the incarnation in Bethlehem and the eschatologi-
cal incarnation of God in all things.

With these considerations in mind, I will now offer a brief summary of
their approaches to the divine-human unity of the incarnate Christ, fol-
lowed by a more substantial description of their Christological politics.
The Divine-Human Unity of Christ

Hans Urs von Balthasar has rightly suggested that Soloviev’s Christological outlook is most deeply informed by the Greek patristic tradition running through Maximus the Confessor, who saw the Chalcedonian formula as “the foundation upon which the entire structure of natural and supernatural reality in the world is erected.” For patristic theologians like Maximus and John of Damascus, the unity of Christ involves more than just an external “adhesion” of the divine and human natures, as if they were two wholly discrete objects standing side by side and held together by the “glue” of the one hypostasis. Instead, the divine and the human “interpenetrate” or “mutually indwell” one another in the person of Christ, giving rise to a new divine-human mode of personhood, a “theandric operation” that completely unites (albeit without confusion) the two natures’ respective characteristics. John’s *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* summarizes this position with particular clarity:

We do not say that the operations are separated and that the natures act separately, but we say that they act conjointly, with each nature doing in communion with the other that which it has proper to itself. [Christ] did not perform the human actions in a human way, because He was not a mere man, nor did He perform the divine actions in a divine way, because He was not just God, but God and man together.

John continues:

Thus, the theandric operation shows this: when God became man, that is to say, was incarnate, His human operation was divine, that is to say, deified. And it was not excluded from His divine operation, nor was his divine operation excluded from his human operation. On the contrary, each is found in the other.

John’s statements highlight the coactive character of Christ’s incarnate activity, showing that Christ, as God, could never act apart from his humanity nor bypass the limitations of his human nature. For the incarnation to be fully realized, Christ’s humanity had to be brought into free correspondence with his divinity, had to be deified, so that by its own properly human capacities it could become the instrument of God’s self-revelation and redemptive activity.
We can see clear influence of the Christological tradition that John summarizes on Soloviev’s and Bulgakov’s own accounts of Christ’s divine-human unity. We see the idea of the theandric operation expressed, for instance, in Bulgakov’s claim that in Christ, “there is nothing that is only Divine or only human; the one in and through the other is Divine-human.” Both he and Soloviev would deepen this traditional understanding of Christ’s divine-human *perichoresis* by examining the historical-ascetical realization of the two natures’ interpenetration within the dynamics of Christ’s incarnate consciousness. The incarnation was not accomplished *at once* in the stable at Bethlehem, but was, in Bulgakov’s words, a “ceaselessly continuing process of the attainment of the divine in the human and the human in light of the divine” across the whole drama of Christ’s earthly life.

In his treatment of the incarnation in his *Lectures on Divine-Humanity*, Soloviev argues that Christ “attains” his divine-human unity by means of a double *kenosis*, or the mutual self-limitation of the divine and human natures. As God, Christ cannot deify his human nature unilaterally, but only by eliciting his humanity’s free participation in his salvific work. For this reason, Soloviev finds the dogma of Christ’s two wills indispensable, because in order for there to be a real synergy between the divine and the human in Christ, Christ’s humanity must possess “a will that is distinct from the divine will and that, through the rejection of any possible contradiction with the divine will, freely submits to the latter and brings human nature into complete inner harmony with Divinity.” The human will’s independence depends on an act of divine *kenosis*: becoming incarnate, Christ renounces his external sovereign power over humanity and submerges his own divinity within the limitations of his human consciousness in order to deify his humanity *from within*, by means of humanity’s own free and conscious activity. The divine *kenosis* liberates Christ’s humanity to enact its own *kenosis*, to renounce its autonomy and subordinate itself freely to the divine will. As Soloviev puts it, “Christ, as God, freely renounces the glory of God and thereby, as a human being, acquires the possibility of *attaining* that glory.” Of course, Christ’s humanity attains this glory not as its own stable possession, but only by adopting the posture of ongoing active receptivity to the divine, by acting out its innate human potentialities in constant coordination with the divine will.

Bulgakov’s Christology, articulated most fully in his late masterpiece *The Lamb of God*, deepens Soloviev’s kenoticism. Following Soloviev, he posits...
a mutual limitation of the two natures. In Christ there was “no consciousness of anything divine apart from the human,” because Christ was conscious of himself as God only from within the limits of his human self-consciousness. He writes:

The divine-humanity consists precisely in such a correlativeness of the divine and the human: the divine consciousness in Christ is commensurate with the human consciousness and does not exceed it. This relativity of the absolute, this becoming that occurs within the limits of the divine consciousness, is precisely kenosis.

In the incarnation, Christ “actualizes His divinity for Himself only in inseparable union with the human nature, as a function of [the human nature’s] receptivity,” that is, “only to the extent of the deification of His humanity.” Because the human nature, with its instinctual drive to assert itself outside God, is not immediately receptive to the divine will, Christ must grow into his divine-human self-consciousness over time, through an “intense and unceasing struggle” to deify his human nature. But once again, as for Soloviev, this struggle will not be won by the sheer force of divine omnipotence, but by eliciting an active kenosis from the human will:

In the God-Man, the fallen and infirm human essence, subjecting itself to the divine essence, becomes harmonious with and obedient to it. But this occurs not through the coercion of the human nature by the divine nature but by the spiritual overcoming of the “flesh” through its free subordination to the commands of the hypostatic spirit.

That is to say, the divine nature “restrained its manifestation” until the human nature’s opposition to God was “inwardly overcome.”

Divine-Humanity and the Politics of Theosis

The perichoresis of the two natures in Christ, as the “inward overcoming” of the distance between humanity and God, ties the Russians’ Christology to their political theology. Most fundamental here are the implications of the incarnation for our understanding of divine sovereignty. Because of the incarnation, “God is enthroned in a new way over the world: in man and through man in the God-Man,” Bulgakov argues. Christ’s human-
ity has been taken up into his eternal lordship over the world, where the divine and human natures “co-participate in the sitting at the right hand of the Father, for God and man are seated there in the one God-Man.”

If redeemed humanity, as Christ’s collective body, is seated on the heavenly throne, then humanity itself is the instrument through which Christ exercises his lordship. Christ’s rule is a divine-human rule, established on the free, conscious participation of those who are ruled. “Christ is enthroned not by virtue of Divine omnipotence but through the inner overcoming of the world, through the struggle against enemy powers, through victory by persuasion.” Just as Christ’s divine nature “leads” his human nature without coercing or erasing his human will, so also Christ leads the world as a whole, his universal human nature, to kenotically renounce its autonomy and egoism and to make itself receptive to the light of divine glory. Thus, even while the theocratic element of Christianity demands our unconditional submission to the will of God, God’s will does not confront us as the external authority of a transcendent sovereign. In Christ, Soloviev tells us, the human will renounced itself in favor of the divine will as its own “inner good”—the transcendent within the immanent. If the incarnation as divine-human communion is “the law of being for natural humanity,” as I have suggested it is, then there can be no contradiction between human freedom and divine sovereignty, because human nature naturally reaches beyond itself to find completion and rest in communion with God. The coming of God’s Kingdom is the fulfillment of humanity’s own innermost potentialities and the implicit aim of all free human development.

With regard to the church-state relations, this approach rules out any sort of “political monophysitism” in which the Church would simply swallow up the secular state and society. Society must first possess relative independence from the divine principle, must first be allowed to discover its full humanness, before it can kenotically renounce its autonomy and be transformed into the human “flesh” of Christ’s divine-human rule. This means that the Church, in turn, cannot incarnate the divine principle in secular society unilaterally, but only by influencing society and eliciting its free cooperation: “victory by persuasion.” The Church relates to the state and society through kenosis, by acting as the conscience of society and bearing an inner witness to the divine-human ideal toward which society should freely strive. Just as the union of the two natures in Christ’s hypostasis depended on the active receptivity of his human will to divine leading, so
also does the Church’s eschatological overcoming of secular society depend on the society’s receptivity to the Church’s witness to sobornost. In this way, “the Church embodies herself in the state only in as much as the state becomes spiritualized by Christian principles,” as Soloviev argues. “The Church comes down to temporal realities by the same steps up which the state climbs toward the Church’s ideal.”

Modeled on the Chalcedonian definition, a properly “theocratic” relationship between the Church and secular society therefore rests on a clear distinction between the divine and the human, the Church and the state. But this is not to suggest that the Church remains indifferent to state politics. As Soloviev reminds us, the Church’s political task is to fill all things with the spirit of Christ and order all human relations around the principle of sobornost:

The church is not only an assembly of believers, but also an assembly of lovers. Love is a force of limitless expansiveness, and the church, founded on love, must permeate the entire life of human society, all its relations and activity, descending into everything and elevating everything to itself. Existing outwardly in the milieu of civil society and the state, the church cannot segregate itself and separate itself from this milieu, but must influence it by its spiritual strength, must attract state and society to itself and gradually make them like itself, convey its principle of love and harmony in all spheres of human life.

The Church carries out this task in two distinct but inseparable ways that S. L. Frank helpfully identifies as the immediate “radiation of love,” or the direct enactment of the principles of ecclesial communion in personal encounters with our neighbors, and the “politics of love,” the systematic attempt to embody those principles in political and legal structures through political and legal means.

The radiation of love takes precedence in the Church’s mission, and with the coming of God’s Kingdom all politics and law will be dissolved into the “anarchy” of sobornost. But in the present age, the politics of love assists the radiation of love, making use of political and legal structures to establish the necessary external conditions that allow Christian social principles to flourish and maximize the potential of all human persons to freely participate in humanity’s common task of incarnating Christ in all things. While state politics can never effect the inner harmony between humanity
and God that deification requires and therefore can never build the Kingdom of God on earth, the more modest aim of the politics of love is to use the power of the state to promote “the free development of all human powers which are to be the instrument of the future perfection, apart from which the Kingdom of God could not be realized in humanity.”

Frank ensures us that such a Christian politics will often resemble “the wisdom of this world.” At the present moment, it may most closely resemble the wisdom of liberal democracy. To the extent that the liberal tradition has championed the rights of individuals and secured an independent social space for the free development of human personality in all its distinctive humanness, Christians can recognize liberalism as a historical outgrowth of the social truth latent in the Christ-event and a providential advancement toward the realization of Christ’s divine-human rule. This is certainly the reason that someone like Bulgakov could look to the United States as a beacon of hope for the future of Christian politics. But to the extent that liberalism remains captive to the heresies of immanence and individualism, it still awaits eschatological “overcoming” by the sacramental society of the Church. Christian politics is therefore never reducible to liberal democratic politics, and the Church’s mission never reducible to the interests of the liberal state. Christian politics is possible only when the divine principle toward which society strives is realized “not in the state, but for it in the Church.” Therein lies the significance of theological critiques of “Constantinianism,” or what Soloviev called the “medieval worldview.” If the Church is to spiritualize secular society, it must bear witness to a different Kingdom established on the basis of kenotic love and sacramental receptiveness to God’s self-gift (which is, at the same time, God’s gift to us of our own selves).

In an important sense, then, liberal church-state separation is a positive development for Christian politics, precisely because it allows the Church and the state to each develop its respective divine or human distinctiveness so that the two might become partners in a divine-human activity without division or confusion. Christians who take seriously the “theocratic” character of their faith can and should work within the liberal democratic structures in which they find themselves, not for the sake of undermining liberalism’s historical successes (for example, by exploiting the democratic process to secure legal privileges for Christianity) but to assist liberalism in the further unfolding of its innate potential to serve as a
human instrument of Christ’s rule. That will mean developing the human aspect of the liberal tradition to its fullest extent, not only through the use of the state’s coercive power to restrain all manifestations of evil that are “dangerous to the very existence of society,” but also by taking positive steps toward a more just and equal society through the promotion of human rights, social welfare, education and healthcare, access to both meaningful labor and leisure, and other measures that foster the development of free human persons who can become agents of Christ’s divine-human activity—all of which can be accomplished entirely through the means of liberal democratic politics. While the Church is driven toward these goals by its own theological commitments rather than by the interests of secular statecraft, it nevertheless can and should make use of liberal means to accomplish the goals in a way that involves the maximum cooperation of secular society itself.

At the same time, the Church will also have to bear witness to its own distinctive “counter-politics” through the living-out of its communal, sacramental life, challenging the heterodoxy of the liberal tradition and calling into the question the liberal state’s pseudotheocratic ultimacy. In the radiation of the love, the Church bears witness to a higher mode of life toward which secular society must freely aspire, the divine telos of collective human activity. But in the same way that divine nature of Christ brings positive fulfillment to his human nature and humanizes his humanity, the Church reveals its own social principles as the inner goal of liberalism, the fulfillment of liberal society’s own deepest humanistic commitments. While the liberal tradition has been remarkably successful at securing the rights and freedoms of human persons, it stands in opposition to Christ’s rule to the extent that it drives human freedom toward the pursuit of private and collective self-interest, depriving human freedom of any absolute content through the attainment of which the human person might realize his or her “absolute, divine significance.” In its radiation of love, on the other hand, the Church “discloses to man the sphere in which his freedom can find positive realization, and his will actual satisfaction.” It is precisely the humanism of liberal democracy that demands it be receptive to that which is beyond the human, that in relation to which alone humanity can become itself. The Church that “overcomes” liberal democracy is not a separate sovereign entity standing over against the state but the completion of the state’s own humanistic work, liberal society in self-transcendent, self-realizing communion with God.
Conclusion

If we approach the politics of theosis in the way that I have described, then the Church’s eschatological overcoming of the secular can only be an inward overcoming. This approach affirms that all Christian politics must begin and end in the sacramental life of the Church, the divine ideal for secular society, but it also suggests that the Church must enter kenotically into liberal democracy to lead toward that ideal from within, without overstepping the limits of liberalism, just as Christ’s deification of his human nature never overstepped the limits of his human will and its receptivity to the divine. In its communal life, the Church embodies those social principles that will someday be freely incarnated in human society as a whole, and in its political activity the Church helps prepare the material and structural conditions that make that incarnation possible. On this view, the Church can both appreciate the accomplishments of liberal democracy as providential advancements in salvation history while also insisting that the liberal state can never be an end itself, since the very humanity that liberalism champions will only be fully humanized when it is fully deified, when it looks beyond itself to discover itself in communion with God.

Notes

29. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 250
42. Solovyov, *Justification*, 392.
43. Frank, 151.
44. Solovyov, *Justification*, 393.