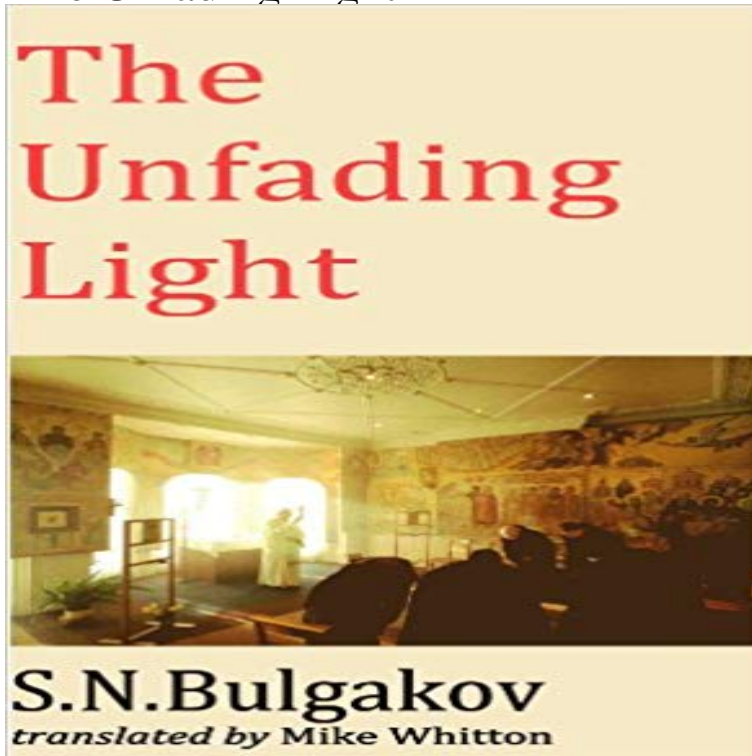


The Unfading Light



Svet Nevechernii is the Russian title of this book. It is impossible to give a good English translation a literal, though not at all English attempt, would be un-evening light. This very difficulty is what caught my attention and began a long involvement with the phrase, the book of which it is the title and, ultimately, this translation. The story begins in the monastic community pictured on the cover. The Unfading Light shines not only through the windows of the chapel during this morning office, but in the daily waiting upon God of the members of the Community of the Servants of the Will of God, in their prayers and in the prayers of the many saints depicted in the paintings surrounding them. These paintings are the work of Sister Joanna Reitlinger, a Russian nun-iconographer, and were made in the 1940s for the ecumenical Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius in London. Sister Joanna was living in Paris, a friend, helper and spiritual child of Father Sergii Bulgakov, who was a founder-member of the St Sergius Theological Institute. Both had been obliged to leave their homeland in the early years of the Bolshevik regime. While I was living in the Community, we embarked on a project to mark Sr Joannas centenary, and my role was to translate a collection of articles written by or about her. One of these was entitled The Phenomenon of Unfading Light, and so began my fascination with this phrase, a fascination caught from Sr Joanna, and, at second-hand, from Fr Sergii. The article was an account of the hours during Fr Sergiis final illness when his face shone with supernatural light. Sr Joanna not only describes the deep effect this had on her, on the other sisters who helped care for him during the illness, and on the numerous visitors who saw it, but also explains how significant a theme this light was in Fr Sergiis thinking, how he had been given to believe (by Fr Pavel Florensky) that he

would be granted an apotheosis, and how important the yearly feast of the Transfiguration had been in his life. When I learned that Fr Sergii had written a book entitled *The Unfading Light*, Sr Joannas enthusiasm compelled me to try to get a copy. No English translation was available, and even Russian copies were hard to come by. I work slowly when translating, and realized that a work on this scale was a major undertaking, which might prove too much. But the seeds had been sown, and, at length, this translation is the inevitable result. Both Father Sergii Bulgakov and Sister Joanna (Julia Nikolayevna in the world) Reitlinger are remarkable figures in their own right. They knew each other in the Crimea before each accepted the inevitability of leaving Russia in the face of the Red Terror. After meeting again in Prague, where both were involved in the foundation of the Russian Students Christian Movement, they made their separate ways to Paris, and it was here that Sr Joanna, with Fr Sergiis encouragement, took up both iconography and the religious life. She was already an accomplished artist. Ella Layevskaya writes in the almanac *Khristianos*, A woman iconographer was such a new phenomenon in Orthodoxy. There was not even a word for it in our language. People called women artists but not yet iconographers. Julia Nikolayevna was the first, others followed after her. And the word made its appearance and became accepted. (In Russian, you cannot call someone an artist or an iconographer without indicating gender.) Sergei Bulgakov, as he was known before his ordination to the priesthood, had already been a prominent figure in Russia before and around the time of the revolutions. He had been a professor of economics at Kiev, and was a member of the second state Duma. This book dates from the years of the First World War, before his ordination. He himself describes it as a kind of spiritual autobiography or confession. It is an evaluation in summary, the total as it were of all my past spiritual journey, so broken and complicat

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