

# Alexei Stepanovich Khomiakov. The Fascination of the Russian Village and the Idea of Sobornost in Ecclesiology

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## 1. Biographical profile

Without doubt one of the most original religious thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Alexei Stepanovich Count Khomiakov (spelled also: Khomjakov or Chomjakov), who lived in and is a significant representative of the Golden Age of Russian Literature. This “Doctor of the Church” – as friend, Yuri Samarin called him – was born on May 1, 1804 in Moscow and passed away on September 23, 1860 in Ryazan, near Moscow<sup>1</sup>. The influence of this cultured and universally educated *gentilhomme* on Russian Orthodox theology can hardly be overstated. Never with the allure of a superficial intellectual or a bookish academic, but graciously he always made for witty and amusing company. Perplexingly, his independent-mindedness led authorities under Tsar Nicholas I (1825-55) to suspect him of lacking patriotism and even of not believing in God. On the other hand, some thought Khomiakov subscribed to nationalist narrow-mindedness. In fact, people generally consider him the founder of the Slavophile movement<sup>2</sup>. This notwithstanding, his *humanitas* was too great and his understanding of Christian faith too profound to be ultimately captured by such terms or currents, that came into being only after his death. Fittingly, he was buried on the grounds of Moscow’s famous Danilov Monastery, now patriarchal headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the company of other great Russians, such as the poet Nikolai Gogol (1809-52), author among

<sup>1</sup> According to the Julian calendar.

<sup>2</sup> P. CHRISTOFF, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Russian Slavophilism: A Study in Ideas*, vol. 1: A. S. Khomiakov, The Hague 1961; N. RIASANOVSKY, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology*, Cambridge, MA 1952; A. WALICKI, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, Oxford 1975.

others of *Dead Souls*, *Purgatory* and last but not least of *Meditations on Divine Liturgy*<sup>3</sup>.

His family had served the Tsars for many generations. While the peasants on the Khomiakov estates had been serfs strictly speaking, they did in fact consider themselves members of the extended Khomiakov family. Emperor Alexander II (1855-81) proclaimed their emancipation only in 1861. Long before, upon his wife's and daughter's sudden death, Cyril Khomiakov, a distant relation of Alexei Khomiakov, had suggested the peasants working on his estates choose his heir among his male relatives. These peasants happened to select the great grandfather of Alexei Khomiakov, Theodore, officer of the Imperial Guards, as their master. As Grabbe relates, «Alexei Khomiakov grew up with the simple people in an atmosphere of mutual respect and confidence. He spent most of his childhood in the country, with peasant boys as playmates»<sup>4</sup>.

The cultured Khomiakov family lived a refined, but not elitist life-style. Its members considered education and service as obligations arising from their social standing and ownership of estates. They entertained a wide-range of interests, kept private teachers, and maintained an exquisite, up-to-date multilingual library. His father Stepan Aleksandrovič was extremely educated, while his mother Maria Aleksejevna was energetic and profoundly pious. Under her guidance he grew up with great fidelity to the demanding requirements and customs of Russian Orthodoxy. She also implanted in his heart a burning desire for Christian unity.

Among others, an émigré Catholic priest, Abbé Boivin, educated Alexei. Berdiaev relates a humorous, but also telling incident. Reading a misprint in a Latin papal bull, the boy asked his French teacher whether the supposedly infallible popes can misspell.<sup>5</sup> This incident notwithstanding, obedience to parents and a sense of responsibility towards the peasants were considered virtues allowing genuine freedom and charity to flourish. Also his cousins Ivan and Peter Kireyevsky left a lasting mark on Russian philosophical thinking. Alexei Khomiakov was in superb command of English, French, and German as well of Latin and Greek. As a 17-year-old he earned the equivalent to a doctoral degree (*Kandidat*) in mathematics from Moscow University (later Lomonosov). Serving as officer in St. Petersburg (1822-5), he was acquainted with the «Young People from the Archives». An 18-month visit to France rounded off his education. He excelled in painting, architectural design and engineering, inventing a steam engine exhibited to much acclaim in London (1851). In addition, he was a self-taught doctor. As a Russian cavalry captain he served in Bulgaria during the Russian-Turkish War of 1828/29.

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<sup>3</sup> During the reign of Stalin the remains of all were reinterred in Novodevichy Cemetery. *Ibid.*, X.

<sup>4</sup> A. S. KHOMIAKOV, *The Church is One*, Seattle, WA 1979, 7; V. TSURIKOV, *A. S. Khomiakov: Poet, Philosopher, Theologian*, Jordanville, NY 2004.

<sup>5</sup> N. BERDIAEV, *Khomiakov suivi de A. S. Khomiakov. Lettre aux Serbes*, Traduit du russe par V. et J.-C. Marcadé en collaboration avec E. Sebald, Lausanne 1988, 29.

His bravery was admired by his peers. He also excelled as a sportsman, winning a first prize for swimming across Lake Geneva in Switzerland. He delighted in hunting. The celebrated Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) highly appreciated Khomiakov's poetry. As the author of a long dramatic poem *The False Dimitrii*, Khomiakov was best known in his home country as a poet of the Pushkin style. He also penned the rather well-known historical drama *Jermak*. Publishing several poems in the *Moscow Messenger*, he maintained in the 1820's relations with the so-called «Lovers of Wisdom» (*Obshestvo Lyubomudriya*), a group vaguely subscribing to pantheistic idealism and poetic romanticism. A frequent guest at numerous salons and intellectual circles, he was a major cultural figure as Russia was rapidly being Europeanized. He was of the firm conviction that Russia needed to turn to the West in order to develop; but the West needed also Russia for spiritual guidance.

Ever since his childhood, he felt religion more important than the sciences and politics. Indeed, his reputation was established by his contributions in the areas of philology, history, philosophy and theology. His pioneering dictionary on Sanskrit was published by the Russian Imperial Academy of Science. In spring of 1847 he visited Prague, Germany and England. He was impressed by the large number of churchgoing people, the street preachers and Sunday schools. He was touched by the evident and deep appreciation for tradition and compared it favorably to his home country's love for heritage. He corresponded with the Anglican deacon William Palmer (1811-79, a convert to Catholicism in 1855) since 1844 – they discussed issues of Church unity. While a cosmopolitan in disposition, he was deeply in love with Russia and considered Moscow, «this thousand-domed city», the epitome of all things Russian. The political and cultural ascendance of Russia in the concert of European powers during and after the Napoleonic wars led quite a number of Russians to ask «whither and whence Russia?» To what culture is it indebted? Peter Chaadaev had responded to this quest in his «first Philosophical Letter» by denying his home country any history. Significantly, Khomiakov retorted on philological grounds:

Does any nation in Europe, apart from the Scots, have legends and songs such as ours? Who has such an abundant, native soul? Whence hover these rich voices of the round-dances, incomprehensibly full of feeling? Read Kirill Danilov's collection of ancient Russian poems and legends. What Christian nation can boast such a Nestor? Which of the nations has such wise proverbs? And aren't proverbs the fruit of a magnificent, past, national life?<sup>6</sup>

He was firmly convinced the Russian language had received «providentially» its skill with words directly from ancient Greece.

Upon the early death of his brother Theodore, Khomiakov resigned from military

<sup>6</sup> A. S. KHOMIAKOV, *Pis'mo Kog-zhe N*, ed. Richard Tempest, in *Simvol* 16 (1986) 132.

service to comfort his mother. Soon he married Katherine Yazykov, sister of the noted poet Nikolai Yazykov (1803-46). They had nine children, of which two died in their infancy. Poems written by Khomiakov on the occasion of their sudden deaths were his first texts translated into English – the work of his Anglican friend Palmer. He managed the family estates Boguèarova directly, while also founding an agrarian bank, advocating the abolition of the death penalty, and planning his peasant's emancipation from serfdom. He never recovered from his wife's death, accepting it from God: «I know that she is happier there than she was in this world, but I used to forget myself too much in the fullness of my happiness»<sup>7</sup>. Henceforth he is completely dedicated to the education of his children. While treating one of his peasants suffering from cholera on the Ivanovskoje estate, he was infected with this sickness. A neighbor assured him shortly before his death on 25 September 1860: «Really, you are improving; look, you are warmer and your eyes are brighter». Khomiakov responded: «And how bright will they be tomorrow!»<sup>8</sup>.

He knew human life in its breadth and depth, in its joys and travails. All this he experienced from the perspective of a devout Orthodox Christian.

## 2. Theological Contributions

The generally strict state and ecclesiastical censorship, as well as the Russian government's suspicions harbored specifically against him, prevented Khomiakov from having any of his theological writings published in Russia during his life time. His Russian contemporaries knew only of his poems, dramas and articles on technical or philosophical issues. During his life, his theological essays were anonymously published abroad. Being self-taught in matters theological, he readily admitted the deficits of his theological training in one of his numerous letters to Palmer. Nevertheless he felt obliged to express his views on matters of faith and the Church<sup>9</sup>. It was far from Khomiakov to create something radically novel, overturning previous assumptions. Rather he intended to bring to light and to new flourishing something long forgotten. His goal was to develop an independent Orthodox theology that did not need to borrow its resources from Catholicism or the Protestant faith – as had been the case ever since Tsar Peter the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> P. P. O'LEARY, *The Triune Church. A Study in the Ecclesiology of A. S. Xomjakov* (ÖB 16), Freiburg 1982, 2; A. KHOMIAKOV, *The Church is One*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> B. PLANK, *Katholizität und Sobornost. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Katholizität der Kirche bei den russischen Theologen in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in *Das östliche Christentum*, vol. 14, Würzburg 1960, 127.

Great (1672-1725). The theology taught in Russia during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was very Western, i.e. Scholastic in style and content. He aimed at lifting the Orthodox position to such heights that it becomes unassailable to Western critiques. This notwithstanding, he admitted with intellectual veracity encountering a certain difficulty. What is genuine Christian teaching to him often originates for both the Orthodox faithful and Catholics from a common tradition. Truth is demonstrated by using devices and buttressed by arguments common to both denominations<sup>10</sup>. One does not encounter in his writings an exhaustive systematic treatment of a theological field. Exclusively in the area of ecclesiology a sustained argument is visible. His positions evolve in exchanges with other authors, alas often in an apologetic or even polemical tenor.

To no small degree he is indebted to Friedrich Schelling's (1775-1854) idea of *All-einheit* (all-unity) and certainly impressed by Hegel's sweeping dialectical method. Nevertheless, one cannot find him in any particular philosophical camp. He rejects materialism as an expression of «the decline of the philosophical spirit» and remains skeptical in a very principled manner of certain patterns of thought associated with Idealism. He divines as the central deficiency of contemporary German thought its penchant to perceive insight as merely grounded in the abstract – wholly apart from reality. This is nothing short of trite rationalism to him. In Hegelian panlogism he detects a serious, long-term weakening of philosophy. While Kant assumed the thing-in-itself ever elusive, Hegel held the thing-in-itself not to exist at all other than as a conceptual idea. If its point of departure is the abstract that becomes inspirited, this school «destroys the world: since the concept inverts for it all the underlying actuality into a pure, abstract potentiality» he argues<sup>11</sup>. At the beginning of all must be something real and concrete to Khomiakov, as it is impossible to create something real from the abstract, through a mere ideational deduction of concepts. Prophetically, Khomiakov sees in a philosophy that denies the reality of the transcendental or numinous the inevitable transition from Hegelian thought into vapid materialism. Indeed, a materialist perspective on life will come to dominate Western thinking for decades to come – whether in the guise of dialectical materialism, empiricism or positivism. «(I)ndeed, both pure rationalism, and materialism also, are nothing other than two sides of one and the same system. Which I cannot term otherwise, than as a system of *necessarianism*, of non-volition»<sup>12</sup>. To him, Hegel inaugurated the «decline of the philosophical spirit»<sup>13</sup>.

Much like Romanticism, he gives preference to an intuitive manner of apprehend-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> A. S. KHOMYAKOV, *Russia and the English Church during the last fifty Years*, Farnborough 1969 (1895), 267.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>13</sup> L. E. ŠAPOŠNIKOV, *Aleksej Stepanovič Chomjakov*, in M. A. MASLINA (ed.), *Russkaja Filosofija Slovar*, Moscow 1995, 595.

ing reality. Every human being is posited from the very beginning of his existence in a relationship with the «creative spirit». This manifests itself in the person's respective worldview and faith. The whole of a people's life is encapsulated in its religion. In his notes on world history he divides religions into two kinds: Kushite and Iranian. The first is based on necessity, subjecting individuals to mindless performance and to an alien power. He considers Catholicism and Protestantism belonging to this school, which is somehow «indifferent to Christ's death on the cross». In contradistinction, the second, Iranian variant is a religion of freedom, as it does not thematize original sin and does not ponder justification. It turns to the interior realm of people and promotes a deliberate, personal choice between good and evil. This universal freedom finds its most sublime expression in Orthodox Christianity, which is called to share it with all. Khomiakov considers especially the Russian people and the Russian Orthodox Church chosen to lead humanity to this Iranian form (in his time only Russia was an independent, powerful Orthodox country; the southern part of Greece having been only recently liberated in 1832). In this qualified sense he views history as progressing on a teleological trajectory à la Hegel<sup>14</sup>. Orthodoxy will achieve its mission when rid of denominational determinations and developing further a «catholic awareness». It alone has preserved this holistic, catholic ecclesial form of life: the foundational religious experience of a creative *amour mutuel*. This «conciliar conciliarity» (Konrad Onasch) will be a defining feature of Russian philosophy of religion in the subsequent 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>.

His first theological text – composed between 1830 and 1840 – bears the title *Cerkov odna* (The Church is One) and remains the only one written in Russian. It was developed in order to counter Prince Ivan Gagarin's (1814-82) much noted conversion to Catholicism and entry into the Jesuit order. Six French occasional theological texts follow in which the author defends his faith and the Russian Church against Western criticism. These apologetic texts are used as venues to present the teachings of Orthodoxy. These are complemented by his personal letters to Palmer, which were not intended for the public<sup>16</sup>.

*Cerkov odna* is so to speak his personal profession of faith in the unity of Christianity. This unity follows with inner necessity from the inner-trinitarian unity of God. Christians are not a plurality of persons where individual separation outweighs their unity. The unity of one divine grace lives in the multitude of divine creatures subjecting themselves to this grace. He even states this unity exists truly and necessarily, despite

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<sup>14</sup> K. ONASCH, *Chomjakow, Alexei Stepanovitsch (1804-1860)*, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 8, Berlin 1993, 2-4, at 3.

<sup>15</sup> J. S. ROMANIDES, *Orthodox Ecclesiology according to Alexis Khomiakov*, in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* II/1 (1956) 57-73; J. L. WIECZYNSKI, *Khomyakov's Critique of Western Christianity*, in *Church History* 38/3 (Sept. 1969) 291-299.

<sup>16</sup> PLANK, 56.

visible separation among Christians. He emphasizes the divine origin of the Church. The one Church is nothing short of the expression of divine goodness, poured out over «the multitude of rational creatures»<sup>17</sup>. This Church is fundamentally unlike any human society where one might find, *inter alia*, divine grace. It is «divine-spirit-creaturely life» drawing all reason-gifted creatures to incorporation within itself. It is buttressed by altruistic charity providing a sense of community (*obschinnost*) in the Holy Spirit. On grounds of the very definition of charity as something spontaneous and voluntary, one must reject a universal church under one head. Jesus Christ is its head and the faithful are his children.<sup>18</sup>

This begs the questions: who are its constitutive members? Khomiakov responds: all those living on earth, and those whose earthly path is completed, as well as those not created for earthly existence – such as angels and future generations of human beings. God's grace-filled activities define the Church as bursting earthly limits. From this follows the unity of God and his activities, so that the Church must be one and know of no separation. All separation or distance in this life is but a deceptive appearance. Amidst the vicissitudes of history the body of Christ, the Church preserves her interior life in God's grace and without her essential unity undergoing change. Echoing Augustine, he observes the Church encompasses equally past, present and future. Khomiakov continues: «the visible or terrestrial Church lives in perfect communion and unity with the total ecclesial body, whose head is Christ. It contains the remaining Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit in the whole, vivacious fullness, but not the totality of her revelations»<sup>19</sup>. This confusing last clause is somewhat explained by stating that the Church is limited in her ability to pass judgment over people. She is mindful that whoever severs ties with her, denies communion with the total Church. On the other hand, she is also aware that whoever is her member, is connected to the total Church and is hence a child of God. Importantly, the institutional Church is also mindful of people estranged from her but, nevertheless connected in hidden ways God did not deign to reveal. Therefore it is the Church's commission to beckon all people to actual unity with God and becoming children of God.

These nuances lead Khomiakov to conclude that the visible Church is subordinate to the invisible Church and becomes credible only to the degree that she gives testimony to the invisible Church. All must be subordinate to mutual love (*amour mutuel*) in Jesus Christ. This produces fruits: holiness and knowledge of divine mysteries. As the spirit of truth abides in her she is holy. Since her protector, Jesus Christ, is unchanging, the Church is likewise unchangeable. In the transition from the Old to the New Testament

<sup>17</sup> A. S. KHOMIAKOV, *Cerkov odna*, Montreal 1975, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

he does not perceive radical cessation but merely a change of rites. These things can be grasped by those who possess «an interior knowledge of faith»<sup>20</sup>. This entails participating in the fruits of the reciprocal love in Christ. In contrast to Schleiermacher, dogmas, sacraments, rites, and ecclesiastical precepts reveal the interior nature of the Church. The visible Church is not exhausted in exterior features. Neither the number of her members, nor the visible assembly represents the Church, but the bond of charity. The Church is the Holy Spirit's revelation, which finds expression also in the mutual love of Christians. It is this charity that guides them homeward to the Father through a forward impelling force unleashed by Christ's incarnation<sup>21</sup>. Sinfulness and errors are due to her members, but do not jeopardize her inner holiness and immutable nature.

One can discern in his writings an anti-Hegelian stance: the Church is an unalterable and indivisible reality in this world, not yielding to a greater or higher unity which might cancel her out. The visible and invisible sides complement each other, forming not two entities, but one Church. The term “collective” is not applicable to the Church as she is the one Spirit of God on earth. Likewise the Church is not an abstract reality grasping itself cognitively – like Idealist philosophy might suggest. The Church is a concrete, living organism, nothing short of God's «revelation in mutual love»<sup>22</sup>. German Idealism's dichotomy between subject and object is thereby overcome.

This serves to affirm the *notae ecclesiae* as professed by Christians in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: one, holy, catholic and apostolic<sup>23</sup>. The Church is catholic and universal, as she sanctifies all of humankind and the whole earth. She is neither selective nor particular to any ethnic group. Nevertheless, he admits the Church is still a small flock (cf. Lk 12:32). This leads to an original and significant construction. The term “catholic” in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is only comprehensible in its Greek original. Other languages need a sound translation to comprehend it. This has occurred in this term's translation into Slavonic. He traces this achievement back to the apostles to the Slavic peoples - Cyril and Methodius- and considers these saints in turn vouching for the term's correct Slavonic rendering. He argues that implicitly also the Catholic Church accepts this rendition as it venerates these saints too. The two brothers had chosen the word *sobornyyj*. The Slavic word *sobor* includes the notion of an “assembly” and conveys the idea of “unity in plurality” he elaborates. Broadly translated, the term conveys the notions of “togetherness” and “symphony” in the meaning of a perfectly organic fellowship of people redeemed in Christ. Such a perception of catholicity

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> A. S. KHOMJAKOFF, *L'Église latine et a Protestantisme au point de vue de l'Église d'Orient*, Recueil d'articles sur des questions religieuses: écrits à différentes époques et à diverses occasions, Lausanne-Vevey 1872, 266f.

<sup>22</sup> KHOMIAKOV, *Cerkov odna*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> DH 150.

permits him to conclude that the Church is something like free and perfect unanimity, transcending nationalities and social strata. She is the *kath'olon* that is the unity of all, as it had existed prior to the fateful “western schism” of 1054.<sup>24</sup> As he deliberately does not connect *sobornyi* to institutional structures, the often used English translations “conciliarity” or “conciliarism” are infelicitous. The reality of catholicity is maintained by those God had preserved from falling into schism. The rest of Christianity fell victim to strife and competition. True Christianity, however, teaches humankind how to live in peace and unity.

It seems this term (*sobornyi*) was developed as a central focus during his debate with Count Ivan Gagarin (1814-82), who had converted to Catholicism and become a Jesuit<sup>25</sup>.

As one sees, Khomiakov ties «catholicity» to unity. This unity can only be grasped by those abiding in the Church. Such unity was destroyed by 1054 and cannot come about by a simple declaration of reconciliation and recognizing reciprocally different creeds. Inner unity can only be achieved through a community in faith. The Church can never be a facile Hegelian «harmony of contradictions», let alone «a numerical sum of Orthodox, Latin and Protestant Christians». Genuine unity requires complete interior unity of faith and external attestation to this faith. He does not advocate a uniform liturgical rite. Also, he does see it worthwhile pondering whether Catholics and Protestants have «deprived individual people of eternal salvation». The question is whether they possess «faith and if they have preserved the ecclesial tradition»<sup>26</sup>. To his mind religious truth is preserved in a “social” way, by living evangelical charity. While bishops are charged in a special way in proclaiming truth and priests are entrusted with administering sacraments, the totality of the Church is commissioned with preserving faith. It has no consequence for the Church if an individual errs.

Khomiakov thus demonstrates that the term “catholic” has no denominational meaning, but is universal. The concept of *sobornaja cerkov* (catholic church) means «a Church united by charity and faith». Thereby the Church became infallible. The term *sobornij* is the decisive reality that sets the true Church apart from the multifarious Western communities. Approaching the issue of the true Church from the Johannine Christ (cfr. John 15:9), he argues the organic bond of mutual love and unity was not kept alive in the West. There, not everyone enjoys same rights and privileges. He considers the Roman church an institutional and legalistic construction lacking *sobornyi* and universality – pejoratively referring to it as “Romanism”. The prime example – and symptomatic origin of what later will evolve into schism – is the thorny issue of the *filioque*.

<sup>24</sup> KHOMJAKOFF, *L'Église latine*, 398f.

<sup>25</sup> PLANK, *Katholizität und Sobornost*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The all-determining consideration is not even for him the fact that it is heretical, but that the West arrived at this teaching unilaterally and “highhandedly” inserted it into the common creed without consulting the whole of Christianity. Such “arbitrary” human opining declared tradition amounts to nothing short of betrayal of the genuine nature of the Church. For this reason only the Orthodox Church preserves the true Church. As he famously pointed out, «Rome kept unity at the expense of freedom, while Protestants had freedom but lost unity»<sup>27</sup>. Consistent with the Johannine notion of “menein”, Orthodoxy “abides” in divine charity.

*Soboronyi* as catholicity is a term designating the supernatural and super-temporal unity of the Church. It predicates a reality neither quantitatively nor by creed but in its quality.

### 3. Influence and Evaluation

The incisive critique Khomiakov leveled against Kant and especially Hegel proves fatefully true. The consequences of Hegelian thought are Marxist dialectical materialism, empiricism and positivism – *mutatis mutandis* all three continue to haunt humankind to this day in the guises of relativism and postmodernism, beguilingly suggesting a self-perfected world. He foresaw capitalism and socialism as equally dehumanizing. Ecclesiologically, this parallels for him Western Christianity’s inability to reconcile freedom and authority – a virulent issue especially since the 1960’s. The relationship between and mutual dependence of these two key terms continues to confound modernity.

For Khomiakov the one Church possesses two dimensions that form one reality: the Body of Christ and the terrestrial community. Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) criticizes him on this point. There is never total identity between the two, famously accusing him even of “Protestantism”. Berdyaev sees too little emphasis on the cosmological and eschatological dimensions of faith<sup>28</sup>.

These observations notwithstanding, Khomiakov does bring to fresh attention the elements of freedom, charity and community as essential for church life. He is the first one to provide a clear definition of the Orthodox Church since the patristic era, influencing in significant ways Fyodor Dostoevsky, Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky, Sergius Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdiaev and Lev Karsavin. Indeed, the terms *soboronyi* and *sobornost* evolve into key terms for 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox ecclesiology. The theologians associated with Russian academies proved especially receptive to his ecclesiology, as Georges Flo-

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<sup>27</sup> N. LOSSKY, *History of Russian Philosophy*, London 1952, 87.

<sup>28</sup> B. JAKIM – R. BIRD (eds.), *On Spiritual Unity: a Slavophile Reader*, Hudson, NY 1998, 38ff.

rovsky (1893-1979) demonstrates<sup>29</sup>. Both Florovsky and Bulgakov were keen in overcoming an extensive and quantitative understanding of catholicity. Originally, to them catholicity (*sobornost*) expresses an ontological relationship to Jesus Christ. Thereby the Church becomes the bulwark of truth by Christ's presence in her<sup>30</sup>. On the biblical basis of the Pauline metaphor of Christ's body and his members (1 Cor 12), this will subsequently form the basis for a Eucharistic ecclesiology. Such an emphasis gives less attention to the dimension of apostolic succession. Archimandrite Sylvester Malevanskij (1828-1908), bishop and rector of the Kiev Academy will use the term as an expression of a fusion of Christian dogma with lived faith, religious feeling and consciousness. The same applies to the position of the St. Petersburg dogmatician Alexander Katanskij (1836-1919). His student Evgenij Akvilonov (1861-1911) introduces the notion of the Church as *organizm* (organism) and *telo* (body) that has Christ as its head. Pavel Svetlov (1861-1941), teaching at the Kiev University, weds the term *sobornost* with that of tradition.

Little wonder then, already the "pre-conciliar committee" introduces *sobornost* in 1906. At the synod convened after the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917 the notion of *sobornost* is employed to delimit the authority of the reintroduced office of a patriarch and to integrate this office within conciliar structures. On the long-term the hierarchical understanding will prevail on the eparchial level. Whereas in parishes, the concept *sobornost* defines everyday life: including lay homilies as well as active and passive voting rights for women<sup>31</sup>.

A visible authority plays no role in Khomiakov's ecclesiology and is even antithetical to his understanding of the pre- (Tsar) Petrine Christian Church. Faith is essentially beyond coercion as it finds ever again expression in and is nourished by the Johannine understanding of charity. On this point he does not do full justice to the notion of apostolic succession as understood by his own Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the visible and invisible churches are never to be conflated for him. Yet, he claims in fact exclusively the particular Russian Church is this historical reality. Such an identity he may conclude on account of his strong, unreflected sense of patriotic loyalty, but does it not run counter to his better judgment? Be it as it may, in this regard he is nowadays isolated within his own Church. Also the Second Vatican Council differentiates in *Lumen Gentium*: «This Church... is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him» (LG 8). This document continues: «The Lord Jesus... formed

<sup>29</sup> G. FLOROVSKY, *Puti Russkago Bogoslovija*, Paris 1937, 380f. (English as ID., *Ways of Russian Theology*, Belmont, MA 1979).

<sup>30</sup> C. KÜNKEL, *Totus Christus: Die Theologie Georges V. Florovskys*, Göttingen 1991, 190.

<sup>31</sup> J. OELDEMANN, *Die Auswirkungen der „Sobornost“-Lehre auf dem Landeskonzil 1917/18 der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche*, in *Ostkirchliche Studien* 41 (1992) 273-300.

(these apostles) after the manner of a college or a stable group, over which He placed Peter chosen from among them» (LG 19)<sup>32</sup>.

Khomiakov reflected much on the word *sobornyi* in order to delineate Orthodox faith from Western individualism. He considered the reception of Aristotelian thought in the Middle Ages responsible for this fateful development, leading also to an emphasis on either deterministic salvation or to authoritarian-hierarchical structures. Faith is something holistic, generating an integral rationality (*raison intégrale*, in Russian *cel'noe znanie*), uncovering a transcendental value for every human being and for the human race in general, and uniting all into a whole (*cel'nost'*). His discussion of *sobornyi* led others to coin the term *sobornost*, notably the early Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky<sup>33</sup>.

It was through Khomiakov's treatise *Einige Worte eines orthodoxen Christen über die abendländischen Glaubensbekenntnisse*<sup>34</sup>, that the former multi-ethnic and multi-religious Habsburg Empire received the concept of *sobornost*. It was warmly welcomed by its oftentimes neglected Orthodox subjects as it sharpened their denominational profile. By strengthening the synodal structure, this term contributed also there to greater lay involvement. However, such a reappraisal of church life was also influenced by the Catholic Tübingen School of Theology, which stressed the term "organism". The Orthodox Metropolitan Andrei of Šaguna (1809-73) initiated on the bases of these two notions a radical reform of the church structures in Transsylvania<sup>35</sup>.

The thoughts of Khomiakov received different, but noteworthy accentuations in Orthodox Serbia. There Justin Popovic (1894-1979), who had studied theology in St. Petersburg in 1916<sup>36</sup>, adopted the notion of *sobornost* wholeheartedly – but maintained a clear separation between the "teaching" and "listening" dimensions of the Church. In fact, Popovic had translated Khomiakov's treatise on the *Unity of the Church* into Serbian. In a nuanced manner he modified Khomiakov's anti-hierarchical understanding of *sobornyi* to mean something akin to conciliarity – rather than catholicity. Creatively he amplified the term *sobornost* to describe comprehensively inner-trinitarian life. Thereby

<sup>32</sup> [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (accessed May 21, 2013). Cfr. Vatican II documents LG 21, 22; AG 5, 6, 38; CD 3, 4; UR 2.

<sup>33</sup> H. SCHÄDER, *Sobornost – in den Schriften von A. Chomjakov*, in Kyrios VII, 3/4 (1967) 122. Cfr. G. CIORFARI, A. S. Chomjakov e l'itinerario filosofico della 'Sobornost', in Nicolaus 6 (1978) 87-129.

<sup>34</sup> A. KHOMJAKOV, *Einige Worte eines orthodoxen Christen über die abendländischen Glaubensbekenntnisse* [A few words of an Orthodox Christian concerning the Occidental Creeds], in N. VON BUBNOFF I.A. (eds.), *Östliches Christentum: Dokumente*, Munich 1923, vol. 1, *Politik*, 139-199.

<sup>35</sup> J. SCHNEIDER, *Der Hermannstädter Metropolit Andrei von Šaguna: Reform und Erneuerung der orthodoxen Kirche in Siebenbürgen und Ungarn nach 1848*, Köln 2005, 185-204.

<sup>36</sup> Popovic had been acquainted with the Russian Orthodox Church abroad that had settled after the October Revolution of 1917 in Karlovci, Serbia and which had been led by Metropolitan Antonij Chrapovickij (1863-1936).

the *sobornost* lived in the Church becomes via analogy the very principle of divinization of human beings<sup>37</sup>.

Within the context of Christian social teaching, as recently as the year 2000 the episcopal synod of the Russian Orthodox Church gave official recognition to Khomiakov's ecclesiology when discussing the Church's diaconal ministry as common ministry (*soborne sluzenie*) so that the world might believe (John 17:21). In 2008, a Russian Orthodox document on *Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights* affirms the concept *sobornost* as part of the Orthodox tradition, when describing everlasting ethical values as preserving social unity<sup>38</sup>.

Russian thought expresses a profound and unshakeable trust in the philological quality of terms, in «the sanctity of words, as expressions of the absolute»<sup>39</sup>. Beginning with the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, the term *sobornost* invigorated the then quite young ecumenical movement within the Russian Orthodox Church and well beyond. Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Pavel Florensky were 20<sup>th</sup> century proponents of *sobornost*. Yves Congar (1904-95), the noted Dominican *peritus* during Vatican II, perceives in the concept of *sobornost* a foundational feature of Christian existence. Though he considers the term untranslatable, this French theologian claims it «expresses or connotes everything that our tradition, social and political as well as theological and canonical, puts into that fine word *collegium*»<sup>40</sup>. It shows that the basic reality for the Church is not one of hierarchy, but of faith and charity. While not denying the significant roles hierarchy and canon law play, to Congar all such dimensions serve to promote the body's life of faith and charity<sup>41</sup>. To him the notion of *sobornost* shows the Church's *nota apostolica* need be grounded in a «collegial ontology», which calls for strengthening the synodal aspect of the Church<sup>42</sup>. Famerée detects in Congar's use of the concept of *sobornost* the direct influence of Khomiakov<sup>43</sup>.

Joseph Ratzinger appropriates the interpretation of Endre von Ivánka and believes Khomiakov to paint a too idealistic picture of the *Raskolniki*, the Old Believers. This community had parted ways with the institutional Russian Orthodox Church in 1667

<sup>37</sup> T. BREMER, *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Würzburg 1992, 213-236.

<sup>38</sup> [www.mospat.ru/en/documents](http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents) (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Robert Bird in the general introduction to B. JAKIM – R. BIRD (eds.), *On spiritual Unity: Slavophile Reader*, Hudson, NY 1998, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Y. CONGAR, *Lay People in the Church*, Westminster, MD 1985, 279.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 380-94.

<sup>42</sup> Y. CONGAR, *L'Eglise: Une, Sainte, Catholique et Apostolique*, in *Mysterium Salutis* 15, Paris 1970, 205.

<sup>43</sup> J. FAMERÉE, *Orthodox Influence on Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar, O.P.: A Sketch*, in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 39 (1995) 409-416.

over the hierarchy's heavy-handed enforcement of making the sign of the Cross using three fingers, rather than two. This Johannine and spiritual ecclesiology is based on a romanticized understanding of the *mir*, the Russian village community, and does not correspond to anything theological. Not revealed doctrine but unanimous assent decides faith's content for Khomiakov. This Ratzinger parallels with the notion of "a Church from below," prevalent in the heady post-conciliar years. He sees the philosophers Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775-1854) influencing Khomiakov's one-sided understanding of the Church and in more recent times Catholicism (liberation theology, basis democratic movements, and other reinterpretations of the concept of the people of God)<sup>44</sup>.

Recent developments suggest the *filioque* is no longer such a divisive issue between East and West<sup>45</sup>.

Though an original thinker, Khomiakov cannot fully part ways with German Idealism. In addition, to what degree he might be indebted to Johann Adam Möhler's (1796-1838) almost contemporary ecclesiological views is much debated. No clear link can be detected. However, both develop their thoughts on patristic grounds and under the influence of Schelling's and Hegel's philosophies: from the Triune God's Spirit of Wisdom issues forth the Church. Both see the Church originating within the Godhead, making ecclesial life one of unity in the Holy Spirit – the Church's "inner soul." Dividing religions into Kushite and Iranian is artificial and certainly lacks any scientific basis. The problem of the historicity of Jesus is insufficiently addressed. Imbalances in his writings notwithstanding, Khomiakov turns our attention afresh to the spiritual dimensions of Christianity and reminds us of charity's centrality. The West is inspired also by him to overcome an over-fixation on justification and structures alone. Incomplete as his *œuvre* is, he remains a constant, if uncomfortable reminder that individualism is anathema to Christian existence. As Nikolai Berdyaev so poignantly observed, his theology serves to elevate every human being from a "slave" to a "lordly gentleman". There is no gainsaying: Khomiakov stands at the beginning of Russian theology, which continues to fathom the Christ-mystery.

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<sup>44</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, New York 1988, 23-26.

<sup>45</sup> *The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue? An Agreed Statement of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation Saint Paul's College, Washington, DC October 25, 2003*, in *Greek Theological Review* 49/3-4 (2004) 359-392.

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