The Doctrine of "Sobornost'" and Christian Unity

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For various historical reasons the Russian Orthodox Church has been isolated from Western Christianity for centuries. As late as the end of the nineteenth century very few Russian clergy and laity were familiar with either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. Western Christians were no better acquainted with Russian Orthodoxy. It is true that some contacts between the Anglican and Russian Churches were made during 1874–75, when a small group of Russian theologians participated in the Bonn Conferences, at which they exchanged views with Old Catholics and Anglicans on a number of theological subjects, but very little headway was made towards a rapprochement between these churches. Only two Russians, Alexei Khomyakov and Vladimir Solovyev, both laymen, made some contact with Western Christians because they were vitally concerned with Christian unity. William Palmer, an Anglican deacon, made a bold attempt to breach the wall of separation, but failed in his attempt, and eventually joined the Roman Catholic Church.

The wall of separation was finally breached, when a small group of Anglo-Catholics, headed by the Reverend H. J. Fynes Clinton, the Reverend R. F. Borough, and Canon J. A. Douglas, founded the "Anglican and Eastern Churches Association" in 1906 in an effort to restore communion between these two churches. The World Student Christian Federation was another channel for East–West co-operation. The Russian Student Christian Movement enabled Russian students to come into contact with Western Christians and learn something of their theological views. This Movement also proved to be a good training ground for ecumenically minded leaders.

These small efforts produced some positive results. Russian Orthodox delegations participated in the Conferences on Faith and Order at Lausanne (1927), Edinburgh (1937), Lund, and Oberlin. These efforts came to full fruition in 1961, when the Russian Orthodox Church was admitted into the World Council of Churches at New Delhi, India.

In his address to the Third Assembly at New Delhi, Patriarch Alexei of Moscow and of all Russia pointed out that the Russian Church had always placed great emphasis upon Church unity. He promised his Church's full co-operation in all the tasks and aims of the World Council of Churches. These are heartening and encouraging signs! However, since co-operation is not a one-sided effort, an understanding of the doctrine of "Sobornost'," which is the key to Russian Orthodoxy, is a *sine qua non* for an effective

realization of genuine Christian unity. The purpose of this article is to expound this doctrine to Western Christians.

I. Historical Background of "Sobornost'"

While "Sobornost'" is implicit in Russian Orthodoxy, the man responsible for developing and articulating this doctrine was Alexei Stepanovich Khomyakov (1804–60). Khomyakov, who stemmed from a very ancient landed family, was a remarkable man. He may be characterized as a person of "total talent." He was the leading figure of the Moscow Slavophils, a devoted member of the Church, and a zealous patriot. He was a gifted linguist, a poet, painter, historian, philosopher, theologian, inventor, a self-taught physician, a successful landowner, and a captain in the Imperial cavalry. His collected works are a living testimony to his genius. He is now regarded as the outstanding Russian theologian, even though he never attended a theological seminary.

Khomyakov's views on the Church are found in a number of essays and private letters, written in either French or English. His famous essay, "The Church is One" ("Tserkov' Odna"), in which he sets forth what he regarded to be the fundamental position of Orthodoxy, was a reply to Palmer's pleas for Church unity. The Reverend William Palmer, mentioned above, was deeply concerned with the reunion of the Roman, Anglican, and Eastern Churches. He made two prolonged visits to Russia in an effort to initiate conversations with the Russian Church. He met Khomyakov and was impressed by his theological acumen and vital interest in Church unity. Palmer and Khomyakov carried on a long correspondence on the subject of Church union, and the above essay was Khomyakov's definitive statement on the Orthodox position.

"The Church is One" is written in the form of a confession of faith and is stated in eleven articles or theses. These articles deal chiefly with the various aspects of the nature of the Church. They treat of the nature of the Sacraments, Holy Orders, Authority, etc. The essay, which was written in 1844–45, was so provocative that it could not be published in Russia during Khomyakov's lifetime. It appeared in Russia in 1863, three years after his death. It took almost half a century for theologians to realize that this was an epoch-making document. The term "Sobornost'" does not actually appear in Khomyakov's earlier essays or in "The Church is One," but is implicit in these writings. "Sobornost'" appears in three of his polemical essays published in 1853 where it is given a fuller treatment. Nicolas Berdyaev regarded the doctrine of "Sobornost'" as the corner-stone of nineteenth-century Russian theology.

II. The Nature and Meaning of "Sobornost'"

The word "Sobornost'" comes from the Russian verb *sobirat'*, which means "to assemble," "to reunite." It should be pointed out, however, that

"Sobornost' " cannot be fully understood in terms of its lexical definition; in its full meaning and implications "Sobornost' " contains a whole confession of faith. It is a definition of the Church and indeed of Christianity itself. It implies *love*, *freedom*, *unity*, *fellowship*, and *harmony*. It is upon this doctrine that the central Christian doctrines are based, such as the Incarnation, the Church, the Sacraments, the Ministry, and the Trinity.

Sergei Bulgakov translates "Sobornost' " by the French term *conciliarité*, i.e. the Church of the Councils. He too attributes to it the meaning of *unity*, *harmony*, *catholicity*, and *ecumenicity*. Catholicity must be interpreted qualitatively (*Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*) rather than quantitatively (the Roman position). Bulgakov states that "Sobornost' " is transcendent to the individual and that it only becomes immanent to the believer to the degree in which he is filled with the spirit of the Church.

Khomyakov claimed that "Sobornost' " was Orthodoxy's real answer to Roman rationalism and Protestant individualism. He regarded Roman Catholicism as "an unnatural tyranny," and Protestantism as "an unprincipled revolt." He contended that "unity without tyranny" and "freedom without revolt" is to be found in Russian Orthodoxy alone. This dogmatic statement can only be understood in the light of his view of the Church. The Church was for him an organic union—a union in love of all individual members, of all existing *communes* (*obschiny*, which are for him the various communions of the Church). He believed that the Western Church, especially the Roman Church, violated the organic unity during the schism, and that the Eastern Church alone retained that union and unity.

Khomyakov's ecclesiology is dominated by the organic concept of the Church. This is clearly stated in the opening paragraph of his profession of faith:

> The unity of the Church follows of necessity from the unity of God; for the Church is not a multitude of persons in their separate individuality, but a unity of the grace of God, living in a multitude of rational creatures, submitting themselves willingly to grace. . . . In fact, the unity of the Church is not imaginary or allegorical, but a true and substantial unity, such as is the unity of many members in a living body.[1]

In setting forth the Orthodox position, it must not be supposed that Khomyakov meant to offer a statement of fact or a description of the Orthodox Church as a "going concern." In reading his ecclesiological views, one often gets the impression that Khomyakov is inclined to confuse potentialities with actual facts. He sometimes uses the term "Orthodox Faith" as a synonym for the Orthodox Church. On other occasions, he speaks categorically of that "faith which, thank God, and owing to an instinctive sense of truth, no one has yet called religion . . . faith with its enlivening constructive vigour, freely moving thought and tolerant love."[2] It must be emphasized that Khomyakov was fully aware of the deficiencies of the

1. A. S. Khomyakov, *The Church is One* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), p. 14.
2. A. S. Khomyakov, *Sochineniye*, Vol. I (Moscow, 1911), p. 256.

Church in the post-Petrine period. In fact, he protested vigorously against the caesaro-papism introduced by Peter the Great when he abolished the autonomous patriarchate and substituted for it the state-appointed Holy Synod. He was also aware that the essence of the Orthodox Church had become Erastian, where a total self-denying conformity of the faithful was imposed by the Tsar. He insisted that the Tsar had no authority to define or even modify religious doctrine. He maintained, however, that the Orthodox Church retained its inward freedom, and that the members of the Church, lay and clerical, gathered in humility and in prayer, managed to preserve the purity of faith.

III. "Sobornost'" and Authority

According to Orthodox teaching, authority is based on the unity of the Church, which in turn is based on the unity of the grace of God. Authority is founded upon the Scriptures, tradition, and good works. Since the Western Churches separated themselves from the Body of Christ, so the argument goes, the Orthodox Church alone retained and preserved the true unity. Orthodoxy takes the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" seriously. It states emphatically that authority resides neither in a Pope, in a Patriarch, nor in an individual Christian commune (*obschina*), but is vested in Church Councils. Hence, the real guardians of the Faith are the people themselves. The interpretation of the Scriptures is entrusted to the Church Fathers, Councils, bishops, priests, monks, and laymen. Any addition or substraction of a clause or even a phrase to a document already approved by a Church Council, such as the Nicene Creed, is tantamount to a tampering with Holy Writ. A classic example of such tampering is the introduction of the *filioque* clause.

Since "Sobornost'" implies organic unity of the Church, it follows that only the *whole* Church can express the true faith in its work and life and transmit it from generation to generation. This expression and transmission is *tradition*. Tradition is the living memory of the Church, which is expressed in doctrines and dogmas. It is a living power in a living organism. The organic unity of the Church is concerned with the qualitative life of the Church.

> The unity of the Church can manifest itself in two ways, in unity of life and faith, and in unity of organization, and these two sorts of unity must be in harmonious agreement. . . . Orthodox unity is realized in the world in a *diffuse manner*, not by unity of power over the entire universal Church, but by unity of faith, and, growing out of this, unity of life and of tradition, hence, also the apostolic succession of the hierarchy. This internal unity exists in the solidarity of the entire Christian world, in its different communities, independent but by no means isolated from one another.[3]

3. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (London: The Centenary Press, 1935), p. 107.

This unity is regarded as a unity in plurality. Such a unity is essentially doctrinal and sacramental, and it allows for national autocephalous Churches.

Orthodoxy claims, and rightly so, that tradition is not merely a record of the past, but is concerned with the whole ongoing life of the Church. Tradition is dynamic and vital, because the Church is always identical with itself. Tradition, which is the inner life of the Church, assumes different forms, such as literary, liturgical, and canonical documents, memorials, etc. In other words, it is concerned with faith and life, doctrine and piety. In addition to the recognized forms of tradition, i.e. *lex credendi*, *lex orandi*, *lex canonica*, and *lex ecclesiastica*, there is a vast area of tradition which is not clearly defined, but which is still regarded as part and parcel of Church tradition.

The Scriptures are the written tradition of the Church. The Church not only produced the Scriptures but also established the canon. Orthodoxy regards the Scriptures as the Word of God and the word of man. The Bible is used (a) liturgically and (b) non-liturgically. Liturgical reading of the Bible is possible only in the Church service, whereas non-liturgical use of the Bible pertains to private reading outside Church services. Hence "Scripture and tradition belong to the one life of the Church moved by the same Holy Spirit, which operates in the Church, manifesting itself in tradition and inspiring sacred writers."[4]

Russian Orthodoxy contends that, since "Sobornost' " is truth, it has the right to claim infallibility for the Church. The Church is infallible (in matters of doctrine), not because it expresses truth correctly (the Roman position), but because it contains the truth. "Sobornost' " implies both passive preservation of the truth and active possession of the truth. "Sobornost' " is not only the *conciliar* Church (i.e. the Church of the Councils), but also the Church of "conciliation" and "reconciliation."

IV. Life in "Sobornost' "

The Church is a community of the redeemed in Christ, and "Sobornost' " gives full expression to that life.

> Thus life in the Church is sanctity in both an active and a passive sense: in the fact of sanctification and our acceptance of it. Life in the Church is a supreme reality in which we participate and by means of which we become sanctified. Sanctity is the very being of the "spirit of the Church." Life in God, deification, sanctity, are the evident marks of the spirit of the Church, its synonyms.[5]

Hence every aspect of the believer's life finds full expression in the spirit of this redeemed community. The Holy Spirit is very central in Orthodoxy and occupies a vital place in the life of the Church. The Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection find their culmination in the experience of

4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

Pentecost—in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in all his power in the life of the Church. It is the Holy Spirit who gives to the world its reality.

The Holy Spirit is not an abstract doctrine but a life-giving power which is manifested in all aspects of the life of the Church of Christ. From the very first day of his life until his last breath on earth, the Orthodox believer is a full participant in this Spirit-filled community. The Russians call this participation "the ritual art of living." Symbolism therefore plays an important role in Orthodoxy. The veneration of the ikon, for instance, is not a crude form of "idol worship," as is frequently supposed by non-Orthodox people, but the ikon symbolizes victory over the powers of sin and evil. The birth of a child, a marriage or a funeral, visits of guests, etc., always serve as occasions for some rite. The "ritual art of living" has been so deeply embedded in the life of the Russian people that even the most violent persecution could not destroy this unity of life in the Church.

Orthodoxy regards life in "Sobornost'" as sacramental. The seven Sacraments accepted by Orthodoxy are the highest expression of the sacramental life of the Church. In addition to the seven Sacraments, Orthodoxy recognizes many acts of sanctification and rites within the life of the Church to be of a sacramental nature (*sacramentalia*). All the acts of the Church service belong to this category. The Church, for the Orthodox believer, represents the fulness of creation—the completion in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, of the divine plan for the universe.

V. "Sobornost'" as the Basis for Christian Unity

According to Orthodox teaching, the unity of the Church is based on the unity of God's grace within the Church. The visible, empirical Church lives in *perfect* communion and unity with the whole body of the Church, of which Christ is the Head. The two fundamental aspects of the Church are: (a) inward holiness and (b) outward immutability. Two principles follow from the above. (a) The Church is not an institution, but a spontaneous brotherhood of believers united in love, freedom, and harmony. (b) The Church cannot pronounce a doctrine to be false which has once been pronounced as truth by a General Council.

We may now ask: Does the doctrine of "Sobornost'" provide an adequate basis for Christian unity? The answer to this important question will depend on the willingness of the Orthodox Church to include all Christian communions under the rubric "Sobornost'." This, of course, is an important *proviso*.

Now that the Russian Church is a full member of the World Council of Churches it should not be assumed that all the differences between East and West will soon be "ironed out." It is true that there is a new spirit abroad. Serious attempts are being made to remove the deep-seated suspicions and misunderstandings which kept these churches apart. We should not, however, expect to find easy solutions to the fundamental issues which

still keep the Church of Christ divided. A brief examination of the historic attitude of Orthodoxy towards "other" churches should provide us with a truer perspective on the seriousness of the problem of Christian unity.

Khomyakov, in his retort to Koshelev, who criticized his exclusive view of the Church, had this to say:

> I say again that all Christian communities must come to us with a humble penitence, not as equals to equals, but as owners of particular truths, which they cannot connect together or retain. They must come to those who are free from errors and can give them the perfect harmony and quiet possession of those truths, which they are about to lose, and undoubtedly will lose without us. . . . Catholicism and Protestantism by their onesided views and mutual struggle have helped us, by the will of Providence, to understand the general harmony, which we preserved as children.[6]

Koshelev, who was a strong protagonist of Slavophilism, nevertheless could not accept Khomyakov's narrow view of "Sobornost' ". Koshelev argued that if the Orthodox Church was "exclusively" Orthodox then all other churches must be unconditionally false. But, in reality, no church was truly Orthodox. He pointed out that the Orthodox Church was very weak in the sphere of social life. He went on to say: "The purity of our faith is sadly contrasted with the impurity, formalism and materialism of our lives. The hierarchy, the foremost guardian of the word of God, is almost the principal apostate from the Holy Ghost, and reading the accusations of the prophets against the Hebrew priests one thinks that the prophets knew our ecclesiastics. . . ."[7] Koshelev emphasized that "reconciliation of *this world* and the *other world*" is essentially the problem of Christianity, and it ought to be solved by the Eastern and Western Churches together. In his view. Church union can only be based on the idea that "our Church [Orthodox] can and must borrow from the Western Church its knowledge of *this world*, its influence on *this world*, in a word its activism, whereas the Western [Church] must acknowledge the dogmatic Orthodoxy of the Eastern Church. . . ."[8]

Vladimir Solovyev, like Koshelev, repudiated Khomyakov's "exclusiveness." He pointed out that, while the Orthodox Church has concentrated on personal piety and prayer, the Western Church, while it did not disparage personal piety, became engaged in social activity for the glory of God and the good of mankind. The Orthodox Church, he continued, is essentially a Church at prayer without action, whereas the Western Church is putting the principle of *ora et labora* into practice.

There is a popular Russian legend which illustrates this difference between the churches. The legend is about St. Nicholas and St. Cassian, who were

6. A. S. Khomyakov, *Sochineniye*, Vol. VIII (Moscow, 1914), pp. 138f., quoted by S. Bolshakoff in *The Doctrine of the Unity of the Church in the Works of Khomyakov and Moehler* (London: S.P.C.K., 1946), p. 268.

7. N. P. Kolyupanov, *Koshelev*, Vol. II (Moscow, 1892), appendix, pp. 74–77, quoted by Peter K. Christoff, in *A. S. Xomjakov* (The Hague: Mouton, 1961), pp. 147f.

8. *Ibid.* p. 148.

sent down to visit our planet. On their journey they met a poor peasant whose loaded hay wagon was stuck in deep mud. St. Nicholas urged St. Cassian to come to the aid of the peasant, but he refused by stating: "I am keeping out of it, I do not want to get my coat dirty." St. Nicholas then went to the aid of the peasant and got his coat torn and covered with mud. Upon their return to Heaven, St. Peter asked St. Nicholas why he looked like a beggar. He explained what had happened. When St. Cassian was asked why he did not help the peasant, his reply was: "I don't meddle in things that are no concern of mine, and I was especially anxious not to get my beautiful clean coat dirty." St. Peter then turned to St. Nicholas and said: "Because you were not afraid of getting dirty in helping your neighbour in trouble, you shall have two feasts a year in your honour, while St. Cassian must be content with having a nice clean coat."

The Orthodox delegation at the Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order expressed views regarding Church reunion similar to those of Khomyakov:

> In matters of faith and conscience, there is room for no compromise. For us, two different meanings cannot be covered by, and two different concepts cannot be deduced from, the same words of a generally agreed statement. . . . We Orthodox cannot conceive a united Church in which some of its members would hold that there is only one source of Divine Revelation, namely, Holy Scripture alone, but others affirm that apostolic tradition is the necessary completion of Holy Scripture. . . . Therefore the mind of the Orthodox Church is that reunion can take place only on the basis of the common faith and confession of the ancient, undivided Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils and of the first eight centuries . . . ; or according to the Orthodox Church, where the totality of the Faith is absent there can be no *communio in sacris*.[9]

Similar views were expressed by the Orthodox delegation at the Edinburgh Conference in 1937:

> We Orthodox delegates, faithful to the tradition of the ancient undivided Church of the seven oecumenical Synods and of the first eight centuries, cherish the conviction that only the dogmatic teaching of the ancient Church as it is found in the Holy Scripture, the Creed, the decisions of the oecumenical Synods and the teaching of the Fathers and in the worship and in the whole life of the undivided Church, can form a solid basis for dealing successfully and rightly with the new problems of doctrine and theology which have arisen in recent times. . . . We Orthodox therefore consider it our duty both to our Church and to our conscience, to declare in all sincerity and humility that while reports in which such vague and abstract language is used may perhaps contribute to the advancement of reunion between churches of the same essential characteristics, they are altogether profitless for the larger end for which they have been used, especially in regard to the Orthodox Church.[10]

Has the admission of the Russian Church into the World Council of Churches changed the situation? If we are to take Patriarch Alexei's

9. H. N. Bate (ed.), *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3–21, 1927* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1927), pp. 384f.

10. L. Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Held at Edinburgh, August 3–18, 1937* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1938), pp. 156f.

declarations and promises made at New Delhi to be indicative of a radical change, then there is indeed hope for Christian unity, and "Sobornost' " may provide a basis for that unity. Patriarch Alexei told the Third Assembly that he was fully aware of the many difficulties which still stand in the way of union and unity, but stated that he was gratified to note that the World Council of Churches was now making serious efforts to discover ways and means of re-establishing the lost unity. He also promised that his Church would co-operate in the commission on Faith and Order as well as in the other commissions, sections, and departments of the World Council of Churches. The task and prayer of the Church of Christ is to keep these lines of communication open to the end that Christian unity may at last be achieved and Christ's prayer become a present reality.