

## SOBORNOST': DREAM OR REALITY?

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**Abstract.** This essay explores the concept of *sobornost'* as a cornerstone of Orthodox ecclesiology, tracing its origins, theological implications, and philosophical underpinnings. Coined in the context of 19th-century Slavophile thought, *sobornost'*—often translated as “catholicity”—balances unity and freedom, offering a mystical vision of the Church as the Body of Christ. The paper examines the term’s adoption into Western theology, its early articulations by thinkers like Khomiakov, and its prominence in ecumenical dialogue, particularly through the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius. However, the ideal of *sobornost'*, emphasizing love and mutual prayer, is juxtaposed against the modern struggles of the Orthodox Church, highlighting tensions between spiritual ideals and political realities. The discussion concludes by questioning the contemporary relevance of *sobornost'* amid ecclesiastical and geopolitical challenges.

**Keywords:** Sobornost', Orthodox ecclesiology, Slavophile thought, Church unity, Mystical theology

From the mid-nineteenth century and thereafter, the word *sobornost'* (соборность) has come to characterize Orthodox ecclesiology, first in a Russian context, and then more widely. This is especially true of the English-speaking world (or perhaps more accurately the British Isles), where the word *sobornost* has been adopted as the title of the journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, founded to promote deeper understanding between Russian Christians expelled from Russia by the Bolshevik Revolution and Western Christians. The origins of the term *sobornost'*, more or less adopted in English as ‘sobornost’, lie in the word used in the Slavonic translation of the Nicene Creed (that is, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, associated with the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381) to render one of the notes

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of the Church, viz., καθολικός, ‘catholic’. It follows that, in English, a natural equivalent to *sobornost*’ would be ‘catholicity’. Why Slavonic did not follow the practice of most Western languages by simply transliterating the Greek, we shall never know, for the origins of the use of соборную in the Creed are lost in the mists of early Slavonic Christianity. It could be that соборную was simply derived from собор, ‘council’ or ‘synod’, and intended, again, to oppose an ‘Orthodox’—synodical or conciliar—understanding of the note of the Church to the Western understanding of ‘catholic’, increasingly associated in the second Christian millennium with the Church as a Papal Monarchy, indicating its universal aspirations.

It is possible, however, the use of соборную was an attempt to render into Slavonic what the word καθολικός meant in Greek, rather than simply transliterating it. In other words, the word соборную was an attempt to reach back into the etymology of the Greek word: derived from καθ’ ὅλου, more usually contracted to καθόλου, it means universal, literally ‘taking as a whole’, in contrast to καθ’ ἕκαστον or κατὰ μέρος, ‘taken individually’ or ‘partially’. So соборный is derived etymologically from the verb собирать/собрать, to collect or to gather together.

‘Sobornost’ entered Western philosophical vocabulary through the thought of the Slavophiles, especially Ivan Kireevsky and Aleksei Khomiakov. Robert Bird, in his introduction to *On Spiritual Unity: a Slavophile Reader*, states that ‘[t]he Slavophiles’ thought is all about sobornost and integral knowledge; these concepts stand, both at the beginning and the end of their writings, at the source and delta of their intellectual journey’.<sup>2</sup> Of these two words or concepts, Bird had remarked a few lines earlier that ‘[t]hese terms retain a certain fragility characteristic of attempts to express the inexpressible’.<sup>3</sup> Neither term, as Bird suggests, is capable of exact definition, which is both maddening for tidy minds and yet allows a broad range of connotation, that can be an advantage in itself: discussion is not foreclosed by a clear lexical definition. The thought of both Kireevsky and Khomiakov concerned the nature of human society, which included the nature of the Church, but it seems the case that their thought had theological ramifications, rather than theological roots: they were concerned with general philosophical issues, in this case the nature of human society and the relationship between individual and community, resisting what they saw as a damaging individualism that characterized the transition from

2 Robert BIRD, *On Spiritual Unity: a Slavophile Reader—Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim and Robert Bird, Hudson NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998, 8.

3 R. BIRD, *On Spiritual Unity*

a largely agricultural society, based on traditional communities with organic structures in which the different groups of people lived in mutual dependence on one another, to an increasingly industrialized society with workers providing the necessary labour for factories, funded by capital which reaped the profits of such enterprise for a relatively small group of owners and investors. The Slavophiles shared this analysis of the transition with thinkers in other countries, whom one might call, following Andrzej Walicki,<sup>4</sup> 'conservative romantics', which would include people such as Coleridge in England and Tocqueville in France. As with these thinkers, the Slavophiles looked back—with rosy spectacles and a good deal of nostalgia—to a past with its villages, churches, and local magnates, an existence that revolved round the cycles of nature, reflected in the liturgical cycles of the Orthodox Church Year.

Khomiakov introduced the Slavophile concept of *sobornost'* into his understanding of the Church, even though its roots lay in a broader understanding of the nature of human society. Difficult to define, it lends itself to negative characterization: what it is not. *Sobornost'* is therefore used to characterize the Church, that is, the Orthodox Church, against Catholicism on the one hand and Protestantism on the other: against Catholicism which achieves unity at the expense of freedom, and against Protestantism which sacrifices unity to freedom. *Sobornost'*, it is maintained, holds together unity and freedom in the organic unity of a community in which its members find their meaning and their freedom. It is an attractive ideal, but does not give much of a clue as to how it is to be achieved or maintained.

The short treatise, written by Khomiakov for his English friend William Palmer, *The Church is One*, is his principal explanation and justification of what he meant by *sobornost'*—Walicki calls it his 'only consistent attempt to systematize his views'.<sup>5</sup>

The unity of the Church is established by Khomiakov in a primarily metaphysical way: *The Church is One* begins:

The Church is one. Her unity 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.<sup>6</sup>

4 See his two works, Andrzej WALICKI, *The Slavophile Controversy and A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 1980).

5 Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy*, 188.

6 Aleksei Stepanovici KHOMIAKOV, *The Church is One*, trans. William Palmer, modified, ed. with an introductory essay by Nicolas Zernov, London: The Fellowship of St Alban

Khomiakov further affirms:

The Church visible, or upon earth, lives in complete communion and unity with the whole body of the Church, of which Christ is the Head. She has abiding within her Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit in all their living fulness, but not in the fulness of their manifestation, for she acts and knows not fully, but only so far as it pleases God.<sup>7</sup>

Khomiakov's presentation of the Church is mostly in abstract or universal terms:

The Church is called One, Holy, Catholic (that is, *соборную*), and Apostolic; because she is one, and holy; because she belongs to the whole world, and not to any particular locality; because by her all mankind and all the earth, and not any particular nation or country, are sanctified; because her very essence consists in the agreement and unity of the spirit and life of all the members who acknowledge her, throughout the world; lastly, because in the writings and doctrine of the Apostles is contained all the fulness of her faith, her hope, and her love.<sup>8</sup>

Khomiakov then turns to the Holy Spirit:

The Spirit of God, who lives in the Church, ruling her and making her wise, manifests Himself within her in divers manners; in Scripture, in Tradition, and in Works.<sup>9</sup>

which leads into an exposition of the relation of Scripture and Tradition; an account of the Nicene Creed, which is quoted in full and provokes a discussion of the Latin addition of the *Filioque* clause. The whole stress of his account of the Church and its activities lies in the heavenly... and the inward; the antecedents of *sobornost'* in the local village seem left far behind. This externality extends to the sacraments; participation in them seems curiously formal. 'External unity is the unity manifested in the communion of the Sacraments; while internal unity is unity of spirit'. The source of *sobornost'* is, clearly, the Holy Spirit, the means by which the Holy Spirit achieves this *sobornost'* remain external realities, otherwise left shrouded in unclarity, save that He works inwardly (and spiritually).

Towards the end Khomiakov seems to change into a different gear:

We know that when any one of us falls, he falls alone; but no one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her, and in unity

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and St Sergius, 1986, 18.

7 A. S. ΚΗΟΜΙΑΚΟΒ, *The Church is One*, 19.

8 A. S. ΚΗΟΜΙΑΚΟΒ, *The Church is One*, 21.

9 A. S. ΚΗΟΜΙΑΚΟΒ, *The Church is One*, 22.

with all her other members. If anyone believes, he is in the communion of faith; if anyone loves, he is in the communion of love; if he prays, he is in the communion of prayer. Wherefore no one can rest his hope on his own prayers, and everyone who prays asks the whole Church for intercession, not as if he had any doubts of the intercession of Christ, the one Advocate, but in the assurance that the whole Church ever prays for all her members. All the angels pray for us, the apostles, martyrs, and patriarchs, and above all, the Mother of our Lord, and this holy unity is the true life of the Church.<sup>10</sup>

This sense of prayer as constituting the sinews of the unity of the Church, which hold the Church lightly (or tightly?) in a bond of unity, yields a more vivid sense of unity as constituted by mutual prayer—prayer in Christ through the Holy Spirit. This leads to a much warmer way of speaking of the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy. Hitherto, the sacraments seemed, as we have seen, somewhat external, and contrasted with the inward, but now Khomiakov says,

we pray in the spirit of love, knowing that no one will be saved otherwise than by the prayer of the Church... The Saints whom God has glorified are much higher than we, but higher than all is the Holy Church, which comprises within herself all the Saints, and prays for all, as may be seen in the divinely inspired Liturgy.<sup>11</sup>

As he continues he says that '[m]utual prayer is the blood of the Church, and the glorification of God her breath... True prayer is true love...'<sup>12</sup> And further on claims that

The Church accepts every rite which expresses spiritual aspiration towards God... but she recognizes as higher than all rites the holy Liturgy, in which is expressed all the fulness of the doctrine and spirit of the Church; and this not only by conventional signs or symbols of some kind, but by the word of life and truth inspired from above. He alone knows the Church who knows the Liturgy. But above all is the unity of holiness and love.<sup>13</sup>

We see that what Khomiakov means by *sobornost'*, as applied to the Church, is deeper than conciliarity, that is, a unity established by councils, as opposed to a unity secured by communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. It is more than a transition into the realm of ecclesiology of ideas about traditional Russian society,

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10 A. S. Khomiakov, *The Church is One*, 38–9.

11 A. S. Khomiakov, *The Church is One*, 40.

12 A. S. Khomiakov, *The Church is One*, 41,

13 A. S. Khomiakov, *The Church is One*, 42–3.

as exemplified in the *mir*, often idealized in such peasant sayings as ‘Doing anything in common is good, even dying’.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it exactly a philosophical or metaphysical notion, even though N. O. Lossky (Vladimir Lossky’s father) professed to find in Khomiakov and his ideas about *sobornost’* ‘the germ of the metaphysical system that has subsequently been worked out in detail in Russian philosophy’.<sup>15</sup>

This sense of something imponderable, even ‘mystical’, about *sobornost’* recurs in early attempts by Russians to explain in an ecumenical context the meaning of the term in the context of the foundation of the originally Anglican-Russian Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius.

Already in the *Journal of the Fellowship the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius*, as it was known before it adopted the title *Sobornost’*,<sup>16</sup> there was reflection on the concept. There were articles in issue 7 (December 1929) by N. Arseniev, ‘The Organic Nature of the Church’, and in issue 12 (June 1931) by Sergii Bulgakov on ‘I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church’. N. Arseniev, something of an apostle for the ideal of Holy Russia, ended his days in exile as a professor at St Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary in New York. His article could be regarded as a sketch for a working out in more detail of the ‘germ of the metaphysical system’, desiderated by N. O. Lossky in the citation above. Arseniev begins by asserting that ‘The Church as a great organism, not merely an external institution, but the great body – the mystical Body of Christ, the great stream of the life of grace which shall embrace everyone and everything’, and he continues, quoting Khomiakov: ‘It is recognized mystical-wise: “The believer”, says the great Russian theologian Khomiakov, “knows the truth; he who does not believe does not know it; he knows it only with an outward and imperfect knowledge”.’<sup>17</sup> ‘There is no external authority... such a conception is inappropriate here. “Authority” is too small, too external for this mystical reality’: and Arseniev continues to speak of the ‘innermost foundation of our life’, ‘our higher life’, ‘the life of grace within us, which has seized us, flows through us, by which we are led, so long as we have not

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14 A proverb quoted by Donald NICHOLL, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia*, London: DLT, 1997, 195.

15 Nikolay Onufriyevich LOSSKY, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1951), 33.

16 *Journal of the Fellowship the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* [= JFSASS] 1 (1928) – 26 (1934), after which it changed its name to *Соборность/Sobornost’*, and eventually to *Sobornost*.

17 JFASS 7 (Dec. 1929), 34.

severed ourselves from the whole'. This Arseniev supports by another quotation of 'eloquent words of mystical power' from Khomiakov—a series of passages that sound as if they come from 'The Church is One', though I cannot identify them precisely. Arseniev is working with a series of polarities: organism/institution, inward/outward, small/powerful, life/structures, mystical/(presumably: rational), love/conformity—the former characterizing the true Church, the latter a deformed simulacrum. All this is summed up in:

It is a mystical doctrine of the Church of soul-stirring grandeur; wherein the principles of freedom and of the great fellowship are most intimately united in the free fellowship of love (*sobornost*); when each surrenders himself to the whole, nay, more, each prays for the others.<sup>18</sup>

Arseniev goes on to claim that it is 'entirely wrong' to think that the Church requires 'enforced unity' or 'enforced obedience': the Church abhors both and instead calls for 'freedom of love'. Nevertheless, the Church is 'no invisible quantity, no formless and lifeless abstraction'; it has to be comprehended 'in her *mystical nature* in her *mystical depth*'. A page or so later he states 'expressly once more': 'it is not something subjective, transient, but something *endlessly objective*, this life of the Spirit in us'.<sup>19</sup> It worth noting, however, that Arseniev links the notion of *sobornost*' with the Eucharist: "The objective divinity of the Spirit, the Grace of God, and the moral freedom of man are here united in one organic reciprocity. The heart of the Church's life is the Eucharist. "Only he understands the Church who understands the Eucharist"."

This certainly illustrates the way in which, as a concept, *sobornost*' retains 'a certain fragility characteristic of attempts to express the inexpressible', as Bird put it above. However, seen like that, the power of the concept can be felt, even if it proves difficult to capture its meaning more precisely.

The other article in the *Journal* can be dealt with more briefly, as Bulgakov's concept of *sobornost*' is fundamentally congruent with Arseniev's. Bulgakov's address covers all the notes of the Church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—but the individual treatment of each is prefaced by a general reflection of the nature of the Church as visible and invisible: the visible manifesting the invisible, and the invisible made known through the visible—or in Bulgakov's own words: 'the nature of the Church is symbolic—the inward and the outward being grafted into

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18 *JFASS* 7 (Dec. 1929), 35.

19 *JFASS* 7 (Dec. 1929), 36.

a single reality'.<sup>20</sup> Bulgakov's treatment of the note of catholicity or *sobornost'* is marked by a good deal of digression.

In the first issue of *Sobornost'* /*Соборность*, there was, unsurprisingly, an article on *sobornost'*, by V. Ilyin (*sic*; Ilyin was Professor of Church Music at the Russian Musical Academy in Paris).<sup>21</sup> This brief article (only three pages) is coherent with what we have found already: *sobornost'* stands for a 'whole complex of meanings', conveying 'the fundamental characteristics of the structure of the Church of Christ', while simultaneously expressing 'the actual spiritual atmosphere in which members of the Church exist— viz., the spiritual oxygen... which they inhale and through which they are united'.<sup>22</sup> It is a reflection of the united life in common of the persons of the Trinity, so that the Trinity itself can be called 'a Heavenly Church, a Heavenly Sobor'.<sup>23</sup> It proceeds from the heavenly prayer of Jesus Christ to the Father (cf. John 17) and is fulfilled in the song of a communion in love between 'the Creator and his Mystical Bride Creation as represented by the members of the Church' (Ilyin 1935, 7).<sup>24</sup>

Even in these early attempts to explain to the English West what is meant by *sobornost'*, we find a positive delight in celebrating its 'mystical' character, without any comment on how this ideal was to be achieved, save for a 'mystical' evocation of prayer as constituting the sinews of the Church and lightly binding its members, members of the Body of Christ, into unity. Perhaps that was all right then, in the period 'between the wars', when on virtually all fronts Orthodoxy was weak. The position of the Ecumenical Patriarch was weak after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in which he had a clearly defined (though constricted) role, and its replacement by Turkey, a secular state then, which recognized the Ecumenical Patriarch as no more than the Orthodox bishop in Istanbul. In Russia the Orthodox Church, even with its newly restored Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus', faced liquidation by an avowedly atheist state. Now both patriarchates are flexing their muscles, the Patriarch of Moscow finding power in giving religious depth to the ideology of a Greater Russia, while the Ecumenical Patriarch seeks a political dimension to ancient canons designed to find some role for the bishop of the newly founded imperial city—the Queen City. One of the results of these

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20 *JFASS* 12 (June 1931), 17

21 *Sobornost'* /*Соборность* 1: 1 (March, 1935), 5–7.

22 *Sobornost'* /*Соборность* 1: 1 (March, 1935), 5.

23 *Sobornost'* /*Соборность* 1: 1 (March, 1935), 6.

24 *Sobornost'* /*Соборность* 1: 1 (March, 1935), 7.



bids for political power has been to lay bare a rift within Orthodoxy, sealed by excommunication of the Ecumenical Patriarch and those that support him by the Patriarch of Moscow in 2018. The rift has ceased to be a matter of words exchanged in anger between patriarchs and has opened up an ugly chasm within Orthodoxy manifest in a war waged by two sides each claiming to be Orthodox, and invoking God's blessing as they kill one another. It looks as if the *sobornost'* that seemed such an attractive dimension of Orthodoxy, its unity depending on mutual love rising from the freedom of its members, is dissolving like wax before fire in a struggle for political, palpable, power. In this context, what relevance has the ideal of the Church represented by the notion of *sobornost'*? It seems too vague a notion, too weak in the context of a struggle for power. Perhaps we should call the mind the words of Christ to his Apostle, Paul: 'My grace is enough for you, for strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12: 9).

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