

Social Engagement as an Expression of What the Church Is

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In recent years my colleagues and I, in the framework of a research project¹ funded by the Czech Government, have been exploring the history and theology, particularly of Russian and European Orthodox communities in their native context and abroad.² A specific focus of our research has been the exploration of the tracks and traces of the development of Russian Orthodox theology in the previous two centuries: some still alive today, others latent or unduly forgotten.³ It is widely agreed that Russian intellectual and religious life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was exceptionally vibrant and vital.⁴ As a result Orthodox theology in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century was largely shaped and dominated by the developments within Russian Orthodoxy.

In this paper I will reflect briefly on the Church's social engagement as an indicator of who the church really is. The critical question that animates this task can be formulated in

¹ "Symbolic Mediation of Wholeness in Western Orthodoxy," GAČR P401/11/1688, January 2011. This article is a part of the research project.

² The first results of this study have been published in Ivana Noble et al, *Cesty pravoslavné teologie ve 20. století na Západ* [The ways of Orthodox theology in the West in the twentieth century] (Prague: CDK, 2012, in Czech). An English translation is to be published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

³ Some results of these investigations are published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press as Ivana Noble, et al, *Wrestling with the Mind of the Fathers in (Post-)Modern Orthodox Theology* (Crestwood, NY: 2015).

⁴ Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, vol. II, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 152–70.

the following way: What was lost and what was gained in the move from *sobornost'* ecclesiology to Eucharistic ecclesiology? And if there is a loss, what needs to be rediscovered?

Sobornost' Ecclesiology and Eucharistic Ecclesiology

Recently Andrew Louth reflected on the move from *sobornost'* to eucharistic ecclesiology and suggested looking carefully at the effect of the experience of the Russian émigré theologians in shifting this ecclesiological vision from one to the other. *Sobornost'* was coined as a key term in describing ecclesial realities. The idea of *sobornost'* in some ways is an attempt to recast ancient Greek and the late eighteenth-century Kantian notion of “the one and the many” of German idealism. Much of Khomyakov’s thought was stimulated by a decade (1844–1854) of exchange of letters with William Palmer (an Anglican deacon and fellow of Magdalene College, Oxford), particularly Khomyakov’s pamphlet *The Church is One*. It is evident that Khomyakov’s notion of *sobornost'* has philosophical, sociological, political, and anthropological roots as much as ecclesial ones. It was derived, according to Louth, from the Russian *sobirat'* = bringing together, but also from the *sobor* as a *veche* or village council. In emigration much of the *sobor* experience in this sense has been lost and this prompted the emigrants to redefine the notion of the Orthodox Church and Orthodox identity in exile.

Nicholas Afanasiev, Louth insists, turned to the New Testament and early Christian writing and specifically to St. Ignatius of Antioch to define the essence of the (Orthodox) church. For him: 1) the whole people of God are the church; 2) the local church is a manifestation of the whole church gathered to celebrate the Eucharist; here are the roots of his Eucharistic ecclesiology. The unity among the local churches is manifested every time they celebrate the Eucharist. Importantly, Afanasiev re-considered the notion of *sobornost'* in strictly ecclesiological terms rather than sociological terms of the early Slavophiles. One must take into account that Afanasiev’s notion is a later (post-Second World War) development of the understanding of *sobornost'*. The danger of Eucharistic

ecclesiology, according to Louth, is in smuggling into the notion of community of faith the understanding of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Afanasiev has picked up the notion of *sobornost'* from the desk of the philosophers and transposed it to the ecclesial realities of the church in exile.

One may think of picturing the difference and complementarities of Khomyakov and Afanasiev's views by referring to two different images evoked by the root meaning of the word *sobornost'*. Khomyakov's notion of *sobornost'* refers to the dynamics of gathering and embracing the holistic interrelation of sociological, political, and anthropological realities of the Russian Orthodox people. For Afanasiev, this notion has spatial and sacral meaning: it is rooted in *sobor* the Russian word for a cathedral. This is a narrower and an inward looking interpretation of *sobornost'* and it refers exclusively to the Church. Eucharistic ecclesiology assumes a hierarchical structure of the church and gives little incentive for social engagement with the cultures outside of the Orthodox parish.

In my view, what was lost in the transition was the ecumenical vision put forward by thinkers like Vladimir Solovyov and Sergey Bulgakov, as well as the awareness and even desire to reach to the wider and sometimes hostile world outside the church with the message of the gospel. What was gained with the development of the concept of eucharistic community is the affirmation that the faith community is "the community assembled by divine initiative and divine love before everything else."⁵

At the Turns of History

The emergence of notions of *sobornost'* and of eucharistic ecclesiology define like two book covers a period of about a century. Any complex religious phenomenon is inevitably contextual and shaped diachronically by a field-force of historic, socio-political, and cultural circumstances. The Church's so-

⁵ Rowan Williams, "Foreword," in Nikolas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, trans. V. Permiakov, ed. M. Plekon (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), vii.