

The Experience of Exile and the Discovery of *Sobornost*'

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In his essay “Two Cities,” the Polish poet and essayist Adam Zagajewski makes a distinction between what he calls the settled, the emigrants, and the homeless, explaining the difference between these three categories thus:

Settled people die where they were born; sometimes one sees country homes in which multiple generations of the same family lived. Emigrants make their homes abroad and thus make sure that at least their children will once again belong to the category of settled people (who speak another language). An emigrant, therefore, is a temporary link, a guide who takes future generations by the hand and leads them to another, safe place, or so it appears to him.

A homeless person, on the other hand, is someone who, by accident, caprice of fate, his own fault, or the fault of his temperament did not want – or was incapable in his childhood or early youth of forging – close and affectionate bonds with the surroundings in which he grew and matured. To be homeless, therefore, does not mean that one lives under a bridge or on the platform of a less frequented Metro station...; it means only that the person having this defect cannot indicate

the streets, cities, or community that might be his home, his, as one is wont to say, miniature homeland.¹

I quote this to open up the notion of exile or diaspora that forms one pole of the subject of this paper: the diaspora created in the 1920s by the expulsion of the non-Communist intellectuals from the Bolshevik republic. I suppose most of them are to be classified as emigrants, who became settled in the country of their reception, and whose children grew up and settled there. My little experience of people in this category suggests that it is not as tidy as Zagajewski suggests. Although “settled,” the children (and grandchildren and great-grandchildren) of these emigrants often preserve a sense of dual belonging; they haven’t become settled in anything like the sense of those whose family has the roots of long-established settlement. They hanker after their origins, and those origins form part of their sense of who they are.²

The third category, to which Zagajewski assigns himself – the homeless – is a very broad category, and might be thought to characterize much modern society in the West. Even I, who couldn’t be more English, could be categorized as homeless in Zagajewski’s sense: like many children born in the middle of the last century, my parents moved about, so that I cannot indicate streets or a community that belong to my “miniature homeland.” And this category embraces many of the emigrants, too, especially if they emigrated as children, for, even if they turn out to be real emigrants in Zagajewski’s sense, whose children have settled, they are unable to point the streets, the neighbourhood, that constitute unequivocally their “home.”

The point of these preparatory remarks is to suggest that in looking at the experience of exile, or diaspora, and its impact on the thought of the Russian émigrés, especially in Paris, we are not looking at a tiny, limited phenomenon, but one that has

¹ Adam Zagajewski, *Two Cities* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 3–4.

² To take one, out of hundreds of examples, see the book by Fr Alexander Schmemmann’s son, Serge, *Echoes of a Native Land* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

resonances in many who not think of themselves as exiles, but whose experience embraces something of that condition so far as their own sense of their place in the world is concerned.

The other pole of this lecture is the notion of *sobornost'*, which has become a key term in the understanding of human community, and in particular, ecclesial community – the sense of being a church – in modern Orthodox theology, and which was profoundly influenced by the thought of the Russian émigrés who made their home in Paris in the middle years of the last century.

The notion of *sobornost'* was one that the émigrés brought with them from their homeland: it is one of the key terms of Slavophile thought, so we must begin by showing how the notion emerged in the nineteenth century.³ Aleksei Khomiakov, along with Ivan Kireevsky, one of the first Slavophiles, sometimes argued that, while Western Christianity was heir to three traditions – of Hebrew religion, Greek philosophy, and Roman law – Slav Christianity, or Orthodox Christianity, was heir to only the first two of those traditions (a very questionable position, given the importance of law in the Emperor Justinian's reforms). This meant, in particular, that the Slavs had no real grasp of the notion of an individual, something Khomiakov regarded as embedded in Roman law; for him it was the notion of the individual, cut off from the organic community to which human beings should properly belong, that was the root cause of the problems of the West: problems that had been introduced into Russian society by the reforms of Peter the Great and made worse during the reign of Catherine the Great.

In truth, it seems to me that Khomiakov and his Slavophilism were not as uniquely Slav as he thought. Many thinkers throughout the Western world were alarmed at the corrosive effects on human society of industrialization and urbanization, which they felt destroyed natural communities, and reduced human beings to interchangeable units – individuals, identified

³ As a matter of fact, the term *sobornost'* (as well as the term 'integral knowledge', *tsel'noe znanie*) is not actually found in the writings of the Slavophiles, Khomiakov and Kireevsky. See Robert Bird in *On Spiritual Unity: a Slavophile Reader*, Hudson, NT: Lindisfarne Books, 1998, 8 and n.