

# The Rebirth of Communion Ecclesiology within Orthodoxy: From Nineteenth Century Russians to Twenty-First Century Greeks

Ernest Skublics

---

## Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 124)

Noting that eucharistic or *communio* ecclesiology has been widely and influentially discussed in contemporary theology, both Eastern and Western, the author provides a history of this ecclesiology in Orthodoxy, tracing its roots to, inter alia, the Slavophile movement of the late nineteenth century as seen in such figures as Alexi Khomiakov, Sergei Bulgakov, and Nikolai Berdyaev. This movement in turn had an influence on more recent figures such as Georges Florovsky, Justin Popovich, Dumitru Staniloae, Vladimir Lossky, Nicholas Afanasiev, and Alexander Schmemmann. In addition, communion ecclesiology has had a wide influence beyond its Slavic origins and proponents, and the author also reviews in particular the recent and ongoing work of John Zizioulas, Christos Yannaras, Georgios Mantzaridis, and Panagiotis Nellas. The author concludes by noting that communion ecclesiology is intimately tied up with issues of theological anthropology and theological ethics, issues which invite further development.

+++++

### ***Introduction***

The revival of a eucharistic or communion ecclesiology<sup>1</sup> in both East and West in the twentieth century is a development in which theologians of both traditions were intimately involved and in fact mutually influential and interconnected. The primary Orthodox theologian who has contributed more than any other to a retrieval of an ecclesiology of communion, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, has credited, among others, the Roman Catholic theologian, Henri Cardinal de Lubac, for leading the *ressourcement* to the patristic sources from which both traditions have drawn such rich results of renewal.<sup>2</sup> De Lubac, Congar and others in the West had, of course, been inspired by returning particularly to the early Greek Fathers.

Tracing backwards this movement of revival and retrieval, we can see the mutual inspiration of East and West fascinatingly intertwined. In the panoramic view that this essay offers, we hope to bring into relief the major steps of this recovery and to reflect briefly on its major proponents, beginning with the so-called Slavophiles in nineteenth century Russia and ending with several theologians of contemporary Greece in the twenty-first century.

### ***Communion and the Slavophiles***

In some respects, the movement in the twentieth century toward a recovery of an ecclesiology of communion was foreshadowed by the Slavophiles of the 1800s. The late Orthodox historian, John Meyendorff, has commented on the positive reception within Russian Orthodoxy of the ideas of nineteenth-century Slavophiles, whose work “inherited from the early Christian and Greek patristic tradition” many of the ideas now taken for granted.<sup>3</sup> These Slavophiles, in turn, had been influ-

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms are used interchangeably throughout this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edmonton: T&T Clark, 1993), xiv–xv.

<sup>3</sup> John Meyendorff, *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow: Historical and Theological Studies* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 152–53.

enced by German Romanticism and Idealism, echoing the latter's hostile reaction to Enlightenment thought.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with the Slavophiles, we shall trace a development from the "romantic" recovery of an appreciation for the organic wholeness and relationality of the universe, and the mystical communion of the Church's character in particular, to the sacramental and eucharistic understanding of this communion in the work of several theologians whom Meyendorff enumerates as being generally influenced by the Slavophiles: Georges Florovsky, Justin Popovich, Dumitru Staniloae, and Vladimir Lossky along with a number of younger Greeks, including Christos Yannaras and Panagiotis Nellas. In a particular way, Meyendorff noted that the Slavophiles influenced Nicholas Afanasiev, John Zizioulas, and Alexander Schmemmann in their work on eucharistic ecclesiology.<sup>5</sup> Following an overview of the Slavophile influence on theological developments in the twentieth century, we will finish with an examination of its inheritance in contemporary Greek theological anthropology and ethics.

*Ivan Kireevsky (1806–56) and Alexei Khomiakov (1804–60)*

The Slavophile movement has roots in two unrelated periods: the first, German Romanticism and the second, the Greek Fathers. In the life and work of Ivan Vasilievich Kireevsky (1806–56), they come together.<sup>6</sup> Not a serious Christian, Kireevsky, a member of the landed gentry, married Natalya Petrovna Arbenyeva in 1834. Natalya was a faithful and apparently very well-read Christian who was grieved by Ivan's "complete neglect of all the customs of the Orthodox

---

<sup>4</sup> Abbott Gleason, *European and Muscovite: Ivan Kireevsky and the Origins of Slavophilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1–5.

<sup>5</sup> John Meyendorff, *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow*, 152–53.

<sup>6</sup> More detailed treatment of the Slavophile movement may be found in Serge Bolshakoff, *The Doctrine of the Unity of the Church in the Works of Khomyakov and Moehler* (London: SPCK, 1946) and Peter Christoff, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Russian Slavophilism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1961).