

# Sobornost as a Means of Anthropeidea in Russian Philosophical Thought

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**Abstract:** *In the present article the problem of seeking the purpose of life in the Russian religious thought is analyzed in the context of closely intertwined concepts, those of theodicy and sobornost. It is demonstrated that the meaning of life in Russian culture is interpreted as the spiritual salvation not only individual, but collective, which can be attained on the way of cooperation between Man and God. Hence, the key concept of Russian thought, sobornost, is originated.*

*The article formulates two ways of interpretation of sobornost. The first one understands it as the means of overcoming the human incompleteness and isolation by unifying individuals with others and with God in the Church. It tends to counterpose the positive social order, the State, non-human in its essence, and the God-like church community of self-realized individuals. The second one, on the contrary, sees the ideal of sobornost realized in the Russian Orthodox Empire.*

**Keywords:** *Sobornost, Anthropeidea, salvation, Russian religious thinking, Slavophiles.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Russian spiritual culture has numerous witnesses of fatal contradictions arising on the way to justifying man. Contradictions between contemplation and activity, the blessing of the abstract ideal and the blessing of concrete political force. Contradictions between the aspiration to spiritual self-perfection and the recognition of the impossibility of real self-perfection in a world far from perfect. Contradictions between belief in exceptional and saving power of prayer and faith used as a bludgeon against the poorest, bringing the people to despair. Many other examples in Russian social life could be given here, but those already named are sufficient to show that these contradictions are the fate of the historic, religious and philosophic creativity of Russian folk.

It is quite clear that the deepening spiritual element of Orthodoxy during the spread of the patristic literary heritage led the Russians to draw the following conclusion out of the philosophical anthropology and ethics of Byzantium: «The human soul thirsts for salvation». That was the most adequate expression of the inner harmony of the Christian symbol of the faith. Human soul — that's what really is a model of divine self-renouncing love. Neither power, nor wealth or health can compete in their vital significance with the human soul of man, which is the first sign of his resemblance to God. The soul was understood as something precious that could be found in man who must live for the sake of its salvation. Thus

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the salvation of another person's soul becomes the condition of the salvation of «myself» — the rescuer will be rescued and only the rescuing will be saved. In its turn this meant postulating the ability of mutual salvation as a result of a joint effort. The recognition of the other person as a continuation of «myself», so typical of the national psychological constitution inspiring the sense of people's unanimity, leads to the understanding that «I» can valuably exist only together with others. This «Sobornost» is not only the realization of the Christian Commandment to love one's neighbor and do unto him you wish to be done unto, but is also a central feature of Russian Orthodox thinking. Thus the problem of the purpose of life in the tradition of the Russian self-consciousness as examined here is clearly differentiated into interdependent questions of the justification of man and Sobornost.

## II. METHODS

In the present article the comparative historical, as well as phenomenological and hermeneutical methods were used.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implanted in the people's consciousness was the idea of searching for the ways of saving the soul that were identified with the search for the purpose of life. This naturally led to the fundamental source and universal metaphysical origin of the individual soul — to God. The man thirsting for salvation thus came to God. Trying to understand, in the spontaneous act of belief, the intentions of God. Trying to feel and realize in the cataphatic manner the inscrutable grandeur of His conception, the seeking man could find around himself nothing more considerable than Man himself. In this way the search for God led to the «discovery» of man. This universal trend should be taken into account, first and foremost, whenever we want to understand the peculiarity of the Russian Orthodox human ideal formed under the influence of the negative attitude to the «filioque». Being more immanent than transcendent, Jesus and Man became so close that worship of the suffering Christ naturally led to belief in the suffering Man. Thus he came to the idealization of the human soul and the striving to save it became a self-sufficient value. From this comes the typical ideal for communication in Russian spiritual culture — the means of relationship with another man — me to «not me» (Ich entgegen). This becomes the purpose of all human thought and deed, an attitude based on the recognition of the divine quality not only of his own soul but the soul of others as well. In accordance with this ethic principle, man can realize himself as a moral subject only when he uses all his strength for the sake of the other man even up to a final own sacrifice for him.

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Only possessing this ability for self-sacrifice and accepting the inevitable consequence of suffering can an individual gain salvation (All the classic Russian literature, all Russian art deal practically with this immense theme).

And the salvation is understood as a process possible only through the cooperation between man and God [1]. This fate results in cropping up of those who try to save themselves attempting to save all humanity and in this attempt often change their position from speculative goodwill to practical social reorganization. The world-understanding base of this transition is the Orthodox concept of «Sobornost», a sort of the sacralization of society.

The history of this concept is very complicated. It was developed first by a philosopher and theologian Alexey Khomyakov in XIX century. He started from the original interpretation of the term *katholikon* in the Nicene Creed, which refers to the Church and is usually (in Western tradition) understood as catholic, universal [2, C. 238-243]. However, concept of Sobornost as developed by Slavophiles, mostly by Alexey Khomyakov, are closely connected with the anthropological ideas of Ivan Kireevsky. The main point of Kireevsky thought is the search for human integrity, the harmonious development of all sides of the whole human being: will, reason, aesthetic sense, and faith, which should crown them all. The ontological integrity of human being is the aim of the whole process of salvation [3, C. 214-268]. This view is characteristic of Russian religious thinking thus making Man not a passive recipient of grace and not a self-centered and self-saving ruler of his own destiny, but a God's collaborator. And the Western civilization took a wrong turn by overestimation the principle of reason.

Khomyakov extends this intuition into the social dimension, understanding Sobornost as the space of Man's self-realization. The Church (regarded by the Russian thinker as the ideal (or the true reality) of human society) helps Man to overcome his own incompleteness as a single, isolated being connecting him ontologically with others and with God through faith. The justification of man can only be effectuated when Man expands his own self and transgresses the borders of his own personality entering into the all-unity of universal life of the Church. Thus, the Church, the ecclesiastical society becomes the indispensable means of Man's fulfillment. It should be noted here that Khomyakov himself never used the term Sobornost as a noun. For him, it could be applied only to the Church (*sobornaya Tserkov'*), in the strict sense, as the mark of the Church only. Later, as we shall see, there is a possibility for it to be «secularized» by applying it to the secular society and, most importantly, to the State, thus making them «sacred».

For as long as the Russian culture didn't make a difference between society and the Church (all society members were Christians, the people from one particular strata, i.e. peasants, were called *Krestyane*, which means Christians), so for it Sobornost means the unanimity of believers in Christ For Slavophiles, the peasants' community embodies the true Church in its social order preserved from the times when the true, Orthodox Christianity, flourished. Divine Providence demands all the people to be of one faith which is possible within the framework of the entire Church organism and becomes the most vital purpose of the true believers. Nikolai Berdyayev elegantly developing the ideas of Byzantine patristics, reasonably insisted on the necessity of principally delimiting the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar,

thus stressing the spiritual essence of Sobornost [4]. In the Sobornost of the spirit, but not in the state organization based on violence, Russian philosophers always saw the chief difference of the Orthodox world-understanding from the Catholic schism which seemed to mix up the notions of «Kingdom of God» and «Kingdom of Caesar» [5-13].

This ideas began to crystallize in the XIV-XV due to the influence of the Sergei Radonezhski, one of the most venerated Russian saints. The transcendent unity of the Holy Spirit was wisely professed by him as a superior ideal that could not have better fitted the peculiarities of his age, the essence of it being, as we have already seen, the struggle with the Tatar-Mongol oppression. These peculiarities, as so often happened, further appeared to be constant: the struggle between centrifugal and centripetal forces in Russian society often made them — and, by the way, makes us now — recall the ideal of Trinity. The regular appeal to it made the name of St Sergei immortal.

But there was another way of interpretation of the ideal of Sobornost. The prototype of the perfect harmony of the Holy Spirit became the basis for the long and difficult unification of the Russian lands into a united Empire. The czarist autocracy made the Iosiflyanian understanding of Sobornost common, and so identified Sobornost with state organization. There were very special, even extraordinary, historic reasons. That is why both its historic and cultural formation took place in the context of the millennial struggle against various foreign invaders (from the Mongol-Tatars to Hitler), which drained all Russia's vital energy and psychological resources. This fight was of course impossible without centralization of the political structure of Russia. Thus, strong, centralized, total, absolute political power was not just a means of preserving Russians as an ethnos, but came to be an end of that national development in itself.

If the Russian state policy was mainly «Iosiflyanian» (to recall the old characteristic) then literature and philosophy became a refuge for «Nestyazhatei» traditions [6, pp.179-198]. «Iosiflyanian» Sobornost turned into the autocracy (hence the slogan — Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality), while «Nestyazhatel's» Sobornost became the basis of the grand religious and philosophic images of the world. These latter were amazing in the scale of their projects for the future of mankind — Fyodorov, Berdyayev, Bulgakov [7] and others, on which the aim of the messianism of Russian Sobornost to unite the peoples of the world was grounded. This controversy between humanistic, liberal and imperial interpretation of the «Russian idea» can be traced in discussions on sobornost through all the XIX-XX centuries till today [8-12].

The evolution of the ideas of Sobornost in Russian Orthodox philosophy has the same tendency as theodicy. This tendency may be conventionally called «anthropocentrism», meaning a displacement of the «centre of gravity» of the religious and philosophical teachings towards man. One of the main peculiarities of the Orthodox understanding of man consists in the ontological understanding of the human soul and human life in general. The soul here has ontological status, i.e. the status of being because it is taken as a natural continuation of divine being, as an organic part of the latter. It is not the body but the soul that really exists.



Because at the reality of its existence it appears at the same time as an end in itself to earthly life. Appearing as a small «fragment» of the superior God the soul aspiration to attain eternal life cannot but see in «not me» («ich entgegen») the bearer of the same potentially eternal soul. The realization of the ontological link of individual souls takes place in fulfilling the imperative of God in the unification of people around Him. There comes then a rather easy link — if Sobornost is an immanent feature of soul and the individual soul has an ontological status, then Sobornost naturally becomes an essential part of «Dasein» and appears as an ontological subject. That is why central to Russian spiritual culture is the deep understanding of the fact that a separate man can save his soul only if he sacrifices himself for the sake of other people. «My» saving as the central feature of Russian thought becomes «our» salvation. Human individuality realizes itself only as a part of Sobornost — joined, social, in its final form common to the whole of mankind.

The completeness of the Sobor existence of the individual was realized in the history of Russia in a number of ways. As the spiritual organization of the Church, as an antistate element of anarchic rebellion, as a despotic, absolutist monarchic state or as a dictatorship of the proletariat. Each of these phenomena of Russian history is objectively determined and consequently, historically necessary. Each of them, despite all their extravagance, and obvious defects in certain situations, promoted in its own way the enrichment of the principles of collectivist self-consciousness of Russian people.

It is easy to imagine that not every observer recognizes the obvious value and universal significance of this status quo. For every potential or active critic the idea expressed by a talented philosopher and publicist Fyodor Stepun, might be of interest. At the beginning of the XX century he reasoned as follows: «Had Russian peasants 50 years ago been enlightened owners and cultured farmers with diesels and tractors, the Russian revolution, might have turned smoother, quieter, more rational than it was, but neither Tolstoi nor Dostoyevski would ever be what they were: world value hieroglyphs of Russian folk religiousness» [9,14]. In this opinion the dependence between the Russian historic status quo and the deep originality of Spiritual culture can be easily seen. One calls for the other, to destroy one means to destroy the other. But much more interesting is the circumstance that the spiritual values and ideals in Russia often played a much greater role than mere simple economic expediency. Russian society is inclined to function not on the basis of rational — as is understood in the West-economy, but on the basis of elevated abstract ideals, the first of which is social justice, adequate in the essence to Sobornost. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 pursued the aim of transmuting the equality and unity of people (in God's sense) into political and legal equality [10-11]. This was a reasonable and by no ways unique acknowledgement of the human soul in its communal and collective basis. That is why, by the way, Marxism could become the official ideology only in Russia.

#### IV. SUMMARY

Whatever the various interpretations of the historic phenomena might be, it is clear that each of them represents a causally reasonable realization of the Sobor idea. That is why the so-called communist era in the history of Russia is the

direct and natural continuation of its Orthodox past. The historic way of Russia shows that the Russian man has lived for a thousand years as a communal collective body recognizing the priority of the latter over the individual «Me». Would he like, would he be able to detach himself from his historic experience in facing the market reforms in Western style? That is the question, the answer to which still does not emerge today. In other words, in Sobornost can be found the basis for understanding both the communal nature of man and the sense of existence of a sociometry consisting of the opening of the individual ability. In the idea of Sobornost can be found the way of appropriation by Russian man of the social essence of his existence. It would be a great mistake not to stress even briefly that Orthodox ontology contains a permanent contradiction of the idealized Sobor essence of man and his social reality demanding constant practical perfection. Throughout the XIX century the diseases of socioeconomic and political nature became so obvious that the inevitability of the revolution at the beginning of the XX century became clear to everybody.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Thus, we can see that the Russian culture developed two different conceptions of Sobornost, the sacred Society. One of them tends to the juxtaposition of the positive social order, the State, which is, in its in its deep sense non-human, and the real, God-like and Church-like unity of self-realized individuals, while the second one identifies them.

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