INTRODUCTION

Alexei Khomiakov[1]

Thinking from Inside the Church

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Alexei Khomiakov (1804–1860) saw the European aristocracy declining before his eyes. Having emerged in the turmoil between Enlightenment thought and the conservative reaction, this aristocracy was becoming the stage for the fight between bourgeois liberalism and the radical democratic and socialist movements, between the nationalist and pro-independence trends and the large empires' policies of repression and expansion. The Catholic Church in the West ceased to play the role assigned to it by the self-styled conservatives, who were still submerged in fruitless nostalgia—at best, it served, like the Protestant Churches did, as formal justification of the new moral structures for the modern alchemists of the nation states. The Orthodox Church in Russia began to once again reflect on its identity while the world it knew was tragically collapsing. The rule of the tsars, the kaisers, and the emperors, which had become a bastion of conservatism, no longer represented an alternative. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Khomiakov, aware of this and with inspiring clairvoyance in the face of the increasingly obvious signs of this decline, sought answers in the Church's tradition of community identity, allowing Nikolai Berdyaev to write: "among the Slavophiles, was the genius of freedom, among the traditionalists, was

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the genius of authority."[2] This freedom in thinking from within the Church, from within the free Church, means that today this retired cavalry officer offers us a superb locus for reflection.

In our opinion, it is very significant that in keeping with Chaadaev's assessment, today Alexei Khomiakov's thought is still considered a "retrospective utopia"[3] instead of being offered the place it deserves based on its own merit: a place alongside his contemporary Alexis de Tocqueville, in recognition of the Russian thinker as one of the great precursors of critical thought on the dangers of modern political ideas—ideas that, with increasingly more evidence, are revealed as utopian.

Therefore, in keeping with Berdyaev, we must underscore that "this particularly needs to be stressed, that *Sobornost'*, as a community within love, was not for Khomiakov a mere philosophical idea, a borrowing from Western thought, but was the rather a religious fact, taken from the living experience of the Eastern Church."[4]

Consequently, the second decade of the twenty-first century, which is especially rich in events of great importance to the Church, gives us a privileged position from which to try to outline a contemporary view of issues that are key to modern man—and, therefore, fundamental to theology, philosophy, and literature. The specific nature of Russian religious philosophy allows us to build a more complete interpretation of the contemporary world by avoiding the increasingly obvious tricks of modern positivist thought, and to explore the theological and philosophical intuitions of Russian thinkers, which with the passing of time seem to be ever more current and on the mark. This attitude towards the legacy of Russian thought allows us to reaffirm the importance of research on the history thereof. At the same time, it makes it possible for us to try to overcome a certain complex that reduces such studies to a type of "exotic philosophical archeology" within academic theological/philosophical circles, even in Russia. Philosophy cannot exist without the "history of philosophy," but when it is reduced to mere investigations of the past, it ceases to be philosophy (the same occurs with theology). This idea underlies the selection of essays collected in this second book of the *Ex Oriente Lux* series and dedicated to Alexei Khomiakov's personality and thought and to the idea of *sobornost'* in our current context.

As we have already indicated in the Introduction to the prior book in the series, *Peter Chaadaev*: *Between the Love of Fatherland and the Love*

2. Berdyaev, *Aleksei Stepanovich Khomiakov*, 90.
3. See Walicki, "Russian Social Thought," 10; Popov, "Khomiakov," 14.
4. Cf. Berdyaev, *Aleksei Stepanovich Khomiakov*, 92.

of Truth,[5] we can identify, as specific for Peter Chaadaev and for posterior Russian thought, the development of anthropological and historiosophical aspects into an ecclesiological narrative (which is the case, for example, both for Marxists and Slavophiles). This ecclesiological aspect of Russian thought reveals its existential roots and vocation, because "we are called upon to resolve most of the problems in the social order, to accomplish most of the ideas which arose in the old societies, to make a pronouncement about those very grave questions which preoccupy humanity."[6] As Vasilii Zenkovsky highlights:

> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian humanism—in its moral or aestheticizing form—grew from this *theurgical* root, from the religious need to "serve the ideal of justice." This same theurgical motif found expression in the occult searchings of the Russian freemasons, and in the mystical flurry of various spiritual movements during the reign of Alexander I; it was also expressed with exceptional force in Chaadayev.[7]

His understanding of Russia's future as a space open to the intervention of God's will was deeply rooted, as Zenkovsky emphasizes, in a "Christocentric conception of history,"[8] a "conception of history," for example later ingrown by Alexei Khomiakov in an ecclesiological principle of *sobornost'*.[9]

For this Russian thinker, one of the founders of the Slavophile school of thought, belief in the Church's—and Christian thought's—organic relationship with the society that has been given to us, is an assertion as self-evident as the need to nourish ourselves from the legacy of age-old ecclesiastic experience. Khomiakov was thus able to unreservedly offer an alternative to the also-Christian schools of thought colonized by modernity and shackled in the sterile fields of neo-Scholasticism, Kantianism, liberalism, and capitalism, even overcoming the limits of the deserts of Christian thought mangled by modernity and buried under the names of conservatism, traditionalism, values, etc. The Slavophile proposal of "integral life" entails the need for ontological, epistemological, anthropological, and historiosophical exploration, which, rooted in the experience of *sobornost'*—communion—allows Khomiakov to explore ways to overcome the colonization by modernity, which is something that the Church continues to need today as well. The life of the Church community thus emerges as a true alternative, full of life and

5. Mrówczyński-Van Allen et al., "Critique of Adamic Reason."
6. Berdyaev, *Meaning of History*, 109.
7. Zenkovsky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 1:55–56.
8. Zenkovsky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 1:157.
9. Mrówczyński-Van Allen et al., "Critique of Adamic Reason."

hope—and not just as one element of individualized, alienated, and fragmented post-Enlightenment society. Thanks to this position, Khomiakov was able to emphatically affirm,

> The communion in love is not only useful, but fully necessary in order to grasp truth; the comprehension of truth is founded upon love and is impossible without it. Truth, inaccessible for any individual method of thought, is accessible only to the sum of methods of though tied by love. This trait sharply distinguishes Orthodox teaching from all others: from Latinism, which rests on external authority; and from Protestantism, which liberates the personality in the deserts of rationalistic abstraction.[10]

The pathologies that Khomiakov attributes to the Latin Church and to Protestantism—namely, authority and individualism alienated in the desert of the abstraction of reason, no less alienated and fragmented—are today the fundamental characteristics of modern states, of the societies in which we live, and to a large extent, of the alternatives that are brought forth in an attempt to counter them, too, whether they be new anarchist and anti-system schools of thought or nationalistic or imperialist claims; that may also be presented as Christian, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox. For Khomiakov, the Church is not merely an institution or a doctrine, but rather a living body of truth and love, imbued with the spirit of *sobornost'*. Understood in this way, the Church is also a social and political community and organization. The importance of this view of the nature of the Church became evident during the dramatic years 1917–1918, when the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church was convened and held. This Local Council, *Sobor*, turned out to be absolutely essential to the life of the Russian Orthodox Church under the control of the Bolshevik party and in the face of the assault of Communist ideas—a life that fundamentally depended on the Russian Orthodox Church's capacity to safeguard its identity.

Alexei Khomiakov's works therefore still figure today as a provocation that helps us once again take on the challenge of rescuing Christian thought from modern colonization, of taking it back from the desert of enlightened abstraction so that it can offer modern man a true alternative, a space for love and truth, the living experience of the Church. His person and thought present us with this challenge, which shapes the objectives of this book and the essays collected in it: namely, furthering knowledge of the work of this Russian thinker, advancing studies of his sources and his influence on the development of Russian thought, and exploring the surprising topicality of his philosophical/theological proposal—because the entire life of this

10. Khomiakov, "On the 'Fragments,'" 313.

"doctor of the Church"[11] figures before us as a profound reflection in light of God's generosity. It figures as a reflection before God, who creates mankind; before God who is the master of history and invites man to, in his freedom, participate in it; before God, who incarnates in Christ this invitation and dedication to humanity in the form of the Church.

In keeping with the entire series, our intention here is to offer Western readers a selection of works that we hope will serve as aids to rediscovering Khomiakov's thought (and the eventual consequences thereof) in the modern context. We would like to do so free from the typical complexes imposed on Christian thought in our era. Our readers will decide if we have been able to achieve this objective. As with this Introduction, which faithfully reflects the idea brought to bear in the series as a whole, we hope that we have been able to put the figure of Alexei Khomiakov into a living and contemporary context without imposing formal or interpretational restrictions and structures. He is a fundamental figure in Russian thought specifically, and through it, in Christian thought more globally. We also hope that this book will serve as the next step on the path towards recovering the Church's reflection on its own identity as *sobornost'*, as the Community that is the living body of Christ, that it will be the next step forward towards recovering the capacity for thought from within the Church.

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11. Samarin, "Predislovie," xxxvi.