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# RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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## Editorial

In this issue of *Religion State & Society* Alexander Agadjanian writes about the first attempt by an Orthodox Church to outline a 'social doctrine', in the form of the *Foundations for a Social Concept for the Russian Orthodox Church (FSC)*, produced by a Bishops' Council of the church in 2000. Agadjanian describes the Russian Orthodox Church as 'facing a classical problem of religious ecology: how to respond to constant changes in the *Lebenswelt*, the surrounding social world, while still retaining a cognitive identity and institutional vitality', and he finds the *FSC* to be a 'torn and polyphonic document', in which a 'pro-world stance, affirmed in the beginning, is constantly questioned through the rest of the text', and in which affirmation of the dignity of the individual turns out to be in the context of the church protecting the individual in his or her need to resist 'an expanding godless civilisation'. One Russian commentator on the document soon after it appeared went so far as to say that it showed that 'all possible forms of social existence of the church in a modern secularised society are in fact in contradiction with the sacral concept of social life which is deeply rooted in Orthodoxy'.

This is the first time the Russian Orthodox Church has attempted the official formulation of a social doctrine; however, from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1920s, and thereafter in exile, successive Russian Orthodox thinkers and social activists grappled with the very question of how Orthodoxy was to respond to the changing social, economic and political environment. One fertile concept, first formulated by Aleksei Khomyakov in the 1840s, was that of '*sobornost*', often translated as 'individual diversity in free unity', and based on the insight that human social relationships are a manifestation of love and analogous to the relationship amongst the three Persons of the Trinity.

Agadjanian draws attention to one fact that appears particularly puzzling. In the *FSC* no reference is made to '*sobornost*'; much less is there any attempt to deploy it as a conceptual tool in the shaping of a social doctrine for the Orthodox Church. Why should this be?

One answer is almost certainly to be found in the way the Russian Orthodox Church is run today. 'There is no democracy in the Church' is the bald opening sentence of an analysis produced earlier this year by the Moscow-based Institute for the Study of Religion in the Former Soviet Union and the Baltic States. The all-pervasive authoritarianism within the Russian Orthodox Church today is in part a legacy of the tsarist period, but possibly to a larger extent of the Soviet period. The Russian Orthodox Church is in fact the only national Soviet institution still surviving in Russia today, in that its leadership remains largely unchanged from Soviet times. Moreover, the tendency towards autocracy seems not to be abating; rather the reverse. Until 2000 the highest authority in the Russian Orthodox Church was theoretically the all-Russian 'Local Council' (*Pomestny Sobor*), bringing together bishops, priests and laypeople, but at the Bishops' Council (*Arkhieireiskiy Sobor*) of that year the assembled prelates decided that this would no longer be so and that Bishops' Councils

would henceforth assume this role. There is thus no longer even a theoretical mechanism whereby important issues affecting church life can be submitted to open debate by representatives of the whole church membership. Those who want the church to convoke a Local Council recall the sterling work done by the Local Council held during 1917 and 1918 while the Bolsheviks were consolidating their control in Russia.

Those involved in formulating an official church document therefore probably avoid resorting to a principle that has been associated with a different method of running the church. *Sobornost'* is an articulation of an alternative to the 'universal ecclesiology', which is embodied most systematically in the Roman Catholic Church. This alternative is a 'eucharistic ecclesiology', which in the traditional Orthodox perspective is the pattern on which the primitive church was built. At that time every local church, under its bishop, was autonomous and independent, and indeed as a eucharistic assembly in itself fully represented the Universal Church. Higher co-ordinating entities such as Metropolitanates and Patriarchates were secondary structures to enable systematic contact to take place between the local churches.

'Democracy', the term used in the report quoted above, is not in fact the most accurate term to use to describe the ecclesiastical alternative to the authoritarianism of the Russian Orthodox Church today; but clearly the question of the reassertion of *sobornost'* involves amongst other things the reassertion of an active role for priests and laypeople in the affairs of the church.

It may be, meanwhile, that there is another reason why current Russian Orthodox social discourse fights shy of the concept of *sobornost'*. To its credit, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church attempts to identify itself with the needs of society at large while distancing itself (not always successfully) from an association with the state as such or with particular political groupings. There is, however, no shortage of public figures in Russia who are all too ready to use the Orthodox Church and its symbols in support of their own programmes. There is hardly a politician who does not feel his campaign incomplete without a photograph of himself standing side by side with an Orthodox prelate.

In this context, the concept of '*sobornost'*' is often taken in vain. 'From the standpoint of ideology and world view, Russia is the keeper of the ancient spiritual tradition', says Gennadi Zyuganov, the leader of the renovated Communist Party. 'Its fundamental values are *sobornost'*, the supreme power of the State (*derzhavnost'*), sovereignty and the goal of implementing the highest 'heavenly' ideals of justice and brotherhood in earthly reality.' Zyuganov thus associates *sobornost'* with nationalist, statist and communist vocabulary. Nor is it only secular politicians who thus misuse the term *sobornost'*. 'The honeyed lie of "pluralism" and "freedom"', said the Russian nationalist Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg, who died in 1995, '... conceals within itself a deadly poison that destroys the spirit of conciliarism (*sobornost'*) of the Russian people as well as the power of the state.'

Over the deployment of the concept of *sobornost'*, then, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church today apparently finds itself between Scylla and Charybdis. It seems that for two reasons, one negative and one more positive, the Russian Orthodox Church is at the moment unable to reattach itself to a potentially fertile stream of its own spiritual and intellectual heritage in the task before it: to flesh out these 'foundations for a social concept' into a fully-fledged contemporary Orthodox Social Doctrine.

## Notes on Contributors

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