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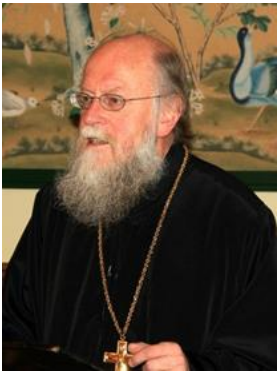
Community and Person

Abstract

Much Orthodox thought over the last couple of centuries has been concerned with the interrelationship of community and person, often conceived of in opposition to the idea of the human person as an individual. In opposition to 'individualism', often seen as a curse of Western society, it is emphasized that one becomes a person out of the experience of community, initially the family, and then wider society, including the Church. After a general discussion of the dynamics of this discussion, the paper discusses the origins of modern Orthodox thought on this question in the Slavophils and their notion of *sobornost'*. The patristic roots of this, as



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well as its source in the doctrine of the Trinity, are discussed and critically assessed.

Keywords
community, person, individual, Trinity, slavophils

1 Community and Person as central Theme of Orthodox Theology

The theme of community and person has become a popular theme in Orthodox theology, perhaps especially Russian Orthodox theology, over the last two centuries. The two terms - community and person - seen as potentially opposed terms that need to be related. On the one hand, there is the community, the group, which may take many forms, from the family, through the village or town, ultimately to the nation or empire. It is seen as ambivalent: on the one hand, the community provides a focus for belonging; we think of ourselves as belonging to families, towns, countries, but we also think of ourselves as belonging to other groups - clubs and societies, say, or the places where we work and find a community of those working in the same place - and also, of course, the Church, both our local church and the group of all those who share our faith, in Orthodox terms, all those with whom we are in communion, through our relationship to our bishop. On the other hand, however, the community can provide something less positive: communities expect us to conform to expectations, they can ostracize those who don't belong, they can coerce their members in terms of behaviour and beliefs, they can seem dehumanizing.
So, on the one hand, the community. On the other, the person. How are we to define that? Much Orthodox theology over the

last two centuries has approached this notion with the sense that there is a difficulty here, that many modern ways of understanding humanity miss - and thus misunderstand - the notion of the person. It has become common to oppose two terms that might otherwise seem similar: person and individual. It is perhaps easier to start with the notion of the individual. It means, etymologically, what cannot be divided any further – individual. It is an ultimate unit: if you seek to divide it any further you destroy it; literally in the case of a human individual, if you seek to chop it up, you kill it, you are left with assorted limbs, which may be human, but are not human beings. But such a notion of individual has little to do with anything specifically human: you can have individual cats and dogs, individual trees, individual flowers, individual insects, individual stones - or individual atoms (the Greek word *atomos* has exactly the same etymology as individual - something that cannot be any further divided). The notion of an individual tells us nothing about what it is to be human; it is simply a way of categorizing or cataloguing things - and they are things, even if they are living things. What they had in mind, those thinkers who felt dissatisfied with the notion of humans as individuals, was the idea of a human being defined, say, by his number as a worker in a factory, or defined by his address (Room x, on floor y, in flat z). In contrast to such a notion of the human individual, they opposed the notion of the human person. Person, *persona*: etymologically it suggests a sound coming through (*per*), coming through a mask, as the original use of the term *persona* was to designate the parts played by actors in a play, the *dramatis personae*, and in ancient drama the actors wore masks. This at least suggests people talking to one another, even if they are playing roles. The Greek word is *prosopon*, which has the same original use as the Latin *persona*, but the etymology is more promising: *pros-ops*, to or towards the face, opposite the face - suggesting

that the person can only be understood in relation to another person, we exist as persons when we turn our faces one to another, when we face each other. So, we don't really exist alone at all; as persons we exist in relation to other persons. Personhood is not an ultimate unit, is something that exists between persons: it already entails some kind of community. This notion can be developed in various ways; we can even see personhood as something that belongs to the reality of God himself, for we believe that God exists as three persons in an indissoluble union of being three persons that face one another in love, a love that binds them together in their unity, and flows out in love for creation. The idea of seeing a face suggests the opposite of a lonely individuality; when we see another face, our eyes meet, a light of recognition may pass between us, we are no longer alone, no longer abandoned.

1.1 Community and Person in Sayings of the Desert Fathers

There is a telling story illustrating this in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. It tells of St Macarius the Great, who walking in the desert one day came across a human skull. He moved it with his stick and the skull spoke. Macarius asked the skull who he was and it replied that he was a pagan priest, now in hell, and he tells him that if the living take pity on them they find respite. 'What is this alleviation,' St Macarius asks, 'and what is this torment?' The priest replies, 'There it is not possible to see anyone face to face, but the face of one is fixed to the back of another. Yet when you pray for us, each of us can see the other's face a little. Such is our respite.'[1] The torment is never to see another face; the respite is a momentary sideglance.

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1 *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Alphabetical Collection, Macarius 38, trans. Benedicta Ward, London 1975, p. 115.

1.2 Community and Person in Russian Thinkers of the 19th Century

The notion of the individual the Russian thinkers of the nineteenth century felt was characteristic of the political thought of the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Take, for example, the idea of society constituted by a social contract. The idea is that free individuals agree - in a 'contract' - to give up some of their freedom in return for the protection that a formally constituted society can offer. So some freedoms are surrendered - we can no longer do what we like, there are laws - and in return we have armies to protect us, a health service to look after us, and so on, all of this organized by the state. It seems a long way from how Aristotle thought of human beings in relation to the society of his day: man, he said, was a *zoon politikon*, a 'political animal', literally a living being who found his sense of belonging in the city, or *polis*. For Aristotle the human being and society belonged together: the city consisted of human beings, and human beings found their sense of identity in the city. The Russian thinkers of the nineteenth century felt that something had been lost, when they compared Aristotle with the political theorists of what they called the 'individualist' West.

So far I have tried to introduce the background to the notions of 'community' and 'person' - and its antithesis, 'individual' - in Orthodox ways of thinking about the human being and society in the last couple of centuries. What I want to do now is go back and look at the sources of our theological reflection as Orthodox, beginning with the Scriptures.

2 Community and Person in the Bible

'And God made man, according to the image of God he made him; male and female he made them' (Gen. 1:27). I've abandoned the gender-inclusive language I've been using so far, because the word translated 'man' here, *anthropon*, is not an abstract noun, like 'human kind', but a concrete noun: man (in Russian and German, too, but not, alas in English, there is a word for a human being that doesn't simply mean male man: *chelovek*, *Mensch*). In the first part of the sentence we are told God made man in the singular, but in the last clause we are told that he made 'them' male and female. It is hardly a mistake. We are being told about the unity of humanity, and yet, also, that humanity is also a manifold, based on the distinction between the sexes, between male and female. This combination of one and many comes again in the next chapter when God makes woman from man's side, for 'it is not good for man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18), and presents her to him, and says that he should cleave to her, and 'the two will become one flesh' (2:24). 'One is one, and all alone, and ever more shall be so', the English folksong has it: not a good idea! The Scriptures present humanity as one-in-many, a unity embracing different persons. In the New Testament, similar ideas are introduced. We are all, as baptized Christians, members of Christ, forming one Body, the Body of Christ. The apostle Paul presents a picture of the Church, consisting of many members, who are all bound up with one another: 'And if one member suffers, all the members suffer together; if a member is glorified, all the members rejoice together. For we are the body of Christ, and members in particular' (1 Cor. 12:26–7).

The Genesis text, however, seems to suggest that the manifold that is humanity is in some way based on the distinction between the sexes. The Fathers, however, are not very good at

handling what an American poet has called 'the archetypal cleft of sex'.[2] I am not sure we are much better, either. We (and they) can see that the relationship of man and woman forms the basis of the family and that that is the primary unit of human society. We can see (most of us; they, the Fathers, rarely) that the relationship is one that offers human beings the deepest human delight, but we (all!) recognize too that this 'archetypal cleft' lies behind the most painful and destructive aspects of human experience. Genesis, furthermore, seems to present the division into male and female as fundamental to what it is to be human, not just something that anticipates the conditions of the Fall, as many of the Fathers were tempted to think; and if fundamental to what it is to be human, fundamental to any kind of human society or community, including the Church. Even in the New Testament there are hints of this in the way in which the Church is spoken of as the (female) bride of the (male) Christ (see Eph. 5:25–32, and Apocalypse 21–2).

However, this verse from Genesis does suggest that we are not to consider human beings as individuals, separate from each other, but as bound together within the unity of humanity, a unity that is embodied in the communities to which we belong. The doctrine of the image of God embraces this aspect of what it is to be human, too, for if being in the image means that we have an affinity with God, that entails, too, that we have an affinity with one another, on the basis of which find some kind of togetherness. And if the Church is the community embracing those who, in Christ, have set out on the path to the restoration of fallen humanity, then the community of the Church should give us some sense of what a true human community should be. The Church, too, is part of the fallen world, so we should not

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2 From 'Dodona: Asked of the Oracle', in: *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt* (New York, 1997), p. 207.

expect to find in any unambiguous way the ideal human community in the Church.

The New Testament gives us some pointers, and we can glean some others from the history of the Church. The apostle Paul has much to say about the nature of the community of the Church and its unity, though this very fact demonstrates how threatened this unity and harmony was in practice. To the Galatians, he affirms that 'in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith… There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:26, 28). National differences, rank, and even the 'archetypal cleft' are to be transcended in the Church. And he talks of the way in which this is to be achieved: through the fruits of the Spirit, found in the Church, which are 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22–3). He speaks, too, of bearing 'one another's burdens' (Gal. 6:2). And of the 'more excellent way', that of love: 'Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

What these add up to immediately is, I think, something like this. We are to think of the Church as many embraced by oneness, and oneness expressed in the many: both poles - the one and the many - are important, irreducible. It is in this sense, I think, that the doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to our understanding of Christian community, or communion; not that the Trinity is some kind of model that we should try to emulate - that would be to think in too anthropomorphic terms, though it has been very popular in the last few decades, not least among Orthodox - but rather that in the Trinity we see that neither one nor three are ultimate: at the very heart of reality, or the source

of reality, there is both one and three, together. So in human community, as it is meant to be, neither the one nor the many are ultimate; the many does not yield before the one, as if what mattered was the one community, and the many has to be compressed into it (by some unitary authority, say), nor is the one simply to be thought of as some kind of harmony among the many, as if it were the individuals who were important, and their harmony secondary. Another way of putting this is to say that we find our own identity as persons in the togetherness we share with others, and that unity is an expression of something that we genuinely hold in common. Many ways of understanding human community either start with the individual or with the community, but it seems to me that what we are to learn in the Church is that neither the one nor the many are more fundamental: we find our identity through our communion with others, and yet we are not just units in a group, which is what really counts. When the apostle Paul talks about the human community that is the Church, he talks about ways of behaving on which we yield to the others and support the others, not ways of asserting ourselves over against the others. There is, to use a word we are familiar with in another context, a *kenosis*, a self-emptying, that enables us to make space for the others, and in that space allowed by the others find ourselves.

In the history of the Church, the kind of community about which we learn most is something that has always been a minority pursuit, though sometimes a large minority: monastic community. It is no wonder that the passage from Galatians referred to above (Gal. 5:22–6:2) is the passage from the Apostle set for a monk or nun who lived in community. And yet, much monastic literature is marked by a sense of the fragility of human community in a fallen world: stress is placed on obedience, as if the exercise of free will is most likely to be a misuse, and there is a good deal of fear about what came to be called 'particular

friendships', again with fear of abuse driving out any attempt to consider what true friendship might have to offer.

3 Sobornost and katholikos

I want to take this sense of the fundamental nature of community to what it is to be human further by reflecting on a notion that has been made much of in Russian Orthodox theology for about a couple of centuries now, and that is the notion of *sobornost'*. The term is associated with the Slavophiles, especially Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevsky, though it appears that the abstract noun *sobornost'* is not actually found in their writings.[3] The word *sobornost'* is derived from the word used in the Slavonic version of the Creed to translate the Greek *katholikos*, catholic. Apparently, though it is not entirely clear, some of the older texts of the Slavonic Creed simply transliterated *katholikos* as *katholichesky*, as did the Latin version, and virtually all European versions, but in (or maybe by) the fifteenth century *katholichesky* came to be replaced by *soborny*. It is often said that *soborny* is derived from the word for a council in Slavonic, *sobor*;[4] but I suspect the truth is more interesting. In translating the Greek word *katholikos*, the Slavonic translators went back to the root meaning of the word, which is formed from the Greek καθ' ὅλον, according to the whole, and took the word to mean something like 'taken as a whole', 'gathered together', and so used the word *soborny*, an adjective derived from the verb *sobrat'*, to gather together. The word for council or synod, translating the Greek *synodos*, meaning a 'coming together', a

3 See Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, *On Spiritual Unity, A Slavophile Reader*, translated and edited by Boris Jakim and Robert Bird (Hudson New York: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), p. 8, n. 1.

4 Ibidem, p. 15.

'gathering' and hence 'council', is *sobor*, so the use of *soborny* in the creed, suggested that one of the notes of the Church was that it is a gathering together. In a remarkable way, then, the word *soborny* makes a link between the Church as Catholic and the Church as conciliar: between the Church as proclaiming a truth that concerns everyone, and the Church as constituted by being gathered together by God. There is another word that seems to fit this vision of the Church: as well as *katholikos* and *synodos*, there is the word *synaxis*, another word for gathering together, which is one of the words used for the Divine Liturgy, the gathering together of the people of God in one place under the bishop. It is in this way—as gathering together into unity—that the Church can be seen as an image of God, as St Maximos the Confessor suggests in his work on the Divine Liturgy, called *The Mystagogia*:

> For many and of nearly boundless number are the men, women and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance, by race and language, by way of life and age, by opinions and skills, by manners and customs, by pursuits and studies, and still again by reputation, fortune, characteristics and habits: all are born into the Church and through it are reborn and recreated in the Spirit. To all in equal measures it gives and bestows one divine form and designation: to be Christ's and to bear his name.[5]

The convergence of the Greek *synodos* and *katholikos* in the Slavonic *sobor/soborny* produces a happy association of ideas. The note of the Church, catholic or *soborny*, is manifest in its gathering together in unity humans of all kinds, and this is man-

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5 St Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogia,* in: Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings, translated by George *C. Berthold*, Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, New Jork: Paulist, 1985, 1, pp. 163–74.187, modified.

ifest in the gathering together, the *synaxis*, in the church building (also in Russian *sobor*, from the Greek *katholikon*, for a public church, as opposed to a chapel) and in the councils, or synods, of the Church. *Sobornost'*, then, developed by the Slavophiles as an ecclesiological concept to account for what they regarded as the peculiarly Orthodox understanding of unity in the Church is also, as it should be, a term to describe the fundamental nature of human community. As an ecclesiological concept, it suggests a vision of the Church as combining unity and freedom: the unity of the Orthodox Church is a free association of believers, or perhaps better those who belong, and within the Church find their true freedom, in opposition to what Khomiakov saw as the unity found in the Catholic Church, imposed by authority and encroaching on, or overriding, human freedom, and the so-called unity within the Protestant Churches, which is a free association of those who agree in their interpretation of the Scriptures and confessions - a unity purely human and thus inevitably quite fragile. As a term to describe the true nature of human community, it also draws together unity and freedom. Clearly some sort of distinction between human community and the community of the Church is needed, but ultimately it is artificial, for it is in Christ, in the Church, that human beings find their true humanity. Khomiakov is often criticized for the vagueness of his notion of *sobornost'*, but that vagueness - or better, lack of an entirely exhaustive definition - seems to me intrinsic to the notion. For it is not some constitutional term that can be cashed in terms of legal norms, rather it is an attempt to indicate the fundamental nature of human community, or association, which springs from the religious nature of humanity, the realization that what is fundamental to being human is the capacity to respond to each other and to God, ultimately the capacity to open oneself in prayer. Khomia-

kov evokes this is a striking passage from his short pamphlet, *The Church is One*:

> We know that those among us who fall, fall by themselves, but that no one is saved alone. Those who are saved are saved in the Church as her members and in unity with all her other members. When someone believes, that person is in a community of faith; when someone loves, that person is in a community of love; when someone prays, such a person is in a community of prayer. For this reason no one can rely on one's own prayers, and each in prayer asks the entire Church for intercession - not as though doubting the intercession of Christ, the one intercessor, but in confidence that the entire Church always prays for all her members. There pray for us all the angels, apostles, martyrs, patriarchs, and the most-high Mother of our Lord, and this holy union is the true life of the Church.[6]

We are saved in the Church, in unity with all her members. It seems to me that Orthodox theology insists on the doctrine of deification, *theosis*, because recovering the fullness of the image will involve real changes in ourselves, changes that mean that the image of God in which we are created becomes more and more evident. We are to become transparent, as it were, to the image of God reflected in who we are most deeply. Others are to find in us, not the fragmented human beings that we are as a result of the Fall, but the love of God, for the sake of which we have been created. In doing this we shall discover our true humanity: deification, as St Maximos makes so clear, is the restoration of our true humanity, not its diminishment or abandonment. And it is a change grounded in the amazing change that God himself embraced, when he became human for our sakes,

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6 Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader, p. 48.

not abandoning what he is - divinity, but assuming what he is not - humanity. St Athanasios affirms, an affirmation that is repeated by one after another of the Fathers: 'The Word of God became human, that we might become god'.[7] It is this amazing exchange, founded in God's love, that reveals that at the heart of what it is to be human is an openness to God and his love through which we are taken up into the divine life, and discover there what it is to be human, what God intended human life to be - communion with Him in the Spirit.

And that is where I want to leave this reflection, with a final summing of what seems to me most important in what we have been considering. We find ourselves ending, in the quotation from St Athanasios, with the conviction that we discover what it is to be human - both as person and community - as we respond to and participate in God's love in the Incarnation of the Son of God and his Death and Resurrection: a response that transforms us into God, and at the same time reveals what it is to be truly human. And what it is that links community and person - the two poles of what it is to be human - is fundamentally prayer: prayer to God, a prayer in which we open ourselves to God's transfiguring love, and find ourselves growing more and more into the image of God in which we were created, but also, prayer for one another, for it is this prayer for one another that creates the sinews, as it were, of the Church; it is this mutual prayer that opens us to one another and fashions a human community, open to the love of God, and in which others can see and be drawn into the love of God. It is an awe-inspiring vision of the Church set in the world, 'for the life of the world'.

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7 St Athanasios, *On the Incarnation*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1977, p. 54.