

# The Social and Historical Impact on the Formation of Russian Medieval Spirituality

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the ways of influence of religious worldview on the spiritual life of Western and Eastern Europe. Considering the arguments in favor of the existence of such a phenomenon as a universal «European worldview», the authors conclude that despite the existence of common grounds, the spiritual life of Western Europe and Eastern Europe (in particular Russia) have fundamental differences.

The authors pay special attention to the figure of St. Sergius of Radonezh who was the embodiment of Russian medieval spirituality. The Saint harmoniously combined «clever prayer» with practical patriotic activity, thus following the principle of «energetic love». The article also analyzes the «contemplative» and «activity» model of man in the context of the dispute between «Nestyazhateli» and «losifyane». The authors conclude that Russian state policy has been mostly «losifyanian», and the philosophy became a haven for «Nestyazhateli».

In conclusion, the authors highlight such a key concept of Orthodox thought as «sobornost», thus noting that in Russian religious thought, human life finds its true meaning only in the human community.

**Keywords:** European thought, Russian religious thinking, Sobornost, medieval spirituality.

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking about «European thought» we must first of all ask ourselves if such a phenomenon exists.

Assuming that for many people the question may seem purely rhetorical and, consequently, superfluous, we shall try, from the very beginning, give a direct answer, without it any attempt at analysis of the influence of religious values upon the public life of Europe made in this paper would not be feasible.

It seems obvious that at the roots of this phenomenon lie some fundamental reasons which determine his entire character. The only obvious evidence confirming the existence of a particular European way of thinking is the objective identity of the humanist values of Christian origin constituting the universal essence of European thought, thanks to which it appears as a unified type of social development.

Despite the obvious nature of these premises for the existence of a specific European world understanding, we should not forget that the social and cultural life of Western and Eastern Europe went in different ways. England is an example of the Western European type of civilized development while the Eastern European states - Russia, in particular, - displayed a very different pattern of life.

In the present article we would try to analyze how this unique life pattern based on the original version of Christianity impacted on the formation of the specificity of Russian civilization.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the present article the comparative historical, well as phenomenological and hermeneutical methods were used. The most important characteristics of the phenomenological method used in this article are antireductionism and eidetic vision (vision of essences). It was used in order to provide the exact and relevant description of essential structures and meanings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Western Europe at the end of the feudal epoch stepped into the period of classic capitalism. The impressive work of laying the foundations of today's economic and political stability was started many centuries ago, and the Reformation became one of the momentous corner-stones of Western European thought in its present form.

As for Russia that formed the Eastern flank of Europe, it was never successful in this capitalist «way of life». After the abolition of serfdom in 1861 by Alexander II Russian capitalism, having just begun its development collapsed in 1917 (Prosic, 1917). Attempts at its galvanization in present-day life seem hopeless to some people. Neither did Russia

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experience Renaissance as a restoration of “pagan” ideals of classical antiquity, a religious reformation and has limited itself to a new version of the Bible translated anew from Greek in the reign of Alexei Mikhailovich (XVII century). (It is curious to note, by the way, that this rather insignificant act of church life led to a social and political cataclysm which in Russian was given the name of *Raskol* (Schism). Thus in the sphere of religion, Russia appeared to be more conservative, more “medieval” than Western Europe (Zenkovsky, 1995).

Even this very brief comparison makes one suppose that if the rhythm of historic movement in various parts of Europe did not coincide, then, perhaps, it did not correlate as well with a different way of thinking and world understanding comprising the nucleus of the whole complex of national traditions. If we do assume that such fundamental differences in European thought exist, then this assumption may be best expressed in the following way: If the life of Western Europeans (as well as American colonists) was formed under the determining influence of the ideal of individual freedom, then in Russia the freedom of individual being was always understood as an epiphenomenon of a collective social organism. We cannot go into an exhaustive explanation of this circumstance in the framework of a single paper, so we should limit ourselves to the examination of one of the most important analytical aspects - the influence of the religious world understanding on the spiritual life of the Russian and English nations, which is the subject of this paper. This influence seems to represent most clearly the peculiarities of Western and Eastern Europe. Though the major part of them is quite understandable *a priori*, it would not be correct to put a full stop after having convinced ourselves of the existence of religious determinism in the traditions of our peoples.

The syncretic embodiment of Russian spirituality which included all the tendencies of historic spiritual culture of Russia developing later, was St. Sergius of Radonezh (1321—1391), the most revered Russian saint who embodied the loftiest ideals of patriotic unity (Florensky, P., and Trinity-Sergius Lavra, 2020). The centralization of the Russian state striven after by Sergius in the epoch of the Tatar-Mongolian Yoke aggravating the disintegration of independent principalities, was based on the patriotic recognition of the belief of man in the irresistibility of goodness and love for one’s neighbour. Here it should be noted that the favourite Russian icon «Trinity» that became a

symbol of the state consolidation of the Russian territory, due to which the Tatar-Mongols were overthrown, was painted by a contemporary of St. Sergius - the great Andrei Rublyov (Reimer, 2008). Thus we see that on the very first steps of forming the original spiritual culture in Russia, the primary significance of the social dimension of Christian life was accentuated. As a result, two different ideal images of man were necessary formed: an “active man,” engaged in social activity, and a “contemplative man” seeking the spiritual transformation and union with Christ.

St Sergius saw in the Christian dogma of Trinity an image of optimal social arrangement and could harmonically combine the mystic practice of the «Jesus prayer» with worldly patriotic activity. The principle of «energetic love» that was followed by Sergi us of Radonezh expressed the universal — the first and last in Russia - harmonic combination of spiritual virtues and practical efficient service to the people. The first great original Russian mystic sought to reconcile the contemplative spirituality and social action. This was most vividly shown in the participation of St Sergei in the preparation of the heroic military move of the Great Prince of Moscow Dimitry Donskoi who started the process of liberation from the Tatar-Mongol enslavement (Bulanina, 2020). Just as with any syncretism, the vital principle combining the merits of contemplative, estranged love with the outer necessity of political activity, led to further differentiation. However, since the time of St. Sergius of Radonezh, Russian religious culture tended to see religious sence in social activity, to ascribe religious values to political action.

The philosophical base of this fact is the Orthodox concept of «Sobornost». This concept was developed first by a philosopher and theologian Alexey Khomyakov in XIX century (Khomyakov, 1994:238-243), but for him, it was the most important aspect of the tradition Russian Orthodoxy, which determined all its history. The concept of Sobornost means, among other things, that human life finds true sense only in the human community. Only in a community can the human soul find salvation, fully express itself, in all its strength and extraordinary creative ability. And, as a consequence, the society is understood in this conception as principally equal to religious community. Thus we see that the result of the development of Russian mentality through the Middle Ages up to the XIX century was ascribing the religious value to human society and social action. Let us briefly analyze the

most important political and cultural factors that helped to form this view starting from the Middle Ages.

The main, dominant factor of the life of Russian society from the XII till the XX century was the necessity of unification of the colossal and comparatively thinly populated territories of Russia before a threat of invasion. The Mongol-Tatars craved immense pastures while the innermost interests of Germans, Poles, and Swedes lay in the sphere of the ideological reorientation of Russia. (Later, in the XX century, Hitler fought for potential riches and vital space for his nation). But at the roots of every conquest (ignoring the historically condemned Golden Horde) there always was present an implicit geostrategic aim - to ensure the leadership of the West over the entire Eurasian continent. Orthodox Russia was a major obstacle in the way of those aspirations.

That is why both its historic and cultural formation took place in the context of this millennial struggle against invaders, 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, which became so close to Russians and is still alive today.

The embodiment of the contradictory «contemplative» and «active» metaphysical principles in some concrete historical Russian figures had corresponding results of their realization.

Turn to the famous argument between «Nestyazhateli» (St Nil Sorski (1433-1508)) and «Iosiflyane» (Iosif Volotski (1439—1515)) (Sobornost, W. N.', pp.179-198]. The two opposing parties hotly argued whether the Church should possess riches. Man, according to Nil Sorski, is, first and foremost, a contemplative being. His aim is the struggle with passions and achievement of humbleness, his ideal is a moral self-perfection (Lilienfeld, 1963).

In Iosif Volotski's views, man is, on the contrary, an active being. He achieves his aims by any means, even by violence. The grandeur of his spirit is for him indisputable only when it is supported by more essential things, i.e. power and wealth (Smith, 2018).

Thus we see that the “active” and “contemplative” principles, united and inseparable for St. Sergius, were polarized in the real history of Russia. The Church, the

guardian of spiritual values of Russian civilization, was bound to seek the governmental support and protection and gave up social leadership. The result was that the focus was shifted to the worldly action of the state, on which the absolute religious value was transferred.

If the Russian state policy was mainly «Iosiflyan» (to recall the old characteristic) then literature and philosophy became a refuge for «Nestyazhatel» traditions. «Iosiflyan» Sobornost turned into the autocracy (hence the slogan of early Slavophiles - Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Patriotism), 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, Florenski, Berdyayev (Russian idea, 2008). and others, in which the messianism of Russian Sobornost was the foundation of the aim to unite the peoples of the world. The Russian religious thinkers in the XIX-XX centuries started to find another ways of harmonizing “active” and “contemplative” principles and gradually turned against the state.

## SUMMARY

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.

Whatever the various interpretations of the historic phenomena might be, it is clear that each of them represents a causally reasonable realization of the idea of Sobornost. That is why the so-called communist era in the history of Russia is the direct and natural continuation of its Orthodox past.

In the concept of Sobornost can be found the basis for understanding both the communal nature of man and the sense of the existence of 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. In this article we highlighted some points that show how this idea was formed in Russian cultural history.

## CONCLUSION

Trying to estimate the experience now, at the beginning of the XXI century, it may be said that after

all the civil cataclysms Russian culture suffered no Apocalypse. It is destined to live on soon on the lines of attempting to fit itself into the classic market matrix, the opportunities, perspectives, and consequences of which are far from clear.

The cult of Sobornost on which Russia stood firm for more than ten centuries, once more meets the challenge of Fate. To predict now the outcome of this confrontation is hardly possible.

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