
Faith and Science in the Thought of Khomiakov

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Critique of Western Solutions

In the activity of Alexei Khomiakov and other Slavophiles one can observe some paradoxes: on the one hand, it emerged under the tremendous impact of European philosophy; on the other, it was a reaction to the westernization of the Russian tradition.¹ Indeed, they were well-versed in German idealism, especially in the philosophy of Hegel and Schelling, whom they knew in person.² Although their opponents, the Westernizers, accused them of “scientific emptiness,”³ the Slavophiles supported the humanities (especially history) as well as natural and exact sciences. Suffice it to say that Khomiakov, who graduated from the faculty of mathematics of the Moscow University—according to his contemporaries—was “interested in everything, had an extensive knowledge in all fields and there was no subject alien to him”⁴ and, consequently, was perceived as “a systematic dialectician, with great talents.”⁵ In this context one can mention his invention of the steam engine “Moskovka” which he patented and sent to the World Exhibition in London in 1851.⁶ Generally speaking,

1. See Noble et al., *Orthodox Theology*, 89.

2. See Kireevskiy, “Rech’ Shellinga”; Lyaskovskiy, “Brać’ya Kireevskie,” 355–57; Christoff, *I. V. Kireevsky*, 43–46, 58; Lipich, “Slavyanofil’stvo i zapadnichestvo,” 9–15.

3. See Vicunich, *Science*, 267.

4. Koshelev, *Alexei Stepanovich Khomiakov*, 43.

5. Stojanović, “First Slavophiles,” 564.

6. See Khomiakov, *Description*; Riasanovsky, “Khomiakov’s Religious Thought,” 88; Christoff, “Industrial Problem,” 143–44.

they never abandoned scientific and philosophical modes of discourse, even when they employed the language of faith, as such an abandonment would have placed their arguments outside the linguistic contours of their day. Instead, Khomiakov and Kireevskii sought to align philosophy and science with their own spiritual autobiographies, which were imbued with religious experiences shaped by Orthodoxy.⁷

In spite of their great respect for science, the Slavophiles “devoted much time to attack Western Enlightenment . . . both in its rational and empirical form” and postulated a solution in the shape of a Russian counterpart that was supposed to be a spiritual Enlightenment.⁸ For Khomiakov, true education consisted not so much in training in science as in rational illumination and clarification of the spiritual component of the person as well as the entire nation. In other words, science as such is just one aspect of education and should be completed with a religious element.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of the domination of positivism as well as a recovery of the monastic tradition in Russia, according to which the purpose of human life consists not in “informing the intellect,” but “training the soul, not *máthesis* but *áskesis*.”⁹ The Slavophiles embraced this tradition and popularized *Philokalia*,¹⁰ the outstanding anthology of Patristic mystico-ascetical texts (translated into Russian, as mentioned above, by St. Theophane the Recluse). At the same time, in a manner similar to the adherents of Russian academic philosophy,¹¹ they tried “somehow to employ that tradition in such a way that it might generate a theoretical, truth-telling power comparable to that of Western intellectual tradition, but not based on it.”¹²

The Slavophiles, especially in the primary stage of their activity, adhered to Schelling’s idea about the necessity of “positive, living knowledge.”¹³ However, they were convinced that German thought could not be transplanted onto Russian soil and postulated creation of a new, original Slavic philosophical system. Starting with the argument that the Western culture

7. Michelson, “Slavophile Religious Thought,” 259.

8. See Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought*, 87.

9. Nichols, “Metropolitan Filaret,” 325.

10. See Coates, “Philokalia,” 676, 687–94; Hughes, “Mysticism and Knowledge,” 18–22; Gvozdev, “Svyatootecheskie korni antropologii.”

11. See Andreev, *Dukhovnaya Akademiya*; Fedotova, “Bogoslovskoe nasledie”; Evfimiy (Moiseev), “Dukhovnaya Akademiya”; Tsvyk, “Dukhovno-akademicheskaya filosofiya.”

12. Nichols, “Metropolitan Filaret,” 325.

13. See Kireevskiy, “Devyatnadsatyy vek,” 15.

had lost its Christian roots, they criticized the disparity between religion and everyday life; secularization on the one hand and the true or irremovable limitation of scientific investigation on the other.

Khomiakov's criticism of the "inappropriate" attitude of the Western model of the relationship between science and religion was a consequence of their disapproval of the European civilization as such. According to them, in the Western tradition (known in Russia from the time of Peter I, who attempted the "secularization" of the Russian culture) science and religion were divorced. The Western Church would interfere in the issues of science and did not leave room for its independent development.

By contrast, Orthodoxy was perceived by the Slavophiles—too enthusiastically and inaccurately—as a place of non-conflicting coexistence of faith and science. Khomiakov's position may serve as an illustrious example of the conviction about the potential, harmonious correlation between science and religion. He affirmed that positive sciences did not appear to fully resonate with the historical evidence of the Holy Scripture or with its dogmatic system.

Every science should report its contemporary conclusions correctly and openly, without humiliating lies, without ridiculous exaggeration, without reticence which could be easily exposed. There is no doubt that the data of some positive sciences, such as geology, a factual science such as history or a speculative science such as philosophy do not seem to be in accordance with the historical testimony of Holy Scripture or its dogmatic system. . . . Sciences have not complicated their development and we are still far from reaching their final conclusions. Similarly, we have not achieved a complete understanding of Holy Scripture. There should be doubts and alleged disagreement; but only by addressing them boldly and appealing to further scientific development of can faith show its firmness and steadiness.¹⁴

Khomiakov did not strive for the unification of Christian truths and scientific data. Quite the opposite, he was convinced that by forcing other sciences to lie or be silent, faith undermines not their authority but its own. In doing so, Khomiakov expressed his aspiration concerned with the freedom of scientific research that was supposed to be in the Orthodox culture. For instance, he wanted to attack the censorship in Russia after the revolutions of 1848. Nevertheless, this standpoint was often in contradiction with the other remarks of the Slavophiles. For them, faith was the premise and result of all

14. Khomiakov, "Ob obshchestvennom vospitanii v Rossii," 357. Yury Samarin concurred with this statement. See Samarin, "Predislovie," xv.

human knowledge, including science. As Khomiakov perceptively pointed out in his unfinished letter, which was posthumously published,

I gave the name *faith* to that faculty of reason which apprehends actual (real) data and makes them available for analysis and awareness by the understanding [*Verstand*]. Only in this area do the data still have the fullness of their character and the marks of their origin. . . . The blind student of optics of whom I spoke knows the laws of light which is inaccessible to him, but he accepts them as phenomena on faith in other men senses, just as the man who can see has faith in his own senses, and the artist in his own creation.¹⁵

As we can see, in the above-cited letter Khomiakov treated faith as an initial phase of each process of cognition, not in a specifically religious sense, but rather as an affirmation of the subject of knowledge. At the same time, the Slavophiles considered faith to be “a higher stage” of knowledge inasmuch as it covers not only a number of rational convictions (e.g., mathematical truths), but also convictions that transcend reason (e.g., faith in God).¹⁶ “Faith is an utter limit of human knowledge, whatever form it takes: it determines the entire sphere of thought.”¹⁷ Viewed as such, faith has universal epistemological significance and acts as a guiding principle. Its preceding point is an intimate recognition of the subject, “inner” or “leaving knowledge.”¹⁸

The Slavophiles adamantly insisted that the one-sided development of education in Europe had culminated in modern atheism. At the same time, as it has been noted, the Slavophiles struggled against rationalism (considered “the greatest threat to inner wholeness” or integrity¹⁹), but not against rationality or reason as such. They did not

sought to eliminate the study of the natural sciences in Russia, nor did they endeavour to subordinate it to strict religious control: their aim was to show that Russia’s national genius and “world mission” derived their strength from the Russian “religious mind” untouched by and only slightly cognizant of the world of reason and science. They appreciated the power of scientific experiment and theory, but they thought the wisdom

15. Khomiakov, “Recent Developments,” 251–52.

16. See Kireevskiy, “Dnevnik. 1852–1854,” 272.

17. Khomiakov, *Zapiski o vseмирnoy istorii*, 6: 250.

18. Khomiakov, “On the ‘Fragments,’” 312.

19. Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy*, 150.

of the saints infinitely more powerful as well as more congenial to the Russian mind.²⁰

The Slavophiles insisted that the Orthodox legacy, where faith interconnects with reason, could serve as an archetype for European education. It is no wonder then that the Slavophiles proposed, as a solution to this situation, an attempt to defend the traditional Byzantine and Slavic way of philosophizing that considered reason (and science) in the broader perspective of the so-called integral life and where the priority belongs to the faculty of faith.

Postulate of Integral Life

The Slavophiles were highly skeptical about the current state of Russian philosophy and theology, as it had grown to be remote from its Patristic sources. They did not diminish the role of reason, but only intended to establish the proper correlation between faith and knowledge, intuitive, empirical and discursive principles. In order to return to an adequate system of cognition, the advocates of this movement postulated recovering the chief position of faith as a state of the entire human being which “is able to embrace the whole of life.”²¹ According to Khomiakov:

Faith is always the consequence of revelation recognized as revelation, it is a perceiving of an invisible fact manifested in some visible fact; faith is not *belief* or logical conviction based on conclusions, but much more. It is not the act of one perceptive faculty separated from others, but the act of all the powers of reason grasped and captivated in all its depth by the living truth of the revealed fact. Faith is not known only or sensed only, but is known and sensed together, so to speak; in a word, it is not knowledge alone but knowledge and life.²²

The Slavophiles’ project of “integral knowledge” rooted in the Patristic tradition consisted of the coordination and concentration of all human capabilities, the wholeness of the human personality. It is not about simple integrity of faith and reason. The point is that the very process of cognition rises up to a higher level in accordance with faith so that the New Testament postulate of “the renewal of mind” (Rom 12:2) would be fulfilled.²³

20. Vicunich, *Science*, 389.

21. Letter of Khomiakov to Samarin from March 1, 1849 (Khomiakov, *Pis'ma*, 276). See also Nizhnikov, “Vera v tvorchestve.”

22. Khomiakov, “Western Confessions,” 56.

23. See Obolevitch, “*Locus Philosophicus*,” 11.

This kind of Christian thinking and philosophy would be “the sum and the common foundation of all sciences and the conductor of thought between the sciences and faith.”²⁴ There is no need to *adjust* worldly knowledge to religion, since the Christian faith should be a *foundation* of each kind of cognition. In this respect Khomiakov asserted that the controversies between scientific knowledge and religion that took place in history curiously stimulated the development of science. As an example, he pointed to paleontological discoveries considered to be a “weapon” against the Bible and urged scientists to continue their work even if their initial motivation was to give up.²⁵ According to this interpretation, it is science that ought to face up to the Christian truths and not the other way round.

Science as such and, in consequence, freedom of science is not dangerous for believers. What is more, science could be an instrument of Christian culture and education, because this knowledge implies the hypothesis which transcends the empirical data. “Science should expand the field of human knowledge and enrich man by its data and conclusions”²⁶; it “makes clear our notions . . . reveals the mysteries of the divine world.”²⁷ Yet, science is just one of the manifestations of true enlightenment and education, the way to the truth, but not the truth itself.²⁸ Whereas the Westernizers (particularly Alexander Herzen) treated science as a remedy for the idealistic philosophy of German Romanticism, the Slavophiles found it to be a merely formal ability that does not reflect the whole of reality. In other words, science is just a *plan* of a building but *not the building* itself. In this depiction, Khomiakov, in his letters of 1844 and 1845 addressed to William Palmer, an Anglican theologian and a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, claimed that “Germany has in reality no religion at all but the idolatry of science.”²⁹ As we can see, the Slavophiles contended that absolutization of scientific knowledge (as it takes place in positivism) leads to a false interpretation of the world. Additionally, science—contrary to “believing reason” or “knowledge”—has no moral value, and so is inferior to the latter.³⁰

24. Kireyevsky, “Necessity and Possibility,” 262.

25. Khomiakov, *Zapiski o vseмирной istorii*, 5: 30.

26. Khomiakov, “Foreigners’ Opinions of Russia,” 169.

27. Khomiakov, “K serbam poslanie iz Moskvy,” 388.

28. Khomiakov, “O vozmozhnosti Russkoy khudozhestvennoy shkoly,” 76.

29. Khomiakov, *Russia and the English Church*, 6; cf. Khomiakov, *Russia and the English Church*, 17.

30. Gershenzon, “Ivan Vasil’evich Kireevskiy,” 436.

At the same time, the members of the Slavophile movement demanded free teaching of secular disciplines and improvement of education at all levels including universities.

Serious and challenging science quenches passion and leads man to reasonable humility; only an empty and superficial science annoys pride . . . in final classes of university courses science cannot be too deep and comprehensive: it needs freedom of opinion and doubt, without which it would lose everybody's respect and esteem; it needs frank boldness that in the best way prevents secret impudence. . . . Science . . . needs freedom of opinion as well as freedom of doubt, without which it loses its estimation and dignity.³¹

Khomiakov added: "where science enjoys freedom and respect for the sake of itself it bears fruit and greatly contributes to the common good, but where it is treated as a hired servant it is powerless and does not bear any fruit."³²

Their project of integral knowledge had both an apparently polemic and apologetic character. First of all, it was an opposition to the "abstract" (for instance, overestimated, autonomic, isolated, separated from the other powers of cognition, therefore partial and perverted) principle of reason that was presented in the West.

The conception of the Slavophiles, following Patristic thought, was directed against the fragmentation of cognition and the whole of human life.

The truth of reason, if it is to be truth, must also be both a moral and an aesthetic truth. From this it follows that for the realization of truth, the spirit must have other qualifications which are not rationalistic. Our intellectual power is also conditioned by the moral side of our life. . . . Truth needs the entire man, and reason that is out of harmony with religion is as powerless a vehicle of truth as faith that denies reason.³³

To crown it all, knowledge is not of a private character, but belongs to the whole of the Church community, that is conciliarity or catholicity (*sobornost'*).³⁴ "The medium of the knowledge of the truth is not the indi-

31. Khomiakov, "Ob obshchestvennom vospitanii v Rossii," 369–70.

32. Khomiakov, "K serbam poslanie iz Moskvy," 407.

33. Stojanović, "First Slavophiles," 578.

34. On the various meanings of the Russian word *Sobornost'*, see Christoff, A. S. *Xomjakov*, 139–40, 145–47; Sabev, "Nature and Mission," 262–63; van Rossum, "A. S. Khomiakov," 76–77; Vogt, "Church as Community," 407–10.

vidual but the Church; truth that is not attainable by the individual is attainable by an assembly of persons bound together by love.”³⁵ To some degree, it resembles the concept of “epistemology of interpretation” by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and Josiah Royce (1855–1916),³⁶ according to which cognition is not an individual but a social process.

These philosophers did not so much intend to harmonise faith and reason, theology and science, as to establish a new order for the whole of life itself (in diverse aspects, such as reasoning and cognition education, religious practices, etc.) that would be in accordance with Christian Revelation and the principles of faith. The Slavophiles did not intend to highlight the pure transrationalism that, taken in itself, could be as abstract as pure rationalism.³⁷ They rather sought unity of faith and reason in the realm of the so-called living knowledge and “believing reason” that is natural reason permeated by the Christian truths and acting in accordance with them. The task was not to exclude or suppress science or any rational activity but provide integrity of different human capabilities in their “free” cooperation, in order to “gather together the separate parts of the soul into one force, to search out that inner heart of being where reason and will, feeling and conscience, the beautiful and the true, the wonderful and the desired, the just and the merciful, and all the capacity of mind converge into one living unity.”³⁸ In fact, the liberty of scientific investigation proclaimed by the Slavophiles was just a declaration far removed from reality. According to this project, science is not a neutral field and should be determined by Biblical truths. The Slavophiles’ aim was not to distinguish between methods of science and theology, but to show that scientific knowledge does not guarantee truth and needs be supplemented with a religious attitude.

Khomiakov recognized that science has an international character: “in the field of abstract and applied sciences all of the educated world constitutes a whole union,”³⁹ and yet, each country conveys scientific truths in its own manner.⁴⁰ Indeed, the Slavophiles underlined the leading role of the very “Slavic” comprehension of philosophy in order to “subordinate the entire meaning of Western civilization to the dominance of Orthodox Christian conviction by developing a law of indigenous thinking,”⁴¹ since “this higher

35. Stojanović, “First Slavophiles,” 570.

36. Gavin, “Community as Process,” 120–21, 123–25.

37. See Sudakov, *Filosofiya tsel'noy zhizni*, 84.

38. Kireevsky, “Fragments,” 285.

39. Khomiakov, “Pis'mo v Peterburg,” 115.

40. Khomiakov, “Razgovor v Podmoskovnoy,” 219.

41. Kireevsky, “Fragments,” 280.

principle of knowledge is preserved within the Orthodox Church⁴² as a repository of the requested *sobornost'*. For this reason their statement was—to a certain extent—of a nationalistic (contrary to the cosmopolitan views of the Westernizers) dimension.

Russia has its own word to say about philosophy and science that should be founded on “living” faith, unlike “formal faith” (that is, formally “proved”) in scholasticism,⁴³ because “in seeking to arrive at the truth of speculation, Eastern thinkers were primarily concerned with the proper inner condition of the thinking spirit, while Western thinkers were more interested in the external coherence of concepts.”⁴⁴ As the opponents of the Slavophiles noticed, they had built a fictional model of Western education—a sort of a “chemical formula” that could be transformed arbitrarily, instead of real facts.⁴⁵ Indeed, their critics hit an imaginary situation according to which science and religion in the West remained in permanent conflict, whereas in Eastern Christendom it had a place where it enjoyed a fruitful cooperation already on the epistemological level in the shape of “believing reason” and “integral knowledge,” which are a description or even metaphors of the existential aspirations of believers rather than a very state of cognition. The Slavophiles had a tendency “to treat reason and faith as essentially a single entity, with rationality (discursive reason) and faith (‘higher’ or ‘believing’ reason).”⁴⁶ It must be stressed that Khomiakov and other Slavophiles were “among the first Russian intellectuals to pay attention to the heritage of the Holy Fathers”⁴⁷ so that Khomiakov himself was considered by another Slavophile, Yuri Samarin, to be “a teacher of the Church.”⁴⁸

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42. Kireevsky, “Fragments,” 282.
43. See Kireevsky, “Reply to A. S. Khomiakov,” 83.
44. Kireevsky, “European Culture,” 213.
45. See Pisarev, “Russkiy Don Kikhot,” 241.
46. Coates, “Philokalia,” 694; “Light of the Truth,” 161.
47. Dushin, “St. Gregory Palamas,” 117; cf. Christoff, *I. V. Kireevsky*, 143–74.
48. Samarin, “Theological Writings,” 183.

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