

APOLOGY of CULTURE

Religion and Culture in Russian Thought



edited by

Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen

Teresa Obolevitch

Paweł Rojek

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Catholicity as an Ideal Foundation of Social Life

Gregory Skovoroda and His Concept of the High Republic

—VICTOR CHERNYSHOV

IT IS A WIDELY acknowledged fact that Gregory Skovoroda stands at the very beginning of modern Russian and Ukrainian thought. Although Russian and Ukrainian scholars fervently dispute whether he belongs to the Russian or the Ukrainian cultural trend, very few of them have ever dared to deny his importance and the key role he played in the history of both Russian and Ukrainian philosophy.

Most of the ideas we find in the texts of prominent Russian thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were already present in Skovoroda's writings, although sometimes in a very specific or imperfect form. One of the ideas is the idea of catholicity (*sobornost'*), which in the nineteenth century drew considerable interest from Slavophiles. Slavophiles (as well as many others afterwards) saw in catholicity the true archetype and ideal foundation of social and political life, sanctified by the authority of the Christian Church—as the concept became widespread and well known from the ninth article of the Nicene Creed.

There is no such term as "catholicity" (*sobornost'*) in the writings of Skovoroda. Actually, abstract terms were quite alien to him—he did not

like them, and therefore used them rather rarely. It was the Slavophiles (e.g. Ivan Kireevsky, Alexei Khomiakov), who initially introduced the concept of “catholicity” to the Russian intellectual tradition. Later, in Russian philosophy and theology, it continued its triumphal procession throughout the writings of Russian thinkers until the end of the Russian Era of philosophy and the beginning of the Soviet one. However, the most brilliant and showy representation it had in the writings of thinkers of the Russian Diaspora (e.g. Nicolai Berdyaev, Semen Frank, and many others), who devoted themselves for different (but equally enthusiastic) studies of the idea, in which they saw the only foundation for any normal social life. Although the issue itself was not altogether alien to Skovoroda, since he described the same reality though in other terms which later Russian thinkers would have usually described with the concept of “catholicity.”

Skovoroda begins from afar. Although it seems altogether natural in order to penetrate into the mystery of human social life, first, we should give us an account of the nature of human beings, as the philosopher considers it to be. Therefore, it is quite natural that the study of social life begins with the issues rather peculiar to anthropology and ethics.

Gregory Skovoroda believed that people are created to be happy. The very source of his philosophy is the aspiration for happiness. The quest for happiness and happy life is an existential foundation of Skovoroda’s teaching: “There is nothing more pleasant for a Pilgrim as talking about the City, which all his Toils will crown with Rest. We were born for True Happiness and Travel to it. And our life is the Way, flowing as a River,”¹ says one of the personages of his dialogues. Thus, Skovoroda says that human life is like a pilgrimage towards a city of rest, comfort and happiness. A guideline on this way is that we can call the basic human instinct, which is the human craving for happiness—everyone wants to be happy. It is, as Skovoroda puts it, the most powerful motivation for any human activities.²

People strive (blindly, and almost madly) for happiness, but in the majority of cases do not obtain the desired goal. Why does it happen? What is the reason for all of these human failures? Skovoroda answers that for a separate human being in itself there is no hope at all, and the battle for happiness is altogether lost. There is a showy image in one of Skovoroda’s works: a dog who is carrying a piece of meat across a river in its jaws happens to catch sight of its reflection. Wishing to take the piece of meat away from the (imaginable) adversary, the poor thing loses its own.³ Thus the life of

1. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 503.

2. *Ibid.*, 502.

3. *Ibid.*, 404, 437, 513, 791, 958.

ordinary people is very much like this fable. People who want to gain more, lose even that which they had. The human pursuit of happiness may easily turn (and in the majority of cases it does so) in a bitter state of unhappiness.

Skovoroda sees the main source of this pitiful state of human unhappiness as human folly⁴ or naughtiness, which hinders people from happiness: “The source of all our troubles is our naughtiness [*bezsovetie*]⁵: it takes us, putting bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.”⁶ The collection of naughty people make a society of unadvised people who are almost unable to decide for themselves; Skovoroda calls them “the crowd,” “low people,” or “the unadvised world.” We may recollect his words:

O world! The world unadvised!
Thy hope thou in princess putttest?⁷

The unadvised world is the source of disorderly passions, tumults, wicked ideas, opinions, and prejudices, which hinder people from happiness. For a concrete human being this state is like a deep sleep: the ordinary unadvised people live as in a sleep, dreaming the dreams, which are very far from the real state of things: “All the world sleeps. . .”⁸ Their life is rather unreal, but the unreal, dreamy life, Skovoroda supposes, can hardly become a happy one, since eventually there will come the time for them to wake up. The basic human instinct can do nothing even against the ruinous activity of time,⁹ yet lesser in face of death.¹⁰ Therefore, an empirical human being is altogether helpless to realise this main instinct and attain happiness—the waves of time, and eventually the death, it seems, are able to take everything, wherein usual people put their trust for happiness.

The only way to avoid unhappiness is to get rid of the collective illusion which the unadvised world offers. Life in this illusion Skovoroda likens to that in Sodom, as well as the people of the crowd he likens to the wicked inhabitants of the biblical city.¹¹ Therefore, to avoid wickedness

4. It seems, here, as in many other places of Skovoroda's works, we may hear an echo of ideas of Skovoroda with those of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was one of Skovoroda's favourite authors. Desiderius wrote an entire book on the subject of folly, which title is *Stultitiae Laus*—“The Praise of Folly.”

5. Literally, the word means the state of being unadvised. The concept comes from the Church-Slavonic translation of the biblical book of Prov 11:6.

6. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 507, see also: 560, 571, 654, cf. Isa 5:20.

7. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 70.

8. *Ibid.*, 200, 966, cf. 960.

9. *Ibid.*, 163.

10. *Ibid.*, 60.

11. *Ibid.*, 440, 603, 788–94, 796, 798, 800, 879; cf. Gen 19:1–29.

and unhappiness (and gain happiness and felicity instead) a human being leaves the wicked city. The departure from Sodom is an urgent task, since the entire human life and happiness depend upon it. It must be proceeded immediately, without any further delay, and glancing back¹² to the hell from which the exodus is made: "Remember Lot's Wife!"¹³ Skovoroda reminds us. The only way to do this is the way of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the only way to overcome the false opinions and prejudices of the crowd, and to overcome them is the only way to put the beginning for pilgrimage toward happiness. Leaving a settled place is not an easy thing, leaving a settled place it is to become a pilgrim and stranger (of that who yet long not ago was a settled and neighbour), taking the road towards the invisible (but intelligible) end of the journey. For Gregory Skovoroda endows the ancient imperative "Know yourself!" with a predominant significance. It is a call for spiritual revival, dehypnotization, and the beginning of the recovery from the illness with which the unadvised world is heavily tormented in its dreamy unhappiness. The revival is the "second birth"¹⁴—the "birth from above" that Christ once upon a time spoke about to Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). Self-knowledge is ultimately necessary. It reveals the things of which an "inhabitant of Sodom"—"the man of flesh and blood" is completely ignorant. The only sign, which reveals the calling (which is generally unconscious) is intuition, deeply rooted and buried in the depths of human nature—the aspiration and craving for happiness.

Describing the metaphysics of self-knowledge as a second birth, Skovoroda insists definitely that self-knowledge is to reveal the reality which the "Sodom man" is absolutely ignorant and unaware of. The reality is the inner life of a person. In many places in his writings, Skovoroda invites us to divide everything "in two," "to perceive two in everything."¹⁵ For him the whole, empirical world (and everything in it) must be divided in two, since the world is twofold in itself, since such is his nature. Considering each particular human being to be a "little world" (microcosm), Skovoroda insists upon using the same principle as with the large world (macrocosm). This division is important enough as it helps to make a distinction between the carnal and spiritual, temporal and eternal, phenomenal and ideal, il-

12. There are at least three widely known cases of "looking behind (back)" in the European culture: that of Orpheus on his way from the netherworld, the second one of the wife of biblical Lot (Gen 19:26), and the third one about which Christ warns in the Gospel of Luke (9:62).

13. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 786–800.

14. *Ibid.*, 784, 789, 790, 791, 798, 1284.

15. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 309–12, 320, 324, 332, 343, 388, 393–407, 440, 461, 528, 578, 604, 666, 928, 1355.

lusion and reality. The division—Skovoroda supposes—is to reveal the inner beauty of the human self, making the spectator interested in his/her spiritual life, and eventually leading the person to reveal the hidden image of everlasting God in their own self.¹⁶

In relation to human nature, the division is presumably to represent the difference between general human nature (i.e. the human substance) and the particular human nature (i.e. the person, the mind or heart), which form the empirical reality of a concrete human being. Following Apostle Paul's footsteps (2 Cor 4:16), Skovoroda recognises in a human being two "men"—an "inward man" and an "outward man."¹⁷ The "inward man" is a spiritual part of human being, turned to God, as the "outward man" is another part of the same (empirical) human being, but turned towards the world and the temporary existence of the transitory life. This distinction enables Skovoroda to make a few substantial conclusions. Only the "inward man" is able to communicate with God and inherit God's Kingdom, while the "outward man" must "exhaust himself" in doing the job which he is intended (and called) to do in this world. This apparent loss of the outward man will contribute greatly to the "inward man." The people who are seeking to find happiness after the "outward man" will eventually suffer greatly and ultimately lose while those, who are seeking happiness in their own "*serdechnyya peshchery*" ("caves of heart")¹⁸ will be given the everlasting joy and felicity of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, having at its foundation the image of everlasting God, the "inward man" can easily overrun the boundaries of created nature that enables him for direct and immediate personal communion with God. The communion takes its place immediately within the holy of holies of a human being—within the human heart. Gregory Skovoroda is discoursing much—it is one of his favourite topics—on the human heart, which he understands as an existential core of any human being. The predominant significance for it has its intentions and values, everything a human being values, craves and strives to attain. On these grounds, there is an opportunity to speak about "the earthly heart" (or "the old heart") and "the new heart:" the appearance of the latter is due to the second birth, which is, in its own turn, a result of self-knowledge.

The call to "Know yourself!," for Skovoroda, is an aspiration for the discovery in the depths of one's personal being the voice of God calling. and eventually obtaining in the fullness of its light the understanding of

16. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 231.

17. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 176, 200–202, 205, 249, 294, 310, 339, 1237, 1270, 1271, 1277, 1279.

18. *Ibid.*, 82.

God's will concerning the concrete human being that is the personal vocation (*srodnost'*), i.e. the call for a kindred activity unto which a person is predestined by God's Providence.

Yet the most important fruit of the self-knowledge is the discovery of the mystery of Divine Providence in relation to the universe in general¹⁹ as well as to any concrete creature in particular.²⁰ This revelation of the mystery of Divine Providence leads the person to be thankful, feeling a deep gratitude to the Creator and Preserver of all humankind, which Gregory Skovoroda supposes to be the only adequate response to it.²¹ This deep gratitude and thankfulness transforms the person, making him or her God's child, ascending from the state of slavery to the most perfect state of kinship with God. It is also noteworthy that Skovoroda stresses that the connection is altogether spiritual that removes any suspicions and disapproves any charges of pantheism: "The unity is neither in a bodily likeness, nor in the same state, nor in likeness of clothes, nor in a number of years, nor in the same age, nor in a clannishness, nor in a sharing of the same lands; it is neither in heaven, nor in the earth, but in hearts which are connected in the unity of Christ's philosophy."²²

Ultimately, the call for self-knowledge is a call for a personal holiness, which is to be realized in a person of the concrete representative of the human race. The mystery of holiness drew the attention and keen interest of Skovoroda many times throughout his writings. The typology of holiness is not easy for the reader to understand. It seems that its main feature is its individual character, a certain setting apart from the rest, a distinct individuation from everything connected with the crowd or even a "mass (or public, collective) conscience." The rest of necessary features are truth,²³ stability (or immovability),²⁴ goodness,²⁵ mysteriousness,²⁶ detachment and uncommonness (set towards the God alone),²⁷ remoteness from corruption

19. *Ibid.*, 218.

20. *Ibid.*, 654, 902, 1365, 1373.

21. *Ibid.*, 874, 927, 1046, 1048, 1364.

22. *Ibid.*, 1270.

23. *Ibid.*, 231.

24. *Ibid.*, 389.

25. *Ibid.*, 656.

26. *Ibid.*, 736, 780-81.

27. *Ibid.*, 736, 751.

(immutability),²⁸ love of virtue(s),²⁹ the greatness.³⁰ All these, Skovoroda supposes, purport to create the “saving harbour,”³¹ a new heart,³² which is the abiding place for the Holy Spirit himself. Apparently, Skovoroda was convinced that human holiness is a result of a deeply personal activity, which is in accord with God’s will. Most people are not holy since they live on their own, pursuing worldly lusts and desires of their own carnal heart, as those, who are holy live in communion with God, after God’s will, keeping his commandments. All of those who feel this kinship with God make up a particular people—a holy nation, a chosen generation of God’s offspring, a city (or commonwealth, or a republic) of God.

The most important means on the way of self-knowledge is the Holy Scripture—the Holy Bible. For Skovoroda the Bible is the third world—along with the great world (i.e. the macrocosm or the Universe) and the little world of a particular human being (i.e. the microcosm). Formulating his teaching on the basis of the three worlds—the macrocosm, the microcosm, and the symbolical world of the Bible, Skovoroda apparently follows in the footsteps of Saint Maximus the Confessor.³³ For Skovoroda (as with Maximus ten centuries before³⁴) there is *Scriptura homo mysticus*—“the Holy Scripture is a mystical human being.” It means that the Holy Scripture offers to any human being a perfect archetype of being, which is apparently an ideal model of being for both the great world and any particular human being. Therefore, the Bible comes to be something like the thread of Ariadne, guiding through a labyrinth of the inward world of human beings (microcosm), governing and directing a particular human being towards the way of happiness and salvation, which is the way of communion with God and the other people of God.³⁵ The Bible shows clearly “the face of the Almighty,” it is a clear symbolical representation of God and his plan for the world. This Skovoroda’s teaching echoes the Pauline doctrine (“Pauline panentheism”) that everything which is there is in God, and there is God in everything, that is because he is called *the Almighty*.³⁶

28. *Ibid.*, 780.

29. *Ibid.*, 1063.

30. *Ibid.*, 141–42.

31. *Ibid.*, 1233.

32. *Ibid.*, 1284, 1359.

33. See, e.g., Maximus the Confessor, “Mystagogia.”

34. *Ibid.*, cols. 683–84.

35. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 201, 796.

36. Cf. Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 2:10; 8:6; 2 Cor 2:18; Eph 1:23; 3:9; Col 1:16–17; 3:11.

It is no wonder then that the showiest and the most original of Skovoroda's images, representing an ideal human society, appears in his tract *Lot's Wife* dedicated to principles of reading and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, being used in relation to the Bible—it is the concept of the High Republic (*Gornyaya respublika*).

You must know, my friend, that the Bible [it] is a New World and a People of God, a Land of the living, a Country and a Realm of Love, the High Jerusalem, since, beyond the low Asiatic, there is the High one. There is neither hostility nor discord. There is no old age or gender, or difference either in this Republic. Everything is common there. The community is in love. Love is in God. God is in the community. Here is the Ring of eternity!³⁷

A few pages later the term reappears, Skovoroda reprises the idea: "In the High Republic, there are all things new: the new People, the new creatures, the new creature. It is very much unlike to that what we have here, under the sun, wherein everything is odds and ends and vanity of vanities."³⁸

It is usually remarked upon that Gregory Skovoroda borrowed the idea of the High Republic from Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (and the early Slavic spiritual writers, e.g. Theophanous Prokopowicz, who also used the term borrowed from Erasmus), but made some changes in its meaning.³⁹ However, whatever the immediate source of this concept was for Gregory Skovoroda, he substantially changed its meaning, complicated the semantics of the term, supplemented the concept with new features, stressed the personalistic aspect, which is rather typical for the theological tradition of the Eastern Orthodoxy.

It can be easily observed that the quoted passages are not directly connected with the (so to say) "empirical problematic" or an empirical social context, as the concept has sometimes been interpreted as being taken out of its proper context.⁴⁰ Skovoroda's purpose is quite far from it, though it is hard to deny that in developing the concept he purports to give substantial grounds for understanding the ideal social model which, doubtlessly, is not to be limited within the narrow bounds of the fleeting earthly life.

Skovoroda is aware enough that the goodness of social life is one of the mysteries of being, which is rather the gift of God's mercy and grace, depending completely on Divine Providence although, to some extent, he

37. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 788.

38. *Ibid.*, 790.

39. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 815.

40. See, e.g., Mishanich, "Skovoroda," 405; Tolstov, "Dukhovni zasady," Shevchuk, *Piznaniy i nepiznaniy Sfinks*, 457–72.

wishes to penetrate this mystery, perceiving the principles of the ideal human society (a commonwealth).

The first principle is set towards God and the perennial truth. Skovoroda calls it "the remembrance of Eternity." Taking for his starting point the teaching on the twofold nature of the being (seen and unseen, visible and invisible, creating and created, false and true), Skovoroda states the twofold character of human memory. There is memory which set towards remembrance of the things perishable (and which have already perished indeed), while there is also the memory which is set towards remembrance of things everlasting—the Eternity which is the Holiness. For Skovoroda, this distinction between the memory unto death and the memory unto life is a fundamental one and which has a powerful impact on social life. The remembrance of the holiness and the set towards the life, Skovoroda believes, is the only subject of all the Sacraments of the Church, which purpose the sanctification and renewal of memory (and through it the whole human being) pilgrims to the Eternal City.⁴¹

As there are two kinds of human memory, so there are two kinds of social organization: one is set towards the perishable, while another towards the imperishable and eternal. Among the symbols of human collectives of these two kinds of organization, for Skovoroda (as well as, yet earlier before him, for many thinkers since Apostle Paul (e.g. Heb 12:22–23; 13:14–15) and Saint Augustine⁴²) there are the biblical cities and toponyms—Sodom, Segor (Zoar), Jerusalem, Sion (Zion), etc. Sodom is the city of sin, which should be left since it is to perish. Segor (Zoar) is the city of refuge, which shelters those who flee from Sodom. Sion (Zion), as well as Jerusalem, are the mountain and the city of the great King, the High Republic, which is the place of the ultimate salvation. It is easy to observe that only Sodom is a place of perils, perishing and destruction, as the others are places that are more positive. The organizations of these two types of human collectives are very contrary to each other, though they have some parallels. These parallels represent the other principles Skovoroda observes throughout his studies on this problematic.

41. Skovoroda distinctly says about the Baptism, which is the sign of the second (spiritual) birth, and the pledge of the new, spiritual life. He also mentions the Eucharist a number of times, interpreting it as a visible sign of invisible relations, connections and communion between God and human beings, i.e. the Church. First of all Eucharist for him, it is the Sacrament of thanksgiving for God as Maker, Preserver, and Saviour, as well as for the fellow-brethren.

42. For instance the main idea of his famous work *De civitatis Dei* that there are two cities throughout human history: one which perishes and another which is to be saved.

The second principle is that of human intention. The crowd of Sodom is concerned merely with their selfish (carnal) lusts, as the intentions of citizens of the High Republic or a commonwealth, which Skovoroda directly calls the Church—“the commonwealth, . . . the fruitful orchard of the Church, saying even clearer, the garden of Society”⁴³—is towards the common good.

The third principle is the principle of spiritual kindred or affinity (*srodnost*). Any normal social life is rather to be founded on spiritual affinity than carnal kindred. This spiritual affinity is the result of an intensive inner activity of self-knowledge. That is why the symbols of this deeply spiritual unity are the city, commonwealth, republic, society (but, it seems, never a family!). The personal vocation (*srodnost*) of the people of God is directly contrary to those enforcements or vain motivations, which are peculiar to the states of the Sodom type.

From the third principle stems the fourth. It is the principle of the “unequal equality” (which is opposed to the illusory, but popular principle of “equal equality”). The principle makes it evident that every member of society is valuable and good, when used in an appropriate way, i.e. according to the vocation that, in its turn, depends upon God’s Providence.

The fifth principle is rather a summary of the preceding four. It is the principle of happiness or the happy, godly and virtuous life, the principle of catholicity as the only foundation of any normal social life. The only pattern and pledge to it is the lively unity of the Catholic Church.

To conclude this brief overview of Skovoroda’s social teaching it should be said that developing his teaching on catholicity as an ideal foundation of social life, Skovoroda goes from the concrete personal reality and the basic human instinct (which is the aspiration instinct for happiness) to an ideal abstraction of social organization (city, commonwealth, republic, society), and from the abstraction of social organization to the lively and real being of the Catholic Church. Self-knowledge (which turns in the knowledge of God), personal vocation (*srodnost*) of each human being are the very foundation stones of the High Republic, which is understood as a real, mystical unity of those, who are obedient to God’s will. Therefore, there is no other way to form a social organization as an organic whole, but by the voluntary unity of those who are godly and good. Any other unions cannot be but merely accidental ones, mechanical compositions, which are hardly able to be the foundation of any real social life.

43. Skovoroda, *Zbirka tvoriv*, 651.

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