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THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF KIEVAN RUS'*

Prince Vladimir's Rus' adopted Christianity twenty odd years after it had been adopted by Mieszko's Poland. Thus scholars and future organizers of *Russiae sacrum millennium* still have some twenty years' time to agree on the exact date and place of Vladimir's baptism and to tell us with certitude when, where, and by whom the first permanent ecclesiastical hierarchy was introduced among the Eastern Slavs. But we do not have to wait for the results of these special researches if our aim is general as it is today: to trace the progress of Christianity among the Eastern Slavs, to view the final act of this progress against the general background of the tenth century, and to assess the immediate consequences of Vladimir's conversion.

Ever since antiquity and down to the late Middle Ages, the Mediterranean world maintained a bridgehead in Eastern Europe—the Crimean peninsula. Christianity may have spread among Jewish communities there as early as the apostolic times. By the early Middle Ages, Byzantine Crimea served as a place of exile for recalcitrant popes, like Martin I, and as a haven for monks fleeing iconoclastic persecution in the Eastern Empire. By the eighth and ninth century the peninsula was covered by a network of Byzantine bishoprics.

Thus it is plausible to assume that Christianity may have radiated from the Crimea to the north even before the ninth century. The Crimea did serve in 861 as a springboard for the Khazar mission of St. Cyril, the later apostle of the Slavs. It may have performed a similar role at an earlier date. But before the ninth century it must have been difficult for Christian influences coming from the south to reach the Eastern Slavs who lived in the Kiev region, since these Slavs were separated from the Byzantine Crimea by various nomadic peoples who, in the course of their westward movement, spelled each other in the Ukrainian steppe. Closer contacts with Byzantine possessions and the Byzantine capital itself became possible only with the emergence of a force which could control, or at least safely enjoy, the Dnieper waterway linking

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the hinterland zones with the Black Sea. Such a force was in existence by the middle of the ninth century. I am referring to the Scandinavian Russes who formed the upper crust in the Varangian-Slavic principalities which they helped create in Eastern Europe. A Varangian expedition, originating in Kiev, attacked Constantinople in 860. Almost immediately, Byzantium struck back with spiritual weapons; in 866 Patriarch Photius proudly announced to his eastern colleagues the progress of Christianity among the fierce Russes and the dispatch of a bishop for the Russian mission. This mission to the barbarians of the north was only one of many which Byzantium was simultaneously and successfully undertaking among the Balkan and Central European Slavs: Bulgarians, Serbs, Moravians, and Pannonians. In Eastern Europe this first attempt failed, probably because a competing Scandinavian group swept away the pro-Christian rulers of Kiev, but from then on, especially from the second quarter of the tenth century, we have convincing evidence that Christianity began to take roots in Kiev. Some Russes who ratified the Russo-Byzantine treaties of the mid-tenth century were Christians. A Christian church existed in Kiev at the same time. It was dedicated to St. Eliah who, to judge by one of his attributes, was a competitor to the local pagan god of thunder, Perun. By 957 Ol'ga, a Kievan princess and regent of the realm, had been baptized, probably in Constantinople, which she visited in any case. And the first recorded Christian martyrs of Kiev antedate the Christianization of the land. They are two Varangians killed by the pagan mob; their martyrdom is placed by the Russian Primary Chronicle in the year 983.

However highly placed the Kievan converts to Christianity may have been at that time, we still must speak of individual conversions, not of the baptism of the land. For Rus' as a whole to have been baptized, the notion of the Rus' land had to crystallize in the minds of the Kievan princes. In that respect Svjatoslav, Ol'ga's son, is somewhat of a reactionary. His Slavic name—the first such name to be borne by a Rus' prince—points to later developments, but his pagan predilections and his Viking restlessness are the remnants of a waning age. Svjatoslav the Viking fought on the Volga and at the approaches to Constantinople, cared little for Kiev, and dreamed of establishing his capital on the Danube, altogether outside the East Slavic territory. But hard realities stopped the southward drive of the Russes. The defeat they suffered at the hands of the Byzantines at Silistria in 971 was the Lech Field battle of Russian history. Thereafter the period of settling down around Kiev begins, and it begins with Vladimir the Organizer. More than any prince before him he must have felt the need for a force which would endow his state with inward coherence and outward respectability.

In tenth-century terms, this meant the adoption of an articulate religion. A local solution could be tried, and seemingly it was. In his pagan period Vladimir did set up a group of statues of pagan gods upon a hill near Kiev. This may have been his attempt to establish a pagan pantheon for his realm. But Finnish, and Slavic wooden idols could not compete with higher religious beliefs held in centers neighboring upon the Kievan state. Through war, diplomacy, and commerce Kievan leaders of the late tenth century were well aware not only of the impressive religion of Byzantium and of a somewhat more sober version of that religion practiced in the newly re-established Western Empire, but also of Islam, adopted in 922 by the Volga Bulgars, and of Judaism, widespread among the recently defeated Khazars. As for the religious situation in the other Slavic countries, Vladimir could obtain detailed information on it within the family circle, from his Christian wives—two Czechs and one Bulgarian.

A decision had to be made. Which of the many religions to choose? The Primary Chronicle contains a colorful description of the "testing of faiths." According to this account first Bulgar (that is, Islamic), Latin, and Greek missionaries arrived in Kiev, and then Russ emissaries were sent out to collect information on the relative merits of these three religions. Most probably we are dealing with a literary commonplace here. But the story does reflect a historical truth, namely the existence of simultaneous cultural influences converging in Kiev and Kiev's awareness of these influences.

The envoys reported their findings (so the story goes) and the decision fell in favor of Byzantium. If we adopt the point of view of tenth century Kiev, we will agree that it was obvious and wise. It was obvious, for Kiev's previous contacts with Byzantium had been frequent and prolonged. It was wise, for in the last quarter of the tenth century Byzantium was, with the possible exception of Bagdad, the most brilliant cultural center of the world as Kiev—and Western Europe knew it. And Byzantium was at the height of its political might. Western contemporaries, like Liutprand of Cremona and Thietmar of Merseburg might scorn Greek effeminacy and haughtiness. Sour grapes, all this. Byzantium had recently emerged victorious from its struggle with the Arabs in the Mediterranean and in Syria and had made considerable advances in the Balkans. As for culture, its provincial prelates read and commented upon Plato, Euclid, and even the objectionable Lucian; its emperors supervised large encyclopedic enterprises; its sophisticated reading public clamored for, and obtained, re-editions of old simple Lives of Saints, which were now couched in a refined and involved style. All this the pagan Russes may not as yet have been able to appreciate. But they

certainly could appreciate the splendor of Constantinople's art and the pomp of its church services. The Primary Chronicle even intimates that this pomp tipped the scales in favor of the Greek religion.

Thus we need only be aware of things as they stood in the tenth century in order to agree with Vladimir that the Byzantine form of Christianity provided the most appealing choice. This much seems clear. Clarity disappears, however, when we turn to the details of the Christianization. Not that our sources—Slavic, Byzantine, Arabic, and Armenian are mute. The problem arises when we try to piece their contradictory information together. It has been done dozens of times. For the present, all such tries must remain enlightened guesses. The attempt which follows is one guess more, every separate detail of which can be contradicted or confirmed by solutions proposed by scholars in the past. I shall give the account of Vladimir's conversion as it might have been—but, alas, was not—recorded by a Byzantine chronicler. I shall adopt some of the Byzantine chronicler's vagueness. *September 987*: The Byzantine Emperor's throne is threatened by a rebellion. The Emperor, whose name is Basil II, sends an embassy to the ruler of the barbarian Russes and asks for military assistance. In exchange, the northern barbarian asks for the hand of the Emperor's sister. This is a highly embarrassing request, for it runs against the concept of the world-embracing Byzantine hierarchy of rulers and states. The Emperor, however, is in distress. The princess is promised, but baptism is demanded of the barbarian as the condition for receiving him and his realm into the family of civilized peoples. Vladimir—this is the barbarian's name—is baptized in his capital, Kiev, in 987 or 988. Troops 6,000 strong (as a matter of fact, Vladimir's own boisterous Varangian mercenaries of whom he wants to rid himself) go to Byzantium and help to suppress the rebellion by a victory won in April of the year 989. The situation of the Empire having improved, there is no need to send the imperial princess to a sure cultural starvation in the north. The embittered barbarian attacks the Byzantine city of Cherson in the Crimea and takes it between April and June of 989. Now the princess has to be sent to the north after all. The marriage is celebrated in Cherson in 989. Vladimir, the Christ-Loving prince, his bride Anna, her ecclesiastical entourage, and some Cherson ecclesiastics and citizens proceed to Kiev, where the whole people are baptized. The head of the new church arrives very soon, not later than 997. By that time, he has the rank of a metropolitan; he is a Greek prelate and comes from Byzantium.

Under the Byzantine stimulus the young Kievan civilization developed with remarkable rapidity. Within one or two generations after the Conversion, it produced important works of art and literature. The Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev with its mosaics and frescoes of sacred

and secular content is a major monument of Byzantine architecture. Metropolitan Hilarion's Sermon on Law and Grace, delivered about 1050, is as sophisticated as a Byzantine sermon of the best period. Thus, in the short run, Vladimir's decision paid very good dividends, and the immediate results reaped by Kiev from its ties with Byzantium seemed greater than those derived by the Poles from their association with the West. Under these circumstances, we should not be astonished to find in Poland some traces of the westward radiation of Byzantine culture with Kiev acting as an intermediary. A German lady praised Prince Mieszko the Second, the son of Bolesław Chrobry, for his knowledge of Greek. He may have learned this language from someone who arrived in Poland via Kiev, and I can think of a likely candidate for the position of the prince's tutor—Anastasius the Chersonian, the Greek who helped Vladimir take Cherson in 989 (one of the Christianization years), who made a brilliant administrative career in Kiev, but who switched sides in 1018, when Kiev was taken by the Poles, and emigrated to Poland with the retreating Polish forces of Bolesław Chrobry.

Still, we know that Kiev did not become an intermediary transmitting the achievements of Byzantine culture to the West. Before we deplore this, we must recall some peculiarities of the Kievan version of Byzantine culture. In one important aspect, this version was twice removed from its original. Most of the literature read in eleventh-century Kiev was received from Bulgaria, where Christianity had thrived for over a century, and—but to a much lesser degree—from Bohemia, heir to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition. Byzantine writings predominated among these imported works, but they were Old Church Slavonic translations from the Greek. Direct knowledge of Greek is attested in Kiev soon after the conversion—both through the Primary Chronicle and through translations of Byzantine texts made on Kievan soil—but the extent of this knowledge should not be exaggerated. Moreover, the list of translated Byzantine works was very selective. Naturally enough, most of them were of ecclesiastical character. The secular ones either were collateral reading to the study of sacred texts or represented the low-middlebrow level in Byzantine literature. There were some advantages to this situation. The availability of a Slavic literary idiom combined with the relative geographical remoteness of Kiev from Constantinople contributed to the impressive growth of the vernacular literature, especially of historiography. This was a genre in which comparable Polish achievements were not forthcoming for centuries. But there also was a disadvantage due to the tenuousness of direct knowledge of the Greek language and literature and to the adoption of a selective procedure in translating—namely, the virtual lack of acquaintance with the works of antiquity. The Kievan bookmen de-

rived their knowledge of antique literature from the translations of Byzantine equivalents to Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. In this one important respect, the "barbaric" West was better off with its intolerant predilection for Latin. Thiethmar and later the Polish historian Wincenty Kadłubek quote Virgil and Horace. The Russian Primary Chronicle does not quote Homer.

Under the year 988, the traditional date of Vladimir's conversion, the Primary Chronicle introduces a "philosopher" who expounds the tenets of the new faith to the prince and admonishes him in the following terms: "Do not accept the teachings of the Latins, whose instruction is vicious." This is an anachronism for the tenth century and therefore a later propagandistic interpolation. Throughout the second half of the tenth century and a great part of the eleventh the upper crust of Kiev did not find the Latin teachings vicious at all. Princess Ol'ga may have been baptized in Constantinople, but in 959—certainly before the final establishment of the Byzantine hierarchy in Rus'—her ambassadors negotiated with Otto I for the sending of a missionary bishop and priests to her land. As such a request fitted perfectly into Otto's grandiose plans of eastern missionary expansion, two bishops were ordained and one of them, Adalbert, was dispatched to the Russes in 961. Adalbert's mission came to naught under mysterious and tragic circumstances. There is no doubt, however, that it took place. Our evidence on it is unimpeachable, since it stems from the unhappy head of the mission himself. I shall omit from this discussion the information we have on several papal embassies sent out to Vladimir, as our evidence on this point is somewhat controversial. This omission does not matter much, for there are many other—and sure—indications that a peaceful intercourse existed between the West and Kiev for quite a time after the baptism of the Russes. The evidence comes from German missionaries who were greatly assisted and judiciously advised by Vladimir when they passed through Kiev on their way to the Pecenegs in 1006. It also comes from the presence in East Slavic manuscripts of Lives of Czech and Western saints and of Western Prayers. This fact, of which Father Dvornik has so rightly reminded us in his writings, points to the traffic in literary texts between the Bohemian centers of Slavic liturgy, active until the very end of the eleventh century, and Kiev. Vladimir's marrying into the Byzantine imperial family should not make us oblivious to the fact that Polish, French, German, and other Western marriages of the Kievan princely house by far outnumber those contracted with the Byzantines. Finally, some see the most dramatic illustration of Kiev's Western contacts in the odyssey of the exiled grand prince of Kiev, Izjaslav, which occurred some twenty years *after* the schism of 1054. In order to further his cause, Izjaslav appeared at the

court of Henry IV of Germany; having failed there, he sent his son to the Curia of Gregory VII. In exchange for papal intercession, he promised "due fealty" to the Pope and commended his land to St. Peter. Izjaslav's Polish wife left prayers *pro papa nostro* in her Psalter which can be inspected today in the Italian city of Cividale.

However, we must keep things in their proper perspective. Adalbert's mission ended in failure. The embittered ecclesiastic called the Russes "frauds." Bohemian texts on East Slavic soil are but a small fraction of texts of Byzantine provenience. Great Prince Izjaslav's peregrinations and promises were but so many moves of a desperate *émigré*. When he recovered his Kievan throne, he promptly forgot all about the vassalage to St. Peter, and he was supported by the abbots of the Kievan Monastery of the Caves. The atmosphere of this monastery must have been pro-Byzantine in the 1070's for—so the Primary Chronicle informs us—when the devil was sighted at that time by one of the monastery's saintly monks, he appeared—I am sorry to report—in the guise of a Pole.

If Kiev remained in the Byzantine fold, this was not only because its Greek metropolitans saw to it, but mostly because it had been closely tied to Byzantium from the very time of Vladimir's conversion. This was apparent to contemporaries, both Western and Eastern. Thiethmar of Merseburg stressed the proximity of Kiev to Greece, and Adam of Breman even took Kiev for one of Greece's foremost cities. But the most significant text comes from Kiev itself. It is a Eulogy of St. Vladimir written in the eleventh century. In his final address the author of the Eulogy prays not to Vladimir alone, in the name of the Russes alone, but to both rulers famous for bring about the conversion of their subjects, Constantine the Great *and* Vladimir, on behalf of the "Russian" *and* the Greek peoples:

O you Holy emperors, Constantine and Vladimir, help those of your kin against their enemies, and rescue the Greek and Russ peoples from all tribulation, and pray to God on my behalf so I may be saved, for you enjoy special favors with the Saviour.

These passages may be interpreted as an expression of emulation of Byzantium. Vladimir has even been given an imperial title, and in another passage (not quoted here) Kiev has been promoted to the position of the Second Jerusalem, a title usually reserved for Constantinople. But I prefer to see, in the passages quoted, an expression of the concept of unity, of membership in and sharing of the only, and therefore the highest civilization, now embracing Byzantium and Kiev alike. What Svjatoslav could not achieve by force of arms alone, Vladimir did achieve—by Christianizing his realm.