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CULTURAL ASPECTS

Volodimer Svjatoslavič's Choice of Religion: Fact or Fiction?

PETRO TOLOCHKO

The chronicle account of the baptism of Rus', set forth under the years 986–988 in the *Pověst' vremennyx lět*, has been much discussed in historical literature. Nearly all the historians of Kievan Rus', including church historians, have dealt with it to a greater or lesser degree. The range of opinions concerning it is extraordinarily wide, varying from unreserved acceptance of the veracity of the accounts in the Chronicle concerning Volodimer's choosing of a religion, to absolute denial of them, explaining them as pious fiction, a sort of poetry in the manner of ancient sacred mysteries.

It is characteristic of church historians to express diametrically opposed points of view. The metropolitan Makarij attempted to put forth the thesis that there is nothing in the account of Volodimer's discussions with the envoys from Bulgaria-on-the-Volga, Germany, Khazaria, and Byzantium that contradicts historical reality or appears incredible.¹ E. E. Golubinskij considered the account an invention of the Chronicle's scribe, "a Greek by origin," with which serious scholarship ought no longer to be concerned.²

It is impossible to say that "serious scholarship" has heeded Golubinskij's appeal, but there is no doubt that he has had a decided influence upon subsequent scholars' research on this topic. He gave particular encouragement to the atheistic historian N. M. Nikol'skij, who wrote that by his declaration of the accounts in the Chronicle and in the "Life of Volodimer" as invention, without the slightest bit of historical truth, the church historian E. E. Golubinskij had displayed great courage.³ But Golubinskij's "courage" consisted in the fact that while he denied the

¹ Makarij, *Istorija ruskoj cerkvi*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1868), pp. 93–295.

² E. E. Golubinskij, *Istorija ruskoj cerkvi*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1901), pp. 105–143.

³ N. M. Nikol'skij, *Istorija ruskoj cerkvi* (Moscow, 1983), p. 21.

reality of the events connected with Volodimer's choosing of a religion, he put forth a theological thesis concerning Volodimer's "divine inspiration." The acceptance of the Christian faith was not the result of a "choosing," but of "enlightenment from above," of "illumination by this higher enlightenment."⁴ However, Golubinskij was not consistent. He denied the reality of the embassies described in the Chronicle, but he was nevertheless obliged to recognize that there must have been a preacher who won Volodimer over to the Christian faith. This was not a Greek, however, but the Varangian Olaf, the son of the Norwegian Konung Tryggvi.⁵

M. D. Priselkov was greatly disturbed by the chronicle accounts of the testing of various faiths. He called the accounts simply absurd since in connection with their main theme—the choice of the best cult—the very substance of religion—its doctrines—are relegated to secondary importance, and ritual is given first place.⁶ In this conviction, he succeeded Golubinskij, who considered ritual an external activity that afforded no understanding of the faith itself.

It would appear that for a church historian this statement is, at the very least, inaccurate. Without ritual faith is simply inconceivable, and it is no accident that the Church placed such great importance on this facet of religion. And for a man such as Volodimer, only recently acquainted with one or another religion, forms were more important than substance. He would not be able to comprehend the latter at once—he might never comprehend it; and inasmuch as ritual was more easily accessible to his understanding, it was of primary importance to his feelings. There is nothing surprising in the fact that, upon their return to Kiev from Constantinople, Volodimer's emissaries declared that when they saw how the Greeks served their God they knew not "whether we were in heaven or on earth, for there is no such sight nor any such beauty on earth."⁷

Surely the same could have been said by men who attended services in the Tithe Church or in St. Sophia in Kiev: the magnificence of the festal services there defied the imagination.

Beginning approximately in the 1950s, more objective, but at the same time more varied, opinions of the chronicle accounts of the baptism of Rus' were expressed in Soviet historical literature. B. D. Grekov considered the exchange of embassies between Rus' and neighboring countries in the years

⁴ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 121–22.

⁵ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 128.

⁶ M. D. Priselkov, *Istorija russkogo letopisanija. XI–XV vv.* (Leningrad, 1940), p. 22.

⁷ *Pověst' vremennyx lét* (hereafter *PVL*), vol. 1 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1950), p. 329.

986–988 completely plausible.⁸ According to M. N. Tixomirov, the chronicle account concerning Volodimer's vacillation over which religion he ought to choose—Islam, Judaism, or Christianity—is simply a repercussion of the religious disputes in Rus' in the tenth and eleventh centuries.⁹ D. S. Lixačev states that although the entire account of Volodimer's testing of religions follows the pattern of instructional literary works, with the purpose of winning readers over to the acceptance of Christianity, following the example of their prince, this in no way means that historical facts do not form the basis of the chronicle account. As was often the case in the Middle Ages, accounts of events which indeed took place could be clothed in the stereotypical forms of church literature.¹⁰

Characteristic of the conclusions of many Soviet scholars of our time is the view that the chronicle account of Volodimer's choosing of a religion is a reflection, albeit an inadequate one, of the actual state of affairs that existed at the end of the tenth century.¹¹ But there are also skeptical opinions. Quite telling is the lack of specific research subjecting the "account" to complex analysis based on the level of our present knowledge and drawing on a wide range of comparative data. The present work is intended to fill in this blank to the extent possible here.

The analysis of the baptism of Rus' is best begun with an elucidation of the precedence of this phenomenon. As is known, Golubinskij considered as one of the most important arguments against the authenticity of the embassies to Volodimer the exceptional nature of the situation, one without parallel in the history of other nations. If the conquest of the faith through Volodimer's agency was the actual truth, it would represent a completely original and bewildering historical event, one every bit as singular in its own way as the choosing of a religion.¹²

In fact, the phenomenon of choosing a religion, marked by diplomatic and even military acts, is not unique to the history of Old Rus'; it occurred in other nations as well.

From the letter of the Khazar king Joseph, written ca. 960 to the Spanish Jew Ḥasdai ibn Šaprūt, which, as the latter had requested, provides a history of the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism, we learn that this event was preceded by embassies from the Christian and Muslim emperors. In their turn, in the years 858–861, emissaries of the Khazar kagan visited the

⁸ B. D. Grekov, *Kievskaja Rus'* (Moscow, 1953), p. 476.

⁹ M. N. Tixomirov, "Načalo xristianstva na Rusi," in *Drevnjaja Rus'* (Moscow, 1975), p. 269.

¹⁰ *PVL*, vol. 2 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1950), p. 329.

¹¹ Cf. *Vvedenie xristianstva na Rusi* (Moscow, 1987).

¹² Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 112–27.

Byzantine emperor Michael and related that from the beginning they believed in one God and prayed to Him, worshipping facing the East, but that they maintained certain shameful customs. Then there came Jews who began to convince them to accept their faith, which many already followed; still the Saracens tried to entice them to their own faith.

The Bulgarians, in their letter to Pope Nicholas, informed him that both Greek and Khazarian preachers attempted to win them over to their faith.

The particular activity of papal missionaries is well known. These missionaries preached simultaneously in Poland, Sweden, Hungary, Norway, and among the Western Slavs.

The sources relate the appeal of the Moravian prince Rostislav to the Byzantine emperor Michael, with the request to send a teacher who might teach the Moravians to read holy books in their own language. It is characteristic that at this time the Moravians had already accepted Roman Christianity.

Missionary activity, the desire to convert one's neighbors to one's own faith, is a characteristic not only of countries that have adhered to one or another monotheistic religion from early times, but also of the newly converted. Kievan Rus' is no exception. As early as 990, as is clear from the Nikon Chronicle, Rus' attempted to spread Christianity among the Volga Bulgarians, and with this purpose the philosopher Mark the Macedonian was sent to them: "The philosopher went to the Bulgarians, and did a great deal of preaching but they went mad in their folly. So they returned to Volodimer in Kiev. . . . And in the same year there came from the Bulgarians four princes to Volodimer in Kiev, and they were enlightened by divine baptism."¹³

It would be possible to give more examples of the choosing of religions, but this hardly seems necessary. Those already cited are proof enough of the regularity and natural character of this phenomenon. Such an event has taken place in the history of every nation that has attained a class-estate stage in its development. This process of choosing usually has an intermediate internal step. Between pagan polytheism in Rus' and the acceptance of Christianity stood the so-called pagan reform of Volodimer, the goal of which was to elevate the cult of the chief Rus' god Perun. In Danubian Bulgaria, the acceptance of Christianity was preceded by the cult of Tengri, the one god of heaven, as it was in Khazaria before Judaism was confirmed there.

¹³ *Polnoe sobranie russkix letopisej* (hereafter *PSRL*), 9 (St. Petersburg, 1862): *Letopisnyj sbornik, imenuemyj Patriaršuju ili Nikonovskojju letopis'ju*, pp. 58–59.

Golubinskij posited that in both the rejection of an old religion and the acceptance of a new one a major place is occupied by a “genuine inner conviction.”¹⁴ But, of course, in order for this inner conviction of the superiority of one faith over another to manifest itself, one must acquire a certain amount of knowledge of various religions. Once this is done, however, one cannot do without the elucidation of many questions. On an international level, these questions and subsequent elucidations led to the repeated exchange of embassies. There simply was no other way. And, if for some reason the account of the arrival in Rus’ of various missionaries was wanting, it would be necessary to presuppose these facts.

The list of countries with which Rus’ had relations with regard to the choosing of a new religion appears completely natural. All of them were its neighbors: Bulgaria-on-the-Volga and Khazaria to the East, Byzantium to the South, Germany to the West. With them Kievan Rus’ maintained diverse economic and cultural ties, and one must posit that they were interested in obtaining the favorable disposition of their powerful neighbor. The surest way of doing this in the Middle Ages was to bring the other into one’s own religious orbit.

According to the *Pověst’ vremennyx lět*, the first missionaries came to Volodimer from Bulgaria-on-the-Volga. In the year 6494 Bulgarians of the Mohammedan faith came, saying: “You are a wise and sensible prince, but you know no law. Believe in our law, and worship Mohammed.”¹⁵ Further on, the chronicle describes the course of the discussions, which, however, did not bring the Bulgarians success. Volodimer was not well-disposed toward Islam, though it seems he did not dismiss it at the very outset. In the following year, 987, he dispatched emissaries to Bulgaria to test their religion.

That this incident could have taken place there is no doubt. But did it in fact occur? Golubinskij answers this question in the negative.¹⁶ His chief argument is that Nestor, working on his recension at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth century could not have known what occurred in the time of Volodimer. In the light of present-day research on the writing of the chronicles in Old Rus’, this argument is not convincing. Certainly the writing of chronicles did not begin with Nestor. The so-called Ancient Recension of 1037, compiled in the metropolitan church, the Chronicle of Nikon of the Caves Monastery of the years 1044–1073, the Chronicle of the Tithe Church, and the first recension of Hegumen Ioann of ca. 1093 all

¹⁴ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 116.

¹⁵ *PVL*, vol. 1, p. 59.

¹⁶ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 119.

preceded the *Pověst' vremennyx lét*. A great deal of material, other than the chronicles, also existed in which the events connected with the baptism of Rus' were reflected. These include the "Life of Volodimer," the "Remembrance and Praise of Volodimer Prince of Rus'" by Jacob the Monk (1070s), folk traditions, and eyewitness accounts. Nestor, too, mentions people (the monk Jeremiah of the Caves Monastery and Jan' Vyšatič) from whom he "heard many things which I have recorded in this chronicle." His predecessors had a wider circle of informants, among whom were eyewitnesses.

But let us return to the chronicle account of the Bulgarian embassy of 986. Even if there was no other notice in the chronicles of any other Rus'-Bulgarian relations, it would still be difficult to dismiss this account as a groundless invention with no basis in historical reality. But, in fact, this account does not stand alone. It is one in a series of other notices in the chronicles that give evidence of constant contact between Kievan Rus' and Bulgaria-on-the-Volga.

In 985, the Chronicle informs us, "Volodimer went against the Volga Bulgarians with Dobryna, his uncle, in boats, and he brought Turks on horses (who followed him) along the river bank. And he vanquished the Bulgarians."¹⁷ As a result, a peace treaty was concluded between Rus' and Bulgaria. "And Volodimer concluded peace with the Bulgarians and they swore it between themselves." The Bulgarians swore an oath: "There will not be peace between us only if stone begins to swim and hops drown."¹⁸

The dispute concerning which Bulgarians Volodimer's campaign was directed against has been decided in favor of the Volga Bulgarians.¹⁹ A. X. Xalikov posits as supplementary proof of this the mention of hops in the treaty. The region in which these grew was principally in the Middle Volga. Among Volga Tatars even to the present day the proverb is preserved: "The climber [plant] is a symbol of friendship."²⁰ The peace treaty of 985 was apparently confirmed by a Bulgarian embassy in the following year. This was the main purpose for the embassy to Kiev. In addition, a proposal may also have been made that the Bulgarians should accept the religion of the Rus', which they themselves had only just accepted. In

¹⁷ *PVL*, vol. 1, p. 59.

¹⁸ See also B. D. Grekov, "Volžskie bolgary v IX-X vv.," *Istoričeskie zapiski* 14 (1945): 13-14.

¹⁹ B. D. Grekov and N. F. Kalinin, "Bulgarskoe gosudarstvo do mongol'skogo zavoevanija," in *Materialy po istorii Tatarii* (Kazan', 1948), p. 140; A. P. Smirnov, "Volžskie bulgary," *Trudy GIM* 19 (Moscow, 1951), pp. 43ff.

²⁰ A. X. Xalikov, "Volžskaja Bulgarija i Rus'," in *Volžskaja Bulgarija i Rus'* (Kazan', 1986), p. 9.

the scholarly literature one finds the opinion that, as a ratification of the peace treaty between Rus' and Bulgaria, Volodimer was married to a Bulgarian princess. Ludolf Müller reckons that Boris and Glěb were Volodimer's sons by this Bulgar princess. One of the proofs of this thesis, according to Müller, is the fact that Boris and Glěb ruled in Rostov and Murom respectively, lands that bordered on Bulgaria-on-the-Volga.²¹

In 990, as we have said, Volodimer offered his religion to the Bulgarians, but his attempt was not successful. The Nikon Chronicle tells of campaigns by Volodimer against Bulgaria-on-the-Volga in 994 and 997, although it does not disclose the reasons for the campaigns.²² One cannot exclude the possibility that these were actions in response to border incidents.

In Tatiščev's *History* under the year 1006 there is an account of yet another Bulgarian embassy to Volodimer, the goal of which was to conclude a trading alliance: "The (Volga) Bulgarians sent envoys with many gifts (asking) Volodimer to allow them to trade in towns along the Volga and Oka rivers without fear, which Volodimer readily did. And he gave them seals for all towns so that they might trade freely everywhere and in everything, and that merchants of Rus' might travel without fear, with seals from governors, to the Bulgarians."²³

Close relations between Rus' and Bulgaria-on-the-Volga began in the years 985–986 when the first peace treaties were concluded and were maintained in subsequent years, right up to the advent of the Mongol-Tatars.

According to the Chronicle, the next to come to Volodimer were the German emissaries: "Then Germans came from Rome, saying: 'We have come as envoys from the pope.' And they told him: 'The pope says this to you: Your country is like ours but your faith is not.'²⁴ Further on the emissaries set forth the fundamental tenets of their religion. Revealing no interest in this religion and confining himself to the words "our fathers did not accept this," Volodimer directed the Papal emissaries to return home.

There is nothing improbable in either the coming of these emissaries or in the explanation of the goal of their visit. This mission, as is evident from Volodimer's response, was not the first. Our chronicle only hints at certain negotiations on this subject, which are clearly reflected in Western chronicles. According to the "Continuer of the Chronicle of Abbot Regino of

²¹ L. Müller, *Die altrussischen biographischen Erzählungen und liturgischen Dichtungen über die heiligen Boris und Gleb* (Munich, 1967), p. 11.

²² *PSRL*, 9: 65–66.

²³ V. N. Tatiščev, *Istorija Rossijskaja*, vol. 2 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1963), p. 69.

²⁴ *PVL*, vol. 1, p. 60.

Prüm," the author of which was the bishop Adalbert, in the year 959 there came to the German emperor, Otto I, in Frankfurt-am-Main an embassy from "Helen, Queen of the Rugi" with a request for the consecration of a bishop and priests for Rus'. In 961 the emperor dispatched his missionaries to Rus', with bishop Adalbert, formerly a monk in the monastery of St. Maximian of Trier, at their head. But, in the following year, Adalbert was forced to return. His activity in Rus' was unsuccessful. In this, as in other German chronicles, there are accusations against the kings of Rus' and their requests. The emissaries of Rus' "came to the king, as it later turned out, with falsehood" and "they lied in everything."

The French historian J.-P. Arrignon rejects the accusation of insincerity on the part of the Rus' emissaries and argues that it is doubtful that they requested a bishop for Rus'. It is more likely, he says, that the initiative was that of King Otto, in keeping with his imperial pretensions. Similar thoughts have been expressed by other scholars who believe that the Rus' embassy carried on negotiations on economic and political topics. Rus' attempted to find in Germany an ally and an economic partner.

This seems reasonable. Yet one must not exclude the possibility of an ecclesiastical aspect to the negotiations between the two countries. It would appear that there was some sort of discussion concerning the sending of a bishop to Rus'. It is another matter whether Otto's intention was to pursue purely diplomatic aims. This was an action to apply pressure on Byzantium. Clearly, one must not leave this aspect of international relations out of one's reckoning. The Bulgarian tsar Boris acted in an analogous manner in his time. In this, as A. G. Kuz'min correctly surmises, we see a reflection of the natural desire to retain complete independence from "enlighteners."²⁵ In the Nikon Chronicle there is a notice that emissaries from the pope of Rome arrived in Rus' in the reign of Jaropolk of Kiev.²⁶ This fact is not confirmed by sources extraneous to the chronicle. But, considering Jaropolk's disposition to Christianity, it is quite possible that it is true.

Golubinskij was even inclined to believe that it was the information in the chronicles concerning the embassies of the Greeks and the pope to Jaropolk which suggested the invention of the embassies to Volodimer to the author of the account of the baptism of Rus'.²⁷

²⁵ A. G. Kuz'min, "Zapadnye tradicii v russkom xristianstve," in *Vvedenie xristianstva na Rusi*, p. 26.

²⁶ *PSRL*, 9, p. 39.

²⁷ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 143.

From written sources it is clear that in the time of Volodimer Svjatoslavič ties between Rus' and Germany and Rome became more constant than in previous times. According to the Nikon Chronicle, the pope sent his emissaries to Volodimer either to Korsun', when he was there, or to Kiev, soon after his return from the Korsun' campaign. "Emissaries from the pope in Rome came, and brought the relics of saints to Volodimer."²⁸

Golubinskij reckoned that the goal of this embassy was the pope's desire to "win Volodimer over from the Greeks to himself."²⁹ In the Tatiščev Chronicle we read that "the papal legates were received in Kiev with love and honor."³⁰ Relations between Kiev and Rome were not curtailed in subsequent years. In 994 there returned from Rome "emissaries of Volodimer to the pope, having accomplished nothing." Some time around 999–1000, an embassy of the pope visited Kiev; and in the following year Volodimer again dispatched his own emissaries to Rome.

The rapprochement of Rus' and Germany, and therefore Rome, was furthered by the marriage of Volodimer to the Byzantine princess Anna, a relation of the German emperor Otto II. There arrived in Kiev, ca. 1006, a German embassy from Henry II, with the bishop Bruno of Querfurt at its head. Bruno stayed in Kiev nearly a month. There is information that he occupied himself there with missionary activity, but with no particular success.

Thus the embassy from the pope of Rome to Volodimer in 986 ought to be regarded as an ordinary occurrence, not only as a possibility but as an actual fact. It occupies a logical place in the scheme of Rus'-German and Kievo-Roman contacts in the second half of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century.

From the chronicle account of the arrival in Kiev of the embassy from the Khazarian Jews, it would appear that it was reports of the missionary activity of the Bulgarians and papal envoys in Rus' that forced the Khazars to increase their own activity. Whether or not this was indeed so, it is difficult to say, although there is nothing improbable here. Rus' carried on regular trading relations with Khazaria; in Kiev and in Itil there were, respectively, Khazaro-Jewish and Rus' trading colonies. Events which took place in Kiev could have been known relatively quickly in the Khazarian capital.

²⁸ *PSRL*, 9, p. 57.

²⁹ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 126.

³⁰ Tatiščev, *Istorija*, vol. 2, p. 64.

Nevertheless, we do not have sufficient ground to suppose that the embassy arrived precisely from there. After the crushing defeat of Khazaria by Svjatoslav, the country underwent a severe crisis that in its turn brought about a weakening of Judaism. In the words of Muqaddasī, who wrote at the end of the tenth century, "the inhabitants of the city of Khazar (Itil) are no longer Jews, but Muslims."³¹ The change of religion was tied in with the weakened Khazar government's search for a powerful protector, which it saw in the Arab Caliphate. As is known, the conversion to Islam in no way altered the fate of Khazaria. The Muslim world was at this time beset by feudal quarrels.

In the scholarly literature the idea is put forward that the Jews might have come to Kiev from the Crimea. It seems more likely, however, to suppose that in fact we are dealing here with the initiative of a Jewish community that lived in Kiev itself. V. N. Tatiščev also supports this view and posits that the Jews "did not practice missionary activity abroad. . . , but in the place where they live, there they make bold to convert the inhabitants, as has occurred often in our country."³² From the "Life of Theodosius," we learn that Jews living in Kiev in the eleventh century occupied themselves with the conversion of Christians to their faith. It was in response to this that Theodosius entered into sharp disputes with Jewish preachers: "Rising often at night, he went to Jews in secrecy from all and debated them on Christ."³³

In favor of the supposition above, one might cite the circumstance that it was only in the case of the Khazarian Jews that Volodimer did not dispatch emissaries to test their religion.

There is an internal contradiction in the account of that embassy, which N. I. Kostomarov noticed. The point in question concerns Volodimer's reproach to the Jews that their own land, Jerusalem, was occupied by Christians. Such a reproach could not have been made before the very end of the eleventh century when Christians took control of those areas.³⁴ At first glance, this fact seems to undermine completely one's confidence in the entire account of the embassy. Because of that, many researchers have declared this account to be an invention of the chronicler. This is hardly justified. Such a contradiction is not a rarity in the chronicles. In most cases they are testimonies of periodic reediting of annalistic compilations,

³¹ *Sbornik materialov dlja opisanija mestnostej i plemen Kavkaza* 38 (1908): 5.

³² Tatiščev, *Istorija*, vol. 2, p. 231.

³³ *Paterik Kievskogo Pečerskogo monastyrja* (St. Petersburg, 1911), pp. 47–48.

³⁴ N. I. Kostomarov, "Predanie pervonačal'noj russkoj letopisi," *Sobranie sočinenij*, book 5, vol. 13 (St. Petersburg, 1905), pp. 364–65.

resulting in the frequent “enrichment” of original reports with new details. The chronicler’s explanation on the conquest of Jerusalem by Christians belongs to these later details.

The last to come to Volodimer, according to the chronicle, was an embassy from Byzantium. Judging from the circumstances, Byzantium was alarmed by the activity of its potential rivals and could not have failed to react. Given the constant contacts between Rus’ and Byzantium from the 860s on, the arrival of another embassy would not seem to be something to arouse doubts of any kind. But such doubts do exist. They are based on the long speech by a Greek philosopher, in which, having shown the imperfections in the Muslim, Jewish, and Roman Catholic religions, he gave Volodimer a detailed exposition of the essence of the Eastern Christian doctrine of faith. Concluding his speech, the Greek showed Volodimer a veil (*zapona*) on which was painted a representation of the Last Judgment. It made a strong impression on Volodimer, but not as strong as the Byzantines had expected: the image of the Last Judgment did not convince him to accept immediate baptism. Volodimer responded to the Greek’s proposal to accept baptism by saying: “I will wait a bit longer.”

Researchers have noticed that what we have here is a reworking of the tale of the baptism of the Bulgarian tsar Boris, executed in a fine literary style.³⁵ That this is then a retelling of an earlier tale is undeniable; however, acknowledgement of this is still not sufficient cause to doubt the arrival of a Byzantine embassy to Volodimer. On the contrary, the inclusion of a reworking of the Bulgarian tale into the chronicle and its adaptation to new circumstances makes it possible to assume that the situation itself was a repetition. Byzantium tried to achieve with Volodimer the same thing it had once wished to achieve with the Bulgarian tsar Boris—the adoption of Christianity. It seems probable that the preaching of another Byzantine missionary could have been somewhat similar to the speech given by Constantine the Philosopher. An element of imitation is quite possible here.

In 987, as the Primary Chronicle attests, Volodimer sent his embassy to Bulgaria-on-the-Volga, Germany, and Byzantium in order to “test the faith.” Researchers have been confused by that report even more than by the number of embassies to Volodimer. Indeed, why was it necessary to go, say, to Byzantium in order to test the faith if Greek Christianity had been known in Rus’ for a long time? Several Orthodox churches existed by that time in Kiev, including the St. Elias Cathedral in the Podil. Judaism and Islam were also known in Rus’.

³⁵ Priselkov, *Istorija*, p. 27.

From a purely religious point of view, Volodimer's embassies do not seem very logical. Nevertheless, their historical actuality should not be denied on that basis. For all its importance, the question of faith in itself was not the main concern of Volodimer and his government. This question arose in connection with the determination of the place of the Rus' in the system of inter-state relations. Kiev was not indifferent to the problems the adoption of a new faith might bring to the status of these relations. The establishment of a new faith could not be permitted to destroy an already organized system of economic and political relations between Rus' and her neighbors. Volodimer could not but fear the fate of Bulgaria, over which Byzantium had spread its religion and authority. Given this situation, negotiations were not only desirable but absolutely necessary. It would have been strange if they had not happened. Even Golubinskij was forced to admit that, when approaching the question of faith for Rus', Volodimer acted not only as an "equal to the apostles," but as a great sovereign.³⁶

The reality of reciprocal embassies of Volodimer is confirmed by reports of Oriental authors. Two of them speak of a Rus' embassy to Khwārezm and of an alleged conversion of Rus' to Islam. The Arabic scholar al-Marwazī (eleventh century) and the Persian writer al-'Awfī (thirteenth century) both told generally the same story of how the prince of Rus' Būlādmīr (Volodimer) sent his envoys to the shah of Khwārezm in order to receive explanations on the advantages of the Muslim faith. The shah of Khwārezm allegedly was happy to hear this and sent his preachers to Rus' to teach the laws of Islam.³⁷ A. P. Novosel'cev thinks that the embassy sent by Volodimer to the Volga Bulgarians came to Xorezm.³⁸

In conclusion, one must dwell upon the very problem of choice. Was there in Rus' an alternative to Byzantine Christianity? B. D. Grekov once wrote that Rus' had long been familiar with religions that appeared in a class society—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. It was inevitable for the class society of Rus' to adopt one of them, but which—that was precisely a question of great political importance.³⁹

M. N. Tixomirov saw in the chronicle account of Volodimer's hesitations merely a reflection of religious controversies in Rus' of the tenth and eleventh centuries. In this connection he did not recognize the reality of the reports of Oriental authors about Volodimer's request for Muslim

³⁶ Golubinskij, *Istorija*, 1: 154.

³⁷ *Zapiski Vostočnogo otdelenija Russkogo arxeologičeskogo obščestva* 9 (St. Petersburg, 1896): 267–68; A. P. Novosel'cev, "Vostok v bor'be za religioznoe vlijanie na Rusi," in *Vvedenie xristianstva na Rusi*, pp. 68–69.

³⁸ Novosel'cev, "Vostok v bor'be," p. 69.

³⁹ Grekov, *Kievskaja Rus'*, p. 476.

missionaries. He based his conclusions on the absence of any chronicle accounts of Muslim propaganda in Rus'.⁴⁰

According to S. P. Tolstov, Volodimer might have sought in Islam a path to an alliance with the countries of the Arabic East against Byzantium. The structure of Islam as a church and religion, as it might have appeared to him, should also have been helpful in solving internal problems related to the final consolidation of the feudal system.⁴¹

A. P. Novosel'cev thinks that the adoption of one or another faith was for Volodimer first of all a political question. He chose the religion that was espoused by the most powerful state of his time. While the adoption of Judaism could not have been seriously considered, this cannot be said of Islam. Finally, however, the realization of the conditions in the Muslim states allegedly forced Volodimer to acknowledge his doubts about the ability of Islam to strengthen a central authority.⁴²

As far as Christianity from Rome is concerned, this path, as many researchers believe, was not only possible but fully realistic. The literature even includes attempts to link, indirectly, Old Rus' Christianity with the Latin West.⁴³ There is no foundation for this, but neither should one deny the openness of Kievan Rus' to the West or the close ties maintained between the two. This can be confirmed by the negotiations of Rus' with Germany and Rome under Ol'ga and Volodimer concerning, among other things, questions of religion.

When one reads the chronicle tale about the choosing of a faith, one has the impression that in this case Volodimer acted according to the proverb: "Measure thy cloth ten times, thou canst cut it but once." It cannot be ruled out that, personally, he faced the extremely difficult decision of which faith to follow. Therefore he kept turning to "boyars and old men" for advice. The decision bore too great a responsibility.

And yet the true sense of the negotiations was not governed by doubt and hesitancy. Volodimer's hesitations were meant to demonstrate to Byzantium that, first of all, it was not the only country from which Rus' might adopt a new religion, and, secondly, that faith could not be imposed on Rus' but could only be of its own choosing. But the choice had actually been made a long time before in favor of the Greek Orthodox Church. It was made by life itself. Even if Volodimer had seriously intended to

⁴⁰ Tixomirov, "Načalo xristianstva na Rusi," p. 269.

⁴¹ S. P. Tolstov, *Po sledam drevnexorezmijskoj civilizacii* (Moscow, Leningrad, 1948), p. 261.

⁴² Novosel'cev, "Vostok v bor'be," pp. 68–69.

⁴³ Kuz'min, "Zapadnye tradicii," pp. 21–54.

choose, say, Islam, Judaism, or Roman Christianity, it would have been extremely difficult to do. The Byzantine Christian tradition had been present in Rus' for two centuries. What Volodimer had really to do was to give it the legal affirmation of the state.

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