

Slavic Paganism in Kievan Russia and the Coming of Christianity

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“In Russia today, many people tend to agree with the opinion that paganism is closer to human nature than Christianity, and that primitive religion is the strongest and most energetic assertion of life that we shall ever find in human culture.” (Arzhanukhin, 2000)

Orthodox Christianity is currently the dominant religion in parts of the world that are inhabited by Eastern Slavs, such as Russians and Ukrainians. However, this was not always the case. At the end of the first millennium C.E., the state of Kyivan Rus’ (Kievan Russia) had undergone significant changes – most notably, the acceptance of a new faith. Before that time, the Slavonic tribes held on to pagan beliefs about the world, such as polytheism and reverence of nature. Although there are very few historical traces of this ancient religion (Zguta, 1976: 266), the lack of information about the subject is in no way a reflection of its importance. On the contrary, the paganism of pre-Christian Slavs has been kept alive by its followers over the centuries and it continues to play a role in the cultural development of various peoples.

In this paper, I intend to explore the pagan religion and mythology of the early Slavs, before their Christianization. Furthermore, I will examine the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Kievan Russia in greater detail. My main focus will be on the persistence of pagan elements in the religious and cultural life of the Slavs, despite the efforts of authorities to spread Orthodoxy in the region.

PAGAN BELIEFS

Before the coming of Christianity, the early Slavs were pagan, which means that they worshipped many deities, as well as various sylvan and household spirits. The culture was polytheistic, rather than monotheistic. Cross introduces these beliefs in the following manner: “The religion of the pagan Slavs was thus primarily animistic in its origins, and the animistic personification of powers of nature is further exemplified by abundant references to water and forest spirits (*vily, beregynji, lesie*)” (1946: 83). The religion was also ancestral and it placed an emphasis on unity and interconnectedness with nature. This is reminiscent of Hinduism and the concept of Ultimate Reality, where everything can be reduced to one basic property. An example of this is the pagan Goddess of the Earth – Mat’ Syra Zemlya (“Mother Moist Earth”) – who is the mother of all Russians and is not to be harmed (dug up) until her birth-giving time comes (at a holiday called “Maslenica”, which is also known as the Vernal Equinox).

However, it has also been argued that paganism is inherently dualistic. This is evident in the contrast between light and dark, male and female, life and death, and so on. For example, there is the Rod and the Rozhenitsa – the God and Goddess of Creation, who provide every human being with a soul at birth. Also, there is Dazhbog (also called “Belobog”, or “White-God”) who has dominion over the sky, and Chernobog (“Black-God”) who rules the underworld. Such opposites are quite common in Slavic paganism, thus supporting the claim that dualism is a vital part of the religion.

The Slavic pantheon is diverse, including Gods like Svarog, who rules the Heavens and is the father of Dazhbog. There is Veles (or Volos) who is the God of cattle and agriculture, but is sometimes associated with the underworld as well. There is Perun, God of lightning and war, often said to be the most important God – the supreme deity. Dvornik writes on this topic: “The supreme god, god of lightning and of the storm, was called Perun by the Eastern Slavs. He has the same function as the Vedic Parjanya and this existence and worship can also be traced among other Indo-European peoples”

(quoted in Marinich, 1976: 62). There is Mokosh, the water-Goddess of fertility and bounty, who is married to Svarog. There is Svarozhits, the God of fire. There is Stribog, the God of winds. Then, there are the lesser Gods, such as Yarilo, the God of youth and Spring, and the three Zori (Morning, Evening, and Night), sometimes referred to as the “three fates”. In general, it seems that there is a great deal of personification and anthropomorphisation in the pagan culture, such that otherwise inanimate objects (like the Earth) are regarded as deities.

There is also the realm of spirits. For example, there is the water fairy (“Rusalka”) and the forest elf (“Leshiy”), as well as the house dwelling creature (“Domovoi”). All of these have control over their own specific domains. Marinich elaborates on this point:

The sylvan beings had particular domains which they protected, and it should be emphasized that they were the guardians of their domains rather than of the humans who might enter their domains. Each was a *genius loci*. Thus, there was no understanding of a guardian spirit of all the forests, lakes, fields, etc., rather each forest, lake, and stream had its own guardian. These beings were the embodiments of their particular environments. As such, their attributes were characteristic of their domains. Not only did the being represent, let us say, a lake, but his size, in certain respects, was a function of the size of the lake, and his temperament depended upon the relative degree of danger or hazards of his particular area (1976: 61-62).

It is clear that the culture and religion of the pagan Slavs was rich and full of myths about Gods and other magical creatures that roamed the land. There was also a great deal of respect for nature and the power it holds over man. As a result, sacrifices were made to appease certain deities, so as to avoid misfortunes and natural disasters, because these were seen as being the product of the anger of the Gods or spirits. One thing is certain – these ancient beliefs were very different from the monotheistic religion that was to replace it.

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

Although it was during the rule of Vladimir the Great that the official Christianization of the Slavs took place in 988, the earliest origins of Christianity in Kievan Russia can be traced to its

Varangian rulers, who were of Scandinavian origin (Spinka, 1926: 42). They were excellent warriors and began establishing their presence along the Dnieper river, eventually settling in Kiev, which became the most important city-centre in the region. Many of these Varangians had already accepted Christianity from the Byzantine Empire, with which they had close commercial ties. Therefore, when they made contact with the Slavic tribes, they began to expose the predominantly pagan population to the Orthodox religion.

The first Varangian grand-prince to lay the foundation for the eventual conversion of Kievan Russia to Christianity was Igor of the Rurik Dynasty. He embarked on several warlike expeditions during his reign, one of which resulted in an important trade agreement with Byzantium. This new partnership clearly made the Slavs far more susceptible to influence from their Greek neighbours. In fact, Spinka argues that Igor himself was a Christian, which is somewhat peculiar, since the official religion of his government at the time was pagan (1926: 43). His wife, Princess Olga, took power when Igor died in 945. She was also a professing Christian and no doubt protected and cultivated this faith while her son was still too young to rule (Spinka, 1926:46).

The next heir to the throne of the Rurik Dynasty, Svyatoslav I, began his reign in 964 and was also a fierce warrior. However, his thirst for battle did not render him favourably disposed to Christianity – he mocked it, because he believed it was a religion for the weak. He was a natural pagan and admired the deeds of his Viking ancestors. During his reign, Christianity was not promoted, but it was also not exterminated. It was this way until the rule of Vladimir I, after which point the religious climate changed dramatically. Spinka remarks on the events preceding the reign of grand-prince Vladimir:

It is evident from the foregoing that Christianity was a factor potent in the public life of Russia before the time of Vladimir as far back as the days of Igor, and that from that time on it survived as the private religion of many influential members of the ruling class, the Varangians, although it might not have as yet penetrated to the Slavic subject classes (1926: 47).

The key figure in the conscious and “global” Christianization of the Slavs was Vladimir the Great. The reasons for his decision are likely political in nature – perhaps he thought that this new religion would bring more order and unity to the Slavic people (Marinich, 1976: 66). According to Spinka, Vladimir was determined to “make of his nation an integral part of the cultured world of his day” (1926: 52). However, he was also very much aware of the dangers of this conversion. He knew that the acceptance of Christianity may lead to a loss of national independence and the eventual annexation of Kievan Russia by the Byzantine Empire. Such things have happened in the past and Vladimir was fearful of repeating history. Moreover, he was not interested in merely adopting certain aspects of Greek culture. Instead, he intended to form “such a close alliance of the two states – on terms of equality, of course – that Greek civilization would naturally penetrate and permeate all of Russia” (Spinka, 1926: 53).

Consequently, Vladimir was baptized in the city of Cherson in 987, officially becoming an Orthodox Christian. Then, two years later, he married Anna, an imperial princess of Byzantium. Entering into such a union was the most reliable and expedient way of forging an alliance with a strong nation, which is what the grand-prince of Kiev set out to do. However, this was not an easy task to accomplish for a ruler of a barbarian state. In fact, the greatest obstacle was the pride of the Greek emperors, who did not want to align themselves with an uncultured country (Spinka, 1926: 53). That is why Vladimir waited for the right time to propose a partnership. When the Greeks were in need of military aid, Russia came to the rescue, demanding the integration of Byzantine culture and religion in return. The Greek emperors had no choice but to consent, and thus a new alliance was born.

The process of Christianization involved preaching and lecturing, rather than forcing unwilling pagans to convert. Vladimir ordered all the idols in Kiev to be removed and churches to be erected in their place. This mass conversion of Russia was to be the main concern of Vladimir the Great for the rest of his reign, which ended in 1015. Although he was generally successful in his endeavour, there were many parts of the country that refused to give up their ancestral faith. This was especially true in

smaller villages on the outskirts of the city-centres, such as Kiev, which were harder to reach by missionaries and promoters of Christianity.

The next ruler of Kievan Russia, after Vladimir I, was his son – Yaroslav the Wise. He continued the work of his father, emphasizing the need to transform the Greek faith into a separate religion that the Russian people could claim as their own. Andreyev describes certain events that took place during Yaroslav’s reign and says that they “prove that the Russians did not wish to be ‘led’ by the Greeks but claimed the right to choose what suited them from the ‘Byzantine heritage’” (1962: 19). For example, the first Russian saints, Boris and Gleb, were canonized not because they died for Christ, but because of their obedience to their older brother. Naturally, the Greeks were opposed to this and to the growing religious nationalism in Kievan Russia.

To conclude, Andreyev offers the following insight on Russia’s conversion to Christianity: “Indisputably, Byzantine influence after the introduction of Christianity gave both form and content to Russian culture, but the pagan foundation acted as a counterbalance which prevented the full and unquestioning absorption of the Byzantine heritage” (1962: 19). The next section deals with this pagan foundation and its persistence in Kievan Russia after the Christianization of the Slavs.

PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY INTERTWINED

The transition from paganism to Christianity in Kievan Russia was not a smooth one. At least, it was certainly not a simple matter of one religion replacing another. The pre-Christian beliefs were so prevalent and so deeply embedded in the culture of the Kievan state that it was extremely difficult to diminish their influence. Andreyev discusses the vigor and longevity of Russia’s pagan heritage:

Christianity in Russia was not transplanted into an uncultured soil, into a wild desert, but into a powerful community which, though scattered and illiterate, had its own customs, art, and religion and which, in some sectors, had long maintained contacts with other civilization (1962: 18).

As a result of this conflict between the old and the new, there were clashes between followers of both traditions and even several violent revolts in the aftermath of the conversion. Some of these escalated into nativistic movements, especially in the 11th century, not long after Vladimir I was baptized (Marinich, 1976: 61). The effect was the following, as described by Arzhanukhin: “The adoption of Byzantine Christian culture did not become common all at once, but for a long time it belonged to the cultural minority” (2000).

When Vladimir the Great began taking serious measures to institute the Orthodox religion of the Greeks, such as ordering the destruction of all pagan idols and forbidding people to pray to trees, the most common form of resistance was an uprising by the *volkhvy*, who were also known as “kudesniki”. These were pagan shamans (or priests), who would usually appear during natural calamities, claiming to know who was responsible for them. Sometimes they would appear before the misfortunes took place, somehow being able to predict the troubles that were to come (Marinich, 1976: 64). Zguta describes their role in the following passage: “Appearing in such major cities as Kiev and Novgorod, they sowed confusion and discord among the people, many of whom, at least momentarily, turned against their ecclesiastical authorities to side with their former spiritual leaders” (Zguta, 1974: 259). Their apparently magical qualities made them popular among people, especially villagers, so that they would incite riots, which often led to bloodshed. However, they are not entirely to blame, and Marinich provides a reason for that: “We will recall that after the official conversion of Russia to Christianity, the *volkhvy* in many of the urban centers were put to death, and laws were promulgated punishing *volkhvy* by death at the stake” (1976: 66). In other words, it was the coming of the new religion that threatened the existence of these pagan elders, who clearly had a high social and religious status during pre-Christian times.

An example of one such revolt by the *volkhvy* is examined by Zguta (1974). He discusses the events that took place in 1071, in the city of Yaroslavl. There was a famine that year and so two *volkhvy* appeared on the scene, claiming to know the cause of it. They gathered all the citizens and

demanded that the most “distinguished” women be summoned at once. Then, the *volkhvy* stabbed these women in the back and allegedly pulled out food from their insides, such as wheat and fish (Zguta, 1974: 259). However, this incident seems to defy reasonable explanation, which is why Zguta aims to explain it with reference to Mordvinian religious practice. He describes a women’s festival in Mordvinian culture that greatly resembles the actions stated above. Therefore, in Zguta’s opinion, there was no actual killing – rather, the Primary Chronicle documents the ritual, where the food is pulled out of sacks that the women are wearing (Zguta, 1974: 263-265). This last part was omitted from the story, however. Why was there no mention of the sacks with food? Perhaps it is because the author wanted to discredit paganism by portraying the *volkhvy* as savages. Zguta adopts this view in the following passage:

From as early as 988 the Kievan church had been waging a relentless, if only partially successful, campaign against all vestiges of paganism. Here was a splendid opportunity for the chronicler-monk to discredit both paganism and the *volkhvy*, its chief spokesmen. Not only could they be branded cold-blooded murderers for stabbing the women to death, and thieves for taking "what they had for themselves," but charlatans as well, because who but an utter fool would claim to be able to remove wheat, fish, and the like from inside a human carcass (1976: 266).

This is simply an illustration of the struggle that ensued between the advocates of Christianity, who were usually from the upper classes, and the supporters of the old pagan traditions, who were usually villagers from the lower classes. In any case, it is undeniable that because of this resistance, Slavic paganism survived and was still widespread, even after the introduction of Christianity into Kievan Russia.

In fact, this subject merits further attention. To begin, Andreyev writes the following: “Thanks to the pertinacity of pagan beliefs among the masses of the people, there arose the phenomenon of *dvoeverie* (ditheism), whose existence is confirmed by historians of all schools” (1962: 17). This phenomenon is also known as the concept of “dual-belief”. It is a notion that can be defined in the following terms: it is the simultaneous belief in two different religions, which often leads to overlap

and blending between the principles of the two faiths one has adopted. This clearly seems to be the case with Orthodoxy and paganism in Kievan Russia. Arzhanukhin explores this issue further and comments on its significance:

During the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, dual-belief was taken as an even more dangerous threat for Orthodoxy than Russian traditional polytheism. The teachers of the Church were concerned about cases in which natural deities were becoming close to angels in the minds of people. Alarmed, they talked about charms, omens and incantations that had become included into a range of Christian practices. The Churchmen talked about the fact that many Christians were Christian in the name only, while actually continuing to live as pagans (2000).

This appears to be the core of the problem. Many Russians remained devoted to some elements of the pagan religion of their ancestors, despite claiming to have accepted Christianity. The authorities were very displeased with this, to say the least, and did their best to combat the emerging threat of dual-belief. For example, Arzhanukhin notes that anti-pagan homilies were written: “They begin with a list of pagan rites and beliefs which are condemned by the Church, and end by condemning paganism and giving examples of the eternal punishments that await those Christians who are in the sin of dual-belief” (2000). It seems as if their efforts have failed, however, since paganism has persisted throughout the centuries among Eastern Slavs. Thus, *dvoeverie* has eventually gone beyond the limits of theology and has come to play a role in the historical studies of medieval Russia. Arzhanukhin concludes appropriately: “Today, Orthodoxy realizes that it can strengthen its position only by respecting specific national and cultural features. The historical experience of the Church has demonstrated that the concept of dual-belief led to a negative radicalization, a situation in which Christianization became opposed to folk culture” (2000).

One final illustration of the synthesis that has existed between paganism and Orthodox Christianity can be found in the examination of witchcraft and medicine in Russia. Zguta addresses “the magical, or folk, tradition in early Russian medicine, particularly as it is reflected in the Russian charm (*zaklinanie*) and incantation (*zagovor*)” (1978: 438-439). He does an excellent job of detailing

the healing process, from the identification of the illness to finding its cure by supernatural means – casting a spell, for example. However, the origin of these incantations remains a topic of great debate. Some observe that there is a large pagan component to them. Others point out the references to Christian beliefs, such as the mention of Christ and the Virgin, and the fact that most incantations begin with a prayer or ecclesiastical formula. Zguta summarizes his conclusions:

Upon examining a representative sample of Russian incantations one cannot help but be struck by the close interaction of pagan and Christian elements in these most popular of magical folk remedies. They are, on the one hand, a skillful blend of ecclesiastical language and formula, and, on the other, of sympathetic magic and ritual; of frequent allusion to myth, and of appeals to the Virgin and saints. As such they offer vivid proof of the persistence of *dvoeverie*, or ditheism, among the Russian people (1978: 448).

The theme of dual-belief seems to be present in much of the literature on Kievan Russia and its conversion from paganism to Christianity. Given the resurgence of interest in neo-paganism in Russia today, it is more than likely that this trend will only continue and grow with time.

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