

ESSAY 4

*The Christianization of Kievan Rus'**

I

Volodimer's Rus' adopted Christianity twenty-odd years after it had been adopted by Mieszko I's Poland. Scholars must still agree on the first exact date and place of Volodimer's baptism and tell us with certitude when, where, and by whom the first permanent ecclesiastical hierarchy was introduced among the East Slavs. But we need not wait for the results of their detailed research, for this essay's task is general: to trace the progress of Christianity among the East Slavs, to view the final act of this progress against the general background of the tenth century, and to assess the immediate consequences of Volodimer's conversion.

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

Thus, it is plausible that Christianity radiated from the Crimea to the north even before the ninth century. In 860 or 861, the Crimea served as a springboard for the Khazar mission of St. Cyril, the later apostle to 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 East Slavs who lived in the Kiey region, for these Slavs were separated from 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 with Byzantium's capital itself became possible only with the emergence of a force that could control, or at least safely enjoy, the Dnieper waterway linking the hinterland

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zones with the Black Sea. Such a force was in existence by the middle of the ninth century. Reference is made here to the Scandinavian Rus', who formed the upper crust in the Varangian-Slavic principalities that they helped to create in Eastern Europe. A Varangian expedition, possibly originating in Kiev, attacked Constantinople in 860. Almost immediately, Byzantium struck back with spiritual weapons: in 866, Patriarch Photios proudly announced to his eastern colleagues the progress of Christianity among the fierce Rus' and the dispatch of a bishop on a mission to them. This mission to the barbarians of the north was only one of many that 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 in Kiev, but from then on, especially from the second quarter of the tenth century, we have convincing evidence that Christianity began to take root in Kiev. Some of the Rus' who ratified the Rus'-Byzantine treaties of the mid-tenth century were Christians. A Christian church dedicated to St. Elias existed in Kiev by that time. Since thunder and lightning were among that prophet's Christian attributes, scholars thought that he had been chosen as a competitor to the local pagan god of thunder, Perun. There exists, however, an alternative and, to my mind, better explanation for the church's dedication. The Byzantine emperor Basil I, who attained sole power by 867, but who had been co-emperor for some time, was expressly connected with the first Christianization of the Rus' by his biographer. Basil was deeply devoted to the prophet Elias, who in a vision had foretold his imperial future. As a token of gratitude, Basil later had a church built in the imperial palace and named it after the prophet. It is likely that the church in Kiev was dedicated to St. Elias to honor Basil I's preferred saint and thus acknowledge that emperor's patronage over the first Christianization of the Rus'. If so, that church would go back to the ninth century.¹

By 957 Ol'ga, the Kievan princess who was regent of the realm, had been baptized, probably in Constantinople, which, in any case, she visited, likely as early as 946. The first martyrs of Kiev to be recorded antedated the Christianization of the land: they were two Varangians killed by a pagan mob whose martyrdom the Rus' Primary Chronicle recorded under the year 983.

However highly placed the Kievan converts to Christianity may have been at that time, we must still speak of individual conversions, not of the baptism of the realm. For Rus' as a whole to be baptized, the notion of the Rus' land

1. On the first Christianization of the Rus', cf. Essay 3 above; on Basil I's devotion to the prophet Elias and the church dedicated to the prophet Elias in the imperial palace, in the capital, and elsewhere, cf. *Vita Basilii* in Theophanes Continuatus, 5:8 = 222,9–19; 5:82 = 308,20–309,1; 5:83 = 325,2–3; 11–16; 5:87 = 329,19–330,4; 5:91 = 337,10–14, Bonn.

had to crystallize in the minds of the Kievan princes. In that respect Svjatoslav, Ol'ga's son, was somewhat of a reactionary. His Slavic name—he was the first Rus' prince to bear such a name—pointed to later developments, but his pagan predilections and his Viking restlessness were 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 Rus'. The defeat they suffered at the hands of the Byzantines at Silistra in 971 was the Lech Field battle of Rus' history.² Thereafter the period of settling down for good around Kiev began, and it started with Volodimer the Organizer. More than any prince before him, he must have felt the need for a force that 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 apparently was: in his pagan period, Volodimer set up a group of statues of pagan gods on a hill near Kiev, which may have been his attempt to establish a pagan pantheon for his realm. But Finnish and Slavic wooden idols could not compete with the higher religious beliefs held in centers neighboring on Kiev. 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 the somewhat more sober version of that religion practised in the newly reestablished Western Empire, but also of Islam, adopted in 922 by the Volga Bulgars, and of Judaism, widespread among the elite of the recently defeated Khazars. As for the religious situation in other Slavic countries, Volodimer could obtain information on it within his family circle, from his Christian wives—two Czechs and one Bulgarian.

A decision had to be made and made at the top, for, as we saw in the previous essay, in their final stages, almost all conversions to a "higher" religion were conversions from above to below. 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 (i.e., Islamic), Latin, and Greek missionaries arrived in Kiev, and then Rus' 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 on 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,

2. In 955, Emperor Otto I won a battle against the Magyars on the Lech Field (near Augsburg). That victory put an end to the Magyar westward drive.

we will agree that it was obvious and wise. It was obvious because Kiev's previous contacts with Byzantium had been frequent and prolonged. It was wise because, as we saw in Essay 2, in the last quarter of the tenth century Byzantium was the most brilliant cultural centre of the world as Kiev knew it. And Byzantium was at the height of its political might. Western contemporaries, like Liutprand of Cremona and Thiethmar 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 it had made considerable advances in the Balkans. As for its culture, the sophistication of its intellectuals and their familiarity with the canon of antique literature—these were traits that the pagan Rus' 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 Volodimer that the Byzantine form of Christianity provided the most appealing choice—that 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, including Professor Andrzej Poppe's recent theory that Volodimer attacked Kherson as an ally rather than an enemy of Basil II. The attempt that follows is one more guess, every detail of which can be contradicted or confirmed by solutions proposed by scholars in the past. I shall give an account of Volodimer's conversion as it might have been—but, alas, was not—recorded by a Byzantine chronicler, and 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 Rus', asking 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 and the official objections to marriages with northern barbarians, as those objections were recorded in a work sponsored by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (Porphyrogenetos), Basil II's grandfather, some forty years earlier. The emperor, however, is in distress. The princess is promised, but the baptism of the barbarian is demanded as the condition for accepting him and his realm into the family of civilized peoples. Volodimer—this is the barbarian's name—is baptized in his capital, Kiev, in 987 or 988. Troops 6,000 strong (in fact, Volodimer's own

boisterous Varangian mercenaries, whom he wants to get rid of) go to Byzantium and help to suppress the rebellion by winning a victory in April 989. The situation of the empire having improved, there is no need to send the imperial princess to sure cultural starvation in the north. The embittered barbarian attacks the Byzantine city of Kherson in the Crimea and takes it between April and June of 989. Now the princess has to be sent north after all. The marriage is celebrated in Kherson in 989. Volodimer, the Christ-loving prince, his bride Anna, her ecclesiastical entourage, and some Kherson ecclesiastics and citizens proceed to Kiev, where all the people are baptized. The head of the new church arrives no later than 997. By that time, he has the rank of metropolitan; he is a Greek prelate and comes from Byzantium.

II

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 Ilarion's *Sermon on Law and Grace*, delivered around 1050, is as sophisticated as a refined Byzantine sermon of the period. Thus, in the short run, Volodimer's decision paid very good dividends, and the immediate results reaped by Kiev from its ties with Byzantium seem 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 Swabian duchess, Mathilda, praised Prince Mieszko II, the son of Bolesław the Brave, for his knowledge of, or at least his praying in, Greek. He may have learned this language from someone in the entourage of his wife, a granddaughter of Theophanu, the Byzantine spouse of Emperor Otto II, but it is legitimate to speculate that his Greek came from someone who arrived in Poland via Kiev. I can think of a likely candidate for the position of the prince's tutor—Anastasius the Khersonian, the Greek who helped Volodimer take Kherson in 989 (one of the Christianization years) and 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 the Brave.

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, or—to a much lesser degree—from Bohemia, heir to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition. Holy Scriptures, liturgical and 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 perhaps through a few translations of Byzantine texts made on Kievan soil (although this is now disputed on good grounds)—but the extent of this knowledge should not be exaggerated. Moreover, the list of translated Byzantine texts 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- to middle-brow level in Byzantine literature. There were some advantages to this situation. The availability of a written Slavic literary idiom combined with the relative geographical remoteness of Kiev from Constantinople contributed to the impressive growth of the vernacular literature, especially in historiography. This was a genre in which comparable Polish achievements were not forthcoming for centuries. But there was also a disadvantage, owing to the tenuousness of direct knowledge of the Greek language and literature and to the adoption of a selective procedure in translating, wherever it may have been done, most likely in Bulgaria—namely, the virtual lack of acquaintance with the works of antiquity. Kievan bookmen derived 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 Rus' Primary Chronicle does not quote Homer.

Under the year 988, the traditional date of Volodimer'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 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 realm. As such a request fitted perfectly into Otto's grandiose plans for Eastern missionary expansion, two bishops were ordained and one of them, Adalbert, was dispatched to the Rus' in 961. Adalbert's mission came to naught under mysterious and tragic circumstances. There is no doubt, however, that it took place. Our evidence about that is unimpeachable, since it stems from the unhappy head of the mission himself. We omit

from this discussion the information we have on several papal embassies sent out to Volodimer, 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 some time after the baptism of the Rus'. The evidence comes from German missionaries who were greatly assisted and judiciously advised by Volodimer when they passed through Kiev on their way to the Pečenegs 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 Francis Dvornik has so rightly reminded us in his writings, points to the traffic in literary texts between Bohemian centres of the Slavonic liturgy, active until the very end of the eleventh century, and Kiev. Volodimer's marrying into the Byzantine imperial family should not make us oblivious to the fact, mentioned in Essay 1, that Polish, French, German, and other Western marriages of the Kievan princely house far outnumbered 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 Pope 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 contains a number of Kievan miniatures and can be inspected today in the Italian city of Cividale in Friuli, near the Slovenian border.

We must keep things in their proper perspective, however. Adalbert's mission ended in failure. The embittered hierarch called the Rus' "frauds." Bohemian texts on East Slavic soil are but a small fraction of texts of Byzantine provenance. Grand 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 vassalage to St. Peter, and he was supported by the archimandrites of the Kievan Caves Monastery. The atmosphere of this monastery must have been pro-Byzantine in the 1070s, for, the Primary Chronicle informs us, when the devil was sighted at that time by one of the monastery's sainted monks, he appeared—I am sorry to report—in the guise of a Pole.

Kiev remained in the Byzantine fold not only because its Greek metropolitans saw to it, but, primarily, because it had been closely tied to Byzantium from the very time of Volodimer's conversion. This was apparent to contemporaries, both Eastern and Western. Thiethmar of Merseburg stressed the proximity of Kiev to Greece, and Adam of Bremen even took Kiev for one of Byzantium's foremost cities. But the most significant text comes from Kiev itself. It is a *Life* of St. Volodimer, possibly going back to the eleventh

century. In his final address, the author of the *Life* prays not to Volodimer alone, in the name of Rus' alone, but to both rulers famous for establishing the conversion of their subjects, Constantine the Great *and* Volodimer, on behalf of the Rus' *and* the Greek peoples:

O you two holy emperors, Constantine and Volodimer, help those of your kin against their enemies, and rescue the Greek and Rus' peoples from all tribulation, and pray to God on my behalf so that I may be saved by your prayers, for you enjoy special favors with the Savior.³

This passage may be interpreted as an expression of emulation of Byzantium. Volodimer has even been given an imperial title in another passage (not quoted here), Kiev has been promoted to the position of the second Jerusalem, a title usually reserved for Constantinople, and Volodimer hailed as a second Moses, an epithet usually reserved for Byzantine emperors. But I prefer to see, in the passage 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 Rus' alike. What Svjatoslav could not achieve by force of arms alone, Volodimer achieved by Christianizing his realm.

3. Cf., e.g., E. Golubinskij, *Istorija russoj cerkvi* 1 (Moscow, 1901), 1: 225–38, esp. pp. 235 and 237, and *Pamjat' i poxvala knjazju russkomu Vladimiru Jakova mnixa i Žitie knjazja Vladimira* (= reprinted from the editions of V. I. Sreznevskij [St. Petersburg, 1897] and A. A. Zimin [Moscow, 1963] in *Berkeley Slavic Specialties*, 1988), esp. pp. 11, 12, 21, 22.

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