
The Conversion of Russia to Christianity in the Light of Greek Missionary Activity Among the Slavs

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"WHAT IS THIS? WHAT IS THIS DISTRESSING AND HEAVY catastrophe and abomination? Why has this dreadful thunderbolt fallen on us out of the farthest north? What clouds compacted of affliction and condemnation have violently collided to force out this irresistible lightning upon us? Why has this thick, sudden hailstorm of barbarians burst forth, . . . who . . . miserably grind up men's very bodies, and bitterly destroy the whole nation? . . . This people is fierce and has no mercy, its voice is as the roaring sea . . . we have beheld their massed aspect and our hands have waxed feeble; anguish has seized us. . . ."¹

This is how the great intellectual and Patriarch Photios started the first of two homilies which he delivered on the occasion of a Russian attack on Constantinople. It was on June 18, 860, when more than 200 vessels originating from the remote north appeared in the Sea of Marmara, landing on the shores destroying and plundering villages, towns and islands, spreading fear and consternation to the inhabitants of the capital and vicinity which had not been attacked since

¹ Photios, *Homiliai*, no. 3, ed. B. Laourdas *Φωτίου Ὁμιλίας* (Thessalonike, 1959), 29; English translation by Cyril Mango, *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 82-84.

the Arabic invasion of 717.

In his second homily, Photios described the Russians as "a nation dwelling somewhere far from our country, barbarous, nomadic, armed with arrogance, unwatched, unchallenged, leaderless" which "like a wave of the sea flooded over our frontiers, and as a wild boar has devoured the inhabitants of the land like grass, or straw, or a crop . . . sparing nothing from man to beast . . . but boldly thrusting their sword through persons of every age and sex. . . ." Photios speaks of "the inhumanity of the barbarous tribe, the harshness of its manners and the savagery of its character." Nevertheless it was this barbarous nation that was tamed, civilized, and later praised by the same Patriarch. It was because of its expedition against Constantinople that the Russian nation "became famous and has risen to a splendid height and immense wealth" Photios adds.²

But is Photios' description a rhetorical hyperbole or a realistic appraisal of the new nation? It is both. Photios refined with rhetorical schemes and harsh epithets the speeches he had delivered in 860 but his information about the nature of the Russian attack on Constantinople is confirmed by several other sources such as Niketas the Paphlagonian, Theophanes Continuatus, George Kedrenos, Ioannes Zonaras, and Leo Grammatikos.³ Whatever the nature of the Russian attack might have been, the fact is that it was the onslaught on Constantinople which placed the Russians on the historical stage. Furthermore, it was this major event which opened up the way in the relations between Russians and Greeks, and the Christianization of Russia. For soon after their assault, the Russians made overtures to Constantinople for a mission.

² Ibid. no. 4.

³ Ioannes Zonaras, *Epitome Historion*, 16.5, 1-2; Niketas the Paphlagonian, "Vita Ignatii," PG 105.516-17, 632. Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), p. 196. George Kedrenos, *Historiarum Compendium*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), 2.173; Leo Grammatikos, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1842), pp. 240-41. See also Laourdas's introduction to Photios's homilies, *Φωτίου Ὁμιλίαι*, pp. 38-39.

Even though we associate the Christianization of the Russian state with the conversion of Vladimir in 988, the first Russian attack on Constantinople in 860 and the missionary work of the Greek Church during the patriarchal tenure of Patriarch Photios should be our starting point. Photios indicates that some Russians became converts to Orthodox Christianity during his own time. In an encyclical to the Patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria written in 867, Photios writes that the Rus "who raised hands against our state" now "confess the pure religion of the Christians." He adds that a bishop had been sent to the Russians from Constantinople.⁴

Theophanes Continuatus relates that soon after the Russian attack on Constantinople in 860, Russian ambassadors or delegates to Constantinople received baptism⁵ and that a few years later the Emperor Basil I (867-886) persuaded many Russians "to receive salutary baptism." While this information is vague, we know that in 874 the Russians accepted an archbishop from Constantinople ordained by Patriarch Ignatios.⁶ Whether this archbishop was sent there to organize an existing church or to instruct the Russo-Varangian princes Askold and Dir and baptize them we do not know. It is certain, however, that in 882 Askold and Dir were killed by Oleg, who captured Kiev, made it his capital, and introduced the Kievan period of Russian history. The fact that both Askold and Dir were honored by the Russians as martyrs indicates that they died as Christian martyrs. Over the tomb of Askold they built a church dedicated to Saint Nicholas and Dir's tomb was behind Saint Irene's church.⁷

⁴Photios, *Epistles*, no. 4, ed. I. N. Valettas, *Φωτίου . . . Ἐπιστολαί* (London, 1864), p. 178; Zonaras, *Epitome*, 16.10, 27-28.

⁵Theophanes Continuatus, *Historia*, p. 196.

⁶Ibid. pp. 342-43; cf. V. I. Feidas, *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱστορία τῆς Ρωσίας* 3rd ed. (Athens, 1988), p. 15.

⁷Samuel H. Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans. and eds. *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), p. 61; Paul Yozyk, *The Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada* (Ottawa, 1981), p. 2.

Notwithstanding Oleg's efforts to eradicate Christianity from Kievan Russia it survived the persecution and may have created a sympathetic climate for Christianity as Diocletian's persecution did for fourth-century Christianity. Christianization continued as a result of gradual historical circumstances — diplomatic, political, economic, and religious. Missionaries, traders, and merchants from the Greek colonies in the Cherson and the mouth of the Dnieper remained active among the natives.⁸

Three major events of the tenth century served as milestones leading to the official Christianization of the Kievan state in 988. In 911 under Oleg, "the Grand Prince of Rus" Russian envoys visited Constantinople to ratify a treaty. During their stay in the capital the Greeks guided them to several places including Hagia Sophia. The *Russian Primary Chronicle*, our most important source, relates that the Greeks showed them "the beauties of the churches, the golden palace, and the riches contained therein. . . . They also instructed the Russes in their faith, and expounded to them the true belief." Upon their return to Kiev, the Russian envoys "recounted how they had made peace and established a covenant between Greece and Rus", confirmed by oaths inviolable for the subjects of both countries." For Russian, Khazarian, Georgian, Armenian, Bulgarian, and all Western European (Latin, Germanic) sources, what we commonly call the Byzantine Empire was simply Greece and its inhabitants Greeks, an important testimony for the ethnology of the Empire.⁹

The second major step in the improvement of relations between Russians and Greeks, leading ultimately to the Christianization of the first, was under the rule of Igor when a treaty between Russians and Greeks was signed in 944. It was

⁸ George Vernadsky, *A History of Russia*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT, 1959), pp. 20-39.

⁹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 64-85, 93-119; Norman Golb and Omerjan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Ithaca and London, 1982), pp. 62-70, 107-15.

a most important treaty and its provisions are of great historical significance. First of all it reveals that the Russian envoys included Christians and non-Christians. The *Russian Primary Chronicle* mentions by name fifty-one delegates "sent by Igor, Great Prince of Rus', and from each prince and all the people of the land of Rus'." The Russian source adds that the Russian envoys addressed the Greek emperor as follows: "Our great Prince Igor, and his princes and his boyars, and the whole people of Rus have sent us to Romanos, Constantine, and Stephen the mighty Emperors themselves, as well as with their boyars and the entire Greek nation henceforth and forever, as long as the sun shines and the world stands fixed."¹⁰

The key words in this account are Igor, princes, boyars, and especially the whole people of Rus. The fifty-one delegates represent Igor's court but also his princes and all the Russian people. Repeatedly the *Russian Primary Chronicle* reveals that the envoys included Christians and non-Christians. The first took their oaths in the Church of Saint Elias in Kiev, and the latter before the statue of Perun. Saint Elias served either as a cathedral or as a parish church, for "many of the Varangians [in Kiev] were Christians." On other occasions the Russians were expected to "swear according to their faith, and the non-Christians after their customs."¹¹ Christians must have existed in several other cities not far from Kiev, such as Pereyaslavl', Kanev, Vyshgorodo, Lyubech, Chernigov, Novgorod Seversky, all along Dnieper or its tributaries. There were "more than a score of Russian cities in the ninth

¹⁰Cross-Wetzel, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, p. 74. For the significance of the 911 and other tenth-century treaties between Kievan Russia and Byzantium, see Irene Sorlin, "Traites de Byzance avec la Russie au X siècle," *Cahiers du monde russe et Soviétique* vol. 2, fasc. 3 and 4 (1961) 313-60, 447-75.

¹¹Cross-Wetzel, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 75, 77-78; For the church of St. Elias and other churches of early Kiev, see Samuel H. Cross, H. V. Morgilevski and K. J. Conant, "The Earliest Medieval Churches of Kiev," *Speculum*, 11 (1936) 477-99, esp. 477-93.

centuries" and Russia was known in Scandinavian sources as Gardariki, a land of towns.¹²

This inference finds support in the *Primary Chronicle's* account which among other things stipulates that "if any inhabitant of the land of Rus' thinks to violate [the treaty of 944] may such as these transgressors as have adopted the Christian faith incur condign punishment from Almighty God in the shape of damnation and destruction forevermore. If any other transgressors be not baptized, may they receive help neither from God nor from Perun. . . ." Apparently the baptized believed in an Almighty God [the Greek Pantocrator] while the pagan believed in a god, or Perun.¹³

The treaty of 944 was followed by the visit of Queen Olga to Constantinople in 957, whose visit there is associated with her baptism. Whether her baptism actually took place in Constantinople or upon her return to Kiev is not of concern to us here.¹⁴ My thesis is that the testimony of Photios, the account concerning the treaty of 911, the provisions of the 944 treaty, the baptism of Queen Olga and several other allusions indicate that evolution rather than revolution characterized the introduction of Christianity to Russia which had been established there long before the reign of Vladimir. Furthermore, in addition to cities with Christian populations, the existence of Christian toponyms indicates that certain places had been used by the Greek missionaries as stepping

¹²M. N. Tikhomirov, *The Towns of Ancient Rus*, 2nd ed., tr. by Y. Sdobnikov (Moscow, 1959), pp. 7-53. Tikhomirov writes that Kievan Russia must have had nearly "300 towns on the eve of the Mongolian invasion."

¹³Cross-Wetzel, *Chronicle*, p. 74.

¹⁴Ibid. 82-84. For the problem of whether or not Olga was baptized in Constantinople, see Dimitri Obolensky, "Russia and Byzantium in the Mid-Tenth Century: The Problem of the Baptism of Princess Olga," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 28 (1983) 157-71. In a previous work Obolensky was more certain that Olga, "while on a mission of peace in Constantinople, was baptized by the Byzantine Patriarch . . ." there. *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (New York, 1971), p. 189. Francis Dvornik, too, accepts that Olga was baptized in Constantinople. See his *Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1970), p. 268.

stones for missionary activity in the interior. Constantine Porphyrogenetos relates that two islands in the Dnieper River carried the names of Saint Gregory and Saint Aitherios.¹⁵ As in the early centuries of the Roman Empire, likewise in the Russian land, Christianity began as an urban religion. Novgorod, Smolensk, Teliutzka, Chrenigov, Busegrad — all along the Dnieper River or tributaries must have been exposed to Christian missionary activity.

From 860 to 988, whether through wars, diplomatic missions, trade treatises, Byzantine imperial propaganda or missionary activity, Russia's isolation broke down and the land opened up to influences from the medieval Greek world. Vladimir's conversion was the climax of Christianity's introduction to Russia, Kiev in particular, whose Christianization had begun with Byzantium's mission to Khazaria.

The mission to the Khazars was conducted a few years before the missionary activity of Cyril and Methodios among the Western and Southern Slavs. The Council of 843 brought the crisis of the iconoclastic controversy to an end and, with men like Photios, a new era was introduced. The international climate in ninth century Europe was ripe for the Greek and the Latin Churches to conduct missionary work in non-Christian Europe, East and West.

Whether for political or religious reasons several established states and developing nations were interested in the faith and practices of Greek Christianity. Muslim, Jewish, and pagan rulers had asked Constantinople for theologians who would explain Christian doctrines, especially those concerning the holy Trinity and the Incarnation of the Logos — Christ.

In the middle of the ninth century the Muslim Caliph Mutawakkil sent an embassy to Constantinople asking for a Byzantine delegation to go to the Caliph's court in Samara, near Bagdad, and to hold a theological dialogue with Islamic

¹⁵Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. and trans. Gy. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins (Budapest, 1949), p. 60.

theologians. A Greek delegation was sent there in 851. It included Photios, who at the time was a layman and university professor, and his disciple Constantine, a twenty-four year old theologian-philosopher. It seems that a similar delegation went to Bagdad in 857/8. It is interesting to note that both religions could hold a theological disputation exploring each other's beliefs and practices¹⁶ long before the ecumenical movement came into being.

A few years later in 863, the Jewish ruler of Khazaria asked the "king" of the "land of Greece" for a theological delegation to visit his court and his people to explain Christianity to them. Both Jewish and Muslim missionaries were active among the Khazars. Many of them along with Bulgarians who lived in the territory near the Bolga River had already embraced Islam. The Jewish communities along the northern borders of the Byzantine Empire were also active in proselytism. It is not certain whether the Khagan of the Khazars was Jewish by birth or by conversion. In any case Khazaria had many converts to Judaism and to Islam.

Patriarch Photios, Emperor Michael, and the Prime Minister Bardas sent Constantine and his brother Methodios, natives of the city of Thessalonike to Khazaria. Constantine in particular was one of Photios' brilliant disciples and his successor at the University of Constantinople. Even though their mission to Khazaria was for more than religious reasons, the two brothers were able to conduct missionary activity and to teach the principles of the Orthodox Christian faith. Theological discussions were held at the court of the Khazar ruler. Among other themes the two brothers analyzed the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, and they compared Orthodox Christian teachings with beliefs of Judaism and Islam. They defended the dogma of the Trinity by quoting passages from the New and the Old Testament which speak of God as Creator, Logos, and Spirit. They defended the Incarnation by asking the Jewish theologians present why

¹⁶Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, pp. 285-89.

God could not have appeared in human form when he revealed himself to Moses as a burning bush. They explained and justified the use of icons and compared Christian morality with Jewish and Muslim ethics.

Soon after the disputation some two hundred pagan Khazars requested to be baptized and admitted into the Orthodox Church.¹⁷ The Khagan, who had received the two brothers cordially, announced that he had given permission to those who wished to receive baptism. Whether he allowed this for political reasons or genuine religious toleration we do not know. It is certain however that he wanted to maintain friendly relations with the Greek Empire and it is possible that it was through Khazaria that Christianity was introduced to Russia. According to a widely held view, Kiev was founded by the Khazars if not in the eighth at least during the first half of the ninth century.¹⁸ But Kievan Russia was not a homogeneous state. Even though the East Slavs comprised the largest single ethnic group there, from the very beginning its population was multiracial, multilingual, and multi-religious. In addition to various Baltic, Slavic, and Turkic tribes, there were Christian Greeks in the Kievan state, who along with the Khazar converts made the presence of Christianity there visible.

In any case, the credit for the Byzantine mission to the Khazars belongs to the two brothers and to Photios who was the main force behind that expedition. Francis Dvornik rightly observes that "if Photios had not been elected patriarch, he would probably have been the man whom the government would have chosen to represent Christian theological scholar-

¹⁷Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, pp. 108-11; Clement of Ochrida, "Life of Constantine-Kyrrillos," Ch. 11, trans. I. E. Anastasiou, *Επιστημονική Ἑπετηρίς Θεολογικῆς Σχολῆς Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης* vol. 12 (Thessalonike, 1967); Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁸J. Brutzkus, "The Khazar Origin of Ancient Kiev," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 22 (1944) 108-24. Also Vernadsky, 27-34; Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, pp. 51-53; Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, pp. 53-59.

ship in Khazaria."¹⁹ By the first quarter of the tenth century, a few years before Kiev's conquest by Prince Igor of the Rus, there must have been many Christians in Khazaria. An anonymous Khazarian Jew writing to Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Spanish Cordova relates that the Khazarian Kagan Joseph in retaliation for the forced conversion of Jews under the Byzantine Emperor Romanos Lecapenos in 930, "did away with many Christians."²⁰

Much more important and fruitful was Byzantium's concern with the Christianization of the Western and Southern Slavs. A period of intensive missionary activity among several Slavic tribes began during Photios' patriarchal tenure. But once again political necessities and religious considerations were interrelated. Church and State, religion and culture were not divided. The origins of the Byzantine missions to the Western Slavs must be traced to the political developments in the West.

In the year 856 the king of the Eastern Frankish Empire Louis Germanikos was succeeded to the throne by his oldest son Charlemagne, who extended his kingdom over Bavaria. He was ambitious and his policies included not only the creation of a great Empire but also the destruction of the Moravian state which occupied the territory between Bavaria and Bulgaria. In order to achieve his goal, the Frankish king negotiated an alliance with the king of the Bulgarians who had extended his own rule far to the West. Thus Moravia was squeezed between the Franks and the Bulgars and felt the need for a strong ally.

It was under these political circumstances that the king of the Moravians, Rastislav, sought the assistance of the Greeks. He asked their emperor not only for a formal diplomatic recognition of his state but also for missionaries to teach his people Greek Christianity. The patriarch and

¹⁹Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, p. 65.

²⁰Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, pp. 115, also 104-05, 137.

the emperor responded promptly. Once again they turned to the experienced Greek brothers Constantine and Methodios who were "familiar with the Slavic tongue" in the words of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, to lead a missionary expedition to Moravia.²¹

The two brothers, sons of Leo, the governor of the district of Thessalonike, had received an excellent education. Both were multilingual. Constantine in particular, in addition to his native Greek, knew not only Slavic, but Syriac, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew. It seems that several years before their departure for Moravia, at the advice of Photios who was greatly concerned with the Christianization of the neighboring Bulgars, they had invented a Slavonic script, the so-called Glogolitic alphabet, and had translated parts of the Bible, and several liturgical books into Slavonic.

Thus well-organized the two brothers led their missionary delegation to the Western Slavs and in 863 they arrived in Pannonia. Their missionary activity was successful, especially during the first three years. Constantine and Methodios earned a great reputation and the approval not only of Constantinople's Patriarch but also of Rome's Pope Adrian II (867-872), who invited them to his see in order to inform the Church of Rome of their activities. While the two brothers were in Rome, Constantine, who had adopted the monastic name Cyril, died prematurely on February 14, 869, in a Greek monastery.

Methodios initially received the support of Rome and became archbishop of Pannonia, with Moravia, the old Sirmium as his see. As archbishop he became a victim of political and ecclesiastical intrigues to the extent that he suffered in the hands of Ratislav's successor Wiching and the Frankish clergy, who resented the fact that the two Greek brothers introduced Christianity in the local language rather than in Latin as was the practice of Rome.

²¹Cross and Wetzor, *Chronicle*, pp. 62-63; Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, pp. 105-09; Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, pp. 134-44.

While archbishop of Pannonia, Methodios translated into Slavonic all the books of the Old Testament, except the books of Maccabees; the "Synagoge of Fifty Titles," a handbook of canon law compiled by John Scholastikos; a Greek Paterikon; and a collection of homilies by Greek Fathers. Furthermore, he left behind a legacy of major cultural significance. Ultimately he found himself abandoned by Rome and his disciples were expelled from Pannonia. He died on April 16, 885, and his funeral was conducted in Greek, Latin, and Slavonic. He was buried by the Cathedral of Stare-Meste, the present-day city of Gradisch-Uherske Hradiste' in modern Hungary.²² Theophylaktos, archbishop of Ochrid in the early twelfth century, who wrote the *Life of Clement*, one of Methodios' disciples, relates that the two brothers left behind 200 congregations with a multitude (*plethos*) of priests, deacons, and subdeacons.²³

The combined missionary work of the two brothers lasted for nearly twenty-two years. Their mission however was continued by their disciples who were especially successful in the state of Zalevar. It survives to the present day in the country of Czechoslovakia, including the old districts of Croatia and Pannonia. George Ostrogorsky has summarized the importance of the two Greek brothers as follows: For the southern and eastern Slavs the achievement of the two brothers who had started their career under the patronage of Patriarch Photios was of undying significance. Not only did they give Christianity to those tribes but they gave them their alphabet and the very beginnings of their national literature, culture, and civilization.²⁴

²²Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, p. 188. For Methodios's episcopacy in Pannonia see Imre Boba, "The Episcopacy of Methodius," *Slavic Review*, 26 (1967) 85-93.

²³Theophylaktos, "*Βίος καὶ Πολιτεία . . . Κλήμεντος Ἀρχιεπισκόπου Βουλγάρων*" PG 126.1194-1240. For an English translation see Ivan Duichev, ed., *Kiril and Methodius: Founders of Slavonic Writing*, trans. Spass Nikolov (New York, 1985), pp. 93-126, esp. par. 23.

²⁴George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* trans. Joan Hussey, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), pp. 229-30.

The missionary work of the two brothers reveals the basic principles of the theology and the practice of mission. First, the two missionaries knew the language of the people they were sent to evangelize. Second, they went to the new nations well-prepared with a translation of parts of the Scriptures and liturgical books in their own dialect. Third, their primary consideration was to organize an ecclesia, a worshipping community rather than a Greek colony for political or economic reasons. The sources do not indicate whether the two brothers initiated the establishment of hospitals, schools, hospices, orphanages, homes for the poor and other social welfare institutions as was the practice in Byzantium.

It was during the same century that Bulgaria, too, officially became a Christian nation. Under the leadership of their king Boris, the Bulgarians realized the need to organize their state on a firmer political and religious foundation by adopting Christianity as their official religion, seeking an alliance with Constantinople rather than the remote Franks. In 864 Boris received baptism and was named Michael. His baptism set an example for his subjects to follow. Following Boris' baptism, Patriarch Photios sent Greek priests to organize the Bulgarian Church. The Christianization of the Bulgarians led to their political, racial and cultural unification.²⁵

The official conversion of the Russians during the reign of Vladimir is charmingly related in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*. It relates that Vladimir summoned together his boyars and the city-elders, and said to them: "Behold, the Bulgars came before me urging me to accept their religion. Then came the Germans and praised their own faith; and after them came the Jews. Finally the Greeks appeared, criticizing all other faiths but commending their own, and

²⁵Theophylaktos, "Bios" 126.16 *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 59-60. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, pp. 126-27; Idem, "Byzantium, Rome, the Franks, and the Christianization of the Southern Slavs," in *Cyrillo-Methodiana*, ed. M. Hellman et. al. (Graz, 1964), pp. 85-125, and especially George C. Soulis, "The Legacy of Cyril and Methodius to the Southern Slavs," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 19 (1965) 21-43, esp. 22-38.

they spoke at length. . . . Their words were artful, and it was wondrous to listen and pleasant to hear them."²⁶

The *Russian Primary Chronicle* adds that Vladimir asked his boyars to express their opinion on the subject of a new religion for their people. The boyars advised him to send emissaries and inspect the four faiths and report back to the prince. Vladimir was pleased with the advice and "chose good and wise men to the number of ten, and directed them to go first among the Bulgars (Muslims), the Germans (Roman Catholics), the Jews, and finally to visit the Greeks." The emissaries fulfilled their mission and upon their return, Vladimir called together his boyars and the elders in order to hear the delegations' report.

The envoys reported "on their visit to Greece" as follows: "The Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty."²⁷ It was the beauty of the service, the splendor of the churches, the esthetics of iconography, and the experience of worship that impressed and attracted the Russians to Greek Christianity — not the theology and the spiritual content of the liturgy. The fact that everything was in Greek and apparently they understood little of the liturgy's theology neither diminished their admiration nor prevented them from making a decisive recommendation to their prince. These aspects of Greek Christianity had a decisive impact on the nature of Russian Christianity and remained its hallmarks for many centuries.

It has been observed that the *Chronicle's* account of the Christianization of Russia is a myth rather than history. Admittedly it contains much legendary material but it also con-

²⁶Cross-Wetzel, *Chronicle*, pp. 110-12.

²⁷*Ibid.* p. 111.

tains more than a kernel of truth. The author, or authors, of the *Russian Primary Chronicle* were nearly contemporaries to the events they described and the oral traditions they used. Thus, they were closer to the events and better informed than we are. The fact remains that during Vladimir's reign we have the mass baptism of the Russian peoples.

Did Vladimir impose the new faith upon his subjects, or did they accept Christianity as an imitation of the example of their leader? A combination of both lies behind the rapid growth of Christianity in the land of the Rus. But whatever the answer may be, this was not an unparalleled phenomenon. Something very similar had happened with the conversion and baptism of Constantine and the spread of Christianity in the fourth century; with the baptism of Tiridates and the conversion of the Armenians; Clovis and the mass baptism of the Franks in the fifth; and the baptism of Boris and the mass conversion of the Bulgarians in the ninth century.²⁸

Mass baptism implied little instruction and the survival of much native culture and tradition. In all four instances, at first the conversion was only nominal. Pagan practices persisted for many years. The masses of people adhered to their old culture and habits while the more cultivated among them assimilated the more sophisticated aspects of Christianity. We should not be surprised therefore to observe that Vladimir's adoption of Christianity and the Christianization of Russia did not mean elimination of established practices and ways of life.

In its missionary activity among the Russians, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople did not seek to destroy the native culture. Furthermore it followed the Cyrillo-Methodian policy which respected local languages, preaching the Gospel in the language of the natives. Cyril had condemned the Latin practice which had emphasized the preservation of the *triglosia*, the theory according to which the Christian

²⁸Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 2.30-31, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York, 1977), pp. 143-45; *Chronicle*, pp. 59-60.

Gospel should be preached and religious services be conducted only in one of the three "sacred languages," that is, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.²⁹

There is no doubt that the Greek missionaries exerted no intentional effort to Hellenize the new nations, to impose the Greek language on their liturgical life and to alter their native cultures. Culture of course, is more than language for it includes the sum total of ways of living, customs and skills, popular beliefs and traditions built up by a group of people and transmitted from one generation to another. Nevertheless through Christianity, the Greek missions taught the new Christian nations aspects of their civilization such as music, art, writing, moral values, ideas concerning the imperial office, laws, coronation rites, political ideologies, and emblems of power.³⁰

For many centuries all these influences survived, and Russian life and civilization felt the impact of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's missions, including its ecumenical and philanthropic outlook. "Beyond all doubt," wrote Dostoyevsky in 1880, "the destiny of a Russian is Pan-European and universal. To become a true Russian is to become the brother of all men. . . . Our future lies in universality, won not by violence, but by the strength derived from our great ideal — the reuniting of all mankind." And K. Leontyev expressed a similar vision when he wrote: "Sometimes I dream that a Russian Czar may put himself at the head of the social movement and organize it, as Constantine organized Christianity."³¹

The background of Dostoyevsky's and Leontyev's religious and political ideology is Greek and Christian, and it

²⁹Ibid. p. 63; see also Francis Dvornik, "The Significance of the Missions of Cyril and Methodius," *Slavic Review*, 23 (1964) 195-211, esp. 204. Dvornik sees in the mission of the two brothers more cultural than religious significance.

³⁰Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, pp. 291-370.

³¹Cited by Herbert J. Muller, *The Uses of the Past* (New York and Oxford, 1966), p. 288.

can be traced to Kievan Russia, but it took shape after the fall of Constantinople. When Ivan the Great overthrew the Tartar yoke he viewed himself as a combination of Constantine and Justinian. "You alone, in all that is under heaven, are a Christian Czar," the monk-Hegoumenos Philotheos (Filofei) wrote him. "And take note, O religious and gracious Tsar, that all Christian kingdoms are merged into yours alone, that the two Romes have fallen, but the third stands; and there shall be no fourth." The first Rome had fallen because it had persecuted the Christian faith. The second Rome-Constantinople had fallen because it betrayed the true Christian faith at the Unionist Council of Ferrara-Florence. The third Rome-Moscow should succeed where the other two had failed.³²

The Christian ideology in Kievan Russia had a civilizing influence upon Tsars and people alike. The first fruits of Christianity's influence can be seen in the transformation of Vladimir's personality. Before his conversion Vladimir was a savage warrior and belligerent chieftain; he had given his sexual impulses a free reign with no self-control, indulging in food, drink, and every carnal pleasure. He had seduced his brother's wife. He had many children with five wives, including a Greek, and some eight hundred concubines in several towns of Russia.³³

After his baptism, Vladimir received instruction in the tenets of the Christian faith, including ethics, and changed his style of life radically. Greek ethical Christianity, which had influenced political theory and governmental policies and inspired much philanthropic activity in the Byzantine Empire exerted much influence on Vladimir and the Russian social ethos. Vladimir pursued a life of practical Christianity and adopted philanthropic policies which became features

³²Ibid. 289. I have several serious disagreements with Muller's interpretation of Byzantine influence on Russia but several of his thought-provoking insights deserve to be noticed.

³³Cross-Wetzel, *Chronicle*, pp. 93-94.

of the Kievan state.

The *Russian Primary Chronicle* underlines Vladimir's ethical virtues and moral concerns, especially his mercifulness, hospitality, generosity toward the poor — his philanthropy in general. But philanthropy as an attribute of the Kievan princes, including Boris, Gleb, and especially Vladimir II Monomach, was not an original idea. It had its Byzantine prototype. As we have repeatedly emphasized, the Byzantine concept of the Emperor's or ruler's philanthropia can be traced back to the age of Constantine the Great. It had deep roots in Greek political theory and practice, and blossomed in the Byzantine era proper. Vladimir's devotion to philanthropy, the establishment of homes for the aged, hospitals, hospices (xenones), monasteries with infirmaries and a commitment to charity toward the poor, the destitute, strangers and travelers, the sick and the dying were policies and practices transplanted to Kievan Russia from Byzantium.³⁴

Vladimir's example was imitated by many of his people. When he sent out heralds inviting them to be baptized, they exclaimed in their enthusiasm: "if this were not good, the Prince and his boyars would not have accepted it."³⁵ The official adoption of Christianity, however, and Vladimir's own policy toward capital punishment did not prevent dynastic struggles and deaths in his own family. The cruel death which Vladimir's sons Boris and Gleb met at the hands of their brother Svyatopolk, and Svyatopolk at the hands of the other brother Iaroslav, who avenged the death of the younger

³⁴Ibid. 119-26, 206-19; Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1968), esp. chs. 4 and 8; idem, *Poverty, Society and Philanthropy in the Late Medieval Greek World* (New York, 1989), esp. part 2. For Vladimir's adoption of philanthropic attitudes and policies see also Nicholas Zernov, *The Russians and their Church* (London, 1968), pp. 8-12; Russell Zguta, "Monastic Medicine in Kievan Rus' and Early Muscovy" in H. Birnbaum and M. S. Flier, Editors, *Medieval Russian Culture* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 54-70, esp. 58, 68-70.

³⁵Cross-Wetzel, *Chronicle*, p. 116.

brothers³⁶ reveals not only dynastic conflicts but also the little effect that Christianity had in the life of some members of his family. Historically it has been confirmed that while individuals can change, societies require much more time to enjoy the fruits of a change.

The Greek missionary activity among the Russians introduced a new faith, more refined morals, philanthropic concerns and institutions but it was not able to alter or extinguish long standing customs and popular culture, a phenomenon present in the early Christian centuries. With the exception of a few heretical movements, Christianity did not perceive culture as alien, deserving destruction. The opposite has been historically true. In its efforts to Christianize "pagan" cultures, Christianity absorbed much of native cultures. Thus to the present time certain aspects of Orthodox Christian culture in Russia are peculiar to Russians.

For example the Russian ruling house did not adopt the Christian practice of referring to its members by the name of their patron saints. Olga was called either by her Scandinavian name Helga or by her Russian appellation but not by her Christian name Eleni (or Helena). Vladimir was seldom, if at all, mentioned by the name of his patron saint Basil (Basileios); Yaroslav by his Christian name Georgios (George), and Svyatopolk as Michael. Paradoxically, to the present day the Russian Orthodox Church does not refer to the first Christian ruler of Russia as Saint Basil but as Saint Vladimir.³⁷

While the Greek missions introduced several aspects of their civilization to the Russians, they failed to give them the Greek classics. Thus the intellectual life of ancient Russia remained very poor for many centuries. Patriarch Photios, the philosopher Constantine-Cyril, Leo the Mathematician and other Greek intellectuals of the ninth and tenth centuries

³⁶Ibid. 126-31. See also Constantin de Grunwald, *Saints of Russia* (London, 1960), pp. 31-38.

³⁷See Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, *The Empire of the Tsars and the Russians*, trans. Z. A. Ragozin (New York, 1969), pp. 24-40; Cross et. al. "The Earliest Medieval Churches of Kiev," p. 478, n. 4.

were great classical scholars with a profound appreciation for ancient Greek heritage. Unlike Greek Christianity, for nearly seven centuries Russian Christianity remained ignorant and even suspicious of the treasures of Greek antiquity with serious consequences for Russian Christianity and intellectual and scientific knowledge. "Anyone who loves geometry is abhorred by God" wrote a Russian bishop. "A spiritual sin it is to study astronomy and the books of Greece" wrote another. This attitude survived as late as the nineteenth century. For example under Nicholas I (1825-1855) all works on logic (including Aristotle's) and philosophy were forbidden. While the Christian Greeks, with some exceptions, never ceased to study the ancient masters, not a few Russians spoke "scornfully of the foolishness of the Greeks,"³⁸ an attitude reminiscent of a Tertullian and a Pope Gregory the First rather than of Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Photios, John of Euchaita, Eustathios of Thessalonike, and other Greek Fathers. The Russians accepted Greek Christianity with enthusiasm but not the Greek Classics which had been an integral part of Byzantine civilization. Because the Russians received Greek Christianity in the Slavic vernacular and not in Greek and only religion and not the classical Greek heritage, has been viewed by several Russian scholars such as E. Golubinsky and George Fedotov as an impediment to Kievan Russia's progress. While Golubinsky did not hold the Greeks responsible for this failure, others blamed Byzantium. Fedotov "had serious doubts about the benefits of the use of the Slavic vernacular. Having received the Bible and a vast amount of various religious writings in their own language, the Slavs had no incentive to learn Greek, for translations once made were sufficient for immediate practical

³⁸Cited by Muller, *Uses*, pp. 290-91. The positive attitude of the Greek Fathers toward ancient Greek learning is common knowledge. Three important works need to be mentioned: B. N. Tatakis, *E Byzantine Philosophia* (Athens, 1977); N. G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (Baltimore, 1983); Paul Lemerle, *Le Premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris, 1971).

needs. They were enclosed, therefore, within the narrow limits of an exclusively religious literature. They were never initiated into the great classical tradition of Hellenic antiquity. If only our ancestors had learned Greek . . . they could have reached finally the very springs of Greek inspiration . . . they received but one Book." The Serbian historian V. Jagic had no appreciation for Byzantine civilization and in his opinion the Slavs and Russians were reared in a "school of senility" and brought up on the "decrepit culture of a moribund world." Even George Florovsky, who refutes some of the arguments of Golubinsky, Fedotov, and Jagic, observes that "the absence of the classical tradition properly was not so tragic and fatal." Nevertheless, Florovsky admits that because the Russians failed to adopt the classical Greek heritage, they did not acquire the Greek inquisitive mind which had kept Byzantium ever searching, unquiet, and in constant tension and renewal. "The Byzantine achievement had been accepted, but Byzantine inquisitiveness had not. For that reason the [Byzantine] achievement itself could not be kept alive."³⁹

Is there any explanation why the Greek classical heritage — philosophy, literature, science — was not introduced to the Slavic world by Byzantium through their missions? Was it because the Greek missionaries were concerned only with the preaching of a simple Gospel? Was it because the Greek Church itself did not at this time appreciate the classics? Some modern scholars explain that "although Kievan Russia was the religious offshoot of Byzantium, Russians found Greek civilization [and secular learning] largely inaccessible because of the Church Slavonic idiom and the narrow religious preoccupation of the [Russian] Christian elite." It is also possible that educationally, the new nations were not ready for the Greek classics, even though the Greek language had been used in Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and

³⁹Georges Florovsky, "The Problem of Old Russian Culture," *Slavic Review*, 21 (1962) 1-17, esp. 6-10.

Russia. In the Kievan community Greek was used for nearly a century before Vladimir's conversion. It was only after Russia's official Christianization that the creation of a Slavophone church became a reality.

With the spread of Greek Orthodox Christianity, an advanced state of civilization was introduced in Kievan Russia affecting its art, architecture, education, law, literature, music, ethics, political theory and systems of government. But this civilization did not eliminate native culture — ways of living, clothing, vessels, customs, popular or laic religiosity. The survival of native culture secured the identity of the natives but their adoption of aspects of Byzantine civilization made them dependent on Byzantium.⁴⁰

It is an open question whether Kievan Russia was a satellite of Constantinople. It is true however that Constantinople was Kiev's political, economic and cultural focus and that "all the laws of the Greco-Roman Emperors were binding upon Russia from the moment of their publication in Constantinople" in the words of the Russian historian V. Ikonnikov. In light, however, of the continuation of native popular culture and national identity a Russian could say: "I am a Russian . . . but my faith and religion are Greek."⁴¹

In brief, the Byzantine Empire "moulded the undisciplined tribes of Serbs, Bulgars, Russians, Croats even, and made nations out of them. It gave to them its religion and institutions, taught their princes how to govern, transmitted to them the very principles of civilization — writing and literature," in the words of Francis Dvornik, one of the most authoritative scholars of the subject.⁴² But ultimately the Greek Orthodox Christian faith became the principal and lasting legacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to Russia and other Slavic nations. Even Soviet scholars who try to

⁴⁰Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, pp. 188-201.

⁴¹Cited by A. A. Vasiliev, "Was Old Russia a Vassal State of Byzantium?" *Speculum*, 7 (1932) 350; Vernadsky, pp. 52-59; Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, pp. 259-82.

⁴²Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, p. xv.

minimize the role of Greek Christianity in early Russia admit "that the Church played an important role in consolidating the Kievan state, and bringing Russian culture closer to the cultural treasures of Byzantium by spreading education and creating enduring literary and artistic traditions."⁴³ With the transmission of Christianity, a new Russian culture was born for religion and culture are in constant interaction. This result was inevitable because Christianity is neither above nor dependently below but an organic part of culture.

⁴³Boris A. Rybakov, *The Early Centuries of Russian History*, trans. John Weir (Moscow, 1965), pp. 51-53, 66-67.