

RUSSIAN RELIGION

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Introduction:

Centuries ago in Kievan Russia lived tribes who believed in gods and spirits which they identified with the forests and meadows. Very little information has survived about the religious customs of these tribes.

We can learn about the religious beliefs and practices of one East Slavic tribe, the Rus, from priests' manuscripts, epics and some treaties signed with princes (Oleg, 971; Igor, 945).

The pagan Russians worshipped the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water, as can be understood from *The Tale of Bygone Years*:

(1) 'Other pagans were among those who made sacrifices to lakes, wells and the forest.'

(*The Tale of Bygone Years*, 1113)

The Russians would place a sick person in the trunk of tree that was cracked or split, and look for sacred stones. Even today in the Novgorod-Pskov region of Belorussia large stones with marks resembling animal or human footprints are still considered sacred.¹

V.V. Sedov² records that on the lower reaches of the Desna River there are still two trunks of an oak tree worn by the waves, and that these were symbols of paganism. Wild boar tusks were driven into these two tree trunks.

At the end of the 19th century there were national forests in the north of Russia that were considered sacred.³ In the records of Novgorod province the following was written concerning these forests:

(2) 'The forests, made up mostly of large pines, have a magnificent appearance and are today that region's adornment; chapels are made from them.

. . .As for the signs that these forests are revered, the first is that forests are not touched, the second is that these days chapels are constructed near many of these forests, the third is that there are many stories about the misfortunes that soon come to anyone who even intends to cut a single tree from these forests, and the fourth is that young people, out of respect, do not gather to enjoy themselves in any of these forests, nor do they dance there in spring.⁴

The Russians conducted their ceremonies, and made their prayers and supplication in these forests and shrines. During these ceremonies they played trumpets and rang bells in a wild, noisy fashion, and danced skipping and hopping. Sacrifices were made during these ceremonies to obtain from the gods what they had asked for. Animal and human bones,

¹ Yudin, A.V., 1999.

² Sedov, V.V., 1982.

³ Yudin, A.V., 1999.

⁴ *Op cit.*

skulls, vessels, coals and ashes have been found in archaeological excavations. Human sacrifice in Russia continued up until the middle of the 16th century.

Christianity first appeared in this pagan land with Princess Olga's visit to Constantinople in 955. Our information about her visit and acceptance of Christianity there comes from *The Tale of Bygone Years*:

(9) 'Olga went to Greece and arrived in Tsargrad.⁵ The ruler at that time was Constantine, the son of Leo. Olga came before him, and the Emperor, seeing that she was both intelligent and beautiful, was astonished. He conversed with Olga and proposed ruling his city together. Upon hearing his words Olga informed the Emperor that she was still a pagan, and if he wanted her to be baptized he would have to do it himself.'⁶

Following this conversation the Emperor, with the help of the Patriarch, baptized her. When Olga returned to Kiev she wanted her son Svyatoslav to be baptized also, but the request was rejected by Svyatoslav. The long-running violence during the reigns of Svyatoslav and his son Yaropolk were not enough to reduce the strength of Olga's Christianity, rather its influences began to become apparent in later years. Years later, when Vladimir, a Viking descendent, became prince of Kiev in 978, he compelled the people of Kiev to accept a single religious system. To this end, he constructed a temple containing images of the gods within Kiev, and demanded that everyone venerate them. However, this effort was unsuccessful and in 988 he himself accepted Byzantine Orthodox Christianity. *The Tale of Bygone Years* relates that before Vladimir converted to Christianity, Jews from the Khazar Khanate, Muslims for the Bulgar state on the banks of the Volga, Catholics from Germany and Greek philosophers from Byzantium came to him, each attempting to convince Vladimir to accept their faith:

(10) 'In that time the Russians were ignorant pagans. Therefore, Satan was happy, but he did not realize that his end had come. He greatly desired to destroy Christianity, but he was driven out of this land by Christians. Vladimir was visited by the Bulgars who kept the religion of Muhammad. ... They told Vladimir that they believed in God, and that Muhammad had commanded them to be circumcised, not to eat pork, not to drink wine, and he promised that after death all their earthly desires would be realized. ... Vladimir told them that their religion – circumcision, not eating pork and not drinking wine – was unacceptable, and answered them by saying, "Drink is the joy of the Russians. We cannot live without that pleasure." ... Next, the Germans came. Vladimir asked them to give him information about their religion. "You must fast when you have the strength, but as St. Paul said, whatever you eat and whatever you drink, you are acceptable to God." Vladimir answered them in this fashion: "Leave here. Our ancestors would never accept such principles." ... Then the Khazar Jews came and said: "Like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob we believe in one God." Later Vladimir asked them what their religion consisted of. They told Vladimir that their religion had commandments such as circumcision, not eating pork or rabbit, and not doing any work on the Sabbath. The Prince then inquired where their homeland was, and they told him it was Israel. When Vladimir asked where Israel was, the replied: "God was angry with our forefathers and due to our sins scattered us among other peoples. Later our land was given to the Christians." Hearing this the Prince said: "Then if God has driven you from your land, how is it that you presume to teach others? If God had loved you and your religion,

⁵ *Tsargrad* means 'city of the tsar' and refers to Constantinople.

⁶ Readings in Russian Civilization, p.6.

He would not have scattered you in foreign lands. You expect us to accept your religion?" ... The Greeks were the last to visit Vladimir, and they criticized the other religions. ... Their words were beautiful and it was pleasant to listen to them. They spoke of the world to come. They said: "Whoever accepts our religion and then dies will be resurrected and live forever." ...

Vladimir's ambassadors continued their journey and when they reached their destination they saw the Bulgars' bad behavior and the way they worshipped in the mosques. Then they returned to their country. ... Upon this Vladimir announced that the ambassadors that had been sent had returned and that he wished to hear their report.

The ambassadors said: "When we went to the Bulgars we saw their ungirt worship in the temples they call mosques. The Bulgars bent over, sat, looked here and there as if possessed by spirits, and they were not happy; on the contrary they were sad and smelled terrible. Their religion is not good... Later we went to the Germans and watched the rituals in their temples, but their was no splendor in their rituals. Then we went to Greece, and the Greeks took us to the places where they worship God, and we could not understand if we were in heaven or in some other place, because there is no such beauty and splendor anywhere else on earth"... Then the boyars began to speak and they said: "If the Greeks' religion were bad, our grandmother Olga, who was more intelligent than all other people, would not have accepted it."

Vladimir then asked where they needed to be baptized, and they replied that he needed to decide this. ... After the people were baptized they returned to their homes. Vladimir, in his joy that God had accepted him and his subjects, ordered that wooden churches be built in the places where the old pagan idols had stood."⁷

The new religion which Vladimir had obtained from the Greeks is known as Eastern Orthodoxy, or Greek Orthodoxy. At first, the Russians perceived their rapid Christianization as an insult to the old gods, and believed that the new religion impoverished the Russian language. However, this religion aided the start of Russian autocracy, and became the reason that the new values flourished on Russian soil. Christianity in Russian territory brought with it a church organization with Greek archbishop appointed from Constantinople at its head. Unlike the Byzantine church, the Russian church used a language close to the Russians' own language, Old Church Slavonic. The Greek priests who served in the churches in Russia accepted the use of Old Slavonic as a liturgical language in place of Greek.

In 1054 the Christian world witnessed the final schism dividing the Eastern Orthodox and western Roman Catholic churches. The western church had adopted a principle of papal superiority and authority over all churches and in matters of doctrine, and claimed that this principle could not be questioned. The Russian church, having its origin in Byzantium, sided with the Orthodox church and opposed Rome.

A few years after accepting Christianity Vladimir granted the church a number of privileges; his son and successor, the Prince of Kiev Yaroslav also gave the church some additional rights. It has been argued that Christianity brought with it attitudes that harmed the status of women in society in Russia.⁸ However, as can be seen in the following excerpts from Yaroslav's *Kiev Canon Law* (Russkaya Pravda) shown in (11), this view is incorrect, and to the contrary, shows that church law contained elements that protected the rights of women.

⁷ Op cit., pp.8-9.

⁸ See Kochan and Abraham.

(11) 'Whoever kidnaps a young maiden and mistreats her, if the maiden is the daughter of a distinguished boyar, shall pay 5 gold *grivna*⁹ for the insult to her... if the maiden is the daughter of a less distinguished boyar he shall pay 1 gold *grivna*...

If a distinguished boyar divorces his wife for no cause, he shall pay the woman 3 gold *grivna* for the insult to her, the wife of a distinguished citizen who does the same shall receive 3 rubles.

If someone leads a young maiden astray in his own home and forces her to have relations with another, the maiden shall receive 3 *grivna* for the dishonor.

If a husband forces his wife into prostitution, this is a religious crime. If a husband marries another without divorcing his wife, the bishop will deal with this matter. The man's new wife will be judged in the bishop's court, as for the man he will be forced to live with his former wife.

If a young maiden does not wish to marry, but her father and mother force her to do so and then the maiden harms herself for this reason, her father and mother are guilty and must pay a fine to the bishop, as must the prospective groom.¹⁰

The adoption of Christianity based on the Byzantine model as the state religion does not mean that only religious doctrine and education were brought to Russia. The lands of the Rus were introduced to Byzantine art and culture, together with religion. Churches were built in the Byzantine style, icons, frescos, and mosaics took the Byzantine style as their foundation. The Prince of Kiev, Vladimir, had Byzantine style cathedrals built in each large city for the purpose of introducing Byzantine art and culture to the Russian people. It is also reported that after the cathedrals were built Vladimir separated children from their families and sent them away to learn the new religion's sacred scripture, the Gospel, for the purpose of creating a new clergy and religious leaders.

Another characteristic that the Russians inherited from Byzantium was the relationship between the church and the state. In Russia, as in Byzantium, the church remained in the position of obeying the state. In western Europe the church and the state were often in conflict, the church was independent of the state and often held a position superior to the state.

Orthodoxy became the means by which an individual Russian judged himself, the society he lived in, and the place of that society in the world, as well as the means by which Russia perceived its place in the world as the Third Rome. At the start of the 16th century the abbot of the Eleazarov Monastery in Pskov, the monk Filofei, described Russia's dream of being the Third Rome¹¹ in these words:

⁹ 1 grivna = 10 kopek.

¹⁰ Dmitrishin, p.43.

¹¹ There are three reasons for Russia's dream of becoming the Third Rome failing to materialize: Religiously, Christianity was divided into two major groups in the 11th century – Catholic and Orthodox. At the end of the 15th century, the Protestant movement begun by Martin Luther divided western Christianity into an ever growing number of sects. The unity of the Christian church that had existed when Constantinople was declared the Second Rome had long since disappeared. Politically, Russia at that time was not a large empire in the league of the Roman or the later Byzantine Empire. Finally, there was the issue of legitimacy. Constantinople was established by

(12) 'According to the books of the prophets, all Christian states will disappear and unite under one state, that is, under Russia.'¹²

In Christianity's initial years in Russia the Russian church was under the control of the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople. Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 the Russian church established itself as an archbishopric and declared its autonomy. In 1589 the Russian church declared its archbishop a patriarch and attempted to show the world that the Russian church was totally independent. In the mid-1600s the Russian patriarch Nikon made some changes to the liturgy and religious practices. Nikon, who declared that errors could be overlooked when the Russians were performing their worship, changed the style of some of the practices of worship in the church. In response, taking the side of the traditional practices in opposition to Nikon the head priest Avvakum divided the Russian church into two camps. Avvakum and his friends, known as the *Old Believers*, opposed the understanding of religious practice advocated by Nikon, who maintained harmonious relations with the western Catholic church. However, this attitude of the Old Believers led to the weakening of the Russian church.

The Russian church experienced major reforms, particularly in the time of Peter the Great. Peter closed the office of the Patriarch of Moscow and its place was taken by the Holy Governing Synod. In 1700, after the death of the patriarch Adrian, he did not allow a new patriarch to be elected. Instead, a committee appointed by the Emperor was established. Thus, by putting an end to the church's independence he was able to transform it into an institution bound to the state. Peter's most important actions were the measures he took to attempt to achieve unity through religion. Peter ordered priests to determine those who had left the Orthodox church and to find ways to bring them back into the church. He even permitted priests to use force to achieve this, if necessary. Those who had left the church paid higher taxes and were forbidden from working in the civil service. However, Peter's efforts to achieve national unity through religion came to naught as Russia's borders expanded and peoples of other religions began to live within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, the efforts to convert members of other religions to Orthodoxy continued; Muslims who refused to convert were driven from their villages. The efforts to convert Muslims to Orthodoxy only came to an end in the time of Catherine II. The Russian state permitted Muslims to practice their religion provided they lived in the remote corners of the Empire and were obedient.

With Catherine II's annexation of a large territory that had been under Polish rule, came a large number of Jews who were now within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Anti-Jewish measures which began in the period of Ivan the Terrible had, by the first of the 1700s, reached the degree that Catherine I ordered all Jews who refused to convert to Orthodoxy to be driven out of Russia. Attacks against the Jews gradually increased, and by the 19th century they were even held responsible for Alexander II's death at the hands of an assassin. In Catherine II's time Catholics living within the borders of the empire were left with no choice but to be associated with the Russian church. At the same time in this century a small Protestant group became active. In the 1860s, a group known as Baptists, active in the Caucasus and the Ukraine, began to expand rapidly within the borders of the empire. Worried by this development, the Holy Governing Synod banned all sects and denominations. Members of the Baptists were kept under surveillance and those who were caught were persecuted. Orthodox missionaries were sent to all the villages and efforts

the Romans themselves, and they recognized the city as their capital and the emperor who ruled from there as their legitimate ruler. Russia, on the contrary, had no such direct connection with Rome or her emperors.

¹² Steeves, p.17.

began to convert to Orthodoxy anyone who belonged to another denomination. The church's attitude became so strict that it eventually alienated its own people.

(13) 'The Orthodox church never found a common language with the educated people because its conservative outlook made it pronouncedly anti-intellectual. Following the medieval Russian precept, 'all evil comes from opinions', it showed little interest even in its own theology to which it resorted mainly when compelled to defend itself from heretics or foreigners. It met all attempts to revitalize it with the instinctive suspicion which turned to hostility, sometimes accompanied by denunciation to the authorities and excommunication, whenever it felt that independent judgment was being brought to bear on any of its dogmas or practices. One by one, it pushed away from itself the country's finest religious minds: the Slavophiles, Vladimir Solovëv, Lev Tolstoy, and the laymen gathered in the early 1900s around the Religious Philosophy Society. It also showed little interest in educating its flock.¹³

The trial and exiles continued until 1905, and cannot even be said to have been completely ended after that year. For the first time in 1905 a law to grant legal tolerance to other religions in Russia began to be discussed. Also for the first time members of other religious groups could act more freely than before. However, of those in prison or in exile, some died and other were able to return only after 1917.

¹³ Pipes, p. 243.

Reading Assignments:

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Questions

How was Christianity reflected in Russian culture?

Is it possible to see traces of pagan culture in Orthodox Russia?

Talk about the concept of Tsar as God. Where did this concept come from? How did Byzantine culture see their Emperor?

Why did Russia see herself as the Third Rome? Why did this doctrine fail?