

THE FOUNDATION OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE
AND THE BAPTISM OF RUSSIA

(Paulos Gregorios)

The 9th and 10th centuries of our era laid the Cultural - Psychic foundations for the three branches of the Russian peoples - the Uterainians, the Great Russians and the Bylonissians. The Baptism of Russia in 988 A.D. was the culmination of a process of national formation, the antecedents of which process in the 9th and 10th centuries are certainly worth surveying.

Pre-Christian slavs were no doubt, like other Europeans, Pagans. Common elements of that pre-christian paganism can still be traced among the Russian peoples - for example the great closeness to nature, particularly to birds and animals still visible in Russian folklore and children's books. It is also worth noting that Russian folklore features sun and moon, and wind and frost. In our present environmental crisis, this closeness to nature can be a very positive feature in the Contemporary Russian Psyche.

As a foundation of Kievan Russia were being laid several cultural factors made their impact as the Russian peoples. They were close enough to the European peoples - particularly the Finns and other Scandinavian peoples. But these European neighbours of Russia had not yet come fully into the light of civilisation and remained somewhat savage and primitive. There was little that Russia could absorb culturally from the Europeans of the 9th and 10th centuries. If they absorbed anything it was mostly Finnish blood - especially the Great Russian of the north.

On the contrary, the slavic people, who were in touch with the great Asian civilization of the Fertile Crescent, were culturally ahead of the other Europeans. They were in touch both with the advanced civilisation of Byzantium and with the flourishing culture of the Islamic Caliphates of the Middle East.

Among their closest neighbours was Khazaria, which rose to power in the 7th century. By the 9th century the Khazarian empire had expanded to include the whole area north of the Black Sea and caucasus, between the Carpathians on the west and the Caspian

coast on the East. They were strong enough to **fight** back the Islamic or Arabic onslaughts from the East, and to defend Europe from Asian conquering armies.

The Khazars were obviously allied with the Byzantines in their opposition to Islam, and Bysantine emporers Justinian II (704) and Constantin V had married Khazar princesses. Strangely enough the Khazars did not embrace Christianity, either Byzantine or Latin, but preferred to adopt the Jeurish religion, merely keeping their identity distinct from the Byzantine Greeks and the Latin West.

Among the slavic people, the Volga Bulgars and several south slavic tribes came for a time under the overlordship of the Khazar empire with the Capital city of Itil on the West coast of the Caspian Sea. Khazania, with a ruling elite that was jeurish, was, however, very Cosmopolitan. Pagans, Muslims, Christians and Jews mingled and flourished together, though Muslims were at a disadvantage.

The Campaign of Kievan Prince Svyatoslav, himself a pagan, against Khazaria in 965 A.D. just preceded the Baptism of Russia by 23 years. The Khazars were beaten, but from the vanquished the victors picked up many institutions, especially military and political institutions.

svyatoslav, the father of Prince Vladimir, was a Varangian, or a Scandinavian whose people had settled around Novgorod and smoleusk. Though Svyatoslav's mother Olga (+ 969 AD) was a Christian and is a saint for the Russian Orthidox, the son was a pagan. But as the Khazar Civilisation and its Jeurish elements were assimilated into **the** new Kievan Rus State, the roughnigh of the Nordic tribes.became a kind of refined strength.

There were, however, other elements that went to make up the culture and the national psyche of Kievan Russia. Chief among these were the other two neighbouring cultures, namely that of the Byzantine Empire, Bazantine influence the Christianity of the southern \$lavs and the Arab civilization.

BYZANTINE INFLUENCE

The Baptism of Russia brought more than Christianity with it to the people. Byzantine civilisation in all its aspects was powerfully influential in the shaping of the psyche of Kievan Russia.

Though the glorious age of Justinian was a thing of the past in Byzantium after the Arab conquests, the Comnenian or Macedonian dynasties that ruled Byzantium from the 9th to the 12th centuries. were also promoters of culture and the arts. It was a Byzantium in which tension ruled between the secular and the ecclesiastical, between the rational and the mystical, between Aristotle and Plato, and also between the state and the Church.

It was also a Byzantium that was in tension with the Latin West that influenced the formation of Kievan Russia. Medieval Latins knew no Greek and the Greeks knew no Latin. That did not prevent them from quarrelling with each other and engaging in the most acrimonious theological disputes. The Filioque controversy had burst out in Jerusalem in 807. Pope Leo III (795-816) had enraged the Greeks by his letter to "all the Churches of the East", telling them that "the Holy Spirit proceeds equally from the Father and the Son"¹.

Charlemagne (Ca 742-814) asked his theologian Theodulf (Ca 750-821) to write his de Spiriti Sancto to answer the Greeks who refused to accept the filioque. The Council of Aachen confirmed the teaching of Theodulf on the filioque. The result was the Photian schism between East and West in Europe.

Photius was Patriarch of Constantinople from 858-886. It was during his Patriarchate that the Bulgarian and Serbian Slavs were converted. He was the one who objected to the presence of Latin missionaries in Bulgaria trying to deflect the newly converted Slavs to Roman obedience. In the same year 867 when he wrote

1. See Richard Haugh, Photius and the Carolingians Nordland, Belmont, Mass, 1975. p.68.

that encyclical, he anathematised the Pope at the Council of Constantinople. In 869, the Latins excommunicated Photius at a Council in Rome.

The Bulgarian Slavs remained in the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople rather than that of the Pope of Rome. This factor had a great deal to do with Vladimir's choice of Byzantine Christianity rather than Roman.

Vladimir's baptism, at least in the period immediately after, made the Kievan Church an ecclesiastical province of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

THE SOUTH SLAVIC INFLUENCE

Though thus Constantinople and Byzantine civilisation became the founts for Russian religious culture, the main documents of Christianity came to Russia from Bulgaria rather than from Byzantium.

St. Cyril (826-869) and his brother St. Methodius (815-885) had both died more than a hundred years before the baptism of Russia in 988. But they had already developed the Glagolitic alphabet as a medium of expression of Slavic identity, and translated the scriptures and liturgical texts, as well as several theological works from Greek to Old Slavonic. Just as Martin Luther provided a foundation for Germanic language and culture, the work of Cyril and Methodius had laid the foundations of Slavonic culture, which developed first in the Balkans and then in Kievan Russia a century later.

The Kievan Christians did not have to learn Greek and translate the Scriptures, liturgical texts and patristic writings into their language. The work had already been done by Cyril and Methodius and by other scholars whom they had taught. Kievan Russia took this whole literature from the South Slavs, and thus the Bulgarian literary centres of Pliska and Preslav Ohrid, made an enormous contribution to the development of the Russian mind and culture.

The disciples of Cyril and Methodius, under the leadership of Bulgarian Tsars, Boris, Simeon and Peter led by the great Bulgarian teacher Kliment Slovenski who ran a school for 3500 students in the tradition of the ancient Museum in Alexandria, produced also a large number of original works in old Slavonic. It was the golden age of old Bulgarian literature, and this wealth was inherited by the newly Christianized Kievan Russia. Constantin of Preslav wrote several devotional and exegetical treatises, in addition to translating the four books Against Arians by St. Athanasius the Great. Yovan Exarch, another prolific writer in Tsar Simeon's literary circle, had translated the De Fide Orthodoxa of John of Damascus, the great Byzantine scholastic theologian.

Thus the Russian Orthodox Church was able to worship in their own language from the very outset, and quickly come into the immense heritage of Christian writings without having to translate them. And the contribution made by the Bulgarian-Serbian Slavs to the Russian culture seems just as important as the Byzantine contribution, which has been well written about widely acknowledged.

THE ARAB CIVILIZATION

The relation between the Russian people and the flourishing Arab civilisation of the ninth century was at best dialectical. Egypt and Syria, the richest and most populous provinces of the Roman as well as the Byzantine empires, had now become the two bases of a vibrant Islamic Civilisation, but with many ups and downs in the power of the Caliphates. The Ommayyad Caliphate, established around 660, with Damascus as capital, soon became a rival to the splendour of Byzantine civilisation. It was an Islamic civilisation, though run largely by Christian administration, thinkers and craftsmen. But their power waned by the middle of eighth century, and the Abbasid Caliphate with Baghdad as capital became the centre of Islamic culture. The so-called Nestorian and Monophysite Christians, who had rejected Byzantine domination in the sixth and seventh centuries regarded the Muslim Arabs as their friends.

Just two decades the Baptism of Prince Valdimir in 988, Niaphoras Phocas, the soldier-emperor had dealt crushing blows to the Arabs re-conquered Cilicia and Cyprus and campaigned against the Arab around the middle Euphrates. In 969 he marched against Syria and Captured it.

As the Crusades began in the eleventh century, the Normans (including Varangians) who provided the spearhead of the Frankish army, were to not total strangers to the Islamic empire. Their forefathers, including the Kievan Varangians had made frequent pilgrimages to the Christian holy places in Palestine controlled by Muslims. In fact for Scandinavians and Varangians in particular such pilgrimages were a regular feature of the life of their elite. Stories about Islamic civilisation and culture were brought back by these pilgrims and spread among the Kievan Russians also, as Steven Runciman tells us².

This Arab civilisation was the only serious rival to Byzantine civilisation in the tenth century. The fact that Prince Valdimir rejected Islam should not obscure the fact that he and his people had learned from Islamic culture and art. It was destiny that brought once again the Islamic civilisations of Central Asia into fruitful Co-operation with the Russian people after 1917.

CONCLUSION

The cultural-psychic foundations of the Russian people, as they laid in the tenth century and especially with the baptism of Prince Valdimir, definitely had strong Byzantine and Christian elements in it. But equally important was the contribution of pre-Christian Russia, the Islamic civilisation of the Middle East, the Khazar Empire, which for a time was Jewish, and above all the southern Slavs, whose successors are now in Bulgaria and Serbia.

2. Steven Runciman, A History of the Crusades, I Penguin, 1965, see especially pp.46 about Scandinavian Pilgrims.