

Martin Hetenyi\*

## THE PLACE OF CYRILLO-METHODIAN HERITAGE IN THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF KIEVAN RUS

*Constantine and Methodius laid important foundations for the diverse culture of Eastern Slavic peoples. In the spread of the ideals of this culture, Christianity played an important role. An official adoption of Christianity in A.D. 988 had several important features: development of art, craft, literature, sacral architecture, etc. It is thus understandable that in eastern Slavic countries, the cult of St. Constantine and Methodius began to grow immediately. However, there is a lack of information about the way the brothers' work affected Eastern Europe and the difficult journey it must have experienced. Both Slovak and Czech historiography provide only rough outlines of these matters. Researchers in Slovakia and the Czech Republic offer no detailed discussion of the huge contribution of Constantine and Methodius to the culture of Eastern Slavs. This condition may be the result of both limited source materials and limited access to the sporadically discovered materials.*

**Keywords:** Constantine and Methodius' cultural heritage, Kievan Rus, Slovak and Czech historiography.

### 1. Introduction

The life and work of Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius have close ties with the history of Great Moravia. Both Slovak and Czech literature deal significantly with this history. Further, we know that, following the death of Methodius in 885, the two brothers' work did not disappear but continued to affect other parts of Europe. The scholarly brothers from Solun were expelled from Great Moravia, yet their work had continued application in Bohemia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and Byzantium as well. In the Slavic world, it was primarily the work of Bulgarian Empire scholars that formed the most decisive action for cultural development and Christianization. And more than a century later, the next generations of scholars stimulated the spiritual environment of East Slavs concentrated in Kievan Rus. Thus the Great Moravian cultural tradition found continuance and settlement there also.

The Solun brothers' efforts began with the creation of an alphabet that copied phonetic peculiarities of the language of Slavic nations. It was by this means the brothers obtained the learning their work needed [1]. A further step was translation of the Bible and other important texts into language with the new script. The brothers were the first to translate religious books so that a majority of people could understand them. Along with this educational work, the brothers evangelized the Slavic nations.

Some of the scholars expelled from Great Moravia found sanctuary in Bulgaria. Its ruler had a strategic interest in expanding the Slavonic liturgy around the country. It was a way to break free from the influence of Greek clergy and the Byzantine ecclesiastical environment. Boris, the Bulgarian ruler, accepted Clement, Naum, Angelarius and Constantine of Preslav, together with their contributions to the development of Slavonic literature. Across the Bulgarian empire, the followers of Cyril and Methodius founded significant cultural centers, including monastic schools in Ohrid and Preslav. Here important thinkers and teachers of the next generation were educated. From these spiritual centers Slavic culture as well as liturgical language spread to other countries – Serbia, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Rus [2].

### 2. Political and religious conditions in Kievan Rus

In Kievan Rus, Slavic people worshipped multiple deities during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet long before the final adoption of the Christian religion in 988, Kievan-Rus people were familiar with Christianity as a result of active business contacts. The pagan and Christian cults of Kievan Rus existed next to each other, and they influenced each other directly [3].

In mid-10<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople, Princess Olga of Kievan-Rus voluntarily underwent Christian baptism as

\* Martin Hetenyi

Department of General and Applied Ethics, Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia  
E-mail: mhetenyi@ukf.sk

she became a goddaughter of Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenet (913 – 959). She also took the Christian name of Yelena. The emperor expected that Olga's state would be strengthened through the creation of a separate church. Olga also wanted to see Christianity take hold in Kievan Rus. To this end, she first flirted with Byzantium, then with the Western church. However, such efforts failed.

Despite the fact that Olga converted to Christianity without difficulty, all attempts failed to convince her son Sviatoslav to adopt the new religion [4]. Following the death of Olga in 969, Sviatoslav brought back an anti-Christian type of paganism. But while the middle of the 10th century did not see Kievan Rus become a Christian country, Christianity continued to grow there. This created conditions for the integration of Kievan Rus with the Byzantine cultural sphere. Thus in 988, the reign of Sviatoslav's son Vladimir witnessed a final decision to adopt Byzantium Christianity. Vladimir's Christian conversion, and his political and military dominance, played a key role in the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Kievan Rus. In comparison with his predecessors, Vladimir had a freer hand in decisions about his people's public worship, and how much they should be involved in the matter. At first, Vladimir, representing the Rurik dynasty, supported paganism, as indicated by an occasional persecution of Christian Rus' people. As soon as Vladimir's control of the country stabilized, the question of the state structure loomed large. But for this requirement, paganism was insufficient and did not meet the needs of a quickly developing Russian society. Further, foreign-political concerns played an important role in the matter. For only by adoption of Christianity could the Kievan prince act as an equal sovereign within Europe's growing Christian universe. Only such recognition could ensure international acceptance of the Kievan Rus state. Thus it was just a matter of time for a Kievan Rus ruler to adopt Christianity as an official religion [5, p. 248].

With Vladimir's baptism in 988, Kievan Rus officially adopted Christianity. Also tied closely with Vladimir's baptism was his marriage to Anna, sister of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II (976-1025). The latter action reflected a beginning alliance with the Byzantine empire, whose affairs Vladimir had just given significant military help against the Bulgarians. Such action of course lifted relations between the two regimes to a potent new level. Such alliance led to broad-reaching Russian cultural developments that have persisted to the present day. The decision to receive Byzantine baptism, and Basil II's pleas for military assistance, gave Vladimir had a prime opportunity to impose his own wishes. The result was his unprecedented marriage to a member of the Byzantine ruling dynasty, and the integration of his country into the sphere of Byzantine Christianity and culture. All this was enhanced by the splendour of Byzantine church ceremonies and buildings, which greatly impressed Vladimir and his

people. But significantly, as depicted by *Primary Chronicle*, the transition from paganism to Christianity is not a fundamental breakthrough. The emphasis rather is on dynastic continuity [6].

In Byzantine thought, all parts of the empire should have baptized rulers who made efforts to Christianize their country. As it was for Roman Catholic worship, so also for Byzantine worship, a liturgy using uncanonical language was unusual. In the case of Byzantine Christianity, however, the acceptance of Slavonic language in liturgical processes was a matter of sound practice. And it reflected the necessary methods of missionaries in the pagan world. Overall, medieval Christian missions focused on prepared liturgical models. One of the few exceptions occurred when Hadrian II and John VIII allowed Slavonic liturgical language under Roman Church jurisdiction in Great Moravia, Bohemia, Poland, and other places. But this was a permission that continued at some length only in Croatia. Yet Eastern Christian missionaries from Constantinople tried to respect the positions of local sovereigns. In the case of the Slavs, religious texts were adapted into Slavonic language and culture. The Slavic environment required a longer period for missionaries to be familiar with indigenous religious traditions [7]. A reflection on missionary work in Great Moravia must respect the fact that Constantine and Methodius were preaching and educating in an environment already acquainted with Christianity from the West [8]. The Solun brothers called themselves defenders of church unity, and their work represented a mediation between the cultures of the Byzantine and Roman worlds. Of course the efforts to spread Christianity among the Russians also stressed efforts to strengthen Byzantine political and cultural influence.

In terms of international politics, the adoption of Christianity meant that the Kievan Rus entered into the community of European countries. This was true even though the Kievan Rus formed part of the Byzantine political-cultural universe. Within this development, the new monotheistic religion accelerated the formation of state ideology as the official religion. It gave a "sacred spark" to the prince's reign. Furthermore, as concerns centralization of the state, the position of Kiev, the main religious center of Rus, became stronger. Now also there were efforts to organize an education system. Even though the Christianization of the Rus was a complicated and painful process [9], numerous dioceses were set up throughout the country by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. At first, it was Greek clergy who came to Rus. The literature they brought influenced both church affairs and other aspects of life. The Archbishop of Kerson had the first oversight of church organization in Rus. Undoubtedly, the Byzantine missionaries used Greek language in liturgies they brought. These however were largely incomprehensible for the broad public and even the upper classes. Only their magnificence could be impressive. Clearly Vladimir wanted to

have Christian contacts beyond the Byzantine representatives, and soon Bulgarian missionaries with Slavonic liturgy and literature appeared in Rus. Immediately, Russian church leaders began using Slavonic language worship materials. Since it had the support of the Rus' sovereign, this development had to be tolerated by the Byzantine missionaries [5, p. 252]. And after 1018 and the destruction of the Bulgarian Empire by Basil II, the inflow of Bulgarian and Serbian clergy to Rus increased significantly.

During the reign of Vladimir's son, Yaroslav the Wise (1015/1016-1054), the Russian church's position stabilized [10, pp. 131-132]. There were 9 dioceses under a Metropolitan of Kiev. Twenty-three metropolitans then held office until the Tartar invasion. Seventeen of these leaders were Greeks who kept up strong Byzantine influences [11, p. 140]. The efforts of Yaroslav to sever the ties with Constantinople had no long-term success. He did appoint Ilarion, an educated priest of local origin, as Kiev metropolitan. But Greeks again took over the post after the prince's death.

The cultural and political expansion of Kievan Rus is especially notable in the area of artistic craft. This refers primarily to the construction of buildings with sacral architecture, and to religious literature. From the beginning, church art in Kiev was distinguished by its Byzantine character [12] Russian literary writings also arose and developed at an early point (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries). Very appropriately, such literature employed the liturgical Slavonic language. It came to Kievan Rus mainly from Bulgaria, but also from Bohemia, since Russian princes had active contacts with the country. Much of this writing was religious literature that, since the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, had been coming to Rus from Byzantium through Bulgarian translations. The introduction of Old Church Slavonic into Christian liturgy, where it gradually prevailed, and the creation of literature in a native language spread not just by clergy but by tellers, musicians and actors, among princes and boyars, and common folk, had an epochal significance [5, p. 268]. As used in everyday life (rather exceptional in Europe), the Cyrillic alphabet, also became an effective stimulus for spreading religious and secular literature in Rus [13]. Paradoxically, in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the interaction of Russian and other Slavonic literary influences started to turn back, while several Russian works influenced subsequent writings of Slavs of the south and west.

As to origin, the literature of Rus can be divided into Slavonic literature from Bulgaria (both translations from Greek and occasionally Latin) and original writings. As to character, such literature consists of religious writings (various genres, mainly sermons, lives of the saints, hymns, etc.) and secular works (annals, legal manuals and codices, epical works and others). Bulgarian priests brought to Rus not only Slavonic liturgical books but all other works created by Bulgarian literary schools during the reign of Simeon (893 - 927)

and Peter (927 - 989). They even brought *Zakon sudnyj ljudem*, a work created by Methodius in Great Moravia [14, p. 276]. One very significant 11<sup>th</sup> century work is a Russian chronicle called *Povest' V remennykh Let (The Tale of Bygone Years)* - also referred to as *Nestor's Chronicle* or *the Kievan Chronicle*. The chronicle ends with a record dated in 1113. It contains narrations about the princes of the Kievan Rus, about battles and relations with other nations, and about Christianization of the state. It also involves testimonies concerning political developments in Great Moravia [10, pp. 40-42].

Equally important is the oldest Russian set of laws, *Russkaya Pravda (Russian Justice of Rus' Truth)* - *Pravda of Yaroslav*. The first report has the date 1016. Completed by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the work describes the situation shortly after adoption of Christianity. Other works are *Primary Chronicle* (1093), *Kormcaja Kniga, The Reading Concerning Prince Boris and Gleb* (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century), *The Life of Feodosij Pecherskij (Bibliography of Feodosij; 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century)*, *The Sermon of Law and Grace (Treatise on Law and Grace, The Word of Law and Blessing, 1037 - 1050)*, *The Pskov Chronicle, Izbornik of Prince Sviatoslav Yaroslavych*, a travel book *The Pilgrimage of Daniil, Igumen of the Russian Land* (beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century), *Instruction* (by Vladimir II Monomakh). Secular literature is excellently represented by a poetic, historical and political document called *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (1185).

Very well-preserved and valuable literary works come from Novgorod, one of the main centers of Rus. Novgorod reached independence during the reign of Yaroslav the Wise. Among the most significant of these works are *Poucenje k Bratii* (containing their own literary texts and translations from Greek; mid-11<sup>th</sup> century), so-called *The Ostromir Gospels* (1056 - 1057), *Novgorod Codex* (Толочко 2003), Novgorod chronicles, and various documents, or *gramotas* written on birch bark in the Slavonic language [15]. Certain episodes in the early history of the East Slavs were also recorded by Latin sources (so-called *Bavarian Geographer, Annales Bertiniani*, 9<sup>th</sup> century). There also are works of Byzantine and Arabic origin (writings by Arabian and Persian scholars - Abu 'Ali Ahmad ibn 'Umar ibn Rustu, Abu l-Qasim 'Abdallah ibn Hurdadbiha, al-Istachriho, al-Mas'udiho and others). In his famous work from the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century, *De administration imperio*, Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenet deals with the issue of the East-Slavic settlement [16]. In the following centuries, many Cyrillic scripts were created in Kievan Rus. In the early 1990s, investigators found some 30 texts dated in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and 65 texts of original Kievan-Russian works from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, these mostly items of religious literature [17]. Nevertheless, only indirect and fragmentary reports with specifics on the spread of Constantine and Methodius' work have been located. Besides difficulties with the lack of sources, the one-sided orientation

or fragmented elaboration of various writings also cause serious problems. And difficulties often arise from another issue. This is the lack of clarity about whether a translation may be considered an original effort or an adapted work. In the science of book appraisal, the latter is one of the most complexes of issues. The most significant of Greek translations is *The Chronicle of John Malalas*. Translations of a religious and philosophical character originated mainly in the Kievan literary school of Yaroslav the Wise [18].

Certainly East Slavic perceptions of Constantine and Methodius focused on their merit for a preparation of scholars concerned with spiritual work. As early as the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, these were followers in other generations whose actions expanded their cult. As regards church worship singing, there were comparisons of the two brothers' spiritual dimension with biblical apostles. After all, Constantine and Methodius have been known in history as the Apostles of the Slavs.

After the death of Yaroslav the Wise, the Byzantine Empire experienced gradual decline, and then isolation and fall. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Mongolian hordes caused Rus political and cultural spheres to recede. Thereafter the cult of Cyril and Methodius weakened significantly. But though references to the brothers were less frequent, their spiritual message was not forgotten. Efforts by local Christian churches played a crucial role in this regard. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of Ukrainian and Russian national revival, the cult of Cyril and Methodius enjoyed a period of rebirth [19].

### 3. Interpretive schemes of the problematic in Slovak and Czech historiography

Slovak and Czech historiography provides only little information on how the work of Constantine and Methodius spread in Eastern Europe, and how difficult the process was. One finds only basic outlines of these concerns. Recent relevant works of Slovak and Czech medievalists on the Slavs do mention the baptism of a Kievan Rus ruler. They also cover the general spread of Slavonic liturgy from Bulgaria. The latter action was crucial to the transmission of the cultural and spiritual values of Constantine and Methodius' works to the East Slavs. But some more extensive publications offer a closer look at that topic. A leading Czech expert on Byzantine history, Frantisek Dvornik has examined the heritage of Cyril and Methodius in Kievan Rus on a long-term basis. His claim is „*It is still not clear who brought Slavonic liturgy there. The keenest propagators of Slavonic literature were Bulgarian missionaries. However, we do not know when the first Slavic princes really came to Kiev from Bulgaria.*” As concerns religious Slavic literary language created by Constantine and Methodius, Dvornik also writes in his monograph *Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs*: „*...being transferred from the Balkans*

*to Russia, it also became an official language of the Russian Church and a literary tool of Russian intellectuals... This might have happened before the Emperor Basil II destroyed the First Bulgarian Empire (1018). It is possible that some Bulgarian priests came to Russia with the army of prince Sviatoslav who was in 972 defeated by the Byzantines in Bulgarian territory and was forced to return to Kiev*” [14, pp. 276-277].

Josef Vasica is a philologist who wrote on the issues of linguistics and literary science in the past century (e.g. the continuity of Cyrilo-Methodian literary production in the Slavic environment). Also significant is *The Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy and the Byzantine Missionary Policy*, a study by Vladimír Vavřínek, a Czech expert on Byzantine history [20] Vavřínek also put his thoughts on the subject in a recent monograph (2013). It examines the Cyrilo-Methodian heritage preserved by Slavs of the South and East. Thus the Bulgarians passed Slavic religious education on to other Slavic nations: „*Thanks to adoption of Church Slavonic literature and Slavonic liturgy, on the edge of the Byzantine Empire, there arouse a line of countries that were politically independent but internally connected with it through their culture and spirituality...*” However, we have to agree with Vavřínek that some of the ideas of Constantine and Methodius' were not preserved. For example, South-Slavic and East-Slavic heirs of the Solun brothers did not take over the conception of ecclesiastical universalism [21].

Another significant expert on Byzantine history, Alexander Avenarius, can be regarded as one of a few authors who compare diverse relationships of Rus with the surrounding countries through an exact critical analysis. In his book *-Byzantine Culture in the Slavonic Environment in the VI. - XII. Centuries*, Avenarius notices that, starting with the reign of Yaroslav, translations of Byzantine works (besides the undoubted borrowings from Bulgaria). supplemented the Russian literature. Russian art thus responded mainly to Byzantine inspiration, and not Bulgarian stimuli. Apart from his deflation of Bulgarian influence, as proved by specific examples, Avenarius refers to a long and geographically extensive Cyrilo-Methodian culture. This he thinks flourished because of its linguistic and national character, its recognition of liturgical and literary Slavonic language, and its role in educating society (these items elude not only from the Byzantine, but also Western cultural concept). Avenarius compares the transformational factors and functions of Cyrilo-Methodian heritage with developments in various countries [22]. In its critical character, its courage to put forth new hypotheses, and its searching for answers to major questions. Avenarius work provides researchers with challenges and inspirations for further thoughts and studies.

As to other works, one should highlight a book written by three authors, Jarmila Bednarikova, Ales Homola and Zdenek Merinsky. The title is *Migration of the Nations and the East of Europe: the Byzantine Empire, the Slavs, the Arabs*. Thanks



to this publication's concern for further exploration, we can learn that baptism was not a random decision, but was the culmination of a long-lasting social process. However, under the influence of the Bulgarian Ohrid, Slavonic liturgy and liturgical language, introduced to Great Moravia by Constantine and Methodius more than a hundred years earlier, made a breakthrough in Rus. It "certainly helped to speed up a process of Christianization, a process of unification of the East Slavic tribes and a final Slavinization of Varangians... Use of Church Slavonic language as a liturgical language, which quite quickly prevailed over Greek, had a positive impact on quicker process of Christianization" [5, pp. 251-252].

Miroslav Danis, a famous Slovak expert on medieval history, summarized the growth Cyrilo-Methodian influence among the East Slavs in his *History of European Middle Ages I. Early Middle Ages*. He comments: "Christianization in Rus was accelerated thanks to the introduction of Slavonic liturgy and literature ... the Bulgarian missionaries, since the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and mainly after the fall of First Bulgarian Tsardom in 1018, were looking for sanctuary from Greek-Byzantine elements in the surrounding countries." The Byzantines were likely to support a departure of Slavic priests from Bulgaria and the Balkans in order to get rid of dissatisfied intellectuals who could endanger their positions in regained Bulgarian provinces [23, pp. 198-199]. This thesis had already been advanced by Frantisek Dvornik [14, p. 276]. Miroslav Danis continues: "Slavonic liturgy became a communicative pillar of the Orthodox Slavonic Churches in Europe" [23, p. 193]. In the same work, its co-author Vincent Mucskain informs readers about the Solun brothers' heritage in Eastern Europe: "The largest concern in Christianization of masses of population belongs to the monks who came from Byzantium, mainly from Bulgaria occupied by Constantinople (a definite defeat in 1018). They brought Church Slavonic language as a liturgical language and the Cyrillic alphabet thanks to which Russian Church became one of the heirs of Constantine and Methodius' work" [24].

A more recent work, *History of Medieval Europe*, by Vaclav Drska and Dana Pickova states: "The introduction of language (intelligible to population) into the church not only increased an interest in a new confession but also contributed to a final Christianization of originally Varangian ruling class" [11, p. 139].

Due to a lack of sources, and also the availability of sporadically discovered materials, Slovak and Czech researchers do not initiate discussions on the huge contributions of Constantine and Methodius to Eastern Slavic culture. After 1989, scholars put greater emphasis on the role of Christian dogmatic in the cultural heritage created by the Solun brothers and their followers. In many scientific fields (theology, linguistics, cultural studies, etc.), various interferences between East and West have had much attention, especially as to the late Middle Ages onward [25]. A younger generation expert on Byzantine history, Martin Hurbanic, has carried out some broad research. In his dissertation thesis, Hurbanic describes stages of acceptance and a subsequent transformation of Byzantine ideological stimuli of Rus in the pre-Mongolian period [26]. For those interested in the cultural history of the East Slavs, there are inspiring new collections called *Cultural, Spiritual and Ethnic Roots of Russia*. There is also a collection of works completed by younger generation Praguean experts on Russian history. It raises a broader range of issues [27].

#### 4. Conclusion

One need not emphasize that the Kievan Rus adoption of Cyrilo-Methodian tradition was preceded by contacts with Christianity and education. The primary importance of the Solun brothers' heritage lies in its contribution to and preservation of the tradition's continuity. Sts. Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius laid the foundations of culture and education in numerous Slavic communities. The conditions they created then developed for centuries. As a specific stimulus and a catalyst of the process, Christianity played a significant role in the adoption of Cyrilo-Methodian ideals.

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