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Slavic Paganism

Religion has played a significant role in the history of the Slavs. Though Orthodox Christianity is practiced today by millions of people in Russia and Eastern Europe, it was not the first religion of Kievan Rus'. A polytheistic religion, which attributed natural occurrences to gods and goddesses, prevailed among the early Slavic people. Toward the end of the tenth century, Prince Vladimir of Russia adapted the Byzantine Empire's version of Christianity, supposedly converting all of Kievan Rus' to monotheism. In truth, converting Rus' was a centuries-long process that required modifying the Byzantine faith to traditional beliefs. In other civilizations, the Christian religion underwent similar modifications intended to accommodate local customs; thus the conversion of Rus' is not an isolated case study. Some argue that Rus' did not truly convert until the fourteenth century when the Czar enforced tougher laws aimed at upholding religious piety (Fedotov). As evidenced by the renewed popularity of pagan beliefs in Russia and Eastern Europe in the twenty-first century, contemporary Slavs are rediscovering their Pagan roots.

Before the advent of Christianity, the European population practiced various forms of paganism. Pagan beliefs were not centralized or codified; they exhibited specific regional characteristics that developed within relatively small territories (Afanas'ev). Slavic cities had differing pantheons comprised of deities whom the inhabitants considered to be most important. Overlapping did exist, however, and scholars as well as modern Slavic pagans have reconstructed pantheons based on some of the major deities. Like the Greeks, the head of the Slavic pantheon was a thunder god, Perun, who is said to be the ancestor of all the other gods.

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Makosh, the goddess of good luck, harvest, and fertility was also particularly important, as was Dazhbog, the god of rain. However, unlike the Greeks, the Slavs had deities who directly personified darkness and light: Chernobog, meaning “black god” in Russian, and Belobog, “white god”. The Slavs also worshiped a sun and moon deity, comparable to the Greek Helios and Selene (Afanas'ev). They held major feasts on the days of the summer and winter solstices and on autumnal and vernal equinoxes. Belief in supernatural creatures such as house spirits, called “domovye”, as well as mermaids, forest spirits, water spirits and many other benevolent and malevolent spirits was widespread. Even though the Slavic pagan religion was not centralized, it would become a formidable opponent for Christianity.

The success of Christianity as a state religion depended on converts, particularly in its nascence. Accordingly, Christian missionaries adapted the stories of the Bible to take into account local standards and traditions. A prominent example is a Saxon Gospel called the *Heliand*, which recounts the life of Jesus Christ. The *Heliand*, composed in the ninth century, was a collection of songs intended to explain the story of Jesus to the Saxons so as to smooth the transition to Christianity (Encyclopedia Britannica, online). In the *Heliand*, Jesus is perceived as a chieftain or king and his disciples as warriors. This gospel depicts Jesus as a successful warrior with numerous ideal Saxon attributes. The *Heliand* is in fact a far cry from the Canonical Gospels, which portray Jesus as a pacifist, and emphasize “brotherly love” as an integral Christian value. It instead seems to be aimed at making Christianity more appealing to the Saxon people by portraying Jesus according to Saxon values. The Saxons, a warrior people, valued skill in battle, ability to lead, as well as magic and mysticism; hence the Saxon Jesus is depicted as possessing these qualities. The story includes a sacred raven that is vaguely reminiscent of the Norse god Odin, who according to myth takes the shape of a raven. The form of Christianity that

the Saxons ultimately accepted had thus been shaped by the tribe's own preexisting religious beliefs.

A scenario similar to the adaptation of the *Heliand* occurred in Kievan Rus'. The Slavic faith was not unified and was deeply rooted in the native population. Many Slavs, particularly the peasants, did not convert readily to Christianity. Not only was the concept of a single god entirely foreign to them, but the Slavic people were fearful that they would anger their own deities by being baptized and pledging to one God. There would be a long struggle before the people of Kievan Rus' would accept the Orthodox faith adopted by Prince Vladimir. The nobles were under pressure to convert due to their inclusion in Vladimir's court. Evidence suggests, however, that pagan practices persisted among peasants into the twelfth century. In either case, Byzantine missionaries were faced with the difficult task of inculcating the Christian doctrine among the people of Kievan Rus'. Thus the Slavs' pagan past shaped the Christianity that developed in Kievan Rus'.

As late as the eleventh century, a concept of dual belief, or "dvoeverie," existed among the descendants of Kievan Rus' (Fedotov). This dual belief system persisted among the Slavic peasants who felt that Christianity was not a substitution, but an addition to their pagan faith. Such beliefs were considered heretical by the church and were largely eradicated. It is difficult to say exactly how pagan and Christian beliefs were molded as well as which institutions had molded them. Upon comparing historical as well as contemporary Eastern Orthodox practices to those in pagan Rus', we can distinguish where Christianity borrowed from pagan culture. This evidence exists in various forms including celebrated Russian Orthodox Saints, the times and rituals of major holidays, and superstitions.

During the change from paganism to Christianity, certain prominent Russian Orthodox saints were given attributes similar to important Slavic deities. For instance, the god of thunder, Perun, became “Elijah the Thunderer.” Another example of this is seen in the Russian version of the Fiery Maria (Afanas'ev). The Virgin Mary is credited with providing the gift of “zhivoi ogon’” (“fire that is alive”) to the Slavs. In the dead of winter, the Slavs would extinguish every flame in the house and relight them with the “zhivoi ogon’.” It is difficult to know whether the Slavic people ascribed the fire to the Virgin Mary in order to keep ancestral tradition alive, or if it had been the nascent church that had adopted the concept of “zhivoi ogon’” to make the transition to Christianity more appealing to the pagan Slavs.

Similarly, the Orthodox Christian church adopted many pagan religious holidays. For instance, the holiday Maslenitsa (“Pancake week”) was originally a pagan spring festival that signaled the end of the cold winter months. However, the Orthodox Church incorporated it as the last week before the onset of Lent. As in the case of Maslenitsa, many pagan traditions such as the eating of “bliny,” Russian pancakes, were kept, but the meaning behind them was either ignored or altered. To the pagans, Maslenitsa was the celebration of the spring solstice (the “bliny” symbolized the sun), while in Orthodoxy, Maslenitsa represents the last chance to partake in dairy products and alcoholic beverages before the beginning of Lent. Many other major church holidays occur around the time that the pagan Slavs celebrated their annual holidays. Russian Orthodox Christmas occurs on January 7th, which is just two weeks off from the winter solstice. In addition, the celebration of St. Ivan, a major saint in Russian Orthodoxy, takes place during the summer solstice.

Perhaps the most immediate representation of pagan beliefs can be witnessed in Slavic superstitions. These still survive today, although they were much more prominent before the

twentieth century. The pagan Slavs believed that when the sun deity Karaluni cried, her tears became rain. To this day, it is still a common belief among Russians that God cries when it rains. Superstitions and supernatural aspects that could not become Christianized were thought of as evil or foolish. Although religion was outlawed during the years of communism, many Russian and other Slavic peoples retained many of their superstitions such as the belief in “good” and “bad” spirits and good” or “bad” omens. Mythical characters such as “domovye”, or house spirits, are to this day considered to be malicious, but there is no question in the minds of superstitious individuals that these spirits are inferior to the powers of the Orthodox Church (Fedotov). Other characters such as mermaids and forest spirits made it into folk tales and poems such as Alexander Pushkin’s *Ruslan and Ludmila*.

Recently, there has been a movement in Russia and other Slavic countries to resurrect pagan beliefs. This movement is termed “rodnoverie”, which roughly translates to the belief in the god “Rod.” “Rod” is the root of the Russian word “priroda,” meaning nature. Many advocates of the movement promote the abandonment of Christian practices and a return to Slavic paganism. Although many pagan practices have been lost, modern Slavic pagans have reconstructed several of the important practices and beliefs that were present before Christianization. These modern pagans come from a variety of backgrounds. They perceive a need to reconnect with the ways of their ancient ancestors. However, the movement has been condemned by the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church and has been associated with extremist Russian nationalist groups. The movement, however, has become quite widespread as a more spiritual way of life that brings its practitioners closer to nature and to ancient traditions.

Bibliography

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