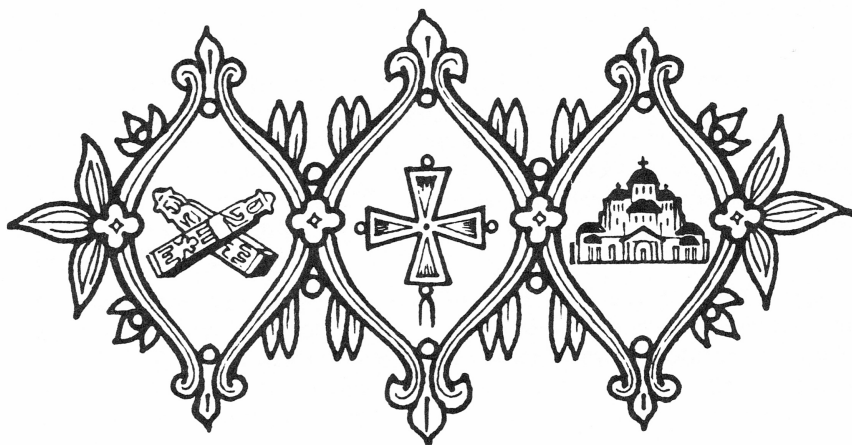


3. Search for religious identity by Eastern Slavs, ix - xii centuries.



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There are three categories of sources for the study of Eastern Slavic mythology and its religious **Weltanschauung**:¹

First, the most ancient sources are remarks in works of authors from other lands with respect to the religion and religious practices of the Eastern Slavs.² To this category can be assigned the records of the treaties between the Greeks and the Rusychi; these have been preserved in the Slavic chronicles. However, these were originally composed by the Greeks, and later translated into Old Slavonic.³

Second, there are writings from the Slavic Christian period which mention ancient pre-Christian beliefs, rites, and the names of ancient deities. Such remarks are to be found in the Kievan Chronicles, in sermons⁴ and other writings which were polemics against the ancient pre-Christian beliefs and practices. To this category, also, belongs the most important medieval witness, **The Lay of Igor's Campaign**, by an unknown author, who wrote it between 1185 and 1187 A.D.⁵

Third, the most unreliable sources (from the scholarly point of view) are contemporary (or recent) folklore and rituals which purport to preserve the ancient ones. To this category belong also descriptions of folkloric elements and rituals which are not extant today, but were recorded with assiduous precision in the nineteenth century.⁶

Each of the three categories has its strong and weak sides; each, alone, cannot supply sufficient material for a reconstruction of the religious practices, rites and religiosity of the Eastern Slavs in the pre-Christian era.⁷ Furthermore, we must take into account the constant movement of the alien tribes and nations throughout what is the contemporary Ukraine, Byelorussia and Russia; this occasioned both ongoing destruction of and contribution to the records of religiosity in those lands.⁸ Hence, only by combining all three classes of sources (mentioned above) is it possible to reconstruct an approximate content and shape of the ancient religious scene.

The foremost general characteristic of Eastern Slavic religiosity is an intense emotionality.⁹ The lives of the peoples are dominated by emotions to such an extent that the functioning of the intellect and will is overshadowed. Their emotionalism, sentimentality, exaggerated delicacy of feelings and lyricism find expression in their aestheticism of folklore, their ritualism, embroideries, music and song. This emotionalism creates an aura of profound introversion, which explains why Eastern Slavs readily display incredible enthusiasm, and then cool down even more quickly. These ethnopsychological traits also contribute to their profound religiosity.¹⁰

The religiosity of the Eastern Slavs is so emotional and profound that even today's revolutionaries — Bakunin, Herzen, Lenin, and others — could not stifle it. **A priori**, they denied all faith, belief and religion; however, in their fanatical fight against religion, they have actually exhibited a strong negative form of religious exuberance.¹¹

The religiosity of Eastern Slavs is not attached to any strict orthodox form of dogmatic formulae. It displays a high degree of individualism and detachment from any legalistic or canonical decisions. Therefore, at times, one might observe in some individuals, eccentric (even anarchistic) formulations or practices.

Another basic Slavic religious trait is a spiritual bond with the soil. In the Slavic mind, this has assumed mythical and mystical dimensions, and has become a legendary entity with secret and life-giving powers.¹² Nature has been interpreted and viewed in her moral and mystical dimensions of Bestowing-love — with which the fruitful soil, golden sun, the friendly breeze and light rain co-operate. Hence, Eastern Slavs, as a federation of agricultural tribes, have developed a very strong cosmic religious sense. In theological terminology, this can be described as "pantheism", a certain immanence of God in His creatures.

The religiosity of Eastern Slavs was not modelled on a **phobos-type** of religion; there is no fear of the deity or of nature-forces. Rather, it is (at least partially) an **eros-type** of religion, with the archetype of **mother** at the centre — **mother**, with all her female characteristics: her goodness, and economic sense, and her intense love of children for whom it is necessary to preserve the fruits of the soil.

The native soil is called the Great Mother, who (among other things) is a remnant of the primitive Indo-Germanic religion which revered the Great Goddess.¹³ Mother Earth stands at the core of the Eastern Slavic religiosity. In her converge the most secret and profound religious feelings. With awe, the people venerate the black, moist depths — the womb which is the source of all fertilized powers, the nourishing breast of nature, the definitive resting place of all in death. Mother Earth is covered by a veil of grass, flowers, forests, trees, vegetables and grain. Thus both beauty and fertility are her choice virtues and powers. As a mother who nourishes living human beings, the earth is the embodiment of kindness and mercy; she also embraces them for rest after death. There is something impersonal and generic also in Mother earth, for she has no indwelling spirits, nor was she ever embodied in a human form. However, possibly, in the very distant past, Mother Earth might have been considered a goddess. Some remnants of fertilizing rites still point in the direction that there might have been a marriage between earth and heaven in the primitive mythology of Eastern Slavs. It must be remembered that the