

The Notion of Religion  
of the Pre-Christian  
and Christian Eastern Slavs  
VI to XII Centuries



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The notion of religion among the Eastern Slavs (Ukrainians, Russians, Byelorussians) has always been a very complex one. All beliefs, rites, ancient and new deities, holy places, mounds with *baby* or fertility statues, *kapyshcha* or places of worship and sacrifices, various religious objects, artifacts, etc. were taken very seriously by the profoundly religious peoples of Eastern Europe. Their geo-political and historic situation was very precarious, for they lived on an open plain between Asia and Europe with few natural boundaries and were exposed to the constant movement of alien tribes. This occasioned both ongoing destruction of and contribution to the records of religiosity in those lands.<sup>1</sup>

All scholars studying Eastern Slavs agree that their foremost general characteristic is an intense emotionality. The lives of Eastern Slavs, and especially their religious lives, are dominated by emotions to such an extent that the proper 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, and this contributes to their profound religiosity.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the bibliography attached to my articles: *The Ultimate Reality and Meaning in the Pre-Christian Religion of the Eastern Slavs* in «Ultimate Reality and Meaning» II, 4, 1988, pp. 247-266 = Bilaniuk, *Studies in Eastern Christianity* Vol. IV, Munich-Toronto: The Ukrainian Free University, 1989, pp. 15-36; *Search for Religious Identity by Eastern Slavs, IX - XII Centuries in Millennium of Christianity in Ukraine: A Symposium*, ed. by Joseph Andrijisyn, Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 1987, pp. 119-154 = *Studies in Eastern Christianity*, IV, pp. 37-72. The best book on the subject in question is B.A. Rybakov, *Iazychestvo drevnei Rusi*, Moskva: Nauka, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Here are some canonical collections of the Eastern Slavs which were quite *unpopular*: V.N. Beneshevich, *Drevnie-slavianskaia kormchaia XIV tyulov bez tolkovaniï*, Sanktpetersburg, 1906, which contains the Church Slavonic and Greek texts; Bishop Nikodim, *Pravila Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi s tolkovaniïami*, I-II, Sanktpetersburg, 1911-12; V.N. Beneshevich, *Kanonicheskii sbornik XIV tyulov so vtoroi chietvierti VII vieka do 883g*, Sanktpetersburg, 1905; *Pedalion*, Athens, 1908, English translation by D. Cummings: *The Rudder*, Chicago: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957; cf. Wolodymyr Janiw, *Do systematyzatsyi pohladiv Ivana Mirchuka na ukrains'ku liudynu* in Alexander v. Kul'schytzkyj (ed.), *Symbolae in memoriam Ioannis Mirtschuk (1891-1961)*, München: Ukrainian Free University, 1974, pp. 149-194. V. Ianiv (ed.), *Relihiia v zhytti ukrains'koho narodu*, Munich, etc. Zapysky Naukovoho Товариства im. Shevchenka, Tom. 181, 1966; G. P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind, Vol. I: Kievan*

The religiosity of Eastern Slavs was not modelled on a *phobos-type* of religion; there was no fear of the deity or of nature-forces. There was only reverential awe before deity and before mysterious created reality. It was, at least partially, an *eros-type* of religion, or one based on love, fertility, and posterity. As we shall see, at the centre there was the archetype of "mother," the Great Goddess, and the fertile soil.<sup>3</sup> Eastern Slavic *eros-type* religion is very closely connected with the *agape-type*. This is based on mutual and social love, and ultimately reveals itself as a *gens-religion*, one based on a solidarity of the members of the clan; it involves also a very strong tie with the deceased members of the clan, or the veneration of ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

*Nomos-types* of religion, that is ones based on law, have been relatively little developed among the Eastern Slavs. Law has not played an important part in their culture; they have had few canonists or legal minds. One consequence of the lack of *nomos-type* religion is a kind of idealistic wishful thinking. Consequently, Slavic religiosity 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, or even anarchistic formulations or practices.<sup>5</sup>

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*Christianity: The Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, 3-20. M. Hrushevs'kyi, *Z istorii relihiinoi dumky na Ukraini*, Winnipeg: Ukrainian Evangelical Alliance of North America, 1962; V. Lypyn's'kyi, *Relihiia i tserkva v istorii Ukrainy*, Philadelphia: A drukarni 'Ameryky', 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Herodotus, *Historiae*, ed. H. Stein, Berlin, 1884, IV, 110-117. M.I. Rostovtseff, *Le Culte de la Grande Déesse dans la Russie méridionale*, Revue des Etudes Grecques 32, 1919. The April-June issue of the «Journal of Dharma», Vol. V no. 2, Bangalore, India: Dharmaram College, was dedicated to the *Feminine Aspect of God*. Cf. also E.V. Gallagher, *Mother Goddesses*, in P.K. Maegher et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, Washington, D.C.: Corpus, 1979, 2447-8; M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1973; G.P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, Vol. I, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, 3-20; M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed, London and New York, 1958; A.P. Evgen'eva - B.N. Putilov (eds.), *Drevnie rossiiskie stikhotvarenniia sobrannye Kirscheiu Danilovyn*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1958; A.M. Astakhova (ed.), *Onezhskie byliny zapisannye A. F. Gilferdingom letom 1871 goda*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1949-51. V. Shcherbakivs'kyi, *Formatsiia ukrains'koi natsii*, Prague, 1941.

<sup>4</sup> On the *gens-religion* see: G.P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind* Vol. I, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 15-20; P. Odarchenko, *Ancestor Worship*, in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, Vol. I: A-F, Toronto, 1984, p. 66. On Kutia, kolliva (or kolyvo) see: H. Hordienko, *Khlib nash nasushnyi*, Philadelphia, 1979; S. Stechishin, *Traditional Ukrainian Cooking*, Winnipeg, 1980. The Polish poet and writer Adam Mickiewicz (with strong ties to the Lithuanian people and culture) composed between 1823-33 his masterpiece *Dziady* (Forefathers), an ideological drama revealing a defiance of God that wins through to reconciliation and a messianic vision in which forefathers play an important role.

<sup>5</sup> The oldest characterization of the religion of the Eastern Slavs was written by the Greek historian Procopius in the sixth century A.D. Procopius was interested in the wanderings of the tribes, especially the Slovenes and the Antes. He reported the following: «They believe that one god, the maker of the lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims; but as for Fate, they neither know it nor do they in any wise admit that it has any power among men, but whenever death stands close before them, either stricken with sickness or be-