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THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANITY ABOUT THE YEAR 1000 (THE MISSIONARY ASPECT)

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I

Historians of our European cultural circle usually place the caesura between the early and full (developed) Middle Ages at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries. While from a global point of view this caesura can be justified, which I will attempt to demonstrate in a moment, from the point of view of different features of the historical process, is the degree of the obviousness of this differs. In the history of the Church the real caesura falls a little later, about the middle of the eleventh century with the Gregorian reform and the beginning of the Investiture Controversy. The tenth century did not form a caesura in the process of the creation of Christian doctrine and thought, and one may even suggest that from this point of view it was even a period of stagnation. In this respect, the Church shared the fate of the rest of the whole of western civilisation in the „Dark Ages”, the „century of iron”. The tenth century prepared the way, however, for the cultural watershed of the eleventh century which was the basis for an American scholar to propose „yet another [tenth century] renaissance”, maybe less spectacular than the Carolingian one, but more significant than the latter in that it did not concern just the intellectual elite but was at the very basis of social existence¹.

Let us remind ourselves of the most important elements justifying the caesura „about 1000 A.D.” Firstly: the internal factor; during the tenth and beginning of the eleventh centuries Latin Europe for the first time in several centuries (at least since the appearance of the Huns in the second half of the fourth century) was released from the threat of destructive and disorganising raids of peoples from outside, or from the fringes of Europe (Saracens [Moslems] from the south, Vikings from the north, Magyars from the east). This does not mean that the Moslem and Viking threats disappeared definitively, but they changed their scale and character. European peoples could now develop in more favourable conditions. While talking of conditions for development, it is worth noting also that approximately in the eighth century A.D. there was a warming of the

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¹ See: R.S. Lopez 1951.

climate, known among climatologists as the Little Climatic Optimum (in the scale of the post–Glacial period). This favoured vegetation and agriculture and allowed obtaining better economic effects, the increase of cultivated areas and the widening of the area of certain agricultural products. When from the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the European climate underwent a clear worsening (the beginning of the so-called „Little Ice Age”, lasting at least to the middle of the nineteenth century), the European economy was dealt a heavy blow², but that was in the fourteenth century. In the tenth and eleventh centuries (if one may use a personification), Latin Europe from the position of a victim attacked by external forces took on a more active pose. The Crusades, at the very end of the eleventh century were to break out in the Near East, but which had been a reality in the Pyrenean peninsular for some time previously, were a phenomenon with many aspects. From a certain point of view, that which is of interest to us here, they can be seen as the first dramatic attempt at expansion of Latin Europe to the east, based as it was in authentic religious ideals, but also undertaken in the interest of more earthly interests.

Secondly: the tenth century sees the preparation of deep–rooted long term economic and social processes (the deepening and spread of feudal structures) and these processes were beginning to have an effect. In the eleventh century, these processes were to bear fruit in an unprecedented and obvious increase in the tempo of the development of Latin Europe. That Europe had until then for many centuries been undergoing a process of agrarisation and deurbanisation (which had begun in Antiquity and was accelerated by the collapse of the social structures characteristic of that period and by the disruptions of the Migration Period, and the laying down of the foundations of the new Medieval order). Europe had become one „great village” with an almost totally agrarian structure, an almost totally natural economy, lacking towns and industry. It was comparatively „younger”, poorer, uglier and „inferior” sister of the two remaining Mediterranean civilisations (Byzantine and Islamic). It was in the eleventh century that this Europe took a huge step forward, gradually catching up (and later even excelling) the others.

Thirdly: the elements concerning the organisation of the state. The tenth century appears on the surface to be significantly different from its predecessor. The ninth century saw the imposing and successful attempt (the first after the collapse of the order of Antiquity) at the political organisation and considerable integration of the more important Latin–speaking Europe by the Carolingians, and the splendour of the „Carolingian Renaissance” — literature, art and science. The tenth century was the „age of Iron” (*saeculum ferreum*), the Dark Age (*saeculum obscurum*) — dark not merely in the sense of the cognitive possibilities available to historians, but also in the sense of more primitive relationships and the „lack of enlightenment” of our tenth century ancestors. When the Carolingian unity began to crumble and then collapse, when a period of renewed and universal anarchy in social relationships came (deepened for

² See: E.P. Borisenkov, V.M. Paseckiy 1988: especially p. 55ff.

some time, as we mentioned above, by intruders from outside), when the light of the splendid but chronologically and geographically limited Carolingian Renaissance was extinguished, it would seem that the development of Latin Europe became retarded. A symptom of this regression may be the situation that in the period from about 920–960 as far as we know, nothing of any great interest in the fields of intellectual development or literature appeared in Latin Europe. But it is precisely in these areas that, by various means, the tenth century saw the sowing of the seeds of the new. The ninth century was in many ways still looking back to traditions which were still Roman. In the tenth century, precisely on the foundations of the disintegrating Carolingian Empire, a new order of Early Medieval Europe developed, and this is our third element forming a caesura. It took on finally and irreversibly a pluralistic character, and also in the political system which it accepted — despite all the later variability — the basic and permanent character which is still visible on today's political maps³. About the year 1000 the political map of Europe for the first time begins to take on the characteristics of the present one. In the course of the ninth and tenth century, the processes leading to the formation of the state (the visible symptom of leaving behind the tribal system „beyond history”) took in the whole of Slavdom and Scandinavia and Hungary. From this period, the Europe until then composed of „Romans + Germans” grew by the addition of a third, mainly Slav, segment⁴. If we allow ourselves a little apparent tautology, about the year 1000 Europe becomes Europe, the process of bringing a considerable part of the European continent into European civilization was reaching an end.

II

The processes of the maturing and political consolidation went together with, and was mutually aided by, a fourth element: the Christianisation of Europe. This was a long term process. We may agree that at the beginning we are dealing with an „externalised”, formal and declarative „initial” Christianity. The „second” stage of „real” Christianisation, that is the internalisation of the Christian faith among the faithful was to take place only later (and in the opinion of many investigators never completed and one may question whether it was possible to complete). The process lasted through the whole of the first millennium of the Christian era, coinciding with the times of the decline and fall of the civilisation of Antiquity and the Roman world, it filled the whole Early Middle Ages. It was not a continuous nor linear process; one may demonstrate several phases of especially dynamic development of Christianity in the first millennium. The first was connected with the Apostolic and post-Apostolic beginnings, dominated by the powerful figure of St Paul of Tarsus, though our perception of the degree of this domination is to some extent the result of the biased approach of the sources which without doubt distort a more complex reality. The second

³ See: G. Labuda 1977: 63–90, and the masterful analysis of the processes of nation-formation: B. Zientara 1985.

⁴ See: J. Szűcs 1995; J. Kłoczowski 1998.

phase falls in the fourth century when the discriminations and persecution from the Roman state had ceased and declaration as a Christian became a condition of participation in public life. Until the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries, with small exceptions on the eastern fringes (Armenia, Ethiopia) and western limits (Ireland) of the known world, Christianisation was accomplished only in the territories belonging to the Roman Empire, even after its disappearance in the west. At the end of Antiquity this led to the identification of the earthly order of things, *orbis Romanus*, *Romanitas* with the Christian (*Christianitas*), which was eloquently expressed by Prudentius, a Christian poet of the fourth and fifth centuries:

But between Roman and barbarian is such a difference
as between a four-legged beast differs from man
mute from the articulate [...]

(*Contra Symmachum* II, 816–818)⁵

This was a view which Augustine of Hippo thought it was desirable to refute in his main work, *De civitate Dei*, in which he rigorously differentiates between the earthly order (*civitas terrena*), and the Divine (*civitas Dei*), at the same time „bringing Christianity out of the Roman backwaters”. In the pontificate of Gregory I the Great (590–604), and with his decisive participation, the third stage of Christian expansion was initiated, this time already beyond the Roman limes, firstly to Britain. This stage was to last with differing intensity throughout the seventh and eighth centuries, and would be conducted by the Irish and Anglo–Saxon Churches in the British Isles, as well as by the Papacy in alliance with the Frankish state. The main results were the Christianisation of the Anglo–Saxons and Germany. At the end of the eighth century Christianity began to reach Slavic peoples, at the beginning to the South Slavs.

The fourth and decisive phase falls in the tenth century, and its result was the Christianisation of nearly the whole of Slavdom (with Poland and Russia), Hungary and Scandinavia. About the year 1000, the main areas of the European continent were already Christian. Only the „pagan wedge” on the east and south coast of the Baltic resisted this tendency. This was an extensive triangular enclave of West Finnish peoples, Balts and Slavs with its point reaching as far to the west as the region of Hamburg. This zone begins to be eroded only at the beginning of the twelfth century (Elbe region, Pomerania; in the thirteenth century the Baltic and Finnic peoples also succumbed). About the year 1300 only Lithuania and Samogitia remained pagan⁶. Excepting the unhappy split between the Eastern and Western Churches and the spread of heretic movements, religious unity of Medieval Europe was prevented only by Moslem territory in Spain on the Mediterranean islands and southern Italy (though

⁵ All but one of the translations of the primary sources included here have been translated from the Polish texts supplied by the Author: translator's note.

⁶ See: J. Strzelczyk 1997; L.E. von Padberg 1998.

diminishing under the pressure of the Christians) and the Jewish Diaspora (a new and considerably more damaging Moslem threat appears for Christian Europe together with the appearance of the Ottoman Turks who in the fourteenth century occupied almost all of the Balkans and in the middle of the fifteenth century finally bring the existence of the Eastern [Byzantine] Empire to an end).

III

It may appear surprising that the huge missionary success of the Western Church, which is expressed in the huge areas of Europe brought into the Christian community and under obedience to Rome, fell in a period of the history of the Church itself which was by no means of interest and was by no means a turning-point (let us mention only, since it is not the theme of this article, that the development of the missionary activity of the Eastern Church developed in a parallel manner with its most significant success being the Christianisation of Russia⁷). In the history of the Western Church the time for change only came, as I said earlier, with the middle of the eleventh century, together with the Gregorian reform. In the centuries preceding this reform the situation in the Church and its Papal centre was far from satisfactory. In the Christian states the Church had long before achieved an indivisible control over the souls of the faithful, as well as a strong position both in the material sphere (land ownership) and in social prestige, but only at the expense of maintaining close connections with secular powers and apparatus of the state. Bishops and the abbots of the great monasteries were also influential state officials, obliged by the rulers to fulfil various services, offices, foreign missions, and (personal!) participation as royal vassals during military expeditions etc. Some of them also understood the needs of education and culture. These mannerisms were imitated by clerics of lower orders (priests and the abbots of lesser monasteries), and also the lesser feudal officers. Those who founded or equipped spiritual institutions thought that they had rights to them similar to ownership rights (the system of so-called private churches; German *Eigenkirche*). In such conditions, situations arose allowing corruption, where churches, monasteries and bishoprics were treated as the means of support of members of a particular family, to the appointment of unsuitable people to ecclesiastic positions, to the use of Church property for private purposes (especially in a situation when in accordance with the general practice of the time of the raising of

⁷ See: Ch. Hannick 1978: 279–359. We would be lead even further from our subject by a consideration of the missionary movement directed towards Central Asia and later the Far East by the Nestorian Church which has tended to be forgotten in the traditions of the great churches of the west (and here I am thinking also of the Orthodox Church). See: W. Hage 1978: 360–393. Only modest remnants of this survive today, see: R.G. Roberson 1998: 25–28 (the Eastern Assyrian Church), if however we would like to find in the history of Christianity a Church which in a territorial sense, and before the era of European colonialism had achieved the most spectacular successes, this honour would undoubtedly be awarded this Church, isolated from the main body of the Church.

families by at least the lesser diocesan clergy and the disregard of celibacy also by not a few members of the episcopate) and also in the light of the excessive attention paid by the bishops and other prelates to political and economic matters and to neglecting of their pastoral duties, which threatened — which was clear already by the eleventh century — alienation of a significant part of the Christian community, especially in the lower ranks of society from the influence of the Church and even in fact leading to resurgence of paganism. It is not surprising therefore that in the course of the tenth century and in the eleventh century, calls for the reform of the Church became more vociferous, neither is it surprising that in the Church itself, there were some who did not meet such calls with much enthusiasm.

The Church in the West was at this time very difficult to control. It was after all only unified in an idealistic sense, though not in organisation. It was in reality a sum or federation of local Churches. The position of bishops, and especially the metropolitans, was very high — at least in the ecclesiastical hierarchy (though these matters appeared differently in connection with secular position). The Apostolic see however had very little possibility of influence over the local churches. From the eighth to the twelfth centuries no general councils were called, the institution of Papal legates was only just forming and they were only sporadically sent out, and this was most frequently connected with local initiatives (sometimes it was more convenient to rely on Papal arbitration). The Popes had in practical terms very little influence on the appointment of bishops and abbots, even the regulation of the cult of the saints was not yet (but soon was to become) the province of the Apostolic see. One of the few possibilities of the assertion and widening of the authority of the Papacy over the local churches was the awarding of the pallium — the symbol of authority of the metropolitans — the issue of which was connected with the swearing of an oath to „St Peter”. Rome was the popular object of visits, though not to visit individual Popes, but the grave of St Peter. The Popes were generally regarded as authorities in matters of the Faith, but they were not allowed to interfere with matters which were the concern of the ecclesiastical dioceses and provinces. We should add that there was, sometimes intense, rivalry between the Roman and Constantinopolitan churches even in Italy itself.

The development and success of missionary activities gave the Papacy certain new opportunities, in that this would lead to the formation of more and more new ecclesiastic organisational links, not always linked with the old „autonomic” ecclesiastical provinces, and these new provinces obviously could not be created without the participation of the Papacy. New chances were also created by the relationships linking some of the local churches with the Papacy (especially the Anglo-Saxon Church, created as we know on Papal initiative) and political factors (the most important of which was connected with the alliance from the middle of the eighth century between the Papacy and the Carolingians ruling the Frankish Empire). It must be said that the Papacy was not always able to benefit from these chances. The tenth century, at least part of it — which even the most ardent supporters of that institution admit — was in the history of the Papacy an exceptional period, in a negative sense. Of course it would be an

inadmissible simplification to see the reasons for the decline of Papal authority merely in the personal characteristics of successive Popes, though it would be easy to find examples of individuals undeserving or unsuitable to fulfil the role (writers sometimes draw attention to the inexperience and indeed sexual misdemeanours of the Roman Papacy of that period). A deeper cause of the bad state of the Papacy of the period was however (as in the Church as a whole) an excessive degree of involvement in purely secular matters. The Popes, bishops of Rome, the patriarchs of the west, were also the rulers of the Papal state (*patrimonium sancti Petri*) in the central part of the Apennine peninsula and whether they wanted or not became involved in (and sometimes even the pawns of) a complex political game conducted particularly by the influential aristocratic, and often rival, families of Rome (the best known being the Crescentius family and the Counts of Tuscany). The annexation of Italy and Rome by the German king Otto I, although it meant the subordination of the Papacy to the protection and suzerainty of the Emperor, released it to a considerable degree from the need to get involved in (and compromised by) the local, Roman, political contest. Because the Emperor was also interested in a „controlled” reform of the Church and therefore made sure that the suitable persons gained the throne of Peter (despite temporary — to the middle of the eleventh century!) problems and misunderstandings, this created reasonably suitable conditions for the reviving of the trends towards reform and giving them a deeper character, though not always one approved by the monarch⁸. It is a paradox that the effectual decentralisation of the western Church and the relative marginalisation of the role of the Papacy, in the existing primitive conditions of inter-regional communication and the particularism then current in Europe, made the fate of the Church independent of the successes and failures of its central institution, about which it is probable that very few outside of Italy or Europe knew very much.

IV

Let us leave aside the question of the relationship between the Christian world of the year 1000 to the two main religions still existing in Europe and beyond it, that is Judaism and Islam⁹, and also to the more distant Buddhism¹⁰, or — beginning from the first half of the thirteenth century — the religion of the Mongols. Here we are interested only in the meeting, and — in real terms — the confrontation, of the Christian world view with the local, pre-Christian, pagan belief systems in those areas of Europe where in later centuries these beliefs found themselves in direct mutual contact. This confrontation¹¹ is for several reasons not easy to study scientifically. Among the problems may

⁸ On the situation of the Papacy about 1000 A.D., see: G. Tellenbach 1984: 165–177.

⁹ There is a huge scientific literature, see among the latest the collective work *Religionsgespräche...* 1992. Among the work done by Polish scholars, there are different studies by L. Winowski, among them the posthumous publication (L. Winowski 1985).

¹⁰ See: D. Scott 1985: 88–100; also — from a different perspective: T. Hahn 1978: 213–234.

¹¹ I consider the numerous studies of H.-D. Kahl among the basic new works in this field, especially 1978: 11–76, and of L.E. von Padberg (some of which are cited below in the relevant footnotes).

be mentioned heuristic ones, resulting from the paucity and partisanship of the source material available to the historian. The scarcity of these sources is a reflection of a general lack of written materials for the Early Medieval period as a whole (especially with regard to two particularly „Dark Ages”, roughly—speaking the seventh and tenth centuries), which is a result not only of the low pace of intellectual activity but especially literacy in society as a whole¹². This is not, however, the whole explanation. There was also a clear distaste among Christian authors — who in the early Middle Ages with few exceptions belonged to the clergy — concerning writing about paganism (as a work or invention of Satan). Our Gallus Anonymus still at the beginning of the twelfth century, ending his brief sketch of the history of our country before the Baptism of Poland and Mieszko I, after describing the sad fate of king Popiel and his family wrote: „But let us not dwell on the history of a people whose recollections are lost in the forgetfulness of the centuries and who mistaken idolatry has condemned, and pass briefly over it to the recording of matters which faithful memory has preserved”¹³. The partisanship of the sources means that the evidence, and therefore descriptions of events and opinions, we have is presented almost entirely from the Christian point of view, while the other side — living entirely fully in the sphere of oral culture was illiterate and unable to express itself in that medium and, it follows from this — unable to present its own point of view and its version of events. This is to some extent supplied by the material traces connected with the lives (especially their religious life of pagan peoples, such as the images of gods, the remains of temples and other cult places, ritual objects, iconographic representations on everyday objects and — in recent decades especially intensively studied and very useful for our problem — bracteates)¹⁴. Christian authors who to some degree considered the confrontation between Christianity and local religious cults, and a few of whom (which only apparently conflicts with what has been said above about the general paucity of evidence), wished and were able to present very valuable, sometimes very detailed information, sometimes from personal observation, were concerned mainly to present the t r i u m p h of Christianity and not the real and sometimes very difficult passage of events during the confrontation. There were two possible approaches to this problem. The first relied on maintaining a silence concerning the opponent, condemning him to a *damnatio memoriae* which was connected with, and was typical of, the early stages of Christianity in newly—converted countries, where the influence of the old religion had not been entirely eliminated, and its supporters

¹² The picture appearing from the reading of the excellent book of P. Riché 1995 is so suggestive, that the reader may easily forget, that it concerns a narrow intellectual elite, while the vast majority of secular society (including its highest circles) lived totally in a world of oral tradition, which left very few traces in the sources. On this second, unwritten (which does not necessarily automatically mean primitive) cultural model of the Middle Ages, see M. Richter 1994.

¹³ *Galli Anonymi Chronica* I,3. Or is the reticence of the foreign writer concerning the discussion of pagan history also a figure of speech hiding a real lack of information? Wincenty Kadlubek, a Pole, and in addition Bishop of Cracow, writing a century later did not have such scruples.

¹⁴ The work of the German scholar K. Hauck in this field has been especially valuable, especially in his great cycle of studies under the title *Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten*. See his synthetic article: *Brakteatenikonologie* (1978: 361–401).

(especially priests, especially strongly connected with it), although now practiced underground, formed a real threat to Christianity, new and weak, and in addition often imposed by force. The second method, however, was the highly-exaggerated demonisation of pre-Christian cults, ascribing to it all manner and usually extremely negative characteristics, ignoble deeds and crimes. It was with such a „picture” of the pagan cult of the Elbe region Slavs for example which was received by the reader of the „open letter” of the bishops and nobles of Saxony in 1108, calling for a crusade against these peoples:

„When they celebrate their holy days, their sorcerers say during the feast: ‘Our Pripegela desires heads! He must be satisfied by such an offering!’ This Pripegela is, as they hold, Priapus and the shameless Belfegor. After beheading Christians before their altar of profanity, they take cups full of human blood and screaming with a terrible voice proclaim: ‘Let us celebrate this joyous day! Christ has been overcome! Our undefeatable Pripigela is victorious’ [The name Pripigala is otherwise unknown, and is presumably a distortion of the name of some Polabian god or other — J.S.]”¹⁵.

There is no doubt whatsoever today that the meeting of Christianity and pre-Christian religious systems of Europe outside the former limes had a very dramatic character, it was a real confrontation. From a historical point of view (and I will not here discuss the theological aspects), it would be an extreme simplification to ascribe any superiority to Christianity over paganism. The fact that it was Christianity which was to prove victorious was the result of many interreacting (or at least acting in parallel) circumstances. We should not however go to the opposite extreme and categorically negate the persuasive power of Christianity, it probably gave better answers to the questions posed by more spiritual individuals, concerning moral, or even existential questions (such as concerning justice, equality in the eyes of God, immortality). We recall the scene described by the Venerable Bede (*Hist. eccl. gentis Anglorum* II,13) as having taken place during the meeting of the *Witan* (gathering of the nobles) in the court of the king of Northumbria in 628 before the decision was taken to convert to Christianity. We have no guarantee of course as to the authenticity of the story, but it represents the vision of a historiographer of the beginning of the eighth century. At the request of King Edwin, the High priest Coifi was first asked to speak, and he — which in itself is interesting — spoke out strongly against the previous cult¹⁶. The pagan gods — in the opinion of their main priest — had proven completely powerless, and since they had proven useless, it was wise to follow the advice of the king and accept the new religion. The arguments of the high priest of the vanishing traditional religion of the Northumbrians were taken from the arsenal of the pagan concepts, evaluating the gods from a purely utilitarian point of view. This is one of the main characteristics of primary

¹⁵ See: P. Knoch 1974: 1–33 (with a German translation of the text); G. Labuda 1975: 233–269 (on p. 234–236 Latin text); G. Constable 1999: 283–299 (with an English translation of the text).

¹⁶ This is probably the only case of the description of the conversion of a pagan priest — representatives of a social group particularly hated by the chroniclers — known to us in any detail.

(primitive) cults, less valuably labelled „pagan”. Their orientation was purely temporal and thus utilitarian; god and gods are only „important” and worth worship if they look after the interests of their worshippers, but — and this is also a fact of fundamental importance — not in an individual sense (at the level of individual human beings), but in the sense of a community, social group, such as clan, tribe, nation. In opposition to this, the „revealed” religions, among them Christianity, without totally negating their „utility value” in the same temporal manner (the grace of God can accompany people on earth too, as was — and is — generally expected), they have from the beginning a totally different basic perspective, an eschatological aim which is not temporal, but eternal; the function of religion is not to provide the believer with well-being in this world, but to lead to eternal happiness, to eternal life in heaven. Probably this concept, so different from the experience and expectations of people used to the „archaic” perspective was one of the more important obstacles forming a barrier hindering mutual understanding and conversion to Christianity. But, if we are to believe Bede, already at the beginning of the seventh century in the Northumbrian court, when the pagan High Priest Coifi admitted the uselessness of the old religion, one of the nobles present — surprisingly a layman — was able to perceive and publicly demonstrate the deeper sense of the new beliefs:

„Your majesty [...] the present life of man on earth [...] seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your thanes and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort he vanishes out of sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows we know nothing. Therefore if this teaching has brought us any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it”¹⁷.

Not only this evidence from the written sources, so engaging in its simplicity warns us against the hasty rejection of the possibility of the appearance in archaic, pagan, societies deeply reflective attitudes, seeking answers to the deeply hidden expectations or leanings of an existential nature. We must consider how typical such attitudes might have been; there is no doubt that reflections of the type described could have occurred to only a few individuals. Let us remember, however, that in the ninth century among the Saxons so stubbornly resisting Christianity in only the second generation of Christians, appeared Gottschalk of Fulda (or of Orbais) one of the deepest (and also most controversial) thinkers of his epoch¹⁸. It was the first and second generation of Christians who were among those who exhibited the greatest sacrifice for the new belief,

¹⁷ Translation from L.S. Price 1955: translator’s note.

¹⁸ For him, see: J. Strzelczyk 1990a: 41–56, and 1990b: 27–40.

and complete subjugation to its demands (it is enough to recall the two Poles among the Five Martyred Brothers of 1003)¹⁹.

From all this, it seems there is no doubt that we cannot ascribe the final triumph of Christianity entirely, or even mainly, to its spiritual superiority, especially as there is much which suggests that paganism was in general satisfactorily able to fulfil the spiritual needs and expectations of its followers. In practice the decisive factors were not purely spiritual but „external” ones, the mutual power relations and the political circumstances surrounding the confrontation between two, pagan and Christian world-views. This confrontation took place, generally-speaking, in situations where the Christian side had the advantage. The societies of the pagan world, politically fragmented, and usually in an ineffective pre-state stage of development, stubbornly looking back towards their past, were forced to take on the Christian societies well aware of their unity and power, organised (though not always, and not always to the same degree) into strong and effective military political entities (first the Roman and later Byzantine states, the Frankish state under Charlemagne and the Carolingians, the German state starting from the Ottonian dynasty, Poland against the Pomeranians, Denmark against the peoples of the eastern shores of the Baltic, the state of the Teutonic Knights against the Prussians and Lithuanians etc.). How adequately Bishop Daniel of Winchester summed up the principles which should guide the missionary in his teaching in a letter addressed to the St Winifred-Boniface, „Missionary of Germany” in about 723-724 when he wrote:

„This also should be demonstrated: If the gods are all-powerful, good and just [as the pagans assert], they not only reward their followers but also punish those who deny their existence. And if in reality they do these things, why do they spare the Christians, who over nearly all the earth led people away from their worship and destroyed their idols? And why do they, that is the Christians, possess fertile countries and lands, bearing wine and oil in abundance, blessed with all types of treasures; while they however, that is the pagans and their gods, are left only the countries suffering from the cold, in which they falsely believe they still rule while they have been driven from the whole of the earth? The power of the Christian world should be shown and compared with that of those few who have remained followers of the old madness”²⁰.

The greater the successes of the Christian side (especially on the battlefield, but also when the standard of living of Christian cultures was compared with that of pagan ones), the more convincing to the pagans sounded the arguments concerning changing sides. Missionaries frequently used to this advantage the full, which it was also easy to express as a threat. St Lebuin, an Anglo-Saxon, active among the pagan Saxons at the end of

¹⁹ Benedict of Benevento and four other followers of St Romuald (the founder of the Camaldolese Order) who were sent from Ravenna to evangelise the Slavs of Pomerania, where they were murdered: translator's note.

²⁰ This letter (number 23 in the editions) has been preserved in the correspondence of St Boniface. For the text together with a German translation: *Briefe des Bonifatius* 1968: 78-84.

the eighth century told the *thing* (traditional gathering of the people of that tribe) that if they became Christians:

„Just as you Saxons have not had kings over you, there will be no king who will defeat and conquer you. If you do not become His [God's], I tell you this: already near you is a king ready to attack your country, he will plunder it and lay it waste, he will destroy you by various wars, drive you into exile, disinherit and kill, and will give your inheritance to whosoever he wishes; you will be his subjects and of his descendants”.

This was a prediction about the imminent military campaign by Charlemagne, who „with an iron tongue” (that is by fire and sword) „converted the Saxons”. The Apostle of Pomerania, St Otto of Bamberg at the beginning of the twelfth century was able to effectively manipulate the attitudes of that pagan people by utilising the threat of the military intervention by the Polish prince Bolesław the Wry Mouth (Krzywousty).

On the other hand the factor of external Christian intervention, whether invasion or threat was not always sufficient. We recall that the Christian side not only had successes and victories, but also it defeats, as for example in the northern Elbelands (Polabia) at the end of the tenth century, when the Slavs there (the Veletians–Luticians and Abodrites) by an armed uprising shook off for a century and a half German rule and together with it Christianity, or this time for considerably shorter time but equally painful for the young church in Poland in the 1030s. Above all however we know cases, and Poland is one of the best, of almost voluntary conversion to the new beliefs, without visible or decisive direct influence of external factors. It was once a popular view that Mieszko I, deciding to accept baptism, was mainly trying to protect his state and his rule against the threat of German intervention or influences from the German church or state. We now know that in the 960s when these fundamental questions were considered and decisions taken, there was very little possibility of a Polish–German conflict, and if external politics played any role in the decisions taken by the ruler of the Polanians, it is more likely that the problem was in the severing of a potential alliance between the Czechs and the Veletians which was an unsafe situation for the state of Mieszko I (and for the German state).

In normal political conditions more important than the contemporary needs of foreign policy were motives concerning and necessities of internal policy. Christianity was not only a specific highly organised religious system, but also a valuable world view capable of having an effect on its own society. Those who led pagan societies and steered — or were trying to steer — consolidative processes were well aware of this. We should remember that at the end of the first millennium A.D. over large areas of central, eastern and northern Europe, the process of state–formation were accelerating; until then, these areas had been at the stage of clan societies. It is an especially notable fact that we do not know of a single convincing case of a successful voluntary (i.e., not enforced from outside) conversion to Christianity of a Slav people at the stage of clan–tribal society. It was the founder–rulers of medieval states such as Mieszko I in Poland, Olav Tryggvason in Norway, Vladimir the Great in Russia, St Steven in Hungary, which led their nations to the new belief.

We understand their intentions and determination in the fight with the forces of the old order, in the interests of the new, Christian one. We do not exclude, obviously, personal motives, internal conviction of the values of the new belief, or (though often overstressed in later tradition) the influences of Christian spouses such as Dąbrówka in Poland or Anna Porphyrogenita in Russia²¹, or the powers of persuasion and determination of the missionaries, but it is difficult to doubt that in taking what was certainly a difficult decision concerning the break with the existing beliefs and the system of values connected with it, the expected social consequences of the conversion were the ones which counted most.

Were, however, these results (so desirable from the point of view of the ruler) entirely assured, easy to predict and obvious for the actors on the contemporary political scene? At first they merely complicated the situation (or at least could complicate matters). For most of society, the new cult was something completely foreign, unknown or little known, and not wanted at all. Archaic societies were basically agricultural, living in conditions of relative mutual isolation and characteristically by nature conservative, also with the rhythm of their lives so closely — and seemingly permanently — intertwined (and maybe especially in the sphere of belief) with the natural rhythm of nature. In contrast to the populations of towns and other concentrations of population which had long been also places of interchange of ideas and competition between beliefs, rural populations always and everywhere were rejected „novelties”, and were distrustful of, and often hostile towards them. It is no accident that the Latin word „paganus” meaning „country dweller”, „villager”, took on a secondary meaning in the course of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, which was a term accepted in different European languages to refer to a non-Christian, a follower of one of the primary religions. Mieszko I, who we may treat here as a representative of the whole group of the „uniter-princes” and Christianisers, would have to take into account that the decision to accept Christianity would in the short-term antagonise a considerable portion of his own society.

Certainly in atypical situations, the balance of losses and gains could have looked differently to a ruler. Among these may be counted the Slav society on the island of Rügen, where (at least in the better-known twelfth century) royal power attained independence, though curbed by the influences of the priests of Svanthvit, it is not surprising that they relatively easily came to terms with the Danish conquest and Christianisation, since in the new conditions they prospered so well²². It cannot be excluded that a similar situation may have applied in the case of the territory of the Veletian (Lutician) tribal union beginning from the end of the tenth century, where a specific kind of theocracy of the priests of Svarożic was created in the mysterious Rethra-Riedegost (mysterious because, despite quite full descriptions in the German

²¹ For the earlier phases of the Middle Ages, we can point to the thorough monograph of C. Nolte 1995.

²² From the extensive scientific literature on the subject of the Rugian pagan cult see only: J. Banaszkiewicz 1996: 75–82; A.L. Miś 1997: 105–149.

sources, it has still not been located). This theocracy (earlier than that on Rügen) was different in that the priests and the popular element (the *wiec*) which was dominated by them were effectively able to eliminate all rivalry to their power from the tribal leaders.

The rulers knew what they were doing and it seems that they saw the long-term benefits which Christianity would bring, and these were various. Christianity „ennobled” the state and its ruler, only Christianity allowed access to the community of Christian states and peoples, and thus to the advanced civilisations of main parts of the contemporary world. Only the Church could supply the ruler with educated people, able to read and express themselves in writing, to serve as envoys, and prepare documents. While Christian rulers, when the situation required it, were able to enter alliances with pagans (perhaps the clearest example is the alliance made at Quedlinburg in 1003 between the extremely pious, and even later canonised, German king (later Emperor) Henry II and the pagan Veletians–Luticians, which was directed against Boleslaw the Brave the Christian king of Poland), but in general Christian rulers despised the pagans. In the seventh century the ambassador of the Frankish king Dagobert I rejected the proposition of Samo, the leader („king”) of the Slavs, to enter an alliance; he is said to have replied haughtily that it was not possible for „Christians and servants of God to enter an alliance with dogs” (Fredegar IV, 48), a remark which was to cost the Franks dearly. Tradition recounts of Bořivoj the semi-legendary prince of the Czechs that when he was invited to the court of Svatopluk, the Christian prince of Moravia, he was not allowed to sit at the same table as the other diners, but *ritu paganorum ante mensam pavimento iubetur insidere*²³. The great uprising mentioned elsewhere in this article of the Elbeland (Polabian) Slavs of 983 and subsequent years started, if we are to believe Adam of Bremen and Helmold of Bosau, mainly as a result of the conceit and treachery of Theoderich (Dietrich), the Saxon margrave of the Northern March, who first promised the Abodrite prince a relation of the Duke of Saxony as a wife, and then retracted his promise under the pretext that „a relation of the duke should not be given as a wife to a dog!” Even the German chroniclers do not disguise their disapproval of the behaviour of the margrave, all the more so as they were aware of the huge misfortune that this behaviour was to bring.

Even more significant, and an extremely desirable consequence of Christianisation for royal power was the sacral enhancement of the person of the ruler. In Germanic societies this was but an extension (although in a new Christian guise) of ancient pagan conceptions of the sacral genesis of royal power (*Sakralkönigtum*); this concept would however have been foreign to Slav societies, to whom in the pre-Christian period the concept of a sacral element in this context would have been difficult to understand. Always, however, the Christian ruler became somebody incomparably more distinguished and dignified than the ordinary pagan leader. The latter—regardless of whatever titles (most often „king”, *rex*) he had been given in Greek or Latin documents, was

²³ The so-called *Christian's Legend* (end of the tenth century?), c. 2.

simply a depositary of the will of „the people” (or, more realistically, above all the tribal aristocracy, appointed and dismissed by the *wiec*), the killer of a „king” must pay wergeld just as for any other member of the tribe (except a much higher amount). The Christian ruler, no matter whether a prince or a king was also and above all the assignee of the power of God. He ruled not only as a result of „consent” of the people but also as by a spiritual dignity, part of the „sacrum”, he was also responsible to God for the salvation of his people. Attacks on the person of the Christian ruler were not only a crime in the eyes of the law, but also a deadly sin, and the crime itself could only be punished by death. The ruler and his family, „appointed” by the Providence of God, even in pagan societies (for example Piast and his family in the version recorded for the first time by Gallus Anonymus) is raised up above the whole of the rest of the society and even above all other potential rivals for royal power. Despite the extreme atrophy of royal power under the later Merovingians, the *coup d’etat* of Pepin of the Carolingian dynasty in the middle of the eighth century was seen as an usurpation and required especial measures to legitimise it (approval of the Apostolic see, and the sacralisation of their kingship). It is not necessary to explain how advantageous the Christianity of the ruler was.

Another aspect was the unity of the state. The uniting of tribes, an extremely important process, but in general poorly-known in the sources, was an extremely difficult, even titanic task accomplished by blood and toil. The degree of coherence of the freshly (and with such difficulty) united state was still not great, it was rather a conglomerate of extremely varied (in a multitude of aspects) territories and peoples, often connected with each other only by the autocratic will of the ruler, breaking any resistance. Not without reason have early states been compared to a monstrous roller crushing the society and removing irregularities. In the longer term the roller, the sword and destruction do not suffice, other factors must be brought into the service of the state, chiefly ideological, above all religious ones. Paganism, with its characteristic particularism, was absolutely impossible to use in this way, although some rulers initially had such intentions. Vladimir of Russia for example became convinced of this when he tried to raise Perun, one of his pagan gods, to the role of the highest god (the „uniting-god”) of the Russian lands. The attempt to introduce henotheism (one god above all others) did not succeed. The great prince began to look around for other religions, and as is well known, after mature counsel (which is described, though we do not know how accurately, by the author of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*), the choice fell on (Byzantine) Christianity. Indeed, Christianity as a monotheistic religion, in the eyes of which in theory all people are equal and also — which is just as important — as a f o r e i g n religion (developed somewhere else and thus is an implant in the areas where it spread), fulfilled a role which no pagan religion could have done as the support of „uniter-princes”.

Since the balance of the advantages of accepting Christianity was decidedly greater than the threats, why did the process of the Christianisation of Europe take so long, and why was it so difficult and non-linear, what was the reason for such a strong resistance, why were there so many martyrs, and what was the cause of the cases of apostasy?

There was one characteristic common to (or similar in) both early Medieval Christianity and paganism: both of them regarded themselves not so much a matter of the individual conscience but a necessary element of the integration of whole groups of humans. Christian missionaries were not dealing with „secular” peoples, but with peoples with clearly-defined religious structures²⁴. The sacral was too important an area of community life to allow a free choice of religion; the god of the ruler should have been the same god as the rest of the community. It is necessary to differentiate several contexts of Christian missions. Missions of the first model occurred where there were strong external influences behind or accompanying the missionaries. This was the model of the conversion of the Saxons in the times of Charlemagne, the Icelanders in the times of Olav Tryggvason, the Pomeranians in the times of Bolesław The Wry Mouth, the Elbe Slavs in the time of Henry the Lion, The Prussians and Lithuanians in the time of the Teutonic Knights. Christianity was accompanied by conquest sometimes preceding it and sometimes following it. Apart from collaborators, who quickly came to terms with the new powers, Christianity was seen by the majority of the people as something foreign and hostile, as an agent of a foreign, self-dependent power. This aroused resistance, and passivity (expressed by apparent, imposed conversion), when however the external pressure was temporarily or permanently removed, the new religion was rejected as a foreign imposition, priests were expelled or murdered, churches were destroyed, and the old cult was resumed.

Sometimes the enforced mission was just a cover for a lightly-camouflaged brutal conquest, which rather hindered than aided real Christianisation. The Slav prince of the Wagrians complained to Gerold, the Bishop of Stargard (Oldenburg in Wagria) when the latter tried to persuade him to accept Christianity:

„Your words, honourable bishop are the words of God and intended for our salvation. In what way can we set out on that way, oppressed as we are by such a huge evil? If you would understand our troubles, listen patiently to my words; the people you see are your people, and it is meet that we should inform you of our dire situation [...]. Your princes loot us with such severity, that because of tribute and the strongest subjugation ‘better for us is death than life’ [Mt 6, 9]. For this year we, the inhabitants of this tiny territory, have paid the [Saxon] prince the thousand *grzywien* [of tribute], and further the count [of Holstein] hundreds, and we have still not paid all, but they daily press us and cause us harm until complete destruction. In what manner can we find time for this new religion, to build churches and accept baptism, we who daily

²⁴ See: L.E. von Padberg 1994: 290–312, especially 310.

expect to be swept from the face of the earth? If only there was somewhere that we could escape to! If we were to cross the [river] Trave, we would meet a similar defeat, if we cross the Peene, it would meet us there. What remains for us but to leave the land and go into the sea and live in its depths? [see Psalm 138: 8–9]. Where is our fault in that, if we have been driven from our homelands, that we are driven to the seas and taking the means to survive from the Danes and merchants sailing the seas? Is it not the fault of the prince who has driven us to this?" (Helmold I, 84).

Despite the changed historical context, this was nothing less than a return to the situation of the missions from the period of the late, Christian, Roman Empire, when Christianity in practical terms equalled the political affinity to the system of the Roman state; at the same time it was a departure from the evangelical call *docete omnes gentes*, since „all” means to the edges of the inhabited earth. Gregory the Great returned to this principle and from that time (the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries) it was a constant element of the programme of the Church (particularly the Roman) and for several centuries it was impossible to separate missionary work and politics and the conquest of pagan countries and it is doubtful that the Church authorities were interested in resigning from the support of the secular powers.

The second model of Christianisation operated where there was not decisive pressure from the outside, but a significant role was played by the pressure applied internally by the native leaders of a society. Such a model applied for example to those Slav states which — like Poland — achieved their own nationhood and came to Christianity „of their own volition”, which does not — of course — exclude organizational help and the employment of personnel from the outside. From the point of view of the society exposed to Christianisation, the difference between the first and second models need not in fact have been so visible, pressure is after all pressure, and an awareness of the need for a sacral unity between the people and their ruler however probably played a certain role.

The third model of Christianisation applied when missionaries had to work in foreign and hostile (or at least neutral) environment, that is in areas which had their own power structures, but where the leaders were hostile to, not inclined to support, or at best not interested in, Christianity. It was only in this third model (where there was no authority from a power directly supporting the missionaries), that arguments and persuasion really counted; in such situations, the supporters of the old and new beliefs were in a similar position. It is difficult not to notice that the experience of history have many times proven the futility of attempted Christianisation carried out in such conditions (for example the activities of St Willibrord among the Frisians and Danes, St Ansgar among the Swedes, and to a certain degree also St Adalbert and St Bruno of Querfurt among the Prussians and Yatvingians).

Missionaries and Christian writers often as it were belittled the pagan gods, generally representing them as the products of human hands which are not in any position either to harm nor help, there even appears sometimes a note of regret for the pagans, who not only had condemned themselves to damnation, but were also seeking help or support

from their lifeless and completely useless idols. Thus the considerable role of the „mission of action” in the history of the missions, it was an easier and quicker way than teaching (the catechism) to convince the pagans of the efficacy of the new religion and an immediate demonstration of the impotency of their gods or the power of the Christian god. This would explain the sometimes surprising (though only apparently so) zeal with which some missionaries destroyed or defiled pagan sanctuaries or images (the most famous example of this is probably cutting-down by Winfried-Boniface of the famous Thor’s Oak at Geismar), or the command of prince Vladimir of Kiev to have the image of Perun flogged and dumped into the Dniepr so soon after he had set it up and commanded it to be worshipped. Even if, as was so often used effectively against them in polemic, the images and sanctuaries themselves were lifeless and useless products of human handicraft, pagan cult was the work of the devil himself. There is no possibility of discussion with the work of Satan, it has to be rooted-out and suppressed, and with all available means.

The principle of „the lesser evil” would explain much, and we have no basis for suspecting that always and everywhere this was simply opportunism. In the Middle Ages (and later, until the Second Vatican Council) the doctrine of the undivided monopoly of the [Roman] Church in the Salvation of souls prevailed. This meant that in the view of the Christians, the huge groups of non-Christians (and in practice also members of other Churches as well) as a *massa perditionis* was condemned to damnation. The imperative of Christianisation was, or at least should be a moral injunction, a fulfilment of the fundamental principle of the gospels, which is the love of one’s fellow man; for some it was a categorical imperative to which they devoted their lives and were willing to give up their lives for. At the same time, as the Gospels tell us nobody knows the day of the end of the world and the Last Judgement. While the Church (as the result of experience) did not approve, and even forbade, calculation when it would occur and in principle did not encourage chiliastic tendencies, it was unable to root them out entirely from the spiritual life of Christians. In certain historical situations, especially considerable external threats or natural disasters (plagues, famine, heavy winters, floods, crop failures) they appeared with greater force. They sometimes formed an expression of spiritual opposition against the official church, which was too strongly connected with the existing socio-political order. But, as it would appear, Pope Gregory the Great himself, in formulating the return to the doctrine of the universal character of the salvationist mission of the Church, found himself under the influence of a conviction of the approach of the end of the world²⁵. The approach of the end of the first millennium of the Christian era did not actually give rise, as sometimes hastily assumed in earlier studies, to some general eruption of chiliastic moods but did arouse however some specific reactions among certain people of a more religious nature²⁶. *Veniet, veniet dies Domini sicut fur cito* — declared a contemporary visionary, referring to the Second Epistle of St Peter (II Pet. 3:10).

²⁵ See: L.E. von Padberg 1994: 301ff.

²⁶ See: W. Sulikowska 1960: 23–43; J. Fried 1989: 381–473; G. Duby 1980, Polish translation: M. Malewicz (G. Duby 1997).

VI

What else resulted in the spread of Christianity often encountering such great resistance?

It would seem that both sides were speaking different languages. I do not have in mind the real linguistic barrier between missionaries and the natives, which was sometimes so great that it was impossible to overcome without a translator (this must have been the situation in the case of Irish missions among the Picts or Anglo-Saxons, the Germans in the Elbe lands²⁷, or St Adalbert among the Prussians), while elsewhere (for example in the case of Anglo-Saxon missionaries among continental Saxons, Constantine and Methodius among the Moravian Slavs, or the hypothetical Czech missionaries who came to Gniezno together with Dąbrówka), these problems seem not to have occurred at all or only to a slight degree. I have in mind rather the completely different conceptual apparatus which was used by both sides, and which — to use today's jargon — we would describe as „incompatible”.

We recall the important role played in the pagan belief systems by the concept of usefulness. A good god was useful to „his” people. It was not enough for him to be favourable, he had to also be useful, and effective. Between the gods and the communities of his worshippers there was a magical bond, strengthened in all societies employing these archaic beliefs by the principle of mutualness (*do ut des*). The worshipper had the hope of obtaining the favours of the god by sacrifices, prayers and magic acts. If the god was not able to reward the sacrificial gift, and the worshipper was not able to ensure this mutuality by magic, it would appear that the god had either turned against his people, or had proven to be powerless. In primary religions there is nothing which suggests a pretension to exclusiveness with reference to other religious systems. As a consequence of this there is also a lack of any tendency whatsoever towards proselytism, that is the desire to convert others to a particular belief. Other gods, the gods of other peoples, are exactly the same reality as one's own, except their competence does not extend to „us”. Their potential to be harmful could be countered by attempts to „domesticate” them, to join them to one's own belief system, to one's own pantheon, not necessarily at once instead of, but alongside or even above, the traditional gods. Primary religions are open to foreign influences and patterns, if the latter are regarded as acceptable.

Sometimes such openness was regarded by Christian eyes as blasphemous. When in the middle of the ninth century in Sweden the fate of the mission conducted by St Ansgar was in the balance, the pagan gods — who were threatened by a certain

²⁷ Although we know of several attempts by German missionaries and churchmen to master Slav languages, see for the southern Elbe region: K. Hengst 1992: 397–406. Concerning the northern Elbe region. Adam of Bremen and after him Helmold state that the Abodrite prince Gotschalk (1043–1066) himself delivered a sermon to his people in the Slav language „for he wished to explain [...] those questions which the bishops and priests had presented in a manner difficult to understand” (Helmold I, 20). The priest Bruno about the middle of the twelfth century knew „both the language and customs of the Slavs” (Helmold I, 84).

proportion of the natives accepting the message announced by the Christian missionaries — sent through their „spokesman” (who claimed to have been present at the meeting of the gods) the following message to the *thing* (gathering of the people):

„You have for a long time enjoyed our favour, and for a long time — due to our care your country has prospered in peace. You made sacrifices and the required offerings to us and your attentions were appreciated. Now, however, you refuse us your customary sacrifices and even rarer do you voluntarily make us offerings. What makes us even more angry, however, is that you have introduced the new [Christian] god and raised him up above us. If you wish to retain our favours you must increase the neglected sacrifices and bring us greater offerings. Do not accept the cult of another god, with his hostile teachings and do not serve him! If however, you require other gods, and we are not sufficient for you, we have unanimously agreed to accept among us Eric, who was once your king and that he would be counted as one of the gods”²⁸.

When in 1156, Henry the Lion the duke of Saxony urged the Slav princes to accept baptism, we are told „Niklot [d. 1160 — J.S.], the prince of the Abodrites answered him ‘Let God who is in heaven be your God, while you will be our god and that will be enough for us [John 14: 8]. You worship Him and we will worship you’, the duke however interrupted those blasphemous words”²⁹.

While in the first example, due to the domination of paganism in the middle of the ninth century, the „offer of the gods” was accepted, and the late king Eric, popular among the people was deified, and according to the gods’ wishes, the teachings of the Christian missionaries was rejected, in the middle of the twelfth century the similar offer of the Abodrite prince to one of the most powerful rulers of the German Empire had to be turned down.

It was probably with great surprise that the pagans received the refusal of the Christians to similar offers of a „compromise”. They probably could not understand the universalistic aspirations of the Christian God, who would not accept any other gods not only „above him” but also „besides” or even „under” Him.

And yet, there must often have been pagan-Christian religious syncretism in the transitional period. Even if the written sources were to fail us (which is not the case) archaeology would provide eloquent enough proof³⁰. Syncretism, which was naturally

²⁸ Rimbart, *Life of St Ansgar*, c. 26; *Quellen* 1978: 86–89.

²⁹ Helmold I, 84.

³⁰ The famous „royal” burial in a boat at Sutton Hoo near Rendlesham a royal power-centre of the kingdom of the East Angles (one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms), included in its contents both pagan elements (the helmet with religious images) and Christian (for example a sword with a representation of the Triumph of the Cross, connected with the story of Constantine the Great and two silver spoons with the names „Saulos” and „Paulos”). In the opinion of many investigators this may be the grave of Raedwald whose complicated relationship with the Christian religion is presented by the Venerable Bede who notes his syncretism (*Hist. eccl. gentis Anglorum* II, 15): *Christo seruire uideretur et diis; in eodem fano et altare haberet ad sacrificium Christi et arulam ad uictimas daemoniarum.* „Aus Sicht der Kirche verharrte er [Raedwald] zwischen Saulus und Paulus, aus Sicht des Heidentums setzte er einen religiösen Mischprozeß in Gang” (see: L.E. von Padberg 1995: 265–266). Maybe more evocative — for it records the wider social range of such syncretism is the finding of metal moulds for the casting of both crosses as well as Thor-hammer amulets.

evaluated by Christian observers (almost all of them churchmen!) very critically as a rejection of one of the basic tenets of the Faith, created no problems from the point of view of the pagans, who perceived the Christian God as just one of the gods, although more powerful than others. Even for those first Christians (ignorant of, or not understanding, or maybe not approving, the theological sanctions against polytheism, or perhaps being forced by a certain political situation to tolerate syncretism), situations where there may be altars in the same place (or at a certain distance from one another) dedicated to Odin and Christ, or Svarožic and Christ, need not necessarily have been unacceptable. In contrast to Christian authors who were only interested in presenting the triumph of their beliefs (that is, the effect of the confrontation with paganism), the latter was treated not as a subject of interest in its own right, but as the antithesis of Christianity and the work of the Devil. It was usually only in this spirit that it was sometimes attempted — if at all — to describe the cult that was to be replaced by Christianity. There is no doubt that in practice there must have been many situations of conflict, impossible to resolve according to the wishes of one of the sides, and situations requiring radical and unconventional resolutions, especially from the point of view of Christian orthodoxy³¹.

One somewhat typical situation was the marriage between a pagan ruler and a Christian princess of a neighbouring polity of from further afield³². As a rule the condition for allowing such a marriage to take place imposed by the Christian party was the assurance of the freedom of worship of the wife in the husband's court. This was in expectation of the conversion, under the influence of a pious wife and those around her, of the pagan ruler (who it sometimes happened was persuaded, and sometimes not). In practice, this must have meant that the wife was accompanied by Christian clergy and a retinue, for whom it was necessary to create conditions to organise a centre of the Christian cult in the residence of the ruler (which most often was a place which was at the same time a pagan cult site). In this way a „Christian enclave” was created in a pagan country. The Eucharist took place adjacent to sacrifices to pagan gods, and both sides had to tolerate this situation for a shorter or longer time. An apparently incomprehensible phenomenon observed frequently by contemporary authors is a schism in the ruling family, as the father accepted Christianity, but his son or sons remained faithful to the old beliefs. The fact that they remained in the father's court however showed that they were not acting against the clear wishes of their father, although it must have been obvious that such a situation could only have led to conflict. It is difficult not to see such situations as expressions of some form by which the ruler secured himself against the consequences of his conversion and an expression of his care for the dynasty and the wish to protect its future as it were against all possibilities. If in the future the supporters of paganism were to gain power, the dynasty would have

³¹ These examples are cited in the work of L.E. von Padberg 1995: 249–278. Interestingly similar cases concerning the manner of Christianising of Iceland are presented in the work of K. Düwel 1978: 249–275.

³² See the monograph of C. Nolte 1995.

a „ready” candidate for power. Besides this, the eventual aid of the pagan gods may still be required, but they would lose power if the whole dynasty rejected their cult.

Further situations provoking a conflict of loyalty and orientation were military failures (especially at the hands of a pagan opponent) or natural disaster which affected the people and the ruler which had decided to accept the new belief. These failures in the opinion of contemporary observers raised questions about the legitimacy of Christianity (had the rejection of the old („one’s own”) gods been worth risking or indeed provoked their revenge?). These situations created ideal conditions for the activation of forces of the old pagan order of things. Fear of the revenge of the old gods, angered by the appearance of Christian missionaries, was a fairly general phenomenon. According to Bruno of Querfurt (*Second Life of St Adalbert*, c. 25), the Prussians chased the missionaries off their lands declaring that „because of such people our soil will not give a harvest, trees will not bear fruit, new animals will not be born and the old ones die”.

The occurrence of possible conflicts was not always avoided by a situation when a ruler allowed a missionary to operate within his state, but did not unequivocally support the mission and put no pressure on his people to accept the new beliefs. The possibilities of the effective operation of Christian missionaries was usually restricted, and the pagan priests had many opportunities to conduct an effective campaign against them (let us recall the „offer” of the Swedish gods mentioned a bit earlier), even if by the proposition of adding Christ to the existing pantheon.

VII

It seems that scholarship has not always seen with adequate clarity yet another area where there may have been a conflict between Christian and pagan value systems. This affected different areas of Europe to varying degree. This concerns the degree to which pagan cult was often connected with regional centres of power, and power was created by „aristocratic circles regarding themselves and regarded as close to the world of the gods”. For these circles, sometimes in their own opinion and that of society as a whole seen as descended from the gods themselves, the idea of a God/Man coming from the common people and who died in disgrace, by crucifixion — a death worthy of a slave — may have seemed very provocative, something highly unseemly. In addition, the acceptance of Christianity automatically implied (in the framework of the existing concepts) a break of the highly important links with the ancestors. An excellent witness of these moral conflicts is provided by the anonymous (from the eighth or beginning of the ninth century) *Life of St Wulfram of Sens (Vita Vulframni)*, describing how close he came to baptising the known enemy of Christianity and the Franks — the Frisian prince Radbod (d. 719):

„and when this Radbod was ready to accept Baptism, he asked the holy Bishop Wulfram [...] where one would find the large number of kings, princes and nobles of the Frisian people: in the heavenly region which he [the bishop] had promised he would

find himself if only he would believe and be baptised, or [...] damned in Hell. The Blessed Wulfram answered him 'do not be deluded noble prince; God has already decided the number of his chosen ones. Your predecessors, rulers of the Frisian people who died without the sacrament of baptism have certainly been sentenced to damnation. He who believes in Christ and is baptised will be joyous with Christ for centuries'. When he heard this the unbelieving prince, who had already started to enter the font, removed — it is said — his foot from the basin and declared that he could not reject the chance of companionship of his predecessors as rulers of the Frisians in order to sit in the Kingdom of Heaven with a small group of paupers. For this reason he preferred not to believe so easily in the new faith but rather would remain faithful to that those beliefs which the whole nation of the Frisians had long preserved"³³.

The Bishop thought he was using an effective persuasive argument (the danger of sharing the fate of pagan ancestors), but the proud Frisian leader treated it as an insult, placing the need to maintain the sacral link with the ancestors above his eternal salvation together with „the Christian paupers”.

VIII

In the two or three centuries before the year 1000, and later in the slightly slower expansion of the Christian states on a local scale, as a result (among other things) of the expansion of the Vikings, the process of the confrontation of paganism and Christianity in Europe became more intense. Christian expansion northwards and to the east was able to oppose a „pagan expansion” to the south and west. The latter was unable, however, to prevent the spread of Christianity, but took on in some areas of the pagan world (for example in the region of the Elbe and among the Baltic peoples) an unexpected power of resistance and an aggressive stance which was so shocking for the Christian world. Positions became entrenched and the pagans, attacked and pushed-back, adopting certain elements derived from Christianity³⁴, in order to survive. They developed a higher form of organisation of the cult (temples, images, henotheism, „warrior gods”, and a theocracy of priests), which demonstrate not only a considerable degree of resistance, but also — in certain situations — expansion. They also demonstrate, at least in certain milieux, the conceptual attractiveness of some of these

³³ MGH SSrerMer V, 668.

³⁴ There are various approaches in science concerning the degree of the influences of Christianity on late paganism. H. Lowmianski for example, in his fundamental study *Religia Słowian i jej upadek* (w. VI–XII), Warszawa 1979, regards the degree of influence as considerable. He regards, among other things, henotheism the personalisation of gods, their polycephalism and even the characteristics of certain gods (Trzygłów — a reflection of the Holy Trinity?, Świętowit — St Wit?, Tjarnoglofi [a god mentioned in one of the Nordic sources] — „Crowned with Thorns”, and thus Christ?) as possible results of the influences of Christianity on Polabian paganism (See: S. Rosik 1995, as well as the dissertation of that author entitled: *Interpretacja chrześcijańska religii pogańskich Słowian w świetle kronik niemieckich XI–XII w.* (Thietmar, Adam z Bremy, Helmold), Wrocław 1998 (printed: Wrocław 2000).

characteristics of Christianity. When at the beginning of the seventh century (and thus at the very beginning of the history of European missionary activity), St Armand attempted to preach the Gospel to certain (Carinthian or Danubian area?) Slavs, nobody wanted to hear him, but at the same time nobody was concerned to stop him by putting him to death. Several centuries later this dispassion no longer existed and was replaced by hostility. The „peaceful” missions (as St Ansgar tried to accomplish in Scandinavia, St Wojciech (Adalbert) and St Bruno of Querfurt on the south shore of the Baltic, or other less well-known but equally unfortunate would-be missionaries such as the Irishman [Scot] Jan, bishop of Mecklenburg sacrificed in 1066 to the god Svarožic in Rethra-Riedegost, or Bernard the Spaniard — mocked and flogged and driven out of Pomerania at the beginning of the twelfth century) failed to produce any results. The future of the missions was in the hands of such people as St Otto of Bamberg — the missionary of the Pomeranians at the beginning of the twelfth century, or Christian — the missionary of the Prussians in the thirteenth century, who were able to merge missionary zeal with good organisation and powerful support.

Translated by Paul Barford

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