

Perception of Christianity by the Pagan Polabian Slavs

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The article explores the question of how the pagan Polabian Slavs could perceive Christianity at the time of its expansion to the East. An attempt is made here to distance ourselves from our Christian background, and to analyse how other people can see beliefs that we often have no doubts about ourselves - a difficult task indeed. The article looks at how the ordinary people saw this new religion and concludes that their general perception of Christianity was negative. It shows that such an attitude was due to the association of Christianity with imperial subjugation, economic exploitation and destruction of the old ways of life. What the new religion sometimes offered was hardly acceptable and understood by the Polabian society. Also, the article explains why Christian conversion gained ground much quicker with the members of the Polabian Upper class and the rulers.

The parts of Europe that were Christianized at a relatively late stage, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, were the lands of the westernmost Slavs known as the Polabian Slavs. These people dwelled in modern Eastern Germany roughly between the Elbe-Saale and Oder-Nisse rivers. Most publications dealing with the Christianization of these people looked at the issue of Christianization of this land from the Empire's point of view, focusing on the advance of Christianity into the region. At the same time most of the scholars from Western and Central Europe who analyzed the relationship between Christianity and pagan Polabian Slavs were schooled in the Western tradition. In consequence, often being a Christian themselves or coming from a Christian background and culture, they perceived this relationship from a Christian point of view - a view no doubt affected by a conviction of theological and ideological superiority and rightness of Christianity. Therefore, in most cases they overlooked an important and interesting aspect of this relationship, that is the true perception of Christianity by the pagan Polabian Slavs.

To analyze how pagan Polabian Slavs perceived Christianity is not an easy task simply because of the nature of available sources. Chronicles, annals and documents of that period were written exclusively by church people, who portrayed the Slavic religion and the pagan Slavs as evil or at best being at serious error. Also, it is very likely that medieval authors in their unshakable conviction of rightness did not pay much attention to the opinions of heathens. Nonetheless, the available sources provide a sufficient amount of information to provide a general reconstruction of the Polabian Slavs' views and attitudes toward the new religion.

The westernmost Polabian Slavs must have been familiar with new religion from at least the beginning of the ninth century, since the first Carolingian push across the Elbe and Saale. However, the organized Christianization of the region did not begin in earnest

until a large part of the Polabian territory had been subjugated by the Empire in the tenth century. The attempts to convert the Polabian Slavs must have gained momentum after the foundation of bishoprics in Brandenburg and Havelberg in 948, and in Oldenburg in 968.

The close cooperation of the Church with the imperial authorities, together with numerous Church estates and episcopal tithes collected on the subjugated Polabian territories, made Christianity and the Church inseparable from imperial yoke. This attitude is manifested in the words apparently said by a pagan priest at Szczecin during the apostasy that took place there shortly after the first mission of Otto of Bamberg departed in 1124. The priest called the Christian God a "Teutonic god".¹ Although Ebbo did not witness this himself, and it may not have taken place in the circumstances described, he was no doubt well informed about the Szczecinians' perception of and attitude towards Christianity. Therefore, Christianity was perceived not only as a foreign and aggressive religion, but as a vehicle of political subjugation and a mechanism to deprive them of personal freedom, and the Christian God as a sort of tribal German deity. Medieval Christianity, especially in the east, was also a different religion than it is now. Most of the clergy behaved like warriors and landlords rather than like priests. Popes or bishops leading military campaigns, taking part in combat with swords in their hands, or looting the civilian population of an enemy were not rare scenes. This is well attested in the eleventh century chronicle of bishop Thietmar of Merseburg. Thietmar, himself a bishop, sanctioned the brutal military conquest of the Polabian Slavs.² Therefore the majority of the Polabian Slavs have seen Christianity not only as a new religion with a new powerful God but also, if not sometimes exclusively, as a vehicle of the Empire's political domination.

This was clearly manifested during the 983 Polabian revolt that pushed the Empire again beyond Elbe and Saale. The Slavs destroyed bishoprics at Brandenburg and Havelberg and committed terrible atrocities on captured priests. Even the dead were not spared and the body of deceased bishop Dodilo of Brandenburg was desecrated.³ Similar anti-Christian excesses took place in 1066 during another Polabian uprising that swept Christianity and the Christian Obodrite ruler Gotschalk. Most spectacular was the capture and martyrdom of bishop John of Mecklenburg, but it was not an isolated incident.⁴

All these accounts leave no doubt that a majority of the Polabian population had a negative and hostile attitude toward Christianity. However, scholars rarely look beyond this obvious statement and explore why such an attitude prevailed. At best, the already mentioned argument that Christianity was perceived as a vehicle of imperial subjugation is given as an explanation. No doubt such a perception played an important part, but such generalization creates a grossly simplified picture.

¹ Ebbo, III.1.

² War-like bishops: TM, I.4 and II.23 and II.27; and Thietmar sanctioning the conquest: TM, I.16; A general overview on medieval clergy: F. Seibt, 'The Religious Problems', in G. Barraclough, ed., *Eastern and Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 103 and 107; and R. Collins, *Early Medieval Europe* (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1991), p. 280.

³ TM, III.17-18; and HB, I.16.

⁴ AB, III. 50-51 ; and HB, I.22.

Perception of christian teaching

A very important, and often overlooked, reason why the majority of the Polabian Slavs resisted Christianization is that they did not find a new religion an attractive alternative. They hardly understood it and did not wish to accept an alien and strange philosophy and theology, turning their world upside down.

The henotheistic or polytheistic religions, unlike monotheism, show a general inclination towards tolerance. When there are numerous gods, one god more does not make much difference. The gods of the other people are as real as their own. Sometimes other deities attract veneration of various different people due to the belief that they possess special qualities or abilities. Sometimes the high standing of particular people attracts veneration for their deity from others. Such was the case of Sventovit of Arkona, a major deity of the Ranove of Rügen island. According to Helmold of Bosau, tributes, or rather offerings, were sent to Arkona from all around Polabian Slavdom including the Obodrite district of Wagrien.⁵ It is worth noting that the cult also achieved recognition among some non-Slavic people, at least on one occasion. In the twelfth century rich offerings were made to Sventovit by a king of Denmark, Svein III Eiriksson, called Gray Heath or the Scorcher (1146 - 1157), himself a Christian.⁶

The general tolerance of the pagan Polabian Slavs was confirmed by Adam of Bremen who in his description of Wolin stated as follows:

*and there live in it Slavs and many other peoples, Greeks and barbarians. For even alien Saxons also have the right to reside there on equal terms with others, provided only that while they sojourn there they do not openly profess Christianity. Otherwise, so far as morals and hospitality are concerned, a more honorable or kindlier folk can not be found.*⁷

This shows that the Volinane were tolerant towards the religions of other people and objected only to missionary activities in their principality, a level of tolerance towards others never shown by contemporary Christianity. Similar cases were reported from other pagan people of the region. For example, sometime in the 930's Unni, archbishop of Hamburg, went to the Swedish port of Birka to preach Christianity. He was allowed to do so although the local rulers remained pagan. There were practically no obstacles to missionaries preaching the Gospel in Norway and Sweden in the tenth and eleventh centuries. There is evidence that during the eleventh century the Swedes worshipped pagan deities alongside the Christian God. In the same period pagan Swedes allowed bishops to participate in the *thing* (the Germanic tribal assembly).⁸

There were, of course, cases of hostility toward Christians, but they were usually caused by missionaries' lack of understanding of the local culture, traditions and beliefs, as well as the zeal of many missionaries which made them perceive non-Christian cults as evil and needing to be destroyed as soon as the mission began. In consequence, on many occasions the mission began with the destruction of cult sites and objects. Practically only bishop Otto of Bamberg had a sensitive, clever and balanced approach to the pagan Slavs and

⁵ HB, I. 6 and I.52, II. 108.

⁶ Svein offerings to Sventovit: SG, XIV. 39 (p. 496).

⁷ AB, II.22 (19).

⁸ AB, I. .61(63) and II. 36(34) and IV. 21 and AB, Appendix, *The Britonic Islands*.

their religion. For example, he gave only minor penance to prince Vratislav of Pomerania and his nobles for practicing Slavic religion⁹ and after the destruction of Triglav's temple he ordered the division of the temple treasury among the people of Szczecin,¹⁰ most likely to the local nobility, to diffuse anger at the sacrilegious destruction of the shrine. Nonetheless, even he received a hostile and unfriendly reception on his first arrival at Wolin in 1127.¹¹

Most of the other missionaries, zealous, intolerant and insensitive, were the worst enemy of the message they preached and even themselves, as the way they conducted their missions often achieved an effect opposite to what they intended. How the missionary conduct themselves can be demonstrated with some examples: Slavic sacred places and temples were desecrated and destroyed as soon as missionaries and the clergy had a chance. A holy grove in Sorbian lands was cut down at the order of bishop Wigbert of Merseburg at the turn of the eleventh century.¹² A Spanish missionary, bishop Bernard, attempted to destroy a holy pagan image at Wolin in 1123 and was rescued by pagan priests from the hands of outraged people. After a meeting of pagan priests and Wolin's *seniores* he was expelled from the town.¹³ Bishop Gerold of Lübeck on his visit to Wagrien himself destroyed a sacred enclosure and statues in the oaken holy grove dedicated to the god Prove in the middle of the twelfth century.¹⁴

Missionaries behaved in a similar fashion throughout the entire central and northern European region. The missionary Egino of the eleventh century, for example, desecrated a holy place by destroying the idol of Frey (Frikko) in Danish Scania.¹⁵ Around the same time an English missionary, Wulfred, went to Sweden and cut with an axe an idol of Thor at Uppsala sanctuary. He was killed for doing that by angry Swedes. It is symptomatic that Adam of Bremen praises him for doing so.¹⁶ Similarly, Saint Vojtěch, or Adalbert as he appears in Western texts, who was martyred by the Old Prussians during his mission in 997, was not killed immediately after crossing the Prussian frontier, and his two associates were spared and later ransomed.¹⁷ It is worth noting that a century later Adam of Bremen stated, in his chronicle, that the Old Prussians were an extremely hospitable people but did not allow Christians into their sacred places.¹⁸ Most likely in his missionary zeal Vojtěch desecrated some sacred Prussian place and was then killed by the local people. It is worth noting that the *Passio Sancti Adalberti* describes the beheading of Adalbert as the execution of some sort of sentence, suggesting that he was tried and condemned by an Old Prussian tribal assembly.¹⁹ This resembles the case of the two Bohemian monks who were tried by the Veletian Union tribal assembly and beheaded. It appears that some charges were laid

⁹ MP, II.3.

¹⁰ MP, III.12.

¹¹ MP, II.5.

¹² TM, VI.37.

¹³ Ebbo, I.1.

¹⁴ HB, I.84.

¹⁵ AB, IV. 9.

¹⁶ AB, II. LXII(60).

¹⁷ J. Strzelczyk, *Apostołowie Europy* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1997), pp. 187-190.

¹⁸ AB, IV. XVIII.

¹⁹ M. Maisel, 'Prawo karne Prusów', in J. Ochmański, ed., *Słowianie w Dziejach Europy* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 1974), pp. 127-129.

against them and they were not killed by someone on an impulse.²⁰ It is not difficult to understand, that from the point of view of the local pagan people, whether Slav, Scandinavian or Old Prussian, damage or destruction of their idols or other sacred places or objects was perceived as sacrilege, and often punished by death. Therefore, the hostility and intolerance toward the Slavic religion prompted a hostile response among the Polabian Slavs toward Christianity.

Moreover, the concept of monotheism was alien and strange to the pagan Polabians. A single god jealously demanding exclusive devotion and worship was conceptually unpalatable in the world of a multiplicity of gods and spirits characterized by general religious tolerance. A world, where gods of other people, although not their own and not worshipped were as real as their own deities. The Polabian Slavs did not comprehend why exclusiveness was demanded and after a forceful conversion, as evidence from Szczecin shows, they worshipped old gods alongside the Christian God.²¹ The Polabians did not negate the existence of the Christian god but simply added yet another deity to their old pantheon, albeit strange and alien. It is worth noting that a similar attitude was observed among Scandinavians. During the raid on Courland, Swedish warriors consulted through divination various gods of their own to gain their divine support for the campaign. Apparently the outcomes of these divinations were interpreted as unfavourable. On someone's suggestion they performed one more rite for a Christian God. This time the outcome was favourable and they succeeded in their enterprise.²² This account clearly shows that for non-Christian Swedes the Christian God was yet another deity that existed and although not their own, it was as real for them as Odin or Thor.

Against this background come significant theological differences that put pagan Polabian Slavs worlds apart from Christian clergy and missionaries, and their teaching. Unlike the Christian God, Slavic gods did not watch people constantly, forever judging, punishing or rewarding every single deed of human beings. The Slavic rituals, ceremonies and offerings to the gods or spirits were seen as a human contribution to maintaining the universal order and securing the gods' support in their earthly affairs.²³

The Slavic perception of the gods' relation with people and their actions can be explored with the three following examples. According to Helmold of Bossau:

*They admit oaths with the greatest reluctance; for among the Slavs to swear is, as it were, to forswear oneself, because the avenging wrath of gods.*²⁴

The Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea wrote:

For they (the Slavs) believe that one god...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 beginning a war, they make a promise that, if they escape, they will straightway make a sacrifice to the god in return for their life; and if they escape, they sac-

²⁰ AB, III.Scholium 71.

²¹ Herbord, III.16; and Ebbo, III.1.

²² Rimbert, *Life of Anskar*, 19.

²³ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno Filmowe, 1982), pp. 159-168.

²⁴ HB, I. 84.

*rifice just what they have promised, and consider that their safety has been bought with this same sacrifice.*²⁵

And Helmold of Bossau reported that they believed in:

*one god in the heavens ruling over the others. They (the Slavs) hold that he, the all powerful one, looks only after heavenly matters; that the others, discharging the duties assigned to them in obedience to him, proceeded from his blood.*²⁶

All three accounts indicate that for the Slavs, their gods were not much concerned with the conduct of the people, and according to one author an otiose god remained totally indifferent to humanity. Neither did they impose any moral or ethical values or obligations upon people. Morality was a matter of clan and tribal tradition, where the rules, laws and customs were sanctioned by social forces. Gods could act benevolently or give favours to people if they were pleased with offerings or sacrifices. They could also be vengeful if annoyed or offended. Breaking oaths or promises made in the name of a god was personal, an offence to the deity himself or herself. But if a matter did not concern them personally the gods remained indifferent. It appears that Slavic gods were not absolute, like the Christian God. They were not omnipotent, omniscient and eternal. They were attributed with superhuman and supernatural strength and abilities but were prone to human weaknesses and emotions. We lack detailed evidence about them, but the Slavic gods were no doubt much closer in their nature and behaviour to the well known Greek gods of Olympus or even more the Nordic gods of Scandinavian sagas. Consequently, sin in a Christian sense, that is breaking some universal and absolute divine rules, was an alien concept to the Slavs, and as a matter of fact to most of the other European non-Christian peoples. In effect the notion of guilt and eternal punishment for bad deeds during one's earthly life were absent in Slavonic religion.²⁷ Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that these people hardly understood such alien theological teaching. Neither would they find it an attractive alternative to their own beliefs.

In addition, some other Christian concepts such as the notion of an almighty God letting himself be killed, rather than destroying his enemies, would be hard to comprehend by the Polabian Slavs and would be perceived as a senseless act. In a society where every able male was a warrior if the need arose, it could not have been otherwise. Some indication that Christians were laughed at and ridiculed is supported by the way the pagan people of Wolin saw those who converted at Kamień and at Wolin.²⁸

The pagan Slavs, including Polabians, were polygenic as attested in sources, a common practice among many other non-Christian northern and central Europeans.²⁹ The demand for monogamous relationships in a patriarchal society where there were always more females than males could not have found common acceptance out of conviction, particu-

²⁵ Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919) VII.XIV.23.

²⁶ HB, I.84.

²⁷ H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek* (Warszawa; P.W.N., 1985 ed.), pp. 164-165 and 358-363.

²⁸ Ebbo, II.5: (The Volinane) ... *solum deridere conversos, sed et sancto pontific eiusque comitibus derogare coeperunt...Chaminenses (people of Kamień) vero ineptos patriae delatores, qui, patriis legibus abdicatis extraneae gentis sequi niterentur errorem.*

²⁹ AB, IV.21, Schollium 132(137).

larly when there was no place in that society for single women. It is worth noting that, during the reign of Boleslaw the Brave of Poland in the early eleventh century, those who did not observe the Lenten fast had their teeth knocked out, and those caught by authorities committing adultery or being promiscuous were mutilated.³⁰ Despite the fact that these punishments were most likely rarely carried out, such draconian methods of punishment indicate that the strict restrictions forced upon peoples lives by Christianity were neither observed nor accepted by the people fifty years after the conversion. Therefore, it can be postulated that the imposition of the Christian obsession with sex and restriction on food, especially red meat, during Lent and some other Christian holidays must have been seen as senseless restrictions on life's pleasures. This attitude finds reflection in the alleged rejection of Latin Christianity by Vladimir I of Kiev on the basis of strict fasts and other restrictions.³¹ Although the entire narrative of the story about Vladimir choosing a religion is most likely fiction, no doubt it reflects the attitudes of pre-Christian Slavs to certain aspects of Christianity. There is no reason to believe that it was much different among the Polabian Slavs.

Furthermore, Slavic religious celebrations were usually joyful festivities and culminated in communal banquets, libations, singing and dancing. Many festivals, for example the summer solstice celebration in June (in some areas known as Kupala) or spring celebrations ended up in an orgy.³² These pre-Christian festivities were in sharp contrast with the guilt and fear inducing Christian services offered as an alternative. We cannot easily find this attitude toward and perception of Christianity in the sources as they were exclusively written by churchmen who were ignorant of Slavic beliefs and perhaps were reluctant to fully describe the Slavic impression of this new faith. Nonetheless, some interesting information was recorded. For example, Bishop Bernard was perceived by the people of Wolin as insane and they advised him to preach to fish and birds instead.³³ Also after conversion of the people of Kamień in Pomerania and the first arrival of Otto of Bamberg at Wolin:

*they not only ridiculed the converts, but also offended saintly bishop and his companions. They have called bishop a sorcerer and a fraud, and inhabitants of Kamień ludicrous renegades of their country.*³⁴

Besides, Christianity's lack of appeal to the Polabian Slavs can also be illustrated by the fact that Otto of Bamberg preached at Szczecin for around two months and it practically bore no results whatsoever, and the conversion took place only after a threat of military intervention by Bolesław the Wry-Mouth of Poland.³⁵ If to this we add that, with the exception of Otto of Bamberg, Eastern German missionaries and clergy were often poorly

³⁰ TM, VIII.2.

³¹ RPC, Year 986.

³² H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian...*, pp. 163-164 and 234; and in S. Urbańczyk, *Dawni Słowianie: Wiara i kult* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1991), p.178. Also confirmed in other sources, ex., Joannis Długossi, *Historiae Polonicae*, in H. Samsonowicz, ed., *Polska Jana Długosza* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), Book IV, pp. 474-475.

³³ Ebbo, II.1. *Iste insanus et desperatus est.*

³⁴ MP, II.5: *nec solum deridere conversos, sed et sancto pontifiti eiusque comitibus derogare coeperunt. Episcopum quidem magnum et impostorem vocare, Chaminenses vero ineptos patriae delatores.*

³⁵ MP, II.11-13.

educated, in the eyes of pagan Polabian Slavs Christianity did not appear in any way superior or attractive. Hence, their later conversion was in most cases enforced and backed by some strong power, such as that of the Empire or kings of Poland.

What finally convinced them to convert was not the preaching of a strange religion by missionaries but rather political and military strength shown by those who worshipped the alien God. The Western Church was no doubt an impressive institution for the Polabian Slavs. Nothing, even Arkona temple on Rügen island, could match the glamour, elaboration and dignity of a Western Church which must have made a great impression upon them. It is most likely that many people who converted were convinced that the strange new god was more powerful than the old ones and deserved veneration too. Some others, perhaps the majority, conformed under pressure simply seeing no other alternative. As commanded they were baptized and attended masses at church, but could hardly be called true Christians converts. It is worth mentioning here a certain incident reported by Thietmar of Merseburg about some of the Sorbs in Merseburg diocese saying “u kriv olša” during prayers instead of “Kyrie eleison”, which meant in Slavic “alder in the bushes”, and at the end adding “says so (bishop) Bozo”.³⁶ This incident shows that for the Polabian Slavs this new and alien religion of the conquerors was far from being understood, or perhaps the subdued people showed their defiance in this way. Perhaps they were mocking the priest, taking into consideration that the name of bishop Bozo resembles the Slavic word for God in the vocative case. Whatever the case, it demonstrates how wide a theological gap there was between the old beliefs and Christianity. No doubt there were numerous genuine individual conversions, but it is impossible to determine the number of true converts. Whatever the case, it seems to be safe to assume that in the initial phase of Christianization they must have been in a minority. Therefore, it is not difficult to realize that true conversion of the Polabian Slavs was a lengthy process that took many generations before the population there became truly Christian.

It has to be admitted that Christianity could be found as an attractive option by the pagans in certain respects. The new religion offered a clear explanation of what awaits people after their death, unlike the rather hazy notion of an afterlife in many pagan religions. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the Christian promise of eternal life would be an attractive option for many people. Nonetheless, the fierce Polabian resistance to a new faith and the long process of conversion, dragging on through many generations, points to the opposite. We can only speculate that this message was lost somewhere due to the aggressive nature of Christianity, as well as its association with foreign political domination and economic exploitation.

Religion and Politics

The negative attitude and hostility towards Christianity expressed by the majority of Polabian Slavs was of course not the only attitude that existed. It has to be remembered that medieval Christianity had another dimension and appeal, other than a purely religious one. Besides being a religious belief and set doctrines it was a “package” that brought access to classical culture and writing,³⁷ as well as ready-to-implement administrative models

³⁶ TM, II.37.

³⁷ R. Bartlett, ‘Reflection on paganism and Christianity in Medieval Europe’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1998, No. 101, p. 56.

for contemporary states. The new religion sanctified a ruler and provided an ideological framework for the integration of various people into a more uniform political and ethnic integration. And, as was pointed out by Peter Skalnik, it was one of the elements characteristic of early states.³⁸ The concept of Western Christendom itself was a powerful ideological and political philosophy. The Empire was the dominant political force in Europe and was often perceived as Western Christendom itself. In this context any ruler in Central and Eastern Europe could not be treated equally or even taken seriously without converting to Christianity. Hence in reality, conversion was the requirement for getting international (European) recognition. It was not surprising that many Polabian rulers were not reluctant to accept the new faith and in most cases they and the upper class were first to convert and became vigorous supporters of the new faith and new order. Among these were Wyszak and Domaslaw of Szczecin or Cieslaw and Jaromir of Rügen, and many others. Perhaps for some other people, opening their society up to the wider, more civilized world of the Empire and Christianity might have had some appeal.

In the following case study, we will look into the Christianization of the Obodrites, as their history is the best known among the Polabian Slavs. However, it has to be acknowledged that similar developments took place between the tenth and twelfth centuries at Havelberg, Brandenburg and some other places.

The Obodrites must have encountered Christianity as early as the second half of the eighth century when contacts with the Franks became more common. The first Obodrite of importance to convert was the exiled prince Sławomir, who converted to Christianity in 821, prior to his attempt to recover the Obodrite principality.³⁹ There is also some evidence that in the 830's the archbishop of Hamburg, Anskar, schooled some Slavic youths as future missionaries.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, if any mission was directed at the Obodrites, there is no evidence for it, neither did it produce any significant results.

There is no evidence of any serious attempts for Christianization in the region until the first half of the tenth century when a tributary relationship was forced upon the Obodrites by the Empire. According to the Widukind, an Obodrite prince whose name is unknown accepted Christianity in 931.⁴¹ Not long after, according to Helmold of Bosau, the Eastern Obodrite chieftain Billug married the sister of a German bishop, Wago of Oldenburg. The marriage must have taken place in the late 960's or early 970's as the story of a later quarrel between Billug and bishop Wago belongs to the period of 973-983. Their daughter Hidica became an abbess in a Mecklenburg convent.⁴² The person of Billug is controversial and hard to identify. For this period the accuracy of Helmold's account is dubious and his chronology confused. Nevertheless, whoever Billug was he was definitely a Christian if he could marry a bishop's sister.

It is worth noting, that the church of St. Peter's was founded at Mecklenburg and a nunnery attached to it sometime between 968 and 973, during the times of bishop Egward

³⁸ F. Heer, *Charlemagne and his World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), pp. 146-14 and 155; and P. Skalnik, 'The Early State as a Process', in H.J.M. Claessen & P. Skalnik, *The Early State* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), pp. 606-607.

³⁹ ARF, Year 821.

⁴⁰ I. H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings, Scandinavia and Europe: AD 700 - 1100*, p. 135.

⁴¹ Widukind, III.50.

⁴² HB, Book I.13-14.

of Oldenburg.⁴³ At that time Mecklenburg was a major Eastern Obodrite centre, and although in a tributary relationship with the Empire, it was under the firm control of prince Mstivoy (reigned c. 966/967 - after 995). Sometime around 980, the same Mstivoy asked for the hand of the niece of the Saxon duke Bernhard Billung. It appears that she was promised to him as he and the Obodrite troops participated in the imperial Italian campaign of 981. Although the marriage did not take place, for whatever reasons, the whole story indicates that Mstivoy must have been a Christian to have been considered. Besides, Thietmar of Merseburg mentioned a priest Awiko who was Mstivoy's chaplain in the period after 983.⁴⁴ This evidence puts in question the anti-Christian character of the Slavic uprising of 983, at least in the case of the Obodrites, because the same Mstivoy, no doubt Christian before and after 983, led the rebellion, sacked Hamburg and pillaged Saxony.

Other members of the Nakonid dynasty were also Christians. Mstislav, who succeeded Mstivoy, allowed the bishopric of Oldenburg to be re-established around 1013/4.⁴⁵ He was driven out from his principality in 1018 because, he "refused to give up Christianity", according to Helmold of Bosau.⁴⁶ For the same event Thietmar gives a description of anti-Christian excesses including burning churches and killing priests by the Obodrites and a supporting host of the pagan Slavic Veleti.⁴⁷ However, the exclusively anti-Christian character of this event is doubtful. Mstislav was succeeded by Pribignev, who was regarded by Saxo Grammaticus as a good Christian.⁴⁸ Pribignev's son, Gottschalk, was "being instructed in learned disciplines at Lüneburg", at St. Michael's monastery⁴⁹, most likely to become a priest. This shows that pro-Christian policies were continued by Pribignev after the deposition of Mstislav. Besides, it is worth noting that Pribignev was very likely Mstivoy's son, and most likely the events of 1018 were a civil war caused by some dynastic quarrel. As for the anti-Christian excesses, there is no evidence that the bishopric of Oldenburg was affected in 1018. Certainly some excesses must have taken place, but they may well have been caused by economic exploitation by the German speaking clergy. Pribignev received some "bad press" from Adam of Bremen, who called him a "bad Christian". This however could be easily explained by Adam's biased view. There is evidence that Pribignev was reluctant to pay an episcopal tithes and rarely delivered any payments.⁵⁰ For that reason Adam of Bremen, a member of the German clergy at the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, could see him as a "bad Christian".

After the assassination of Pribignev the Obodrites were ruled by Ratibor (1031-1043), possibly a member of the Nakonid dynasty, although this is not clear. However, according to Adam of Bremen he was a Christian and allowed Christianity to be preached during his reign.⁵¹

⁴³ HB, Book I.12.

⁴⁴ AB, II.42; and HB I.16; and on the priest Awiko, see: TM, Book III.18.

⁴⁵ HB, I.18.

⁴⁶ AB, II.43(41) and Scholium 30(28); and HB I.16. Adam & Helmold said it was Mstivoy but they were mistaken. Thietmar for whom the events were contemporary stated correctly that it was Mstislav: TM VIII.5(4).

⁴⁷ TM, VIII.5(4).

⁴⁸ AB, II.66(64); and SG, X. 17.

⁴⁹ HB, I.19.

⁵⁰ HB, I.18.

⁵¹ AB, II.71(69) and 79(75).

Gottschalk, Pribignev's son, recovered his domain in 1043. As it was said before he spent some time at the monastery of Lüneburg, and this strongly influenced his internal and foreign policy. His monastic background gave him an education and broadened his horizons beyond his peripheral principality. He was the first Obodrite ruler who fully realized the political implication of conversion and the international position of the Empire. According to Helmold of Bosau, during his reign Gottschalk vigorously promoted the Christianization of his principality and on many occasions he personally explained the Christian doctrines to his subjects.⁵² To his advantage the see of Hamburg-Bremen was occupied during his reign by archbishop Adalbert who, unlike most of the contemporary German high clergy, was a missionary in the true Christian spirit. Helmold of Bosau stated that two new Obodrite bishoprics at Mecklenburg and Ratzeburg which were established in 1059/60, besides that of Oldenburg, were the archbishop's initiative without the Emperor's involvement.⁵³ Gottschalk was on very good terms with Adalbert, and in this context it is reasonable to postulate that he was instrumental in the foundation of those two new sees.

On a political stage, it seems that by peaceful Christianization Gottschalk aimed to achieve international recognition for his principality. It appears that his further plans were to form a fully independent duchy, associated with the German Empire. Ecclesiastical, he must have aimed for links with the Empire in a similar way to the Bohemia of the Pøemyslid dynasty.⁵⁴ There is also the other possibility that his further aims were to establish an independent archdiocese, as in the case of Piast's Poland. A lack of direct evidence allows us only to speculate, but it is interesting to note that the first bishop of Mecklenburg, John, was not German but Irish. Also, the first bishop of Ratzeburg was not a German. He was called Aristo of Jerusalem and it has been postulated by Francis Tschan that he might have been a Greek.⁵⁵ Taking into consideration Gottschalk's excellent relationship with the archbishop of Hamburg, it could be speculated that he played an important role in the consecration of a new bishops. If so, it would have been an attempt to reduce the influence of the German clergy in the region and possibly a first step toward the independence of the Obodrite church. It appears that in his plans, Gottschalk counted if not on the support of, then at least on being accepted by the emperors Henry III and Henry IV. Both those German rulers were not very happy with the growing strength and separatism of the Saxon duke.⁵⁶ They would probably accept the formation of a duchy loyal to the imperial crown, which would counterbalance the Saxon ambitions.

The year 1066 resulted in the assassination of Gottschalk and the destruction of all three Obodrite bishoprics. This was probably the only truly pagan rebellion in Obodrite history. During the reign of Krut (1066 - c. 1093), unrelated to the Nakonids, Christianity suffered a serious setback. However, it is unlikely that it was totally wiped out. Its practice was probably allowed, but it lost its official status as an official religion.

Gottschalk's son Henry seized the Obodrite principality around 1093. He reverted to the policies of his father and promoted Christianity. His commitment to Christianity is

⁵² AB, III.19(18); and SG, X.17; and HB, I.20.

⁵³ HB, Book I.22.

⁵⁴ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1983), p. 211.

⁵⁵ HB, I.22, and AB, III.21(20) and F.J. Tschan in HB, p. 96n.

⁵⁶ F. Dvornik, *The Slavs: Their Early History and Civilisation* (Boston: American Academy of Arts and Science, 1959), p. 298.

well attested in Helmold.⁵⁷ However, he did not attempt to re-establish bishoprics at Oldenburg, Mecklenburg or Ratzeburg. Instead the church at the city of Lübeck became a religious centre for the Obodrites.⁵⁸ Toward the end of his reign, probably around 1126, Henry allowed a prominent priest, and true missionary, Vicelin, a future bishop of Oldenburg, to carry out missionary work from Lübeck.⁵⁹ Again a lack of evidence allows us only to speculate that Henry might have waited for the opportunity to re-establish ecclesiastical structures in the Obodrite lands on his own terms, possibly with Lübeck as the all-Obodrite bishopric. Vicelin began his work around 1127 under Sventopelk, Henry's son and successor. However, Sventopelk was assassinated in 1128/29 and with him a main line of the Nakonid dynasty expired.⁶⁰

The last Nakonid ruler from another branch, Pribislav of Lübeck, who in the 1130's controlled the Western Obodrite lands, and Niklot of the Eastern Obodrites, were accused by Helmold of being hostile to the Christians.⁶¹ The claim was certainly made because Pribislav of Lübeck made a number of successful attacks on Saxony, and expelled some priests and monks from Segeberg. However, at the same time, his Lübeck church and Vincelin's mission functioned without problems. Pribislav of Lübeck was aware of the potential of Vincelin's mission, while he perceived a monastery at Segeberg as an outpost of the Hamburg archbishopric.⁶² Years later Helmold himself, accompanying bishop Gerold of Oldenburg, visited Pribislav, dined and slept in his residence, and they all attended mass.⁶³ So, Pribislav of Lübeck was definitely anti-Saxon, but not anti-Christian and Helmold's claim is a product of his bias.

The crusade of 1147 against the Eastern Obodrites was evidently of a political and not a religious nature. It is worth noting that an exchange of messages between Niklot and Adolph II, the count of Holstein, prior to the conflict does not include any religious references.⁶⁴ Neither has Helmold's description of the crusade, and participating rank and file Saxons exhibited more concern about material rather than spiritual matters. The only exception is that as part of the peace agreement Niklot promised to Christianize his principality⁶⁵, but it appears to have been lip service to the ideal of the crusade. Niklot himself was definitely a Christian as his name indicates, although rather indifferent toward Christianity. When he took control of the Eastern Obodrites, after the death of Knut Lavard, there is no evidence that he persecuted Christians, although he was very cynical about the intentions of the Saxon duke and Christian clergy. This is clearly shown by Niklot's reply to Henry the Lion, who in the late 1150's, inquired about the progress in conversion of the Obodrites:

*Let the god, who is heaven, be your God; you be our god, and it sufficeth us. You honour Him, in turn we shall honour you".*⁶⁶

⁵⁷ HB, I. 34, 41, 46.

⁵⁸ HB, I. 41, 54.

⁵⁹ HB, I.46.

⁶⁰ HB, I.48.

⁶¹ HB, I.52.

⁶² HB, I.53.

⁶³ HB, I.83(82).

⁶⁴ HB, I.62.

⁶⁵ HB, I.65.

⁶⁶ HB, I.84(83).

Not long after, in 1149, the bishopric of Mecklenburg was again re-established and the newly consecrated bishop Emmehard was sent there.⁶⁷ A few years later Niklot, supported by some Saxon troops campaigned in his eastern provinces against rebellious subjects and he was reported to have destroyed a pagan shrine,⁶⁸ perhaps the one unearthed in the 1970's at Gross Raden.

Summarizing the issue of Christianity in Obodrite history, the emerging picture is different and much more complex than some common assumptions. The evidence presented indicates that, beginning from prince Slavomir in 821, many Obodrite rulers and prominent people understood well the realities of their contemporary world and fully realized the political implications and benefits associated with conversion. In this respect the Obodrites differed from their fellow Polabian Slavs who in their majority tried to stick to their old beliefs. From the foundation of the Oldenburg bishoprics, in 968, the Obodrite principality was formally Christian. The conversion of the Obodrite people on a substantial scale must have taken place sometime around the middle of the tenth century as indicated by Helmold of Bosau.⁶⁹ This is at a time when the Eastern Obodrites, although tributaries of the Empire, retained their independence. Most Obodrite rulers, from Mstivoy onwards were Christians and the later Nakonids vigorously promoted Christianity for political reasons, but some probably out of conviction. From the time of Gottschalk, Christianity became an official policy. There are also strong indications that Gottschalk and his son Henry aimed for an independent Obodrite ecclesiastical structure. Furthermore, Helmold of Bosau wrote about thousands of converts among the Obodrites during Gottschalk's reign.⁷⁰ The chronicler might have exaggerated; nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that by the eleventh century a large section of the Obodrite upper class and perhaps some ordinary people were Christians, at least nominally. It is hard to believe that all the converts became Christians out of conviction, but it is also hard to believe that all converts relapsed into paganism after the 983 anti-Empire rebellion, and again after the pagan insurrection of 1066.⁷¹ Surely, most of the population must have remained pagan, but the conversion of an entire ethnic group or nation does not happen overnight. It is usually a long process and the people of most other countries remained semi-pagan long after official conversion. For example, Helmold of Bosau bitterly complained that the Holzatians, a northern branch of the Saxons, were still semi-pagan, many still worshipping holy groves and waters.⁷² This was in the twelfth century, long after the official Saxon conversion.

The difficulties encountered by Obodrite rulers in Christianization of their principality were of great magnitude due to internal opposition. This was so, because ecclesiastical expansion of the Hamburg-Bremen archbishopric often not only had a missionary aspect. The Church had a less noble material incentive in its expansion to the east, as it meant more land grants and more tithes. As ecclesiastical and imperial interests overlapped for most of the time we are concerned with, the Church and the state worked hand in hand for the subjugation and exploitation of the new conquered territories and their people.⁷³ Not

⁶⁷ HB, I.69.

⁶⁸ HB, I.71.

⁶⁹ HB, I.11.

⁷⁰ HB, I.20, 22.

⁷¹ HB, I.16, 22.

⁷² HB, I.47.

⁷³ F. Seibt, 'The Religious Problems', pp. 103, 107; and F.J. Tschan in HB, p. 13.

surprisingly, the contemporary sources often gave the Obodrites “bad press” simply because of the conflict between political and economic interests. Any independent developments and peaceful Christianization from within the Obodrite principality deprived the German speaking clergy and the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen of lucrative revenues.⁷⁴ There was substantial opposition towards Christianity, as the events of 983 and 1066 show. Many Obodrites and other Polabian Slavs were much more hostile to the new faith than, for example, Poles or Czechs. This however should not be a surprise. Many, if not the majority of them, perceived Christianity as a strange, alien religion of their enemies, as explained in first part of this paper. In this context, Christianization from within attempted by a number of the Obodrite rulers encountered greater opposition and difficulties, than for example, in the case of Poland. In Piast’s domain there was not a clear association of Christianity with foreign political power or economic exploitation. Prior to the Polish conversion in 966, there were no military conflicts with the Empire and Christianity was adopted via Bohemia.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The perception of Christianity by the majority of pagan Polabian Slavs was no doubt negative due to various factors. Above all, the message preached by Christian missionaries was alien and perceived as a strange set of beliefs. The Polabian Slavs accustomed to polytheism could hardly comprehend the demand for exclusive worship of a monotheistic god. The Christian demands to change their way of life and the numerous restrictions and rules affecting their way of life could hardly be seen as an attractive alternative by these people. The hostility of Christian missionaries and clergymen toward their religion created in turn the hatred and hostility of the Polabian Slavs toward Christianity and the clergy. Furthermore, the Church was perceived as a vehicle of political and economic subjugation and exploitation working hand in hand with imperial authorities. The Polabian converts were seen as traitors of their people or at best treated with suspicion as agents of the Empire or other foreign power. As a result the majority of Polabian Slavs resisted conversion and when forced to convert accepted this new faith only nominally.

It has to be acknowledged that medieval Christianity was much more than purely a religion. Above all, it guaranteed political recognition within Western Christendom, that is contemporary Europe. Moreover, it provided access to classical civilization, writing, models for state apparatus and state administration itself. It also sanctified the ruler giving him God’s given authority over his subjects. This was widely recognized by many Polabian rulers and upper class, who accepted the new faith for political and economic rather than religious reasons. As the Obodrite case presented above shows, these rulers promoted the new religion, often vigorously, within their principalities. Their aim was to retain the political independence and territorial integrity of their domains. The obstacles and difficulties they encountered were of a dual nature. Firstly, they faced internal opposition by a majority of their own people due to their negative attitude and hostility towards Christianity. Secondly, they had to resist attempts of the imperial Church to establish their ecclesiastic authority over their principalities, which in reality meant greater dependency on the Empire. These rulers had to balance between those two forces, which indeed required great political

⁷⁴ HB, I.12.

⁷⁵ F. Dvornik, *The Making of Central and Eastern Europe* (Florida: Academic International Press, 1974), p. 70.

skills. Overall, as the Obodrite case shows, their rulers were successful as far as difficult circumstances allowed. In a sense the Duchy of Mecklenburg was a continuation of the Obodrite principality. After all, Pribislav's submission to Henry the Lion in 1167 cannot be viewed as an abrupt political change. An Obodrite remained hereditary ruler, there was no Saxon or imperial administration imposed and the Obodrite upper class retained its privileges and most of its possessions. Over the centuries the Duchy of Mecklenburg lost its Slavic character and became an integral part of modern Germany, but this topic goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, it has to be acknowledged that among the Polabian Slavs there must have been some true conversions by conviction. However, these true conversions are hardly traceable through analysis of historical records. Nonetheless, taking into consideration that mass conversions are not documented elsewhere in reliable sources we can assume that they occurred in a relatively small number.

Abbreviations

- AB - Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*,
ARF - *Annales Regni Francorum*
HB - Helmold of Bossau's *Chronica Slavorum*,
MP - *Monachi Prieflingensis' (Wolfger), Vita Ottonis Episcopi Babenbergensis*,
RPC - *Povest' vremennykh Let - The Russian Primary Chronicle*,
SG - *Saxo Grammaticus' Danorum Regum Heroumque Historia*,
TM - *Thietmar of Merseburg's Chronicon*.

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Dojemanje krščanstva pri poganskih Polabskih Slovanih

Roman Zaroff

Avtor razpravlja, kako so lahko polabski Slovani doživljali krščanstvo v času njegovega širjenja proti vzhodu. Avtor se poskuša oddaljiti od našega krščanskega ozadja in analizirati, kako so drugi ljudje lahko videli verovanja, za katera pogosto sami nimamo nobenih dvomov - resnično težka naloga. Članek prikazuje, kako so navadni ljudje videli novo veroizpoved, in zaključuje, da so na splošno dojemali krščanstvo kot nekaj negativnega. Pokaže, da je bil tak odnos posledica povezave krščanstva z nadvlado cesarstva, z gospodarskim izkoriščanjem in z uničenjem starega načina življenja. Kar je nova veroizpoved včasih ponujala, je bilo težko sprejemljivo in razumljivo za polabsko družbo. Članek prav tako pojasnjuje, zakaj se je krščanstvo mnogo hitreje uveljavilo v zgornjem sloju polabske družbe in pri njihovih vladarjih.