The Conversion of Vladimir the Great to Orthodox Christianity

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The events that led to the acceptance of Christianity by the Russians is still somewhat shrouded in mystery that historians have yet to fully solve. However, it is no mystery that the conversion of the Rus was instrumental to the development of Russian cultural identity. The distinction between Russians and other Slavic ethnic groups began in the late 10th century with Vladimir Sviatoslavich, the Grand Prince of Kiev. His conversion was necessary for that to happen, and the effects of siding with the East over the West can be observed to this day. This has led historians to ask why Vladimir took that direction. The details we know of Vladimir’s conversion are that he had prior exposure to Christianity through his grandmother and his advisors, personal interest and inquiry into other popular religions around him, and a political motive to achieve greatness his people had never seen before.

The conversion of the Rus can actually be traced to a century before Vladimir. Russian and Byzantine sources referring to the Christianization of the Rus go as far back as between A.D. 860 and 867, but Russian chroniclers after Vladimir’s rule had expunged most recordings of the conversion as to not cause a decline in the famed ruler’s status as the first successful baptized ruler (Ericsson, 98).

Later on, many Russian mercenaries would leave to serve as mercenaries for the Byzantine Empire, and because of these ties and their long-standing trade relationships, many mercenaries would convert to Christianity. Many would find themselves back in Rus with their new faith and establishing Churches (Spinka, 42-44). So Christianity would not have been completely alien to the Rus, and even Vladimir’s grandmother, Olga, would become enamored with Christianity. The true details behind her conversion are not clear due to a lack of verifiable information and confictions between available sources (Ibid., 44-45). Russian legend has it that Olga traveled to Constantinople and was baptized by the patriarch and sponsored by the emperor, Constantine VII (Butler, 232-33). She was the designated regent in Rus following the death of her husband until her son Sviatoslav grew old enough to assume the throne. Vladimir was educated by Olga in his youth after she had left her role as regent. She had influence...
over him and that caused Vladimir to develop a deep appreciation for his grandmother and her life (Spinka, 49). This would become a contributing factor later when his advisors bring up her history and wisdom during his religious search. Because Vladimir held Olga in such high regard and he trusted in his advisors’ judgment, converting to Christianity could appear to be a desirable option if presented.

Many writers have posited that Vladimir had a sincere conviction to convert to Christianity on his own merits (Ibid., 47-50). This could correlate with the fact that he sent subjects to foreign countries to observe and examine their local religions. With regard to Islam, customs like circumcision and abstinence of pork and alcohol did not compliment the customs of Vladimir’s own culture, so he was quick to dismiss it. He would have had similar reservations with Judaism, accompanied by a perception that it is a weak religion due to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Christianity was the next logical place to look. The schism between the East and the West had yet to occur, but there were still distinct differences between the two that Vladimir and his envoys were able to recognize.

One difference they could see was the architecture. Eastern churches were adorned with beautiful and colorful iconography, while Western churches were considered by the emissaries to be uninspiring and depressing to look at. The St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople was especially moving to the men and they told Vladimir the glorious temples to God the Eastern Christians built for Him (Moss, 18).

An investigation into the life of Olga by Vladimir’s advisors would find its way to him. The advisors validated his love and respect for Olga by saying to him that she was a wise woman, and if it were an evil faith, she would not have converted to it. These events weighed heavily on his consideration of converting, and it is reasonable to believe that Vladimir had an honest desire to have a spiritual awakening.

There is, however, another reasonable and realistic reason that involves a consideration of the powerful Christian neighbors that bordered Kievan Rus, particularly the Byzantine Empire. That power could be consolidated for the people of Rus, and Christianity was the conduit by which it could be reached.

The empire was suffering a civil war by an upstart by the name of Bardas Phocas, who had a significant amount of support within the empire. Basil II, the legitimate emperor of the Byzantine Empire, was beginning to run out of options and turned to Vladimir. Basil knew of Vladimir’s growing interest in Christianity and came up with a proposal that Basil knew he would not be able to resist. Basil wanted military assistance from Vladimir, in exchange, he would be offered the hand of Basil’s beautiful sister Anna in marriage. In order for this to happen though, Vladimir would have to convert to Christianity and lead his people to Christianity as well. Vladimir agreed and offered six thousand soldiers to serve the emperor, and the emperor used his army to defeat Phocas and protect his claim to the throne.

Afterward, Vladimir and the Kievans were baptized into the Orthodox Church. The emperor was not expeditious in arranging the marriage between Vladimir and Anna, because the Rus were considered barbarians to the Byzantines. A Byzantine princess getting married to a perceived barbarian would be otherwise unthinkable.

But eventually, the underestimation of the power of Vladimir would be a tremendous miscalculation by Basil. Vladimir angrily assaulted empire and took the city of Cherson from them. Basil gave into pressure and sent Anna to Cherson to wed Vladimir in order to cease the hostilities (Poppe, 197-98). This marriage was extremely important to
Vladimir. He succeeded where Charlemagne and so many other European rulers failed. The relations gained by marrying into the line of Roman emperors were extremely beneficial towards increasing his influence and power within the world. It would also begin to set a precedent amongst the Rus from then on out with this new Byzantine influence and Eastern Orthodox Church influence (Ibid., 231). By incorporating these elements into the Kievan Rus society, Russian identity would begin to start developing into a separate distinct culture amongst Slavs. Vladimir had a lot of incentive to invest his time, money, and effort, into the Orthodox Church because the Empire was able to build and sustain a multiethnic state under one emperor that was identified as God’s earthly representative among the church’s clergy. Perhaps if Vladimir were to join and marry into the royal family, he would be able to gain the advantages as well (Moss, 18). These political advantages would have been envied and sought over any able-bodied ruler in Europe, and Vladimir was able to capitalize on these events.

With the schism between the Western and Eastern churches, it would appear to be a logical decision for the Russians to have sided with the Patriarch of Constantinople over the Bishop of Rome (Moss, 19), because the efforts of Vladimir and his successors went in order to establish Russians as powerful influencers in the Eastern church would not have been wanted to go to waste. Not only was Rus powerful within the church, they were also able to establish themselves as a dominant political and military power to be reckoned within Europe. The distance from the Papacy meant that they could not sufficiently threaten or influence Rus, and even if they did, the Pope in Rome had no way of ensuring the Russians that would retain the power and influence in the Western church that they had in the Eastern church.

The influence of the Byzantine empire and the Christianization of Rus was so extensive that after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, many Russians considered the city of Moscow to be “the Third Rome” (Moss, 96). The influence of Christianity and Byzantine ideology on Russian culture, society, and beliefs is practically undeniable.

In conclusion, the ambition of Vladimir the Great to become powerful was dependent on him converting to Orthodox Christianity, and his spread of Christianity began the process of developing a new Russian identity that would impact the history of the world for centuries to come.

References


