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“Unity in Diversity: Russia and the English-Speaking World”

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**«Крещение Руси и Англии: роль Владимира Великого
и Августина Кентерберийского»**

**«The Baptism of Russia and England: the role of Vladimir the Great
and St. Augustin of Canterbury»**



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Theses

The most important turning point in the history of Great Britain and Russia, which determined their further development, was the adoption of Christianity.

Both Britain and Russ, being originally pagan, went through a long process of adopting Christianity. These events in the two countries, despite the obvious differences, had many common features. Pagan cults demand bloody sacrifices. Paganism is not able to unite the tribes, each of which considers its gods to be superior.

Both the Slavic prince and the king of Kent needed monotheism for uniting society as well as for strengthening of the ruler's authority.

After an unsuccessful attempt to create a single pantheon of pagan gods, Vladimir decided to choose a mono religion through a "test of faith".

Christianity of Byzantium turned out to be the best choice for Kievan Rus. To convert Rust, the prince needed to use the power of princely authority. The gradual Christianization of Russian society helped to avoid a civil war, but led to a dual faith.

To convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, Pope Gregory sent a mission to Britain led by Augustine. The pagan king of Kent Ethelbert needed a test of faith.

Using the authority of King Ethelbert, Augustine converted the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Kent to Christianity. Due to his ignorance of local customs, the process of Christianization stretched over a long period, which also led to a kind of synthesis of faiths.

The Christianization of England and Russia was a progressive phenomenon in the history of these states. The great merit in this is Vladimir's and St. Augustine's.

The most important turning point in the history of Great Britain and Russia, which determined their further development, was the adoption of Christianity. One of the main characters of the “Tale of Bygone Years” is Vladimir (Pic. 1). His biography is full of various events, but the crucial ones are connected with the baptism of the ruler of Russ and the Christianization of the country. For St. Bede the Venerable who wrote “Ecclesiastical History of the English People” one of the main themes is also the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. The monk describes in detail the missionary activity of Augustine of Canterbury who managed to convert the citizens of the Kingdom of Kent, together with King Ethelbert (Pic. 2), to the Christian faith.

Both Britain and Russ, being originally pagan, went through a long process of adopting Christianity. These events in the two countries, despite the obvious differences, had many common features. Both the Britons and Slavs were familiar with Christian doctrine long before Augustine (the first British martyrs Alban, Julius and Aaron have been venerated since the Roman Empire) and Vladimir (whose grandmother, Princess Olga, who ruled Kiev, kept to Christianity). But in the fifth century, Britain was invaded by barbaric Germanic pagan tribes – and most of England remained loyal to the ancient northern gods for about a hundred years. The sacrifice of people, typical of the Celtic tribes, was revived again. The pagan cult justified the horrors of war. Olga’s son, the famous warrior Prince Svyatoslav, also chose to remain a pagan and serve Perun, who (like his Anglo-Saxon counterpart) was thirsty for blood. Moreover, since the future victim was chosen by lot – the oldest way to find out the gods’ will – anyone could face the fatal destiny. In 983, such a lot fell on the son of a baptized Varangian. Both of them died, but their appeal to the people and martyrdom was the first serious challenge to paganism. As soon as there is an opportunity to compare and choose – a person begins to hesitate. Paganism, in principle, is not able to unite the tribes, each of which considers its gods to be

superior. Christianity was a force that reconciled peoples and put an end to human sacrifice.

Both the Slavic prince and the Kentish king needed monotheism to gather tribes under the reign of the only mighty ruler. Taking into account the experience of neighboring monarchies, they decided to unite the country by means of a single religion.

Nevertheless, Prince Vladimir first tried to reorganize the existing pagan cults. Several years passed before he realized that creation of a single pantheon of pagan gods could not gather together the diverse Slavic tribes (Pic. 3). A centralized state and autocracy need a strong monotheistic religion. According to the “Tale of Bygone Years”, representatives of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Judaism and Islam arrived at his court with an offer to accept their faith (Pic. 4). In the 21st century, such a “test of faith”, typical of pagan tribes, may sound like an artistic fiction, but people in those days were sure that the stronger the god-patron, the stronger his adepts. We can draw the following conclusion: such a variety of options indicates that Russia was in the sphere of influence and struggle of various creeds. Vladimir had something to choose from. In the 10th century, the most powerful country in the world was Byzantium, the center of political power, wealth, education, and culture. The squad of Svyatoslav (Vladimir’s father) was defeated by the Byzantines. Jesus Christ took a better care of his children than Perun. Another reason why Vladimir chose the Byzantine church was that Russia and Byzantium had long-standing commercial and cultural ties. Christianity was long known in Kiev because of its frequent relations with Constantinople. The dazzling Byzantine splendor amazed Slavic merchants and warriors, captivated them with the greatness of religion.

Vladimir was a shrewd and cautious politician. Despite the fact that his rise to power was dubious from the point of view of modern men, in the eyes of pagan society, the prince did the right thing. Having removed from the throne Yaropolk, who had killed his brother Oleg, Vladimir committed an act of blood

revenge. And even his numerous harems did not reduce, but strengthened the prestige of the prince. The power of this authority will later help him in the process of Christianization of Russia. Being a natural outstanding ruler, Vladimir was guided in his actions by political expediency. At that time, for his full status in European politics, he needed a dynastic marriage to a European princess. According to the chronicles, in order to get the Byzantine Princess Anna as a wife, Vladimir had to besiege Korsun. The siege of the city dragged on, and Vladimir vowed to be baptized if the enterprise succeeded. Having captured the city, he forgot his promise and sent envoys to the tsars Basil and Constantine, threatening with a military campaign aiming at Constantinople. By the time Anna arrived in Korsun, the prince suddenly “had gone blind”. Having become a Christian (Pic. 5), Vladimir regained his sight and first baptized his squad, then, on his return to Kiev – the residents of the capital, who did not really resist, because they believed that the Prince and his entourage could not do anything unwise, and the Christian God gave Vladimir the victory over the Greeks and a princess to be his wife. In Novgorod, where the authority of the Kievan prince was not so high, baptism was accompanied by uprisings of the people and their cruel suppression. After that, Vladimir did not force the events; as a consequence, it took a long period to convert Russia to Christianity which began to gradually penetrate into all layers of society. Perhaps the Prince’s approach made it possible to do without a civil war, but later led to a synthesis of Orthodoxy and paganism, the so-called dual faith.

In England, the active process of spreading Christianity began in the 6th century. As well as in Russia of the 10th century, a single state and nation on the island did not yet exist, there were several kingdoms founded by different peoples – the Utes, Angles, Saxons, etc (Pic. 6). Despite the Christian missions already operating in Britain, the majority of the island’s population remained pagan. To achieve the title of Bretwalda-lord of Britain, King Ethelbert I of Kent married the Christian daughter of the King of the Franks, Bertha; thus becoming

related to one of the most powerful dynasties of that time – the Merovingians. Either under the influence of his Christian wife, or, perhaps, like many rulers of Europe before and after him, hoping to strengthen his authority with the help of the world religion, he asked Pope Gregory to send missionaries. Perhaps it was the initiative of Pope Gregory himself. According to legend, before becoming pope, he had seen in a slave market in Rome some young boys captured from the Angle tribe. Being impressed by their light complexion and fair hair he remarked, “These are not Angles, these are angels.”

Be that as it may, the holy Pope Gregory I sent there a mission led by Augustine, the Benedictine monk (Pic. 7). When the missionaries learnt about the wild customs of the Anglo-Saxons, they were afraid and cowardly decided not to go north. Just as Kievan Rus for Constantinople (the center of the eastern branch of Christianity) was somewhere on the outskirts of the empire, so Britain seemed to Rome (the center of Western Christianity) a distant and dangerous barbarian country. The Pope had to turn to the Frankish rulers for help. In response to the Pope’s request, they seconded several priests and interpreters to help the missionaries.

Finally, in 597, the mission arrived in the capital of Kent, Canterbury. According to legend, Ethelbert received the monks with some curiosity, but, suspecting that Augustine might have magical powers, insisted on meeting him in the open air, where the king would not be so vulnerable. Here, again, we see the “test of faith” that is quite characteristic of paganism. The king is already “afraid” that his God may be weaker than the new, Christian one. The king was impressed by Augustine’s courage and straightforwardness. The preacher was offered the capital of Canterbury as a residence, hence he is known to us as Augustine of Canterbury. The ruler granted the monks the right to preach in his domain, then allowed them to restore the destroyed and dilapidated churches and build new temples in different places of the kingdom. The process of Christianization in both countries was accompanied by the construction of many

churches on the same spots where temples and idols were previously located, in order to inherit their sacredness. And over time, more and more people came there to be baptized.

Prince Vladimir did not have such an ardent preacher and missionary as Augustine, he had to convert Russia by the power of his princely authority. Augustine, having persuaded Ethelbert to be baptized, made full use of the royal authority to carry out his great mission, too. But Ethelbert was still guided by Augustine and Bertha (Pic. 8), the main credit for the baptism of the Anglo-Saxons certainly belongs to Augustine. It was he who went down in history as the founder of the Church of England. Unfortunately, Augustine's attempt to unite the Celtic bishops under his rule failed, probably, due to his ignorance of local traditions. Other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were baptized in the following decades. The same way as in Russia, people themselves slowly and gradually went to Christ. English Christianity was also the result of a synthesis of Roman Christianity and local traditions. Thanks to the unity of faith, new nations were formed from conglomerates of tribes.

The Christianization of both Britain and Russ was a progressive phenomenon in the history of their nations. It took place in the Early Middle Ages on the lands inhabited mainly by pagans. In both cases, representatives of the largest Christian centers of that time (Constantinople and Rome) took part in the conversion process. As a result of the spread of Christianity, Russia and England raised the level of culture by borrowing from more developed regions. In addition, the status of the Christian powers contributed to the growth of the prestige of these states on the international arena. Finally, a common religion facilitated to national unification within these countries. There is no doubt, that the great merit in this is Vladimir's, glorified in the face of saints as equal to the apostles (Pic. 9), and St. Augustine's, who went down in history as the "apostle of the English" (Pic. 10).

Illustrations:

Picture 1:



Vladimir the Great on the Millennium of Russia monument in Novgorod

Picture 2:



Detail from a 12th-century manuscript showing St Augustine and King Æthelberht of Kent. © Bodleian Library

Picture 3:



Map of the settlement of the Eastern Slavs.

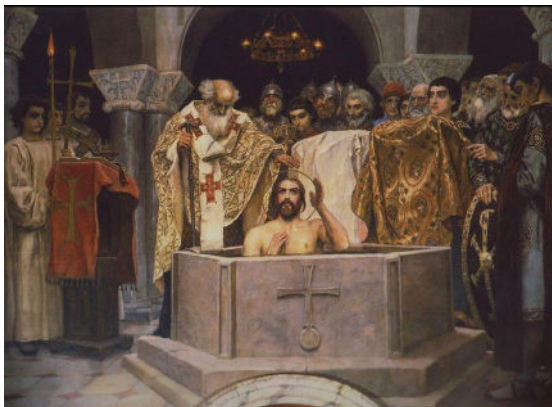
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Picture 4:



Eggink I. Conversation between Prince Vladimir and a Greek philosopher about the Christian faith. 1822. The State Museum of the History of Religion, St. Petersburg

Picture 5:



Vasnetsov V. The Baptism of Saint Prince Vladimir. 1890. Kiev art gallery, Kiev

Picture 6:



Map of the general outlines of some of the British kingdoms about 600.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Canterbury

Picture 7:



Pope Gregory sending St Augustine to convert the people of England to Christianity, from an 11th-century manuscript. © British Library Board

Picture 8:



St. Augustine and Queen Bertha of Kent depicted in a stained glass window by J Powell & Son, 1900, Blakeney, Norfolk. © Holmes Garden Photos / Alamy Stock Photo

Picture 9:



*Holy equal to the apostles grand prince. Fresco. 1502. Ferapontov Monastery
<http://www.dionisy.com/eng/museum/123/140/index.shtml>*

Picture 10:



St. Augustine. <http://www.sourozh.org/british-saints/2009/8/17/604-26.html>

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