

Paganism in Ukraine:

Its Beliefs, Encounter with Christianity, and Survival

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“...the past decade has seen a revival of neo-paganism in Ukraine...”¹



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This article presents an overview of Ukrainian paganism as the main pre-Christian religion in Ukraine, explains its encounter with Christianity, and evaluates the reasons for the rising interest in paganism in modern day Ukraine. The first part of the article shows that Ukrainian pagan beliefs could have a connection with ancient Asian religions because of trade routes from India and China to the Roman Empire that passed through the lands of modern day Ukraine. The second part of the article demonstrates that Ukraine was already partly Christian even before its official Christianization due to the missionary outreach of the apostle Andrew, Greek colonization, and the political influence of Byzantium and Rome. The third part of the article presents a short overview of neo-paganism in Ukraine and its international connections. The conclusion of the article responds to the two main reasons for rising interest in paganism in Ukraine: the issue of national identity and the essence of Christianity itself.

Paganism in Ukraine

As one of the world religions, paganism is, of course, present in Ukraine. It is impossible to say when paganism “came” to Ukraine. However, neither are there sufficient historical sources indicating that paganism has always been in Ukraine. One thing is clear—according to the sixth century Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea, paganism is the main pre-Christian religion in Ukraine.²

¹ Andrij Yurash, “Ukraine,” in *Religions of the World*, J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann, eds., vol. 4, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, Inc.: 2002), 1321.

² Bohdan Kravtsiw and Bohdan Medwidsky, “Mythology,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?>

Pagan Beliefs in Ukraine

The Encyclopedia of Ukraine speaks of four main periods in the development of paganism in Ukraine. Archeological investigations along the Dnieper, Don, and Dniester rivers revealed that the first inhabitants of this land (3500-2700 BC) lived in large villages with as many as 600-700 people, and had a "culture rich in magical rituals and supernatural beliefs."³ The characteristic belief of the earliest period was animism—the simple belief in the existence of supernatural beings⁴ which explains death, dreams, visions, and natural phenomena.⁵ Animism was expressed in Ukrainian paganism in the belief in the existence of good (*berehyni*) and evil (*upyry, demony*) spirits,⁶ a primitive form of ethno-religious dualism.⁷

During this period the ancestors of the Ukrainian nation, the Cimmerians, as Homer in the *Odyssey* called the nation that lived on the northern shore of the Black Sea in the eighth century BC,⁸ also worshiped a mythical hero-horseman. Animism developed later this period into the worship of fertility gods (Rod and the *roz hany*

tsi) and ancestor spirits,⁹ but still held to its general description as a polytheistic religion.¹⁰

Scholars who have explored the history of paganism in Ukraine cannot explain the fact that there is a third phase in its development that is radically opposed to the previous two. Bohdan Kravtsiiv and Bohdan Medwidsky in their article in *Ukrainian Mythology* state that during this phase paganism changed its nature from polytheistic animism to monotheism.¹¹ This was the time when all of the deities were organized in the doctrinal pantheon with Svaroh being the supreme god. Later, however, the religious system was changed and Perun came on the scene, subdued Svaroh, and took authority over the pantheon.

It should be noted that this development in the doctrines of paganism from animism to Perun's supremacy does not mean that all other pagan gods were forgotten and not worshiped anymore. Development in doctrines did not eliminate the previous beliefs, but added to them the supremacy of a new god without neglecting to worship to the old ones.

AddButton=/pages/m/y/mythology.htm> (24 March 2006).

³ Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 6.

⁴ Raymond Firth, "Animism," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983), 21.

⁵ D.A. Hu, "Animism," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 24.

⁶ Mykola Mushynka, "Paganism," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=>

pages\P\A\Paganism.htm> (24 March 2006).

⁷ H.B. Kuhn, "Dualism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed., 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 357.

⁸ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 9.

⁹ Mushynka, "Paganism," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bohdan Kravtsiiv and Bohdan Medwidsky, "Mythology," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=/pages/m/y/mythology.htm>> (24 March 2006)

Table I: Names and Functions of Gods in Ukrainian Paganism

Name	Description
Rod	one of the fertility gods
Svaroh ¹²	god of sky, sun, and heavenly fire (thunder); ¹³ identified with the Roman Vulcan ¹⁴
Perun ¹⁵	god of thunder, lightning, and rain, the ruler of the heavens, and later the god of war; ¹⁶ the thunder god in the old Baltic religion ¹⁷
Khors ¹⁸	a god of the sun and the source of righteousness; ¹⁹ the healer ²⁰
Dazhboh ²¹	a god of the sun, the son of Svaroh; third after Perun and Khors; ²² ancient Ukrainian people (Varangians and Polianians ²³) were called “the children of Dazhboh”
Stryboh ²⁴	a god of the wind; ²⁵ however, <i>Dictionary of Pagan Religions</i> says that the functions of this pagan god are obscure; ²⁶ the counterpart of the Greek god Aeolus ²⁷
Mokosh ²⁸	a goddess of fertility, water, and women; related to Hecate and Aphrodite in classical mythology; Perun’s wife ²⁹

Unlike the Egyptians, Babylonians, or Greeks, Ukrainian pagans did not build huge temples for their gods. Mykola Mushynka in his article on pa-

ganism in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* says that Ukrainians preferred to worship gods in open areas using altars built on the sacred places.³⁰ Archeol-

¹² Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

¹³ Mykola Mushynka, “Svaroh,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\S\V\Svaroh.htm>> (24 March 2006)

¹⁴ Harry E. Wedeck and Wade Baskin, eds., *Dictionary of Pagan Religions: The Cults, Rites, and Rituals Associated with Polytheistic Religion from the Stone Age to the Present*, s.v., “Svaroh” (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1973), 312.

¹⁵ Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

¹⁶ Mykola Mushynka, “Perun,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\P\E\Perun.htm>> (24 March 2006).

¹⁷ Wedeck and Baskin, eds., *Dictionary of Pagan Religions*, 260.

¹⁸ Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, “Khors.” n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages\K\H\Khors.htm>>,

(24 March 2006).

²⁰ Wedeck and Baskin, eds., *Dictionary of Pagan Religions*, s.v., “Khors,” 186.

²¹ Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

²² *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, “Dazhboh”, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages\K\H\Khors.htm>>, (24 March 2006)

²³ G.Y. Shevelov, “Rus,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\R\U\RushDA.htm>> (24 March 2006)

²⁴ Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

²⁵ *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, “Stryboh.”

²⁶ Wedeck and Baskin, eds., *Dictionary of Pagan Religions*, s.v., “Stribog,” 305.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, “Stryboh.”

²⁸ Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

²⁹ *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, “Mokosh.”

³⁰ Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

ogists have discovered several minor and two major places of worship.

One of the main altars was built by the Grand Prince of Kyivan Rus' (the ancient name of Ukraine) Volodymyr the Great (956 – 1015) near his palace in Kyiv, and was dedicated to Perun, Khors, Dazhboh, Stryboh, and Mokosh in thanksgiving for the victories he gained over the enemies of his country.³¹

The second known place was built under a great sacred oak on Khortytisia Island (an island in the middle of the Dnieper near the city of Zaporizhzhia) and worshipers, mainly merchants, sailed down the Dnieper River to bring sacrifices there.³² Natalia Polonska-Vasylenko in her book *Ukraine-Rus' and Western Europe in the Tenth–Thirteenth Centuries* says that some of those merchants could have been from as far away as India and China, because the main trade route between China and the Roman Empire went through Ukrainian lands, crossing the Dnieper River near Kyiv.³³ Also, Orest Subtelny in his book *Ukraine: A History* proves this when he says that among the archeological discoveries on Ukrainian land are items of Asian origin: silk from China, crystal from the Caucasus, and semiprecious stones from Iran and India.³⁴ This being the case, the doc-

trines of Ukrainian paganism could represent an encounter with the beliefs of these two ancient Asian cultures.

These altars and places of worship to pagan gods reflect the condition of the Ukrainian nation before the official “introduction” of Christianity.

The Encounter of Paganism and Christianity in Ukraine

Being relatively close to Christian Byzantium and having trade contacts with Catholic Europe, Ukraine was open to outreach by missionaries from both the Eastern and Western Christian churches and to the influence of new ideas from the Greek colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea. Wasyl Lencyk, in his article on the Christianization of Ukraine says that because of its favorable geographical location—close to the Black Sea and the Near East—Christianity was known in the present territory of Ukraine as early as the first century AD.³⁵ According to Orthodox tradition, Andrew, one of the twelve apostles and the brother of Peter, was the first missionary in the lands of the northern shore of the Black Sea and traveled along the Dnieper River.³⁶ Later he was proclaimed the patron saint of Ukraine.³⁷

³¹ Arkadii Zhukovsky, “Volodymyr the Great,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\V\O\VolodymyrtheGreat.htm>>, (27 March 2006).

³² Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

³³ Natalia Polonska-Vasylenko, *Ukraine-Rus' and Western Europe in the Tenth-Thirteenth Centuries* (London: Ukrainian Publishers Ltd., 1964), 8.

³⁴ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 12.

³⁵ Wasyl Lencyk, “Christianization of Ukraine,”

Encyclopedia of Ukraine, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\C\H\ChristianizationofUkraine.htm>> (30 March 2006).

³⁶ *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, “Saint Andrew,” n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\S\A\SaintAndrew.htm>>, (30 March 2006).

³⁷ Harold W. Attridge, “St. Andrew,” in *The Harpercollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, Richard P. McBrien, ed. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 45.

Later Ukrainian lands became not just the place for the popes' exiles, but also for the popes' visitations. At the end of the tenth century, the Grand Prince of Kyivan Rus', the same Volodymyr the Great who built altars for pagan gods, considered the possibility of conversion to Christianity. It is difficult to say whether it was from pure belief or merely a political move, but in 987 Volodymyr the Great was baptized, and in 988 he forced the whole nation to reject the old gods and be baptized in the Dnieper River.³⁸ If it was a faith decision, then there is a question of who influenced him more: his friend Olaf Trygvason the First, King of Norway, or one of his Christian wives, or his grandmother Olha, princess of Kyivan Rus' from 945-957, who herself be-

came a Christian and was baptized in 955.³⁹

After these events, the "war" for Ukraine started between Rome and Byzantium and Kyiv became the place of visitations from these two Christian camps. Natalia Polonska-Vasylenko says that there were three missions from Rome to Kyiv (in 979, 991, and 1000) and two missions from Kyiv to Rome (in 992 and 1001).⁴⁰ In addition to this, at approximately the same period there were numerous expeditions from Eastern Byzantium. Having chosen the Eastern liturgy, Ukraine still kept a friendly relationship with Rome. Later Kyiv became an advance point for Western monks returning to Rome from missions in the eastern and northern lands.⁴¹

Table II: Christianization of Ukraine

Method	Example
Missionary Outreach	Visits of St. Andrew, Roman clerics, missionaries from Byzantium,
Colonization	Greek colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea
Political Influence	Economic, political, and family relationships with western and eastern countries

However, it should be noted that paganism was not completely removed by traditional Christianity from the religious life in Ukraine. Paganism, partially merged with Christian doctrines, is still present in some

beliefs, customs, and holidays of traditional branches of the Christian church in Ukraine. The chart below shows the pagan holidays united with religious holidays of the traditional church in Ukraine.

³⁸ Lencyk, "Christianization of Ukraine," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

³⁹ Mykhailo Zhdan and Arkadii Zhukovsky, "Ol'ha," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, n.d., <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages\O\L\OlhaPrincess.htm>> (2

April 2006).

⁴⁰ Natalia Polonska-Vasylenko, *Ukraine-Rus' and Western Europe in the Tenth -Thirteenth Centuries*, (London: Ukrainian Publishers, Ltd., 1964), 13-14.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 14.

Table III: Pagan Holidays Adapted by Christianity⁴²

Paganism	Christianity
<i>Perun</i> : the god of thunder, lightning	Saint Elijah
<i>Veles</i> : the old Slavic god of cattle, wealth, and trade	Saint George: protector of agriculturists, one who blesses the fields
<i>Kupalo</i> : translated from Old Slavonic language, meaning “the one who washes”	Saint John the Baptist
<i>Equinox</i> : the winter holiday, the return of the sun or the commencement of the agricultural year	Christmas
‘Great Day’ (<i>Velykden</i>): the spring festival, beginning of life after the winter	Easter
<i>Rosalia</i> : the festival of the return of the dead in the form of spirits	The Descent of the Holy Spirit

Neo-Paganism in Ukraine

According to the website *Neo-Paganism in Central Eastern Europe*, the founder of the new pagan movement in modern day Ukraine was Volodymyr Shayan who was born in L’viv in 1908.⁴³ After World War II he immigrated to London where his continued work influenced the Ukrainian pagan movement and promoted the founding of the strongest pagan organization in Ukraine: the Union of Ukrainian Indigenous Faithful. Presently this organization publishes a monthly magazine, *Svaroh*.

The second most influential pagan organization in Ukraine is the Society

of the Ukrainian Native Faith “Pravoslavyya,” which was founded in Kyiv in 1993⁴⁴ and, interestingly, uses the same name as the Eastern Orthodox Church. The founder of the Society of the Ukrainian Native Faith considers the Orthodox Church⁴⁵ to be a thief and accuses it of stealing this name to “deceive the faithful during the first centuries following conversion to the Christian religion.”⁴⁶

These two major pagan organizations are members of European pagan organizations and have connections with worldwide federations of paganism.

⁴² Mushynka, “Paganism,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*.

⁴³ *Neo-Paganism in Central Eastern Europe*, “Ukraine,” n.d., <<http://vinland.org/heathen/pagancee/#Ukraine>> (30 March 2006).

⁴⁴ “Society of the Ukrainian Native Faith “Pravoslavyya,” *World Congress of Ethnic Religions*, n.d., <<http://www.wcer.org/members/europe/Ukraine/>> (31 March 2006).

⁴⁵ The English transliteration of the Russian word “Orthodox” is *pravoslavyya*, which translated from Russian means “one who praises God rightly.”

⁴⁶ “Society of the Ukrainian Native Faith “Pravoslavyya,” *World Congress of Ethnic Religions*, n.d., <<http://www.wcer.org/members/europe/Ukraine/>> (31 March 2006).

Table IV: Beliefs of the Society of the Ukrainian Native Faith "Pravoslavyya"⁴⁷

Doctrines	Explanation
God	Immortal, with multiple identities and names: "The ancient God of our faith is Svaroh, the high God of the universe, the heavenly zodiac. His sons are Dazhboh, Perun, Veles, Sryboh, Yarylo, Khors, Lado, Kupajlo, Symarhl, Pozvizd, Pereplut and others. His daughters are Lada, Leiya, Kupala, Dana, Perunystya, Mokosha, Kolyada and others."
Holy Scriptures	<i>The Book of Veles</i> , written in the fifth century on oaken boards
Trinity of existence	"Reflected in the idea of the sacred Tree of Life: the roots of this tree reach to underground depth (the universe of the ancestors); the trunk and branches symbolize the manifestation of Life (the Universe of living people)."
Nature	"The main idea of our Faith is to obtain a better knowledge of Nature and the Universe and to praise our Gods for the happiness in our lives."

Evaluation of Paganism in Ukraine

As was said above, the last ten years in Ukraine was a decade of rising interest in paganism.⁴⁸ Paganism was in Ukraine before the coming of Christianity; paganism survived and adjusted to this new religion after its coming; and paganism is experiencing a revival in Ukraine now.

That paganism is experiencing a revival in Ukraine means that there are some needs in the hearts and minds of people that have not been met by Christianity. The brief research in this article shows that there are two main reasons why paganism is growing in Ukraine.

The first reason for rising interest in paganism concerns the national identity of the Ukrainian people.

Many people confuse paganism with national identity and call for a return to paganism in order to discover this lost native religion and to deny "foreign" religion. However, people who hold this opinion forget that Ukraine was partly Christian even before the official Christianization of Ukraine in 988-989 because of the missionary outreach of the apostle Andrew and the spread of beliefs from the Greek colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea. Therefore national identity does not equal paganism.

The second reason for rising interest in paganism concerns the essence of Christianity itself. In some cases Christianity has failed to keep the pure Christian doctrine and has adopt-

⁴⁷ Society of the Ukrainian Native Faith "Pravoslavyya," *World Congress of Ethnic Religions*, n.d., <<http://www.wcer.org/members/europe/>

Ukraine/> (2 April 2006).

⁴⁸ Yurash, "Ukraine," *Religions of the World*, 1321.

ed pagan traditions, forms, and beliefs; because of this many people see paganism as a foundation of Christianity and call for a return to the spiritual roots of the true religion. However, people who hold this view either forget, or do not know at all, that it is not the doctrine of any particular church that defines the core of Christianity, but the Bible. The Bible does not have any traditions, forms, and beliefs adopted from paganism. There-

fore, Christianity is not based on paganism.

The situation with paganism in Ukraine waits for Christians to respond. If Christianity will not provide an answer to these two questions—national identity and the essence of Christianity—then many people will perceive this silence as a positive answer and the partial failure of Christianity.

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