

II. POLEMIKI I RECENZJE – POLEMICS AND REVIEWS

Mihai Dragnea, *Christian Identity Formation Across the Elbe in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*, New York–Bern–Berlin–Bruxelles–Oxford–Vienna–Warsaw, Peter Lang 2021

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The history of pre-Christian Slavic culture and its Christianization has enjoyed unflagging interest among researchers and readers alike, for innumerable years. One of the most recent embodiments of this unwavering fascination is a treatise titled “The Formation of Christian Identity by the Elbe in the 10th and 11th Centuries”, published in 2021 by Ph.D. Mihai Dragnea, the researcher at Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge.

The book is divided into seven chapters. In the introduction, the author – apart from the basic assumptions of the dissertation – outlines the development of relationships between the secular and religious authorities, taking into consideration the issues of contacts with pagans and expansion into pagan lands.

Chapter II (“Who were the Wends?”) is a sketch of the Polabian Slavs’ history. In this part author described the settlement network, taking into consideration the division into tribes and the individual settlement type’s names used in the sources. At this point, an important part of the settlement transformations is the overlapping of the former territorial units and the new, secular (marches) and clerical (bishoprics), which was a consequence of the subordination of these territories by the German state. However, it should be mentioned, that the main emphasis in this chapter is on the Abodrite tribes, which is not surprising considering the frequency of their occurrence in sources compared to other Slavic communities.

In the chapter entitled “A Brief History of Christianity across the Elbe” (Chapter III), the author describes not only the history of Christianity between the Elbe and the Oder but also the history of the conquest of these lands by German po-

litical organizations, starting with the wars of Charlemagne. He characterizes both the clergy and laypeople as responsible for the progress of Christianization (e.g. Adalbert, Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, Boso, Bishop of Merseburg, and the Abodrite princes). It also outlines the methods they use.

Chapter IV (“Wendish Idolatry in a Broader Context”) focuses on pagan reactions, seen as disturbances in the Christianization of the region. Reporting the course of events in the years 983, 1018, and 1066, he creates a picture of their participants (especially of princes Mstivoj and Gottschalk). Also tries to track down the reasons for these occurrences and their consequences for the course of the missionary action. For similar reasons, as in Chapter II, it focuses on the history of the Abodrites.

In the chapter entitled “Divination and Fortune-Tellers in Christianity” (Chapter V), the author presents the divination traditions functioning in early Christianity (“sortes sanctorum”), and the attitude (without exception negative) that the ecclesiastical authorities and theological authorities had towards them. This short chapter can be seen as an introduction to Chapter VI.

In this chapter (“Horse Divination among the Liutici”), the author focuses on the rituals performed in the Liutici temple in Radogoszcz. It begins with the presentation of ancient and Scandinavian analogies of the aforementioned rites. Then, analyzing in detail the account of Thietmar of Merseburg, the author tries to reconstruct the foundations of the functioning of the Liutici rituals, concluding its origins and the influence of Christianity on the final shape of the Redarian religion. At the same time, the author goes beyond the religious themes, entering his considerations about policy issues, which, in his opinion, are also a repercussion of religious influences.

In the chapter entitled “Rethra as the *sedes ydolatrie* of the Liutici” (Chapter VII), the author focuses in particular on the accounts of Adam of Bremen and Helmold of Bozau to discuss the topic of Retra’s position in the religious hierarchy of Wendish lands. At this point, the author only develops the thesis highlighted in the earlier chapters about the existence of a barbarized form of Christianity among the Polabian Slavs, whose institutions would be visible in the sources and would copy Christianity on many levels and areas. In this case, the author makes use of analogies to other than Liutici areas of the Wendish lands. This leads to the thesis that Wendish paganism in the strict sense did not exist at the time when the quoted sources were written (Thietmar, Adam of Bremen, Helmold). Instead, it depicts an apostatic religious structure whose opposition to Christianity is based on inheritance from old beliefs, and in particular from an aversion to fiscal and political dependence on the Saxon church.

The reviewed dissertation by Mihai Dragnea is another work by this historian dealing with the aforementioned subject. It extends the author’s earlier theses (Dragnea 2016, p. 57 et seq.), which did not cause controversy in the research community, and was received positively (Pychowski 2019, p. 57). In this case, the

mentioned extension of the propagated theses means entering the topic of the religious identity of the inhabitants of Wendish lands and is the biggest problem of the dissertation. The author states that the reason why the Wendish tribes were considered pagans was not the actual professing of the old faith, but a rebellion against the authority representing Christianity (Dragnea 2021, pp. 58-62). Such a view had appeared earlier in the literature (Janson 2010, p. 13 et seq., see earlier literature there).

According to the author, professing paganism or returning to it was not possible due to the deep and effective Christianization of the Polabian Slavs in the 10th century. One of the foundations of this conviction is the information about the catechesis carried out by the Bishop of Merseburg, Boso (Dragnea 2021, p. 30). However, two objections must be raised here. First of all, the information from Thietmar, which the author refers to, indicates rather the uniqueness of the bishop's attitude, not the norm. Secondly, it describes the activity of the Merseburg church, i.e. the one responsible for the catechization of the Serb people. This method seems to be quite effective, as evidenced by the lack of confirmed information about attempts to abandon the new faith. However, even in the areas inhabited by Serbs, religious syncretism prevailed, and the frequency of their participation in Christian rites left a lot to be desired, as mentioned by the author himself (Dragnea 2021, pp. 100-102).

Was the situation the same in other parts of the Wendish land? The author himself admits that the baptism of the Abodrites took place as a result of coercion, or even violence (Dragnea 2021, p. 38). At the same time, as proof of the consolidation of Christianity among the Abodrite elite before 983, Dragnea provides information taken from Helmold, i.e. from the second half of the 12th century (Dragnea 2021, p. 96). He himself cites facts that verify opinion about Christianity influences. Listing the missionary achievements of the Hamburg-Bremen Archbishop Adalbert recalls that as a result of his activity bishoprics in Mecklenburg (1050) and Retzburg (1053) and several churches (probably parishes) in these dioceses and the Oldenburg diocese were established. Dragnea notes that any missionary work was absent until the mid-eleventh century (Dragnea 2021, pp. 37-39). Even in the case of Oldenburg, the formation of the parish network couldn't take place before 1043, that is, before Adalbert take up the bishopric.

The case had to be no different among the Liutici. Mihai Dragnea admits that the missionary activity of the Magdeburg Archbishop Adalbert was based on "coercion and intimidation" and it is not known how individual acceptance of baptism was shaped and that there was no parish network in the Redar country (Dragnea 2021, p. 84).

The above opinions – quoted by the author himself – do not present rather favorable conditions for Christianization in the Merseburg style. The researcher seems to contradict himself in assessing the progress of the Christianization of Wendish lands. In the same paragraph, he states that the Polabian Slavs "were

converted”, that it is not known how many “accepted Christian baptism” and what shape the ecclesiastical organization on the right bank of the Elbe took, and that the presence of Christianity “must have been strong at least among the upper class”, since in the Ottonian time’s several bishoprics were established for the needs of Wends (Dragnea 2021, p. 46).

The most glaring examples of aversion to Christianity in the Wendish lands are the repeated uprisings against the new faith. The author tries to eliminate the anti-Christian overtones of the uprisings. And so the most important argument of Dragnea undermining the pagan identity of the insurgents of 983 is the participation in the events of Abodrite duke Mstivoj, whose Christian confession is quite well confirmed by sources (Dragnea 2021, pp. 48-52, 94-97; similarly: Janson 2010, s. 17-18). Here we can see the lack of knowledge of Polish literature, in which Mstivoj’s participation in the events of 983 has long been questioned (Labuda 1960, pp. 217-222) and so far this view has not been denied in the literature. Surprisingly, this also includes the papers used by the author (Rosik 2020, p. 86). On the other hand, when considering the death of Bishop John and the lack of information about other Christian victims of disturbances in Mecklenburg in 1066 (Dragnea 2021, pp. 55-56), the author omits the issue of a four-months earlier stoning of Abbot Answer, along with a group of Christians (perhaps monks) from Retzburg (Adamus Bremensis, p. 193). This fact significantly weakens the thesis that the uprisings were aimed only at clerical authorities, and not at ordinary Christians or clergymen.

Moving on to an attempt to characterize the actual religious identity of the Wends, Dragnea stated that Radogost was rather the high priest of Rethra than a deity. Moreover, this priest did not have to represent and profess the pagan religion at all. In the author’s interpretation, the “ministry” mentioned by Thietmar were the service of this person, and the most important religious conflict of the Wendish lands would be the rivalry between the “prelate-like” high priest of Rethra and the Saxon church organization (Dragnea 2021, pp. 83, 89, 92-93). Unfortunately, the researcher, while constructing this quite revolutionary hypothesis, did not support it with any source argument or even an analogy. The entire inference is based only on quite loose associations (e.g. the purple decoration of Radogost’s bed, or describing him with the word “princeps”). It is important as it binds the whole concept of the dissertation.

The connection between the cult of Radogost and Christianity seems to be convinced by calling him a prince (“princeps”) of demons. The researcher associates this term with Christian rulers, or those who recognize Christian domination, like Niklot after his submission to Henry the Lion (Dragnea 2021, pp. 89-93). The problem is that the term “princeps” has a much broader meaning (Bogucki 1998, pp. 555-557; Boroń 2010, pp. 56, 78-79). For example, Helmold calls Niklot “princeps” even before the events mentioned by Dragnea (Helmold, pp. 104, 112). After all, Satan himself is also referred to as a “princeps” (Rosik 2020, pp. 108-109,

217, note 107). Another clue pointing to the dominant influence of Christianity among Liutici meant to be the matter of unanimity in voting at rallies, and the repercussions of the lack of it. The whole concept was supposed to result from the adoption of the Christian vision of obedience to religious authorities. The way to repent of this “sin” was to sacrifice a bunch of hair. This opinion fails to take into account, however, that unanimity was the standard way of making decisions at rallies in other regions as well (Boroń 1999, pp. 83-85).

Dragnea also proposes a new way of unraveling the settlement name of Radogoszcz and the deity name of Radogost as “the spirit of Redars” (Old Saxon: *gest/gast*, Old High German: *geist*, English: *ghost*) (Dragnea 2021, p. 85). This idea seems adopted from H. Janson (Janson 2010, p. 26). In the argumentation of the thesis – interesting, if only because of the possibility of the origin of it from the name of the tribe – there is no reference to the fact that the place name Rade-gast (Polish: Radogoszcz, Russian: Радогоща, Belarusian: Радагошча, Ukrainian: Радогощ) has analogies in other parts of the Slavic region (*Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego*, pp. 390-391). Therefore, there is no reason to assume that the name has been created by German chroniclers. The connection between the place name and the first name explained S. Rosik (Rosik 2020, pp. 215-216, see earlier literature there).

Recapitulating: for Dragnea the only reason why the Polabian Slavs are called pagans is the fact of rebellion against the secular and spiritual power of the Saxons. However, they did so without rejecting Christian God. Their religion would be syncretism, containing many elements of paganism and Christianity, which, in the author’s understanding, makes them true apostates. The Liutici were supposed to copy the hierarchy of church structures. The author, referring to Thietmar, claims that the tribe was a well-organized and centralized institution under the leadership of a high priest (Dragnea 2021, pp. 79-80, 92-93, 97, 108, 110-111). Leaving aside the dubious question of hierarchy and religious centralization among the Liutici (Rosik 2020, pp. 141-142), it should be noted that the Merseburg bishop only mentions a group of priests, without specifying any high priest (Thietmar, pp. 302-305, 478). While building his concept, the author did not reserve any hard conceptual framework for syncretism, Christianity, and paganism. It turns out that the Wends, professing many gods (Thietmar, p. 302), could remain Christians. The concept of syncretism, therefore, works only in one direction for the author: everything that has adopted any Christian elements becomes Christian. Most importantly, however, when using the concept of apostasy, he does not take into account that its image may be only a result of the specific perception of the character of Christianization by chroniclers, according to which entire communities could be converted regardless of the individual baptisms of their members and the actual progress of catechesis (Rosik 2017, pp. 70-71; 2024, pp. 187, 249, 369; cf.: Rechowicz 1966, s. 69-70). This is an evident step back compared to the author’s earlier paper, where he formulated his opinions more carefully (Dragnea 2016, pp. 57-58, 60).

This does not mean, however, that none of the author's theses are worth paying attention to. The idea of Adam of Bremen adopting the name "Rethra" from the Spartan Great Rhetra should be considered interesting and worth further research (Dragnea 2021, p. 90).

An important disadvantage of the dissertation seems to be the uncritical adoption of Erwin von Wienecke's optics (Dragnea 2021, pp. 45-46). The views of this German historian were criticized by Stanisław Rosik (2020, p. 13 et seq.), whose book was used by Mihai Dragnea (2021, pp. 9, 41-42, 63, 86). Nevertheless, he did not follow Rosik's instructions, nor did he enter into discussions with the aforementioned criticism. The lack of polemics with historiography (mainly Polish) is one of the most serious accusations against the dissertation. As already mentioned, this is the case even with the cited literature. Perhaps many of the author's theses would gain more argumentative power and broader support after confronting them with the opposite opinions of researchers. The last remark is especially important from the perspective of the nature of the paper and the author's theses: brave, revolutionary, and undoubtedly interesting.

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