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What Would Jesus Do? Create a Written Language

Christianity has made its way through time and space, affecting the progression and civilizations of many cultures all throughout the world. The effects of Christianity are evident, in many things from the way people live their day to day lives to what they name their children. Christianity has also made impacts on societies that are not as well known. One less commonly known impact of Christianity is its role in the creation of the written language Cyrillic, or more importantly the precursor to Cyrillic, Glagolitic. Today, I will discuss the effect of Christianity on the language creating process of Cyril and Methodius. To properly examine this, I will explain the differences in the spreading of Western Christianity (better known as modern day Catholicism) and Eastern Christianity (better known as modern day Orthodox). I will also explain who Cyril and Methodius were, and the role that the church played in their decision to create a written language for Slavic civilizations that up until that point did not have one. Finally, I will explore the controversy that emerged from the creation of Glagolitic. All of these points will be necessary to justify that Christianity was the reason for the creation of Glagolitic and its successor Cyrillic.

The East and West church, much like their modern counterparts, had their differences when it came to just about everything (other than that Jesus is the savior). They had differences in beliefs and traditions, and most important for the scope of this paper they differed in the ways in which they spread those beliefs and traditions amongst the early Slavs. These differences led to a greater separation between the Churches, “The struggle to raise the prestige and power of the

Churcher was reflected in their efforts to increase the area of their influence by conversion of the pagan peoples beyond the pale of contemporary civilizations.” (Barford, 211).

The Western Church, had a very specific vision for how they wanted to spread Christianity amongst the Slavs. They had the notion that, Christianity was to be spread in its purest form, meaning it should only be written and spoken in its original holy language. This was problematic, due to the fact that the majority of Slavs were illiterate. Only the most wealthy and powerful were literate, which caused a hierarchy of those who were Christian (and therefore educated) preceding over those who clung to their pagan beliefs. “Very often, conversion was achieved by the baptism of a native ruler who then encourages his subjects to follow, since the ruler had a decisive influence on the political form of society and controlled the ideological sphere within which it functioned.” (Barford, 211).

In these societies Christianity became a source of power, over conscientious desire for one God. “The sacral was a very important area of community life; and religion was not determined by individual conscience alone.” (Barford, 211). The Slavs were not converting for their desire to be Christian, but the need to appropriate to themselves to the new norms.

The Eastern Church, had a contrasting vision for how they wanted to spread Christianity amongst the Slavs. They focused their importance on spreading Christianity to the greatest number of people, even at the cost of (what the western church would refer to as tainting it) by allowing it to be written and spoken in a language other than its original holy language. Christianity being taught in the Slavs native language opened doors for those who were not of higher stature and therefore not educated in Western languages.

However, teaching Christianity in the Slavs native language was not enough, due to the fact that they still had not established a written language to transcribe the liturgy. “An effect of the missions among the Slavs (among whom, unlike some of the population of the barbarian kingdoms of the west, knowledge of Latin or Greek was likely to be extremely meagre) was the establishment of a need to translate the gospels and liturgy into Slav languages...” (Barford, 215).

The East Church deployed missionaries as a way to spread Christianity amongst the Slavs. The Prince of Moravia, Prince Rastislav requested that the Byzantine Emperor Michael III send missionaries to Moravia, missionaries that could teach of the Gospel in Moravia’s native tongue; brothers Cyril and Methodius were chosen for this task.

Cyril (originally known as Constantine) and his brother Methodius were missionaries from Byzantine. Cyril was a professor of philosophy at the patriarchal school in Constantinople. The two brothers were born in Thessalonica, in present-day Greece. Cyril was born in about 827–828 and Methodius about 815–820. Cyril was born Constantine, but later decided to change his name upon becoming a monk in Rome. Methodius was born Michael but later decided to change his name to Methodius upon becoming a monk at Mysian Olympus. (Smith, 132-138). It is still up for debate whether the brothers were of Slavic or Byzantine Greek origin, or both. They did however know Slavic which allowed them to teach the Slavs in their native tongue.

Cyril and Methodius decided to translate liturgical books into the Old Slavic language that was understandable to the general population, but as the words of that language could not be easily written by using either the Greek or Latin alphabets. Cyril and Methodius used their knowledge of Slavic languages to create a written language tailored to the Slavs. Cyril decided to

invent a new script, Glagolitic, which he based on the local dialect of the Slavic tribes from the Byzantine Salonika region. “The establishment of a literary language with its own scripts (Glagolitic, Cyrillic) was an important step, potentially allowing the new beliefs to reach all members of the congregation, and not just those versed in the classical languages.” (Barford, 215)

Glagolitic was based on some form of the Greek alphabet. The translations of liturgy were based on a Slavic dialect of the Thessalonica area, which formed the basis of the literary standard known as Old Church Slavonic. Old Church Slavonic was used as the liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox church between the 9th and 12th centuries. A more modern form of the language, known as Church Slavonic, appeared during the 14th century and is still used in the Russian Orthodox church.

Glagolitic is the precursor to modern day Cyrillic. Cyrillic is still used in many modern day Slavic languages. It is most commonly known for its title as the national alphabet of Russia. Cyrillic is a later adaptation of Glagolitic by the followers of Cyril after his death in 885.

The creation of Glagolitic, was met with political backlash, and hatred towards Cyril and Methodius. “The introduction of a Slav liturgy further threatened German attempts at cultural imperialism as a means of domination” (Barford, 219). This perceived threat led to raised tensions and even an attack by the Germans on Moravia in 864.

The German archbishop of Salzburg was unhappy with the brothers because, he claimed that their missions had made their way into territory in which he had control and the people used the Latin form of liturgy. Cyril and Methodius had to make their way to Rome to defend their

cause to Pope Adrian II, thankfully for the brothers he sided with them, and formally authorized the use of Slavonic liturgy.

During their time in Rome, Methodius was ordained a priest, and Cyril fearing his time was nearing its end became a monk. Cyril passed away only fifteen days later, and Methodius was left to carry out their work alone.

Methodius returned to his work with the Slavs shortly after, but began with avoiding Moravia due to the current political circumstances of the country. However, avoidance of Moravia altogether was not feasible for him.

When Rastislav lost power over Moravia his nephew Svatopluk became his successor. Unfortunately for Methodius, Svatopluk did not support him as his uncle once had. Methodius was captured and tried by German clergy in 870, during this time he was treated heinously. He was later liberated by the intervention of Pope John VIII. After which time he returned to Rome to plead his case once more for the use of Slavic liturgy.

Unfortunately, after the death of Methodius, Pope Stephen V recanted the ruling made by John VIII and outlawed the use of the Slavonic liturgy. Disciples of Cyril and Methodius were then driven into exile. This exile had a positive outcome despite its intentions. The followers of Cyril and Methodius were only motivated to work harder because of this action taken upon them. Through the efforts of their disciples Slavonic liturgy made its way all throughout Eastern Europe and produced the Bulgarian and Serbian Orthodox churches (which still use the Slavonic liturgy). Russia, which converted to Orthodoxy about a century after Methodius died, continues to use his Cyrillic alphabet to this day.

Christianity has long been known to have a large impact on the communities in which it touches. From causing wars, to creating peace, and just about everything step in between Christianity (and religion in general) has impacted millions if not billions of lives over the course of history. Although not always very well-known Christianity has had an everlasting impact on Slavic nations. This impact was its role in the creation of the written language Cyrillic, or more importantly the precursor to Cyrillic, Glagolitic.

Today, I discussed the effect of Christianity on the language creating process of Cyril and Methodius. To properly examine this, I explained the differences in the spreading of Western Christianity (better known as modern day Catholicism) and Eastern Christianity (better known as modern day Orthodox). I also explained who Cyril and Methodius were, and the role that the church played in their decision to create a written language for Slavic civilizations that up until that point did not have one. Finally, I explored the controversy that ensued the creation of Glagolitic.

In conclusion, all of these points were necessary to justify that Christianity was the reason for the creation of the Glagolitic and its successor Cyrillic. At the mass in Victory square, Warsaw, Pope John Paul II said, “it is impossible then to exclude Christ from the history of human race anywhere in the world in any geographical longitude and latitude.” As we saw today Slavic nations were no exception.

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