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**MONOGRAPHIES 47**

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**“PEARLS BEFORE SWINE”  
MISSIONARY WORK IN BYZANTIUM**

adapted from a translation from Russian by

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## FOREWORD

During the Middle Ages orthodoxy spread from the Greeks to other peoples. The present work examines how this process developed and, most importantly, how the Greeks themselves viewed it. Why did they strive to baptize “barbarians,” and what, in their opinion, occurred to the “barbarians” as a result of that baptism? Henceforth for economy’s sake the word “barbarian,” which will be repeated many hundreds of times, will not appear in quotation marks; its evaluative and relative nature will be assumed.

The author has not set out to write a history of Christianity in barbarian lands: The present study focuses on mission. This is a work of cultural history, and not of theology or church history, the first monograph in international scholarship specifically dedicated to the phenomenon of Byzantine missionizing as a whole.

The monograph was completed over an extended period of time. Research trips to libraries overseas, made possible thanks to support from IREX (1995), the British Academy (1997), the Onassis Foundation (1998), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (1999, 2003), and the Fulbright Program (2000–2001), were of great benefit to the author. A Research Support Scheme grant from the Soros Foundation permitted the writing of the text. The author likewise expresses deep appreciation to those colleagues who agreed to review the manuscript or portions of it and provide their opinions.

## INTRODUCTION

The word “mission” (Latin *missio*, “sending”) has several meanings, but it will be used in this work with one alone. Mission will be defined as the activity of a religious organization in recruiting non-believers into its ranks. Christianity is a missionary religion. The church that professes this religion describes itself as “catholic and apostolic,” that is universal and established by Apostles (“messengers”), the first missionaries sent to proclaim the new faith. Thus it announces its goal of embracing the entire “universe” or all humanity, and the mission to be the means of attaining this goal. “And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” (Romans 10.14–15). Mission rooted as it is in Christianity’s very essence, its missionary zeal might seem to have always remained a constant. Yet, a specialist in medieval missionizing moderates this view. While admitting that “the contemporary observer is inclined to view the universality of mission as a requirement which inevitably arises from the primary teaching of Christianity,”<sup>1</sup> he points out that missionary consciousness was different in different eras, that each missionary was prompted to his activity by various motives, and that each generation of missionaries read the evangelical missionary precepts in a new way.

Referring to Christianity as a missionary religion is somewhat anachronistic to the extent that the linguistic term “mission” was not fully developed until the early modern period. The Greek term, which denoted the mission of the Apostles, ἀποστολή, was reserved for them alone, and was never applied to anyone else. The Latin term *missio* was only officially introduced in 1622. Most obviously, just as the hero of Molière’s “The Bourgeois Gentleman” spoke in prose without realizing it, medieval churches in the East and in the West could practice mission without using the term. All the same, superimposing the grid of contemporary concepts upon an ancient culture involves the risk of misrepresenting one’s own terms of reference. I have kept this danger in mind throughout this entire work.

To state again the task at hand, it is desirable to clarify what the orthodox Greeks thought about their obligation to sow the true faith among the barbarians, what steps they took in this direction, how they evaluated their successes and failures, and how they interacted with the baptized barbarians up to the point when the latter created their own churches. Constantinople’s interactions with the newly created orthodox churches will only be discussed to the extent that the Greeks themselves continued to consider their activity there as ‘missionary’ in nature. Our other task consists of understanding how the barbarians, once Christianized, changed the way the Greeks perceived them. Could a barbarian, once baptized, cease being a barbarian in Byzantine eyes? This, in turn, raises a new question: how did the goal of religious enlightenment correlate with Roman imperialism and Greek cultural snobbery?

1. FRITZE 1969: 123.

Our attention will focus on missions dispatched by Constantinople, rather than on missionary activity by the “heretical”<sup>2</sup> churches (Monophysites, Nestorians) independent of Byzantium. This is a difficult line to draw. For example, in one period Constantinople considered Monophysitism to be a tolerable form of Christianity for a mission outside the Empire, while already persecuting it within its borders. Nevertheless, some sort of distinction must be made since the history, for example, of the Nestorian missions to China, an enormous and significant topic, has nothing to do with Byzantium. The missionary activity of the Syrian Orthodox church is a borderline case. Multilingual Syrians possessed an inherently missionary spirit to a great degree and Syrian clergy were the engine of many missionary undertakings, such as the enlightening of Armenia, even attempting to create an Armenian alphabet; Georgian, Persian, and Arabian orthodoxy had Syrian roots. Elaboration on this theme will be limited, however, due to the author’s lamentable unfamiliarity with Syriac.<sup>3</sup> All texts in Syriac included in this study have been accessed in translation. As regards the missionizing of the Arab Melkite church, an orthodox church that acted outside the sphere of Imperial jurisdiction, it does not come under the designation of “Byzantine.”

The gradual Christianization of the barbarians settled on the Imperial territory (resulting, for instance, in the formation of an ethnic community of orthodox Turks–Gagauz) is a separate topic, as marginal to this work as the conversion to orthodoxy from heresies and Catholicism. It is the Christianization of barbarian pagans beyond the boundaries of the Empire that shall be examined first and foremost.

The phenomenon of Byzantine missionary activity has been insufficiently studied to the present day. Certain periods, particularly mission in the early church, or individual episodes, such as the Cyrillo-Methodian mission, the conversion of Bulgaria, and the baptism of Rus’, have been more fully examined. The present work will touch upon well-known events from the point of view of Byzantine missionary history, without repeating, as far as possible, what has already been said. In examining mission from the standpoint of a cultural history, this work will not explore the theological aspects of missionizing.

Many works mention Byzantine mission in passing. However, only a few scholars have devoted attention to the phenomenon of Byzantine mission as a whole. These include several chapters in collective works and a single conceptual article from the pen of Ihor Ševčenko.<sup>4</sup> A few publications have appeared recently.<sup>5</sup> Several works on this topic have also been published by the present author.<sup>6</sup>

2. The ideological concept of “heresy” has a real meaning only in opposition to a “true faith” and will only be used in the present work for economy’s sake, in order to avoid such cumbersome descriptions as “a Christian doctrine having fallen out of favor with the state authorities in Constantinople.”

3. See now: SAINT-LAURENT 2009.

4. BECK 1967; HANNICK 1978; DAGRON 1991; SHEPARD 2002; ŠEVČENKO 1989.

5. STREK 2010a; STREK 2010b; ANGELOV 2011.

6. IVANOV 1989; IVANOV 2007; IVANOV 2008 etc.