



Mihai Dragnea, *Christian Identity Formation Across the Elbe in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (Christianity and Conversion in Scandinavia and the Baltic Region, c. 800–1600, vol. 1), Peter Lang, New York–Bern–Berlin–Brussels–Vienna–Oxford–Warsaw 2021, ss. VIII + 118, ISSN 2694-555X (print), ISSN 2694-5568 (online), ISBN 978-1-4331-8431-4 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4331-8451-2 (ebook pdf), ISBN 978-1-4331-8452-9 (epub), ISBN 978-1-4331-8453-6 (mobi).

The book by Mihai Dragnea reaffirms the author's interest in the history of the Baltic Sea Region in the High Middle Ages.¹ The main research questions, summarized in chapter one (*Introduction*, pp. 1–9), are: what did it mean to be Christian for the Slavs settled between the Elbe and Oder rivers in the 10th–11th centuries? Was the nature of their Christianity purely religious, or was it also political? To what extent was the local Christian identity formed and perceived as being in contrast to paganism?

The author is aware of the cognitive restrictions imposed by sources of exclusively Christian origin on a researcher willing to tackle the title topic. He thus explains that his book “does not try to fill the gap between the historical reality of the Wendish *sacrum* and its image in the Latin sources. Yet we propose to offer to the reader both the context in which the religious identity of the Wends was formed, and to identify the architects. Moreover, the book presents the methodology and tools used to carry out the creation of a Christian identity” (p. 5).

Missing here is an explanation of how the author understands the concept of ‘Christian identity’ in general and in relation to the Middle Ages. The lack of such an explanation is even more surprising as we read: “[...] no one [scholar] focused on the religious identity of the Wends in theory and practice and thus the recent research does not offer any information on how it was created” (p. 5). Neither did Dragnea properly justify the book's chronological framework, especially the end time frame: the 11th century. It is only in the third chapter that we learn that the mission came to a standstill in the second half of the 11th century, and that its revival at the beginning of the 12th century was attributed to different factors, namely, it was associated with the presence “of lay and monastic settlers” (p. 31).

In addition to the aforementioned chapter one, the book is composed of six more chapters, as well as a summary, list of abbreviations and index. The footnotes were placed at the end of each chapter, which makes the reading a bit less convenient. There is no bibliography and, most importantly, a map of the area covered by the author is missing.

The role of chapter two: *Who were the Wends?* (pp. 11–24) is to introduce the reader to the proper subject of the book. The author recalls that the Germans used the name *the Wends* to refer to a heterogeneous group of Slavic *gentes*, who settled between

¹ See my review of his previous book: Marian DYGO, [rev.] Mihai DRAGENA, *The Wendish Crusade, 1147: The Development of Crusading Ideology in the Twelfth Century*, *Zapiski Historyczne*, vol. 86: 2021, issue 2, pp. 161–166, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15762/ZH.2021.17>.

the Elbe and Oder rivers. He believes that the name was ethnographic in nature, as was the name *Slavi*, while the tribal nomenclature was political. This view, however, could be questioned in connection with the title of „princeps / rex Slavorum”² which Helmold used in relation to Henry, the Obodrite Prince.

The author did not provide further insight into the nomenclature of: *gens, populus, natio*, which is closely related to the issue of Christian identity.³ On the other hand, he attached great importance to the source terminology concerning territorial divisions (*provincia, terra, regio*, etc.) trying to notice precision in its usage (Cf. e.g. p. 16).

The author makes another interesting claim stating that “by the term *provincia*, Helmold would have referred to the tribal residence” (p. 17). It is not convincing at all, because the term *provincia* refers to an area, not a centre of power. If Helmold writes: “Haec autem civitas [Oldenburg] sive provincia fortissimis quondam incolebatur viris”⁴, the conjunction ‘sive’ means the same as ‘et’. It is clear from the context that the word *provincia* here is synonymous with: “terra Wagirorum”. Moreover, it seems that Helmold paid more attention to central places (*civitates, urbes*), which were hubs of pagan or Christian worship, than to territorial structures.

Chapter three is entitled *A Brief History of Christianity across the Elbe* (pp. 25–44). The titular ‘History of Christianity’ is a description of the missionary effort undertaken against the Wends by their Christian neighbours. Dragnea highlights various aspects of this mission, such as chronology, promoters, hubs, methods. As far as the driving force behind the mission is concerned, he pointed to the idea of a ‘Christian empire’ which defended and disseminated God’s order on earth in the first chapter of the book. This idea, which was formed in Carolingian times, was adopted by the German rulers of the Saxon dynasty. While reading the book, the reader discovers that the ‘Christian empire’ is perhaps the most important analytical category for the author.

In chapter one Dragnea insists that “the inclusion of the newcomers in the *imperium Christianum* was made through baptism [...]. This proved to be a useful tool for the ecclesiastical authorities, because it was fundamental to Christian identity. [...] By accepting the *sacramentum* of baptism, the Wends affirmed their place in *Christianitas*” (p. 4). On the other hand, in chapter three he writes that it is difficult to capture the religious identity of the Wends because chroniclers did not precisely distinguish between pagans, apostates, catechumens, etc. (p. 37). He cites information provided by Adam of Bremen regarding Adalbert, Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen: “Quam ob rem tractavit sedulo per se ipsum ingredi legationem illam, si quam necdum conversis posset gentibus afferre salutem aut iam conversis addere perfectionem”⁵.

² *Helmolds Slavenchronik*, eds. Bernhard SCHMEIDLER, Johann Martin LAPPENBERG, Hannover 1937, p. 72 (lib. 1, cap. 36), p. 83 (lib. 1, cap. 41), p. 91 (lib. 1, cap. 46); Cf. p. 97 (lib. 1, cap. 49).

³ Cf. e.g. Benedykt ZIENTARA, *Populus – Gens – Natio. Einige Probleme aus dem Bereich der ethnischen Terminologie des frühen Mittelalters*, [in:]: *Nationalismus in vorindustrieller Zeit* (Studien zur Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, vol. 14), ed. Otto DANN, München 1986, pp. 11–20.

⁴ *Helmolds Slavenchronik*, pp. 23–24 (lib. 1, cap. 12).

⁵ ADAM VON BREMEN, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernhard SCHMEIDLER, Hannover–Leipzig 1917, p. 219 (lib. 3, cap. 72).

However, the cited passage seems to indicate that Adam of Bremen distinguished between the formal conversion associated with baptism, and personal conversion to God. While the former conversion established a collective Christian identity (being part of *Christianitas*), the latter served to shape individual identity. Archbishop Adalbert probably hoped that meeting him, a prominent figure, would cause a spiritual shock in many neophytes and send them on the path of profound Christian religiosity.

Adam's story of the mission under Emperor Otto I should also be cited: "magnus Otto subiugatis christianaeeque fidei copulatis Sclavorum gentibus inclytam urbem Magedburg [...] condidit, quam Sclavis metropolem statuens Adalbertum, summae sanctitatis virum, ibidem consecrari fecit archiepiscopum. [...] [multos] Sclavorum populos ille predicando convertit"⁶. He points out that while Otto brought faith to the *gentes*, Adalbert converted the *populos*. Were the missionary activities led by Adalbert carried out through "coercion and intimidation", as Dragnea writes (p. 33)? Let us note that the verb *subiugo* is referred to Otto, while the verbs: *converto*, *predico* – to Adalbert.

Dragnea devoted considerable attention to Boso, Bishop of Merseburg (pp. 29–32). Thietmar writes that before Boso became a bishop, "in oriente innumeram Christo plebem predicacione assidua et baptisate vendicavit"⁷. The word *plebs* here most likely refers to the congregation in relation to the bishop. Thus, the chronicler brought individual conversion to the fore, and thus also the individual aspect of Christian awareness.

The author of the book is particularly interested in the information provided by Thietmar about how Boso taught the *Kyrie eleison* prayer to the Slavs: "Hic ut sibi commissos eo facilius instrueret, Sclavonica scripserat verba et eos kirieleison cantare rogavit exponens eis huius utilitatem"⁸. According to Dragnea (p. 31), the story referred to catechumens who participated in the liturgy and was meant to refer to the act of penance. In any case, the author points out that Boso demonstrated the *utilitas* of this prayer to the Slavs, perhaps referring to the psalms, which mention deliverance that comes only from God (e.g., Ps. 41:4.10: "Ego dixi: Domine miserere mei [...] Tu autem Domine miserere mei")⁹. And this means that, according to Thietmar, Boso laid an emphasis on the formation of individual Christian identity in neophytes, which was concentrated on man's relationship with God.

We should also add that this very aspect of identity must have been important to Thietmar. For when he broached the subject of the immortality of the human soul, having the desire to reach the Slavs with the truth of immortality, he concluded: "Ergo tu homo, [...] da pre omnibus gratias altissimo, retribuens ei pro possibilitate tua, quae tibi fecit miseratione sua"¹⁰. Thietmar was so irritated when the Slavs twisted the words

⁶ Ibid., p. 71 (lib. 2, cap. 15).

⁷ THIETMAR VON MERSEBURG, *Chronik*, ed. Werner TRILLMICH, Darmstadt 2011, p. 74 (lib. II, cap. 36).

⁸ Ibid., p. 74 (lib. 1, cap. 37).

⁹ Biblical quotations from: *Biblia Sacra Latina vulgatæ editionis. Auctoritate Sixti V et Clementis VIII*, London [s.a.].

¹⁰ THIETMAR VON MERSEBURG, lib. I, cap. 14, p. 18.

Kyrie eleison to 'ukrivolsa' because he was so sensitive with regard to the relationship between man and God.

Let us now proceed to chapter four: *Wendish Idolatry in a Broader Context* (pp. 47–67). The author again points to the relationship that existed between the Saxons' political expansion and the mission (see above), and to the fact that "the payment of tribute was a defining criterion of religious status and thus a sign of obedience to the *imperium Christianum* ruled by the emperor" (p. 47). On the other hand, Dragnea reminds us that chroniclers condemned the Saxon wealthy citizens for their fiscal exploitation of the Slavs, which led to their apostasy. It is worth recording that the arguments of the chroniclers were of religious nature. For example, Thietmar pointed out the community-wrecking sins and transgressions committed by Christians, thus he referred to both aspects of Christian consciousness: the individual (a Christian's relationship to God) and the collective (a Christian's relationship to other Christians).¹¹

The author devotes a fair amount of attention to the Slavic uprising of 1018, based on the chronicles of Adam of Bremen and Thietmar (pp. 49–53). Interestingly, according to Thietmar, the uprising broke out in February, a month which is worshipped by pagans with purification offerings and gifts.¹² Dragnea is also considering a hypothesis that "It is very likely that the uprising started when the Christians celebrated the Candlemas, also known as the Festival of the Purification of the Virgin Mary" (p. 50). And more: "The refusal of the Obotrites to be purified, brought them the label of idolaters" (p. 51).

However, it should be noted that Thietmar is reticent about the Marian theme, while being more vocal about the Christological theme, which is obviously related to the presentation of Jesus at the temple. Thus, Thietmar writes that the 'imago Crucifixi' was cut up, that the churches erected 'ad honorem et famulatum Christi' were destroyed, that the sweet yoke of Christ was shaken off, that the 'membra Christi' should weep because of this and 'complain to their Head' ("hoc capiti conquerantur suo").

The presentation of Jesus at the temple is God's gift to humanity represented by Simeon, who sings a hymn on the salvation of the peoples (Luke 2:25–35). Jesus' death on the cross was the climax of his mission. And so 'imago Crucifixi truncata est'. The phrase 'membra Christi' is of particular interest. St. Paul wrote the following about Christians: "Vos autem estis corpus Christi, et membra de membro" (1 Corinthians 12:27). The Church is like a living organism in which every organ is essential for the proper functioning of the whole. The head of the Mystical Body mentioned by Thietmar is Christ.

The author stops briefly over Adam of Bremen's account of how the Obodrites dealt cruelly with John Scotus, Bishop of Mecklenburg in 1066 (pp. 55–58). He points out that the chronicler writes only about John's martyrdom, and does not mention the fate of other clergymen.¹³ According to Dragnea, the chronicler meant to emphasize that John was killed on account of his function of a bishop and the prerogatives associated with it. By focusing on John's function, Thietmar wished to emphasize the fact

¹¹ Ibid., p. 104, 106 (lib. 3, cap. 17–18).

¹² Ibid., p. 444 (lib. 8, cap. 5): "Haec abominabilis presumptio fit mense Februario, qui a gentilibus lustracione et muneris debiti exhibicione venerandus ab infernali deo Plutone, qui Februus dicitur, hoc nomen accepit".

¹³ ADAM VON BREMEN, pp. 193–196 (lib. 3, cap. 51).

that the rebels were idolaters. Thus, Dragnea suggests that we look at the bishop's fate primarily as being a representative of the *imperium Christianum*, rather than a follower of Christ. And this is the author's key thesis regarding the interpretation of the Slavic uprisings: "All Wendish uprisings were described by contemporary authors as acts of disobedience. Because of that, the Wends were depicted in various ways: pagans, idolaters, apostates, rebels, and so forth" (p. 58). Dragnea points to the context related to the Gregorian Reform movement of the 11th century: in the language of the protagonists of this reform, disobedience to the pope as head of *Christianitas* was referred to as idolatry (p. 59). This is that broader context of Wendish idolatry mentioned in the title of chapter four.

However, one should not lose sight of the expressive description of John Scotus' martyrdom "pro confessione Christi". One might arrive at a hypothesis that Adam was inspired by the epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews. In chapter eleven of this epistle Christians are shown heroic examples of faith, starting with the Old Testament. Paul used the word *ludibrium* here, which was otherwise unknown in the New Testament, and used only twice in the Old Testament. The word *ludibrium* appears in Adam of Bremen's chronicle (Bishop John was "per singulas civitates Sclavorum ductus ad ludibrium"). Bishop John was thus portrayed as a witness to the faith who represents all persecuted Christians (the chronicler writes: Slavs murdered those "qui perstiterunt in fide"). In turn, based on the information provided by Adam: "in derisionem Salvatoris nostri etiam cruces a paganis truncatae sunt" one can guess that he meant indicating the correspondence between the manner in which the crosses were destroyed (cutting their arms), and the way Bishop John was put to death (decapitation and cutting off the limbs). The portrayal of martyrdom for the faith was indeed spectacular.

A short chapter five: *Divination and Fortune Tellers* (s. 69–74) serves as an introduction to chapter six: *Horse Divination among the Liutici* (pp. 75–88). Both chapters could be successfully combined with each other. The author's considerations centre around Thietmar's account of the pagan cult among the Redarier, with particular emphasis on divination practices. However, before we discuss this issue, it should be mentioned that Dragnea also took into account the information given by Thietmar about the propitiatory sacrifices of humans and animals made by the Normans and Danes for their crimes on the island of Zeeland in Lederun, every nine years "mense Ianuario, post hoc tempus, quo nos theophaniam Domini celebramus"¹⁴. The chronicler condemned human sacrifice and cited the *Book of Exodus*, which says: "Insontem et iustum non occides: quia aversor impium" (23:7). Thietmar's statement is commented by Dragnea as follows: "What surprises us is that the chronicler mentioned that only human sacrifice was forbidden by God, while animal sacrifice was allowed." (p. 76). Was this really the chronicler's intention? The verse from the Book of Exodus refers to judicial murder.¹⁵ In the context of the feast of Epiphany, the verse points to Jesus as the victim of such murder, and that this sacrifice was perfect and further sacrifices, including animals, are not required (cf. Hbr 9).

¹⁴ THIETMAR VON MERSEBURG, p. 20 (lib. 1, cap. 17).

¹⁵ *Nowy komentarz biblijny*, vol. 2: *Księga Wyjścia*, ed. by Janusz LEMAŃSKI, Częstochowa 2009, p. 496.

But let us return to the Slavs. The author juxtaposes two pieces of information regarding Riedegost given by Thietmar: first the urbs of Riedegost is mentioned, which is where a temple of deities and goddesses led by Zuarisici was located,¹⁶ and later we read: “civitas supramemorata principalem tenet monarchiam”¹⁷. According to Dragnea, “The mention of Riedegost as a *civitas* only in connection with its administrative importance might emphasize the Christian ecclesiastical model adopted by the Liutici” (p. 79). Based on this assumption, he concludes that “the obedience of the Liutici to a false priesthood disobedient to the Saxon ecclesiastical authorities caused them to be described as idolaters. In this case the idols would be regional high priests, adored by the Liutici and honoured by their *ministri*, with prerogatives similar to those of Christian bishops, but who chose to have their own ecclesiastical organization” (pp. 79–80). Surprisingly, the idols are identified with high priests; this is a result of the removal of the question of faith outside the scope of the author’s considerations. At the same time, Thietmar asks the reader to keep away from the Liutici and adds: “divinarum mandata scripturarum ascultando adimple”¹⁸. The chronicler puts the issue of faith to the foreground.

In chapter seven: *Rethra as the sedes ydolatriae of the Liutici* (pp. 89–105) the author continues the manner of interpretation presented in the previous chapter. First of all, he expresses the view that Redigast, whom Adam refers to as the principal deity (*princeps demonum*) in the aforementioned *urbs / civitas* Riedegost¹⁹, may not have been so much an idol as a high priest who was worshipped as a deity. Although Adam mentions that “Simulacrum eius auro, lectus ostro paratus”, Dragnea associates purple with the colour of a bishop, and is only one step from recognizing Redigast as the spiritual leader of the Liutici, or even a rival to Adalbert the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen at that time. Additionally, the author says that Redigast may not have been a pagan at all! The fact that the chronicler referred to him as a demon was meant to emphasize the departure of the Redarier from Christian faith and hostility towards Church dignitaries. The cult of Redigast, a spiritual leader, was to be spread by the *ministri*, whom Thietmar also mentions.²⁰ For, according to the author, the word *ministri* meant “either clerics or servants, who were in the service of a bishop” (p. 92), and not simply priests who performed duties in the temple in Riedegost. The *ministri* were to be rivals of the Saxon clergy. According to the author, the name *Zuarasici* mentioned above was not a substitute name for Redigast (or rather, the leader of the Liutici), but was a name of an independent deity worshipped in Riedegost.

Thus, according to Dragnea, Christian identity of the Wends boiled down primarily to their relationship to the *imperium Christianum*. Being part of this *imperium* is not to be overlooked, of course. In connection with this, it is quite informative what Adam of Bremen wrote about King Henry I as the one who contributed to the dissemination of Christianity: „[populi Sclavorum] et regi tributum et Deo christianitatem

¹⁶ THIETMAR VON MERSEBURG, p. 268 (lib. 6, cap. 23).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 268 (lib. 6, cap. 25).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁹ ADAM VON BREMEN, p. 78 (lib. 2, cap. 21).

²⁰ THIETMAR VON MERSEBURG, p. 268 (lib. 6, cap. 24).

ultra promitterent”²¹. The word *christianitas* most likely means clerical jurisdiction in this context.²² Secular and clerical jurisdictions indicated the range of *imperium Christianum*, or speaking more broadly, Christian culture.

However, the author absolutises the significance of being subjected to the *imperium* as a factor that shapes the Christian identity of the Wends, even at the cost of an extremely risky interpretation of the source material. Christianity as a revealed religion, as well as pagan religion were lost in the book. However, the existence of such chronicles as that of Bishop Thietmar’s means that their authors recognized both the problem of Christian identity arising from personal faith in God in Jesus Christ, as well as the problem of collective identity which stems from the membership in the Church as a community of believers. The author closed the subject with the statement that the Slavic elites were heavily christianized, that beyond all of that some ‘pseudo-Christianity’ prevailed, and that such a state could continue even when subjection to *imperium Christianum* was shaken off (pp. 96, 107; cf. p. 55).

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²¹ ADAM VON BREMEN, p. 56 (lib. 1, cap. 56).

²² Dragnea interprets the meaning of the word *christianitas* somewhat differently: The Slavs “promised to Henry the payment of the tribute, and to God that they would become Christians” (p. 28).

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