

***Homo religiosus: the phenomenon of Poland's Mieszko I***

The full significance of Mieszko I's decision to adopt Christianity in 966 has generally evaded Polish historiography. This is understandable regarding recent generations of Polish scholars, as the dogmas imposed during the country's communist period had the effect of preserving the rationalist skepticism which Jacob Burckhardt, for instance, had applied in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. toward understanding the conversion of Constantine the Great<sup>1</sup>. That reductionist approach, often labeled "scientism" in Poland, dismisses the etiological power of religious beliefs and motives in history's dynamics – and it was by and large rejected in Western scholarship roughly a century ago.<sup>2</sup> Yet as the medieval historian Richard Fletcher observed already a decade into the post-Cold War era, "This line of argument has held some appeal for historians of a Marxist inclination, of whom a few may still be encountered in remote places"<sup>3</sup>. Polish historians might chuckle upon reading that – or cringe, as the case may be. For the shoe certainly fits.

The structural realities of the Soviet bloc of course compounded this problem, inasmuch as they fostered the virtual autarky of national scholarly communities. Thus, until the demise of communism, Polish historians were importantly cut off from the community of Western scholars. Their ensuing lack of skill with Western languages only deepened the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*, Basel 1853.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, London, New York 2013, p. 285-286.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 238

isolation<sup>4</sup> – and this goes far in justifying what, until recently, was a pronounced allergy toward comparative studies, one of many cases being the conversion of Mieszko I.

These two factors together – the once compulsory, but still lingering ‘Daltonism’, as I sometimes call it, together with the aversion to comparative studies – led to a very truncated grasp of Mieszko’s “acceptance of baptism”, as is the shorthand in Polish. Most certainly the *impact* of Mieszko’s decision for Poland’s subsequent history has been rightly (albeit variously) stressed all along, but the reasons historians (and untold hosts of teachers) have cited as underlying that decision are fundamentally misguided. For beyond their lack of comparisons to other rulers’ conversions and the crisp clarity that can bring, they also have tended to ignore both the powerful hold of paganism as a “political program” seeking *pax deorum*, and above all the selfsame nature of Christianity’s attractiveness for the pagan ruler. As Stanisław Trawkowski wrote in 1993, offering an early breath of fresh air, “For decades the positivist proclivities of the critical school [in Poland] confined the interests of historians of the Church to its organizational development, leaving the realm of religious experiences and attitudes aside”<sup>5</sup>.

Nonetheless, no breakthrough was soon in coming. One telling example of this is provided by Professor Gerard Labuda (1916-2010) who in 2002 published the biography *Mieszko I*, where we find a subchapter promisingly entitled “On the transition from the pagan cult to the Christian”<sup>6</sup>. Here Labuda writes: “What is most difficult to determine is the state of the religious mindset of the Polanians and other Polish tribes in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> c., during the period when they were discarding the polytheistic pagan cult and adopting the monotheistic,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Karol Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska Europa* [Barbarian Europe], Iskry, 2004, p. 466-7; also Marianne Sághy, “Medieval perspectives after the fall”, *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU*, vol. 15, 2009, p. 171-5, “English and American [medieval] scholarship [...] is the single most significant cultural influence the former socialist countries experienced in the past fifteen years” (p. 173).

<sup>5</sup> S. Trawkowski, “Początki Kościoła w Polsce za panowanie Mieszka I”, [in:] *Polska Mieszko I*, ed. J. M. Piskorski, Poznań 1993, p. 54. *Nota bene*: all translations of Polish-language sources are my own.

<sup>6</sup> G. Labuda, *Mieszko I*, Wrocław 2002, p. 217-223.

Christian worldview”<sup>7</sup>. The matter is undeniably difficult, and yet in what follows Labuda makes no attempt whatsoever at an answer. Rather, the scholar delves primarily into a linguistic dispute over whether the god appearing as “Nyja” in Jan Długosz’s famed 15<sup>th</sup>-c. *Annals* is one and the same as the god “Tja” mentioned by Polish bishops in 1415 (sic). In the end, Labuda discusses source-materials describing the process of Poland’s Christianization as not having been easy – and offers nothing about the issue as tabled: the religious mindset at the time of Mieszko’s conversion.

The primary objectives of this paper are: to offer non-Polish scholars a sense of Polish-language historiography concerning Mieszko I; to refute the major materialist explanations of his baptism; to describe the scope and sway of “empirical religiosity” in early medieval Europe and how, in its pagan form, empirical religiosity lent itself as a bridge to Christianity; and to highlight, on a comparative backdrop, the strikingly religious nature of Mieszko’s choice to adopt Christianity.

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What are the reasons traditionally cited for Mieszko’s baptism?<sup>8</sup>

(1) The most prominent stresses the dire threat posed by Ottonian Germany and argues that Mieszko adopted Christianity in order to rob the newly resurrected (as of February 962) Holy Roman Empire of the pretext to crusade against his pagan realm. That baptism was “the better part of valour”<sup>9</sup>. Further underlining the anti-German motive behind Mieszko’s decision, his baptism is nonetheless said to have been received “from Czech hands”.

(2) The second explanation highlights the material and civilizational benefits Mieszko sought in joining Christendom – in the words of one historian, that Christianization

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 217.

<sup>8</sup> These reasons, and their refutation, are treated at greater length in my book: P. E. Steele, *Nawrócenie i chrzest Mieszko I* (1st ed. Warsaw 2005), expanded 2nd ed. Warsaw 2016.

<sup>9</sup> N. Davies. *God’s Playground*. Vol. I, New York 1982, p. 63.

was “the price for modernizing the state”<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, in its openly Marxian form this argument holds that Christianization was to facilitate the feudalization then incumbent upon Poland’s Piast dynasty.

(3) The third, in a rare instance of comparison, draws on the case of Bořivoj I, the Czech ruler (r. ~870-889) who, together with his wife Ludmila, are revered as Bohemia’s Christianizing couple<sup>11</sup>. The story in question, found in the *Legend of Christian*<sup>12</sup>, concerns how Bořivoj was humiliated for his paganism and made to sit on the floor in the banquet hall of King Svatopluk of Great Moravia during a feast enjoyed by the Christian elite. No less than St. Methodius himself then scolded Bořivoj, imploring him to turn away from paganism – which the Czech ruler subsequently agreed to do. On the basis of this analogy, Polish literature explains that Mieszko I opted for baptism in order to overcome “the lowly stature of the pagan in the diplomatic protocol of the period”<sup>13</sup>.

(4) The fourth argues that Mieszko I, in establishing himself as a Christian ruler, aimed to strengthen his throne in line with the doctrine commonly dubbed “the divine right of kings” as importantly laid down by St. Paul: “Everyone is to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authorities exist have been appointed by God”<sup>14</sup>.

(5) The fifth argues that, in introducing a new, uniform religion for the peoples (“tribes”) within his expanding realm (as well as for the neighboring peoples he yet intended

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<sup>10</sup> H. Samsonowicz, “Pierwsze wejście do Europy”, *Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej*, Dec. 22, 1995, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Wihoda, “The beginnings of Christianity in Bohemia”, paper to be published later this year by the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Bažant, N. Bažantová, F. Starn, *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Durham NC 2010, p. 17-19.

<sup>13</sup> G. Labuda, *Mieszko...*, p. 103. Labuda also cites here the late VIII-cent. “prototype” account in *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* involving a priest named Ingo (whom Labuda calls a prince) who treated pagans “like dogs”. Cf. M. Barański, *Mieszko I i Bolesław Chrobry*, Warsaw 1999, p. 17-18; idem, “Chrzest Polski, Chrzest Litwy”, *W Sieci Historii*, nr. 04 (35), April 2016, p. 10-14; G. Pac, “Polska zaczęła się wraz z chrztem” - [Electronic resource]- available at: <http://dzieje.pl/artykulyhistoryczne/polska-zaczela-sie-wraz-z-chrztem>. See also H. Samsonowicz, *Dzień chrztu i co dalej...* (The day of baptism and then what?), Warsaw 2008, p. 62-63.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 13: 1. *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

to conquer), Mieszko sought to foster and facilitate their sense of unity – in accord with the principle *religio vincula societatis*.

As we see, these interpretive views<sup>15</sup> fall within a materialist paradigm, focusing as they do on geopolitics and sociotechnics. None of them stands up to criticism.

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The argument concerning the threat from Germany disregards the facts from the period of Mieszko's reign (ca. 960-992) – nevertheless it deeply meshed with Poland's post-WWII anxieties over German revanchism vis-à-vis the “Recovered Territories”, which in 1945 the Allies had ceded to Poland from Germany. Thus, postwar Poland's renewed presence along the Odra's right bank was buttressed by a state policy of extolling the Piast presence there in the early Middle Ages. The German menace (*Drang nach Osten* – i.e., the aggressive march eastward – in fact, a phrase coined not until the 19<sup>th</sup> c.) was likewise transposed all the way back to the days of Mieszko I.

However, our sources on the rule of Otto I make clear that the thrusts of his foreign policy hardly concerned the east. Most apt would be to subsume them under *Drang nach Süden* – for especially over the final dozen or so years of Otto's life (which precisely coincides with the *first* dozen or so years of Mieszko's reign), it was Italy (in particular, the papacy) that consumed virtually all of the emperor's time and efforts. Indeed, shortly after his intense entanglements with Pope John XII in Rome in 961-963, and then with Pope Leo VIII in 964 and early 965, Otto simply moved to the Eternal City, and remained there with his

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<sup>15</sup> There are others, as well, including the notion that Mieszko's baptism (treated, mistakenly, as part of the marriage contract with the Czech princess Dobrawa) was meant to break the Czech-Poľabian alliance. However, why the Piasts would have to forsake the religion of their ancestors and risk losing the favor of their gods, though pagan Poľabie could pact with Christian Bohemia, goes unexplained: Dariusz Sikorski argues the same in *Kościół w Polsce za Mieszka I I Bolesława Chrobrego*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Poznan 2011, p. 101 and 102-103.

court for six years, from 966 to 972. This *Drang nach Süden* goes far in explaining why we have such scant Ottonian sources on the lands ruled by Mieszko during Otto I's life<sup>16</sup>.

The source that has misled many historians into accepting the existence of a German threat to Mieszko's Poland was provided by Thietmar, the Bishop of Merseburg, in his *Chronicle*, written from 1012 until his death in 1018<sup>17</sup>. There, in Book II, chap. 9<sup>18</sup> he reports on matters from the year 963: "Gero, the margrave of the Eastern March, subordinated to the supremacy of the Emperor the Lusatians, Selpoli – and also Mieszko together with his subjects". However, beginning with professor Labuda shortly after the war, and extending to Tomasz Jasiński in Poznań today, this passage has been shown to be a mistake on Thietmar's part. As Professor Jasiński restated the case with utmost clarity in a paper published last year to commemorate the 1050<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mieszko's baptism, I shall quote him here:

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, **Hrotsvit**, in the surviving portions of her *Gesta Ottonis* ("Deeds of Otto", commissioned when Otto I was away living in Rome), mentions Mieszko not at all – nor any other Slavs, for that matter. I rely on *The Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Facsimile of the first edition (1501) with English translation*, ed. D.H. Price, Champaign IL 2015.

**Liudprand**, who served at Otto's court, in conversation with Basileus Nicephoros in Constantinople in 968, vaguely alludes to "Slavic peoples" under Otto, ones he claimed were mightier than Peter, king of the Bulgarians (*Embassy* – 16), but adds nothing more. We may nonetheless assume that Liudprand must have had in mind Mieszko and the Polanians, then the mightiest of the Slavs allied with Otto I. I rely on: *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*, trans. P. Squatriti, Washington D.C. 2007. Cf. Ibrahim Ibn Yakub's words made just two or three years earlier – namely, that Mieszko (the "king of the north") ruled over "the most extensive of the Slavic countries", and that he possessed a fearsome army: "He has three thousand men in armor [...] and one hundred of them means as much as ten hundred others" – on the basis of the translation by Tadeusz Kowalski, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, Kraków 1946, seria II, vol. I, p. 50.

The infamously selective **Widukind** (who omitted Italy from his accounts, never mentioned a single pope, wrote not a word about the creation in 968 of the archbishopric in Magdeburg or the bishopric in Poznań, and devoted a whopping 47 chapters of book III [viz. 23-69] to the otherwise marginal figure and Saxon outcast Wichman – whom Thietmar barely even referred to in his *Chronicle*) does mention Mieszko twice by name in Book III (where, in chapters 66-69, he recounts the battles that Wichman, *commanding Polabian warriors*, waged with Mieszko), but only in passing. Moreover, despite working on his *Res gestae saxonicae* until 973, Widukind neglects to note Mieszko's baptism: though he does refer to Mieszko as both king ("Misaca rex" – III 66) and as an ally of the emperor ("amicus imperatoris" – III 69). I rely on: *Res gestae saxonicae Die Sachsengeschichte*, Reclams Universal-Bibliothek, Ditzingen 1980.

Lastly, archaeology also confirms a dearth of Ottonian interaction with Polish lands: "The territory of present-day Poland was separated from Ottonian Germany by Bohemia and the lands inhabited by Polabian Slavs, which is why interactions with Germans were rather insignificant until [...] the process of Christianization began. This is reflected in the small amount of [...] archaeological findings which might be connected with this cultural circle. The few older [Ottonian] items [...] had made their way to Polish lands mainly through Great Moravia and/or Bohemia", M. Bogucki, "Intercultural relations of the inhabitants of Polish territory in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries", [in:] *The Past Societies: Polish lands from the first evidence of human presence to the early Middle Ages, Vol. 5, 500 AD – 1000 AD*, ed. P. Urbańczyk, Warsaw 2016, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> I rely on the outstanding scholarly Polish edition of his work: Thietmar, *Kronika Thietmara*, ed. & trans. M. Z. Jedlicki, Kraków 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

On the basis of [Thietmar's] information, scholars [...] accepted that ca. 963 Mieszko I was defeated by margrave Gero and compelled to receive baptism. We would have to assent to this mistaken view if *The Deeds of the Saxons* written by Widukind at the time of the events in question had not survived. For it turns out that Thietmar's brief note is no more than a summary of four chapters of *The Deeds* (65-68) [...] and contains several serious errors [...] When we examine Widukind's account we find out that he describes Gero's defeat of the Lusatians, but mentions nothing of Mieszko and his subjects [...]

Nor is this the end of the matter, as yet a further important [contemporary] source is silent [about Mieszko] – namely, the continuation of the *Chronicon of Regino*. This source was completed in December 967 [...] and was written on the occasion of the coronation [...] of the young Otto II, December 25, 967. For this reason, the author of the work tasked himself with enumerating all the marvelous deeds and conquests of the Ottonian dynasty. The defeat or even subjugation to the emperor's rule of Mieszko's realm, one of the most important in the region (I refer scoffers to Ibrahim ibn Yakub) would have been a diadem in the *Chronicon's* narrative. And yet we find nothing of the kind here. Rather, all we may read for the year 963 is: "The Slavs who were called Lusatians were subjugated". Thus we have two contemporary sources interested in listing the conquests of Otto and his subordinates, each of which is silent about any dependence whatsoever of Mieszko on the empire, against the single mention Thietmar made 50 years after events, and this in a passage containing a series of errors arisen in the course of summarizing earlier sources [...].<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> T. Jasiński, "Chrzest Polski", -[Electronic resource]- available at: <http://chrzest966.pl/chrzest-polski/>; Cf. D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce za Mieszka I i Bolesława Chrobrego*, Poznań 2013, p. 98-101, where he concludes it is unclear who should be given priority – Widukind or Thietmar, although he fails to include the *Chronicon* in his consideration (sic); cf. also J. Strzelczyk, *Mieszko Pierwszy*, Poznań 1992, p. 81-96, where the *Chronicon* is included.

The problems with the purported German threat run deeper still. Suffice it to say that Christian countries incessantly waged wars against each other in the Middle Ages. Otto I himself – in addition to his many internal wars to crush rebellions – warred against such members of Christendom as West Francia, Bohemia, and Italy. Moreover, Christian and pagan countries were known to form military alliances<sup>20</sup>, as in the highly relevant case of the Czech-Poľabian alliance lasting into the mid-960s, and the somewhat later German-Poľabian alliance which emperor Henry II targeted against Christian Poland under Mieszko’s son, Bolesław Chrobry (the Brave). Baptism hardly shielded the Christian realm from attack by fellow-Christians in the Middle Ages. We have a telling example from the year 972, when the Saxon margrave Hodo warred against Mieszko on the Odra river. Importantly, Mieszko’s army won that battle, which fact makes the image of Mieszko as a Slavic ruler covering to the Germans all the more untenable. And this was naturally put to good use in postwar Poland’s commemoration of the Battle of Cedynia<sup>21</sup>.

Returning to the Poľabians, that kaleidoscopic hodge-podge of pagan Slavs<sup>22</sup> living between the Odra and the Elbe<sup>23</sup>, and from the Carpathians to the Baltic – despite their puzzling inability to form a united polity, they nonetheless managed to repel one German incursion after another, to throw off one German attempt at subjugation after another (as in 983, during Mieszko’s reign), to overthrow and kill a would-be Christianizer of their own (Gotszalk, in 1066<sup>24</sup>), and to thereby remain both pagan and independent for two full

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<sup>20</sup> There are too many examples to list, though among the more colorful is the alliance of 892 between the apostate Vladimir of Bulgaria, pagan Hungarians, and Arnulf, would-be Holy Roman Emperor, against... Christian Great Moravia – cf. Liudprand, *Retribution* Book I, p. 56. Another involves the Emperor of East, Nikephoros, who in 969, according to Nestor, pacted with the pagan ruler of Kiev, Sviatoslav, against Christian Bulgaria – cf. “The Primary Chronicle”, [in:] *Medieval Russia’s epics. Chronicles, and tales*, ed. S.A. Zenkosky, Dutton 1963, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. B. Noszczak, “History as a tool in the state’s battle with the Catholic Church during the celebrations of »1,000 Years of the Polish State« (1956-1966/7)”, paper to be published later this year by the Polish Academia of Sciences in Berlin.

<sup>22</sup> Their very names are bewildering, particularly in Polish. Among my favorites are the Łużyczanie, Chyżanie, Dołężanie, Wkrzanie, Drzewianie, and above all the Czreżpienie.

<sup>23</sup> In Polish, “Łaba” – hence the geographical term “Poľabie”, meaning “beyond (past) the Łaba”.

<sup>24</sup> For a brief description of Gotszalk’s fascinating career, see P. E. Steele, *Nawrócenie...*, p. 126-127.



centuries after Mieszko's baptism<sup>25</sup>. If the fragmented Pólabian Slavs could accomplish this, all the while buffering, as it were, the Piast dynasty from Germany, the same could only have been vastly easier for Mieszko (and his successors). Had only the Piasts wished.

This whole point is moot for even better reason: the leading Polish scholars have rejected it (though not Polish textbooks and museums, etc.<sup>26</sup>). For instance, in 1988 Labuda wrote: "Our historiography is rife with the conviction that Mieszko was baptized in order to deprive the Germans of a pretext to invade Polish lands [...] [But this premise is] of course made up out of thin air [...]. Mieszko's baptism neither protected his country from [German] expansion nor could it deprive the Germans of a pretext to do so"<sup>27</sup>. In 1992, Jerzy Strzelczyk emphasized that:

in 965-966 the 'German problem' was not in all probability perceived by Mieszko I as a genuine threat, and in spite of the unquestionable qualifications of the statesman, ones which we shall not deny Mieszko I, he probably did not possess the gift of clairvoyance, so he could not have known how relations between Poland and Germany were to develop in the future. What is more [...] the relations between Poland and Germany up until the death of Mieszko I, and even during the first decade of his

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jerzy Strzelczyk, *Słowianie Połabscy*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. K. Ożóg, who explains Mieszko's decision to adopt Christianity entirely (sic) in the context of external relations, especially vis-à-vis Ottonian Germany, in 966. *Chrzest Polski*, Kraków 2016, p. 82-88. However, in the summer of 2016, Ożóg made a sharp about-face from his book in comments to the press: "At the bottom of all this is an act of faith, the act of Mieszko's conversion from the pagan faith to the true Christian faith"; "Mieszko [...] became a believer, he genuinely came to believe", -[Electronic resource]- available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kg9ZQG\\_oOQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kg9ZQG_oOQ).

Noteworthy in 966... is Ożóg's claim that all of Pólabie had been incorporated into the Holy Roman Empire by the mid-960s (p. 83). True, marches had been established, but these were simply borderland buffer zones. Moreover, any claims about the marches having established rule are clearly refuted by the swiftness with which they were shrugged off even 20 years later, during the Pólabian uprising of 983.

Professor Andrzej Nowak is another modern-day champion of the *Drang nach Osten* thesis. Cf. "My, Polanie – 'Polani' Wodą Chrztu Świętego", [in:] *Fronda wSieci*, April 2016, p. 54-59. A more nuanced argument, albeit one that also focuses on external relations, is found in his *Dzieje Polski*, vol. I do 1202. *Skąd nasz ród*, Kraków 2014, esp. p. 80-81.

Cf. the comment by D. Sikorski: "**It's easy to agree with Gerard Labuda when he states that the search for external motives frees one from having to address the reasons for which Mieszko himself wished to become a Christian**", *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> G. Labuda, *Studia nad początkami państwa polskiego* (SNPPP). Poznań 1988, vol. I, p. 452.

successor's reign, were altogether correct – even somewhat more than correct<sup>28</sup>.

He further adds that “we simply should accept the fact that a thousand years ago there were no fundamental clashes of interest between Poland and Germany”<sup>29</sup>. What also speaks volumes about the *Drang nach Osten* thesis is that Dariusz Sikorski does not even deign to discuss it in his magisterial work from 2011 *Kościół w Polsce za Mieszka I i Bolesława Chrobrego*<sup>30</sup>.

Now let us examine the sub-thesis concerning Mieszko's purportedly cunning reception of Christianity “from Czech hands”. We foremost need stress that until 973, some seven years after Mieszko's baptism, there was no independent Czech Church. For until the founding of the bishopric in Prague<sup>31</sup>, the Czech Church was administered by the German bishopric in Regensburg, such that conducting missionary work was beyond the Czechs' competence. As Władysław Abraham long ago recognized, “Christianity could have been brought to Poland from Bohemia only through the Germans, for in Bohemia itself it had not yet become sufficiently rooted. And that there could have existed a clergy capable of autonomous missionary activity is highly doubtful”<sup>32</sup>. In fact, there is now a general, albeit tentative consensus in Polish scholarship that Rome was the most probable provenance of the

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<sup>28</sup> J. Strzelczyk, *Mieszko...*, p. 118-119. Among the many matters then giving evidence to Poland and Germany's “altogether correct” relations is Mieszko's marriage (after Dobrawa's premature passing in 977) to Oda, the daughter of Dietrich of Haldensleben, margrave of the Northern March. In yet further refutation of Mieszko's purported anti-German policy, it was only Oda and her two sons with Mieszko (namely, Lambert and Mieszko Jr.) who were included in Mieszko I's ‘final will and testament’, *Dagome Iudex* (i.e., it makes no mention of Bolesław Chrobry).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>30</sup> See chapter 3.1, “Chrzest Mieszka I: Przyczyny, [in:] *Kościół w Polsce...* Much the same may be said of professor Roman Michałowski's pivotal analysis from 2008 – “Chryścianizacja monarchii piastowskiej”, [in:] *Animarum cultura: studia nad kulturą religijną na ziemiach polskich w średniowieczu*, ed. H. Manikowska, W. Brojer), Warsaw 2008 – which most closely follows mine from 2005 regarding empirical religiosity (*Nawrócenie...*), and which will be discussed later in this text.

<sup>31</sup> The year 973 is the traditional date. However, the bishopric in Prague in fact began to function not until several years later with the consecration of Bishop Dietmar/Thietmar in 976. See D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 327-328.

<sup>32</sup> Taken from: S. Trawkowski, “Początki kościoła...”, p. 53.

Christianizing mission to Mieszko's Poland<sup>33</sup>. This view is buttressed *inter alia* by the fact that Poland's amazingly swiftly erected bishopric (in Poznań already in 968) did not fall under the purview of the archbishopric created that very year in Magdeburg<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, had the Church in Germany been the vehicle for Mieszko's baptism, Bishop Thietmar most certainly would have known and not have ascribed the matter to Dobrawa's influence. Nor does the name of Poland's first bishop – Jordan – at all suggest Bohemia (or Saxony), but rather Italy. Nonetheless, one can only conjecture about the probable papal mission to the Piast realm in the 960s<sup>35</sup>.

But first, none of the preceding is meant to belittle the role of the Czech princess Dobrawa, who must have been influential – particularly *after* her husband's conversion, in the course of teaching him the practices of the Christian faith. We shall say more about this later. For now, however, the earliest surviving annals inform us that *Dubrovka venit ad Misconem* in 965<sup>36</sup> – a year before Mieszko's baptism, which the annals ascribe to the year 966. The accounts of both Thietmar and the anonymous Monk from Lido, author of the early 12<sup>th</sup> c.

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<sup>33</sup> In 1992 Father Professor Anzelm Weiss summed up the problem as follows: "After many years of discussion on the beginnings of Christianity and Church organization in Poland, certain facts are generally accepted. Among them are: that Mieszko I and his subjects by their own will consented to baptism; the connections of that ruler with Rome; and the independence of the early Polish Church's organization from the German metropolitan. Consequently, the bishops Jordan and Unger are regarded as directly subordinate to the Holy See on the grounds that they were missionary bishops". Ks. A. Weiss. *Biskupstwa Bezpośrednio Zależne od Stolicy Apostolskiej w Średniowiecznej Europie*, Lublin 1992, p. 157.

On the most recent scope of this discussion cf. D. Sikorski, "O nowej koncepcji okoliczności powołania biskupa Jordana" [On the new conception of the circumstances surrounding the appointment of Bishop Jordan], [in:] *Ecclesia. Studia z Dziejów Wielkopolski* [Ecclesia. Studies into the history of Wielkopolska], vol. 9, 2014, p. 7-20. The conception in question (tabled initially by Tomasz Jasiński in several papers; later by Wojciech Jasiński) argues that Pope John XIII appointed Jordan an exempted bishop – not a missionary bishop.

<sup>34</sup> In 1920 the German scholar Paul Kehr presented a thesis, soon expanded upon by German colleagues A. Brackman and W. Mollenberg, which today is essentially uncontested among both Polish and German scholars (see: M. Hardt, "Magdeburg and the Beginnings of the Archdiocese of Poznań", paper to be published later this year by the Polish Academia of Sciences in Berlin). This concerns two questions important for us; namely that Jordan, from 968 the first bishop in Piast Poland, was not subordinate to the German archbishopric in Magdeburg, and that the German metropolitan in Magdeburg (established in 968 – i.e., two years after Mieszko's baptism) made no claims to suzerainty over lands to the east of the Odra, that is, to territories included within Mieszko I's realm (Cf. K. Buczek. *Pierwsze Biskupstwa Polskie*. Kraków 1995, a reprint of Buczek's original work from 1938).

<sup>35</sup> As there is no space to discuss this here, please see: P. E. Steele, *Nawrócenie...*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 52-54. The matter involves Liudprand's description in *Concerning King Otto* of Pope John XII's machinations, and a possible mission to Gniezno analogous to that of Zacheus'.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *The Old Holy Cross Annals*, Latin manuscript from the early 12th century; copied from the no longer existing *Annales Regni Polonorum deperditi*.

*Polish Chronicle*<sup>37</sup>, also give this sequence – first marriage, then baptism. “The unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife” – I Cor. 7:14. Yes, the marriage of a Christian princess to a pagan ruler was an altogether standard vehicle (and *topos*) for Christianity’s spread following the demise of the Roman Empire<sup>38</sup>. Examples run from the classic story of Clovis and Clotilda, to Ethelbert and Bertha in Kent, Edwin and Ethelburg in Northumbria, past Pribina of Nitra and his Bavarian wife, to Mieszko and Dobrawa, and on to their daughter Świątosława, who married Eric, the pagan king of Sweden. In that case, however, Eric never did convert – although his son with the Piast princess did. We know him as Olaf Skötkonung, Sweden’s first Christian king. And this is the point I have in mind: hopes no doubt being what they were on the part of the Bohemian bride, her family, her *adiutor fidei*, etc., the conversion of her pagan husband was neither stipulated in the marriage contract<sup>39</sup> – nor was it fully assured. In the case of Clovis, we need recall, Clotilda’s efforts took at least three years (if we accept the traditional 496 as the year of Clovis’ conversion) and as many as 15 years if we

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<sup>37</sup> Nearly a decade ago professor Tomasz Jasiński (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań) succeeded in establishing that the author known since the 16<sup>th</sup> century as “Gallus Anonymus”, and who wrote the *Polish Chronicle* at the court of Bolesław Krzywousty (“the wry-mouthed”) in the years 1112-1116, is one and the same as the author of *Translatio Sancti Nicolai* (written between 1102 and 1108), who describes himself as a monk from the Benedictine monastery in Lido, near Venice. Interestingly, *Monachus Littorensis* (as the author of the *Translatio* is known, and who may have come from Slavic Dalmatia) stated that he had been in Tours. Jasiński explains that this is how his Latin acquired certain stylistic features that inclined scholars to identify him as a Frenchman. Professor Jasiński is hopeful that the Monk from Lido will not long remain anonymous, and that his career will soon be more fully known. Cf. T. Jasiński, *O pochodzeniu Galla Anonima*, Kraków 2008 and *Gall Anonim – poeta i mistrz prozy*, Kraków 2016, p. 163-182; also M. Eder, “In search of the author of *Chronica Polonorum* ascribed to Gallus Anonymus: a stylometric reconnaissance”, *Acta Poloniae Historica* 112, 2015, p. 5-23.

<sup>38</sup> However, despite this being a standard vehicle and *topos*, some Polish scholars are unaware of it. It would seem that the much sung 14<sup>th</sup>-century marriage of Poland’s “King” Jadwiga to the Grand Duke Władysław Jagiełło (when the Lithuanian pagan was first made to submit to baptism) has created a *topos* of its own. Cf. A. Nowak: “[...] the Czech duke Boleslav could not marry his daughter to a pagan” – in: “My, Polanie...”, p. 54-59.

<sup>39</sup> In fact, the Monk from Lido (*vel* Gallus Anonymus) does make this suggestion (Book I, chap. 5), though he immediately thereafter contradicts himself, citing first marriage then baptism, as do the surviving annals and bishop Thietmar, who more fully describes Dobrawa’s committed, post-marital efforts to persuade her husband (Book IV, chap. 55-56).

About the resistance of Polish historians to accepting Thietmar’s account of Dobrawa’s role, Dariusz Sikorski writes that this “results from the habit of always treating the conversion of rulers in political categories: either they accepted baptism under the duress of external forces, or after minute calculation of gains and losses”, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 98.

accept the more likely date of 508<sup>40</sup>. Even so, such cases involved Church missions. Clovis was encouraged to adopt Catholicism by the Frankish bishops Remigius and Avistus<sup>41</sup>. Ethelbert's conversion drew not only from Bertha and her confessor Liudhard – but also from the mission Pope Gregory the Great sent to Kent, as headed by Augustine. Edwin's conversion, in turn, as we know from the Venerable Bede, involved the persuasion not only of Ethelburg and her confessor Paulinus, but also that of the pagan high priest Coifi (sic!) – and above all a visitation by a spirit who, in line with the precepts of empirical religion, promised Edwin that, in exchange for obedience to the Christian God, “you should become king, crush your enemies, and enjoy greater power than any of your forebears, greater indeed than any king who has ever been among the English nation”<sup>42</sup>.

There remains a list of further matters to be refuted within the case made for the Czech provenance of the evangelical mission to Mieszko's Poland<sup>43</sup>. Perhaps the most important of them is linguistic. For it was long held that 75% of the earliest ecclesiastical vocabulary in Polish derives from Czech<sup>44</sup> and, furthermore, that the relevant terms – *kościół* (church), *ksiądz* (priest), *oltarz* (altar), *msza* (Mass), etc. – had been borrowed during the reign of Mieszko I from the Czech clergy then hypothesized to have been evangelizing Piast lands. This view elicited deep reservations on my part, ones I expressed in the 2005 edition of my book, though as no more than a loose hypothesis. As I explained, my doubts stemmed from the fact that even well into the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Czech and Polish could hardly be distinguished<sup>45</sup>,

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751*, Harlow 1994, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 41-49. Wood does not, however, give credence to the purported teaching role of a third churchman, Vedast of Arras.

<sup>42</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book II, chap. 12, London, New York, Ringwood, Toronto, Wairau Road 1991, p. 127. The riveting story of Coifi (“the classic case of the poacher turned gamekeeper” – R. Fletcher *The Barbarian Conversion...*, p. 123) is in Book II, chap. 13.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, by pointing out that Cosmas of Prague failed to ascribe Poland's Christianization to Bohemia.

<sup>44</sup> E. Klich, *Polska terminologia chrześcijańska*, Poznań, 1927.

<sup>45</sup> The case in point concerns the sentence every Polish schoolchild knows as the earliest recorded example of Polish language: “daj, ac ja pobruszę, a ty pocziwaj”, which in the original document (*The Book of Henryków*), in an entry made by the Cistercian monk Peter in about 1270, more accurately reads: *day ut ia pobrusa, a ti pozivai*. The rub is that the sentence – which records a man's remark to his (Polish?) wife made while they were working: “Let me grind now, you take a rest” – may also be considered Czech. And perhaps correctly so, as it

and that sources known to me from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries treated the language of Bohemia and Poland (and other parts of Slavdom) as one and the same, labeling it simply “Slavic”. Among the many such examples is Adam of Bremen, who in his work *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (written in the years 1075-1080) stated that Poles and Czechs “differ neither in appearance nor in language”<sup>46</sup>. The Czech chronicler Cosmas, writing shortly before the year 1120, several times refers to “the Slavic language” as one shared by the Slavs (Book I, chap. 23, 31, and 40)<sup>47</sup>. The Monk from Lido similarly suggested a shared Slavic language in the *Polish Chronicle*, written just a few years earlier<sup>48</sup>.

The breakthrough came the next year, in 2006, together with the 6-page publication of professor Dariusz Sikorski entitled “O czeskiej proveniencji polskiej terminologii kościelnej” [On the Czech provenance of Polish ecclesiastical terminology]<sup>49</sup>. Sikorski subsequently expanded on that work in 2009 with a 24-page study<sup>50</sup>. His books published since then have developed that analysis<sup>51</sup>. In a nutshell, Sikorski has demonstrated that only 13.5% of the ecclesiastic terms in Polish have an *unequivocal* or *probable* Czech origin (5% and 8.5%, respectively). Moreover, Sikorski confirmed my supposition that it is impossible to show that any of those 13.5% were borrowed during the reigns of Mieszko I and Bolesław Chrobry:

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was spoken by Bogwalus Boemus – Bogwal the Czech. Henryków is found in Lower Śląsk (Silesia) some 50km south of Wrocław, and about half that distance north of the border with Czech lands.

<sup>46</sup> Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. J. Tschann, New York 2002, Book II, chap. xxi – p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Cosmas of Prague, *The Chronicle of the Czechs*, Washington, D.C. 2009, p. 73, 84, 102.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. “in the city of Gniezno [originally, ‘Gniezdno’], which in Slavic means the same as ‘nest’ [gniazdo]”, at the very beginning of Book I; and “vessels known in Slavic as ‘cebry’ [buckets, pails]” in Book II. Anonim tzw. Gall, *Kronika Polska*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1996.

<sup>49</sup> D. Sikorski, “O czeskiej proveniencji polskiej terminologii kościelnej” [On the Czech provenance of Polish ecclesiastical terminology], [in:] *Przemysłodzi i Piastowie – twórcy i gospodarze średniowiecznych monarchii*, Poznań 2006, p. 101-106.

<sup>50</sup> D. Sikorski, “Najstarsza warstwa terminologii chrześcijańskiej w staropolszczyźnie – próba weryfikacji teorii o czeskim pochodzeniu”, [in:] *Wielkopolska – Polska – Czechy: Studia z dziejów średniowiecza ofiarowane Profesorowi Bronisławowi Nowackiemu*, Poznań, 2009, p. 347-370.

<sup>51</sup> See especially his book: *Początki kościoła...*, p. 223-272; also *Kościół w Polsce...* p. 283-85.

“the hypothesis that the Czech genesis [of Polish language’s ecclesiastical vocabulary] began in the missionary phase (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) can no longer be maintained”<sup>52</sup>.

(2)

Fortunately, this and the remaining explanations can be dismissed much more succinctly. So let us proceed with the interpretation that Mieszko chose to be baptized in anticipation of civilizational and material benefits, and that Christianity allowed the feudalization of Polish lands to take place.

The purported civilizational advancements for which Mieszko is said to have rejected the gods of his people and their guardianship over the Piast dynasty vanish under sober examination. On the one hand it is enough to recall what paltry inroads literacy made among the Piasts. After all, with the single exception of Mieszko’s final will and testament *Dagome Iudex*, not a one of our sources is of Polish authorship<sup>53</sup>. And that fact extends all the way through the early-12<sup>th</sup> century’s *Polish Chronicle* (written, again, by *Monachus Littorensis*). Rather, our sources are foremost German, sprinkled with Arabic, Czech, Ruthenian, Greek, and other works<sup>54</sup>.

Secondly, Ibrahim ibn Yakub, writing on the eve of Mieszko’s baptism, left us with a description of Mieszko’s “state administration” that is altogether impressive. He reports that Mieszko (the “king of the north”) ruled over “the most extensive of the Slavic countries”, and that he possessed “three thousand men in armor [...] and one hundred of them means as much as ten hundred others”. Ibn Yakub also explains how Mieszko collected taxes in order to

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<sup>52</sup> D. Sikorski, *Początki Kościoła w Polsce...*, p. 272.

<sup>53</sup> In fact, it must be surmised that *Dagome iudex* was drafted by the bishop of Poznań, Unger, who may have been a Saxon (and probably served for a time as the abbot in Memleben), or maybe (as his name seems to indicate) a Hungarian. Cf. D. Sikorski, *ibidem*, p. 186-194.

<sup>54</sup> Worth recalling in this vein is the crude “denar of Mieszko”, which, along its rim, misspells his name thus: “OCZLTM” (scholars explain this must be read backwards, as “MTLZCO” – *sic!*). In fact, many numismatists now believe the denar (about 50 of which have survived) was minted during Bolesław Chrobry’s reign, and refers to his son, Mieszko II – which, if true, would place the civilizational advancement theory in even greater doubt. Cf. J. Strzelczyk, *Mieszko Pierwszy...*, p. 202-203; for an image of the denar, see: [Electronic resource] - available at: <http://www.denary.com.pl/denar-mieszka-lamberta-01.html>.

make monthly payments to his soldiers, adding that Mieszko taxed his soldiers for each child they fathered, and that later, when the child (whether male or female) was given in marriage, Mieszko gave the father a considerable wedding present<sup>55</sup>.

What, more broadly, must be borne in mind is that Western Europe and the Church's "soft power" knows no lower ebb than the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>56</sup>. There is no solid ground for suggesting there were potential civilizational advances of a kind that could, in the near-term, justify the risk Mieszko must have perceived as part and parcel of apostasy to the Slavic gods<sup>57</sup>. Dariusz Sikorski recently added in this vein that neither could the Ottonian political system have loomed before Mieszko as something coveted, as something superior to his own system:

Mieszko's closest examples of Christian rulers did not give him any bases for believing that the functioning of the new religion [could strengthen his power]. The German throne, although in practice hereditary, was nevertheless elective. Rebellions against the lawful Christian ruler were

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<sup>55</sup> On the basis of the translation by T. Kowalski, *Monumenta Poloniae...*

<sup>56</sup> There simply was no dazzling light of civilization shining from the Christian West to Mieszko's Poland. The Carolingian renaissance was already long over. For that matter, Charlemagne himself, despite his troubles, remained illiterate, as we can read in the accounts of his biographer, Einhard (25 – Studies). It was only on the eve of the baptism of Poland that the papacy found a new defender for itself in the person of Otto I, crowned in 962 the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, then in its infancy. However, his title was at that time "hopelessly lacking the splendor that Charlemagne had lent it in the year 800" (J. Strzelczyk, *Mieszko Pierwszy...*, p.31). In a short lament over "the iron century" or "the century of darkness" we can read that "little care was given to cultivating literature, science and the arts, few took up a pen, intellectual horizons narrowed..." (Ibid. p. 14). The papacy of this period boasts a far more colorful name – namely, "Pornocracy", as Cardinal Cezare Baronius (1538-1607), "the father of Church history", dubbed it. A minor matter that countless concubines were maintained, that the Papacy remained for about twenty years a brothel under the control of a certain Madame Marosia, or that the pope's son could inherit his father's post: worse that the Holy See was a stage for murders and torture. Over the space of the 84 years preceding the baptism of Mieszko not less than eight, and possibly even ten popes were killed, two of them at the hands of their very successor to the throne of St. Peter – cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, Oxford 1986; J. Mathieu-Rosay. *Prawdziwe Dzieje Papieży*, Warszawa 1995. The murdered Popes are: John VIII, 882; Formosus (poisoned?), 896; Boniface VI (poisoned?), 896; Stephen VI, 8897; Leo V, 903; Christopher, 904; John X, 928; Leo VI, 928; Stephen VII, 931; and John XII, 965. The papicidal Popes are: Christopher, 903 – 904, and Sergius III, 904 - 911). Madness also raged, as can be well seen in the case of the 'cadaver synod' in 896, when Pope Stephen VI ordered the exhumation of the body of Pope Formozos and began proceedings against him. Matters did not end there. The unfortunate man's eternal rest was disturbed twice more (the last time by order of Pope Sergius III in 906) that he stand before the Papal court. And what was the sentence in the last case? Off with his head (and remaining fingers).

<sup>57</sup> As Clovis (according to Gregory of Tours) explained to Bishop Remigius, "There remains one obstacle. The people under my command will not agree to forsake their gods" – cf. *The History of the Franks*, London 1983, Book II, chap. 31, p. 144.



hardly a rarity, and thus from Mieszko's perspective the bases of the power of Christian rulers were not at all that different from those he knew as a pagan in his own Polanian backyard<sup>58</sup>.

The material benefits Mieszko is supposed to have counted on must also be rejected – foremost for the reason that, following his baptism, Mieszko ended the trade in his realm's hitherto greatest export commodity. Just recently, Mateusz Bogucki, archeologist from the Polish Academy of Sciences, published a breakthrough in this matter. It concerns the presence of Arab coins in Wielkopolska – and above all their sudden disappearance. Archeologists have discovered a huge amount of these coins – dirhams, as they are known – dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the 930s these dirhams are ever more numerous. It seems there was a votive ritual involving the burial alongside one's homestead of approx. 1%, as it is estimated, of one's earnings from trade with Arab buyers, ones primarily from the east (Baghdad). That is, differently than one might otherwise assume in thinking of Ibrahim ibn Yakub and his service to the caliph in Cordoba, there are relatively few dirhams from Muslim Spain. And what was the main commodity in trade with the Arabs? Slaves. Trade in slaves is what brought wealth to the rising Piast dynasty<sup>59</sup>.

The mid-10<sup>th</sup> century, when the vast network of strongholds was being built in Wielkopolska, is the period when that trade reached its zenith. Hence the dirhams. Large quantities are found dating to the 930s, as I have noted – and even larger quantities dating to the 940s, 950s and 960s... at which point they all but disappear from Wielkopolska. Directly after Mieszko's baptism. It is hard to imagine that this timing is a mere coincidence. Rather, what seems most probable is that Mieszko accepted the Church's ban on slavery and ended the practice in his realm – that his decision reflects Christian teaching<sup>60</sup>. And there may be a

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<sup>58</sup> D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 105.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. P. Urbańczyk, *Mieszko Pierwszy Tajemniczy* [Mieszko I, the Mysterious], Toruń 2012, p. 121-125.

<sup>60</sup> M. Bogucki, "Intercultural relations of the inhabitants of Polish territory in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries", [in:] *The Past Societies...*, p. 236-245.

case of sociotechnics here, as well: that is, in the eyes of many in his realm Mieszko may have seemed a liberator, as having issued an “emancipation proclamation”, so to speak.

We need bear in mind that slavery was not successfully forbidden in every Christianized country. The case of America again presents itself. But the more appropriate case is of course 10<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemia. For as we know from the *Vitae* of St. Wojciech/Adalbert (as well as from the illuminated cathedral doors in Gniezno), the slave trade went on apace in Prague, where it left St. Wojciech at wit’s end – and ultimately drove him to flee his Czech flock<sup>61</sup>. In Mieszko’s Poland things took a radically different course, where – in startling defiance of economic thinking – trade in the realm’s most lucrative export good was stopped<sup>62</sup>.

Finally on this point, it was back in 1993 that professor Stanisław Trawkowski, in a paper notable for its focus on the religious dimension of Mieszko’s conversion, scorned the Marxian thesis long seriously regarded. “We may dismiss out of hand”, he wrote,

the majority of conjectures on the internal political reasons behind Poland’s baptism that were declared in the 1950s and early 60s, including that at issue was introducing the Church to Poland because it was an institution engaged in the flourishing of the socio-economic feudal system, whose development lay in the interests of the Polanian social elite with Mieszko as its leader. [... After all] the feudalization of socio-economic relations in Poland occurred not until the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century. Even so, it did not lead to the creation of feudalism as the state system.<sup>63</sup>

As professor Karol Modzelewski put it in 2004:

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Święty Wojciech w polskiej tradycji historiograficznej: antologia tekstów* [St. Wojciech in Polish historiographical tradition: an anthology of papers], ed. G. Labuda, Warsaw 1997.

<sup>62</sup> Trade with Arabs in other goods, albeit on a vastly smaller scale, did of course continue, as we note in the case of Mieszko’s gift in 985 to the boy emperor, Otto III – namely, **a camel**: Thietmar, *Kronika...*, Book IV, chap. 9, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> S. Trawkowski. “Początki Kościoła w Polsce...”, p. 55.

[...] the term [feudalism] was at bottom a masking device, a kind of extortion that Polish medieval historians paid half a century ago in their game of hide-and-seek with the guardians of the compulsory ideology. If we are to understand feudalism as it is grasped in today's medieval studies in the West, then we must state that Eastern Europe never did experience feudalism<sup>64</sup>.

### (3)

The next thesis we wish to discard is that Mieszko, “mired in the mistakes of paganism”<sup>65</sup>, felt intolerably constrained with “the lowly stature of the pagan in the diplomatic protocol of the period”<sup>66</sup> – and that is why he was baptized.

Well, let us deny Mieszko neither vanity nor arrogance, but we must again reflect on the gravity of rejecting worship of the Slavic gods (and we shall do so more fully below). We hardly need ask if Mieszko abandoned the venerable religion of his people and their forefathers, if he cut down the sacred groves only to drink hygge toasts with VIPs from distant capitals. Unless the whole idea is simply facetious (a kind of scholarly joke), it would have to be shown that Mieszko intended to frequent Europe's Christian capitals and/or to invite Christian kings to Gniezno. Yet all we know of his travels abroad is that he was twice (perhaps three times) *summoned* to Quedlinburg (where the Ottos kept court) – and nothing more. The same goes for inviting Christian kings to his own palace. Nothing. Simply put, with the thesis that Mieszko was really a European – and/or found himself “entangled in a vast and complex system of feudal and courtly values and behaviors incumbent upon

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<sup>64</sup> K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska Europa*, Warsaw 2004, p. 453-54.

It must be stressed, however, that the feudalization thesis in its vulgar Marxist form in fact persisted into the 1980s: cf. J. Lesław Wyrozumski, *Historia Polski do roku 1505*, Warsaw 1984, particularly chapter IV, “Early Polish feudalism (from the mid-10<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century)”, p. 80-115.

Concerning the post-communist period, professor Henryk Samsonowicz is among the dwindling number of scholars who have continued this tradition (albeit in less vulgar form): see: his manifoldly idiosyncratic *Dzień chrztu...*, p. 72-3 and chapter VII, “The economy and the time of baptism”, p. 93-112.

<sup>65</sup> Gall Anonim, *Kronika Polska*. Book. I, chap. V.

<sup>66</sup> See: footnote 14.

representatives of the imperial elite”<sup>67</sup> – we completely lose sight of the fact that at the time of his baptism the Polanian king<sup>68</sup> ruled over an entirely pagan country – and that his ambitions, clearly seen in the historical record, were directed toward the conquest of surrounding pagan territories.

(4)

We can just as summarily dismiss the still popular view that Mieszko opted for Christianity in order to make his subjects more obedient on the basis of St. Paul’s teaching<sup>69</sup>. Let us admit that in countries with a Christian establishment and society, the Pauline doctrine carried certain advantages for kings, although regicide and rebellion were never something unknown in Christian Europe – and that most certainly goes for Otto I, against whom not only a range of dukes rebelled, but even his own son, Liudolf (952-54 – i.e., during Mieszko’s early adulthood). Nonetheless, in 966 in Wielkopolska there was a *pagan* establishment and a *pagan* society. How was Paul of Tarsus to have swayed *them*? Clearly, this line of reasoning is absurd on its own terms. It also ignores two important facts – namely, that pagan convictions of the sacred also “embraced the institution of kingly leadership”<sup>70</sup>, and, again, that political realities in Christian countries hardly bespoke the spell of Paul’s teaching.

“On the basis of his knowledge that the German elites were Christians”, Dariusz Sikorski writes, “[Mieszko] could not conclude that a society of Christians gathered in the hand of a single ruler was not at risk of internal conflicts and local separatisms. As we know –

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<sup>67</sup> J. Banaszkiwicz, “Mieszko I i władcy jego epoki”, [in:] *Civitas Schinesghe: Mieszko I i początki państwa polskiego*, ed. J. M. Piskorski, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Warsaw 2004, p. 95.

<sup>68</sup> With rare exception, Polish historiography is obsessive about using the term “duke” (*książe*, in Polish) about Mieszko – not “king” (*król*), for the reason he was never crowned by a pope. The same goes for foreign historians who stay too close to their Polish-language sources. However, the convention upheld i.a., in English and Frankish sources – whereby “king” is used about the highest monarchical ruler of a given land (be it ever so small, be it even pagan – King Ethelbert of Kent, King Edwin of Northumbria, King Radbod of Frisia, etc.) – absolves of the need to hold to the Polish convention. As does the use of “rex” about Mieszko by Widukind (Book III, chap. 66) and the equivalent Arabic term “malik” by Ibrahim ibn Yakub. See: the discussion of this problem (which “guides us like horse-blinders”) in K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska...*, p. 403-406.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. P. Jasienica, *Polska Piastów*, Warsaw 1992, p. 55; M. Bogucka, *Dawna Polska: Narodziny, Rozkwit, Upadek*, Warsaw, Pułtusk 1998, p. 30; G. Labuda, *Mieszko I...*, p. 107.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska...*, p. 402.

and as Mieszko most certainly did, too – Christian countries were no less assailed by internal conflicts than was his own realm”<sup>71</sup>. As professor Strzelczyk points out: “In the short-term the adoption of Christianity [...] must have meant (as the Christianizers must have been aware) a dramatic splintering of society, which, after all, not at once and not as a whole let itself be converted to the new religion”.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, inasmuch as Mieszko I perceived the potential advantages of the Pauline teaching for the Christian monarch (which is far from certain), by no means could he have hoped to reap such advantage during his own reign, but rather only during that of his prospective Christian successors<sup>73</sup>. He himself could only expect insurrection. That is, insofar as he did not count on Providence – a matter which we shall take up below in our discussion of empirical religiosity.

## (5)

Finally for this portion, let’s consider the thesis that Christianity was to have been a tool in Mieszko’s aim of uniting his own people and the surrounding Slavic tribes into one great state – that his introduction of a foreign, jealous religion was to have been a “unifying factor”<sup>74</sup>.

This too is plainly absurd. Why should Mieszko have expected to find it *easier* to wield power over his pagan subjects, let alone subjugate Pomorze, Mazovia, Małopolska, and Śląsk as an apostate whose rule had to mean not only the submission of their leaders, but also the eradication of all they considered sacred?<sup>75</sup> In line with any socio-technical use of religion, it

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<sup>71</sup> D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 104.

<sup>72</sup> J. Strzelczyk, *Mieszko...*, p. 124.

<sup>73</sup> Professor Zbigniew Dalewski makes a point worth noting: “The breakdown of the first [Polish] kingdom [in the 1030s], along with the later collapse of Bolesław Śmiały’s monarchial rule [1079], clearly prove that – regardless of the external factors that hindered the Piasts’ royal ambitions – the idea of the Divine anointment of royal power did not enjoy many adherents in 11<sup>th</sup>-century Poland”. See: “Publiczny wymiar kultu w chrystianizowanej monarchii piastowskiej” [in:] *Animarum cultura...*, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. J. Strzelczyk, *Mieszko...*, p. 122; S. Trawkowski, “Początki Kościoła...”, p. 55-6; R. Michałowski, *Zjazd Gnieźnieński: religijne przestanki powstania arcybiskupstwa gnieźnieńskiego*, Warsaw 2005, p. 98; A. Nowak, *Dzieje Polski* [The history of Poland], vol. I *Do 1202. Skąd nasz ród* [To 1202. Whence our people?], Kraków 2014, p. 83; G. Labuda, *Mieszko...*, p. 107.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. S. Trawkowski, “Początki Kościoła...”, p. 66: “The destruction of public places and fixtures attached to the pagan cult was an obligation of the Christian ruler, as explained by St. Augustine. The destruction of idols

not have been far more logical for Mieszko to have striven to unite his own and neighboring peoples as one of them, a Slav faithful to the Slavic pantheon then universally worshipped<sup>76</sup> in the *Slavic* language (!), and not as a defector or invader bent on toppling their gods and bringing an end to the world they knew.<sup>77</sup> The example of Germany's Christianizing encroachments into Połabie answer this question.<sup>78</sup> – as does the fact that it took more than 500 years for Christianity to overcome paganism as it spread beyond the Roman *limes* to Scandinavia. Not only does this thesis fly in the face of Połabie's case – and not only does it violate historical methodology by flattening time: it also betrays a striking absence of

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made by human hands and of places pagans deemed sacred was at the same time, from the viewpoint of Christians in those days, an exorcising of the country and its populus from the power of demons”.

<sup>76</sup> Although far too few details of pagan worship among the Slavs (and other medieval European peoples) are known, suffice it here to stress **four** matters. **The first** concerns what Karol Modzelewski, building on Reinhard Wenskus, demonstrated in his magisterial work *Barbarzyńska Europa*– namely, the astounding similarity of the (completely independent from each other) descriptions of pagan worship recorded by both pagans and Christians alike – from Tacitus to Thietmar, Adam of Bremen, and Helmold – that encompass Germanics, Slavs, and Balts. **Secondly**, we also have the fact of identical names such as Swarożyc and Swaróg for Slavic gods from east to west across Slavdom (from the Rus' to the Połabians). Cf. A. Szyjewski, *Religia Słowian*, Warsaw 2003. **Thirdly**, Polish archeologists today write of a material and symbolic culture so homogenous throughout Polish lands in the pre-Christian period that they are unable to identify “territorial political organizations”. This homogeneity includes burial customs, and leads to the conclusion that “pre-state Poland was a large ethno-historical region, relatively uniform in terms of language and culture, whose people cultivated similar lifestyles shaped by similar experiences [...]”. See: professor P. Urbańczyk, “Preface” [in:] *The Past Societies: 500 AD – 1000 AD*, ed. M. Trzeciecki, Warsaw 2016, p. 15-16. **Fourthly**, I see no reason to assume the existence of divergent gods among the (Połabian) Slavs on the basis of Bishop Thietmar's remarks in the famous passage in Book VI, chap. 23-25, where he writes, “There are as many shrines, and as many images of idols are worshipped by the pagans, as there are districts in this country”. For as is clear in this passage taken as a whole, he is describing a religious hierarchy having a pantheon (re: his description of Śwarożyc and the other gods at the high temple in Radogoszcz) that is “worshipped among all the pagans” – along with a lower system of local and household gods that would seem to echo that of the Romans' lares and manes.

<sup>77</sup> I argued this point in the first edition (2005) of my book *Nawrócenie...* It was restated by Dariusz Sikorski in the 2011 and 2013 editions of his *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 104: “One may nonetheless ask whether in fact the consolidation of conquered peoples was the primary aim of Christianization, or if it would have been better – from Mieszko's perspective – to impose on all conquered peoples a unified, pagan ‘Gnieznan’ religion that no doubt would not have differed essentially from the putative local cults, and hence would have been sufficiently similar that subjection to it would not have elicited important resistance. If Mieszko had indeed wished to employ Christianity as a platform for ideologically unifying the inhabitants of the lands he ruled over, then we have to conclude that he was able to construct a political vision a century into the future, for we can hardly suspect Mieszko to have naively assumed that the process [of Christianization] would yield results within the foreseeable future. [...] Here it is rather the results of Christianization seen from the perspective of two or three centuries that compel us to state that the new religion ultimately gave rise to such a shared ideological platform. However, we cannot treat the results of actions [...] as their cause”.

Cf. the discussion by Jerzy Dowiat concerning pagan syncretism in Slavdom, especially the example of multi-faced gods (Trzygłów, Światowid), whose statues are conjectured to have represented the deliberate creation of a “shared platform”, a case best known (again) in Rus', Połabie, and western Pomorze: J. Dowiat, *Chrzest Polski*, Warsaw 1958, p. 24-29 and 59-60.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. J. Dowiat, *Chrzest...*, p. 56: “And that's precisely how it was in the Połabian part of Slavdom, where paganism reigned until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, despite the fact that those lands had entered into various German dioceses a couple centuries earlier. How precious little the mission inspired from outside meant!”.

sociological thinking<sup>79</sup>. More happily, it has given me a chance to offer a little levity in my lectures on the topic, as when I've pointed out that today's Polish society is deeply fractured and asked if, in a bid to heal divisions, Poland's President Andrzej Duda shouldn't introduce... Islam.

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Having set the above explanations aside, we are faced with the apparent recklessness of Mieszko's decision to adopt Christianity. He was already a powerful *malik*, after all, and was under no compulsion – whether external or internal – to tear down his people's "Irminsul", the pillar holding up their world. On the contrary, Mieszko should best have sought to employ a syncretic form of Slavic paganism in extending his dominion – all the more so, as we have no information, whether written or archeological – about the presence of any Christians whatsoever in Polanian lands prior to Mieszko's baptism<sup>80</sup>. Not so much as a single errant Irish monk<sup>81</sup>. Every bit as important to remember is the fact that in the 960s the Piast realm

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<sup>79</sup> One cannot help but flash on the checkered history of sociology in communist Poland, where sociology departments were liquidated during the Stalinist period. Sociology returned shortly after the "thaw" of late 1956, and even though it was then largely rid of non-Marxists, it made but weak inroads as minor institutes subject to Marxism-Leninism. Later, once university departments of sociology had been re-created, sociology remained tasked with the problems of shaping a communist society. This no doubt weakened whatever chances there may have been in Poland for, say, the *Annales* school. Cf. J. Bielecka-Prus, "Społeczne role socjologów w PRL", *Przegląd socjologiczny*, 2009, vol. 58, no. 2, p. 71-103; and P. Łuczeczko, "Poza 'samoograniczającą się socjologię'? Szkic historyczny o dawnej i nowej autocenzurze w socjologii polskiej", *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, 2011, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 13-30.

<sup>80</sup> There is in fact a set of three pottery shards from Podeblocie (~100km south of Warsaw) discovered in the 1980s in a phase of settlement dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some scholars see on fragments 2 and 3 the Greek letters IXCH, which they have interpreted as an acronym for *I(sus) Ch(ristos) N(ika)*. One counter-interpretation – that the marks are not even letters, but rather the imprints of twigs – was ruled out by specialist examinations in 1998. Moreover, the clay of one of the shards was found to be of Mediterranean origin. It is hypothesized these objects may have belonged to a trader or slave. Cf. A. Buko, "Chrześcijaństwo i poganie: o problemach interpretacji odkryć archeologicznych związanych z początkami chrześcijaństwa na ziemiach polskich", *Slavia Antiqua* LVII (2016), p. 14-18.

<sup>81</sup> Columbanus – in 611, or shortly thereafter – weighed the idea of traveling "to the territory of the pagan Slavs [... to] preach the word of the gospel to their blinded minds", as Jonas of Bobbio tells us, but was dissuaded by an angel in a vision. Amandus, in turn, about a quarter century later, did cross the Danube (we know not where) and preached the gospel to the Slavs, as Baudemundus in his *Vita* reports. However, he met with such meager success that he soon gave up and returned (cf. R. Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion...*, p. 142; 153). From about 757 the Irish monk Modestus, operating on behalf of the bishopric in Salzburg (presided over by another Irishman, Virgilius), pursued the evangelization of the Carantanian Slavs (then living in what today is eastern Austria/western Hungary (cf. *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*). But about Polish lands, in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century Methodius may or may not have had missionary contacts extending just north of the Carpathians to the "ever so powerful pagan ruler seated in Visle" (*Pannonian Legend*). And that would be all. Cf. R. Michałowski: "At the moment when Mieszko I received baptism, the region extending from the Warta to the middle Vistula

was surrounded by pagans literally from all sides. The Połabians to the west, the Pomorzans to the north, the Balts to the northeast, the Lechites in Mazowsze, and the Varangians farther to the east – they were all pagan. Śląsk, between pagan Wielkopolska and Christian Bohemia, was still an unevangelized no man’s land<sup>82</sup> – and Ottonian Germany’s “angle of repose”, as stressed above, was southward.

So what convinced Mieszko to carry out an *autogolpe*, as it were? “The baptism of new peoples was not the result of political transformation, but rather its beginning”, Karol Modzelewski stresses: “Baptism entailed a societal coup d’état. It struck at the foundations of the traditional system of European tribes, demolished it, and set the path toward establishing a new order”<sup>83</sup>. “For the barbarians”, Modzelewski adds, “the death of the gods signified the end of their world”<sup>84</sup>. Indeed, the gamble Mieszko took may seem outright foolhardy.

For the history of medieval Europe is littered with examples of pagan rulers who, for varying reasons, adopted and strove to institute Christianity – only to be killed or banished by their own people. The Venerable Bede gives us two such cautionary tales from 7<sup>th</sup>-c. Britain. The first concerns Earpwald, king of the East Angles, who, having barely commenced the evangelization of his people in 627, was murdered by one Ricbert, after which “the province relapsed into heathendom”<sup>85</sup>. The second instance is that of Sigbert II, king of the East Saxons. In 653 he began “to convert his people to the Faith of Christ and baptize them”. Only

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was unspoiled pagan territory. Never before then – whether in Antiquity or in the early Middle Ages – had Christianity reached those lands. And even if missionaries, ones completely unbeknownst to us, did make their way to the region, their activity left no trace”, *Zjazd Gnieźnieński...*, p. 91.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. D. Sikorski, *Początki Kościoła...* p. 11-104, especially “Conclusions”, p. 102-104, where we read: “Our sources certainly do not indicate in any convincing way that the southern lands of [today’s] Poland were part of the Přemyslids’ state in the 10<sup>th</sup> century [...] There is no unequivocal trace of the presence of Czech regiments in the strongholds of southern Poland, nor are there traces of Czech exploitation of those territories – we do not possess even the flimsiest of premises [to postulate otherwise]. The character of what traces of Czech provenance we do find permits us to deem them no more than traces of mutual trade contacts, which – given the direct proximity – is not only understandable, but entirely obvious. [...] Inasmuch as the dependence of Poland’s southern lands on the Czech bishopric [which began to function over a decade after Mieszko’s baptism, PhES – see: footnote 31] is not at all a tenable likelihood, there is no need in further reflections to treat it as a fact that can influence interpretations [...] of the beginnings of the Church in Poland.”

<sup>83</sup> K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska...*, p. 454.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 460.

<sup>85</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History...*, Book II, chap. 15, p. 132-133.



a couple years later, however, “at the instigation of the Enemy of all good men, the king was murdered by his own kinsmen”<sup>86</sup>.

A third such example pertains to the Dane Harald Klak, who was placed on the Danish throne in 819 by no less than Emperor Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne. Seven years later, in 826, Harald, together with his family and retinue, traveled to Louis’s court in Ingelheim near Mainz and was baptized. As we know from Ermoldus Nigellus, a contemporary courtier to the Emperor, Harald’s godfather was Louis himself: Empress Judith stood beside Harald’s wife. Following his christening, all the powers of Heaven and Earth on his side, Harald returned to Jutland together with St. Ansgar to evangelize the Danes. They began with the construction of the country’s first church in the bustling trade city of Hedeby. However, the new religion was not to the Danes’ liking and Harald was soon driven out of the country<sup>87</sup>. He seems to have lived in exile in Frisia for the next 20-some years<sup>88</sup>. The Danes, meanwhile, returned to their pagan gods – and for another 6 or 7 generations. All the way until the conversion of Harald Gormsson in about 965.

Other examples, ones which come after the reign of Mieszko I, but nonetheless further refute the tenet that the adoption of Christianity secured the convert-ruler’s throne, include: Gotszalk, the would-be Christianizer of Połabie (killed in 1066); and Mendog/Mindaugas, Lithuania’s first and only king, who was crowned by Pope Innocent IV in 1253 and killed, together with his two sons, 10 years later when Christianity was violently rejected<sup>89</sup>. It was

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<sup>86</sup> Ibidem, Book III, chap. 22, p. 178-180.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *Vita Ansgari*, chap. VII written by bishop Rimbert of Hamburg and Bremen ca. 875, [-Electronic resource]- available at: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anskar.asp>; and Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops...*, Book I, chap. xv – p. 21-22.

<sup>88</sup> Intriguingly, in all three of these cases we see royal sponsorship of baptism from abroad. Earpwald, Bede tells us, was persuaded by King Edwin of Northumbria; Sigbert II, in turn, was won over to Christianity by King Oswy of Northumbria. Harald, caught up in a “game of thrones” going back at least to 812, was enthroned by Louis the Pious. Among the many other such cases is that of Bořivoj, who was sponsored by Svatopluk I of Great Moravia. Of course, the Czechs swiftly forced Bořivoj to flee Bohemia, though Svatopluk soon restored him to the throne.

<sup>89</sup> For a discussion of Mindaugas, see: P. E. Steele, *Nawrócenie...*, p. 139-141.

not until nearly a century and a half later (1386) that Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila/Jagiełło was baptized<sup>90</sup>.

We also know cases when the convert-ruler himself rejected Christianity and reverted to paganism, having become convinced that the new religion was either ineffectual and/or unable to quell the wrath of the abandoned pagan gods. One such example is again from the Venerable Bede, who describes an event from 665 when a plague that had begun to rage among the East Saxons prompted their neophyte king Sighere to lapse into paganism: “For the king himself, together with many of the nobles and common folk, loved this life and sought no other, **or even disbelieved in its existence**. Hoping for protection against the plague [...], they therefore began to rebuild the ruined temples and restore the worship of idols”<sup>91</sup>. Similar events reflecting the grip of empirical religion took place throughout Europe, and include the ultimately failed Swedish mission of St. Ansgar, who – after Harald Klak’s expulsion from Denmark – crossed the sea northward and, beginning in Birka in 829, pursued the evangelization of the Swedes, initially with marked success. However, as professor Władysław Duczko has argued, a series of comets in 837 (among them Halley’s) prompted the Swedish folk to expel the Christianizers (along with King Anund, as he had permitted the mission) and to reassert the worships of their gods<sup>92</sup>. The case of the Slavs of Pomorze in the third decade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century provides several other examples. We know of them thanks to Ebo and Herbordus, the mid-12<sup>th</sup>-century biographers of Bishop Otto of Bamberg, “the Apostle of Pomorze” (~1060-1139), the lapses in question having been led by pagan priests<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> The list of failed Christianizers can profitably be extended to other rulers across history who – in defiance of the otherwise binding principle *religio regionis religio regis* – endeavoured to institute a new religion, only to meet with failure: e.g., Akhenaten, Elagabalus, Julian the Apostate, Robespierre...

<sup>91</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History...*, Book III, chap. 30, p. 200 [bold type is mine, used to emphasize the characteristic lack of eschatological thinking.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. W. Duczko’s discussion of this matter in a presentation on his new book – *Moce Wikingów*, Warsaw 2016 – aired on Polish Radio 1, July 8, 2017, -[Electronic Resource]- available at: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/7/5098/Artykul/1786350,Zagadkowe-okolicznosci-ktore-opoznily-chrzest-Szwecji>).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. 1) “The wicked priests, when in a certain year men and beasts suffered illness and death owing to the changes in the temperature, declared that this calamity was sent by the gods, and, with the consent of the people, they had broken down the bells and had begun to destroy the church of the blessed martyr Adalbert.”; 2) “It

Rejections of Christian proselytization need also be borne in mind. Bede mentions the case of Penda, king of Mercia in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, who chose to remain a pagan, even though in 653 his son Peada agreed to baptism “together with his companions and thegns and all their servants” and began a Christianizing mission with the help of four priests<sup>94</sup>. One also thinks of the Połabian chiefs, often vacillating over whether “to be or not to be” Christian<sup>95</sup>. For instance, Thietmar presents Mstivoj as a pagan, although he mentions that Mstivoj kept a Christian chaplain named Aviko in his retinue<sup>96</sup>. Adam of Bremen describes Mstivoj’s son Udo as “a bad Christian”, although he adds that Udo did send his son Gotszalk to the abbey in Luneburg for his education<sup>97</sup>. Despite that schooling, in 1029 Gotszalk apostatized – only to reconvert in the 1040s and become Połabie’s would-be Christianizer<sup>98</sup>.

The most riveting rejection of Christian proselytizing is that of Radbod, the late 7<sup>th</sup>-/early 8<sup>th</sup>-century Frisian ruler. As the *Vita Vulframni* tells us, literally seconds before he was to be christened, Radbod – standing but a single step from the baptismal font, no doubt wearing a white gown, *alba vestis* – asked Bishop Wulfram where his (pagan) ancestors, the kings and nobles and leaders of the Frisian people, were – in heaven or in hell? Wulfram is reported to have replied:

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happened, moreover, that a great mortality occurred in the town, and, when the [pagan] priests were questioned by the people, they said that they had met with this calamity because they had put away their idols, and that all of them would die suddenly if they did not try to appease their ancient gods by sacrifices and the accustomed gifts. In consequence of this declaration a public assembly was forthwith held, the idol images were sought out and the profane, idolatrous observances and ceremonies were performed again by the people, and the middle portions of the Christian churches were destroyed”, *The Life of Otto Apostle of Pomerania 1060-1139*, New York 2007, p. 155; 110.

Though neither does the late 10<sup>th</sup>-century case of St. Wojciech’s mission to the Prusy concern *kingly* rejection, it too is worth bearing in mind. For as Bruno of Querfurt tells us in his *Life of St. Wojciech (Vita altera*, chap. xxv), when, in the spring of 996, Wojciech and his fellows encountered the pagans in Prusy, they were ordered to leave: “Our lands will yield no harvests, our trees will cease to bear fruit, no new animals will be born, the old will die off. Go out, go out from our borders!”.

<sup>94</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History...*, Book III, chap. 21, p. 177-178. Bede lists the priests as Cedd, Adda, Betti (who were English), and Diuma, an Irishman.

<sup>95</sup> See: Christian Lübke, “Between Reception and Aversion: The earliest traces of Christianity among the Polabian Slavs”, paper to be published later this year by the Polish Academia of Sciences in Berlin.

<sup>96</sup> Thietmar, *Kronika...*, Book III, chap. 18, p. 51.

<sup>97</sup> Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops...*, Book II, chap. lxvi, p. 100.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100-101.

it is certain that the multitudes of his elect are at the house of God, but on the other hand, your predecessors, the leaders of the Frisian people, who passed away without the sacrament of baptism, have certainly received the sentence of damnation. However, whomever henceforth believes and is baptized, will rejoice with Christ eternally.

This crystallized matters for Radbod, who at once knew he could not sever his ties with his ancestors. He then turned about and left – remaining a pagan until his death in 719<sup>99</sup>.

The case of Radbod is compelling because of its eschatological component, something we comparatively seldom encounter in the history of medieval Europe's conversion. Among the better known examples, one flashes on the case of “*translatio*” in Jelling, where Harald Gormsson, who had converted ca. 965, reburied his pagan father Gorm the Old (d. 958) in a nearby church (something Clovis, by way of contrast, didn't do, leaving his pagan father Childeric forgotten in his tomb in Tournai<sup>100</sup>). We may well also recall the words spoken in 627 by one the “chief men” at King Edwin's court in Northumbria, who, during the court's debate on whether or not to accept Christianity, waxed poetic with a yearning to know what comes after death:

Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thegns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall,

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<sup>99</sup> *Vita Vulframni*, chap. IX; Radbod also appears in Alcuin's *Vita Willibrorda* and in Bede, *Ecclesiastical History...*, Book V, chap. 9-10, p. 280.

Radbod's strident attitude was echoed in Poland during the heady days of pursuing European Union membership by professor Maria Janion, who entitled her book from 2000 *Do Europy, tak – ale razem z naszymi umarłymi*.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. I. Wood, *The Merovingian...*, p. 44: “For a Merovingian, whose dynasty originated with a sea-monster, rejection of previous beliefs must have been particularly hard. In Clovis's case the sharpness of the break seems to have been remarkable. It can be gauged by a comparison between Childeric's burial at Tournai, and his son's interment in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Paris. Further, Childeric's grave was apparently forgotten about; the horse burials which surrounded it were already cut into in the sixth century by secondary inhumations. Clovis and his descendants did not protect the tombs of their pagan ancestor.” Childeric's grave was rediscovered after nearly 1,200 years, in 1653.

and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a moment of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.<sup>101</sup>

But we must at once remind ourselves of the words Edwin's pagan high priest Coifi shared immediately before then, as they bespeak the empirical religiosity we shall now turn to:

Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching; for I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects has been more devoted to the service of our gods than myself; yet there are many to whom you show greater favour, who receive greater honors, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods had any power, they would surely have favoured myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them.

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There is, to be sure, a greater multiplicity of types of kingly conversions/rejections of conversion than I have given above. After all, there were the syncretists like Redwald, the 7<sup>th</sup>-century king of the East Angles, who "tried to serve both Christ and the ancient gods, and he had in the same shrine an altar for the holy sacrifice of Christ side by side with a small altar on which victims were offered to devils"<sup>102</sup>. Another is the father of Hungary's Stephen the Great, Gejza, about whom Thietmar, referring to him as Deuvix, wrote that after he had been

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<sup>101</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History...*, Book II, chap. 13, p. 129-130.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, Book III, chap. 15, p. 133.

baptized, “he nonetheless made offerings not only to Almighty God, but also to sundry false pagan idols. And when his bishop rebuked him for this, [Gejza] declared to him that he was rich and powerful enough to allow himself to do so”<sup>103</sup>. There were also: latter-day Julian-the-Apostates, including the late 9<sup>th</sup>-century Bulgarian ruler Vladimir and the mid 10<sup>th</sup>-century Sviatoslav I in Rus’; the many opportunists from Clovis (who ruled over a largely Christianized realm with a developed ecclesiastical structure)<sup>104</sup> to Vladimir the Great (who aspired to the Byzantine crown, through marriage to the Basileus’ sister); and of course those who were baptized by force of arms, particularly in the context of Charlemagne’s Saxon wars (e.g., Hessi, the Ostphalian chieftan) and the Baltic crusades beginning in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

But the point to stress is what a rocky, uncertain road Europe’s Christianization was. For the way it is often understood, from the vantage point of a millennium later, is that Christianity spread via centrifugal, all-but inevitable forces – again, ones that focused on the tactic of “get the king”. Polish scholars – and in cases ranging all the way from Constantine the Great to Mieszko and beyond – are wont to portray conversion as virtually inescapable and always having been rationally calculated, neglecting the myriad different paths Christianity’s erratic advance took and ignoring the many risks and setbacks it suffered throughout the period from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Above all, however, it is the matter of empirical religiosity that gets ignored.

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The enormous role of empirical religiosity in the conversion of Europe is most starkly displayed in two areas. The first concerns the myriad “showdowns” staged by priests and missionaries, during which the earthly power of the Christian God was demonstrated to be

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<sup>103</sup> Thietmar, *Kronika...*, Book VIII, chap. 3, p. 219.

<sup>104</sup> One cannot help but hear a distant echo of Clovis’ decision in Henry IV’s quip: “Paris is well worth a Mass”.

superior to that of the pagan gods. The second, which is even more relevant for our considerations of Mieszko I's decision in the year 966, concerns the scores of cases when the Christian "pitch" made to the medieval pagan ruler laid stress above all – and usually exclusively – to the promise of strengthening his rule and realm.

But first, let's examine the "religious mindset" which Labuda failed to address concerning Mieszko's Poland. What most easily can be evaluated is the presence of magical thinking. As Karol Modzelewski has shown, across "barbarian" Europe – from Antiquity to the Middle Ages – the many pagan peoples, when gathered at their public assemblies (*wiec* in Polish – cf. *thing*) relied on astonishingly similar divination rituals (ones most typically involving horses) to discover the will of the gods and win their favor for the tribe's worldly safety, health, prosperity, etc.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, "In matters giving rise to doubts, it was necessary to turn to the gods for guidance – that is, to reach out to oracles. There can be no doubt but that divinations were the link conjoining pagan cultic practices with the decision-making mechanism at the *wiec*"<sup>106</sup>, Modzelewski stresses.

One of the fathers of the anthropology of religion – Poland's Bronisław Malinowski – succeeded, I am convinced, in describing the origins of apotropaic patterns of thought, i.e., ones that magically seek to ward off danger and assure wellbeing. Namely, Malinowski showed that even in primitive societies (among which we can include the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Polonians) people behave "scientifically", as he put it. They do not begin their endeavors with prayers or the performance of extravagant rituals. Rather, they teach themselves how best to make a spearhead, how to weave a fishing net, how to start a fire, how to sow seeds, how to assess their enemies' strength, and so on. Magical or religious thinking (in fact, Malinowski failed in his attempt to distinguish them) arises from the anxiety that remains after having done everything as best as one's intellect allows. And so you have fertilized the soil, spaded

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<sup>105</sup> See: footnote 72.

<sup>106</sup> K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska...*, p. 384.

or plowed it, sown and watered it – but will the weather be propitious? This you cannot know, and the anxiety that haunts you expresses itself as an emotional outburst that takes the form of a ritual beseeching the favor or blessing of supernatural powers<sup>107</sup>.

Przemysław Urbańczyk, in one of his recent books focusing on Mieszko I, presented the nature of such empirical religiosity<sup>108</sup> (which he calls “practical paganism”) as follows:

Whereas in pre-Christian religions it was of utmost importance to perform prescribed rituals intended to succor the favor of the gods and/or one’s ancestors, Christianity, in turn, laid stress to an internal conviction that was made manifest in obligatory participation in highly ritualized activities. Simply put, the difference between practical paganism, whose adherents expected a specific and swift “payment” for having performed ritual activities, and Christianity – based on obeying an ethical code and on devotion that points to a distant, posthumous reward – must have been rather difficult to comprehend for early-medieval converts. We may therefore suspect they maintained an altogether mercantile approach to the new God and treated the duties imposed by the Church as the means to obtain due ‘payment’ for having fulfilled the requirements of the new faith<sup>109</sup>.

The corollary to *do ut des* is: be sure you are imploring the most powerful and/or most concerned god. Hence both our upcoming showdowns, and the pitches made to pagan rulers. For it was none other than empirical religiosity that offered pagans the easiest and most direct bridge to initiation into Christianity.

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<sup>107</sup> See: B. Malinowski, “The role of magic and religion”, [in:] *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. IV, London 1931, p. 634-642.

<sup>108</sup> I am indebted to Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion...*, for this term.

<sup>109</sup> P. Urbańczyk, *Mieszko...*, p. 206.



However, the scope of pagan empirical religiosity was foremost collective. It was tantamount to a political program, one based in religious categories of thought that centered on assuring a people's temporal *pax deorum*. "For the tribe was a community whose bond was conceived in sacral categories", Modzelewski writes, "[...] Cultic practices connected with the *wiecz* and with war rested on the conviction that the gods take part in all the activities of tribal institutions"<sup>110</sup>. By all reckoning the conception of the community's sacral identity betrayed virtually nothing akin to notions of personal salvation and individual heavenly reward: instead, it focused on achieving and maintaining earthly security for the tribe<sup>111</sup>. This is what is meant by "empirical religiosity" – a kind of collective "prosperity gospel", as it were.

The showdowns we shall now briefly discuss are of course a *topos*. As such it bears repeating that they portray not real events, but the mindscape – which is not a whit less important. They have their basis in the Torah – specifically, in the showdown waged by Moses and Aaron against the Egyptian priests and sorcerers found in Exodus 6-8. The passage in 7:10-12 distills the point:

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as Yahweh had ordered. Aaron threw down his staff in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh in his turn called for the sages and sorcerers, and by their spells the magicians of Egypt did the same. Each threw his staff down and these turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs.

There is almost no end to analogous descriptions in the history of Christianity. They extend from Lactantius' account in *De mortibus persecutorum* – where the presence of

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<sup>110</sup> K. Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska...*, 402. Cf. "The gods were always present at the *wiecz* as the guarantors of the sacral peace and as the source of inspiration for the people gathered. [The gods] were behind the *wiecz*'s every decision. The role that was played at the *wiecz* by pagan priests and oracles offers telling testimony to the unseverable tie between the tribe's politics and decision-making and the pagan *sacrum*", p. 397.

<sup>111</sup> This matter (as so many of the preceding ones) is discussed more fully in: P. E. Steele, *Nawrócenie...* .

Christians during divinations conducted by Diocletian's *haruspices* prevented them from reading the entrails (and prompted the emperor to launch the Great Persecution); to that of Sulpicius Severus in his life of St. Martin – where the sacred pine tree the pagans agreed to fell ‘miraculously’ missed Martin; to the even more dramatic 8<sup>th</sup>-century story of St. Boniface and the Oak of Donar; and to Widukind's account (Book III, chap. 65) of the Christian missionary Poppa carrying the glowing-hot piece of iron without injuring his hands, whereby he convinced King Harald Gormsson to convert. What these dozens upon dozens of stories bespeak is none other than the “religious mindset” existing among pagans, for whom empirical demonstrations of superior supernatural power (or: tales of such demonstrations) were the linchpin in converting them to Christianity.

The same goes for the pitches made to pagan rulers to convert to Christianity. *Hoc signo victor eris* was the promise made ever and again during Christianity's expansion out from the Roman world. Fletcher has cited scores of examples<sup>112</sup>, both far too many to list here – and far too many to ignore any longer in Polish scholarship on Mieszko I. These pitches were made by popes, missionaries, Christian wives to their pagan (and heretical<sup>113</sup>) husband-rulers, and Christian kings to pagan (and heretical<sup>114</sup>) ones. They range from Bishop Avistus explaining to Clovis that baptism would make his weapons even more powerful<sup>115</sup> – to that of Methodius, who told Bořivoj, “When you abandon idols and the demons dwelling in them, you will become the lord of your lords, and all your enemies will be subjugated to your rule, and your descendants will multiply daily, like an enormous river, into which various streams

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<sup>112</sup> R. Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion...*, i.a., p. 97-129; 242-248; 515-519.

<sup>113</sup> As in the case when the Catholic princess Chlodowintha (Clovis and Clotilda's granddaughter) was sent in about 565 to marry the Lombard ruler, Alboin – an Arian. Before leaving the Frankish realm, she was advised by Bishop Nicetius of Trier (his letter to her survives) to seek Alboin's conversion (which seems never to have happened) by recounting the great victories her grandfather had achieved as a Catholic – cf. R. Fletcher *The Barbarian Conversion...*, p. 105-106.

<sup>114</sup> The case of the early 7th-century Visigothic king Sisebut is an important such example. Sisebut, a Catholic, wrote to the Arian ruler of Lombardy, Adaloald, explaining that his people had suffered calamity as Arians, but at once began to enjoy prosperity as Catholics: see: R. Fletcher *The Barbarian Conversion...*, p. 121-122.

<sup>115</sup> See: D. Shanzer, I. Wood, *Avistus of Vienne: Letters and selected prose*, Liverpool 2002, Epistula 46, p. 362-369.

flow”<sup>116</sup>. They include even Poland’s own Monachus Littorensis, who underlined for Bolesław Krzywousty and his heirs the blessings Bolesław Chrobry had received for his devotion to Christ and His Church: “God lifted his head in glory and thus in everything [Bolesław] fared well and prosperously. And as far as Bolesław was pious in matters concerning God, all the greater was his glory in things mundane”<sup>117</sup>.

Indeed, nor does even the ringing “Dirge on the death of Bolesław”<sup>118</sup> say anything of Chrobry’s heavenly reward.

There is a persistent premise at work throughout much of Polish historiography on both Mieszko’s and other rulers’ conversions, one that makes invisible the role of empirical religiosity. Let us return yet again to the case of Bořivoj, often cited in the literature, for perhaps nowhere is this premise revealed more conspicuously. After all, the passage about Bořivoj’s shame in not being permitted to eat at the table is *immediately* followed by the passage containing Methodius’ pitch to Bořivoj’s empirical religiosity – notwithstanding which, one scholar after another completely ignores it, opting to see only the issue of wounded pride<sup>119</sup>. This is all the more puzzling as, again, there are literally scores and scores of parallel pitches known from the early Middle Ages – and merely a few similar shame stories<sup>120</sup>. Moreover, those few are greatly outnumbered by counterexamples of pagan rulers being “wined and dined” by Christian ruler-proselytizers<sup>121</sup>. Thus, the fact that numerous

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<sup>116</sup> From “Legenda Christiani” [in:], *The Czech Reader...*, p. 18.

<sup>117</sup> See: *Kronika Polska...*, chap. 11 (cf. chap. 9).

<sup>118</sup> Ibidem, chap. 16.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. G. Labuda, *Mieszko...*, p. 103-4; J. Banaszkiwicz, “Mieszko I...”, p. 90-91; A. Pleszczyński, *The birth of a stereotype: Polish rulers and their country in German writings c. 1000 AD*, Leiden 2012, p. 29; M. Barański, “Chrzest Polski...”, p. 10-14.

Besides Methodius’ pitch to empirical religiosity, what is also tellingly ignored is that Bořivoj *was run out of Bohemia for his Christianity*, although he later regained the throne – cf. **Wihoda**, “**The beginnings...**”.

<sup>120</sup> E.g., that found in *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*

<sup>121</sup> Again, one thinks of Earpwald, persuaded by King Edwin of Northumbria; Sigbert II, won over to Christianity by King Oswy of Northumbria; and Harald, lionized by Louis the Pious – along with the inveterate pagan Sviatoslav I, who – according to Nestor – was courted by the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros (in 968) and then 3 years later by Tzimiskes (who even allowed the Kievan ruler to swear by his pagan gods)...

Polish scholars discern here only the issue of “the lowly stature of the pagan in the diplomatic protocol of the period” discloses a pronounced flaw in the optics at work.

This flaw is typically accompanied by another, one that just as badly misconstrues matters and – in sum – outright justifies the relevant scholars in ignoring the religious aspects behind early-medieval conversions at large. Namely, one scholar after another submits that acceptance of baptism by hitherto pagan rulers involved “personal spiritual conversion”, “personal motives”, “personal convictions”, and thoughts on “eternity”, “eschatology”, and “the salvation of the soul”<sup>122</sup> – and that as these matters supposedly lie outside the realm of historical methodology, they must be left aside<sup>123</sup>.

These conclusions, most especially the first, hardly bring accolades to Polish scholarship. For just as with the leap toward making Mieszko a modern religious cynic, the leap toward ascribing him with a “personal spiritual conversion” and wishes for heavenly reward in 966 violates our methodologies by removing Mieszko from his own time and “zip code”. Mieszko must be viewed in his own context, and not that of Paul on the road to Damascus or Mary of Egypt in Jerusalem. Close examination of “getting the king” in early-medieval Europe plainly reveals that issues of sin and the need for redemption, along with the promise of reward in the life hereafter, were seldom ever explained or used as motivating factors in converting pagan rulers: throughout the *Barbaricum* it was the demonstration and/or promise of earthly power and prosperity that was pitched to them and led to conversion. Moreover, such conversion was treated collectively, decided at the court, the *wiec* or the *thing*, and adopted as a political program designed to secure *pax deorum*.

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<sup>122</sup> These are terms used i.a., by A. Nowak, *Dzieje Polski...*, p. 85-86; idem, “My, Polanie...”, p. 56; D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 98; P. Urbańczyk, *Mieszko...*, p. 206, 234; and many others.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 105.

Mieszko, as a pagan Slavic ruler of his time, acting within a culture that was inextricably political and religious, chose the more powerful god to safeguard his rule and his realm.

This idea has in fact been developed by a tiny number of Polish scholars in recent years. Notable are the papers published by Roman Michałowski and Zbigniew Dalewski in 2008 in *Animarum Cultura*<sup>124</sup>. Writing then of Mieszko, Michałowski stressed that the Piast dynasty's choice of Christianity was meant "to secure divine blessings together with all consequences – political and existential, temporal and eternal", adding more generally about the conversion of Europe's pagan rulers that, "At issue was not merely sociotechnical cunning and securing for oneself the greatest number of allies. The main issue lay elsewhere: which religion, it was asked, will more effectively win the favor of the heavens?"<sup>125</sup>. Dalewski, in turn, elucidated the role empirical religiosity played during the reign of Bolesław Chrobry and its "pagan-leftover" collective form: "In this regard, it seems the difference between Christianity and pagan beliefs did not have a fundamental character. In both cases the predominant role fell to the public cult. Its proper fulfillment was to guarantee prosperity and protection by the sacral powers"<sup>126</sup>.

As I argued in the first edition of my book (2005), and Michałowski after me<sup>127</sup>, there is very solid ground for holding that, following his conversion, Mieszko's empirical "religious mindset" went on to reinforce him in the conviction that he had chosen the more powerful God. This in all likelihood began as soon as the very next year, when Mieszko defeated Wichman and the Połabian forces he led, Wichman himself falling in that battle. It is easy to

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<sup>124</sup> See also: A. Szyjewski, "Jeszcze jeden Bóg" [One further God], [in:] *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 9.IV.16, - [Electronic resource]- available at://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/jeszcze-jeden-bog-33204.

<sup>125</sup> R. Michałowski, "Chryścianizacja...", p. 36; 14. Professor Andrzej Pleszczyński recently (2016) made this argument on the website of the Museum of Polish History, -[Electronic resource]- available at: <http://muzhp.pl/pl/e/1139/chrzest-mieszka-i>

<sup>126</sup> Z. Dalewski, "Publiczny wymiar...", p. 54.

<sup>127</sup> R. Michałowski, "Chryścianizacja...", p. 16-17.

picture Mieszko, having experienced the favor of Providence, kneeling on the battlefield and offering thanks to his new God. Perhaps, in triumph, he even held a cross high above his head and led his warriors in prayer, wishing to convince them on the basis of their victory that – as a Christian army – they were unconquerable. Victories like this continued on to the end of his reign in 992, by which time he had tripled or even quadrupled the size of the Piast realm. Mieszko’s sense of accomplishment must have been great, and indeed, he clearly expressed his gratitude to his new God in his final will and testament, *Dagome iudex*.

Mieszko’s understanding of Christian theology of course grew over the 26 years of his life following baptism in 966. We may well surmise that, in line with what Thietmar and “Gall” had to say about Dobrawa, his Czech wife truly did instruct him in Christian belief and practice. This was no doubt also the case with his subsequent wife, Oda – whom he extracted from the convent in Kalbe (Milde). The same obviously goes for bishops Jordan and Unger. Both Bruno of Querfurt<sup>128</sup> and Thietmar<sup>129</sup> describe Mieszko as a committed Christianizer of his expanding realm, and additional sources allow us to discern several examples of medieval piety in Mieszko from the period after his conversion. For instance, that in 973, when having to leave his son Bolesław at the imperial court in Quedlinburg, Mieszko sent a large locket of the boy’s freshly cut hair to the Pope. And when, having been shot in the arm with a poisoned arrow, he was “miraculously” saved thanks to the intercession of St. Udalryk, after which he sent a silver arm to the saint’s grave in Augsburg<sup>130</sup>. And when, having grown old and sensing the approach of death, he bequeathed in *Dagome iudex* his entire realm to Saint Peter. Which again is to highlight the strong parallels between Mieszko and Constantine the Great, each of

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<sup>128</sup> In his famous letter to Henry II written in 1008, Bruno refers to the happier days of Polish-German relations, and cites Mieszko’s efforts to “convert the pagans”.

<sup>129</sup> See: Thietmer, *Kronika...*, Book IV, chap. 56 and 57, p. 83.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. D. Sikorski, *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 302-304.

whom for no “secularly rational” reason, but as superstitious pagans opened themselves to the Christian God, and thereafter became His informed and committed adherents<sup>131</sup>.

The last thing I must say – while leaving out much more<sup>132</sup> – is that the sheer temerity we have depicted in Mieszko’s conversion is all the more remarkable when we glance at the ever so different origins of Christianity among Poland’s neighbors and peoples elsewhere across Europe.

Among the Czechs, for instance, as we know from the *Annals of Fulda*, 14 of their princes were baptized in 845. Nonetheless, the Christianizing career of Bořivoj and Ludmila began not until the 880s, and that process did not become earnest until half a century later, under Boleslav I. And yet the first bishopric in Bohemia wasn’t up and running until the late 970s – some 130 years after Bohemia’s initial baptisms. Even so, St. Wojciech (the *second* bishop of Prague) still had the Czechs for pagans. So, false start after false start, and nearly all the while the Czechs found themselves with contiguous Christians neighbors west, south, and east<sup>133</sup>. Moreover, the Czech example is altogether normal. It is the case of Mieszko that is so extraordinary.

After all, the mission to the Swedes, briefly described above, began some 170 years before Mieszko’s grandson King Olaf was baptized in about 1000. The baptism of Denmark’s Harald Gormsson came nearly 140 years after Harald Klak’s. Christianity had also long made inroads among the Rus’ before Vladimir the Great’s baptism. Close contacts with Constantinople reached back more than a century by then. What is more, Vladimir’s own

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. C. Odahl, *Constantine...* .

<sup>132</sup> I most regret being unable to discuss the recently debated question among Polish archeologists, “to what degree did Mieszko pursue the Christianization of his people?”. Suffice it to say that professor Przemysław Urbańczyk, in several recent works, has argued forcefully that the label “Christianizer” suits Bolesław Chrobry – but not Mieszko. Professor Andrzej Buko has just as forcefully countered, and it is he with whom I side. Cf. P. Urbańczyk, “Jak (s)chowano pierwszych polskich chrześcijan?”, *Funeralia Lednickie*, vol. 17, 2014, p. 129-142; and A. Buko, “Chrześcijanie i poganie...”, p. 13-51.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. P. Sommer, D. Třeštík, J. Žemlička, E. Doležalová, “The Christianisation of Bohemia and Moravia”, [in:] *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU*, vol. 13, 2007, p. 153-163.

grandmother Olga had become a Christian and was baptized in Constantinople in 957 – and as the regent of Rus’, no less. Nothing whatsoever of the kind can be said of the Piasts before Mieszko.

Glancing further afield and deeper into time, Clovis ruled over a land having a largely evangelized population and a developed ecclesiastical structure. He joined a winning team. Ethelbert, in turn, handed over to Augustine a church still standing from Roman times...

And among the Polonians? Here, in contrast to countries near and far, Mieszko introduced Christianity on utterly virgin soil. From scratch. Surrounded by pagans. At his own will, at a time of strength and stability, and with no obvious “ulterior” motives. The case of Mieszko’s “acceptance of baptism” stands as one of the clearest examples in medieval Europe not only of empirical religiosity – but of empirical religiosity having been the primary motive for a ruler’s conversion.