

The *Sacred-Profane* in the Archaic Beliefs of the Slavs

According to S.A. Tokarev (1970, 47-48) "the work of the great Czech scholar Lubor Niederle has created a whole new epoch in the historic-ethnographical research of the Slavic nations. This applies both to research concerning their economic and material culture as well as to research dealing with the history of their social and spiritual culture. The same can be said with regard to the history of the development of the religious beliefs of the Slavs. First of all, Niederle was one of the first scholars to stand up decisively against the uncritical fanaticism of older scholars who had dealt with religious ideas of the ancient Slavs ... Niederle was not the first scholar to call for a critical revision of the confused 'mythological' systems of the ancient Slavic religion. As early as in 1870, articles were published by authors more or less critically keyed, including some notable scholars. ... It was only Niederle who took it upon himself to do the gigantic work: to systematize and critically evaluate all the reliable data available in the field of pre-Christian religion of Slavic tribes and peoples. The result of Niederle's research was *Slovanské starožitnosti* published in several volumes." (Niederle 1924; 1953). "In spite of all the results of research in archeology and linguistics - especially Slavic - it is difficult to find something that could be added to Niederle's conclusions about his material. In our approach to specific problems of ancient Slavic religion, we are easily convinced that these problems have been handled by Niederle from the position of classic evolutionist sociology. His whole concept of the essence of ancient religion and its origins was closest to that of Edward Tylor" (Tokarev 1970, 49).

At the time when Niederle was preparing his work about the religion of ancient Slavs, European religious studies were yet to emerge as an independent field. The ones who helped this development the most were Max Müller, Peter Kornelis Tiele, Edward B. Tylor, Emil Durkheim, Wilhelm Schmidt, Rudolf Otto and Nathan Soederblom (Margul 1964). However, religious studies have remained part of linguistics, ethnography, archeology and sociology for a long time. Religious studies became an independent field of study only later, and even then they had no influence on the research of ancient Slavs' beliefs and spiritual culture. This field was, first of all, the domain of archeologists. Even though they were expected to take account of

the development in other fields, the center of their research lay in their own method determined by the material character of their excavations. Their results - the discoveries of tombs, of grave-mounds, of traces of ancient Slavic sanctuaries surely contributed to the research into the religion of ancient Slavs (Urbańczyk 1947; 1968, 29-46; Antoniewicz 1957; Kozłowski 1962, 329-359; Eisner 1966, 454-485; Gediga 1976; Gierlach 1980). Recently, B.A. Rybakov (1981; 1987) has emphasized the interpretation of ornamental motifs and various objects of art and based on it his division of ancient Slavic religion into periods. In his view the motifs of animals and plump women in the Stone Age are evidence of animal and *Terra Mater* cults. But from the Neolithic period and the advance of agriculture onwards, Rybakov has had to take recourse to Indo-European data, to medieval literary documents and to folklore. It shows that archeology encounters difficulties when interpreting excavations from the more distant past of mankind. In this respect, all live, historical and ethnographic sources provide much greater possibilities of accurate interpretation.

Many works and studies about Slavic religion present a certain one-sided view, resulting from the methodology of the particular field of study. On the other hand, there are no works with the specific characteristics of religious studies even though in modern times they have brought a lot of new information about the beliefs at various communities (tribes, peoples) of the world, as well as new research methods. Following R. Otto, N. Soederblom, M. Eliade, G. van der Leeuw, J. Grandmaison, G. Mensching and others, contemporary religious studies use concepts as *sacred* (*sacrum*), *profane* (*profanum*), *numen*, *numinosum*, *cratophany*, *hierophany*, etc., which express more deeply the substance of beliefs not only as a social phenomenon, but first of all as a psychological one. In this context, for example, H. Łowmiański's (1979) work about the religion of ancient Slavs and its decline can be rightly classified as belonging to the specific field of religious studies. To make his language more precise particularly from the methodological point of view, Łowmiański uses the concepts of *antisacrum*, *numinosum*, *prototheism* (*uranism*), *sacrum*, *secondary* (*derivative*) *sacrum*, partially borrowed from Otto's vocabulary. A. Gieysztor (1982) often uses the concept *sacrum* in his work about the mythology of the Slavs.

By contrast to old religious studies, contemporary specialists in this field support the opinion that *sacrum* is the best expression for the substance of religion, since it is manifested in various forms in all the religious

systems in the world. Opinions differ as far as to what *sacrum* is. Some, including N. Soederblom, understand it as an impersonal power (*mana*), or as the experience of the supernatural, that is, as a psychological experience. R. Otto (1968, 30-36) puts emphasis on religious irrationality, intuition. This way *sacrum* shows two aspects of religion: Subjective - in the form of experiencing a deity (*sensus numinis*) and objective - in the form of the impenetrable, incomprehensible, inaccessible concept of *numinosum* (Margul 1964, 203). But if a concept is imperceptible, it is difficult to define, too. Really, we can find no definition of *sacrum*.

Without doubt, M. Eliade (1965, 13-20; 1966, 18-20) accepts Otto's concepts. According to him, *sacrum* is religion transferred to the psychological sphere. It is a sensation, a feeling of something inexpressible which inspires awe and at the same time attracts. He sees the course of history as the manifestation of sacred - *hierophany* - in time as well as in space. *Hierophany* has its dialectics based on the dichotomy between *sacrum* and *profanum* which actually expresses the substance of religion. *Sacrum* appears to be something else, something distinct from *profanum*. It is some kind of manifestation which does not belong to our world, in objects forming an integral part of the natural world. From the point of view of *profanum*, for example, a stone is not different from other stones in the elementary, undeveloped *hierophany*, but if it is a meteorite, a stone fallen from Cosmos - the sacred sphere - it becomes *sacrum*. We can find such *sacrum* in the Old Testament, this *sacrum* was the stone Jacob put under his head when sleeping away from home. In this case, *sacrum* was transferred to the stone when Jacob had a dream of a stairway to heaven where angels walked about and God was standing there and spoke to Jacob. He woke up and felt fear and said: "How awful this place! This is really the house of God (Betel) and this is the gate to Heaven!" (Gen. 28, 11-19). We can say, that *sacrum* and *profanum* actually represent two ways in which man has experienced his existence in history.

After this introduction considered necessary for our further discussion, we shall try to demonstrate *sacrum* - *profanum* on the material of the archaic beliefs of Slavs.

First of all, it must be made clear what Cosmos as sacred space meant to the Slavs. The most decisive opinion can be found in *The War against the Goths* (III, 14, 23) by Prokopios from Kaisareia. With regards to the

Slavs he says: "They believe in one god, the creator of thunder and in one lord of all things and they sacrifice bulls and other animals of every sort to him. They do not know what merciless destiny is and otherwise, they ascribe no influence over mankind to it. When death comes near and they fall ill or go to war, they promise to bring their god sacrifice expressing their gratitude if they do not perish. And when they survive, they sacrifice everything they promised to him and imagine they redeemed their lives through this sacrifice. Further on, they worship rivers, water nymphs and other deities, they sacrifice for all and they practice augury during these sacrifices ..." (Brückner 1926, 2).

Today nobody doubts that the words of Prokopios from Kaisareia correspond to historical reality. Though he spoke about one god, the creator of thunder, and one lord of all things, it does not follow that he meant the monotheism in the sense of *interpretatio Christiana*. He meant the high god of the Slavic Pantheon reigning over other deities. As we do not want to turn away from our topic, we refer to Łowmiański (1979, 83-89) who critically analysed sceptical opinions of Prokopios's report.

However, another document is important for our reasoning. It is Helmold's chronicle completing in some way Prokopios's report. In 1156 Helmold wrote about the Slavic tribe of Obodrites: "They do not deny that among the variety of deities - patrons of fields and woods, sorrows and passions - one god exists in heaven who rules over all the other (deities) and he, almighty, takes care of heavenly matters, but those (deities) obediently fulfilling their duties descend from his blood and the nearer one stands to that god of gods, the more important he is" (Brückner 1926, 5).

For Łowmiański (1979, 186), Helmold's chronicle is a testimony about the Slavic prototheism (*uranism*) based on the faith that the sky, heaven is god. However, in the period Helmold wrote about, "god-heaven" had already been transformed into "god acting in heaven". In both instances we deal with the cosmic sacred space where *cratophany* and *hierophany* occur while "heaven directly demonstrates its transcendency, its power and its *sacrum*" (Eliade 1966, 44). Since that time the highest, the unattainable, the imperceptible have become attributes of deity for mankind and the highest space has become the residence of gods. And as heaven manifested its power; *sacrum*, *cratophany* and *hierophany* manifested themselves through cosmic, astral and atmospheric phenomena, and everything was sacred which descended from the sacred sphere (Eliade 1966, 45; Komorovský 1986, 67).

Now it is important to mention that Prokopios's and Helmold's reports, as well as other documents (*Povest' vremennykh let*, Saxo Grammaticus, Arabian reports, Thietmar and others), show that the beliefs of the old Slavs differed considerably after the Slavic migration. Although gods with various names, Perun, Svarog, Dažbog, Svantovit and the like, were at the highest points in these systems, each of them represented one god ruling over gods of a lower rank; and each of those highest gods manifested his being by revealing his power, by *cratophany*. If we look for a functional common ground for the particular local highest worshipped beings, we find out that several of them represent a form of some *cratophany* manifesting itself in the sacred sphere of cosmos and so becoming *hierophany*. The underlying form is mainly fire in its various manifestations, either thunder ruled by Perun, or the sun in Svarog's power, or earthly fire derived from heavenly fire ruled by Svarog, namely his son Svarožič, also called Dažbog.

As we have seen, Cosmos as the sacred sphere is set against earthly *profanum*. But this sacred sphere, the opposite to earth, is not closed; *cratophany* and *hierophany* are transferred to earth where everything influenced by, or in contact with cosmic *cratophany* becomes *sacrum*.

The fire *cratophany* in the form of lightning, ruled by Perun according to the beliefs of old Slavs, transported *sacrum* onto the trees struck by a lightning, especially onto oaks. All Slavs ascribed this tree to the thundering god as they believed Perun visited it very often through his lightning. Helmold probably means such a tree struck by lightning when he mentions an oak in his chronicle; this tree was venerated by Polabians as if some deity lived in it, presumably Prov (Brückner 1926, 5). First of all, such "chosen" oaks were considered as sacred. The sign of their "chosen nature" was a very high age, bulkiness and a spreading top. With the passage of time, this *sacrum* became generalized in the consciousness of ancient Slavs and was extended to all oaks. According to the report of Constantine Porfirogenetos from the 10th. cent., the Russians made vows under a bulky oak over the Dnieper rapids on the island of St. Gregor and they sacrificed living birds or bread and meat to the oak. As recently as in 19th cent., bridegroom and bride went to an old oak after their wedding ceremony in the Voronež district, walked around it three times and then brought a sacrifice (Gieysztor 1982, 174). The Slavs regarded the oak to be a "good, clean, sacred" tree, that is, appropriate for gods and saints. Some time ago an oak served as a temple for Bulgarians in the absence of an actual building (Moszyński 1967, 528). On the other hand, the linden was spared from lightning, so no cult was associated with it.

Owing to their *sacrum*, at the time of old Slavs oak groves formed sanctuaries in designated areas where no stranger was allowed. Sure, not every oak grove became a sanctuary, only those defined and designed for this purpose (*linea sacra*).

It must be noted that the *cratophany* of lightning was not understood as isolated. It came along with heavenly precipitation, rain, which was secondary *sacrum*.

In effect, another *cratophany* consisted of heavenly fire, namely the sun ruled by Svarog and it seems he was the universal Slavic deity with various local functions. As in other nations, the Slavs also believed that there was a close connection between the heavenly and earthly fire. In the system of the Slavic Pantheon it meant that earthly fire was regarded to be Svarog's son, called Svarožič or Dažbog. On the one hand, this earthly fire as utility fire was *profanum*, on the other hand it was derived from the *cratophany* and *hierophany* of the sun, so it was *secondary sacrum*. It was used in the drying room of corn-sheaves where, in some sense, it substituted for the *cratophany* of the sun (Ivanov - Toporov 1965, 16).

The *cratophany* and *hierophany* of the sun was transferred with the help of the ritual *posoloň* ("after the sun"). A ritual act of turning or walking "after the sun" was part of some rituals of the Slavic wedding. It was performed at various moments during the wedding ritual according to local custom. "After the sun" meant "in the direction of the sun's apparent path", i.e. when we face the morning sun and follow the sun to the west, we will gradually turn from left to right by 180 degrees. This act was given various names by Slavic peoples, like the Russian *posoloň*, the Serbian *naoposun* and the like. The sacred circle "after the sun" was to ensure the good influence of the sun on the earth and people. It is so that its light drives away the dark forces of the night, its warmth and brightness gives life to nature. On it depends the welfare of the peasant, harvest, life. The sacred circle "after the sun" was to invoke the desirable state of prosperity, to cast a good spell on people and symbolic objects, around which or with whose help this state was created. The orientation "after the sun" was quite widespread in the agricultural cult of old Slavs. It was recommended to the eastern Slavs to plough, to sow, to work after the sun (Soloviev 1921-22, 267; Moszyński 1967, 445; Komorovský 1976, 149-152).

In the past, the room in a traditional Slavic dwelling was divided on the principle of *sacrum* — *profanum*. The front corner, in Russian *krasnyj*

ugol ("beautiful corner") was a cult corner and in Christian era sacred pictures, icons, the table were placed there. This corner was usually faced south-east, so the sun shone into the room through the front windows. This fact supports the idea that the *sacrum* of this cult corner was derived from the sun. The second corner was of normal sort, in the third corner - placed diagonally to the cult corner - there was an oven, sometimes together with a fireplace, or connected with the fireplace in the kitchen. The fourth corner, the rear corner, was designed for the door.

The *sacrum* of home-fire was derived from the sun, but the *sacrum* of fireplace as well as of fire was determined by cult ancestors. One's home-fire was a sacred symbol of lineage unity, it linked the living members with their ancestors. Therefore the fireplace played an especially significant role in the ritual of a traditional Slavic wedding (Ciszewski 1903, 117-122). Rituals and acts connected with the ancient cult of domestic lineage, with patrons and ancestors, were preserved in the wedding ritual of the Slavs to a different degree in various modifications. The cult of lineage was especially important at those moments of the wedding ceremony when the bride separated from her lineage cult and joined the domestic cult of the bridegroom's lineage. Rituals connected with this, like worship of the fireplace, the table or the threshold belonged to the group of the rites of passage (Komorovský 1976, 231-238).

The cult of lineage formed some sacred area in the dwelling delimited by *linea sacra*. On this line or boundary lay the threshold, from the functional point of view considered to be *profanum*, but at the same time it was considered to be sacred place, while it formed boundary between the home cult of lineage and the outer world full of adverse, evil forces. The meaning of *sacrum* was attributed to threshold through the ritual of joining the bride to the domestic cult of the bridegroom's lineage. As the bride was not yet joined to the new domestic cult by worshipping the fireplace, it was necessary to carry her over the threshold. Somewhere the bride worshipped the threshold by kneeling and kissing it. She had to step over the threshold in any case (Komorovský 1976, 236-237).

Profanum and *sacrum* was also connected with the table. As we have already mentioned, it usually stood in the front cult corner of the room. It is true that the table served different profane aims, but once it stood in the cult corner it also had the sacred function. As a result, bread put on the table was *sacrum*, too. Then, the *sacrum* of the wooden vessel used for kneading dough for bread (*dieža*) was derived from bread. During the

rituals of aggregation at the wedding, the bride also worshipped the vessel she was to use frequently in the future, and she walked with bread three times around the table, usually "after the sun". This ritual worship of the table had different variants according to the local custom.

At the end, we can conclude that these rituals did not have the characteristics of magic. *Sacrum* reveals itself obviously, in this case, in a lasting or transient, secondary form and can be understood only against the background of *profanum*. So the research of relationship *sacrum* – *profanum* provides the possibility to delimit the place of magic in religious systems; it makes possible to investigate more deeply the processes occurring in the collective consciousness and to ask and answer specific questions of religious studies applied to the spiritual culture of Slavs.

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