

Mystagogical Philosophy as Itinerary

Christian Wisdom in the Slavic Primary Chronicle

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Abstract: This article rereads Prince Vladimir's conversion narrative (years 986–988, Kievan Rus') in the *Primary Chronicle* as a patristic mystagogy (a deliberately staged itinerary of purification, illumination and union). Using a symbolic hermeneutic grounded in Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, it argues that the *Chronicle* portrays Rus' encounter with Christianity as a philosophical way of life that unites reason and revelation and culminates in theosis. In this study, "philosopher" is defined as the one who mediates between human inquiry and divine wisdom through a life aimed at likeness to God. St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Cyril-Constantine frame it as knowing "divine and human things" in an eros-driven ascent that is verified in deeds. In the *Chronicle*, the unnamed "Greek Philosopher" functions precisely so. Moreover, the article shows how dialogue functions as a performative engine transforming persons and positions the *Chronicle* within the canon of Christian philosophy in Rus'.

Keywords: mystagogy, Primary Chronicle, Christianization of Rus', symbolic realism, dialogue, participation, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor.

Introduction¹

THE EMERGENCE OF THEOLOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL consciousness in the early Kievan Rus' can be approached through the conversion narrative of Prince Vladimir (986–988) as preserved in the *Primary Chronicle*², where

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian, Church Slavonic, Greek and French are the author's and made from the original-language sources.

² The *Primary Chronicle* is an early-12th-century Old East Slavic annalistic compilation produced in Kiev. As a stitched-together historical record (combining origin legends, events of war, church affairs, etc.), it narrates the Rus' past from the 9th to the early 12th century. It is the foundational source for the history and self-understanding of early Rus' and the keystone of East Slavic medieval history.

Vladimir, prior to his baptism of Rus', begins to receive emissaries of competing religious traditions and gradually comes to adopt Eastern Orthodox Christianity from Constantinople. In this article I argue that Vladimir's conversion story is best read as a *patristic mystagogy*: a staged itinerary of purification–illumination–union that teaches wisdom as intrinsically ordered to holiness.

Since the early 20th century, there has been a growing academic interest in the *Primary Chronicle*, similar to the broader body of Old East Slavic writings. However, this interest has primarily been confined to the fields of medieval studies, philology, literature and political history, while its theological and symbolic dimensions (especially the conversion narrative and the figure of the "Greek philosopher") have rarely received sustained treatment that takes seriously the metaphysical and mystagogical logic presupposed by the text's narrative form.³ This article addresses this gap.

The argument of the article develops from a simple observation: The *Chronicle* arranges Vladimir's path as a triad: first, the testing of emissaries from rival religious traditions; second, the Philosopher's speech, which reframes Vladimir's metaphysical horizon; and third, the encounter of Vladimir's envoys with the Divine Liturgy in Constantinople, where beauty and ritual function as decisive criteria of truth. Read together with the later vow–victory–blindness–baptism–healing–marriage cycle, this architecture depicts conversion as a passage from searching to seeing and from seeing to being transformed. The arrangement is sufficiently patterned to warrant a structural reading that goes beyond chronological reporting of events. The narrative thus suggests that Rus' encounters Christianity as a form of *wisdom in which reason and revelation co-inhere* and culminate in *theosis* through symbolic and liturgical participation.

Methodologically, this article develops a close reading of narrative form as a carrier of theological meaning. The analysis treats dialogue as structurally decisive: The *Chronicle's* direct speech functions performatively by orienting desire and triggering action. Accordingly, the "Greek Philosopher" episode is approached as the narrative's conceptual core. His speech, together with

³ As Michail Gromov, the main contemporary specialist in Old East Slavic philosophy writes: "When turning to the literature on the Old Russian period, one immediately notices the following paradox. On the one hand, since [a long time], there has existed a vast stream of research, publications of primary sources, [etc.] on Old Russian history and culture [...]. On the other hand, there is a very weak stream of specialized philosophical literature on this same period. What is the reason for this contradiction? Is it due to the scarcity or perhaps the complete absence of Old Russian philosophy as such – an opinion still held by a few skeptically inclined scholars? Or is it the inability to discern Old Russian philosophy as a distinct phenomenon that escapes too straightforward comparisons with Western, Eastern, scholastic, Renaissance, modern European and other forms of philosophizing?" Mikhail Gromov and N. Kozlov, *Russian philosophical thought of the 10th–17th centuries* [Русская философская мысль X–XVII веков] (Moscow: Moscow University Press [Издательство Московского университета], 1990), 5.

Vladimir's questions, reorganizes the categories through which Vladimir can perceive history, time and material reality as sites of divine presence.

To articulate the theological logic enacted by this narrative structure, I read the *Chronicle* within the patristic symbolic-metaphysical hermeneutic developed with particular clarity by Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. These authors function as conceptual instruments that clarify how conversion can be narrated as ascent, how material and liturgical forms can mediate divine action and how knowledge can be transformative rather than merely cognitive. Taken together, these three authors articulate what the *Chronicle* stages narratively: itinerary, symbol/rite and transformative participation. The term "philosopher" is likewise approached within the late-antique and Byzantine Christian sense of philosophy as a way of life ordered to likeness to God. The article therefore treats the Philosopher figure as a mediator of wisdom and holiness and grounds this usage in early Slavonic and Byzantine conceptual resources.

A crucial clarification concerns the scope of the article. The central claim put forward here is theological-typological and structural: first, to demonstrate that the *Chronicle* itself, by its narrative architecture and dialogical dynamics, presents conversion as wisdom ordered to holiness and culminates in participation and, second, to show that the *Chronicle's* conversion narrative becomes *intelligible* when interpreted within the Byzantine-Slavic Orthodox symbolic horizon whose liturgical-ontological logic is most adequately described through Dionysian and Maximian categories. The article does not attempt to establish direct literary dependence of the chronicler upon particular patristic treatises, since the *Chronicle* itself does not provide the kind of evidence required for a strict source-critical demonstration. Where "influence" is suggested, it refers to the circulation of a broader conceptual toolkit through ecclesial practice and Old Slavic liturgical language that render such a reading historically plausible, while leaving open the question of direct textual access.

1. The "Philosopher": What are Wisdom and Holiness?

Before retelling the conversion cycle as it is narrated in the *Primary Chronicle*, it is necessary to clarify why the narrative introduces a "Greek Philosopher" at the decisive point of Vladimir's inquiry. The long speech of the "Greek Philosopher" is placed in the middle of the story. The *Chronicle* itself frames the episode as an encounter with "philosophy" and the plausibility of the argument developed in this article depends on spelling out what "philosopher" can mean within a Byzantine-Slavic Orthodox symbolic horizon. Again, it is of particular significance that he is referred to not as a cleric, a preacher or a missionary but specifically as a *philosopher*. A number of modern descriptions reduce the Philosopher's discourse to a

“catechism summarizing the Bible story”⁴, a “Greek priest’s religious sermon”⁵, “an account of world history [...] in the form of a missionary sermon”⁶ or a “brief compilation of material from Sacred History”⁷. Such labels are not entirely wrong but they easily miss the narrative’s conceptual intention: The Philosopher is introduced precisely where Vladimir’s inquiry must become an itinerary, that is, where discernment must become a movement that reshapes desire and practice.

In this article, “philosopher” is used in the late antique and Byzantine Christian sense of philosophy as a way of life. Philosophy is thus treated as teleological and practical: a mode of wisdom ordered toward likeness to God and verified in deeds. I work with a threefold criterion that will guide the reading of the *Chronicle*’s Philosopher episode: first, mediative knowledge; second, eros-driven ascent; and, third, likeness through action. Each element is grounded in patristic usage and is directly relevant to what the *Chronicle*’s narrative requires from the Philosopher as a character.

A particularly illuminating example can be found in the *Menaion* for January 21, where St. Maximus the Confessor is praised:

Having acquired the knowledge of both earthly and Heavenly things, Maximus has justly been called a philosopher. By the desire (*eros*) for Wisdom, you were seen as the most-excellent imitator of your Christ, O glorious Maximus.⁸

This short snippet from the *Menaion* already contains the core of the Christian meaning of “philosopher”. First, philosophy is framed as a knowledge that holds together “earthly” and “heavenly” realities, rather than separating them into unrelated domains. Second, the dynamic principle of this knowledge is *eros*: Philosophy is a movement of desire toward Wisdom. Third, the *telos* of this movement is imitation of Christ, which

⁴ Vladimir Petrukhin, “The Bible, apocrypha, and the formation of early Slavic historical traditions (toward a formulation of the problem)” [Библия, апокрифы и становление славянских раннеисторических традиций (к постановке проблемы)], in *From Genesis to Exodus: Biblical motifs in Slavic and Jewish folk culture* [От Бытия к Исходу: Отражение библейских сюжетов в славянской и еврейской народной культуре] (Moscow: Sefer, 1998), 277.

⁵ V. Mansikka, *The religion of the Eastern Slavs* [Религия восточных славян] (Moscow: IMLI im. A. M. Gorkogo RAN, 2005).

⁶ L. Müller, “The significance of the Bible for Christianity in Rus’ (from the baptism until 1240)” [Значение Библии для христианства на Руси (от крещения до 1240 года)], *Slavic Studies* [Славяноведение], no. 2 (1995): 9.

⁷ T. Vilkul, “On the origin of The Speech of the Philosopher” [О происхождении «Речи Философа»], *Palaeoslavica* 20, no. 1 (2012): 1.

⁸ The original Greek: “Ὁ γινώσιν τῶν γῆϊνων ἀθροίσας, καὶ οὐρανίων, ἐνδίκως φιλόσοφος, κατονομάζεται Μάξιμος. Σοφίας τῆς ἀμείνω τῷ ἔρωτι, τοῦ Χριστοῦ σου, μιμητὴς πανάριστος, ὠφθῆς ἀοιδίμε Μάξιμε.”

implies that “philosophy” culminates in holiness rather than remaining at the level of speculative contemplation.

As Maximus himself puts it: a human must become “the most unifying laboratory of all things”⁹, only then this person is a true philosopher. The human is the site where disparate orders cohere, so the way of knowing is integrative, as a single movement of *eros* directed *toward* the Divine *through* the world¹⁰. Philosophy, in this sense, is not the flight from earthly things. It is the transfiguration of how earthly things are known and lived. And precisely because knowledge is meant to unify, it is inseparable from desire (*eros*) and from the shaping of life.

This is, following Maximus, “the principle of that wisdom which is revealed to all: that we should know and praise God through His creation and that by means of the visible world we should understand whence we came, what we are, for what purpose we were made and where we are going”¹¹. Reason, perception and bodily engagement with the world become instruments of true knowledge and holiness. This reveals a logic that is both *incarnational* and *theotic* (deifying): incarnational, in that all of creation is seen as grace-bearing and worthy of attention; theotic, in that this attention becomes transformative, guiding both the knower and the known toward communion with God. Philosophy is thus a mode of transfigured life that leads to holiness.

The definition from the *Menaion* for Maximus echoes the first definition of philosophy in the Slavonic language that was given by St. Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher (827–869)¹², who, together with his brother Methodius, laid the foundation for the philosophical and theological vocabulary of *Slavia orthodoxa*¹³. The definition of St. Cyril appears in his lengthy hagiography *Vita Constantini*, which is attributed to his disciple Clement of Ohrid:

⁹ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguorum* 41 (36), PG 91:1305A–C.

¹⁰ Maximus makes it explicit in his *Mystagogia V*: “ἐξ ὧν ἀμφοτέρων ἡ ἀληθῆς τῶν θείων καὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἐπιστήμη συνέστηκε πραγμάτων” (from both of these together, the true knowledge of divine and human things *forms a union*). Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia: Una cum Latina interpretatione Anastasii Bibliothecarii*, ed. Christian Boudignon, Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 31.

¹¹ Maximus the Confessor, “First—Fifth Century of Various Texts,” in *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), PG 90:1144–45.

¹² Cf. Two most recent articles in English on this topic: I. Christov, “Why ‘Philosopher’? Problems and Misunderstandings Associated with the Epithet of St Cyril,” in *Der heilige Methodius, Bulgarien und Europa*, ed. Emil Ivanov and Ivaylo Naydenov (Leiden: Brill Schöningh, 2023); A. Stamatov, “St Constantine-Cyril’s Definition of Philosophy: The Beginning of Bulgarian Philosophical Culture,” in *Der heilige Methodius, Bulgarien und Europa*, ed. cit.

¹³ As Mikhail Gromov notes: “The understanding of philosophy in the spirit of Cyril is widespread in Old Russian culture. More than fifty copies of his *vita* are known, most of them of Russian origin. Old Russian authors frequently refer to his authority, and his definition of philosophy appears in various miscellanies, primers and other composite manuscripts”. M. Громов, “Определения философии в Древней Руси” [Definitions of philosophy in Old Rus’], *Русская философия* [Russian Philosophy] 22, no. 2 (2021).

‘Philosopher, I would like to know what philosophy is’. – And Constantine, being quick-witted, answered him right away: ‘To get to know divine and human things, to approach as close as possible to God and to learn through deeds [through own activity] to become like the One who created him in his image and likeness’¹⁴.

Scholars have sought to trace multiple influences behind this concise definition¹⁵, ranging from the Cappadocian and Byzantine Church Fathers to Alexandrian Neoplatonism. What emerges is a threefold characterization each with a patristic backbone:

1) The philosopher is identified as the mediator between acquired knowledge of created realities and participatory knowledge of the uncreated divine;

2) The philosopher is called to unite these modes of knowledge within a single teleological orientation, i.e. it is not a static intellection but a dynamic ascent, a movement of return *towards* the Divine governed by *eros*;

3) Ultimately, this return entails becoming like God by *active* engagement *in* and *with* the world. Gregory of Nyssa summarized this idea as concisely as possible: “we show Christ by our way of life”¹⁶. This principle of active participation finds a spiritual parallel in the later Slavic monastic-ascetic notion of *podvig* (подвиг) – as a radical, *kenotic* commitment to transformation.

Thus, the *Chronicle* portrays the first encounter of the Rus’ with Christianity as already deeply infused with philosophical content. According to the *Chronicle*, Christianity did not arrive in the Slavic world merely as a set of religious doctrines or ritual practices but as a comprehensive philosophical worldview: The Christian message was mediated through conceptual structures drawn from patristic thought. The three criteria established here will therefore guide the readings that follow: the Philosopher brings a framework in which divine action becomes intelligible through history and the world (mediative knowledge), his speech reorients Vladimir’s desire

¹⁴ The original Slavonic: “Он же хытрим умом рече тогда: божиим и человеческим вешем разум, елико может человек приближити ся Бозе, яко детелию учить человека по образу и по подобию сътворшему его”. Clement of Ohrid, *Събрани съчинения* [Collected Works], vol. 3 (Sofia: BAN, 1973), 91.

¹⁵ Thinkers whose influence can be discerned behind St. Cyril’s definition include both Christian theologians and Neoplatonic philosophers. Among the former are Gregory the Theologian, Photios the Great and especially John of Damascus (with *Philosophical Chapters*). From Alexandrian Neoplatonism, Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and David the Invincible’s *Definitions of Philosophy* were key. These interwoven strands suggest that Cyril intentionally engaged with both theological and philosophical traditions in formulating his conception of philosophy. See for more: I. Ševčenko, “The Definition of Philosophy in the Life of Saint Constantine,” in *For Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfecta christiani forma*, PG 46, 256.

and judgment toward a teleological movement of return to God (eros-driven ascent) and the narrative immediately translates Philosopher's disclosure into vows, baptismal transformation and communal change (likeness through action).

2. Summary of the *Chronicle*

Now, it is necessary to learn, at least in broad outline, the story of the conversion narrative. Here, I offer my short summary of the events recounted in the *Primary Chronicle* (years 986–988)¹⁷: The account of Vladimir's conversion begins with a sequence of encounters and dialogues. Proselytes from Volga-Bulgars (Islam), Germans (Roman Catholicism) and Khazars (Judaism) present one by one their faiths and rites at his court, each of which Vladimir evaluates individually and ultimately rejects. A Greek envoy, described as a Philosopher, follows with an extended exposition of the Christian worldview, during which Vladimir poses three questions concerning the Incarnation, its fulfilment and its sacramental form. Still seeking clarity, Vladimir sends a delegation to observe religious practices abroad. In Constantinople, the delegation experiences the Divine Liturgy and returns overwhelmed by its beauty, saying they no longer knew whether they "were in heaven or on earth". Deeply moved, Vladimir strongly considers the conversion. The narrative then shifts to the battle under Cherson. Vladimir besieges the Byzantine city and declares that, if victorious, he will be baptized. After taking the vow, his army conquers the city. However, soon after, he is struck with blindness. At the urging of the Byzantine princess Anna, he receives baptism and immediately recovers his sight. Following his healing, he marries Anna, and the two return to Kiev. There, Vladimir orders the destruction of pagan idols and calls the people to the Dnieper River, where he oversees the mass baptism of the population, completing the Christianization of Rus'. Thereafter he sends the children "of the best families" to Constantinople for education.

3. Symbolic-Mystagogical Architecture and Dialogue

I argue that the sequence of events narrated in the *Primary Chronicle* surrounding the conversion of Prince Vladimir is far more than a loosely arranged string of political or hagiographical episodes (which is, unfortunately, commonly argued in the scholarly literature). When examined closely, the structure reveals itself to be an intentionally ordered *mystagogical*

¹⁷ See the whole text in English translation in: Samuel H. Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds. and trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian text* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 96–117. Further on in this article, all the scenes from the conversion story are taken from these pages.

itinerary, in which the soul, the people and the state are drawn into progressive stages of purification, illumination and union (perfection). This is structurally analogous to the Mosaic ascent upon the mountain as it is described in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* and in Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*. It is noteworthy that Elena Fedorova's concise study, in contrast to the majority of the scholarship, explicitly foregrounds the dialogical and spiritual architecture of the conversion narrative. Though only three pages long, it indicates with precision the approach developed here. Fedorova confirms that "the dialogical nature of Prince Vladimir's story is due to his awakening self-consciousness [...], the ascent from profane to spiritual values"¹⁸.

As I show in my provisional scheme (see page 61), this narrative unfolds in a highly structured, *threefold* form that mirrors both the pedagogical logic of catechesis and the patristic metaphysics of ascent. It begins with discursive encounters (proselytes) and symbolic-visionary disclosure (Philosopher), moves through active participation (vow, destruction of idols) and culminates in sacramental (baptism, marriage) and political transformation (mass baptism, sending kids to Constantinople). The soul of Vladimir becomes the stage upon which these acts unfold, but he also figures as the representative of the people of Rus' and the political body. The conversion enacts a reordering of being itself through an ascent toward participation in the Divine. It is also philosophical in a premodern sense: it argues for the truth by leading the soul toward it. It is not concerned with demonstrating doctrine through proofs. Rather, what's important here is unfolding a metaphysical worldview through dialogue, vision and transformation.

Philosophically, the narrative draws from a range of metaphysical traditions. From patristic mystagogy, the structure resonates with Gregory of Nyssa's model of the soul's ascent, with Dionysius of Areopagite, whose theology operates through *eros*, symbol, ritual and beauty as well as with Maximus the Confessor, who offers a vision of salvation as cosmic reconciliation. Thus, Vladimir's journey can be read as a microcosmic drama of that reconciliation. These frameworks imbue both the form and the content of the conversion narrative. The events are structured as progressive acts of the soul's initiation into divine reality, each deepening and preparing for the next.

Moreover, the narrative's use of *dialogue as its structuring form* is not at all a coincidence. As Fedorova highlights: "Vladimir's speech in this legend is dialogical. The questions that Vladimir asks become stepping stones in comprehending the spiritual foundations of the Christian faith"¹⁹. Prince Vladimir is portrayed as a figure *undergoing transformation through relational*

¹⁸ Elena A. Fedorova, "Dialogism of the word in the story of choice of faith by Prince Vladimir (according to A. Ukhtomsky)," *Вестник Новгородского государственного университета* [Bulletin of Novgorod State University] 94 (2016): 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

encounter. "Vladimir's speech is not only polemical, it is intimate and confessional"²⁰. The dialogical mode reflects the *Platonic conviction* that truth is not imposed but *drawn out through engagement with others*, "from much association/companionship" and "through shared life" (Ep.7, 341c). Each dialogical moment in the narrative moves the Prince (and by symbolic extension, the people of Rus') closer to ontological alignment with the Divine. The first stage is one of purification: three emissaries present their respective religions. Each is heard, considered and ultimately rejected. The second stage brings in the Philosopher from Byzantium, who unveils the symbolic order of salvation, which functions as a moment of illumination. The third stage extends the inquiry into the domain of aesthetic experience. Vladimir sends his envoys to see the religious rites for themselves. Their *ecstatic* response to the Divine Liturgy and bringing this reaction back home marks the completion of the dialogical arc.

As Rachel May²¹ has shown, dialogue in the *Primary Chronicle* is the central mechanism of transformation and not just a decorative literary feature: "The pivotal event is most often a speech or dialogue. What is more, these tend to be made up of [...] sentences that accomplish actions by their very utterance: promises, betrayals, threats, invitations, treaties, proposals, and so on"²². The chronicler himself, May observes, "is confined to a constative role, fitting his words to the world, while the characters engage in *performative* speech, changing the world by their words"²³. Here, the dialogical form of the narrative converges with its ontological substance: events do not merely unfold, "events quite literally speak themselves: the characters are permitted to pronounce the crucial statements, and their speeches are what make things happen, not the chronicler's exegetical remarks"²⁴.

This narrative style is not incidental to the Old East Slavic tradition. "Other European chronicles also use this style, although rarely to such a degree as the Slavic one, or with such verisimilitude"²⁵. One of the first researchers of Slavic chronicles (in their historic and linguistic dimensions), Dmitry Likhachev, notes already in 1947:

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

²¹ Although May's primary concern lies in the domain of narrative theory and speech act analysis rather than theological or metaphysical interpretation, her work remains crucial here, as she is one of the few scholars to take seriously the dialogical structure of the *Primary Chronicle* and to treat its performative speech as narratively and structurally central, which is precisely the foundation upon which my symbolic-philosophical reading builds.

²² R. May, "The Power of Speech: Dialogue as History in the Russian Primary Chronicle," in *Dialogue and Critical Discourse: Language, Culture, Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Macovski (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

One of the most characteristic features of Russian chronicle writing, sharply distinguishing it from the narrative style of Byzantine and Western European chronicles, is the abundance of instances of direct speech. [...] [It] is distinguished by its vivid, concrete and non-fictional character. It is not literary or bookish language, but rather a living, oral speech that closely reflects the actual words spoken. It is precisely in the direct speech of chronicles that one most strongly senses the dependence of the chronicle on *real life itself*.²⁶

4. Philosopher's speech

With this background in mind, we can now turn to the Philosopher's speech itself. With the emissaries of the world's religions dismissed, the narrative turns to the unnamed Greek Philosopher. The fact that the *Primary Chronicle* calls him *философъ* signals a fundamental shift: from religious persuasion to philosophical disclosure. The Philosopher reframes the conversation entirely. What follows is a symbolic narration of the divine economy: the history of God's engagement with the world, ordered according to a metaphysical structure and expressed in typological language. The Philosopher enters into a dialogue with Vladimir, marked by a *rhythm* of three philosophical questions and three theological responses. Each of Vladimir's questions corresponds to a fundamental metaphysical issue: the nature of Being itself, the question of relation between eternity and time and the symbolic realist logic. Each answer unfolds a vision of divine action in time.

Vladimir's first question is interesting in its philosophical depth: "Why did God descend to Earth and suffer such pain?". In other words, why should the absolute unchanging Transcendence enter into the domain of time and death? Why should the Eternal become subject to suffering? The Philosopher responds with a narrative-theological arc that begins with the Creation of the world and the Fall of man. His answer moves through the typological key of the Old Testament, tracing the disorder introduced by sin (human's Fall is both an event in time *and* a metaphysical rupture) and God's salvific promise. Through this retelling, the Philosopher introduces a logic of *katabasis* and *anabasis*, that is central to Christian soteriology. This aligns with categories articulated by Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius of Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor behind the Philosopher's answer.²⁷

²⁶ Dmitry Likhachev, *Russian Chronicles and Their Cultural-Historical Significance* [Русские летописи и их культурно-историческое значение] (Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1947), 114.

²⁷ The motif of *descent* and *ascent* has been widely examined in the context of Greek Church Fathers. While many scholars tend to simply subsume or collapse the Fathers into the Neoplatonic framework (calling it "Christian Neoplatonism"), I propose to understand their engagement as a deliberate *transfiguration* of Neoplatonic language and ideas within

The scene follows a philosophical *pattern* that begins with Plato's allegory of the philosopher descending once again into the Cave after his "enlightenment" (*Politeia* VII, 519c) and reaches its theological culmination in Byzantine and Old Slavic iconography where Christ's Resurrection appears as a Descent into Hades.

God's *erotic* descent (the Dionysian *ecstatic eros*) is a necessary inversion that enables the restoration of the fallen order. The Philosopher shows that descent is the *only* path to ascent. The divine enters into the condition of sin to transform it from within. A particularly vivid expression of this dynamic appears in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, where the transformation of Moses' rod into a serpent (i.e. descent) and its return to its original form (i.e. ascent) is interpreted as a foreshadowing of Christ: "If a serpent is sin and the Lord became sin, the conclusion should be evident to all: who became sin, also became a serpent, which is nothing other than sin. For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and destroy the Egyptian serpents"²⁸. In this way, the Philosopher introduces the foundational Christian claim: that the transcendence redeems the world *through* immanence, and that the descent of God into the world is not a diminishment of divinity, but its highest manifestation, the fullness of love as self-emptying. As Vasilakis succinctly notes: "Resurrection qua descent to Hades is a fact that is repeated every 'now and forever'"²⁹. Or as Kallistos Ware expressed it: "*Kenosis* leads to *plerosis*"³⁰.

a Christian theological horizon. Florovsky expressed this most precisely by the example of Dionysius: "The *Areopagitica* bears the stamp of late Neoplatonism, above all in language. The author has a special peculiar and very sophisticated theological terminology. But the Neoplatonic influence does not absorb or suppress him at all. In philosophical and Hellenistic formulas, he concludes a new and Christian content, a new mystical experience. The author is not so much a thinker as a contemplator, and speculative boldness is inwardly tempered in him by the pathos of inexpressibility and a lively liturgical feeling". Georges Florovsky, *Byzantine Fathers of the 5th–8th Centuries: Part 6, Corpus Areopagiticum* [Византийские Отцы V–VIII веков: Часть 6, Corpus Areopagiticum] (Minsk: Publishing House of the Belarusian Exarchate [Издательство Белорусского Экзархата], 2006).

The following is a small selected list of academic contributions relevant to this topic: Maximos Constas, "Maximos the Confessor, Dionysios the Areopagite, and the Transformation of Christian Neoplatonism," *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1–12; Nikolaos Loudovikos, "Ecstasy as Descent: The Palamite and Maximian Bedrock of the Theology of St Sophrony," *Analogia* 11 (2020): 77–88; Dimitrios Vasilakis, "Love as Descent: Comparing the Models of Proclus and Dionysius through Eriugena," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 726; Ann Conway-Jones, "Exegetical Puzzles and the Mystical Theologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite," *Vigiliae Christianae* 75, no. 1 (2021): 1–21.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, "De vita Moysis" 2.33, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. VII/1, ed. Herbert Musurillo (Leiden: Brill, 1964).

²⁹ Dimitrios Vasilakis, "Love as Descent: Comparing the Models of Proclus and Dionysius through Eriugena," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 4.

³⁰ Kallistos Ware, *Orthodox Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), 48.

Vladimir's second question concerns the temporality of salvation: "When was this fulfilled? Has it happened, or is it yet to occur?". The Philosopher's reply ("All was fulfilled when God was incarnate") delivers a metaphysical blow to simplistic linear historicism. His answer (including a recounting of the whole New Testament story) collapses the boundaries of past, present and future into a single Christological axis. As Olivier Clément calls it: "le temps déifié de l'Eglise"³¹. This is an example of *paradoxical eschatology*, where salvation is not simply a future promise or a past event, but a present reality grounded in the eternal Logos and actualized within the life of the Church. Incarnation and Resurrection are most importantly transfiguration of time from within. "In the Kingdom, time is called not so much to disappear as to be transfigured"³², explains Clément. Indeed, as he further writes:

True eternity is not the negation of temporality, since it chooses to reveal itself in it. It is not by rejecting time and history that man can open himself to the eternity of the Living God; it is through time, when hope, faith and love bring to maturity the moments of encounter: moments as perfectly temporal and perfectly eternal, as Christ is true God and true man³³.

Thus, salvation has happened, is happening and will happen. History becomes typological, sacramental and eschatological. This is the proper hermeneutic lens through which Mark 1:15 can be read.

The development of the *kairotic* understanding of time as divinely charged (a truly *nuptial* relationship between eternity and time) finds its most mature expressions yet again in Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius of Areopagite³⁴ and Maximus the Confessor. For Gregory, for instance, "Christ's resurrection is the central *kairos* event of the Christian mystery"³⁵, positioning Christ as the center of all time, the one in whom all scattered moments are gathered into unity. The Resurrection not only reconfigures *chronos* but inaugurates a new mode of temporality: one that is eschatologically linear and symbolically-nonlinear at the same time. In this framework, the *eschaton* is *already* active, unfolding within the participatory, sacramental life of the

³¹ Olivier Clément, *Transfigurer le temps: Notes sur le temps à la lumière de la tradition orthodoxe* (Neuchâtel/Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1959), 51. – To date, Clément's book represents the most extensive and comprehensive treatment of the theme of time and eternity in the Greek Church Fathers known to me. Another valuable source is without any doubt: David Bradshaw, "Time and Eternity in the Greek Fathers," *The Thomist* 70 (2006): 311–66.

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴ See Elena Ene Draghici-Vasilescu, "Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite on the Notion of Time," *Analele Științifice ale Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași. Teologie Ortodoxă* 27, no. 1 (2022): 71–81.

³⁵ Richard McCambly, "Taxis and Akolouthia as Used by Gregory of Nyssa," *Lectio Divina*, 2024, <https://www.lectio-divina.org/images/nyssa/Taxis%20and%20Akolouthia.pdf>.

Church. That is why, according to Maximus, while the past served as a shadow (*skia*) of the things to come (*ton mellonton*), the present constitutes the true *icon* (*eikon*) of the Kingdom, which is itself the ultimate Truth (*aletheia*)³⁶. Yevtic articulates this Christocentric temporal structure as follows:

History so conceived is understood not merely in the linear sense, in the sense of historic continuity, historical processes, and successive chronological movement and development, but rather in a unique eschatological event, where time and history are contained and at the same time are transcended, overcome, and brought into the new eschatological *aion* of the kingdom. This Event is Christ. [...] So Christ *in* the Church and *with* the Church (by himself *as* the Church) introduces the *eschaton* already here into history. He brings the new *aion* of the kingdom here and now (*hic et nunc*).³⁷

Now, it is precisely within this eschatological horizon that the opening exclamation of the Byzantine Liturgy acquires its full depth. The phrase “*Kairos tou poiesai to Kyrio*”³⁸ (uttered by the deacon to the priest in the sanctuary just before the Liturgy begins) marks the liturgical moment as a decisive *kairotic* time for divine action. The Liturgy thereby both extends the act of Creation and manifests the Last Judgment, situating the *ecclesial present* within the fullness of salvific time. Returning to the dialogue between the Philosopher and Vladimir: the Philosopher’s narration is ontologically performative. It reconfigures Vladimir’s understanding of being, time, history and fulfillment.

The third and final question posed by Vladimir reveals the symbolic core of the narrative: “*Why was he born of a woman, why crucified on the tree, and why baptized with water?*”. This question shifts the dialogue towards *symbolic realism*, to the question of how *material* reality effectuates salvation. It is, fundamentally, a question about the real-symbolic structure of the world and the economy of redemption. The Philosopher’s answer unfolds a typological schema initiated by Jesus Christ himself³⁹ and most fully developed by Gregory of Nyssa. Within this symbolic economy, the elements once associated with rupture or disorder (Eve, the tree of knowledge, the primordial waters) are not cast away but assumed and transfigured. In

³⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia in Ecclesiasticam Hierarchiam*, on EH 3.2–3, PG 4:137D.

³⁷ Atanasije Yevtic, “Eschatological Dimensions of the Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 38 (1993): 94.

³⁸ Psalm 118 (119) [LXX], 126.

³⁹ The famous post-Resurrection story of Emmaus, in which the resurrected Christ interprets Himself through the *types* of the Old Testament: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in the Scriptures” (Lk 24:27). A few lines further the two disciples recount this transfiguring experience and claim their hearts were *burning* within them as they had the Scripture *opened* to them (cf. Lk 24:32).

place of Eve, there is Mary; in place of the tree of temptation, the Cross; in place of the chaotic waters, the baptismal water. We see here a sort of ontological inversion: the fallen world is redeemed through its own symbols.

As Gregory shows in his exegesis, especially in the *Life of Moses*, biblical narratives are not abstract allegories but God-implanted *types*, i.e. living signs that carry spiritual power and direct the soul upward in its transformation. These *types* are spiritual realities embedded within the biblical text. As Margaret Beirne emphasizes, Gregory's approach rests on the conviction that, "where the meaning is hidden or covered, we must find other ways, searching 'the divine Scriptures with every means at our disposal'"⁴⁰. Thus, his symbolic reading of Scripture is a carefully considered way of *seeing* – a contemplation of *meanings* in which each symbol is revealed in the light of the household of salvation. Scriptural figures and objects *participate* in the mysteries they foreshadow.

This patristic symbolic theology finds its metaphysical deepening in the cosmic-sacramental ontology of Dionysius the Areopagite, in which Creation itself is a vast hierarchy of symbols, where every created thing is a symbolic *theophany* that both conceals and reveals God in its own hierarchical way. Not only do symbols signify, they *effect* what they signify. What is crucial to understand here and what is so often forgotten when speaking of "symbolism" and "holy symbols"⁴¹, is that for Dionysius (and, by extension, for other Church Fathers standing in the tradition), "these symbols are not allegories – they directly signify a higher reality"⁴². More than that: the symbol grants a share of itself, it transforms those who partake in it⁴³. In his system, liturgical rites and scriptural forms are *theurgic* acts: they carry divine *dynamis*, because they originate in and operate through God. Here, I stand in direct opposition to such scholars as, for instance, John Meyendorff who consider the Dionysian understanding of liturgy as merely figurative and non-literal. On the other hand, such scholars as Andrew Louth⁴⁴, Panagiotis Pavlos⁴⁵ and Sarah Wear have, in my view, demonstrated with excellence the real-symbolic function of the liturgy in Dionysius. As Sarah

⁴⁰ Margaret Beirne, "Spiritual enrichment through exegesis: St Gregory of Nyssa and the Scriptures," *Phronema* 27, no. 2 (2012): 87; Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 5.

⁴¹ Dionysius the Areopagite, *Epistle* 9, PG 3:1105C–1108D.

⁴² Sarah Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (London: Routledge, 2007), 89.

⁴³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 109 and Dionysius the Areopagite, EH 400AD.

⁴⁴ See Andrew Louth, "Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denis the Areopagite," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986).

⁴⁵ See P. Pavlos, "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Pavlos et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 151–80.

As Pavlos explains on page 152: "In spite of the temptation of reading the Areopagite Neoplatonically, there is an important Christian modification and variety of the metaphysical, cosmological, and epistemological principles that govern the development and structure of the Dionysian system. The implications of this for theurgy are enormous".

Wear explains, Dionysius inherits the Neoplatonic symbolic-theurgic language of Proclus and Iamblichus but reorients it fundamentally around Christ. The pagan notion of *theourgia* (divine action mediated through ritual) is reinterpreted as God's own salvific initiative, enacted for all in the Incarnation and sacramentally perpetuated through *hierourgia*, the Church's sacred rites. Thus, *hierourgia* is the *participatory* re-enactment of *theourgia*, a kind of *synergy*⁴⁶ with God's actions⁴⁷. The sacraments are thus not symbolic "reminders" of divine presence but the very means by which it becomes effective in time.

From this perspective, Vladimir's question is metaphysical. Christ is born of a woman not in spite of matter but through it; baptized not as a simple gesture but to fill water with the *dynamis* of deification. In the symbolic realism of the Fathers, the elements of the Fall become the instruments of transfiguration. The world is thus ritually assumed into the very work of God.

Through these three questions and answers, the Philosopher leads Vladimir into a new vision of reality that recasts history, time and matter as vehicles of divine presence. In this sense, the Philosopher functions as a metaphysical guide and mystagogue.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that the Vladimir conversion cycle in the *Primary Chronicle* is best approached as a narrative of initiation. The text narrates how a person (and, by extension, a people) is led from religious curiosity into a form of life. The story moves from discursive evaluation to metaphysical disclosure and from this disclosure to embodied participation. Read as patristic mystagogy, the Vladimir narrative discloses how wisdom and holiness converge in a staged itinerary that reframes reason and culminates liturgically.

Five results can be stated. First, the conversion cycle displays a deliberate internal pattern. The sequence of testing rival emissaries, the arrival of the Philosopher and the envoy to Constantinople is narrated as a controlled progression in which each stage prepares the next. The later episodes (vow, illness, baptismal healing, marriage) return to the same logic by translating insight into transformation. On the basis of this patterning, it is reasonable to treat the narrative form itself as a carrier of theological meaning.

Second, the *Chronicle's* choice to place a "Philosopher" at the narrative center is not accidental. Once "philosophy" is taken in its Byzantine-Christian sense as a way of life, the Philosopher's role becomes intelligible. He

⁴⁶ Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite, CH 3.2.

⁴⁷ Cf. Sarah Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (London: Routledge, 2007), 102.

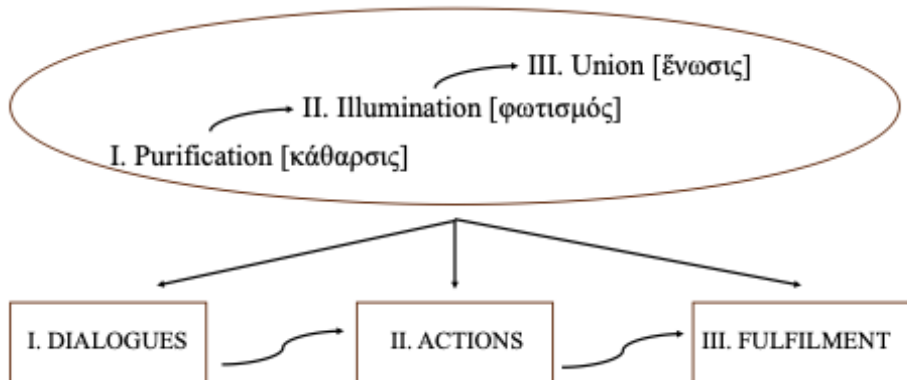
functions as the figure through whom Vladimir's search receives a metaphysical horizon and a practical direction. This is why the definitional work in the first section matters for the later reading. It provides the conceptual profile that the story presupposes when it calls its key "instructor" a philosopher.

Third, the narrative's use of direct speech is likewise not accidental. The *Chronicle* repeatedly lets crucial turns occur through promises, questions, refusals, confessions and decisions spoken by the characters themselves. In other words, speech in this text often does something: It changes positions and initiates action. If this is correct, then "dialogue" is part of the story's theological content, because conversion is presented as something that happens through encounter rather than through detached reflection.

Fourth, the Philosopher's three-question exchange with Vladimir crystallizes the narrative's metaphysical claims. The questions open three problems that the story treats as decisive: how being and, by extension, salvation works (descent and ascent), how time is charged by divine action (*kairos* within ecclesial life) and how matter can become an instrument of redemption (symbolic realism). The patristic materials brought into the analysis are not invoked to "prove" that the chronicler copied specific texts but to articulate with precision the theological logic that the *Chronicle* itself stages in this dialogue.

Fifth, the *Chronicle* deliberately stages the co-inherence of reason and revelation: rational inquiry (testing, questioning, discernment) moves within, and is completed by, revelatory participation (liturgy, symbols, sacraments). In patristic terms, knowing becomes true only as it is performed in life.

If this reading is on the right track, it points to several concrete research tasks. One is textual and historical: a careful study of the relationship between Philosopher's speech and Byzantine catechetical and homiletic genres. A second is comparative: placing the *Chronicle's* conversion story alongside other Byzantine and Slavic conversion narratives to test whether the same movement recurs and where the *Chronicle* is unusual. A third is philological and liturgical: mapping early Slavonic liturgical vocabulary and translated materials to see how strongly the participatory and symbolic logic assumed here can be shown in the wider textual environment. Finally, the patristic framework itself can be sharpened: future work can sort more rigorously which patristic categories best illuminate which narrative segments. Taken together, these steps would give the theological reading offered here a clearer historical and linguistic profile.



➡ I. DIALOGUES:

1. Discursive purification:

- a) Volga-Bulgars
- b) Germans
- c) Khazars

2. Symbolic Illumination

- (philosopher's speech):
- a) Old Testament
 - b) New Testament
 - c) Last Judgement (*eschaton*)

3. Aesthetic Theosis :

- a) Sending of envoys
- b) Liturgical *ekstasis*
- c) Return back transformed

➡ II. ACTIONS:

1. The Vow in the Battle:
Reorientation of own *tropos*

2. Healing through Baptism:
Death and Resurrection

3. Nuptial Union:
Marriage with Byzantine Princess (incorporation of *Sofia*)

➡ III. FULFILMENT:

1. Destruction of idols
in the river

2. Mass baptism in the river
as communal salvation

3. Initiation of the Heirs:
Sending children to study in Constantinople

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