

A RESPONSE TO A BOOK REVIEW OF MIHAI DRAGNEA'S *CHRISTIAN IDENTITY FORMATION ACROSS THE ELBE IN THE TENTH AND ELEVENTH CENTURIES*, NEW YORK: PETER LANG 2021, WRITTEN BY KURT V. JENSEN AND PUBLISHED IN *CRUSADES* 21.1 (2022)

MIHAI DRAGNEA

The following is a response to a short review of my book¹ that was included in *Crusades* 21.1 (2022), a journal published by Routledge on behalf of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East, of which I have been a member since 2019. Since its publication in 2021 the aforementioned book has been reviewed by several specialists, some of whose comments turned out to be really useful, which I gladly received.² Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the overall nature of the critique that appeared in *Crusades* 21, hence I decided to craft this response in order to clarify a few things about the content of my work.

The review in question was written by Kurt Villads Jensen, who is currently Professor of Medieval History at Stockholm University and the director of the Centre for Medieval Studies. He is a specialist on conversion, warfare, and crusades in the Baltic Sea region, including the Elbe Slavs, also known as the Polabian Slavs or the Wends, who inhabited a vast area between the Elbe and Oder rivers. I have been in contact with Jensen since 2017, and he supported me in many ways during my doctoral studies and after I defended my PhD dissertation in January 2018. He was kind enough to pen the foreword to my short-form monograph that was published by Routledge in 2019.³ He also sent me copies of primary sources and new studies and advised me with regards to methodology and approaches regarding my research topics. Furthermore, he provided letters of recommendation for several grants that I applied for during this period. In the winter of 2018–2019, whilst I was a guest postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of History and Archaeology within the University of Tartu, Jensen invited me to attend a workshop organised by the Centre for Medieval Studies that was to take place in February 2019. This was a good opportunity to finally meet him and to also visit Stockholm. Thus, it goes without saying that Professor Jensen has helped with regards to my career development, for which I am grateful.

Jensen knew about my intention to prepare a work on Christian identity formation, paganism, and idolatry beyond the Elbe between the tenth and eleventh centuries. The importance of the topic, the area, and the subjects of my work – various Slavic groups such as the Luticians,

¹ M. Dragnea, *Christian Identity Formation across the Elbe in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*, New York: Peter Lang 2021.

² A. Paroń, *Speculum* 99.2 (2024), 567–568; M. Atanasov, *Religious Studies Review* 49.3 (2023), 39; F. Biermann, *Baltische Studien. Pommersche Jahrbücher für Landesgeschichte* 108 (2022), 201–203; A. Grabowski, *Acta Poloniae Historica* 125 (2022), 206–262; M. Dygo, *Zapiski Historyczne* 87.4 (2022), 145–151; D. Kalhous, *Historia Slavorum Occidentis* 1.32 (2022), 186–188; T. Galović, *Journal of the Institute of Croatian History* 53.2 (2021), 316–318; J. Vokoun, *Studia Theologica* 23.4 (2021), 155–157; S. Malmenvall, *Bogoslovni vestnik* 81.1 (2021), 250–252.

³ M. Dragnea, *The Wendish Crusade, 1147 The Development of Crusading Ideology in the Twelfth Century*, London–New York: Routledge 2019.

Obotrites, and Redarians – are emphasized at the beginning of his review in *Crusades*. He admitted that some ideas and claims were “clearly formulated”, but that the arguments used were not convincing. In his opinion, the book contains a lack of consistency in its argumentation, which creates confusion. Of course, opinions always differ, but one would expect a reviewer to at least mention some of the real ideas and claims in the book and to say why the arguments used are not convincing, rather than resorting to “strawman” and “cherry picking” fallacies. That, however, would be a very difficult task since Jensen’s judgement is based on a distorted understanding of the main idea of my work.

I never intended to show that Slavic paganism has “nothing to do with the pre-Christian cult”. I also did not claim that “Slavic paganism” is a “Christian construction” resulting from the mixture of “Classical Roman superstition and magic with some Christian practices”. Even more bizarre is the fact that Jensen, a well-known scholar, is not willing to accept that medieval idolatry and paganism are fluid concepts and are not exclusively related to a set of pre-Christian beliefs with genuine spiritual, cultural, and social features.

This book, as with my recent studies, argues that analysis of any features of the Slavic religiosity in the Middle Ages must be done very carefully. We all know there are no indigenous reports on pre-Christian religious beliefs and rituals east of the Elbe. Contemporary records on these aspects come from the Christian literary environment and there are hardly any persuasive arguments that these works should be regarded as valid sources. Therefore, most of the arguments put forward regarding this matter are actually hypotheses. From a methodological point of view, this is wrong, because the research and discovery process should not use hypotheses to generate facts, on the contrary, facts should be used to corroborate a hypothesis. Thus, the correct approach is to try and decrypt the records provided by Christian authors, and not to totally reject the data, as can be understood in the review.

Jensen knows that I never rejected the existence of a Slavic pre-Christian cult, but rather questioned the accuracy of the information. In our previous private discussions, we both agreed that in fact we know very little about this subject and this is why we need realistic interpretations, not speculative approaches. Moreover, he understands very well the political interference that exists regarding the study of Slavic identity and is familiar with the latest research on the history of the Early Slavs. It is not clear why he ignores the influence of the very fashionable revival of Slavic paganism, a movement that should be detached from research for two reasons. First because it creates a fictitious identity and second because the aims of the Slavic pagan revival movements rely on certain political trends.⁴

What seems to have been forgotten is that the current knowledge about Slavic mythology is, to a large extent, a legacy of nineteenth-century ethno-romanticism. The Slavic pre-Christian religious beliefs and rituals as they are perceived in the modern sense are often projected onto

⁴ For the political dimensions of modern Pagan religious movements, see M.F. Strmiska, “Pagan Politics in the 21st Century: ‘Peace and Love’ or ‘Blood and Soil’?”, *The Pomegranate* 20.1 (2018), 5–44.

the very different medieval political realities. The pioneers of this speculative approach are several researchers who are striving to demonstrate the existence of a “common pan-Slavic heritage” and unity throughout the Early Middle Ages.⁵ This approach is connected to the Slavic expansion and thus identity of the Early Slavs, which is explained by the traditional models of migration. It is not easy to understand why a Scandinavian researcher goes in this direction.

The Slavs between the Elbe and Oder rivers were always seen as the last bearers of a native culture.⁶ The existence of genuine pre-Christian religious beliefs and rituals among them is a strong argument used to confirm the migration. This is challenged by newer models, according to which the Slavic identity in some other areas was formed through the transformation of existing populations, involving the spread of language and social and economic patterns. That is why any idea that questions the Slavic identity is seen as an attack against the traditional models of migration, which often leads to aggressive reactions in the reviews.

The arguments in my book were ignored by Jensen because he does not see the influence of theology on biblical concepts like disobedience, rebellion, and apostasy in the Middle Ages and the strong connection between them. The religious dimension of rebellion, the transition to apostasy, and how this was influenced by the political context, were also not taken into account. Furthermore, he seems to be avoiding one of the central ideas of my book, namely that the religious identity of the Elbe Slavs was shaped by the clerical authors according to their fidelity and obedience to both *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, which functioned as indivisible parts of the Christian empire. In the process of constructing the pagans’ identity, references to religious beliefs and rituals, whatever they were, are less important. The medieval pagans did not refer to themselves in this way, nor did they leave written testimonies regarding their identity. Studies focusing on such kinds of approaches will refresh research on pagan identity in the medieval Latin periphery and dismiss the speculative approaches of the “neo-panslavists”. Hopefully paganism in the Early and High Middle Ages will no longer be associated with the modern concept of pagan identity.

In his review, Jensen again proves that he misunderstood some of the ideas analysed in the book. For example, he scolds me for explaining a priest’s ordination as a transmittal of grace. However, I actually pointed out the importance of the transmission of grace through the apostolic succession, explained by the Holy Fathers, for legitimacy of faith beyond the Elbe, through ecclesiastical organization. The killing of a bishop (John of Mecklenburg) was seen as an attack not only against the Church as a sacred and legitimate institution, but also against what can be called *fides Christiana*. What was omitted is that ecclesiastical authority and spiritual legitimacy were unseparated. After the Slavic rebellion in 983, the episcopal sees beyond the Elbe were abandoned and the archbishops of Hamburg–Bremen and Magdeburg lost territ-

⁵ J. Dyma, “Religion with No Voice: Literary Construction of Slavic Paganism”, [in:] T. Klir, V. Boček, N. Jansens (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Early Slavs and the Rise of Slavic: Contact and Migrations*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2020, 127–150.

⁶ L. Leciejewicz, *Słowianie zachodni*, Wrocław: Ossolineum 1989, 215.

orial jurisdiction. Titular bishops (*episcopi titulares*) were appointed as *episcopi in partibus infidelium* in exile. Some dioceses like Havelberg and Oldenburg had no bishops at all, not even titular ones (*sede vacante*). Thus, since there were no bishops, i.e. the legitimate representatives of the Church as an institution and the Christian faith, Slavic territory was not considered part of the *Imperium Christianum*. The Elbe Slavs were labelled as apostates after 983 and the source of their faith was no longer the divine grace transmitted from the apostles and their successors, but one based on idolatry.

Another huge misinterpretation is that I understood the Ottonians' *familiares* only as their relatives. I actually said that *familiares* were members of a sort of power network known as *familia regis*, which was controlled by the monarch and included relatives as well as lay and clerical counsellors without family ties. Moreover, *familia regis* meant not only relatives by blood or alliance, but also intimates of the monarch in an institutional sense, who were active in the royal entourage. Their level of influence was determined according to how close they were to the monarch.

However, the review does contain two correct observations. The first concerns the italicizing of the word “illiterate” due to an editorial error after the last revision, which was seen by Jensen as a Latin term. The second is that the sixth chapter contains little information on horse divination, which was reported by Thietmar of Merseburg as being practiced by the Luticians. The chapter rather discusses various types of prognostication among the Luticians (including divinatory practices) and analyses their connection to human and animal sacrifices. It also discusses the analogy with similar practices in Scandinavia and Kievan Rus' and the literary transmission of the Roman tradition of “casting lots” (*sortes*). Hippomancy among the Luticians⁷ as described by Thietmar is indeed discussed only in a few pages, and thus the chapter should have had a slightly more general title.

To be honest, I was surprised to see how such a supportive person, whom I had known for more than five years, was able to radically change his position and, moreover, resort to making several false and malicious statements. In my opinion, some of the comments in the review were not made merely due to inattention following a skim reading of the text, but that they also involved bad intent.

Mihai Dragnea
Balkan History Association / University of South-Eastern Norway
mihaidragnea2018@gmail.com
ORCID 0000-0002-8749-2532

⁷ The characteristics of divination since the Early Middle Ages, canonical regulations on the practice, theological arguments used for its condemnation, and the semantic ambivalence of medieval vocabulary on various types of prognostication of the future, were discussed in M. Dragnea, “Legitimate and Illegitimate Divination in Medieval Writings”, *Croatica Christiana Periodica* 46.89 (2022), 41–57. Horse divination among the Pomeranians, the desecralization of sacred horses, and the missionaries' tactic to reduce the faith in ancient superstitions were analysed in M. Dragnea, “The Christian Attitude to Hippomancy in Twelfth-Century Szczecin”, *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* 3.2 (2021), 204–233.