

## **Chapter 6: The Birth of Christ and Christmas**

*“For unto us a Child is born,  
Unto us a Son is given;  
And the government will be upon His shoulder.  
And His name will be called  
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”<sup>1</sup>*

We can assert without any doubt that the birth of Christ remains one of the most important events of world history.

Our commemoration of the incarnation of the Savior is a necessary spiritual reverence of the person who claims more followers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century according to recent statistics than any other man who ever walked the earth. In fact, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of many ancient Old Testament prophecies, which were recorded centuries earlier by the prophets of God. In the Old Testament, there are about 60 major and 270 minor prophecies which were fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ. At this point, we will mention only a few of them that are closely tied to his arrival in the world through the conception by the virgin Mary.

The first prophecy concerning the birth of the Savior Jesus as a physical human being was issued by the Lord God the Creator after the fall into sin of the first couple - Adam and Eve. Namely, at the beginning of human history, God proclaimed that the future Redeemer would be born of a virgin without the intercourse of man. This prophecy would literally be filled in the virgin conception and birth of Christ the Lord. Here is how the Lord at the beginning announced the specific details of Jesus' birth. Speaking to Satan, who caused Adam and Eve to fall into sin and appeared in the form of a serpent, the Almighty said:

*“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”<sup>2</sup>*

Yet this is not the only place where the Old Testament foretells that Christ would be born of a virgin. Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah would write:

*“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”<sup>3</sup>*

The apostles Matthew and Paul confirmed this gospel truth about the fulfillment of this prophecy in their New Testament writings.

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<sup>1</sup> Is. 9:6.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 3:15.

<sup>3</sup> Is. 7:14.

*“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit... So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’”*<sup>4</sup>

*“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law...”*<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the clearly confirmed sign of the virgin conceiving and giving birth to the Savior, the Old Testament prophets foretold the geographical location of His birthplace centuries before His Incarnation. The prophet Micah in his book wrote:

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,  
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me  
The One to be Ruler in Israel,  
Whose goings forth are from of old,  
From everlasting.”*<sup>6</sup>

If this prophecy was known at the time before the birth of Jesus Christ to both the servants of God and His enemies, this example demonstrates that it was familiar to King Herod the Great, who attempted to murder the only begotten son of Mary:

*“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”*<sup>7</sup>

In addition, even some of these numerous prophecies heralding the arrival of the Savior of the world showed his physical origin from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His bloodline would also pass through Jacob's son Judah along with King David and many others.<sup>8</sup>

According to precise calculations of mathematical probabilities, it is absolutely impossible that someone in the past or future would be capable of perfectly fulfilling all the prophecies recorded about the coming of the Savior. For instance, the probability that only eight of over three hundred prophecies being fulfilled by chance in any other person

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<sup>4</sup> Mt. 1:18,22-3.

<sup>5</sup> Gal. 4:4.

<sup>6</sup> Mic. 5:2.

<sup>7</sup> Mt. 2:4-6.

<sup>8</sup> See Gen. 12:2-3; 49:10; 2 Sam. 7:12-16; Is. 11:1-2.

except Jesus is 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000 (1 quadrillion). The probability of another individual except Jesus to fulfill 48 of these 300 prophecies is 1 in  $1 \times 10^{157}$  (i.e. a number with 157 zeros).

In order to simplify these mathematical expressions, let us imagine the entire surface of our planet (millions of square kilometers) to consist of equal-sided metal coins, of which only one single coin is specifically marked. Now answer this question: what are the real chances for even the most ingenious person who is blindfolded to randomly find the marked coin among that great multitude given that person had only one chance to find it and did not know where it was?

Chance for his success only exists in theory. In reality, his chances are zero.

Such is the case with any effort to find in history another person other than Jesus of Nazareth who was able to fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies related to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. Undoubtedly, Christ the Lord is totally unique.<sup>9</sup> Such a view represents the heart of belief of faithful members of evangelical Protestant churches.

On the other hand, despite its belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and all the miracles of His incarnation and birth, the Orthodox Church in its tradition has added some details that do not exist in the revelation of Holy Scripture. The next section, the bulk of this chapter, will examine some of the Orthodox teaching based on sacred tradition. It will become quite apparent that such teaching does not correspond to what is written in the Gospels. In this way, it will become clear that the truth believed by evangelical Christians corresponds to that taught by the Scriptures. Not only does the Orthodox Church not preach the full truth about the events surrounding the birth of Christ, but it also teaches information that is not orthodox and completely true. In fact, Orthodoxy teaches things that are actually proven totally wrong by historical data. Also, we will deal with some specific beliefs and customs about Christmas peculiar to Serbs. Such erroneous beliefs endure with the blessing of the traditional churches of our nation.

## **ORTHODOX BELIEFS ABOUT THE BIRTH OF CHRIST**

### *The Date of the Birth of Jesus Christ*

One of the prominent beliefs amongst the churches both in the East and the West is that Jesus Christ was born on December 25. Among Roman Catholics and Protestants, Christ's birth is celebrated in accordance with the new, Gregorian calendar. As for Orthodox people, some of them (including the Russian, Greek, and Bulgarian churches) observe this holiday according to the revised Julian calendar developed by the Serbian astronomer Milutin Milanković<sup>10</sup> and adopted at the All-Orthodox Congress in Istanbul

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed treatment, see Josh McDowell, *More than a Carpenter*, (Sinod: Belgrade, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> This calendar is identical to the Gregorian calendar and confirms its astronomical accuracy. (Translator's note: practically, though, most Orthodox churches still use the Julian calendar. See:

in 1923. Most churches, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, still observe it by the old Julian calendar.<sup>11</sup>

Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic makes this statement about Christ's birth:

“That is why the righteous Joseph came with the Most-holy Virgin to Bethlehem, the city of David, for they were both of the royal lineage of David. Since many people descended on this small town for the census, Joseph and Mary were unable to find lodging in any house, and they sought shelter in a cave which shepherds used as a sheepfold. **In this cave-on the night between Saturday and Sunday<sup>12</sup>, on the 25th of December**-the Most-holy Virgin gave birth to the Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Bishop Nikolai assumes as a fully confirmed fact that the birth of Jesus occurred on the stated date during the night between Saturday and Sunday.<sup>14</sup> As this author enjoys great popularity among the Serbian people, it is easy to assume that the majority of people accept his claim for granted without further verification of the historical facts. However, it is interesting to examine the question of the origin of the date of Christ's birth in light of the historical documents recorded by contemporary historians. From these sources we can learn a great deal of information that will reveal to us the inaccuracy and untrustworthiness of sacred tradition:

“**In the first three centuries, the birth of Christ was not celebrated.** The listing of Christian holidays by Tertullian and Origen do not include Christmas. Neither is the holiday mentioned in the *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*. Only in the fourth and fifth centuries did a few provinces introduce this holiday... The first mention of the date of December 25 as a feast of the birth of Christ was recognized in Rome only around 336 A.D. (Duchesce, Leclerc) It is unknown whether the holiday was observed before. In others' opinion (Usener), Pope Liberius established the festival of the Birth of Christ in Rome in 354 A.D... While Rome observed the festival of Christ's birth in the year 354, the East does not observe the holiday on December 25, but rather

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milutin\\_Milankovi%C4%87#cite\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milutin_Milankovi%C4%87#cite_note-0) “The majority of Orthodox Christians (Russians, in particular) follow the [Julian Calendar](#) in calculating their ecclesiastical feasts, but many (including the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Church of Greece), while preserving the Julian calculation for feasts on the Paschal Cycle, have adopted the [Revised Julian Calendar](#) (at present coinciding with the [Gregorian Calendar](#)) to calculate those feasts which are fixed according to the calendar date. )”

Cited from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgical\\_year](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgical_year) .)

<sup>11</sup> The Old (Julian) Calendar is “late” vs. the New (Gregorian) Calendar by 13 days. Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church celebrate Christmas on December 25 according to the Julian calendar, which is 7 January in the New (Gregorian) Calendar.

<sup>12</sup> As evidence for the assertion that Jesus was born at midnight, the holy fathers cite “prophetic texts” from the Old Testament apocryphal book The Wisdom of Solomon 18:14-15, which actually says nothing about the birth of the Savior, but the killing of the firstborn in Egypt by the Angel of Death, which was completed at midnight of his mission (2 Moses. 12:29). See Justin Popovic, *Lives of the Saints* in December, 734. The book of The Wisdom of Solomon is not included in any edition of the Bible in Serbian language. It is found in the Catholic translation (Christian Present, Zagreb, 1983.) under the name “The Book of Wisdom.”

<sup>13</sup> Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *The Prologue of Okhrid*, December 25. (See <http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/prolog.cgi> )

<sup>14</sup> These same words and belief in this story are confirmed by sacred tradition according to the Archimandrite Justin Popovic in his *Lives of the Saints*. The author says that many reliable writers affirm that Jesus was born at midnight between Saturday and Sunday, and that this is in accordance with the conclusions of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. See *Lives of the Saints* for the month of December, (Monastic Cells of Valjevo: Belgrade, 1977) 719, 734.

commemorates the Epiphany on January 6 along with other events on that day.<sup>15</sup> Only over the course of a decade was the holiday introduced officially throughout the churches, and particularly in the East. While the Church of the West adapted most of the holidays along with their dates from the East, in the case of 25 December as the date for Christmas, the East received it from the West. In the East, Constantinople was the earliest church to observe the festival of the birth of Christ. Saint Gregory the Theologian initiated it on December 25, 379... **So from antiquity the date of December 25 has been associated with the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ really born on that day. However, the month and day of the birth of Jesus Christ remain unknown.**"<sup>16</sup>

Eusebius Popovic, Professor in the Department of Orthodox Theology at Chernovcima in the last century, wrote the following in his voluminous work *A General Church History* regarding the decision to celebrate the birth of Christ on the Christmas day in December:

"In the old days before the end of the fourth century, some thought Christ was born on April 20, others May 19, and still others January 6, because most in the Western Church observed it on December 25 in the first half of the fourth century. Though the West celebrated it during this day, the East did not at first. The East commemorated the birth and baptism of Christ on one day, January 6. **Only at the end of the fourth century did the East follow the example of Rome and the West by celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25.** However, the Eastern church continued to celebrate the memory of Christ's baptism in the Jordan, while the West continued to commemorate His being greeted as a newborn Savior by the Magi."<sup>17</sup>

So, this historian argues that the religious authorities of the third and fourth century were not in agreement with each other regarding the date of Jesus' birth. The Holy Scriptures say nothing about that date, and we realize that the first century Christians in general were not interested in the celebration of Christ's "birthday." The Gospels and apostolic epistles describe the interests and aspirations of members of the early Church. They focused on preaching the Good News of salvation through faith in the Savior to those who did not believe in Him and holding weekly gatherings in assemblies (churches) to celebrate the heavenly Trinity and strengthen each other in mutual fellowship. Therefore, it is important to discover how and why, of all the dates mentioned above, that the date of December 25 was chosen, and that only in the fourth century after Mary gave birth to her firstborn.

Veselin Chajkanovic, a Serbian historian of religion, is renowned for his outstanding scholarly contributions in researching ancient Serbian religion. He shares some of his findings on this subject:

**"As for the official church holiday of Christmas, it did not exist until the fourth century...** It came only later when the church was trying to determine the date of Christ's birth (from the New Testament writings which do not tell us anything), that then they made it a holiday. The day chosen was the twenty fifth of December, certainly because this day **on the Roman calendar** was celebrated as the day of the **'invincible sun'**. This day was revered amongst all peoples as the birth and rising of the sun, which marked the start of new life in nature. **December 25 was the**

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<sup>15</sup> In other words, January 19 under the New Calendar, which commemorates the Epiphany, e.g. the baptism of Christ.

<sup>16</sup> Lazar Mirkovic, (Cheortologija), excerpt from the section "Christmas" in *Today*, 2002, 5. Author's emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 113. Author's emphasis.

**birthday of Mithras**, whose religion differed greatly from that of the Christians and... posed very serious competition to the young Christian religion, but by the fourth century, the church grew in power and superiority and eventually eradicated all traces of the cult of Mithras, yet it chose the birthday of Mithras for its most holy holiday. Thus, the holiday on December 25 gained a secondary Christian meaning, and effectively suppressed the holiday of 'the invincible sun', which drew a large following, even among Christians, before its extinction."<sup>18</sup>

The Catholic Encyclopedia informs us that Christmas is not an original festival among the early Christians. Furthermore, it tacitly admits the pagan origins not just of birthdays, but also the date of December 25:

"Christmas was not among the earliest [festivals](#) of the [Church](#). [Irenaeus](#) and [Tertullian](#) omit it from their lists of [feasts](#); [Origen](#), glancing perhaps at the discreditable imperial *Natalitia*, asserts (in Lev. Hom. viii in [Migne](#), P.G., XII, 495) that in the [Scriptures](#) sinners alone, not [saints](#), celebrate their birthday."<sup>19</sup>

"The well-known solar feast, however, of Natalis Invicti, celebrated on 25 December, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date. For the history of the solar cult, its position in the Roman Empire, and [syncretism](#) with [Mithraism](#), see Cumont's epoch-making "Textes et Monuments" etc., I, ii, 4, 6, p. 355. Mommsen (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1<sup>2</sup>, p. 338) has collected the evidence for the feast, which reached its climax of popularity under [Aurelian](#) in 274."<sup>20</sup>

The Archpriest Alexander Schmemman confirms these assertions in his statement:

"During the same time when Christianity's influence was expanding in the beginning of our time (i.e. the Christian era), the Greco-Roman world also grew as rapidly, in particular, the last great pagan cult - the cult of the sun. In the decade of the seventies of the third century, the Roman emperor Aurelian proclaimed the cult of the sun as the official religion of the entire Roman Empire... The Roman Emperor Constantine - who at first was an idolater and a devotee to worship of the sun - converted to Christianity early in the fourth century. This era ended three centuries of persecution of Christianity... **The main method which the church used to attract pagans to Christianity was a method of sublimation and transformation of the pagan beliefs themselves; the Church adapted some pagan customs and invested them with Christian meaning and content.** The pagans celebrated the birth of the sun in December. On that same day, the Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ..."<sup>21</sup>

These documents reveal that the celebration of Christ's birth (Christmas) was invented only after the paganization of Christianity (and not the Christianization of pagans - as Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians would have us believe). This syncretism resulted in the adoption of a pagan holiday from the cult of Mithras. Worship of the god Mithras, which spread from Persia to the Roman Empire at the same time as the founding of Christianity, was a cult that originally came from ancient Babylonian idolatry.

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<sup>18</sup> Veselin Chajkovic, *Collected Works from Serbian Religion and Mythology*, (Belgrade, 1994) Book One, 121. Author's emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm> ,

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm> .

<sup>21</sup> Text from the special supplement "Christmas" on the page of *Today* (excerpt from the book *The Sacrament of Holidays* by Alexander Schmemman), 2002, 6. Author's emphasis.

It is obvious that Christ was not born the day in December as traditionally observed by nominal Christianity in the East and West. Adoption of festivals from pagans and “baptizing” them was something completely unknown and unacceptable to Christ and His disciples in the first century. However, the proclamation by the emperors Constantine and Theodosius I of Christianity to be legal and the official religion of the world empire resulted in the forcible baptism of numerous pagans. These pagans were declared to be “Christians”, yet they never experienced true conversion to Christ. Instead, they forced the retention of many of their previous pagan customs and beliefs, among which was a holiday of the “invincible sun”. As explained in the previous chapter, the fourth century was crucial for the adoption of many pagan beliefs in opposition to the Biblical faith of the Christian church. Similar to the adoption of worship of the goddess queen of Heaven (Ishtar - Astarte) in the guise of the early Christian Virgin Mary, even though she bore no resemblance to the aforementioned goddess, so the festival of the Sun god (the god Nana in ancient Sumer, i.e. Mithras in Persian religion) was declared the birthday of Jesus Christ. Instead of opposing this pagan worship with strong apostolic preaching and the rejection of Christian fellowship<sup>22</sup>, the church did something quite different in the following centuries. It adopted the method that Schmeman claims was used to convert pagans – thus, the merging of Christianity and pagan religion, giving Christian names and meanings to unchristian beliefs and customs.

The veracity of the Orthodox sacred tradition, which Bishop Nikolai of Okhrid in his prologue assures us that it supports the exact day and date of birth of Jesus Christ, is completely unreliable and fallacious. The next sections in this chapter will demonstrate the same in the case with other tales connected to Christ's birth.

### *The Worship of the Wise Men before the Infant Jesus*

“The Lord Jesus newly born in Bethlehem receives the first worship from the shepherds and the magi (astronomers) from the East, thus, the simplest and wisest of the world... But who were these wise men from the East? **This question was researched thoroughly by St. Dimitri of Rostov.** He claims that the magi were kings of some minor regions or cities in Persia, Arabia and Egypt. At the same time, they were great scholars in star gazing (astronomy). They witnessed the appearance of a miraculous star, who has hinted at the birth of the New King. **According to St. Dimitri, the star appeared to them nine months before the birth of the Lord Jesus, that is, at the time of conception of the Most Blessed Theotokos.**”<sup>23</sup>

The Scriptures reveal many inconsistencies with the Orthodox tradition cited above. The first inconsistency pertains to the “Star of Bethlehem” appearing at the time of Christ's conception, nine months before Mary delivered the firstborn baby. According to the biblical account, this heavenly sign appeared two years before the Lord's arrival into the world:

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<sup>22</sup> See 1 Cor. 5:10; 10:19-22; 2 Cor. 16:48.

<sup>23</sup> Bishop Velimirovic, *Prologue of Okhrid*, 943-4. Author's emphasis.

*“Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, **from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.**”*<sup>24</sup>

Matthew notes that the murder of children in Bethlehem and its vicinity proceeded based on the accurate knowledge foretold by the appearance of the star from the perspective of Herod the king (which indicated two years rather than nine months). Archmandrite Justin Popovic in *Lives of The Saints* admits that “the holy fathers” contradicted one another as to when the star appeared:

“Regarding the time when the star appeared, **different commentators have differing views.** Some believe it appeared on the very night when the Savior was delivered from the Virgin’s womb. This is certainly not the case... Other commentators, **among them St. Epiphanius,** believe the star appeared in the hour of the birth of Christ, but that the Magi came to worship two years afterward when Christ was two years old. This opinion is based on the fact that Herod gave orders to kill all young children two years and younger, based on the information he received from the wise men. **But St. Theophylact contradicts this view and asserts it is obviously incorrect...** But the ancient Greek historian Nicephorus claims the star appeared in the East two years before the birth of Christ, and that the wise men traveled to Jerusalem over two years, thus arriving at the very hour of His birth. Apparently, this historian agrees with what is written in the Gospel [of Matthew] regarding the murder of children two years and younger. But this opinion is not credible... **So which theory about when the star occurred appears most valid? Let us take a look at what was said by St. John Chrysostom and St. Theophylact.** These teachers claim the star appeared to the magi before the birth of Christ. They had to spend much time traveling, for the star had to have appeared a long time before the birth of the Savior, so that they could arrive on time in Bethlehem and worship Christ while He was still in His infancy. Please note that these holy teachers did not say the star appeared two years ago. Rather, they claim the star appeared a long time before, not merely a few months ago. On the basis of the interpretation of these holy Masters, we arrive at this conclusion: the star appeared in the east alone in that day and hour, when the Holy Archangels proclaimed that the Word, the Spirit of God, was made flesh, conceived in the immaculate womb of the Virgin. So then, **nine months before the birth of Christ, on the day of the Annunciation, the wise men saw the star in the east.**”<sup>25</sup>

The preceding passage openly admits that the “Fathers” were in discord with one another. Let us demonstrate that the “final version” of these events was a mere attempt to reconcile the various contradictions of these different theories.

Dr. Dimitrije Stefanovic from his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew believes the star first appeared two years before Jesus' birth. He states that Herod used this event as “a starting point for his calculations on the appearance of the star.”<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, Saints Dimitri and Nikolai assure us they know the story of the origin of the names of the wise men. They claim to know more than the testimony of the Scriptures and church historians. In reality, their claims belong to the realm of fantasy:

“One of them was called **Melchior.** He was old, gray-haired, and had long white hair and a beard. He offered the gift of gold to the Lord. Another was called **Caspar,** a person with red hair, young, and no beard. He offered the gift of frankincense to the Lord. The third is called **Balthazar,** who

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<sup>24</sup> Mt. 2:16. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Popovic, *Lives of the Saints*, 738-9. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Dimitri Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, (Second edition, 1923), 14.

had a black face and a heavy beard. He offered the gift of myrrh to the Lord... It is worthy to add that these three wise men were representatives of three major human races, which are derived from the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Japheth was the father of the Persians, Shem was the father of the Arabs, and Ham was the father of the Egyptians. So one could say, through all three of them, the entire human race gave gifts of worship to the Lord our God.”<sup>27</sup>

So, according to the tradition that comes from St. Dimitri of Rostov and other fathers, they know the names, number, countries of origin, and ages of the wise men. Even though the Gospel tells us that after a miraculous warning in a dream, the wise men “*departed for their own country.*”<sup>28</sup> This clearly proves that the wise men were citizens of the same country rather than different nations.<sup>29</sup> The Biblical truth stands in stark contrast to the fables of Orthodox tradition.

Eusebius Popovic is opposed to the idea that one can trust such an interpretation from sacred tradition:

“Here is another dark spot about the proclamation to the Magi. Who the Magi actually were is not clearly explained. The people at first called the Magi were the high priests of the Medes, Persians, and Babylonians. These were people who at first only occupied as purely scientists, particularly astronomers and astrologers or fortune tellers who followed the stars, especially the stars of their respective countries. **Thus, the Gospel account indicates they can be no one other than skilled astronomers who came from the East, that is, from countries east of Palestine, perhaps from Babylonia.** It is unclear whether they were Jews or Gentiles, but when they saw this unusual star, they interpreted it as a sign that the Messiah will be born. The Old Testament predicted that a star, which would predict a Messiah, would come from Jacob. Thus, these Magi most likely were either Jews or proselytes. These kings brought gifts to the Messiah, which conforms to the prophecy saying that they would offer gifts to the Messiah at the time of his birth. **Centuries later, Western (Roman Catholic) legends assign names to these kings: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. But history knows nothing of this.** The Western Church accepted all the legends about these kings and counts them as three. They commemorate their act on January 6 as the Day of Epiphany. **The legends of the three kings were spread from the West to the near East. The idea spread among people in the western parts of the Eastern Church,** and the Romanian people know the legend of the three kings from the East.”<sup>30</sup>

This historian, even though he himself is Orthodox, believes this information was invented much later, in spite of the claims of the Eastern Church that considers it to be “fully consistent with the Scriptures”,<sup>31</sup> and he correctly calls them fictional legends that

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<sup>27</sup> Bishop Velimirovic, *Prologue of Okhrid*, 944. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Mt. 2:12.

<sup>29</sup> If they were actually wise men were from Persia, Arabia and Egypt, they would not have been called “wise men from the East”, but instead “wise men from the East, Southeast, and South.” Dr. Stefanovic, in contrast, believes that the terms of Babylonia, which was the “cradle of magic and astrology”, and, according to Joseph Flavius, where “many thousands of Jews” lived during the time of Herod and believed in the imminent coming of the king of Judah - the Messiah. See Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> E. Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 114. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Yet “the Holy Fathers” were unable even to agree with each other, let alone with the Holy Scriptures. “Some of the Holy Fathers consider the wise men to have come from Persia, such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, the Blessed Theophylact, and others... Other Fathers believed that the wise men came from Arabia, such as St. Justin Martyr the philosopher, Blessed Cyprian, and St. Epiphanius... And still other Holy Fathers believe the wise men came from Ethiopia ... We can believe this idea to be the most probable: one of the wise men came from Persia, another from Arabia, and the third from Ethiopia.” (In

are not based on historical facts. Dr. Dimitri Stefanovic also agrees that the tradition that the wise men were kings and they were only three comes from legend rather than historical fact.<sup>32</sup>

### *Infanticide in Bethlehem and Its Vicinity*

The Orthodox Church remembers the slaughter of innocent babes by Herod on December 29, according to the old Julian calendar:

**“The Fourteen Thousand Holy Children of Bethlehem.** When the Magi from the east did not return to Jerusalem from Bethlehem to inform Herod about the newborn King but rather, at the angel's command, returned to their homeland another way, Herod became as enraged as a wild beast and ordered all the children two years old and under in Bethlehem and its surroundings to be killed. This frightening command of the king was carried out to the letter. His soldiers beheaded some of the children with swords, smashed others against stones, trampled others underfoot, and strangled others with their hands... This crime against many innocent children **occurred up to the date December 29, one year after Christ's birth.** During that time, Herod sought to kill the Holy Family, but he failed.”<sup>33</sup>

Orthodox tradition makes two major claims. The first claim is that Herod managed to have 14,000 male children killed, and the second is that it occurred only one year (actually 370 days) after Jesus' birth.<sup>34</sup> Both of these claims are impossible to verify, and the Bible certainly does not prove them. Eusebius Popovic comments with regard to the number of children murdered:

“Finally, with regards to the slaughter of children at Bethlehem ordered by Herod, this event is completely consistent with the character of Herod, according to contemporary historians. Joseph Flavius of Judea (37-93 AD) writes that as Herod saw his own death approaching, in his cruelty he issued orders to murder a certain number of Jews in each city when he died. The fact of the murder of children in Bethlehem is also confirmed by the pagan author Macrobius in his work *Saturnalia*.<sup>35</sup> **The number of male children 2 years and younger slaughtered in and around Bethlehem could not have been great, as Bethlehem was a small town. However, fables and legends exaggerated the small number to grow into the thousands, to the point that even the legends in the church amass to 14,000 children.** Nowhere does any credible history attest to such numbers.”<sup>36</sup>

So, from this angle, we ought to have great skepticism regarding the credibility of these fables from Sacred Tradition! As we have just read, the historian claims that it would

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other words, a compromise between the contradictory views of the “Fathers” was made.) See: *Lives of the Saints*, December, 736-737. Author's emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prologue of Okhrid*, December 29, 952-3. Author's emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> Justin Popovic cites the figure of 14,000 children slaughtered one year and nine months after the appearance of the star. See: *Lives of the Saints*, December 29, 816, 819.

<sup>35</sup> Macrobius lived well after Herod's time, as he wrote only in the beginning of the fifth century AD, though he relied on much older but lost sources. He records: “When he [emperor Augustus] heard that among the boys in Syria under two years old whom Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered to kill, his own son was also killed, he said: it is better to be Herod's pig, than his son.” See [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Macrobius/Saturnalia/2\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Macrobius/Saturnalia/2*.html) .

<sup>36</sup> E. Popovic, *General Church History*, vol.1, 114-5. Author's emphasis.

have been impossible for so many children to have been killed, and that this tradition arose from “fables” (i.e. unsubstantiated stories) and legends without any historical basis.

The Protestant writer R. T. France in his commentary on Matthew<sup>37</sup> proposes the idea that in Bethlehem during the birth of Jesus there lived only about 1,000 people (or even as few as 300). Consequently, the number of children murdered could not have exceeded twenty. This perspective is confirmed by the commentary on Matthew written by Dr. Dimitri Stefanovic, whose textbook before World War II was used in the Karlovac Orthodox Theological Seminary. He writes the following:

**“The number of children killed among the population of Bethlehem and its surroundings could not have been great.** Such a horrible act by Herod, though he committed many other evil deeds, is not mentioned by Josephus. One must conclude that this large number is improbable and fictitious, because Herod, one who according to Josephus murdered the innocent and the guilty, in addition to many others slew three of his own sons, wrote nothing about Bethlehem. **At most, Herod ordered the murder of perhaps 20-30 poor, insignificant, rural children.”**<sup>38</sup>

What probably proves to be confusing most of all for honest Orthodox believers is the conclusion that many theologians and historians in the Eastern Church themselves do not believe all the details of “sacred tradition” (upon which Orthodoxy bases much of its authority and confidence). Instead, they dismiss these traditions as fables and legends. Holy Scriptures support the previous statement and contradict the idea that thousands died in Bethlehem killed thousands for reasons mentioned earlier.

However, not all Orthodox doctrine regarding this event and based on sacred tradition matches the actual historical facts. Namely, in a book that deals with the “problem” of activity by non-Orthodox religious communities in Serbia and Russia, the Orthodox archpriest Kirill Zayets mentions a dialogue conducted between an Orthodox priest and members of one of the evangelical Protestant denominations. The accusation relates to the absence of baptizing infants in the Evangelical Church. A large group of Orthodox believers accused the evangelical Christians of “hindering the salvation” of infants:

“You are great sinners, you Baptists, and you are similar to heretical schismatics! Even worse – you are criminals!... Fear God, you miserable schismatics! **You are repeating Herod’s crime when he murdered 14,000 children.** Stop the crime of Herod with your own children! Do not murder them!”<sup>39</sup>

I do not wish in any way to comment on the above allegation that declares hundreds of thousands of Russians and Serbs who were Protestant believers of evangelical orientation to be criminals and murderers<sup>40</sup> - and lacks any theological or substantive arguments. I do wish to emphasize the fact that the Orthodox world is divided about its own belief in the traditional (and illogical) story about Herod’s slaughter of more children in the vicinity of Bethlehem than the entire population. While some dismiss this claim,

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<sup>37</sup> R.T. France, *Commentary on Matthew*, (Good News: Novi Sad, 1987) 86.

<sup>38</sup> Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, (Second Edition: 1923) 14. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Ed. Vladimir Dimitrijevic, *The Bible without God, Christianity without the Church. Church and Sect*, Volume Two, (Cetinje: 1997). Author’s emphasis.

<sup>40</sup> The reader can learn more in the chapter “The Church that Persecutes”.

“sacred” tradition under the weight of historical evidence fails to conform to reality. No matter, some stubbornly refuse to consider the truth that is shed under an objective review of the facts and blindly accept “sacred tradition”.

However, what is more interesting is the sequence of events one year after Jesus’ birth. Namely, the Scriptures say:

*“Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.’ When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother **by night** and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Out of Egypt I called My Son.’”*<sup>41</sup>

The writer of the *Prologue of Okhrid*, among other things, reveals his erroneous conclusions in relation to the flight of Joseph with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Furthermore, he illustrates the contradictions between the accounts from Holy Scripture with those from sacred tradition.

#### *The Chronology of Events According to the Holy Scriptures Compared with Sacred Tradition*

The Bible tells us that after Joseph arrived in Bethlehem with his pregnant wife Mary, Christ was born in a rural stable, as all the rooms at the inn were filled (Luke 2:4-7). That night, after the angelic announcement of the Good News to the shepherds about the birth of the Savior, these shepherds came to where Jesus was born and worshiped Him (Luke 2:8-20). According to God's law given to Moses in the Old Testament (Gen. 17:12, Num. 12:3), Jesus was circumcised eight days after birth. Living with the divine Son thirty-three days after the circumcision of the child (such time needed to pass for the purification of a boy after his birth, per Lev. 12:4-8), Joseph and Mary brought sacrifices for purification to the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22-24). That same day, the baby Jesus received the prophetic words of Simeon and the prophetess Anna, the daughter of Phanuel (Luke 2:25-38). Around this time (probably the day after offering sacrifices) in the house<sup>42</sup> where the travelers from Nazareth stayed, the wise men came to worship and brought their gifts.<sup>43</sup> Having been in a dream instructed not to return to Herod, the wise

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<sup>41</sup> Mt. 2:12-15. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the gospel of Matthew, Sts. Justin Martyr, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome claim that the Lord remained in a cave during the forty days of purification in the temple, where the wise men found Him. However, Dr. Dimitrije Stefanovic, on the other hand argues that "the newborn Messiah is no longer in a stable (Lk. 2:7), but in a house." See *Lives of the Saints*, December, 742; and compare with Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Dr. Stefanovic agrees with this thesis and says: “The Magi coming to Jerusalem had to come right after the first 40 days of Jesus' birth, i.e. after the Lord Jesus was presented in the temple of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:22 ff.), otherwise Herod would have heard of this event before the arrival of the because of Jesus or Herod

men left Judea and returned to their own country (Matt. 2:12). Probably the same night, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph telling him that Herod intended to kill the Son of God, and commanded him to flee as soon as possible to Egypt. At that very moment, he took with him Jesus and his mother, and under the auspices of the night left Bethlehem for Egypt (Mt. 2:13-15). At around the same time, realizing that the wise men deceived him by not telling him the location of the Child, Herod dispatched his soldiers to the place of Jesus' birth in order to murder all the children born two years ago (Matthew 2:16-18). After the "Holy family" had stayed several months in Egypt, the angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream and commanded him to return to his hometown - Nazareth in Galilee (Matthew 2:19-23).

However, the Orthodox tradition mentions an apparently distorted order of events in contrast with the Bible.<sup>44</sup>

According to Bishop Nikolai, after the wise men worshiped Jesus and He met with "St. Simeon the Righteous", Joseph with Mary and Jesus first went to Nazareth, lived there a while, and then (which was quite unnecessary as they already were outside of the territory administered by Herod) went back south to Egypt. They brought along from Joseph's first marriage his son James (who, again, demonstrating the contradictions of sacred tradition, was around 50 years yet sacred tradition says Joseph could not have children, thus James would have been born after Jesus – both versions cannot be correct, ergo sacred traditions contradict themselves<sup>45</sup>):

"The angel of God appeared to Joseph in a dream and commanded him to take the young Child and His Mother and flee to Egypt. Joseph did this. Taking the Divine Child and His Most-holy Mother, he traveled first to Nazareth (Luke 2:39), where he arranged his household matters, and then, taking his son James with them, went off to Egypt (Matthew 2:14). Thus the words of the prophet were fulfilled: *Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt* (Isaiah 19:1)... After having lived for several years in Egypt<sup>46</sup>, the holy family returned to Palestine, again in response to a command of an angel of God. Thus another prophecy was fulfilled: *Out of Egypt have I called my Son* (Hosea 11:1)."<sup>47</sup>

In order to make Holy Scripture, the infallible Word of God, to conform to "sacred" tradition (rather than vice versa), the bishop bases his interpretation on Luke 2:39-40,

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heard this act before the coming of the Holy Family to the Jerusalem temple and undoubtedly he would have carried out his bloody plan already." Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, 10 in the footnote.

<sup>44</sup> According to the holy fathers, cites Justin Popovic, the wise men worshiped Jesus on the day of his birth. Then, Joseph received the angelic message to flee Bethlehem, which he did. However, Joseph was obviously "misbehaving" with the angelic warning, for Mary and Jesus stayed another 40 days in the village, waiting for the day of purification in the temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus was presented in the temple, Herod realized that the wise men misled him. Thus he set out in the following year to locate God's Son and kill Him. Meanwhile, Joseph went to Nazareth first, and then fled with Jesus and Mary to Egypt for several years unknown to us. See *Lives of the Saints*, December, 746.

<sup>45</sup> See more about this in chapter five on "Blessed Mary and the Queen of Heaven", under the subtitle "Joseph's children in the Light of Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition."

<sup>46</sup> The Holy Fathers cannot agree on this issue: St. Epiphanius says that this period lasted two years, Nicephorus three, and George Kedrin five years. Aminiye Alexandria taught that the "Holy Family" stayed in Egypt for seven years. See Justin Popovic, *Lives of the Saints*, December, 750.

<sup>47</sup> Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prologue from Okhrid*, December 26, 945.

which says that after the sacrifices Joseph, with Mary and Jesus returned to Nazareth. However, Luke does not mention their flight to Egypt, as well as the star of Bethlehem and the wise men who came from the East to worship. However, although the evangelist does not mention the aforementioned events, we cannot conclude that they did not occur. Matthew, of whom Luke must have been aware, reports these events.

It is obvious that Bishop Nikolai accepts the claims of St. Dimitri of Rostov as an indisputable fact (that the “Holy Spirit” revealed to him) that the star in the East appeared at the time of Jesus' conception. Since Orthodox authorities like him were aware that two years had passed from the appearance of the star to the massacre of children in Bethlehem, the bishop apparently decided to somehow add at least another year in the time “gap” from when the star appeared. By adding this year to the existing nine months appearance of stars, the Orthodox “Fathers” were very clumsy and ignorant to arrive at the conclusion that it took Herod one year since the Magi visited him to issue the decree to slaughter the children in Bethlehem. Even this extra year, however, would still fall short of two years. If this is indeed so, then it was completely unnecessary for Joseph and Mary to take the child in the middle of the night to Bethlehem not to Egypt - as the Lord commanded – but rather to Nazareth – as sacred tradition claims. In that case, he would have had one whole year to safely remove the Child from His birthplace.<sup>48</sup> However, since the matter was very urgent, that very night, Joseph and his family walked 2 or 3 days to the Roman province of Egypt and settled there.<sup>49</sup>

We showed in the previous chapter that Joseph had no children from a previous marriage. (Joseph was not married until he had met Mary.) It is not true that he had an older son named James nor did Joseph with Mary and Jesus flee to Nazareth before going to Egypt.

Bishop Nikolai mentions Isaiah 19:1, which is difficult to see how it relates to the flight of the “Holy Family” to Egypt. However, the Lord went down to Egypt not in a when the Lord did not arrive in Egypt by “riding on a swift cloud”, but rather was carried by Mary in her arms. None of these incidents fulfill any prophecies in Isaiah, nor do the Gospels mention such events in that context. This silence clearly shows that the Bishop is resorting to mere speculation rather than factual proof in his argument.

### *The Meeting of Simon “the Righteous One” and Anna the Prophetess with the Baby Jesus*

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<sup>48</sup> Nowhere in his commentary does Dr. Dimitri Stefanovic does not mention their first trip to Nazareth, but rather talks about an emergency trip to Egypt, which is exactly in line with the Bible. This example once again proves that not all Orthodox agree exactly with the claims of the Holy Fathers, but reveals their tacit admission that they know the Bible does not agree with sacred tradition. See Stefanovic, *Commentary on Matthew*, 14-5.

<sup>49</sup> A trip to Egypt was an urgent need to save Joseph's family, most likely because the road to Nazareth was not safe because of Herod's army, which moved from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. If Joseph and Mary with Jesus had gone first to Nazareth, Joseph's hometown where they would have been safe (Galilee was not under Herod's rule), it is not clear why they would have yet once again gone onto such a long and exhausting time in Egypt, a place full of danger. Thus, by looking at the events logically and through the texts of the Biblical Gospels, we prove the fact that sacred tradition distorts the events from the reality that occurred.

We read in the entry for February 3 in *The Prologue of Okhrid* about this event:

**“During the reign of the Egyptian Emperor Ptolemy Philadelphus, Simeon was chosen as one of the prominent Seventy to whom was entrusted the task of translating the Bible from the Hebrew language into the Greek language [The Septuagint].** Simeon was performing his task conscientiously but when he was translating the book of the Prophet Isaiah and came upon the prophecy: **“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and will give birth to a son”** (Isaiah 7:14), he became confused and took a knife to remove the word **“virgin”** and to replace it with the words, **“young woman,”** and as such to translate it into Greek. At that moment, however, an angel of God appeared to Simeon and restrained him from his intention, explaining to him that the prophecy is true; that the prophecy is correctly written: that it is true and correct. The messenger of God also said that Simeon would be convinced of it personally for, according to the Will of God, he will not die until he sees the Messiah born of the Virgin. The righteous Simeon rejoiced to hear such a voice from heaven, left the prophecy unchanged and thanked God Who is making him worthy to live and to see the Promised One. When the young Child Jesus was presented in the Temple in Jerusalem by the Virgin Mary, the Spirit of God appeared to Simeon who was very old and as ‘white as a swan.’ Simeon quickly entered the Temple and **there recognized both the Virgin and the young Child by the light that shone around their heads as an aura...** Anna the Prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, was also there, who recognized the Messiah and proclaimed Him to the people. At that time, **Anna was eighty-four years old.** St. Simeon died shortly after that. This righteous Elder Simeon is considered to be the Protector of young children.”<sup>50</sup>

So, according to Holy Tradition, the righteous Simeon was one of the translators of the Septuagint (a translation of the Old Testament from the Jewish to the Greek language which was done by seventy people according to tradition). Tradition asserts this translation was done during the reign of the Greek ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, who died in 246 BC.<sup>51</sup> Based on the date of this ruler’s death, we can easily calculate the approximate age of St. Simeon when he met Jesus. Bishop Nikolai says his old age made him look as “white as a swan.” According to this legend, Simeon would have been at least 280 years old, i.e. nearly in his fourth century of terrestrial existence. So the evangelist Luke when he wrote about Simeon obviously was not aware of his old age as the holy fathers were. Writing about the prophetess Anna, Luke stated that she was very old, although at the time of Christ’s presentation at the Temple, she was “only” 84 years old. If Luke called Anna “of great age” when she was less than ninety years old, then it seems quite strange why Luke does not refer to Simeon as someone “surprisingly ancient”. Although this evangelist was an eyewitness to these events as well as an excellent historian who investigated all things, even minor details, such as Anna had been married for seven years and then became a widow up to the age of 84:

*“Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was **of a great age**, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years...”*<sup>52</sup>

It is impossible to believe for this very accurate historian to have omitted Simeon’s age, if in fact that is what had happened. Specifically, human life in Christ’s time was limited to less than one hundred years. (It was probably rare, as it is today, for people to exceed

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<sup>50</sup> Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *The Prologue of Okhrid*, February 3. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> See Branko Bjeljic, *The Holy Scriptures of the Serbs*, (Belgrade, 1997), 22.

<sup>52</sup> Lk. 2:36-7. Author’s emphasis.

this age.) We just noticed that Luke considered Anna to be “of great age”. The last time in history when the average life expectancy exceeded two hundred years was recorded in the Bible about 2100 BC, during the seventh generation after the Flood in the time of Terah, the father of Abraham (Gen. 11:32). But after a few hundred years, the average life expectancy shrank to under eighty years, where it has remained until the present day:

*“The days of our lives are seventy years;  
And if by reason of strength they are eighty years,  
Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow;  
For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.”*<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, according to the Scriptures, we have reason to believe that Simeon was much younger than the prophetess Anna, because his “advanced age” (even in relation to the “great age” of Anna) is mentioned nowhere in the Scriptures. After all that has been said, it seems ridiculous to believe the Orthodox assertion that “Simeon was so old that his life itself was worn out; he impatiently awaited his death, but it still did not come.”<sup>54</sup>

So as we examine and arrive at conclusions consistent with the records of Holy Scripture, it is easy to see that this Orthodox belief is yet another “fable” and legend with no foundation in the divine revelation of God’s Word. This teaching on Simeon falls into the category of other Orthodox teachings we have studied.

### **Christmas Traditions among the Serbian People**

“We Serbs observe and keep the rules of the Christmas holiday based on culture, not on religion,” said Vuk Vrčevića as the voice of a simple-minded Serbian priest. Vuk Vrčevića was correct. Christmas, as Njegos described it, consisted of straw laid out before a bonfire, yule logs crossing on the fire blessed with rifles, powder, wreaths, carols, and toasts – **such a beautiful and beloved Christmas is not a Christian, but an old Serbian, holiday.**”<sup>55</sup>

“When the Serbian people received Christianity, and with it all the holidays which the Orthodox Church observed, they started to celebrate Christmas. The church replaced other holidays with Christmas, which our people celebrated at the time of the winter solstice. It is not exactly a replacement, but **rather a compromise with the ancient holidays which gained extended life.** Only the church gave them a new name, a new explanation, and several quite insignificant details from the Christian cult.”<sup>56</sup>

The literature of the Orthodox Church that appeals to a wide audience not only expands and declares legends and myths to belong to original Christianity, but it also assures its members that traditions related to certain religious holidays originate from the Bible. As we learned from Alexander Schmemman in the previous section of this chapter, the main method of “evangelization” in the fourth century was the invention and adaptation of Christian meanings for pagan customs and rituals. On this occasion, we will study the pagan traditions related to the Christmas holidays that have undergone similar

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<sup>53</sup> Ps. 90:10.

<sup>54</sup> *Orthodox Doctrine*, (The Voice of the Church: Valjevo, 1990) 52.

<sup>55</sup> Chaykanovic, Vol. 1, 240. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> Chaykanovic, Vol. 1, 122. Author’s emphasis.

“adaptation”. These are the rites related to Tucindan, Christmas Eve and for Christmas I am.

### *Tucindan*

Here is what Orthodox literature has to say about this holiday:

“Tucindan – it is another day before Christmas. Our people observe this day by slaughtering (beating) the Christmas “pechenitsa”, a whole roasted pig”, which the whole family will eat on Christmas Day, after a long period of fasting for six weeks. And this custom of the people related to ‘Božićnjari’ or ‘the loins’, although it is in fact a pig, not a lamb, comes from the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem in the manger where the shepherds tended their flock. The Holy Apostle and Evangelist Luke testifies about the Bethlehem shepherds, that when they heard the angel of the Lord revealed to them the glory of the Lord, on that wonderful night when the Lord was born, they went to Bethlehem and found in a stable in Bethlehem ‘Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger’ (Lk. 2) and worshipped Him. Sacred Tradition, which is stored in the Holy Church, testified that at that time the shepherds took the gift of a lamb to the Divine Child. This is our ‘Božićnjari’, which is prepared on Tucindan, by being turned on a skewer on Christmas Eve and eaten on Christmas Day as the first fatty foods. ‘For reasons that the ‘Božićnjari’ of yore is not slaughtered but hit on the head with a lump of salt and then its throat is slit. **That is why this day is called Tucindan (beating). Our version of the day is to use a pig, rather than a lamb, because there were no lambs during Christmas.**”<sup>57</sup>

This excerpt claims the slaughter of the pig preceded Christmas, “the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger in Bethlehem.” It further alleges that the animal on the spit was a roasted lamb instead of a pig because at Christmas time in our region there are no lambs.<sup>58</sup> However, is Tucindan truly a Christian holiday? Does roasted pig on Christmas have any real connection with the birth of Jesus Christ? As we will see, none of these practices have any connection with the events described in the gospel.

Veselin Chaykanovic wrote that our nation before the “acceptance” of Christianity practiced various rituals aimed at protecting themselves from evil spirits. Protection from the spirits (demons) was conducted by worshiping totem poles of demonic animals, which were considered deities who could protect an individual or an entire family. We will now uncover the origin of the hidden meaning of rituals just described by the Orthodox author:

“One very revered portion of the Christmas holidays is the ‘roasted pig’. Without the roasted pig, there is no Christmas: ‘Christmas is Christmas, and the roasted pig is its brother.’ (Vuk, *Letters*, 355) The pig is chosen well in advance of the Christmas holiday, and then it is prepared in a special way and has a particular name such as ‘božićnjari’, etc... This is obviously an unusual dish, of which it is merely one of many delicacies for the Christmas banquet. **One should realize that roast pork indicates a belief in its magical powers, and quite a firm belief in its strong link to Christmas – which by killing and eating roast pig, we have a religious, sacrificial rite.** The words ‘Christmas is Christmas, and the roasted pig is its brother’ has a much deeper religious meaning than at first glance... Religious rites with animals are or were known to all peoples, and

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<sup>57</sup> *Catechism for the Home*, (Belgrade, 1991), 57. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Although during Christmas season, our region has more pigs than lambs simply because sows can give birth to ten baby pigs compared to only one lamb for a sheep, it is not true that at Christmas time in Serbia there are no lambs to be found. This fact can be confirmed by any inhabitant of any Serbian village.

every religion went through a phase when animals were worshiped. The religion of our people shows a strong trace of such affairs. A trace of the most primitive alliance between man and animals, in the form of totem poles, is the most visible... Thus far, we have not spoken specifically regarding the pig. **However, historical data exist that show us that our ancient ancestors believed in its demonic power and its clear shamanistic character...** From all this it is clear that our ancestors viewed pigs as demonic, shamanistic animals... The Christmas pig is a sacrifice, a sacramental victim, a kind of communion. Primitive society had an obligation to placate the shamanistic spirit, or else a demonic animal, that it would not kill or eat them, but along with that tradition came another one of **theophagy**<sup>59</sup>, or the ritual of eating the body of a god. Apart from this situation, primitive man would never touch the world of animals or demons. However, it would certainly have been in his interest to have occasional access (such as in the case of an epidemic) to eat the blood and body of animals, thus to partake in divination and gain power to resist the effects of evil demons... **The end result of all this is to realize that the Christmas pig is a form of communing with a shamanistic spirit or god in the form of an eating ritual.** The saying - obviously, very ancient - 'Christmas is Christmas, and the roasted pig is its brother' becomes clearer to us now. The pig is now elevated to the rank of deity, and it identifies the deity to which belongs the Christmas holiday. So, we have a roasted pig which symbolizes the deity who receives the sacrifice. **However, one of the main ideas of the history of religion is that deity both takes sacrifice and gives birth at the same time depending on what is offered (e.g. the case of Adonis, Dionysus, etc.). In this respect, it is interesting that Christmas as the day of the birth of a young, newborn god begins at the moment when the sacrifice is definitively ready, i.e. when the roasted pig is set at the table: at the moment when the host enters the house, he puts his head forward and greets family members with 'Christ is born!'**”<sup>60</sup>

For all the quoted statements and explanations in Chaykanovich's works, it is quite clear that the "Christmas pig" does not come from the Christian faith (i.e. the stable in Bethlehem), but rather from the dark depths of old pagan Serbian religion. However, as we continue to examine the facts, we will see this is the case with other folk customs conducted under the auspices of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

### *Christmas Eve*

“Carefully peel off the Christian coating, and you will find the core to be pagan. Such a fusion appropriately satisfies everyone's desire,” said S. Trojanovic. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are such examples, as they are solar holidays, because the sun starts to shine longer after Christmas - 'the holiday of the invincible Sun'. Perhaps Christmas Eve truly belongs to the god Perun, who carries the attribute of 'ancient' or 'grandfather'. In any event, Christmas Eve is a living organism. In fact, this holiday reached a tacit (perhaps unconscious) **compromise between the enduring pagan tradition of Christmas Eve and the Christian celebration of Christmas, between Christmas Eve, which conceived an idol, and the birth of Christ.**”<sup>61</sup>

The prominent Orthodox writer and psychiatrist Vladeta Jerotic teaches us some very important information about the origin of Christmas Eve and Day. Although, as we shall see, the Orthodox Church claims this holiday was originally Christian, a brief study of its customs and rituals related to the holiday will affirm the position of Mr. Jerotic.

There are several customs related to this day. The most important custom is cutting down the Christmas tree. After they bring the tree into the home, they sprinkle it with corn

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<sup>59</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theophagy> (Translator's note.)

<sup>60</sup> Chaykanovich, Vol. 1, 137-146. Author's emphasis.

<sup>61</sup> Vladeta Jerotic, *The Old and the New in Christianity*, (Belgrade, 2000) 25. Author's emphasis.

coated with honey and wine and throw metal coins and nuts into the corners of the room. Tradition also requires the host to sing a Christmas troparion and imitate a hen calling to its chicks, “Kva, kva, kva,” while the other family members act like chicks and respond, “Pyu, pyu, pyu.” It is important to eat that day on the straw spread on the floor, not at the table, and to remain there through the night. The Serbian Orthodox Church deems these practices Christian and alleges that they originated at the time of Christ's birth:

“Christmas Eve is the day before Christmas. ‘Christmas Eve Day’ precedes the night called ‘Christmas Eve’, because that day and that evening run contiguously. People stay up all night without sleeping as they eagerly await the most solemn moment in the history of humanity – the birth of Christ the Newborn Son. Consequently, the visible symbol of this event involves a special meal in their homes called Christmas Eve. **The Christmas tree** (a young oak tree or log or branches) **symbolizes our Savior - the Lord Jesus Christ**<sup>62</sup>... The Christian Christmas Eve and Christmas Day originate from that divine Bethlehem night when in the pastoral manger was born the Savior of mankind, and the shepherds, who ‘were watching at night over their flocks’ (Lk. 2:8), had taken a break to warm themselves at the fire... They also brought a lot of branches to stoke the fire to warm the Newborn and His Mother, as it was a very cold night.”<sup>63</sup>

“When Christmas Eve falls, the host of Christmas Eve again takes an oak branch, puts it up to his right shoulder and solemnly enters the house... And the Christmas tree is sprinkled with corn, coated with honey and wine sauces... With the well known refrain, the host utters, ‘God’s peace to you - Christ is born!’ The wife of the house replies: ‘He is born, indeed!’... The symbolism of this event is clear. The Lord Jesus Christ, the newborn Savior of mankind, in the form of Christmas Eve, has entered our home... The Christmas tree is in our home ... all the rooms are covered with straw and silver coins, in the guest room, there are a host of glorious icons with just three nuts in all four corners... They usually sing the Christmas troparion, ‘O God Thy Nativity’, after which they eat and drink. When they do not know the Christmas hymn, they just simply engage in eating and drinking... **These customs of Christmas Eve embody specific Christian symbolism**... Thus, the nuts lying in all four corners of the guest rooms symbolically represent the Holy Trinity... The family cannot eat at the table, but rather on the floor, where sit either on the straw itself or on the sacks which the host stuffed with straw.”<sup>64</sup>

In the same way as we learned that the slaughter of pigs in Tucindan never originated with the first century Christians, we thus determined that the customs have a pagan, not Christian, origin. We have already confirmed the fact that Jesus Christ was not born on December 25. Although Serbian people did not know that this date was adopted from the cult of Mithras, since ancient times our nation observed the transition from the old to the new year with certain important holidays.

Chaykanovic claims to have been holidays that originated from the cult of the dead, also known as “the days of the dead”. This distinguished author claims that all these customs associated with Christmas are related to invoking the soul of the deceased in the form of ritual. This would mean that today's celebration of Christmas by Orthodox people

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<sup>62</sup> “Once upon a time, at the dawn of civilization, at a time when the European areas were covered with vast forests, and human nature and the world were caught up in animism, **the cult of worshipping trees as gods** was devised. The most common form of tree worship centered on oak trees (and relatives). **The Christianization of such pagan customs** gave them a new symbolic meaning.” See the special article on “Christmas” in *Today*, (2002), 4. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> *Catechism in the Home*, 57-8. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61. Author’s emphasis.

actually is a kind of open spiritism and occult practice that is disguised in the attire of Christianity. Here are his conclusions derived after many years of research:

“The foods that are eaten on Christmas Eve have a spiritual character. This is most clearly apparent with the nuts and beans.<sup>65</sup> **The walnut** comes from a fruit tree which particularly interests demons from the abyss... Clearly, nuts from trees of the nether world of evil demons serve as food for evil spirits... **Honey** is also a familiar dish to Greeks, Romans, Indians, Slavs, and Indo-Germanic peoples... They feed honey to the souls of the dead, and all the demons of the nether world... This symbolism clearly reveals to us **the intent of the Christmas Eve dinner as a meal to honor the dead.** The four nuts which the host throws into the four corners of the room are for the souls of the dead... There is a tradition to eat ‘from the bag’, e.g. from the earth... what is not clean is left as food and drink to be fed to orphans on Christmas Eve. **All these rules about gifts are important in the cult of dead souls, both amongst the ancient Serbs and for all the Indo-Germanic peoples.**”<sup>66</sup>

“In order to understand the tradition of laying straw, it is necessary to determine the significance of the Christmas Eve feast in the first place. **First of all, Christmas Eve is the mortuary feast for dead souls; it is organized as a banquet on behalf of souls of the deceased** and gives them the opportunity to warm themselves up. Traditions of the Christmas dinner have a corporeal character and resemble the very practices of funerals and memorials of dead souls in general. Even the Serbian name for Christmas Eve derives from the verb “to keep a vigil”... On Christmas Eve, one member of the household must keep a vigil. This vigil has the same importance as a vigil next to a corpse. Foods that are eaten on Christmas dinner - especially nuts, beans, honey, fish – all have a spiritual character **and are also dedicated to the souls of the deceased.**”<sup>67</sup>

“Why do they lay straw in the house on that Eve? The answer is very simple: For gods and the souls of ancestors, straw has a particularly attractive force... Now we are clear about the role of straw in the Christmas Eve dinner. To that dinner, they invite participate the souls of deceased ancestors. In order to attract those souls, they lay out the food on straw spread out on the floor... Once we understand this, it is easier to put into context other Christmas customs in relation with straw. After the host lays the straw throughout the house (and this was done before the evening sunset), **he clucks like a hen, and the rest of the family, especially children, follow him and cheep...** When ancient man desired to invoke a dead soul, he would allure him with the clucking of a bird... Such a custom of luring dead souls with clucking was also known to the Christian Copts... However, the clearest explanation for why people cluck during the Christmas Eve dinner is most visible in the Russian version of the cult of the dead... **According to this tradition, laying straw and clucking during the Christmas Eve dinner has the evident goal of alluring dead souls to the banquet.**”<sup>68</sup>

Thanks to these allegations, we note that modern Christmas Eve traditions really amount to “Christianized” occult rituals inherited from our heathen ancestors. I truly believe that no true follower of Jesus Christ should observe nor participate in these ritual acts, which continue under the guise of Christianity, the ancient pagan psychic practice.

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<sup>65</sup> Even *Catechism in the Home* on page 62 acknowledges that the beans are fed to the spirits of dead ancestors, but this fact “was given spirit” by saying that the grains of these plants on the night of Christmas Eve represent those who died because Christians were waiting for the birth of the Savior. The same book gives readers more details on this subject already familiar with Chayanovski’s works.

<sup>66</sup> Chaykanovic, Vol. 1, 124-8. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-7. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-191. Author’s emphasis.

## *Christmas Day*

Continuing our study in the same way, we come to the Day when the Eastern Church celebrates Jesus' birth. Ritual acts, which subject the Serbian people under the auspices of traditional religion, also have no basis in the original Gospel, although, of course, efforts are made to put them under the guise of Christianity. This section will deal with the topics of "poleznik" in the Christmas ritual, and the so-called "mirbozhaniye."

### *Poleznik and the Burning Fire*

"Poleznik. He is the first person who visits our home on Christmas morning. The poleznik starts at our home, hence the name "poleznik". Common belief says he brings happiness to our homes. Therefore, take care to treat the poleznik well as a child with a clean, innocent heart filled with love. But, of course, the poleznik could also be an adult, neighbor, relative, passerby, or **even animals (in the villages)** – such examples today are rare but in earlier times occurred more often."<sup>69</sup>

"We welcome the poleznik into our homes as **we would welcome the Lord**, whose birth brings peace and goodwill to all men... He inserts a coin (into the fire). And the Christmas Eve log (a branch from the Christmas tree) **begins to burn in the fire** in such a way that the fire and sparks on Christmas Eve kindle while he utters a blessing:

As many sparks fly out, so may happiness abound in this home.  
As many sparks fly out, so may money abound in the patron's pocket.  
As many sparks fly out, so may many sheep abound in the pen.  
As many sparks fly out, so may many pigs and lambs abound.  
As many sparks fly out, so may many geese and chickens,  
and most of all, health and joy."<sup>70</sup>

From these statements we learn that a family welcomes the poleznik into their home with reverence that only the Lord deserves, that the poleznik could even be an animal, and his function is to bless a home with sparks from a fire. The works of Veselin Chaykanovic once again reveal the non-Christian origins of these traditions:

"The word 'poleznik' comes from the verb to set aside – take a walk, visit, with an original meaning of being a guest. Indeed, the poleznik is a guest, but of a special kind. Such a guest brings everything **to a primitive family - health and fertility**, in fact the fate of the entire household depends on this guest. Obviously this poleznik who possesses such extraordinary powers, is beyond the ordinary realm of mortal man."<sup>71</sup>

Chaykanovic says that the ancient Serbian religion (and others) had a holiday when a deity or demon in human likeness would visit people in their homes. The aforementioned deity was welcomed into the home with great reverence (as God) and invited to take lunch, after which they sacrificed a ritual cake. If a poleznik happened to be an animal, then it was fed a cake decorated with a horn. This author further argues that such animals, similar to the pigs on Tucindan, represented divine shamanistic animals – an old

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<sup>69</sup> *Catechism in the Home*, 63. Author's emphasis.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. Author's emphasis.

<sup>71</sup> Chaykanovic, Vol. 1, 146. Author's emphasis.

shamanistic entity.<sup>72</sup> Neither Christ nor the apostles left any such “testimony” for Christians today to practice the sparks of the fire and blessing of the household by this guest. Such customs are directly related to the old Serbian polytheistic cult. This religious cult believed that the deity would enter the house through the attic or chimney. The Serbian name for the popular “Santa Claus” is the “Christmas knocker”. This term refers to the need to listen for the “knock” or echo of the footsteps of “Father Christmas” (the ancient deity) that visits and approaches the home. Precisely because of this belief that the deity comes down the chimney into the house,

“Once the poleznik enters the house, immediately the sparks of the fire fly, and the family **watches the chimney** and says, ‘God help us!’... Evidently this tradition could only be based upon the ancient belief that the deity had entered. **Regarding his participation in the feast, something for which we find no confirmation in Christianity, we do find confirmation in pagan religion:** each family organizes a feast devoted to their personal pagan god.”<sup>73</sup>

What is particularly important to emphasize at this point is that the practice of kindling the fire and blessing the household in this manner (with divination and invocation) is strictly forbidden by God's commandments as written in the Scriptures:

*“Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.”*<sup>74</sup>

*“A man or a woman who is a medium, or who has familiar spirits, shall surely be put to death; they shall stone them with stones. Their blood shall be upon them.”*<sup>75</sup>

Chaykanovic asserts that “the vast majority of Christmas traditions relate to divination and invocation”, which aimed to summon shamanistic demons, i.e. spirits of ancestors, so that they might provide a fruitful and joyous new year. According to the author, even just burning fire on Christmas Eve has no connection whatsoever with the events concerning Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Rather, it is connected with the shamanistic pagan belief that fire could “augment one’s power through the sun and fertility of nature.”<sup>76</sup>

#### *Mirbazhaniye (The Peace of God)*

On the other hand, although the tradition of “the peace of God” most closely resembles events described in the Gospels pertaining to the birth of the Savior, the Orthodox author Chaykanovic will shed more light about the origins of this tradition:

“One of the most famous Christmas traditions is the custom known as ‘the peace of God’ and the ‘mirbozhaniye’ (kissing between someone and his beloved). During Christmas, no one could even in jest hit someone! This tradition of ‘the peace of God’ does not apply to all holidays... but it is strictly true of all **holidays for the dead souls** during the year.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>73</sup> Chaykanovic, Vol. 2, 481. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> Lev. 19:31.

<sup>75</sup> Lev. 20:27.

<sup>76</sup> See Chaykanovic, Vol. 3, 133-7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 244. Chaykanovic’s emphasis.

According to the author, calling this custom of Christmas "the peace of God" comes from rituals entirely and originally pagan that were never taught in first century Christianity. Yet, someone perhaps might ask how it could be possible that the greeting "Peace of God - Christ is born" could possibly have a pagan origin? Is it not a quote from the Bible?

The New Testament makes no mention that the early Christians greeted one another with these words. (Amongst other reasons, they did not celebrate Christmas.) The modern custom of "the peace of God" is very reminiscent of the song of good news proclaimed by the angels as described in Luke's gospel:

*"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"*<sup>78</sup>

If we accept at face value Karadzic's translation of these verses, we might be able to rationalize the custom of "the peace of God". However, this idea would contradict and differ to other verses made in the Scriptures. Taking Karadzic's translation literally would suggest that God gives peace to all people on earth, including believers (who are in the minority) and the godless (who are in the majority). However, the Lord of the Old and the New Testaments says that the wicked will find no peace in his spiritual life:

*"There is no peace, says the LORD, for the wicked."*<sup>79</sup>

*"But the wicked are like the troubled sea, When it cannot rest, Whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, Says my God, for the wicked."*<sup>80</sup>

*"Their feet run to evil, And they make haste to shed innocent blood; Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; Wasting and destruction are in their paths. **The way of peace they have not known, And there is no justice in their ways; They have made themselves crooked paths; Whoever takes that way shall not know peace.**"*<sup>81</sup>

The Lord Jesus Christ affirms that the wicked behavior of ungodly people will bring them spiritual turmoil:

*"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.'"*<sup>82</sup>

In these verses Christ underscores the fact that the consequences of His arrival in the world would bring about division in families between those members who accepted Him

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<sup>78</sup> Lk. 2:13-4. Karadzic translation.

<sup>79</sup> Is. 48:22.

<sup>80</sup> Is. 57:20-21.

<sup>81</sup> Is. 59:7-8. Author's emphasis.

<sup>82</sup> Mt. 10:34-6.

as Savior and those who did not. However, it is clear that such division and hostility within a family comes from the unbelieving relatives, not the believers who obey Jesus' words to be peacemakers (Mt. 5:9). Spiritual strife and other kinds of turmoil are very apparent among unregenerate people. The Apostle Paul testified that they have no fear of God and do not know the way of peace.<sup>83</sup>

However, as we read the verses of Lk. 2:13-14 according to the translation of Dr. Carnic, we will gain a totally different impression of the angelic proclamation:

*“And suddenly there was with the angel a heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and **on earth peace among men who obey God's will.**”*<sup>84</sup>

Part of the angels' song and blessing thus does not pertain to all people without distinction, but only to those who obey God's will. However, by His will, only those who are born again can truly know the way to please God, unlike the people described in Isaiah 59:8 who walk false spiritual paths.<sup>85</sup> In fact, it would be quite tragic if non-believing people possessed “spiritual peace,” because in that case, they would remain “asleep” in their sins and ultimately awake to finally experience God's punishment. Thus, since God does not grant the wicked peace, so God can initiate in His heart the search for evangelical Truth – hope in Christ and humility of the soul in himself.

We have shown that the true peace of God belongs only to believers who are reborn of God, not merely to those who celebrate religious holidays by repetitive pagan rituals and customs. It is obvious that the Christmas custom “the peace of God” (that is, merely invoking “the peace of God”) has no spiritual importance in the original Christian sense. It is obvious, therefore, that the custom of “the peace of God” among the Orthodox is a mere part of the overall “Christianization” of pagan Christmas rituals of the old Serbian religion.

### **Conclusion**

At the end, what else is left to say other than that the beliefs of the Eastern Churches with regard to the ritual practices used to observe the commemoration of the birth of Jesus in many ways do not conform to the Scriptures. Contradictory “sacred tradition”, on one hand, and adapting “Christian” meaning to pagan rituals, on the other hand, lead us to the final conclusion that Orthodox teaching on this issue is wrong. Yet again, this false teaching of its theologians negates the claims of the Orthodox Church to be “the pillar and foundation of truth”.

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<sup>83</sup> See Rom. 3:13-18.

<sup>84</sup> Nearly identical translations of these verses are given by the Orthodox professor Dr. Dimitrije Stefanovic, the Baptist preacher Mr. Miroslav Zivkovic (published by the International Bible Society), and the Contemporary Serbian translation (published by the World Translation Center in Fort Worth, Texas, USA). Similar translations include those of Vuk Karadzic and that of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church done by Dr. Alexander Birvish and Dr. Lujo Bakotić.

<sup>85</sup> See Num. 6:24-6; Ps. 4:8, 29:11, 85:9, Jn. 14:27, 16:33; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; Phil 4:7-10.