

The description we are offered of the various symbols and events around which those public occasions are organized is provocative, but insufficiently analytical. The syncretism seems in these occasions to be composed of equal parts of religious ritual, loyalty to the “old country,” and a born-again American nationalism. Why? Why, this time to borrow a metaphor from the author, are the “new bottles for the old wine” shaped by nationalism? Was the old wine made from grapes of Slavic nationalism? Was Byzantine Catholicism always so imbued with patriotism, with nationalistic ritual, or is that element merely a response to the immigrant experience? There are many highly religious immigrant populations in this country whose syncretic adaptations have not included the intense nationalism that characterizes the populations at issue here. What differentiates Byzantine Catholics from those other groups?

One particular area suggests itself for further exploration in this context: we are aware that under czarist rule, certain Slavic nationality groups were inflamed against Jews for political ends through the church and by means of symbols. Infamous pogroms, for example, grew out of Easter/ Passover rituals. Is that bit of history germane to this analysis? Structural approaches of the sort undertaken by Skovira are of value and interest only if the descriptions of symbols and structures serve as vehicles for substantive analysis that leads to meaning. One is led by the article to wonder mightily why nationalistic emblems and rhetoric should figure so significantly in Byzantine Catholic religious structure—here or in the old country. We are not offered even a suggestion of an answer.

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Critique

Unraveling the tangle of theses that shape the Skovira essay, “Some Symbols of Identity of Byzantine Catholics,” exposes not only the intersecting dimensions of ethnicity but also the complex nature of semiotics. Before we can accept the author’s concluding remarks on symbols, we need to consider the ramifications of these various theses. It so happens that the two major theses clash: one suggests ethnic assimilation; the other implies a strengthening of national identity. Perhaps some clarity can be achieved if we consider these themes separately.

If the purpose of the essay is to trace the gradual assimilation of the Ruthenians into a diverse ethnic population, one which adheres to the Byzantine Rite of the Catholic Church, the essay has succeeded only in confusing the dynamics of ethnicity with overt religious politics. In fact, assimilation is contra-indicated by the very definition of ethnicity Skovira uses. Furthermore, that definition—a self-ascribed identity—is supported by numerous examples of Ruthenian sensitivity to names associated with the group: Slovak, Hunky, Slavish, Rusnaks, Rusins, Rusyns. This same sensitivity emphasizes the vitality of the group concept. The importance of Ruthenian heritage is further confirmed by the conversations tracing individual ancestry in terms of county, town, or village in the Old Country. These conversations play a prominent role, according to Skovira, in the activities associated with the Theotokos Pilgrimage, Byzantine Catholic Day, and in the local parish. “Being from the same village or county,” Skovira maintains, “is an identity marker for individuals born in the United States, even for third or fourth generation people.” That the Ruthenians are quite aware of their backgrounds and profess pride in their history as a people is formally confirmed by the importance delegated to the singing of the national anthem on Byzantine Catholic Day. Throughout Skovira’s essay we can find support for the fact that the Ruthenians persist as an ethnic group, in spite of the fact that Skovira describes situations where he believes acculturation of the Ruthenians appears to be taking place.

If the purpose of the Skovira essay is to suggest that the symbols of identity associated with St. Nicholas Day, St. Thomas’ Sunday, and Green Sunday are in any way specific, private symbols of a Ruthenian parish, the essay has succeeded only in confusing public pan-Slavic religious traditions, upheld by the majority of churches in the Byzantine Rite as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church, with the communal functions of a particular group. Skovira does not provide any data on this local parish, so the personalized and private expressions of general traditions as they have adapted to local conditions cannot be evaluated. It is variation alone which will reveal the private individuality of a group. Not only is this parish in southwestern Pennsylvania not identified but no comparisons of activities with other parishes are made. That a private dimension exists is obvious; it is unfortunate that Skovira did not illustrate the specific, local, private symbolism of this parish.

If the purpose of Skovira’s discussion of private ceremonies is to demonstrate the eclipse of Ruthenian identity by a religious identity, the discussion succeeds only in demonstrating the obvious: among the religious, religious beliefs transcend earthly matters, and this priority is a cultural value shared by the Ruthenians as well.

If the purpose of Skovira's description of public, Byzantine Catholic events is to illustrate the gradual acculturation of the Ruthenians into a larger, more diverse, ethnic population, bound together by shared religious beliefs, the description illustrates that Byzantine Catholic Day is observed today not only by Ruthenians but other Byzantine Catholic groups, as is the Theotokos Pilgrimage. To specifically label these religious observances "Ruthenian" is inaccurate. Byzantine Catholic Day was and is celebrated predominantly by Ruthenians, as evidenced by references to Ruthenian heritage on leaflets, in programs, through songs, dances, the Slovak language, the Marianist hymn, and the Ruthenian anthem, but it is first and foremost a religious observance, and the Catholic Church will emphasize it as such. Participation in the Theotokos Pilgrimage, likewise, is open to all Catholics, even though the event was originally designed to preserve and nourish Ruthenian identity. A religious event of this kind officially transcends national identities, and that it does so is documented by Skovira.

In his conclusions Skovira suggests that identification with the Byzantine Catholic Rite reinforces national identities — be they Ruthenian, Rusyn, Slovak, Hungarian, or Croatian. The symbols of this shared religious life are seen as helping form national identity patterns. And, Skovira concludes, the symbols of identity reflect a continuing adaptation and transformation of meaning.

That a symbol is a channel of social, political, and psychological allegiance to the values and beliefs of a group is indisputable. Skovira has focused attention on several interesting issues; however, the symbols described in the essay are neither peculiar to the Byzantine Rite nor to the Ruthenians. They belong to many cultural and religious groups. Not one of the symbols cited can be designated as exclusively Ruthenian. Yet, without doubt, symbols revealing and nurturing ethnic identity have been described here. *How* these general symbols have acquired specific connotations must be examined. *How* these symbols function to reveal Ruthenian or exclusively Byzantine Rite identities requires closer scrutiny. The diversity of backgrounds among the Ruthenians themselves is most likely reflected in a multitude of variations in traditions and symbols. Skovira refers to variations in names, languages, and foods. Clearly, variety exists. The relationship between local and specific expressions of symbols and their more universal forms should be explored before conclusions are drawn. More cautious and formulated distinctions between general symbols, such as ceremonies, and particular symbols, such as linguistic salutations or physical gestures, should be developed and maintained. No recognition of the accommodation and localization of some of these celebrations and rites appears, and such recognition is necessary before a symbol of identity can be properly evaluated.

Although the material on the Ruthenians is fascinating and valuable in its own right, Skovira's treatment of the group is too general and too diversified to provide the reader with a clear assessment of the group, especially with regard to the dynamics of ethnicity and to the persistence and change of the folk symbols. Perhaps a closer study is warranted: an analysis of the specific religious and cultural symbols of a single parish might yield more evocative conclusions.

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SONNETS POLONAISE II*

Averting our Polish eyes
rose-bordered self-owned homesteads
compounded with Slavic sweat
trooping to eight o'clock mass
that propaganda warren
abrogation of custom
all for the greater glory

we skulked past those whitened
fashioned of Anglo wealth
benighted hooligans
then on to convent school
where surrender was taught
language pagan mores
of social adjustment.

Set loose like hungry rabbits
against tomato patches.
revenge for degradations
with the northern oppressor
for more acclimatizing.
than all of those skirmishes

we'd instigate forays
Rebelliously we sought
continued our duel
then back to school again
That taught us more of stealth
which left us so frightened.

—Albert Solomon

*The editor notes that the author notes: A word of explanation about the form [of SONNETS POLONAISE II] . . . a traditional sonnet is fourteen lines of iambic pentameter (10 syllables per line). However, I experimented with the form. In Polish poetry a thirteen syllable line is popular; 7 syllables, a pause (caesura), and 6 syllables. Unlike English there is not as much emphasis on the regularity of the stressed syllable. Thirteen, then, became the magic number for my sonnets: a 13 syllable line; 13 lines for the sonnet; rhymes for lines 1-13, 2-12, 3-11, 4-10, 5-9, 6-8, 7 unrhymed. There is a natural pause after the first seven syllables of each line and a pause (though lesser) after the second six. It is an experimental form, unique to my proposed sonnet cycle.