https://doi.org/10.59076/2603-2899.2026.3.12

Stamatis Zochios (Athens, Greece)

CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF *INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA*

1. *INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA* AND THE STUDY OF SLAVIC RELIGIONS

The studies brought together in this special issue originated in the international conference *Aspects of Interpretatio Christiana in the Slavic World*, held at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in October 2025. The conference was conceived as a forum for scholars working across Slavic studies, Byzantine studies, medieval history, linguistics, philology, archaeology, religious studies, and folklore to reconsider one of the most enduring methodological problems in the study of the Slavic past: how should we approach the religious history of societies whose pre-Christian traditions survive almost exclusively through Christian sources? Although this question has accompanied scholarship since the earliest attempts to reconstruct Slavic religion, it has acquired renewed significance as advances in textual criticism, archaeology, historical linguistics, manuscript studies, and the anthropology of religion have exposed the complexity of the processes through which knowledge about the pre-Christian past was produced and transmitted.

The concept of *interpretatio christiana* provides a particularly fruitful framework for addressing this problem. Far from referring solely to the historical process of Christianization, it directs attention to the mechanisms through which Christianity interpreted, classified, translated, and reshaped religious phenomena that preceded or existed alongside it. It also reminds us that nearly every written testimony concerning Slavic paganism is itself the product of such interpretative processes. The Christian chronicler, hagiographer, missionary, translator, compiler, or preacher did not merely record religious practices that survived into the Christian period. Rather, these authors observed them through theological categories, rhetorical conventions, pastoral concerns, and intellectual traditions that fundamentally conditioned how non-Christian religions could be described, evaluated, and remembered.

Consequently, the study of pre-Christian Slavic religion is inseparable from the study of Christian discourse itself. The historian is confronted not with an unmediated record of pagan beliefs and practices, but with representations that have already undergone multiple stages of selection, reinterpretation, translation, and transmission. The question is therefore not simply how much authentic pagan material survives within Christian sources, but how these sources constructed the very object that modern scholarship calls "Slavic paganism". In this respect, *interpretatio christiana* is not merely a historical phenomenon but also an epistemological one. It concerns the production of religious knowledge as much as the transformation of religious life.

The contributions assembled in this volume approach this problem from diverse perspectives. They examine chronicles and missionary texts, Old Church Slavonic translations, hagiographical traditions, liturgical language, visual representations, archaeological evidence, undeciphered inscriptions, and modern intellectual discourses on national identity. Their chronological scope extends from the earliest stages of Christianization to the modern period, while their disciplinary approaches range from philology and linguistics to art history, manuscript studies, religious studies, and intellectual history. Such diversity reflects not a fragmentation of the subject but precisely its complexity. Rather than producing a single definition of *interpretatio christiana*, the volume demonstrates that the concept operates simultaneously on multiple levels – textual, linguistic, visual, ritual, historiographical, and ideological.

The purpose of these concluding remarks is therefore not to summarize the individual contributions, each of which speaks for itself, but to consider the broader questions that emerge when they are read together. Taken collectively, the studies invite us to rethink *interpretatio christiana* not simply as a useful label for particular strategies of Christianization but as a broader analytical framework for understanding how religious knowledge is created, transmitted, negotiated, and transformed. They encourage us to move beyond the traditional opposition between "pagan survivals" and "Christian reinterpretations" towards a more dynamic understanding of the interactions between religious traditions, textual practices, and cultural memory.

2. RETHINKING INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA

Although *interpretatio christiana* has become an increasingly familiar concept within the study of Christianization, its meaning remains far from settled. As Jiří Dynda observes in his introductory essay, the term has generally been employed in two closely related, yet analytically distinct, senses. On the one hand, it denotes the Christian interpretation of non-Christian religions: the intellectual process through which pagan deities, rituals, sacred places, and beliefs were translated

into Christian conceptual categories such as idolatry, demonology, superstition, or divine providence. On the other hand, it refers to the accommodation of pre-Christian religious elements within Christian culture, whereby earlier cultic sites, ritual practices, seasonal customs, and symbolic forms were reinterpreted, transformed, or integrated into Christian religious life rather than simply eliminated.

These two understandings are often presented as alternative definitions, yet the contributions to this volume suggest that they are better understood as complementary aspects of a broader historical process. The first emphasizes discourse: the ways in which Christian intellectuals perceived and represented religious alterity. The second concerns practice: the gradual negotiation through which Christianity established itself within societies whose religious landscapes had been shaped by older traditions. Together they reveal that Christianization was neither a simple replacement of one religious system by another nor an uninterrupted continuity of pagan survivals beneath Christian forms. Rather, it was a continuous process of interpretation in which religious meanings were translated, contested, reorganized, and reassigned.

At the same time, the studies collected here show that these two definitions do not exhaust the analytical potential of the concept. If *interpretatio christiana* is understood solely as either theological reinterpretation or cultural accommodation, important dimensions of the phenomenon remain insufficiently explored. Throughout this volume, Christian interpretation appears not merely as a theological response to paganism but as a broader epistemic operation affecting the production and transmission of knowledge. Christianity did not simply assign new meanings to pre-existing religious realities; it transformed the languages in which those realities could be described, the narratives through which they were remembered, the images by which they were visualized, and the categories through which later generations came to understand them.

Seen from this perspective, *interpretatio christiana* operated simultaneously on several interconnected levels. It was first a process of theological interpretation. Christian authors situated non-Christian religions within the universal history of salvation, interpreting pagan gods as idols, demons, false divinities, or manifestations of humanity's estrangement from the true God. Such classifications were never neutral descriptions but theological judgements grounded in biblical exegesis, patristic thought, and ecclesiastical doctrine. Paganism acquired meaning primarily through its relationship to Christianity, becoming the necessary negative counterpart against which Christian truth could be articulated.

Yet theology alone cannot explain the complexity of these transformations. Christianization also required an immense effort of linguistic translation. The emergence of Christian Slavic literatures demanded the creation of new

vocabularies capable of expressing biblical, liturgical, and theological concepts while negotiating the semantic heritage of pre-Christian languages. Translation was therefore never a purely lexical exercise. Every choice of terminology involved cultural interpretation, determining whether existing words would be preserved, modified, rejected, or endowed with new meanings. Language itself became one of the principal arenas in which Christian categories gradually reshaped indigenous conceptual worlds.

Closely related to this linguistic dimension was the restructuring of narrative. Chronicles, saints' lives, sermons, penitentials, and liturgical texts did not merely preserve fragments of earlier traditions; they reorganized them within Christian narrative frameworks. Stories of conversion, martyrdom, miracles, or the destruction of idols endowed the pagan past with coherence by integrating it into providential history. Even when pre-Christian practices were remembered, they were generally remembered as stages within a larger narrative culminating in Christian triumph.

The same dynamic extended beyond texts into visual representation. Religious interpretation was expressed not only through words but also through images, architecture, spatial organization, and material culture. The visual reconstruction of pagan gods, the transformation of sacred landscapes, the Christianization of writing practices, and the symbolic reconfiguration of religious space all reveal that interpretation operated through visual as well as textual media. Images did not simply illustrate inherited knowledge; they actively participated in constructing authoritative representations of religious realities that had often long disappeared.

Taken together, these perspectives encourage a broader understanding of the concept. *Interpretatio christiana* should be understood neither exclusively as the reinterpretation of paganism nor solely as the accommodation of pre-Christian traditions. Rather, it designates a multidimensional process through which Christianity produced new religious meanings, transformed inherited languages and narratives, reconfigured visual and material cultures, negotiated cultural identities, and shaped the very historical record upon which modern reconstructions of the Slavic past continue to depend.

3. FIVE DIMENSIONS EMERGING FROM THE VOLUME

3.1. Christianity producing paganism

Perhaps the most significant insight emerging from this volume is that Christian sources should not be approached merely as imperfect repositories of information about pre-Christian religion. Rather, they constitute active agents in the construction of the very object they appear to describe. Instead of asking only what Christian texts preserve of pagan traditions, several contributions invite us

to reverse the perspective and ask how Christianity itself participated in producing the historical image of paganism inherited by later scholarship.

This epistemological shift lies at the heart of Jiří Dynda's theoretical reflections. His discussion of *interpretatio christiana* demonstrates that Christian discourse did not simply encounter an already defined religious reality. Through processes of classification, translation, and theological evaluation, it established the conceptual categories within which non-Christian religions became intelligible. Terms such as "idol", "false god", "demon", "superstition", or "error" were not neutral descriptions but elements of a Christian taxonomy that situated pre-Christian religions within a providential vision of history. Paganism was therefore not simply observed; it was interpreted from the outset according to theological principles that determined both what could be seen and how it could be described.

Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa develops this perspective through a reassessment of one of the most frequently cited motifs in the study of Slavic paganism: the alleged worship of stones. Rather than treating repeated condemnations of litholatry as straightforward evidence for the existence of a widespread pagan cult, he demonstrates that these accusations belong to a much older Christian literary tradition inherited from Late Antiquity. References to the veneration of stones, trees, springs, and other natural features circulated through conciliar legislation, homiletic literature, and pastoral treatises long before they appeared in medieval Slavic contexts. Their repetition therefore tells us as much about the persistence of Christian rhetorical strategies as about the religious practices they purported to describe.

A similar methodological reorientation underlies my own examination of Georg Adam Schleusing's *Universa Religio Ruthenica sive Moscovitica*. Written more than seven centuries after the Christianization of Rus', the work cannot plausibly be read as an independent witness to pre-Christian religion. Its significance lies elsewhere. Schleusing assembled fragmentary notices preserved in medieval chronicles, ecclesiastical histories, and learned compilations into what appears to be a coherent pagan religious system. Through textual synthesis, visual reconstruction, and editorial circulation, isolated references to deities such as Perun, Mokoš, Khors, or Stribog were transformed into an apparently systematic Slavic pantheon. Ironically, a work intended to celebrate the triumph of Christianity over idolatry became one of the foundational texts through which modern Europe came to imagine "Slavic mythology".

These studies converge on a common conclusion. Christian discourse did not merely preserve traces of pagan traditions while simultaneously distorting them; it actively participated in producing the historical image of paganism itself. Demonization, narratives of idolatry, providential historiography, literary commonplaces, and successive acts of textual compilation generated representations that gradually acquired the status of historical fact.

3.2. Language as christianization

If Christian historiography transformed the ways in which pagan religions were represented, the contributions devoted to language demonstrate that Christianization simultaneously unfolded through profound processes of linguistic change. Conversion did not consist solely in the adoption of new beliefs or institutions; it also required the creation of new semantic worlds capable of expressing Christian theology, liturgy, and religious experience within Slavic languages.

Vladislav Knoll's study illustrates this process by examining the religious terminology of Old Church Slavonic. Rather than attempting to reconstruct pre-Christian religion directly, he investigates how translators negotiated the encounter between inherited Slavic vocabulary and the conceptual demands of Greek Christian literature. The lexical choices made in the earliest translations reveal processes of semantic adaptation, in which existing words acquired new meanings while new terminological distinctions gradually emerged. Christianization therefore involved not only the introduction of foreign concepts but also the transformation of indigenous semantic structures.

Tatiana Borisova approaches a related problem from the perspective of translation technique. Her analysis of Greek derivatives with the prefix *kata-* demonstrates the precision with which Byzantine hymnographic texts were rendered into Church Slavonic. What may initially appear to be a narrowly linguistic investigation ultimately reveals a broader cultural process. Translators were required not simply to reproduce lexical meanings but also to transmit theological nuance, rhetorical structure, and liturgical function. Morphological choices thus participated in the transmission of Byzantine intellectual culture to the Slavic world.

Aneta Dimitrova's contribution adds an important philosophical dimension to this linguistic perspective. By tracing the Slavonic renderings of the ancient definition of man as ζῷον λογικὸν θνητόν ("a rational mortal animal"), she shows how Greek philosophical terminology entered medieval Slavonic culture through Christian translation. Although no original philosophical treatises are known in medieval Slavonic, philosophical concepts circulated through florilegia, theological treatises, hagiography, homiletics, and historiography. Comparing tenth-century Preslav translations with fourteenth-century Athonite revisions, Dimitrova demonstrates the gradual standardization of philosophical terminology and the increasing consistency with which Greek conceptual vocabulary was rendered into Church Slavonic. Her study thus shows that interpretatio Christiana also involved the transmission, adaptation, and stabilization of ancient philosophical language within a Christian intellectual framework.

Martina Chromá broadens this perspective by examining the vocabulary associated with fermentation and fermented products. Such terminology belongs to the sphere of everyday material culture, yet precisely this ordinariness reveals how deeply Christianization penetrated daily life. Words relating to bread, wine, leaven, and fermentation moved between domestic practice, biblical translation, liturgical symbolism, and theological controversy. The Christian reinterpretation of ordinary vocabulary demonstrates that conversion was experienced not only in churches or monasteries but also through the language of food, ritual practice, and everyday existence.

Taken together, these studies remind us that Christianization proceeded as much through language as through institutions. Translation was never a purely linguistic operation. Every lexical decision involved acts of cultural interpretation, semantic negotiation, and intellectual adaptation. The contributions of Knoll, Borisova, Dimitrova, and Chromá demonstrate that the Christianization of the Slavic world also entailed the construction of a new conceptual vocabulary capable of expressing biblical revelation, liturgical practice, theological reflection, philosophical anthropology, and even everyday experience within a shared Christian semantic universe.

3.3. Narrative transformation

The dynamics of *interpretatio christiana* become equally visible in the sphere of narrative. Christian texts were never transmitted unchanged across time and space; they were continuously translated, abbreviated, expanded, reorganized, and reinterpreted in response to new linguistic, liturgical, and cultural contexts. The studies by Evelina Mineva and Maya Petrova-Taneva demonstrate that Christian memory itself remained a dynamic process of textual transformation.

Mineva's analysis of Saint Alexander of Side illustrates how hagiographical traditions may disappear, survive in unexpected textual environments, and eventually be reconstructed through careful comparison of Byzantine and Slavic manuscript traditions. Rather than preserving a fixed narrative inherited from an original source, successive translations and compilations reshaped the saint's memory according to changing ecclesiastical and literary contexts. The history of the text thus becomes inseparable from the history of its reception.

Petrova-Taneva likewise explores the transmission of a particular narrative motif within the *Passion of Saint Marina*: the confrontation between the saint and the demons in prison. This episode exemplifies the flexibility of hagiographical literature. Demonological traditions, biblical motifs, classical imagery, and rhetorical amplification were continually adapted as the text circulated through different manuscript traditions. The resulting narratives instructed, persuaded, entertained, and reinforced Christian conceptions of the invisible world.

Together, these contributions demonstrate that *interpretatio christiana* extends beyond the reinterpretation of pagan traditions. Christian narratives themselves remained subject to continuous processes of adaptation, revealing a literary culture in which transmission always involved creative transformation.

3.4. Material and visual christianization

Several contributions also demonstrate that Christianization cannot be understood exclusively through texts. Religious transformation unfolded equally through images, writing practices, material objects, and the organization of sacred space. The visual dimension of *interpretatio christiana* represents one of the most innovative themes emerging from this volume.

Antoaneta Granberg's study of the rune-like graffiti at Murfatlar provides a striking example. Rather than attempting another speculative decipherment, she approaches the inscriptions through their spatial distribution, graphic organization, and visual relationships with churches, crosses, images, and other inscriptions. Even when their linguistic content remains inaccessible, the graffiti reveal participation in an evolving Christian visual environment. Writing itself becomes a material practice whose meaning depends not only upon language but also upon placement, form, and ritual context.

The same attention to visuality informs my discussion of the engraved representations accompanying Schleusing's *Universa Religio Ruthenica*. These images did not simply illustrate textual descriptions of pagan deities; they gave visual coherence to figures that medieval sources had preserved only as isolated names. Borrowing iconographic models from broader European antiquarian traditions, they transformed fragmentary textual references into apparently tangible religious personalities. Visual representation thereby acquired historiographical authority, contributing decisively to the later construction of a coherent Slavic mythology.

Both studies encourage us to move beyond a narrowly textual understanding of Christianization. Images, inscriptions, spatial organization, and material forms all participated in the production of religious meaning.

3.5. Modern afterlives

The final contribution reminds us that *interpretatio christiana* did not end with the Middle Ages. Ewelina Drzewiecka demonstrates that Christian classificatory frameworks continued to influence modern intellectual life long after processes of secularization had apparently transformed European societies. Categories such as "pagan", "heretical", "religious", or "Orthodox" persisted not only within theology but also within literary criticism, historiography, ethnography, and the construction of national identity.

Her analysis of Bulgarian intellectual discourse reveals that modern descriptions of the Bulgarian national character frequently rely upon inherited Christian conceptual structures, even when articulated within secular academic frameworks. Narratives concerning Bogomilism, folk religion, or the supposedly "pagan" disposition of Bulgarians reflect deeper cryptotheological assumptions embedded within modern scholarship itself. Christian categories survived not because they were explicitly defended but because they continued to organize the ways in which cultural difference and historical development were understood.

This perspective extends the chronological scope of *interpretatio christiana*. Rather than viewing it as a phenomenon limited to the era of Christianization, the volume suggests that its effects continue into modern historiography and the humanities. The Christian production of religious categories has shaped not only medieval perceptions of paganism but also many of the conceptual tools through which contemporary scholars continue to investigate the religious past.

4. METHODOLOGICAL LESSONS

Beyond the specific historical, linguistic, or literary questions addressed by the individual contributions, this volume raises a broader methodological issue: how should scholars approach religious traditions that survive almost exclusively through the interpretative frameworks of another religion? Although the case studies span different periods, sources, and disciplines, they converge on several methodological principles that extend beyond the study of the Slavic world.

The first and most fundamental lesson concerns the nature of the available evidence. Christian texts emerge neither as transparent windows onto pre-Christian religion nor as sources devoid of historical value because of their ideological character. Rather, they occupy an intermediate position. They preserve information precisely because they reinterpret it.

This observation requires abandoning the long-standing opposition between "authentic" pagan traditions and their supposedly "distorted" Christian representations. Such a dichotomy assumes that an objective pagan reality once existed independently of the texts describing it and that the historian's task consists simply of separating historical facts from theological embellishment. The studies collected here suggest a more nuanced approach. Christian authors did not merely add ideological commentary to otherwise neutral descriptions; the very act of observing, classifying, and narrating religious difference was already shaped by Christian conceptual categories. Consequently, preservation and transformation cannot be analytically separated. The information survives precisely in the form in which it has been interpreted.

Recognizing this mediation does not diminish the evidentiary value of Christian sources. On the contrary, it allows them to be read more critically and

more productively. Rather than asking whether a particular chronicle, sermon, hagiographical text, or legal document faithfully records an earlier religious practice, we may instead ask what the source reveals simultaneously about the practice itself and about the intellectual, theological, and rhetorical framework through which it became historically intelligible.

A second methodological consequence follows directly from this observation. If the sources themselves are products of interpretation, reconstruction cannot rely exclusively upon philological criticism or source comparison. Philology remains indispensable for establishing textual relationships, identifying borrowings, tracing manuscript transmission, and reconstructing linguistic developments. Yet philology alone cannot explain why particular representations of paganism emerged, how they acquired authority, or what social, theological, and cultural functions they fulfilled. These questions require the combined perspectives of history, religious studies, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, art history, literary criticism, and the history of ideas.

The volume also invites a reconsideration of one of the oldest explanatory models in the study of European Christianization: the search for pagan "survivals". Since the nineteenth century, scholarship has frequently interpreted elements of folklore, ritual, popular belief, or material culture as direct remnants of pre-Christian religion that somehow escaped ecclesiastical suppression. Although this perspective has generated important insights, it often presupposes a static opposition between an original pagan tradition and a later Christian veneer.

The contributions collected here suggest a more dynamic understanding of religious transformation. Rather than emphasizing survival alone, they draw attention to processes of translation, negotiation, adaptation, appropriation, and reinterpretation. Religious traditions were neither simply preserved nor simply destroyed; they were continually reconfigured as they entered new theological, linguistic, social, and political contexts. A sacred place became a Christian shrine not because its earlier significance remained untouched beneath a new dedication, but because its symbolic functions were renegotiated. A lexical item acquired Christian meaning not by losing its previous associations altogether, but by entering a new semantic network. A narrative motif survived because it proved capable of being reinterpreted within different religious frameworks.

Finally, the methodological implications of this volume extend beyond Slavic studies themselves. Similar processes of religious reinterpretation accompanied the Christianization of Germanic, Baltic, Celtic, Mediterranean, and other European societies, while analogous mechanisms can be observed wherever expanding religious traditions encountered existing systems of belief. Byzantine missionary activity among the Slavs may be compared with Latin Christianization in Scandinavia, the Carolingian frontier, or the Baltic regions. The reinterpretation

of sacred landscapes, the transformation of indigenous religious vocabulary, the construction of pagan antiquity in medieval historiography, and the visual representation of non-Christian religions all reveal structural similarities despite considerable regional variation.

Such comparative perspectives encourage us to understand *interpretatio christiana* not as a specifically Slavic phenomenon but as one manifestation of broader processes through which Christianity generated knowledge about religious difference. The Slavic material therefore contributes not only to regional history but also to the comparative study of Christianization, religious translation, and cultural memory across medieval Europe.

5. FINAL REFLECTIONS

The studies brought together in this volume leave little doubt that *interpretatio christiana* is far more than a useful label for describing the Christianization of the Slavic world. Rather, it offers a conceptual framework through which the complex relationships between religion, language, memory, material culture, and historical knowledge can be understood in their full depth. Whether examining chronicles, liturgical and philosophical translations, hagiographical traditions, archaeological remains, visual representations, or modern intellectual discourses, the contributors consistently demonstrate that Christianization was not a single historical event but a long and multifaceted process of cultural interpretation.

This perspective also encourages a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between continuity and change. The encounter between Christianity and pre-Christian traditions did not produce either complete rupture or simple continuity. Instead, it generated successive processes of translation, adaptation, negotiation, and reinterpretation through which both inherited traditions and Christian discourse were continually reshaped. The concept of *interpretatio christiana* therefore directs our attention away from static oppositions between "pagan" and "Christian" and towards the dynamic interactions through which religious meanings were constructed and reconstructed over time.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the concept lies not in explaining how Christianity transformed pagan religions, but in reminding modern scholars that every surviving description of those religions is itself already an interpretation. The task of scholarship is therefore not to strip away Christian mediation in search of an unattainable original paganism, but to understand the historical processes through which religious worlds were translated, negotiated, remembered, visualized, and continually reconstructed. Christian texts, images, and material practices should not be regarded merely as imperfect witnesses to a lost religious past; they constitute the very historical environments within which that past acquired meaning and became transmissible to subsequent generations.

In this sense, *interpretatio christiana* is not only an object of historical investigation but also a methodological principle. It invites us to approach the sources with critical awareness, to recognize the productive power of interpretation itself, and to view religious history as a continuous process of cultural mediation rather than as the simple succession of separate belief systems. If this volume contributes to future research, it will do so not because it offers a definitive definition of *interpretatio christiana*, but because it demonstrates the heuristic value of the concept across disciplines and periods. Such dialogue, we hope, will continue to refine our understanding not only of the Slavic religious past, but also of the broader historical mechanisms through which societies remember, reinterpret, and continually recreate their religious traditions.

Stamatis Zochios
Academy of Athens
stamzochios@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-1478-3793

Дата на получаване на статията: 07.07.2026 г.