

An Easter Lesson

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Христос: Christ

This year as both Western and Eastern Christian churches prepare to celebrate Easter (Пасха), it seems like a good time to seek answers to some of the cultural and linguistic puzzles of the season.

The first mystery is why the dates of Easter usually don't coincide, but sometimes do (like this year). All the churches figure the date the same way. Easter is the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox.

But it all gets complicated by which solar and lunar calendars are used. Western churches use the Gregorian calendar and set the equinox on March 21. The Orthodox church uses the older Julian calendar, which is now 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar (and therefore the equinox is April 3). So if there happens to be a full moon between March 21 and April 3 — that is, before the “Orthodox equinox” — it won't count for the Eastern church, which will wait for the next full moon. Hence, the sometimes large gap between the two holidays.

The calculation of the date is further complicated by the way the lunar calendar is figured, which gives me a headache just to think about. (If you have strong nerves and a scientific turn of mind, type “ecclesiastical moon” or “paschal full moon” in your search engine.) In any case, this is the last time the Christian churches will celebrate Easter on the same day until 2034.

Another mystery for the more linguistically minded is the declension of the word Христос (Christ). You hear the expression Христа ради (for the love of Christ, for Christ’s sake) and wonder what happened to the -ос in Христос. I’ve found several different explanations — like the calculations for the date of Easter, everything depends on classification systems and starting points — but the most likely seems to be that the word was borrowed from Greek and declined by analogy with that language (in which the -os ending is dropped). If your ancient Greek is a bit rusty, it may be easier to think of the word as Христ for purposes of declension and regard the nominative Христос as an exception.

In Russian culture, Христос and Бог (God) are not words to be used lightly. But today you might hear ради Бога (for God’s sake) used very casually. If you ask a co-worker if you can use his stapler, he might answer: Да, ради Бога (Sure, of course.)

To my ear, the phrase Христа ради is a much stronger. It is used when asking for alms, when beseeching someone or asking them to speak truthfully, as if swearing an oath: Скажи мне честно, Христа ради, ты меня любишь? (Tell me honestly, in the name of Christ, do you love me?)

There is one common expression with the word Христос that I’m very fond of: жить как у Христа за пазухой (to live without a care in the world). The word пазуха is from the noun паз (groove, slot) and refers to the space between a person’s chest and his or her clothing.

There isn’t an equivalent of this in English, except the figurative and old-fashioned word “bosom.” Пазуха is the place where you hide your money or valuables, the space where you might tuck a small child or mewling kitten — close to your heart but protected from the elements. Ложись спать. Здесь ты будешь как у Христа за пазухой. (Go to bed. Here you’ll be as safe and cozy as in God’s pocket.)

What a lovely place to be.

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