

**Religion and Nation-Building:
The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church**

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I

Although theories about ethnicity and nation-building usually mention religion as a possible dimension of ethnic identity, or as one of the factors that might contribute to the building of a nation, it is nevertheless often taken for granted that language, and what is loosely referred to as cultural tradition, plays a predominant role, or is, as it were, the natural foundation of peoplehood.

While it is true that in a European perspective, language is the most common basis of nation-building and collective identity, this, as pointed out by Ernest Gellner, is primarily a consequence of the fact that a modern society is unthinkable without a standardized literary language. However, there is nothing intrinsic in the connection between language and ethnic identity and there are important cases where religion has constituted the main or even necessary foundation of nationhood, of which perhaps the most interesting example is Yugoslavia.

A majority of the Yugoslavs speak dialects of the same Serbo-Croatian language, and the literary standards that have developed differ very little from each other. In spite of this, there evolved distinct national identities based on religious and cultural tradition. In fact, without the religious factor, there would hardly be a separate Croat, Serb, or, indeed, a Moslem nationality in contemporary Yugoslavia.

It is not only the case that religion contributed to the process, but rather that - in a situation where language is not an objective criterion of identity - religion as a socio-cultural complex must be understood as the general and basic foundation of nationhood.

Of these examples, the case of the Serbs and the role of the Orthodox church in the formation of a Serb national consciousness is of particular interest, both from the point of view of sociology of religion and theories of ethnicity.

I will try, very briefly, to discuss the most important aspects of this process. There are three main phases or historical situations where the role of the church is decisive: 1) The creation of the medieval Serbian state; 2) The specific sociocultural conditions prevailing in the Ottoman Empire; 3) The position of the Church in Austria during the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, I will make some comments on the relationship between religion and Serbian identity in contemporary Yugoslavia.

II

With the reign of Stevan Nemanja (1169-1196) begins what might be called the glorious period of Serbian history. During the Nemanja dynasty medieval Serbia was consolidated as a state belonging to the sphere of Eastern Christendom. In 1219 the Serbian Orthodox Church was recognized by the Patriarch of Constantinople as an autocephalous church, and its independent position and prestige was further strengthened as the Serbian archbishop in 1346 was given the rank of patriarch.

What is characteristic about medieval Serbia are the strong ties between church and state. While this is, of course, not uncommon in Orthodox countries, the Serbian case is in many ways specific due to the very intimate relationship between the ruling dynasty and the church. A paradigmatic and symbolic pattern is represented by the sons of Nemanja, where Stevan as king assumed leadership of the state, and his younger brother Rastko, who at 17 escaped with a Russian monk to Mount Athos, was to become the first archbishop under the name of Sava. Sava was later joined by his father, Nemanja, or Simeon, as he was known as a monk, and together they founded the monastery of Hilandar on Mont Athos, which since then has been a guardian and symbol of Serbian culture.

With great diplomatic skill Sava and his brother managed to secure religious and political autonomy and lay the foundations of an independent Byzantine-Slavic culture centred around the values of the Orthodox Church, and based on Byzantine law, theology and hesychast mysticism. The monasteries built by kings and royal princes functioned both as centres of higher learning and popular enlightenment; and produced sometimes remarkable works of art: in church architecture, icons, frescoes, music and literature.

An important aspect in the formation of Serbian medieval culture was the creation of a pantheon of Serbian Saints, of which perhaps the most well-known are Saint Sava and Saint Lazar. Sava, who is always referred to as the First Archbishop and Enlightener of Serbia, represents the cultural, spiritual and state-founding aspect, whereas Prince Lazar, who lost the Battle of Kosovo, embodies the idea of martyrdom, to which we will return in a moment.

With the defeat at *Kosovo polje* in 1389 begins the disintegration of the medieval state, and by the middle of the 15th century the Turks had finally conquered the Serbian lands, which they would reign for another 400 years.

It is important to note, on one hand, that the Serbian state was destroyed before a national consciousness of a modern type had developed, and, on the other, that the existence of a medieval high culture was to be of tremendous importance for later developments.

III

During Ottoman rule a society and culture developed which in several very important respects differs from both Western Europe and Russia.

The inhabitants of the Empire were classified according to their religious affiliation, an arrangement known as the *millet* system, and the various religious communities enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy. Non-Moslems were represented politically by their clergy, who were thus both parts of the Ottoman administrative system, and leaders of their respective communities. The church was independent in religious matters, controlled large areas of civil law and enjoyed certain economic privileges.

This specific political and social system was a logical consequence of the Islamic view of religion and society. As Islam does not distinguish between religious and secular, between church or state - it actually lacks a concept of religion in the Western sense - but perceives society, religion and culture as a unified whole, all affairs were naturally regulated by *sharia*, the "religious" law. By analogy, therefore, other religious communities were treated according to the same principle.

This situation is structurally very different from the relationship between Church and State in the Protestant/Catholic West, or in Orthodox Russia. There was no state functioning as a clearly defined secular opponent of the church. Neither was the church dependent on the state in the same way as in a state- church system.

Another important consequence of the Ottoman occupation were the fundamental changes in social structure. The nobility disappeared, the urban centres were dominated by Turks, Jews, Armenians or Greeks, while the majority of the Slav population lived in rural areas, having relatively little contact with formal social institutions or a high culture based on literacy.

Although the Orthodox Church in one sense played a more important role than in the medieval state, it was nevertheless subject to Ottoman control, and was weakened as an ideological organization, with less direct influence on religious attitudes than the Church in Protestant or Catholic Europe.

The undifferentiated social structure and the position of the church led to the formation, or revival, of a patriarchal and syncretistic folk culture, where Christian values and beliefs were blended with earlier pagan elements into a specific religious form referred to by Eliade as *Cosmic Christianity*.

In 1557, after a period of Greek ecclesiastical domination, the Serbian Patriarchate was

reinstated, which meant that the Serbian Orthodox Church in effect succeeded the medieval state as a political institution and now represented all Orthodox Serbs in the Empire, which was most important in view of the migration movements taking place during the Ottoman period. The higher clergy was conscious of its role, on the one hand energetically resisting Catholic proposals for Union, and on the other trying to balance between compromises with the Turks and political contacts with Venice, Austria or Russia.

On a cultural level the Church fostered the heritage of the Nemanja state, making the lives of the Saints present in liturgy and teaching. The defeat of Kosovo is reinterpreted in a Christological frame as a moral victory, where Prince Lazar choosing the *Kingdom of Heaven*, becomes a model for the suffering Serbian people, and a promise of resurrection. These ideas are also found in the realm of folk culture where the theme of Kosovo and the struggle against the Turks - the struggle for the *Glorious Cross and the Golden Freedom* - is reiterated in a rich and original oral literature.

The millet-system had several important consequences. Of particular interest in this context is that the preservation of an Orthodox folk culture meant that religious affiliation became an ethnic marker, as it was synonymous with a specific way of life, or culture in the broad sense of the word.

Towards the end of the 17th century the Church openly allied itself with the Austrian armies occupying large areas of Serbia and Macedonia. Therefore, in 1690, when the Austrians had to withdraw, a great number of Orthodox Christians led by the patriarch Arsenije III fled north to escape the revenge of the Turks. This is referred to as the *Great Migration* and involved an estimated 20-40 000 mostly Serbian families who settled in southern Hungary, in today's Vojvodina. A similar migration, of smaller scale occurred in 1737, and finally, in 1766 the Ottomans abolished the Patriarchate of Peć.

IV

With the migration to Hungary starts a new and crucial chapter in the history of the Church and the Serbian people. During the 18th and well into the 19th century the Serbian Orthodox Church is the leading actor in a process where the identity models of the folk culture are being transformed into a modern national consciousness.

In Vojvodina developed what Emanuel Turczynski has called a *Konfessions-Nationalität*, or "Confessional Nationality", that is, an intermediate sociocultural and political structure existing between the millet-system and a modern state.

By defending and trying to enlarge the privileges granted by the Austrian Emperor, Serbian church leaders managed to establish an institutional framework which in certain respects

preserved the earlier position within the Ottoman Empire. Against opposition from the Catholic Church and repeatedly subject to strong pressures to become Uniate, the Serbian Orthodox Church at first had to safeguard its autonomy as a church, that is, the right to conduct its own internal affairs. Another important task was the organization of an educational system, both at elementary and secondary level, and provisions securing the import or printing of books. The Metropolitans further promoted higher learning by creating foundations financing studies at German protestant universities or in Russia. They also contributed to the development of trade and craftsmanship by offering credits. Finally, through the annual synodal meetings and at occasional national ecclesiastical congresses, *narodno-ckrveni sabori*, at which laymen participated, the Church provided a forum channelling social and political demands from a growing bourgeois class.

Of special interest during this period is the strong Russian influence among the Serbs in Hungary. Already during the 17th century Russia had in various ways assisted the Patriarchate of Peć and the Serbian monasteries in Turkey. These contacts were now intensified. In the 1720s and 1730s Russian teachers invited by the Metropolitans of Sremski Karlovci started the first schools for the education of teachers and priests, and a large number of Russian books were supplied throughout the 18th century. Serbian students were educated at the theological Academy of Kiev and Serbian officers enrolled in the Russian army. There was even, around 1750, a migration of several thousands of soldiers and officers, who left the Austrian Military Border to establish two colonies, *Nova Srbija* and *Slavjanosrbija*, on the banks of the Dnjepr.

The Russian cultural influence was so pervasive that a new literary language, *Slavenoserbski*, largely based on Russian and Russian Church Slavonic, between 1725-1740 replaced the older Serbian Slavonic and for about fifty years served as the general means of communication among the educated classes in Vojvodina.

The 18th century also marks the beginning of a modern Serbian literature. A number of authors, most of them priests or otherwise affiliated with the Church, mainly writing in *Slavenoserbski*, are engaged in reviving the historical past. The traditional self-understanding of the Church as guardian of the medieval heritage is fused with a modern historical awareness influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. A new Serbian self-image is thus created, interpreting the present predicament of the Serbs in the light of a national history.

One of the most interesting aspects of 18th-century Serbian culture is, indeed, the interplay between Enlightenment and tradition. The new world-view, transmitted through the contacts with Petrine Russia or, more directly, by students returning from German universities like Halle or Leipzig, was actively promoted by the higher clergy and inspired their educational and cultural policies.

However, by adopting a positive attitude towards the Enlightenment, the Church also opened the doors to criticism of its own position, and with the development of a socially more differentiated Serbian society the Church gradually loses its political influence. Of particular importance in this context is the rise of a Serbian intelligentsia acquainted with European ways of thinking and capable of articulating the ideas of those middle classes that traditionally have been the bearers of nation-building. The ideal-typical personality of this period is the former monk Dositej Obradović (1742-1811), who as a writer and educator personified the rationalist outlooks of his generation and had a tremendous influence on Serbian culture. Obradović on principle wrote in the vernacular and he was the first to formulate the idea that language, not religion, should be the basis of Serbian identity.

The position of the Church was affected by political developments both within the Habsburg monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. As a result of the reforms of Joseph II, inspired by the Enlightenment, the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church was finally restricted to purely religious and educational affairs. The most profound changes were, however, caused by the Serbian revolutions in 1804 and 1815 and the establishment of an autonomous Serbian state. Although the Church continued to play an important cultural role propagating the idea of a Serbian identity in areas still dominated by Turkey or Austria, the Serbian revolution represented the culmination of the political leadership of the Church. In Serbia proper it was replaced by secular institutions and soon had to face conflicts with the state similar to those in Western Europe. Moreover, the cultural climate was increasingly characterized by indifference or hostility towards church and religion. The controversy during the first half of the 19th century about the adoption of a new literary language based on the popular dialects, a project strongly opposed by the Metropolitan Stevan Stratimirović, symbolically marks the end of ecclesiastical influence in societal affairs.

As a result of these developments the religiously legitimated understanding of Serbian history is during the 19th century, at least among the educated classes, transformed into a modern national ideology, centred around the medieval Serbian state and a secular version of the Myth of Kosovo. The Church no longer plays a primary role in the formulation of political solutions to the national question. Nevertheless, religious affiliation continues to be the basic ethnic marker differentiating Serbs from Croats, or Moslems.

In a comparative perspective the case of the Serbian Church, especially the formation of a confessional nationality in Hungary, is of great interest. The Church facilitated the process of nation-building in a situation where the characteristics of Serbian identity were very unclear, where there was a potential threat of assimilation, and where, finally, there did not exist any alternative institutions or social groups capable of performing the same function.

The Church did this a) by securing religious autonomy and formally uniting a territorially scattered Orthodox population into a single institutional structure; b) by organizing a modern educational system furthering cultural unification; c) by creating an institutional framework for the articulation of social and political demands of a growing middle class; d) by preserving and popularizing, in a contemporary form, the idea of a Serbian tradition, thus contributing to the reconstruction of a Serbian historical self-consciousness.

V

What, then, is the role of the Orthodox church today? To what extent is it possible to speak about a religious dimension in contemporary Serbian identity?

At first sight the answer seems to be simple. According to the indicators usually employed by sociology of religion, the Serbs must be considered a rather irreligious people, and consequently the role of the Orthodox faith in maintaining ethnic identity would be of minor importance. Although it might be argued that the somewhat crude measures of sociological surveys fail to capture those aspects that are characteristic of Serbian Christianity, it is nevertheless true that the Serbian Orthodox Church, by its integration with an agrarian folk culture and its historical orientation, has had certain difficulties to adapt to a modernizing urban society.

However, there are tendencies pointing in another direction. One is connected with general trends in Balkan culture. The intelligentsia in 19th century Serbia as a rule was indifferent or hostile towards the church, identifying it with what they considered a backward village culture, and equating religion with superstition and primitive mentality. These attitudes, being part of an emotionally ambivalent relationship towards 'Europe' and the native heritage, have continued to dominate Serbian culture.

However, like all Balkan countries, Serbia has, since the onset of modernization and national renaissance, been faced with a lack of cultural continuity. The problem is how to reconcile a modern Europeanised culture with the medieval- byzantine heritage and the folk tradition. This predicament is perhaps especially accentuated in a socialist state with a future-oriented utopian ideology.

Now, in a situation where the idea of a new socialist culture and a common Yugoslav identity seems to have failed - or at least is faced with grave difficulties - the question of cultural continuity is particularly salient.

During the last decade there is in Serbian cultural life a rediscovery and a reassessment of the past, including the Orthodox tradition. Not only are frescoes and icons being studied and admired, but the religious aspects of this culture are no longer negated or hidden. And

similar to recent developments in Russia, editions of medieval religious literature are being published and treated as an integral part of the cultural heritage.

Parallel to these tendencies there are cases of Serbian intellectuals returning to the church: writers, artists, but also social scientists. And on a popular level the church is able to gather large audiences at religious holidays or other manifestations.

On the whole, the church is made more visible in the media and in public life; and is nowadays generally treated with respect and tolerance by Serbian politicians. It is symptomatic that the state and the church together have celebrated anniversaries of religious and cultural monuments such as the monastery of Studenica.

Another example is the building of an Orthodox cathedral in Belgrade, to be the largest in the Balkans, on the site where the relics of Saint Sava were burned by the Turks in 1594.

Finally, there is the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1989. In the committee preparing the celebration are to be found not only leading state and party functionaries, but also independent intellectuals and bishops.

The Orthodox church is thus increasingly present as a guardian of Serbian culture and symbol of national integrity. The question is whether this will also lead to a revitalization of religion as such.

In a situation where the political authorities are obviously losing credibility and openly admit that they are doing so, the church might stand out as a moral alternative. It is poor, it is powerless, but it is uncorrupted, and it cannot be held responsible for the present crisis. Moreover, in a situation when the Kosovo problem is causing widespread frustration among Serbs all over Yugoslavia, the church can proudly point out that it has not forsaken its people.

The church has no explicit political program. It is preaching the message of *Svetosavlje*, of following the teachings of Saint Sava, that is, preserving the tradition, being a good Christian and leading a moral life. Another aspect of this ideological complex is the idea of suffering. The Serbs are urged to live according to the principle of Prince Lazar, that is, to choose the *Kingdom of Heaven*, whatever will happen. This means suffering for one's ideals, like the believers and the church always did - under the Turks, in the First World War, during the massacres of the Second World War, and today in Kosovo. This *Message of St Vitus Day* is symbolically represented most vividly when - as part of next year's celebration of the Battle of Kosovo - the relics of Prince Lazar are carried around Yugoslavia, to all those parts where Orthodox Serbs are living.

There are those within the church who would prefer a more active political stand. They are sometimes inspired by a traditional distrust of the West, pointing out how Western rationalism with its cult of the individual, its consumerism and immoral behaviour has led to a general neglect of spiritual values which is fatal for the national culture of the Serbs. They suggest that Serbia should recognize its cultural predicament and build an Orthodox society beyond East and West, centred around the principles of *Svetosavlje*, as expressed by the late bishop Nikolaj Velimirović in his conception of the Serbian people as *Teodul*, Servant of God.

It would be easy, in view of sociological theory, to dismiss these tendencies as marginal phenomena. One cannot, however, with any certainty claim that an Orthodox revival or national-religious mobilization is impossible in a Yugoslavia where nation-building is still an issue.

I have been speaking as an outsider. Let me end by quoting Dimitrije Bogdanović (1930-1986), medievalist and outstanding Orthodox intellectual:

The Orthodox faith, in particular the Orthodoxy of the Serbian autocephalous church, constitutes the national consciousness of the Serbian people, and is one of the historically fundamental elements of the Serbian nation. I know, I have been asked many times: if this is so, what will happen with the Serbian people if the Orthodox religion fades away, if religion loses the place it once occupied in the life of the people? My answer was, and will be the same here: In that perspective the Serbian people would have to find a replacement, of at least the same strength and value, which would support it as it was supported by the faith it is on the verge of losing; I, however, do not believe in such a substitute, and I look with a sombre view at the future of such a dechristianized Serbian people. It would, naturally, exist in an ethnic and physical sense, but it would be a people of a new, different, and perhaps foreign identity.

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