

Orthodoxy in Serbia: A Newfound Religiosity*

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A great crisis from God will befall all those countries that have bombed us, but they do not know, they do not believe in God. God is one, but it is important that God is a Serb, a Serb, a pure Serb.¹

A Kosovar refugee from Orahovac, 1999

For those who did not know, it seems that God is a Serb. Though exaggerated (having in mind that it is a refugee speaking emotionally), the quote serves well to depict the situation with religion in Serbia at the present day. During the short period of the last decade or two, the population of Serbia has been becoming increasingly religious. The religion popular among Serbs is Christian Orthodoxy, officially led by the Serb Orthodox Church and its Patriarch, Pavle. Asne Seierstad dedicated a whole chapter to the newborn religiosity in Serbia from the nineties up to the present:

Today in Serbia, it is modern to go to church, especially in large cities. Every Sunday, the houses of the Lord are filled with urban, often highly educated people. Baptism is nowadays 'in', and atheism is for the old-fashioned. Young, even the educated, go to monasteries in search of something to believe in.²

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¹ 'Sve će ove zemlje što su nas bombardovale snaći velika kriza od Boga, ali oni ne znaju, oni ne veruju u Boga. Bog je jedan, ali važno daje Bog Srbin, Srbin, čist Srbin.' In: Lukić, Svetlana and Vuković, Svetlana, ed: Pešcanik FM, book 1-7, Elvod print.

² 'U Srbiji je sada moderno ići u crkvu, naročito u velikim gradovima. Svake nedelje su domovi božji prepuni urbanih, često visokoobrazovanih ljudi. Krštenje je sada «in», a ateizam je za staromodne. Mladi, čak obrazovani odlaze u manastire u potrazi za nečim u šta bi verovali.' In: Seierstad, Aasne: *Portreti iz Srbije*, Laguna, Belgrade, 2006.

When she wrote about the 'young, *even the educated*' who are nowadays religious in Serbia, Seierstad touched an important matter. Religiousness is so strong in Serbia nowadays that even the well-educated succumb to 'higher powers' and mysticism. Some twenty years ago, there was almost no religion present in Serbia, yet the number of the religious has been steadily rising during the last decades:

The public poll on religion from 1982 showed that only 3% of the young from the traditionally Serb orthodox areas consider themselves religious, while the percentage in catholic areas were 30%. The outlook has changed drastically by 1999, when 58% of the whole population started to define themselves as believers.³

Nowadays, almost a decade after the poll, the situation is far worse. The Church, next to the Radical Party, is the prime supporter of xenophobia, revisionism, nationalism, and similar ideas and ideologies. The most prominent characteristic of the Serb Orthodox Church is its fascination with one of its early saints, Sava, considered to be the founder of the Church, and with that I shall continue.

The church of saint Sava

Åsne Seierstad explains the Serb fascination with the figure of saint Sava, nowadays more a mythological figure than a historical one. His character, embellished by centuries of poetic imagination and mystical misconceptions, possesses a lot of the features of the old pagan gods, namely those of Perun (from the Slavic pantheon) and Odin (from the Scandinavian pantheon), such as the character's connection with wolves, the idea that he is a traveler, traveling with a stick, sometimes described as lame etc. Those characteristics helped to elevate him to a

³ 'Ispitivanje javnog mnjenja iz 1982. godine pokazalo je da svega 3% mladih na tradicionalno srpskopравoslavnim područjima sebe smatra religioznom, dok je procenat u katoličkim sredinama bio 30%. Godine 1999. slika se potpuno izmenila, i 58% ukupnog stanovništva počelo je da se izjašnjava kao verujuće.' *Ibid.*

cult status, being that they helped in building a representation of a more fictitious character than a real person. In Seierstad's words, the situation in Serbia considering the tremendously strong cult of saint Sava is as follows:

The faith is based on the teachings of saint Sava, a monk who in 1219 became the first archbishop of the Serbian Church and who made Church officials only out of Serbs. He established the doctrine that the Serbian orthodox Church and the Serbian people are the same, a doctrine later to be used by bishops to emphasize Serb supremacy. It explains why a lot of them supported Milošević when he was using nationalistic rhetoric to gain power. Always talking about injustices committed to the Serb people, not mentioning those that the Serbs themselves have committed, the Church strengthened interethnic tension. As a sign of gratitude, Milošević gave it better influence.⁴

Rastko Nemanjić, from the twelfth century royal family of Nemanjićs, is nowadays in Serbia better known as 'saint Sava' (*Sveti Sava/Savo*). He is considered to be the patron saint of health and education, yet his prime influence on present day Serbia is well described by Åsne Seierstad. The idea that the Serb Orthodox Church and the Serbs are the same has stuck for eight centuries since. From a present-day point of view, it can be described by observing the Church, which seems to be the only unifying factor for the Serbs scattered throughout the lands of former Yugoslavia, namely in Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro. That is why the very idea of putting the sign of equality between Serbs and the Church is seen in Serbia as rather normal and positive. Sava's value has - especially during the 90s and later - become overstated and

⁴ 'Vera se zasniva na učenju svetog Save, monaha koji je 1219. godine postao prvi arhiepiskop srpske crkve i koji je za vladike postavljao same Srbe. On je ustanovio doktrinu da je Srpska pravoslavna crkva isto što i srpski narod, koju su episkopi kasnije koristili da ističu srpsku nadmoć. To objašnjava zbog čega su mnogi od njih podržali Slobodana Miloševića kad je koristio nacionalističku retoriku da bi došao do vlasti. Uvek govoreći o nedelima počinjenim protiv srpskog naroda, ne pominjući ona koja su počinili sami Srbi, crkva je pojačavala međuetničku napetost. U znak zahvalnosti za podršku, Milošević joj je obezbedio veći uticaj.' *Ibid.*

exaggerated to the point of the obstinate repeating of his name⁵. Seierstad describes, on an occasion of visiting a religious ceremony in Serbia:

During the first hour, she explains everything to me: 'This is a song about saint Sava. That is a poem about saint Sava. Now there is a speech about saint Sava'. After a certain time, she forgot to translate. When I asked her what was the lovely young girl singing about, she retorted: 'Oh, that is a song about saint Sava'. I quit asking.⁶

The Church is one of the most important supporters of the idea that Serbs are only *victims*, not guilty of anything. It is, furthermore, suspected that Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić have spent several years in exile in Bosnia, hiding in Serb orthodox churches and monasteries. Officially, the view of the Church is that the Hague inductees are - as already explained - heroes.

The Serb orthodox Church sees itself as a martyr Church, and Serbs as victims. It speaks to the people with myths from the past, and the battle is being fought not for this world, but for the Kingdom of Heaven, while certain Church authorities claim that myths are more truthful than history⁷.

The connection with the victim mentality, with the irrational and with the ubiquitousness of helplessness is now clearer. Religion, in all its forms, is connected to the irrational. It is of small wonder that it found firm roots in a society where similar cultural instances were already strong. What became an even bigger problem is the fact that the Church

⁵ This clearly reminds on the repeating of the 'national integrity and sovereignty' in Serbia's public discourse.

⁶ 'Tokom prvih sat vremena, objašnjava mi: «Ovo je pesma o svetom Savi. To je poema o svetom Savi. Sad ide govor o svetom Savi.» Nakon izvesnog vremena se zaboravila i prestala da mi prevodi. Kad sam je upitala o čemu divna devojčica peva, kaže: «Oh, pa to je pesma o svetom Savi». Više ne pitam.' *Ibid.*

⁷ 'Srpska pravoslavna crkva sebe vidi kao stradalnu crkvu, a Srbe kao žrtve. Narodu se obraća mitovima iz prošlosti, a borba se vodi ne za zemaljsko već nebesko carstvo dok pojedine crkvene vođe tvrde da su mitovi istinitiji od istorije.' *Ibid.*

became highly integrated with the ruling parties in Serbia (of which I shall discuss in more details on the following pages):

‘(...) the Church did get a more important place in society since Koštunica came to power. Religion and church activities now have a more important place in the media, and the government is thinking of introducing religious catechesis into schools. Maybe already come fall.’ Sveta considers it to be quite natural for priests to teach religious catechesis. He also thinks that the Church should have a bigger part in running the country. ‘Koštunica meets regularly with the patriarch Pavle’, says he. ‘The highest ranking leader of the Church’.⁸

And so it happened – *religious catechesis* was introduced into Serbian schools, even at the elementary school level. Six and seven year olds can nowadays be 'taught' how a mythological creature created the world in six days, how it all happened some six thousand years ago (incidentally, as Sam Harris says, a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue) and how the woman was created from a man's rib. Needless to say that the separation of Church and State is in Europe nowadays even considered to be an old conception by some. Yet here we see a European country introducing religious catechesis into education. What is more, the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia clearly prohibits the mixing of religion and education. Thus, we see that in Serbia, the government itself is the first one to break the Constitution.

⁸ ‘(...)“Crkva jeste dobila značajnije mesto u društvu otkako je Koštunica došao na vlast. Religija i crkvene aktivnosti sad imaju važnije mesto u medijima, a vlasti nastoje da uvedu veronauku u škole. Možda već na jesen.” Sveta smatra sasvim prirodnim da sveštenici podučavaju veronauku. Takođe misli kako bi Crkva trebalo da ima više udela u upravljanju državom. “Koštunica se redovno savetuje s patrijarhom Pavlom“, kaže. “Najvišim vođom Crkve.”’ *Ibid.*

Orthodox Values in Serbia

*We have to return to our original faith and build a society based on orthodox values, in which the Church shall be the most important institution. (...) Our true culture is orthodox, and we can reach it through religious cleansing.*⁹

Sveta, an Orthodox priest

Should one just replace the 'orthodox' in this statement with 'muslim', the whole would sound like a statement of a religious authority from Iran or Saudi Arabia. Yet this is a quote from a man from Serbia (a priest, though), a country located (at least geographically) in Europe. Of course, religious zealots are found almost in any society and religious group, yet such a view is not the only one; during the recent decades, such type of thinking has become more and more spread throughout Serbia. One does not even have to mention that the Serb 'original faith' (as much as that of all Slavic people) was *paganism*, belief in deities such as Mor, Perun, Svarog, Veles, Vid etc. Even orthodoxy, as a 'Serbian faith' and a part of Christianity can be disputed from the point of view of 'originality', as Stefan Nemanja, the first of the 'great kings' of Serbia in the twelfth century was originally *catholic*, baptized in a catholic church, later to be baptized in an orthodox fashion by the insistence of Rastko Nemanjić. An excerpt from Åsne Seierstad's book serves well to illustrate the 'values' that are currently respected in Serbia. The dialogue is between the author and two priests from Niš (a city in southern Serbia), Raša and his son, Sveta:

'There is no God in the West', claims Raša.

'There is a lot of Christians who would disagree', I retorted.

'There is no God in your lifestyle. To be Christian means living how the Lord wants: praying, being just, fasting, following his commandments. In the West, everything is pure business. Judas was a businessman as well.'

⁹ 'Sveta: Moramo se vratiti svojoj izvornoj veri i izgraditi društvo zasnovano na pravoslavnim vrednostima, u kome će crkva biti najvažnija institucija. (...) Naša istinska kultura je pravoslavna, a nju možemo doseći kroz religijsko pročišćenje.' *Ibid.*

‘In your system of values, God plays no role’, emphasizes Sveta. ‘The crisis in which the world is nowadays is also a temptation. God is tempting us. We have to find the real way and to follow it’.¹⁰

The Srebrenica massacre from 1995 was conducted by soldiers who, prior to going into action, were blessed by an orthodox priest.¹¹ Everything was recorded on tape which left the world in shock. Is the (Serb) Christian God really so ‘just’?

I would now like to present an interesting cultural instance related to religion in the next paragraph. The very combination of misconceptions that a common, religious person in Serbia nowadays hosts can only be classified as fascinating, from a purely anthropological level:

‘Do you know what will be the end of Islam?’ asks father Raša.

‘No’, I answer, expecting a bloody, apocalyptic prophecy.

‘The end of Islam will be the liberation of women’, the priest explains. ‘While men rule all, fundamentalist Islam will sustain itself. But if women could choose, they would not choose that faith.’

‘Why not?’

‘I ask you again: what is the most important thing for a woman?’

‘Well...’

‘It is to bear children.’

‘Okay.’

¹⁰ “Na Zapadu nema Boga”, kaže Raša.

“Mnogo je hrišćana koji se ne bi složili s tim”, usprotivim se.

“U vašem stilu života nema Boga. Biti hrišćanin podrazumeva živeti onako kako Gospod želi: moliti se, biti pravedan, postiti, slediti njegove zapovesti. Na Zapadu je sve čist biznis. I Juda je bio biznismen.”

“U vašem sistemu Bog ne igra nikakvu ulogu”, ističe Sveta. “Krizu u kojoj se svet sada nalazi takođe je iskušenje. Bog nas kuša. Moramo pronaći pravi put i slediti ga.” *Ibid.*

¹¹ This is still of small wonder. One should at this point remember George Zabelka, the priest who blessed the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

'Allah has no children. But *our* God, our true God has a son.'

'Hm.'

'Allah is a cold God. *Our* God radiates warmth'.¹²

One would, first of all, expect that an orthodox Serb should criticize Islam, in light of the struggles in Bosnia and on Kosovo. Yet the way in which it is achieved is rather peculiar. It attacks the Muslim position of women, even though the very concepts of orthodoxy (and Christianity in general) have always placed the woman as inferior to man.¹³ It is the Father-Up-In-Heavens, not the Mother. That particular patriarchal moment is present in Serbia even today, especially in rural communities. Then the criticism goes on by presenting its side, its moral values. In this case, it is the woman's 'obligation' to bear children. This can be seen as a little bit strange, as it reminds more on Catholicism than orthodoxy with its extreme insistence on the woman as a child-producing tool. Then it continues, invoking Jesus as the 'son of God', noticing that Allah has no son. Even from a Christian theological perspective, everything remains unclear, as Jesus is sometimes considered to be the 'son of God' and sometimes to be 'God' himself. Plus, the orthodox god '*radiates warmth*' – was the conduct of the Serb army in Bosnia and Kosovo, supported and blessed by the Serb Orthodox Church, the result

¹² "Jel' znaš šta će islamu doći glave?", pita otac Raša.

"Ne", odgovaram i očekujem krvavo, apokaliptično proročanstvo.

"Kraj islamu će doći od oslobođenja žena", kaže sveštenik. "Sve dok muškarci vladaju svime fundamentalistički islam će se održati. Ali kad bi žene mogle da biraju, ne bi izabrale tu veru."

"Zašto ne?"

"Opet te pitam: šta je ženi najvažnije?"

"Pa..."

"Ženi je najvažnije da rađa decu."

"Dobro."

"Alah nema dece. Ali *naš* Bog, naš istinski Bog ima sina."

"Hm."

"Alah je hladan Bog. *Naš* Bog zrači toplinom." *Ibid.*

¹³ For more on this, see: Onfray, Michel, *The Atheist Manifesto*; Harris, Sam, *Letter to a Christian Nation*; Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* as well, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*.

of the orthodox god's *warmth*? All in all, what is seen here is an interesting mixture of old mentalities and ever-present misconceptions.

Such a combination of misconceptions, most of which stand in severe contradiction to the values of democracy, liberalism and the value system of the European Union¹⁴, have resulted in a serious value shift, noticed best by Seierstad, in a conversation held with the wife of the Serb orthodox priest, Raša:

'Have you married?'

It is early in the morning, and I haven't even drunk my coffee.

'No' I reply dryly.

'How old are you?'

'Thirty-four.'

'When I was you age, I already had three children', she says proudly, almost dreamingly, while gazing at me sternly the same time. What is she expecting, an applause?

(...)

'And I have written three books', I murmured. That should silence her.

Rasa's wife put on a smile. 'Well, it is not quite the same', she says, in a motherly fashion, like someone who is explaining the difference between what should and what shouldn't be done to a child.

'It isn't. And why would we all have to do the same?', I replied.

Her smile froze on her lips. In her eyes, I read: Lost, lost.¹⁵

¹⁴ One has to notice that it is in the European Union where we can, for the first time ever, find countries that are essentially *atheistic*, that is, whose population hosts a majority *without* religion, such as the Netherlands, The Czech Republic etc.

¹⁵ "Jesi se udala?"

Rano je, a ja još nisam popila kafu.

"Ne", odgovaram suvo.

"Koliko imaš godina?"

"Trideset četiri."

"Kad sam ja bila tvojih godina već sam imala troje dece", kaže ponosno, gotovo sanjalački, dok me istovremeno fiksira pogledom. Šta očekuje, aplauz?

(...)

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“A ja sam napisala tri knjige”, promrmljam. To će je valjda ućutkati.
Rašina žena nabaci osmeħ. “Pa to nije baš isto”, kaže pokroviteljski, kao neko ko detetu objašnjava razliku između toga šta sme a šta ne.
“Nije. A što bismo svi morali da radimo isto?”, odgovaram.
Osmeħ joj se ukoči na usnama. U očima joj piše: Izgubljena, izgubljena. In: Seierstad, Aasne: *Portreti iz Srbije*, Laguna, Belgrade, 2006.