

Svetosavlje: A case-study in the Nationalization/ Politicization of Religion

This paper is a case-study that analyzes church produced responses to the ideological and political challenges of the first Yugoslavia. The temporal focus is on the mid-1930s, these years are of special interest for the analysis of the impact religious thought or rather thought that was coming out from a religious community on politics, in particular national politics. With the end of royal dictatorship in 1934, the Serbian Orthodox Church as an institution once again had the freedom to act in the political scene. At the same time by the middle of the 1930s a significant intellectual capital had been accumulated within the Serbian Orthodox community, in many respects due to the influence of the Russian immigration.

This paper by no means aims at presenting a comprehensive account of church history of that period, nor does it discuss purely theological questions; it captures though several important moments in religious and national/ political thought development. Despite the fact that the analysis largely stays at the level of ideas/ narratives, the paper also deals with a certain number of important events or 'actions' that took place at the same time and cannot be omitted from the discussion. The so called 'Concordat crisis' of 1937 or the year of 1935 which was said to be the "year of St. Sava" can be taken as an example of an 'action', while the reconstructed narrative of the ideology of *Svetoslavlje* clearly belongs to the cluster of 'ideas'.¹ The relationship between the two is a complicated one, as there was no simple causal relationship between the two.

National ideologies

The importance of the national question in the first Yugoslavia cannot be underestimated. "No understanding of the problems faced by the first Yugoslavia or the solutions proposed to them can proceed without recognition of the crucial ethnocultural belief that underpinned the county: that the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes formed a single nation".² Three separate nations were seen by the official ideology as parts of 'the three-named people', i.e. the Yugoslav nation, and the mutual relationship of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes resembled the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity. For the sake of the living up to the idea of Yugoslav unity, politically the Kingdom was organized as a simple national state. Although theoretically the idea of a single Yugoslav nation presumed the equality of the three nations (or tribes, according to the original terminology) out of which it was composed, in practical politics of the 1920s Serbian parties were dominant. Serbian political leaders were not ready to give up an almost century long tradition of 'romantic' national idea and were trying to impose Serbianness upon two other brotherly nations.

Institutional position of the Serbian Church, and particularly the change of its status after 1918, is of vital importance to the understating of the ideological program the Church has created. Although, there is no doubt that the making of Yugoslavia with all its institutional, social, cultural, political, etc. consequences can be taken as a starting point for the discussion

¹ The Concordat crisis per se could be an interesting focal point for the study of discursive practices of the Church. See e.g.: Olga Manojlovic Pintar, "Još jednom o konordatskoj krizi", in *Tokovi Istorije*, Vol. 1-2, 2006, 157-171.

² Andrew B. Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 69.

of the national program of the Serbian Orthodox Church, it is important to remember that the Church had produced well articulated narrative of the nation, the relationship between the church and the nation, etc. already in the nineteenth century.

After the creation of the new state in 1918 in regard to religious developments and church life, the change of the state borders was of ultimate significance. For the Serbian Orthodox church the unification of the Serbian lands in one state meant that finally six previously not closely connected church jurisdictions now could be united in one body, i.e. the Serbian Patriarchate under the rule of the Patriarch in Belgrade which was proclaimed in September 1920³. Despite the fact that the unification of the church was long-awaited after several decades of longing and hopes, it did not run entirely smoothly.⁴ It also posed a number of important questions that had to be resolved quickly.

The complexity of the task to reconcile the views of the Orthodox Church on the Serbian national identity with the new state-driven ideologies of integral or synthetic Yugoslavism is responsible for the ambiguity of both the language used by the Church representatives and the position the clergy took concerning their political involvement. During the two decades following the creation of Yugoslavia the Serbian Orthodox Church was watching the developments of political life, especially the parliamentary life, with the grimace of ultimate dislike on its face to say the least. In these conditions, the church, i.e. significant numbers of lower and higher clergy took up the task first to keep the clergy out of the direct involvement in party politics (which was a matter of serious debate among parish priests); and second to develop new ways to exercise influence over society that would keep the flock within the bounds of the Orthodox church and, more importantly, to find the ways to secure the place of Orthodoxy in the national and state ideology.

These concerns of the church representatives fit nicely into several research questions one can pose in the discussion of the nationalization/politicization of religion: *participation* of the church as an institution *in the political life*, *instrumentalization and appropriation* of religious teachings by political actors to their own needs, and finally the problematic *relationship between religious thought and secular nationalism*, as it should not be reduced to the abovementioned (ab)use of religion, e.g. for mass mobilization purposes.

Participation in politics

The practical activities of the Serbian Church did not necessarily meet the theoretical position it took concerning the issue of its (non)involvement in politics. The movement of *bogomoljci* [God worshipers] underlined the need to develop the social work of the Church, to increase the level of popular piety, etc., what the members of the movement were trying to do in the 1920s and early 1930s. By the middle of the 1930s the situation has changed, the movement had already acquired a certain degree of organization and its spiritual leaders developed more

³ Prior to 1918 there were three independent church bodies: Serbian Orthodox Church in the Kingdom of Serbia, Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, and Serbian Orthodox Metropolis in Sremski Karlovci in Vojvodina. The other three enjoyed different degrees of autonomy from the Constantinople Patriarchate: Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbian Orthodox Church in Southern Serbia and Macedonia, and Bukovina-Dalmatian Metropolis.

⁴ The unwillingness of the clergy of previously autonomous church organizations, in particular those in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sremski Karlovci, to submit to the centralized system ruled from Belgrade, which contradicted their long tradition of 'national' autonomy and self-government resulted in the delay in creation of working and stable system of local eparchies. (Radmila Radic, *Država i verske zajednice, 1945-1970*. Beograd: Institut za Noviju Istoriju Srbije, 2002. Vol. 1, 20)

articulate political program. It still remains unclear whether the members of the Evangelical movement led by Velimirović massively joined *Zbor* of Dimitrije Ljotic (a fascist type Serbian political movement that was marginal in the 1930s but became rather prominent during the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia) in the end of the 1930s; nonetheless, there is no doubt that the membership of *Bogomoljci* and *Zbor* considerably overleapt. Among those with ‘double membership’ were Dimitrije Najdanović and Đoko Slijepčević, both of who actively contributed in the early 1930s to *Svetosavlje* and other theological journals.

Najdanović makes a curious rhetorical move while talking about the non-involvement of the Orthodox Church into politics, something that he claims to be an undeniably positive characteristic that the Church possesses. For example, he claims that intrigue and petty-politics are not in the spirit of the Orthodox Church, clearly unlike that of the Catholic Church; at the same time he sees the role of the Orthodox Church in the building of the free *Jugoslovenstvo* to be just “a prologue to the Serbian Orthodox messianism, whose first aim is the spiritual liberation of the brothers from European civilizing role [civilizatorstvo], from the vain, deadly ‘kulturträger’ and western spleen, fiction and lies.”⁵ Applied to the sphere of national politics such statement can easily be understood as the call for the Serbian cultural domination and hegemony. Thus although denying any political commitment of the Church and opposing the need for it, Najdanović argues for such national belief system in which “Orthodox values’ will be dominant. Despite his (and others’) claim that Serbian Church is not taking part in politics, Najdanović makes a strong case in favor of “orthodox activism”. Among other things he maintains that “superiority of Orthodox thought, if it is not materialized into a force, a movement, a blow” will turn into something abstract and futile and vain.⁶ We can see therefore an open ‘call for action’ coming from church activists like Dimitrije Najdanović taking place in the middle of the 1930s.

The Year of St. Sava - 1935

The climax of the publishing activities occurred in 1935. The year of 1935 was a year of Saint Sava, the so-called *Svetosavska godina* when the kingdom of Yugoslavia celebrated and commemorated 700 years anniversary of the death of Saint Sava, the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the patron of the Serbian nation.⁷ Throughout the year various events have been organized by the state authorities, the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as by different societies, clubs, etc. The press was flooded with the publications devoted to life and deeds of Sava. Numerous academic and publicist texts reflected on the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the main national saint. Given the amazing multitude of texts that addressed topics connected to St. Sava, it is not surprising that the absolute unanimity in regard to what exactly Sava should be remembered and praised for in the first place was lacking.

⁵ Najdanovic, *Jugoslovenstvo i crkve*, 3.

⁶ Najdanovic, *Udruzenim snagama*, 5.

⁷ Born in 1169 St. Sava (prior to becoming a monk on Mount Athos in Greece he was called Rastko) was the third, youngest son of Nemanja, the founder of the first medieval Serbian dynasty. Among many great deeds Sava is remembered and praised for are the establishment of a Serbian monastery on Athos, and most of all the activities in securing a state of autonomy (autocephaly) for the Serbian Church whose first archbishop he became when he returned from Athos to Serbia. Upon his death he was canonized together with his father, Nemanja, and remains to the present day to be one of the most respected, praised and loved saints in Serbia. In the late sixteenth century the relics of St Sava were burned by Sinan Pasha on Vracar hill in Belgrade, where now stands the St. Sava Cathedral.

The programmatic statement of *Svetosavlje* ideology “Nationalism of St. Sava” was delivered by Nikolaj Velimirović in 1935 as a lecture at the Kolarčev University during the week of Eastern Christianity. In this lecture that was published the same year as a separate brochure Velimirović discusses how St. Sava had created Serbian church, Serbian nation and basically laid the foundations of the entire Serbian national culture.

The main argument goes as follows: since Sava was the founder of the Serbian national church, he was also the creator of the Serbian nationalism as an idea.⁸ By ‘Serbian nationalism’ the archbishop understood the ultimate results of the activities of Sava in the field of building Serbian nation. “This nationalism of Sava encompasses national church, national dynasty, national state, national education, national culture, and national assertion. The national church forms the basis and the center of the nationalism of Sava. The church acts as a spirit that resuscitates the entire national organism, by illuminating it, inspiring it, and uniting it by the one faith, one hope and one love”⁹. Hence, it is the national church in the person of St. Sava that is given all credit for the creation, maintenance and survival of the Serbian nation. Naturally, the definition of the national church is of utmost importance for this argument. The national church “means an independent church organization with the central authority coming from the nation /people and directed to the nation/ people, with the national clergy, national language and national traditional expression of its faith. In opposition to such national church stands non-national or international church, with its center outside the nation, with the clergy coming from everywhere, with foreign language and with the unified, uniform expression of its faith. What is more natural and wholesome? With no doubt, it is the national church.»¹⁰ Clearly, Velimirovic contrasts here the Serbian Orthodox Church (or as a matter of fact any Orthodox church) to the Roman Catholic Church, which is more centralized. The hostile attitude towards the Catholic Church was not unique to Velimirovic’s thinking. The animosity towards the Catholic Church and in the Yugoslav context this primarily meant the Catholic Church in Croatia was shared by a vast majority of clergy and common people in Serbia. These hostile feelings reached their climax in the period of 1935-37 during the so-called Concordat crisis.

Svetosavska godina with its abundance of publications triggered the appearance of several distinct narratives of the life and deeds of St. Sava; these narratives partly reflected different stances towards the Orthodox Church and Orthodoxy in general that were present both in the narrow Serbian debate and wider Yugoslav context. This is not to say that opinions on this matter have never been heard before, but prior to 1935 they were rather a number of loosely connected individual statements than a clear pattern of thought which became well represented in public sphere.

The basic opposition in the interpretations of Sava’s historical and cultural significance occurred between those who saw him as primarily a statesman and those who underlined his activities as a religious figure. Since both opinions had firm ground to be based upon, the stumbling block was the question what the main virtues of St. Sava were. Some of the Serbian clergy were unhappy with the fact that Sava was increasingly seen as a political figure, and a national hero, at the expense of downplaying his Christianity. This basically meant a discursive argument over the question what is more important: the foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church by Sava and his efforts to bring it to independence from the Greek hierarchs, or the Christian virtues he was representing and promoting by his life and deeds?

⁸ Mirko Đorđević, *Srpska konzervativna misao*. Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2003, 60

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58

Conclusions

As this paper demonstrates, the Serbian Orthodox Church, alongside with other influential actors of the Serbian/ Yugoslav political and ideological milieu, produced a well elaborated ideology of *Svetosavlje* in response to the political and social challenges of the new state of Yugoslavia. This applies equally to the steps the Church has made as an institution, and intellectual responses articulated by the clergy.

The emergence of *Svetosavlje* should be seen as both the result of intellectual and discursive practices of the church and at the same time a reaction to the events that happen outside the immediate Church context.

In this sense Svetosavlje is not just an ideology that places Orthodoxy in the heart of Serbian nationalism and thus inevitably blocks the way of non-Orthodox into Serbian political realm; it is rather a sophisticated intellectual construction which has the traits of *sacralization of nation* and *nationalization of religion*. The first aspect has more theological character and derives from the long Christian tradition of connection between nation and the sacred. The second aspect of this construct rather belongs to the sphere of political, which may explain why it is much more visible in both academic discussions of the phenomenon and also in its contemporary interpretations.