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Aleksov's "Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National: Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850-1914" - Book Review

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Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National: Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850-1914*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2006. pp 205.
Reviewed by Angéla Ilić

This interesting read is definitely one that fills a gap in the English language literature on the subject matter, exploring the origins and the spread of a little-known and somewhat enigmatic religious movement.

In the first half of the book Aleksov chronicles the birth of the Nazarene faith and its relative quick spread to Hungary in the mid-19th century. After exploring the popularity the new religion found particularly among the country's Serb population, he moves on to examine the strategies of the Nazarenes for maintaining their communities and for continual expansion. The second half focuses on the interaction of the Nazarene movement with other actors in their context: with politics, with the Serbian Orthodox Church and with the emerging Serbian nationalist movement.

The main thesis of the book, which actually is the author's revised doctoral dissertation from the Department of History of the Central European University in Budapest, is laid out at the beginning in a clear and well-structured way. Aleksov builds his work on the premise that the Nazarenes represented a new, modern way of life, and that is why they came into conflict with (Serbian) nationalism, which in his view, seemed to be an expression of pre-modern ideas. The author tends to contrast these two notions (modern vs. national) as if they were antonyms of each other. Nevertheless, the question whether the Nazarenes were truly ahead of their time by focusing on the individual rather than exclusively on the community, or by drawing clear lines between the religious and the secular, remains unanswered.

Religious Dissent first recounts the history of how Nazarene beliefs took root in mid-19th century Hungary. The teachings of the founder of the Nazarene faith, Samuel Heinrich Fröchlich spread to Hungary through traveling apprentices, who had embraced this new way of believing and brought it back with them upon their return home. The Nazarene movement in Hungary can trace its beginnings to Lajos Hencsey, who was the first convert there to get baptized. Later, however, the social group that embraced the Nazarene faith in greatest numbers, especially in Vojvodina, was village folk. In consecutive chapters the author provides insight into the everyday life and rules of the community, relying on previous publications as well as on some personally conducted interviews. Topics examined include

the leadership structure of the churches, their worship services and the role of faith in family and social life.

Drawing from a limited number of primary sources, some from inside the Serbian Orthodox hierarchy, Aleksov constantly compares the morally and socially strictly controlled behavior of the Nazarenes to that of the Serbian peasantry. He also emphasizes the devoted spiritual life and work ethics of the Nazarene believers, in contrast to the financial excesses and lack of religious discipline that characterized their Orthodox counterparts, by and large. Exploring the social and religious influence of the Nazarenes, he claims that they actually played an important part in the formation of Serbian identity. First, they did this mostly inadvertently, as they were perceived as the enemy by many and were often used as a negative example of those who had strayed away from the true faith. Later, when certain leaders in the Serbian Orthodox hierarchy (most notably Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović) advocated change and spiritual renewal, the Nazarenes were employed as a positive example, although this was usually done without any overt reference to them.

The available literature in Serbian tends to emphasize pacifism as a major factor of the Nazarene faith and is generally restricted to superficial observations. Aleksov also picks up on the strong commitment of the Nazarenes not to bear arms and blames their rigid attitude toward conscientious objection as making a significant contribution to their ultimate demise. Aleksov's thesis is that the Nazarenes were always persecuted and that their very strengths that first caused them to spread so successfully eventually led to their decline and (almost complete) disappearance.

One of the crucial issues is whether and how the lack of primary sources affects the quality of the present work. The book definitely could have benefitted from the use of more primary sources. Although it does a good job at describing the traditions, organizational structure and history of the Nazarene communities, it is almost exclusively from an outside perspective and adds no significant new information to already existing literature. The Nazarenes did not leave much archival information behind about themselves on purpose. However, some such records do exist, as particularly Swiss visitors and church contacts habitually made reports about their trips available.

On the other hand, the chapters on the reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and on internal changes within the Church, which Aleksov claims, were inspired by and done in order to counteract the Nazarenes, to a great extent, do provide a glimpse into the

lesser-known historical aspects of this ecclesiastical body. How the Nazarenes unintentionally encouraged the emergence of a nationalist Serbian historiography and the nationalistic empowerment of the SOC, is insightfully presented.

Finally, a few observations regarding the form. Throughout the book Aleksov has very long and complicated sentences, which is typical of the German (and also Serbian) academic writing style but makes the English text difficult to follow and digest. The constant lack of articles or their incorrect use, while understandable for a Slavic speaker, makes for cumbersome sentences and takes away the enjoyment from reading. There are also many misspelled words in practically all of the languages Aleksov uses, which shows poor line editing. All in all, the presence of so many linguistic mistakes proves that the book would have benefitted from review by a native English speaker.

On the whole, this is a highly engaging work which will allow the reader a look behind the curtains of the emerging modern Serbian national identity and its religious component. Furthermore, it will certainly deepen one's understanding of the various social, religious and political processes taking place during this formative time period in the country's history.

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