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ADAMANT AND TREACHEROUS: SERBIAN HISTORIANS ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS

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Ever since the inception of their discipline historians have tried to distance their work from myths, disentangle them and interpret them historically. But historical narratives, while certainly not myths in the ancient form and meaning, nevertheless often perpetuate mythic features—history has not been immune to fiction, stereotype, distortion, exaggeration, and omission. Like myth, history tends to reduce the diversity and complexity of events to one particular model of interpretation or to provide answers without ever clearly and explicitly formulating the problem. Most important, historical narrative, like myth, exercises a strong cognitive dynamic in the definition of a community's ethical and political principles.

Emerging in 'the age of nationalism', modern history writing was more often than not entangled in the web of 'nationhood myths'. In his famous speech at the Sorbonne in 1882, Ernest Renan asserted that to get one's history wrong is an essential part of the making of a nation.¹ Historians figure prominently among the architects of nationalism; they are able to provide meaning to the projects of the present through an interpretation of the past. Erich Hobsbawm has pleaded for the exposure of nationalist history as myth to safeguard the objectivity of the history profession.² The historian of Eastern Europe Hugh Seton-Watson has criticized historians for 'excesses of patriotic myth-making', which he sees as a result of the influence of the times and 'the compulsions to which [historians] were or still are subjected' in their effort to define a national identity.³ This compulsion of a nationalist political agenda increases scholarly production of myths about a nation's alleged antiquity,

¹ Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est ce que c'est une nation?' ['What Is a Nation?'], in Alfred Zimmern, ed., *Modern Political Doctrines*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 189.

² Erich J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 12-13.

³ Hugh Seton-Watson, 'On Trying to be a Historian of Eastern Europe', in Dennis Deletant and Harry Hanak, eds., *Historians as Nation-Builders*. London: Macmillan Press, 1988, p. 13.

cohesion, solidarity, virtues, exceptionality—and most harmful are the myths that serve to delineate boundaries between nations.

This essay analyses representations of religious conversions in Serbian historiography that make up some of the core Serbian nationhood myths. Within the context of the traditional understanding of religious identity and religious conversion, historically speaking the most important cases of conversion among Orthodox Serbs were Islamisation and (to a much smaller extent) Union with the Catholic Church. Change of religion is undoubtedly one of the most unsettling and destabilising events in a society. It threatens the cohesion of a community and reactions to it are universally defensive, because it necessitates a change of balance between members of different faith communities.⁴ In the context of centuries-long religious segregation and firm identification between ethnic and religious identities—as has been the case in the Balkans—religious conversions have evoked a long history of distrust and intolerance that has been the topic of numerous studies. My focus here is on conscious efforts, undertaken mostly from the nineteenth century on, of adoption, employment, and deepening of inherited religious divisions through mythologized portrayals of conversions in the past.

My principal source material in studying the genesis and the dynamic of the transformations of these conversion myths and the factors and forces behind them has been the works of historians whose position is well established in Serbian society. They were, or are, university professors, academicians, textbook authors, ministers, and ambassadors. Assessing the creation and employment of these myths over time, I analyse history writing and teaching in the Serbian context within the general context of cultural production and public opinion formation. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of historical production: The elaborations and endless adaptations of the stock of history imprinted in the collective consciousness are also the result of oral and family tradition, literature, school, church, media, and political discourse, and in this discourse historians are both producers and products. Also the writers Petar Petrović Njegoš and Ivo Andrić, cornerstones of Serbian literature and culture, were powerful producers; both had powerful ideas, if not to say mythologized views, which I will analyze in relation to the cultural and political context of their time.

⁴ See Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

This chapter examines especially the recasting of certain aspects of the myths, and the exploitation of these myths, that took place in the years preceding and during the most recent wars in former Yugoslavia. The survival of the conversion myths is striking as it seems to defy the growing distance from the time of the events they refer to, the seemingly insignificant role of religion in modern society, and the fact that many of them had already been successfully demystified. And in Serbia, there have been studies that have provided alternative, non-nationalist modes of explanation. The last part of my paper is dedicated to these examples of contesting the mythologized conversion paradigm. I start by elucidating the role religion had in the formation of the Serbian national consciousness, and showing that religious intolerance is one of its main features.

RELIGION AND NATIONALISM

Massive intolerance among the members of different faiths in the Balkans is a trait that dominated descriptions of nineteenth-century travelers and locals alike. One German traveler, for instance, wrote that: “The overall impression is that the Catholics and the Orthodox live as if they were in a permanent state of conspiracy against each other. They hate and despise each other just as much as Jews and Christians do.”⁵ The first learned men among the South Slavs, influenced by the ideas of enlightenment and linguistic nationalism, found the intolerance they saw puzzling. One of them noted: ‘The hatred and intolerance that permeate the members of the three religions, despite their common language, descent and origin, is something unheard of and totally incomprehensible.’⁶

In the course of the nineteenth century the entire region saw the birth of nationalism, which gradually became the primary, unifying, and normative factor in the formation of the collective identity. In the process, nationalism took on numerous religious attributes while religion as such was relegated to a subordinate role. Scholars of nationalism have demonstrated that national consciousness is shaped through certain phases; national traditions are created and transformed through ample use of inherited religious content, values, and symbols. Existing beliefs and knowledge took on new forms, and even more important, gained a new, comprehensive, and teleological function in the formation of the national state. Although religion was repressed through modernisation efforts, secularisation, and eventually the atheist campaigns of the twentieth century, the nationalism of the Serbs and their

⁵ J. G. Kohl, *Reise nach Istrien, Dalmatien und Montenegro II*. Dresden: 1856, p. 226.

⁶ Pavle Karanotvrtković, *Stari srpski spomenici* [Old Serbian Writings]. Belgrade: 1840, p. XV.

neighbours had by then already been built on the historical memory and models that stemmed from and exploited religious divisions and intolerance of the past.

One of the few historians who have seriously studied the religious factor in the rise of nationalism among South Slavs, Milorad Ekmečić, thinks that the churches were an exclusive basis for South Slav national movements. On the one hand, their national culture evolved within the framework of a single church or religion, while on the other hand, the churches during critical periods became beacons of social organisation. They lost their religious character and refocused on ethical issues, culture, and social organisation. Although none of the denominational institutions among the South Slavs had been exclusively national, they increasingly acquired such a character during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through the efforts of church leadership wishing to separate their followers from those of the other religions. In an atmosphere of 'religious nationalism', as Ekmečić calls it, people of the 'other' denominations were blamed for all troubles and frustrations. In the minds of ordinary people, every neighbour who professed a different religion belonged to an 'enemy' civilisation.

Confrontations between the various religions and denominations represented an insurmountable obstacle to the creation of a single Yugoslav nation on the dominant Herderian or Central European model (according to which the nation is a community of language). Instead, religion became the fault-line between nations. The 'religious' nationalisms that were engendered in this way constantly stoked the mythologisation of the historical consciousness (as well as the provincialisation of culture and extremist politics); religious nationalism, not religious intolerance, formed a basis for the military and political strategies at the time of momentous historical crises.⁷

In analysing the nationalism of the Yugoslav peoples, special note should be made of the role of the secular intelligentsia and the political elites and how they, as key protagonists of nationalism, have used religion and the religious legacy in the nation-building project. The blending of religion and nationalism over the past two centuries has strengthened both the religious and the secular elites.

Another historian of the region, Ivo Banac, holds the thesis that the cause of the antagonism among the South Slav peoples is not religious differences or unequal economic development, but rather the different structures and objectives of their respective national

⁷ Milorad Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790-1818* [Creation of Yugoslavia 1790-1818]. Belgrade: Prosveta, 1989, p. 15.

ideologies and political cultures.⁸ Banac, too, acknowledges that national ideologies are to a large extent historically determined, and that they contain elements of historical determinism of cultural and religious differences. But, he posits, of and by themselves religious differences cannot explain the strong divisions among the Balkan peoples. The impact of nationalism and nationalists in exploiting these differences is crucial.

One aspect of nationalism used to build barriers and excite antagonism between modern nations is myths about religious conversions. I will illustrate this use in the Serbian case, with a special focus on the role which mythologized historical narratives have played in the process.

FROM FOLK EPIC TO SCIENTIFIC FACT

Folk myths and folk tales offer rich material for the study of religious conversions as momentous events in the world at the time when religious identity was still of primary importance. Notwithstanding the importance of oral culture, however, I shall concentrate on those persons who have contributed to the creation of the Serbian national consciousness in writing. In this I follow Hobsbawm's observation that what makes up the main body of knowledge and ideology in a nation, state, or movement is not what is preserved in popular memory, but rather what is selected, written down, visualized, and made popular by those whose task it is to do this.⁹ In these works, as we shall see, popular myths and tales that depict the world in a stylized and schematized way were often taken for granted and elevated to the level of 'scientific' truth.

Until the late eighteenth century, cultural life in the Balkans was dominated by denominational communities. Conversions necessarily implied a change of cultural identity. During the nineteenth century, the churches lost their position as the only popular institutions and as a result, their religious, educational, and political mission was radicalised. They increasingly insisted on their exclusiveness and on deepening differences with other churches. Any outside meddling with denominational specificity was fiercely resisted. In the early nineteenth century, the Serbian Orthodox Metropolitan Stratimirović accused the Serbian-language reformer Vuk Karadžić of 'wanting to convert the Serbs into Šokci'¹⁰ and

⁸ Ivo Banac, "Foreword," in Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Politics, Culture, and Religion in Yugoslavia*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. xi.

⁹ Hobsbawm, 'The Invention of Tradition,' in Erich J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 13.

¹⁰ Derogatory term for Croats.

Uniats with his translation (which allegedly had been financed by Germans and by the Catholic Slovene scholar Jernej Kopitar) of the New Testament to vernacular. However, when the Catholic Church rejected Karadžić's translation due to its similarity with the Serbian one, the Serbian Orthodox Church accepted it.¹¹

The first written accounts on conversions to Islam among the South Slavs date from this time and were written by educated Serbs in Austria—that is, in a Muslim-free milieu. They had encountered Muslims when they travelled to Serbia, where they perceived Muslims within the context of the revived hatred towards Islam that prevailed in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, the era of Romanticism. The founder of the *Letopis Annals Matice Srpske*, the first Serbian literary magazine, Georgije Magarašević, describes his visits to his fellow-nationals living across the Sava River in 1827 in the following way:

What a terrible thing merciless fate has done to our brothers! They are thoroughly transformed by their change of religion and law! They don't want to hear any talk about their Slavic origins, but instead persecute their brothers. They are like dry and fallen twigs from the Slavic tree. Their ancestors were forced into conversion under tyrannical regimes and by force of arms, while they now willingly embrace the new faith and extol it. By accepting the foreign law, they have renounced their ancestry and origin. Islamised Serbs, blinded by fanaticism, are much worse than the Turks.¹²

Sima Milutinović's pioneering ventures and numerous historical and literary works written in the 1820s and 1830s had a tremendous impact on the views of an entire generation of Serbian writers and historians. He is the author of the legend of Deacon Avacum, a man who was offered all kinds of promises and subjected to various threats to convert to Islam. He rejected them all, even when faced with being impaled. Adamantly defying his torturers, the young deacon sang:

There is no better faith than Christian!
A Serb is Christ's, and rejoices in death.¹³

After living and studying in Hungary and Germany, Milutinović came to Montenegro to be a teacher of the future bishop and celebrated poet Petar Petrović Njegoš. In Montenegro, Milutinović allegedly heard a folk song about the massacre of Muslims in a part

¹¹ Petar Kuzmić, *Vuk-Daničićovo Sveto pismo i biblijska društva na južnoslovenskom tlu u XIX stoljeću* [The Vuk-Daničić Holy Bible and Biblical Societies on South Slav Soil in the XIXth century]. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1983, pp. 176 and 229.

¹² Đorđe Magarašević, *Putovanje po Srbiji u 1827 godini*, Pančevo: 1882, quoted in Oto Dubislav pl. Pirh, *Putovanje po Srbiji u 1829*, Đorđe Magarašević, *Putovanje po Srbiji u 1827 godini* [Travelling in Serbia in 1829 and 1827]. Belgrade: Prosveta, 1983, p. 262.

¹³ Sima Milutinović, *Istoria Serbie 1813-1815*. Leipzig, 1837, pp. 91-92.

of Montenegro and he built this story into his works *Dika Crnogorska* and *Istorija Crne Gore* (Montenegrin Pride and History of Montenegro).¹⁴ Later, Njegoš based his epic *Gorski vijenac* [The Mountain Wreath], on the same legend. The poem, one of the most influential works in Serbian literature, created a national myth about the massacre of converts. Over time, the alleged but historically not recorded massacre of Islamised Serbs on Christmas Eve 1702, as described in *The Mountain Wreath*, became solidly embedded in popular memory. The literary critic Vojislav Nikčević posits that the artistic power of *The Mountain Wreath* and its lively spirit make both readers and scholars experience the depicted event as reality.¹⁵ Elimination of 'the treacherous converts' as described in the epic acquired in the national consciousness the significance of a ritual cleansing, a catharsis of the nation. The massacre is vested in a religious apotheosis, despite the fact that murder is contrary to the basic tenets of the Christian religion and that Njegoš's work is a mythological and poetic construction.

The Serbian historian Slobodan Jovanović asserts that Njegoš reconciled himself to the massacre of these converts as a political necessity, one that served the interests of his nation.¹⁶ Njegoš wrote his epic at a time when the liberation of the Serbs from their conquerors was glorified in the national-romantic interpretation as the peak of their historical path. He set the eradication of the Islamised Serbs against the backdrop of an all-out struggle of the Serbian people for liberation. But through his poetic and mythological approach Njegoš went beyond narrow national limits and transported the event to the domain of the universal themes of freedom, death, and resurrection.

To put Njegoš's epic into context one needs to understand the development of the views on the Islamised population. The German historian Leopold von Ranke noticed the interesting fact that no folk songs depicted the massacre of the Belgrade Turks in 1807 after the liberation of the city in the First Serbian Uprising.¹⁷ Ranke also records that after this brutal act, the Serbian leadership was divided; the older among them believed that the massacre was a sin. But the escalation of the Serbian rebels' fighting deepened the antagonism and led to the imposition of the principle that the Muslims had to be expelled.

¹⁴ Michel Aubin, 'Legenda o Badnjem Večeru i evropska književnost' [The Legend of Christmas Eve and European Literature] *Filološki pregled* I-IV, 1971, pp. 13-17.

¹⁵ Vojislav P. Nikčević, 'Istrage Poturica nije ni bilo' [There was no eradication of converts to Islam], *Ovdje* no. 189, Titograd, 1985, pp. 8-10.

¹⁶ Slobodan Jovanović, 'Srpski nacionalni karakter' [Serbian national character], in Bojan Jovanović, ed., *Karakterologija Srba* [Characterology of Serbs]. Belgrade: Naučna knjiga, 1992, p. 232.

¹⁷ Leopold von Ranke, *A History of Servia and the Servian Revolution*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973; reprint from 1848, p. 179.

This principle lasted until the 1912-1913 Balkans Wars.¹⁸ The 1829-1830 Law of the Montenegrin Vasojević Tribe, in its Article 2, illustrates the popular attitude towards the Islamised population a few years before Njegoš's epic:

3. New mosques should not be built, and the old ones should fall into disuse.
4. Converts should not be killed, but every group should re-convert its members into the ancestral faith.
5. Who converts now and embraces a false faith, should be considered a Turk.¹⁹

Njegoš too considered the converts Turks, not because he thought they were different but because of their political dissociation from the Serbian nation-in-the-making. As bishop, Njegoš kept in close touch with the Bosnian and Herzegovinian beys, provincial governors of the Islamised domestic population, and expected them to join in the liberation from the Ottoman occupiers. A letter to Osman Pasha Skopljak expresses his views:

God only knows ... how long these brothers of mine shall alienate themselves, call themselves Asians, and work for foreigners without remembering their true selves and their true people. From that unfortunate day when the Asians conquered our kingdom, a handful of rebels have been fighting for general honesty in the name of our people, and against their Islamised brothers. Brother fights against brother, brother kills his brother, the ruins of our kingdom are blood-soaked. This is the general misfortune of our people!²⁰

In his second epic, 'Šćepan Mali', Njegoš is even more explicit about the national imperative which he now divorces from religion. Through the words of the monk Teodosije, Njegoš announces:

Every Serb who converts,
And embraces the foreign faith,
Shall be pardoned by God.
But he shall not be pardoned
and shall be ashamed
when he does not want to be called a Serb.²¹

¹⁸ Radoš Ljušić, *Tumačenje srpske revolucije u istoriografiji 19 i 20 veka* [Interpretations of Serbian Revolution in Historiography of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries]. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruha 1992, pp. 115-118 and 120.

¹⁹ *Vasojevički zakon od 12 točaka* [Vasojević Laws in Twelve Points]. Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1929.

²⁰ Petar Petrović Njegoš to Osman Pasha Skopljak, High Official of Skadar, Cetinje, October 5, 1847. The entire text of the letter may be found at http://www.rastko.org.yu/rastko-cg/povijest/njegos-pismo_skopljaku_c.html.

²¹ Petar II Petrović Njegoš, *Lažni car Šćepan Mali* [False Tzar Šćepan The Little]. Available at: http://www.rastko.org.yu/rastko-cg/umjetnost/njegos-scepan_c.html.

The general principles of justice and moral values of Njegoš's heroes originated in the then-patriarchal culture and were common to contemporary Muslim folk songs as well.²² The recent branding of Njegoš as an arch-ideologue of genocide is an ahistorical distortion, and blatantly disregards the cultural-historical context of his work.²³ In Serbia and Montenegro Njegoš's epic has not yet been decanonised or deconstructed, only then can its literary value be preserved from political manipulation.²⁴ In the schools, even during the communist period, Njegoš's work was never viewed from a historical distance. His poetry was taught as an ideal; no distinction was made between the universal validity of his artistic achievement and the historically changeable, conditional, and political aspects of his epic.

Other Serbian romantic poets also contributed to the Serbian view of Turks as *Erbfeind*, and exacerbated popular resentment, according to their contemporary, the poet Laza Kostić.²⁵ Kostić says that these romantics transformed popular spite towards the Muslims into 'a principled hatred'.

Among the literati, the most influential besides Njegoš in crystallising views on Islamisation was the Nobel-prize winning novelist Ivo Andrić. In his youth, Andrić believed that Njegoš genuinely expressed popular opinions and beliefs, and in his dissertation, Andrić accepted as truth Njegoš's vivid description of Islamisation, as in the following verse of 'The Mountain Wreath': 'The lions [i.e. the brave who remained Christian] turned into tillers of soil/the cowardly and the covetous turned into Turks.'²⁶ Andrić could have adopted this view also from the Bosnian Franciscans, whom he frequently quoted and who since the nineteenth

²² Celia Hawkesworth, 'Points of Contact between Serbo-Croatian Christian and Muslim Oral Epic Song: Opportunities for Building Bridges', in Božidar Jakšić, ur, ed., *Interkulturalnost u multietničkim društvima* [Interculturality in Multi-ethnic Societies], Belgrade: Hobisport, 1995, p. 215.

²³ Copious literature which tries to explain the Serbian crimes during the 1992-1995 wars in the manner of cultural determinism nearly always quotes Njegoš as the original cause of accumulated Serbian hatred of Muslims and his epic as a blueprint for genocide. See Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993 and 1998; Norman Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia, The Policy of Ethnic Cleansing*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995; Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*. New York: New York University Press, 1999. Much more balanced is the most recent analysis of Cathie Carmichael in the chapter "Mountain Wreaths: Anti-Islam in Balkan Slavonic Discourses", in her book *Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 21-38.

²⁴ Two other recent articles also contained this suggestion: Srđa Popović, 'The Mountain Wreath: Poetry or a Blueprint for the Final Solution', *Spaces of Identity*, Vol. 1(4), 2001, available at http://www.univie.ac.at/spacesofidentity/Vol_4/_html/pavlovic.html p. 2; and Andrew Baruch Wachtel, "How to Use a Classic: Petar Petrović Njegoš in the Twentieth Century", in John Lampe, Mark Mazower, eds., *Ideologies and national identities: the case of twentieth-century Southeastern Europe* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2003).

²⁵ Laza Kostić, *O Jovanu Jovanoviću Zmaju* [On Jovan Jovanović Zmaj]. Sombor: 1902, p. 441.

²⁶ Andrić's dissertation 'Die Entwicklung des geistlichen Lebens im Bosnien unter der turkischen Herrschaft', defended at Graz University in 1924, was first published in *Sveske zadužbine Ive Andrića* 1-1982. English-language translation published as *The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia under the Influence of Turkish Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

century had grown increasingly intolerant of the Bosnian Muslims, depicting them as greedy and venal. His views on Islamisation stemmed also from a theory that suggested that Bosnian Muslims were descendant of the medieval Bogomils. This thesis originated in the efforts of Austro-Hungarian historians to legitimise the existence of a separate Bosnian nation. By splitting the population in this way they hoped to blunt the edge of Serbian and Croat aspirations to Bosnia and Herzegovina and make easier its occupation by the Hapsburg monarchy after 1878.²⁷ Serbian and Croat historians in their turn accepted the thesis, not wanting to recognise that their fellow nationals had converted to Islam, or preferring to attribute the conversions to so-called Bosnian Bogomils, who, despite their Slavic descent, yielded to the new faith as incomplete and immature members of the community, church, and nation.

In explaining Islamisation in his doctoral dissertation, Andrić invoked folk narratives and stressed two factors: the blood tribute (*devshirme*), and greed—the wish to obtain or preserve property. Andrić's description of the blood tribute, which is fully developed in his literary work, made a tremendous impact on the popular consciousness, and was recently canonised, as it were, when it was used as a theme on a fresco painting in the Serbian Nova Gračanica monastery in Libertyville, Illinois, USA.

Andrić's doctoral dissertation is our first view of the key motifs of his later literary works.²⁸ The cruelty and historical hatred of the converts towards their former fellow nationals are basic features of his unfinished novel 'Omer Paša Latas' and are encountered also in the novels *Travnička hronika*, *Na Drini ćuprija* and in the story 'Nemirna godina'. However, limiting Andrić's portrayal of Turks and Muslims to the characterisations found in his doctoral dissertation is one-dimensional. One strength of his art was to place his characters in many different metaphors - comic, tragic, ironic or grotesque.²⁹ Andrić's description of hatred and intolerance in Bosnia, which made him so famous, was always balanced by an emphasis on the common heritage of Bosnia's population with images of interwoven cultures and symbolic bridges.³⁰

²⁷ Marian Wenzel, 'Bosnian History and Austro-Hungarian Policy: Some Medieval Belts, the Bogomil Romance and the King Tvrtko Graves', in *Peristil. zbornik radova za povijest* Zagreb, 1987, pp. 29-54.

²⁸ Interpretation of Zorana Konstantinović on model of French post-structuralists in 'Andrić's Dissertation Reflected in his Literary Work' in *Ivo Andrić. Proceedings of a symposium held at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies 10-12 July 1984*. London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1985.

²⁹ Svetozar Koljević, 'Nationalism as Literary Inspiration', in Božidar Jakšić ed., *Interkulturalnost*, p. 206.

³⁰ See assessments by Aleksandar Popović, 'Ivo Andrić i "kuća Islama"' [Ivo Andrić and 'The House of Islam'], in *Delo Ivo Andrića u kontekstu evropske književnosti i kulture* [The Works of Ivo Andrić within the Context of European Culture and Literature]. Belgrade: Zadužbina Ivo Andrića, 1981; Zorana Konstantinović, 'O Andrićevom

School primers and other textbooks offer explicit examples of how the works of Njegoš and Andrić, along with the folk epic sources they built upon, have been exploited by the nationalist propaganda.³¹ In the nineteenth century, Serbian primers served not only to spread literacy but also to inculcate knowledge and ideas about ‘us’ and ‘others’. Their importance in the largely illiterate country is seen in the fact that ministers and even prime ministers counted among their authors. Written at a time when there was not much knowledge about the processes of conversion, the Bosnian Muslims, or the Croats, they present in simple nationalist rhetoric the Serbs who converted to Islam or Catholicism as victims of coercion.³²

History textbooks examined the issue in more detail, and went so far as to claim that the Croats had been Christianised as Orthodox and only later, through a decision of their rulers and contrary to the will of the people, were converted to Catholicism.³³ Folk epics and Njegoš's poem “The Mountain Wreath” provided the ground for the following view on Islamisation: ‘Serbs of the Mohammedan faith ... accepted Mohammedan faith when the Serbian Empire had disappeared in Kosovo, in order to save their property and nobility.’³⁴ History books also name the violence of the Albanians as a significant cause for the conversions.³⁵ More than a century later some of these stereotypes linger. Even the most recent history textbooks contain Andrić's depiction of the blood tribute to illustrate the section on Ottoman rule and Islamisation.³⁶

Nineteenth-century Serbian textbooks, and the prevailing attitudes of the time, are distinguished from later textbooks and attitudes by the insistence on the *sameness* of the converts with the national population in general. Common origins and a common past, customs, and language are emphasised to justify the need for a national expansionism, or, as it was called, “the liberation of our brothers under the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian yoke”. Intellectual elites tried to instill a spirit of religious tolerance by proclaiming that ‘a brother of

doktoratu’ [On Andrić's doctoral dissertation], *Sveske Zadužbine Ivo Andrića* 1/1982; and Svetozar Koljević, ‘Dve Bosne Ivo Andrića’ [The two Bosnias of Ivo Andrić], *Sveske Zadužbine Ivo Andrića* 2/1983.

³¹ The comprehensive analysis for the earlier period is Charles Jelavich, *South Slav Nationalisms – Textbooks and Yugoslav Union before 1914*. Cleveland: Ohio State University Press, 1990. My quotations are from the Croatian translation *Južnoslavenski nacionalizmi*. Zagreb: Globus and Školska knjiga, 1992.

³² Jelavich, *Južnoslavenski nacionalizmi*. p. 85.

³³ Jelavich, *Južnoslavenski nacionalizmi*. p. 185.

³⁴ From the fourth-grade class textbook published in 1890, cited in Jelavich, *Južnoslavenski nacionalizmi*. p. 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³⁶ Radoš Ljušić, *Radne sveske iz istorije za VI razred* [History Manual for the Sixth Grade]. Novi Sad: Platoneum 2002.

any religion is still and always a dear brother'. These 'Yugoslav' thinkers among Serbs considered Catholics and Muslims as Serbs, but did not demand their return to their real roots, because, in their minds, Islamisation, and Uniatism—indeed, religious faith in general—played no part in the process of national awakening, or could be overcome by other factors, notably language, customs, or awareness of common descent.³⁷ However, the thesis of one Serbian people with three faiths, as exemplified by the expression 'Muslims of our Serbian blood', could not stop the process of differentiation among the South Slav nations, as this process did rest predominantly on a denominational base. Jaša Ignjatović, a Serbian writer of the late nineteenth century, describes the deeply rooted religious element, and by extension the widespread view on religious conversions:

A Serb without his religious rites and customs is not considered a Serb. A dissident from the faith is considered by the people as a lost son, as one who has lost the sense of importance of Serbhood. Religious ideas are still more important than nation-building ideas.³⁸

The first attempts to give a scholarly aura to commonly held views on conversions are those of Jovan Cvijić. Though a geographer by education his works included ethnographic observations of the Balkan people, which tremendously influenced the works of later historians and ethnologists. Cvijić was mostly interested in the impact of conversion on the formation of identity, and claimed that conversions intensified religious feelings and jealousy, sentiments which, Cvijić- thought, had been waning throughout the nineteenth century because of the influence of education and the general progress of civilisation.³⁹ Cvijić believed that conversion increased aggressiveness in what he called the Dinaric type of man, prevalent among South Slavs. 'Former brothers were separated from each other still further by the wall of religious intolerance.'⁴⁰ Though without any scientific evidence, the thesis of the destructive conduct of converts, notably in the shape of feelings of shame, rooted in popular myth, gained popularity through literature, science, and historiography. According to Cvijić, intolerance, envy, and hatred develop spontaneously between isolated and closed groups, and these feelings are intensified among religious groups, for their isolation is

³⁷ Nikola Begović, *Život Srba graničara* [Life of Serbs in the Military Border]. Belgrade: Prosveta, 1986; first edition 1887, pp. 88-92.

³⁸ See Jakov Ignjatović, *Memoari, Rapsodije iz prošlog srpskog života* [Memoirs, Rhapsodies from past Serbian life]. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruka, 1966, p. 42.

³⁹ Jovan Cvijić, *Balkansko poluostrvo i južnoslovenske zemlje I* [The Balkan Peninsula and South Slav Lands I]. Belgrade: Državna štamparija, 1922, p. 406.

⁴⁰ Petar Džadžić, 'Pogovor' [Conclusion], in Jovan Cvijić and Ivo Andrić, *O balkanskim psihičkim tipovima* [On the Balkan Psychological Types]. Belgrade: Prosveta, 1988, p. 203.

elevated to the level of ideology. Members of these close-knit groups forge their links by embracing fundamental views on the human soul and its salvation. Exacerbated religious diversity is hence the most onerous legacy of the South Slav peoples, and dates back to Turkish, Venetian, and Austrian rules. Cvijić also held the belief that in Bosnia Islamisation was to a large extent forced, but he suggested that the force was not exerted by the Turks, but by the converts themselves, who due to their inherent zeal and guilt tried to convert their fellow nationals and next of kin. The most intense conflicts between Serbs and Muslims took place because the two groups had similar aspirations and the prevailing character trait of the need to dominate.⁴¹ Further, as new members of the Muslim fold, the converts had to prove their new identity by hating their co-nationals.

Cvijić believed that the Bogomil and Orthodox populations were most subject to Islamisation in areas where Christianity had not struck deep roots and lacked organised church institutions. He held similar views on the Uniate Church and the conversion of Orthodox people to Catholicism. All these phenomena, he thought, were due to a weak church organisation and the isolated life of the Orthodox Serbs among the Catholic population. Cvijić credited the influence of foreign religious centres, notably the Bosnian Franciscans, to explain the differences in character and views of the Orthodox and Catholic varieties of the Dinaric population, and the Islamised Serbs in Bosnia he portrayed as heirs of Turkish-Eastern influences. Finally, he blamed forced conversion and the influence of Austria-Hungary for the social anarchy and endemic violence in Kosovo.

Cvijić and his disciples were the first to conduct field research and try to support their claims with material they collected. Their research, however, was undertaken in the typical manner of mapping the nation. They focused on Kosovo and Macedonia, the only areas where in the beginning of the twentieth century Serbian expansion was possible.⁴² The Muslim population was very large in these areas, and their origin had to be explained in a way that justified Serbian claims to the land—hence the abundance in these works of mythologized interpretations on Islamisation. The information used was for the most part

⁴¹ Petar Džadžić, 'Pogovor', p. 247.

⁴² The titles produced include Jovan Cvijić, *Osnove za geografiju i geologiju Makedonije i Stare Srbije I-III* [Guidelines for Geography and Geology of Macedonia and Old Serbia I-III]. Belgrade, 1906-1911; Jovan Cvijić, *Makedonski Sloveni* [Macedonian Slavs]. Belgrade, 1906; Jovan Tomić, *O Arnautima u staroj Srbiji i Sandžaku* [On Albanians in Old Serbia and Sandžak]. Belgrade: Geca Kon, 1913 and Belgrade, Priština: Prosveta, Grigorije Božović 1995; Jovan Hadži Vasiljević, *Muslimani naše krvi u Južnoj Srbiji* [Muslims of Our Blood in South Serbia]. Belgrade: Sveti Sava, 1924 and Belgrade, Priština: Prosveta, Grigorije Božović, 1995; Jefta Dedijer, *Stara Srbija. Geografska i etnografska slika* [Old Serbia: Geographic and Ethnographic picture]. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1912, and Belgrade: Junior 1998.

collected from local Christians or from older Serbian and other Christian sources. The sources they relied on most were reports written by Russian consuls like Jastrebov and Hilferding, who also had had a predilection for Christian informants. As for the lack of Muslim informants, the historian Hadži Vasiljević explains that the Muslims “are very suspicious and afraid to disclose any information by accident. They are especially concerned not to say anything about their ancestors and their conversion.”⁴³

Despite the one-sided nature of the information in these works, they include numerous quotations, and thus convey a scholarly impression. Providing many examples and especially figures, the authors attempt to tilt the scale of evidence enough to justify their preconceived judgment and persuade their readers. Folk sayings and songs and verses from Njegoš’s epic are incorporated into the narrative as illustrations with no real differentiation between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ facts, like this sentence from Vasiljević’s *Muslimani*:

Everywhere in religiously mixed villages real Albanians and Turks laugh at converts because they still keep in their attics earthen pots which their ancestors used to cook sauerkraut with lard.⁴⁴

Discursive strategies to delineate the national space depended on such notions as ‘religious syncretism’ and ‘crypto-Christianity’ to prove the Serbian origin and ‘real nature’ of the ‘converts’ to and members of other faiths. Shrines, festivals, and practices that were common to all faiths were cited as crucial proof of the real religion of those observed.⁴⁵ In fact most of these practices simply testified to the richness of popular culture in the premodern world. But instead of seeking to uncover the multiple identities of those who converted long ago, the scholars sought to determine how genuine the conversions were; then, believing that conversion is untenable and alien, reconvert them. With the preconceived notion that their ancestors could not possibly convert, abandoning the identity that was so dear to them, the Serbian scholars furnished numerous proofs that the conversions had been temporary, partial, or tendentious. These works also frequently dated the ‘conversions’ to very recent times, just before the time of the observation, which implied the possibility of bringing the converts back into the fold:

The smallest and most exposed villages like Krstac converted first whereas the most distant, biggest and richest village Brod was the last to convert. In Brod the last remaining Christian woman Božana died only in 1856. In other

⁴³ Hadži Vasiljević, *Muslimani*. p. 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Tihomir Djordjević, ‘Preislamski ostaci među Jugoslovenskim muslimanima’ [Preislamic vestiges among Yugoslav Muslims], in his *Naš narodni život* [Our Folk Life] vol. 1. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1932.

villages there were also remaining Christians here and there. A careful researcher of this area, Milisav Lutovac, was told that in Vranište even at the beginning of this twentieth century there lived a woman, the wife of a certain Todor, whose sons provided her a special area in a corner of the house to practice her religious rites.⁴⁶

The works of these historians and ethnographers, while scholarly obsolete and politically biased in their aim to justify Serbian expansionism, have nevertheless been revived almost a century later, and many of them went to a second edition in the 1990s. Serbian historians who praised them and advocated their reprinting in the 1990s treated them as if they were almost primary sources because of their archaic style and alleged proximity to events they described.

The generation of Cvijić's disciples in the interwar period introduced an entirely new study, *characterology*. In the context of this paper, characterology is the analysis of new character traits shared by converts in addition to the ingrained notions of cowardliness and hatred of former co-nationals. One of Cvijić's disciples, Čedomil Mitrinović, produced a whole book on the analysis of the alleged new character of the converts to Islam.⁴⁷ All the good traits he found were ascribed to the 'Serbian basis' of their character, whereas the negative ones were Non-Slavic, developed under the influence of Islam. These included vanity, wastefulness, lasciviousness, sensuality, rooted mysticism, and fatalism. Mitrinović ascribes the demographic decline of Muslim converts to their inclination towards prostitution, alcohol, and 'certain perversions', among which he counted homosexuality as a specifically Ottoman import. This description is strikingly reminiscent of the models and images created much earlier in the West in the ideological construction which Said called *orientalism*.⁴⁸

The most prolific and original among the interwar characterologists was Vladimir Dvorniković. He claimed that Islamisation nourished a psychology of accommodation (in order to preserve old privileges) and 'a compromise-like biology of the mob.'⁴⁹ Dvorniković interpreted Islamisation in Bosnia as a consequence of church and feudal anarchy, and also of foreign, notably Hungarian pressure on Bosnian and Bogomil independence. In glorifying the Bosnian Bogomil Movement as an autochthonous Slav freedom and statehood-oriented movement, and an authentic religious expression, Dvorniković explained Islamisation as

⁴⁶ Dimitrije Bogdanović, *Knjiga o Kosovu* [Book on Kosovo]. Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1986, pp. 96-97.

⁴⁷ Čedomil Mitrinović, *Naši muslimani* [Our Muslims]. Belgrade: 1926.

⁴⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Dvorniković, *Borba ideja* [Struggle of Ideas]. Belgrade: Službeni list, 1995; first edition 1937, p. 58.

popular defiance: 'Bosnia has saved itself from Rome and Hungary! The Bosnian Marko has converted himself into a Turk out of sheer spite.'⁵⁰

NEVER -ENDING CONVERSIONS

The interwar Yugoslav State finally rallied all Serbs in one state headed by their monarch, but the need for an integrative and bonding nationalist ideology had not receded. For Serbs in Serbia this was the first experience of living in a multiethnic and multireligious country where they constituted less than a half of the total population. There was also the issue of binding the Serbian intelligentsia to the church. Since the end of the eighteenth century a significant segment of the intelligentsia had been militantly secular, and a conflict between the church and the intelligentsia was increasingly perceived as destructive both for the church and the nation. Under these circumstances, the myth of dissension through conversion gained increasing relevance and was used to illustrate both modern atheism and anti-nationalism, as in the following passage from a 1933 treatise:

Once upon a time our 'noble' elders converted into Islam, thus saving their bodies. Others saved their bodies and souls by remaining loyal to their religion, innocent and patient. A third group waged continuous wars in a bid to blend the nation and the faith. And when finally the third group liberated the others, there are still some 'noble' and 'wise' who eagerly embrace 'Islam': This 'Islam' is our intelligentsia's atheism, it is shame and treason of an age-old Orthodox faith.⁵¹

In interwar Serbian historiography a division arose between those who accepted 'the Bogomil theory' and those who maintained that the Bogomils were in fact Orthodox Serbs. The assumption that prevailed was that Orthodox Serbs could not have committed apostasy and that only Bogomils were Islamised.⁵² Serbs had a continual, uninterrupted religious adherence to their church, and faith was an inextricable part of their soul and character, as this ethnographer insisted:

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 81. Marko here is synonym for a Christian.

⁵¹ Mihailo Popović, *Istoriska uloga Srpske Crkve u čuvanju narodnosti i stvaranju države* [Historical Role of the Serbian Church in Preservation of Nationality and Creation of State]. Belgrade, 1933.

⁵² Vasa Čubrilović, *Prvi Srpski ustanak i bosanski Srbi* [The First Serbian Uprising and the Bosnian Serbs]. Belgrade: Geca Kon, 1939, p. 12; and Jovan Tomić, *Deset godina iz istorije srpskog naroda i crkve pod Turcima 1683-1693* [Ten years in the history of the Serbian people and church under Turkish rule 1683-1693]. Belgrade: 1902, p. 3.

The faith of the people remains unspoiled in spite of all assaults; The People feel attached to their faith and will never abandon it. Whoever attacks it becomes alien to people's soul.⁵³

Belief in and advocacy of solid and unbreakable ties between Serbhood and Orthodoxy and their mutual common interests became particularly manifest as the interethnic and interreligious tensions in the country rose. Under these new circumstances the mythologized version of Islamisation found new uses. Church historian Majeovski writes:

Massive conversions from Orthodoxy into Islam were recorded only in the first period of the collapse and subjugation of the Serbs, and were typically found among the higher classes. These conversions helped the noblemen to save their property. Later, despite the fear of persecution, conversions into Islam or other religions happened rarely, unwillingly and unconsciously. Cases of dissension from the faith, independent of external circumstances, among Orthodox Serbs in Turkey, were rare, almost imperceptible. Conversely, most Serbs not only preserved, but with the passage of time also confirmed their belief in the genuineness of their faith. It moreover remained unshakeable in the face of persecutions, propaganda and martyrdom.⁵⁴

This attitude was revived half a century later, when the ethnic tensions of the 1980s threatened the existence of another Yugoslavia, this time in a socialist guise, and in this new incarnation it continues to hold sway. Thus, it is argued that in Bosnia “the widespread Bogomil sect did not hold Christianity in high esteem, while in Kosovo only the Albanians, as fickle, professional warriors and inclined to dictatorship, converted to Islam—in contrast to the freedom-loving and individualistic Serbs.”⁵⁵ Conversion is depicted as the main thrust of the Ottoman policy and the essence of the *millet* principle is disregarded. The medievalist Miodrag M. Petrović writes about the humiliating effects of Islamisation and by and large excludes the Serbs from it.⁵⁶ The Albanian presence in Kosovo is explained as a result of a migration of Islamised Albanians into the area at the end of the seventeenth century. At the same time, Serbs embraced Islam only through coercion and deception. The prominent historian Bataković writes:

Many Serbs accepted Islamisation as a necessary evil, waiting for the moment when they could revert to the faith of their ancestors, but most of

⁵³ Rađenović, Petar. *Bjelajsko Polje i Bravsko ispitivanje*. Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1925, cited in Mile Nedeljković, *Krst i Polmesec Najstrašnja srpska razdeoba* [Cross and Crescent: The Most Horrible Serbian Division]. Belgrade: Politika, 1993, p. 117.

⁵⁴ Vladimir A. Majeovski, *Srpski patrijarh Varnava i njegovo doba I* [The Serbian Patriarch Varnava and His Age I]. Osijek: A.Rot, 1933, p. 14.

⁵⁵ Alex N. Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich, *The Saga of Kosovo: Focus on Serbian-Albanian Relations*. Boulder: East-European Monographs, 1984, p. 48.

⁵⁶ Miodrag M. Petrović, ‘Spisi o izmailčanskoj veri u Zakonopravilu Svetog Save’ [Writings on Islam in Saint Sava's Legal Codex], *Istorijski časopis* vol. XLII-XLIII, 1995-1996, pp. 5-23.

them never lived to see that day. ... Albanization began only when Islamised Serbs, devoid of national feelings, married girls from the ethnic Albanian tribal community.⁵⁷

Bataković claims that a strange synergy existed between the Ottoman Porte, the Roman Curia, and local Albanians in their concerted efforts to convert the Serbs.⁵⁸ According to the church historian Slijepčević this was the second Kosovo debacle, more tragic than the first one, for this time the political subjugation entailed spiritual estrangement.⁵⁹ Islamisation is both the cause of and a synonym for the Albanization of Kosovo and Metohija.

None of these works use Ottoman sources (because of the language barrier). More effort is invested in the refutation of the Bogomil theory and the myths of the origins of the present-day Bošnjaks than in any research aimed at explaining the delicacy of the numerous layers of the process of Islamisation.⁶⁰ Foreign interpretations, which perceive the process of Islamisation in Bosnia and in the Balkans in a broader perspective, are disregarded.⁶¹ Comparison with other regions where substantial Islamisation has occurred is lacking. The influence of dervish orders is never mentioned by Serbian authors, while some foreign authors espouse this factor as most significant.⁶² Overlooking all these factors Serbian historiography still relies on mythologized notions of blood tribute (*devshirme*) and coercion as major tools of Islamisation, even though *devshirme* no longer is interpreted as a religious, but rather as a military measure aimed at strengthening Ottoman military power and as a compensation for the exemption of Christians from military service.⁶³

In the encyclopedic *Istorija srpskog naroda [History of the Serbian People]*, compiled by Serbia's foremost historians, Radovan Samardžić dismisses even the possibility of voluntary conversion. Disregarding apparently voluntary cases of acceptance of Islam, Samardžić assesses all conversion as psychologically and physically coercive:

The fact that Islamisation was most thoroughly carried out among the Serbs is not negligible. All discussions about forced or non-forced conversion into Islam are futile, for any abandonment of one faith and acceptance of the

⁵⁷ Dušan Bataković, *The Kosovo Chronicle*. Belgrade: Plato, 1992, p. 51.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Đoko Slijepčević, *Srpsko-arbanaški odnosi kroz vekove [Serbian-Albanian Relations Through the Centuries]*. Himmelstür: 1983, pp. 139-140.

⁶⁰ See Ema Miljković, 'Muslimanstvo i Bogomilstvo u istoriografiji' [Islam and Bogomilism in Historiography], in Slavenko Terzić, ed., *Bosna i Hercegovina od srednjeg veka do novijeg vremena [Bosnia and Herzegovina from Middle Ages to Modern Times]*. Belgrade, Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1995.

⁶¹ Notably the works of John V. A. Fine and Srećko Džaja.

⁶² Peter F. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule 1354-1804*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977, pp. 53-54.

⁶³ Nedeljковић, *Krst i Polumesec*, pp. 61-62.

other religion, both collectively and individually, cannot be imagined without an earlier pressure. Among the most onerous pressure is the promise of a better and safer existence, but also persuasion that the best religion is the one offered, for it has richer contents, causes less moral dilemmas, offers satisfaction every day and ensures a paradise. In the face of dissipation caused by invasions, Serbs embraced Islam in order to save their lives and property, but also because of the need to become equal with those who had all the rights, and to feel and show to the other world their enhanced importance. In Serbian territories fewer Turks settled than in other countries, but they insisted on the Islamisation of the local population. They were shrewd enough to realise that converts to Islam more skilfully than others could corrupt their former fellow-nationals and cousins. In the Balkans and notably in the Near East, the historical layers were too deep. This meant that converts to Islam subconsciously hated those whom they had abandoned, and thus re-asserted themselves before the latter by sporadic venting of their anger.⁶⁴

Though they rest on the thesis of the forced nature of conversions, no study explains what is meant by 'coercion' and what effect it may have after several generations (not to say centuries). There are no studies that deal comprehensively with the issue of the Turkish legacy in Serbia and the age-old interaction between the Islamised and other Muslim peoples, although we know that this enormous religious and cultural exchange contributed to the formation of a specific Muslim identity in the Balkans.⁶⁵

In my reading, the persistence of two mythologized causes for conversion in Serbian historiography stems from a methodology which depicts all phenomena, including religious conversions, as linked to the national past. In a teleological way, within the context of the ongoing struggle for survival and resistance, occupation and religious conversion are collapsed into one act. The past is viewed in light of the division into occupiers and subjugated and the nation is seen as the principal protagonist of historical developments. History is viewed from the perspective of the Christian symbolism of suffering and sacrifice, and translated into a story of unique martyrdom, popular resistance, and the heroism of Serbian leaders. One example comes from Bataković:

Those who suffered most during these centuries of utter lawlessness were the Serbs. They were untrustworthy subjects who would rise up every time the

⁶⁴ Radovan Samardžić, ed., *Istorija srpskog naroda II* [History of the Serbian People II]. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1982, p. 14.

⁶⁵ French historian of Serbian origin Alexandre Popovic has written extensively on the topic. See his *L'Islam balkanique. Les Musulmans du sud/est européen dans la période post-Ottomane* vol. II. Berlin: Osteuropa Institut an der Freien Universitat Balkanologische Veröffentlichungen, 1986.

Turks waged war against one of the neighbouring Great Powers, and Serb patriarchs led the people into enemy land.⁶⁶

The American historians of Serbia Alex Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich assert that Balkan peoples throughout history learned their survival lesson well, and adapted to new circumstances in one of two ways: Some chose a more difficult road, while others chose compromise in what they considered a temporary situation – an allusion to the Islamisation of Albanians. The Serbs, the two authors maintain, belong to the first category, for ‘the Kosovo syndrome does not let them behave differently.’⁶⁷

The Union Question

In a similar way, attempts at Union with the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century are generally projected as attempts to destroy an alleged Serbian national individuality.⁶⁸ Serbian historiography has amassed abundant historical material and studied intensely attempts at Union, but has not yet produced a critical comparative assessment of the Union and of conversion of Serbs to Catholicism in the context of the relations, ideas, and principles of religious tolerance prevailing at the time.⁶⁹

A schematised view, along lines drawn long ago by the interwar historian Stanoje Stanojević, in his *History of the Serbian People*, still prevails: “Without scruples and considerations, and contrary to law and justice, Catholic propaganda was operating forcibly and cruelly.... notably Jesuits against Orthodoxy, and they imposed the Union on Serbs forcibly, and by deception.”⁷⁰ Consistent with the teleological principle of national history writing, most attention is paid to resistance to the Union.⁷¹ The most prolific historian of the

⁶⁶ Batakovic, *The Kosovo Chronicle*. p. 51.

⁶⁷ Dragnich and Todorovich, *The Saga of Kosovo*. p. 53.

⁶⁸ Slavko Gavrilović: ‘Union of Serbs in Croatia, Slavonia and Baranja XVI-XVIII Century’, in *Srpski narod van granica današnje SR Jugoslavije* [Serbian People Outside the Borders of the Current FR Yugoslavia]. Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 1996, p. 38.

⁶⁹ For the historical development of religious tolerance principles in the region, see Bela K. Kiraly, *Tolerance and Movement of Religious Dissent in Eastern Europe*. Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1975. Union with the Roman Catholic Church was sometimes an incentive for the emergence or guarantee of national language and autonomy. In reference to Albanians, see Max Demeter Peyfuss, ‘Religious Confession and Nationality in the Case of the Albanians’, in D.A. Kerr, *Religion, State and Ethnic Groups*. Dartmouth: Aldershot, 1992. In reference to Romanians, see Keith Hitchens, *A Nation Discovered: Romanian Intellectuals in Transylvania and the Idea of Nation 1700/1848*. Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1989.

⁷⁰ Stanoje Stanojević, *Istorija srpskog naroda* [History of the Serbian People], Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1926, p. 288.

⁷¹ Slavko Gavrilović, ‘Borba protiv unijačenja u karlovačkom generalatu’ [Struggle Against Union in Karlovac District] and Kosta Milutinović, ‘U borbi protiv unijačenja’ [Combating Union] in *Istorija srpskog naroda IV-1 and V-2*, Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1986 and 1981; Dušan Kašić, *Otpor marčanskoj uniji* [Resistance to Marča Union]. Belgrade: Pravoslavljje, 1986; *Zborniko Srbima u Hrvatskoj 3* [Compendium on the Serbs in Croatia 3]. Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1995 carried three articles on Union.

subject, Slavko Gavrilović, tells us that when resistance was crushed, as in the case of Žumberak, “a dark Jesuit-Uniate curtain fell over its people.”⁷² Conflicts between the flock and the clergy, in particular the higher church authorities, which until the late nineteenth century frequently were the instigators behind the Union, are neglected.⁷³ Negotiations about Union, which some of the Serbian Church hierarchy and individual bishops were involved in, are viewed as diplomatic manoeuvres, while every action on behalf of the Catholic Church is branded as a brutal pressure.

Neglected and distant Serbian Orthodox communities obviously bowed to the Pope but in the right moment they would return, without any hesitation, to their faith.⁷⁴

The dominant characterisation in Serbian historiography of the conduct of the Serbian clergy as ‘patriotic’ conflicts with the not-so-positive picture painted by foreign historians.⁷⁵ Similar disagreements are present in interpretations of attempts at the conversion of Catholics into Orthodoxy. Forced ‘re-conversion’ of Muslims from the nineteenth century on are wholly disregarded in Serbian historiography.

The most problematic aspect of research on the Union, however, is the uncritical linking of events in the past with current ones. Time compression is a classic method of historical manipulation. For Slavko Gavrilović the attempts at Union are continuous:

The Serbs from Dalmatia to Baranja were for centuries exposed to the pressure of Catholic religious and political authorities to renounce their Orthodox religion, church and nationality, to become Catholics and Uniats, and consequently Croats, and after that last stage to become principal enemies of the religious and ethnic milieu from which they originated... and there seems to be no end in sight of that phenomenon.⁷⁶

In the same vein, in his introduction to a translation of a nineteenth-century Austrian history of Union in the Croatian Military Border, Vasilije Krestić claims:

Schwiker and his works were glossed over; the history of our Serbs who were forced into Union was falsified and interpreted in the spirit of the

⁷² Slavko Gavrilović, ‘Unijačenje i pokatoličavanje Srba XIII-XIX vek’ [Union and Conversion to Catholicism of Serbs XIII–XIX Century] in his *Iz istorije Srba u Hrvatskoj, Slavoniji i Ugarskoj XV-XVIII vek* [From the History of Serbs in Croatia, Slavonia and Hungary XV-XVIII century]. Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 1993, p. 43.

⁷³ As late as in 1891, locals of the village Dragotinja in Krajina threatened the top church authorities that they would all convert to Catholicism if their village parish priest was not reinstated. Archives of Karlovci Metropolitanate (AMK), Fond A 1891-168.

⁷⁴ Samardžić, ed., *Istorija srpskog naroda III-2* [History of the Serbian People III 2], Belgrade: SZK, 1985, p. 87.

⁷⁵ See Slavko Gavrilović ‘J. V. Kostjašov, *Srbi u Habsburškoj monarhiji u XVIII veku*’ [Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy in the XVIII Century], review in *Zbornik za istoriju MS*, 1999.

⁷⁶ Slavko Gavrilović, ‘Problem unijačenja i kroatizacija Srba’ [The Problem of Union and Croatisation of Serbs], in *Republika Srpska Krajina*. Belgrade, Knin: Srpsko kulturno društvo Zora, 1996, p. 124.

aggressive ideas of the Croat Catholic church and Greater Croatia chauvinists. They from the early days saw the members of the Orthodox church only as members of schism, who by all the means available were to be converted to the 'only genuine and saving Catholic church.'⁷⁷

And in the conclusion to the history, Jovan Olbina writes:

The history of the Serbs in the Croat areas is nothing but a terrible continuity of events. There is nothing new under the Sun. The book enables us to understand the reality and prepare us for the future, since the situation 120 years ago⁷⁸ is comparable to situations which our generation experiences, only in a different context. In only 19 years Orthodoxy has disappeared from Žumberak, and all Serbs became Croats, and their descendants in our times are more militant and blood-thirsty than many of their Roman-Catholic brothers.⁷⁹

This metaphor of the catholicised Serb as the most deadly enemy of Serbhood, together with the similar image of Islamised Serbs, of which we have seen many examples, is imposed as the key element in the formation of the image of the Other. The recent synthetic overview of the nature and the consequences of religious conversions for Serbs by the anthropologist Bojan Jovanović shows that over more than a century only the emphasis has shifted - the mythologized interpretations remain:

In accepting Islam for the sake of the preservation of the existing feudal privileges or the acquisition of new privileges, Serbs became intolerant and angry opponents of their former ethnic brothers. This new identity of converts who identified with the one of conquerors is responsible for the converts' subconscious, internal conflict which manifests itself in their typical irrationality. As preservation of the ethnic identity was a precondition for the continuity of their culture, acceptance of another religion was a crucial step towards ethnical estrangement ... The attempts at Union and the re-christening of Serbs [sic] in the Western part of the Balkan peninsula, in Dalmatia and Croatia had the effect of annulling and denying their ethnic identity. During the recent war this acquired the hallmarks of a genocide, as is well known.⁸⁰

Symptomatically, the Serbian historiographic production on the Union and Islamisation gained ground as an integral part of the nationalist campaign prior to the outbreak of World War II and on the eve of the recent wars. In the late 1930s, texts on

⁷⁷ Vasilije D. Krestić in introduction to the second edition of Johan Hajnrh Šviker, *Istorija unijaćenja Srba u Vojnoj Krajini* [History of Union of Serbs in the Military Border], translated by Nikola Živković, Novi Sad: Arhiv Vojvodine, 1995. In the original, Johann Heinrich Schwicker, *Zur Geschichte der kirchlichen Union in der croatische Militärgrenze*. Wien: Archiv für österreichische Geschichte 52, 1874.

⁷⁸ This mistake is repeated twice; the Union, in fact, occurred 220 years before the book was written.

⁷⁹ Jovan Olbina in afterword of the Serbian translation of Schwicker's book, p. 96.

⁸⁰ Bojan Jovanović, 'Srbi u ključu nacionalne karakterologije'[Serbs in the Light of National Characterology], in Jovanović, ed. *Karakterologija Srba*, p. 22.

Islamisation dominated *Srpski glas* [Serbian Voice], the journal of the leading intellectuals, who gathered in the Serbian Cultural Club, and the prestigious *Srpski književni glasnik* [Serbian Literary Gazette]. In 1991, on the eve of the almost ten-year war that ravaged the former Yugoslavia, these texts were republished,⁸¹ as was Andrić's doctoral thesis, revived as an 'absolutely correct analysis.'⁸² The nationalist campaign not only intensified old prejudices and stereotypes about conversions, but also produced new ones. A veritable flood of press articles spreading hatred depicted Muslims as an imminent danger.⁸³ The revived anti-Muslim position shares many of the notions of contemporary orientalism, such as an emphasis on the alleged foreign, Asian, or African descent of the Bosnian Muslims, their alleged racial characteristics, and, notably, their oriental sensuality, weak character, and fickleness. The dominant allusion is to a great threat posed, in the shape of Radical Islam, to European civilisation as embodied by Serbs, and great emphasis is placed on connections between Bosnian Muslims and Libya and Iraq.

On the other hand, in Serbian public opinion in the 1980s, Union and conversion to Catholicism was exclusively linked to the forcible conversions of Serbs in Ustaša Croatia during the Second World War. Serbian historians flooded the market with books on that topic.⁸⁴ The nationalist campaign fed on this identification and created fear among Serbs—namely that they might see a repeat of that experience in Croatia. All the dangers that the Serbian nation is facing have been explained by borrowing notions of religious conversion and extended to include any change of religion, the acceptance of atheism and

⁸¹ Miodrag Jovičić, ed., *Jako srpstvo – jaka Jugoslavija* [Strong Serbhood – Strong Yugoslavia]. Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1991.

⁸² Miroljub Jevtić, *Islam u delu Ive Andrića* [Islam in the Work of Ivo Andrić]. Belgrade: author, 2000 14. This work was created as a response to Muhsin Rizvić, *Bosanski muslimani u Andrićevo svijetu* [Bosnian Muslims in Andrić's world]. Sarajevo: Ljiljan, 1995. These books attempt to confirm or deny Andrić's views in the context of contemporary political claims.

⁸³ There is no comprehensive study about hate speech used by the Serbian media on the eve of new wars. For the most detailed review, see Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*, pp. 24-32 and 64-73.

⁸⁴ Veljko Djurić, *Ustaše i pravoslavlje: Hrvatska pravoslavna crkva* [Ustašas and Orthodoxy: the Croat Orthodox Church]. Belgrade: Beletra, 1989; Veljko Djurić, *Prekrštavanje Srba u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj: prilozi za istoriju verskog genocida* [Conversion of Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia: contributions to the history of religious genocide]. Belgrade: Alfa, 1991; Milan Bulajić, *Misija Vatikana u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj: 'Politika Stepinac' razbijanja jugoslovenske države i pokatoličavanja pravoslavnih Srba po cijenu genocida* 2 vol. [The Vatican's Mission in the Independent State of Croatia: 'Stepinac-style' policy of breaking up the Yugoslav state and conversion to Catholicism of Orthodox Serbs at the cost of genocide - 2 vol.]. Belgrade: Politika, 1992; Sima Simić, *Prekrštavanje Srba u Drugom svetskom ratu* [Conversion of Serbs in World War II]. First edition, Titograd: 1959;; second, Belgrade: Kultura, 1990.

Yugoslavism; having children in mixed marriages, and even moving to other countries in search of education or employment.⁸⁵

DISSONANT VOICES

Despite the domination of myth production and reproduction in Serbian historiography on conversions there were dissonant voices that sometimes sounded in clear difference with the rest. Jovan Hadži Vasiljević, who was among the first Serbian historians to write about Islamisation, noted that the myth about forcible Islamisation originated in the difficult conditions of life in the Turkish Empire at the end of the seventeenth century and after, including continuous Turkish wars with Christian states, Christian uprisings, and migrations. He stressed that “Our Church, our émigrés, writers, warriors, rebels, etc. created the widely spread conviction that the higher Turkish authorities exerted pressure on Christians to convert to Islam.”⁸⁶ In the late nineteenth century, some writers, notably Stevan Sremac and Jelena Dimitrijević, depicted the East, and 'domestic' Muslims as its representatives, in a favourable light.⁸⁷ These dissonant voices arose mostly from people of ideological, often socialist persuasions who held to class roots of social and historical processes. Vasa Pelagić, an early socialist and anticlericalist, is the one who shows most understanding of Islamisation:

Most people converted to Islam somewhat voluntarily, for personal interests and they were not forced by knife or arson. The nobility converted to preserve their noble status, and the poor to get away from the spahis or some oppression. Hundreds of thousands preferred to ease their burdens and enjoy material welfare and personal freedom and safety rather than preserve their religion so they easily converted. This was fostered by the democratic nature of the Muslim faith and the Muslim government. Furthermore, the Bogomils converted to the last person because both Orthodox and Catholics persecuted them for their liberal faith.⁸⁸

Another early socialist, Dragiša Lapčević, thought that Serbian scholars should establish the real origins of our Muslims, that is, “the traces of the medieval ethic and the life

⁸⁵ Milan Bursać, ‘Slabljenje biološke i duhovne snage srpskog naroda’, in *Geopolitička stvarnost Srba* [The Geopolitical Reality of the Serbs]. Belgrade: Institut za geopolitičke studije, 1997, p. 454.

⁸⁶ Hadži Vasiljević, *Muslimani*, p. 54.

⁸⁷ See Ivan Šop, *Istok u srpskoj književnosti, Šest pisaca-šest vidjenja* [The Orient in Serbian literature]. Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1982.

⁸⁸ Vasa Pelagić, ‘Istorija bosansko-hercegovačke bune’ [History of the Uprising in Bosnia-Herzegovina] in *Izabrana djela* III. Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1971. First edition Budapest: 1879.

of our people in the current material and spiritual culture of our Muslims.”⁸⁹ Friendly towards Muslims, Lapčević asserts that the nature of division does not lie in Islam or in any other religion but rather in the economic and social conditions of the time. Therefore, Lapčević optimistically thought, economic and social development will lessen the influence of religious denominations.

The left-wing sociologist and post-World War II official Streten Vukosavljević explained the emigration and territorial expansion of the Albanians as a consequence of their cattle-breeding economy and tribal community, and not as part of a deliberate strategy of conversion. Vukosavljević even gave an example of how the Islamisation of the Slavic population in Sandžak functioned as a barrier to Albanisation.⁹⁰ According to him, Islamisation is a reflection of the tribal mentality of Dinaric people, and their bellicosity and obstinacy often result in fragmentation and confrontation. For that reason, Islamisation is more common in mountainous areas than in the plains:

The roots of conversion to Islam lie in the tribal mentality of the people. Hence, the largest number of converts came from those tribes, even those most protected from the Turkish influence and invasions, who attached great value to heroism and knighthood. Vukosavljević supports his notion with the folk saying ‘In every wheat there are wild oats, most of them are found in the best wheat’⁹¹

Still, very few works on Islamisation from the perspective of class relations were written at the time of Communist Yugoslavia.⁹² Rather, the whole issue was avoided and little was done to change existing notions. For example Andrić’s doctoral dissertation was prevented from being published, for, as Communist ideologue Rodoljub Čolaković maintained, “It is a hastily written thesis which superficially discusses very complex issues, Bogomils, Islamisation of part of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, relations between religions, etc.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Dragiša Lapčević, *O našim muslimanima sociološke i etnografske beleške* [On Our Muslims: Sociological and Ethnographic Notes]. Belgrade: Geca Kon, 1925, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁰ Streten Vukosavljević, *Istorija seljačkog društva I* [History of Peasant Society]. Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka, 1952.

⁹¹ Streten Vukosavljević, ‘Plemenski i seljački mentalitet’ [Tribal and Peasant Mentality], in Jovanović, ed., *Karakterologija Srba*, p. 151.

⁹² Aleksandar Matkovski, ‘L’Islam aux yeux des non-musulmans des Balkans’, *Balkanica* IV 1973; Nedim Filipović ‘Napomene o islamizaciji u Bosni i Hercegovini u XV vijeku’ [Notes on Islamisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the XVth Century], in *Godišnjak ANUBH* VII, 1970.

⁹³ Cited in Nikola B. Popović, ‘Srpski pisci i naučnici o Bosni i Hercegovini. Priredio: Zdravko Antonić. Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ, 1995’ [Serbian Writers and Scientists on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Prepared by: Zdravko Antonić], review, *Balkanica* XXVII, 1996, p. 374.

The most prominent interwar historian and state official Vladimir Ćorović, who was one of the advocates of the Bogomil theory and who often described Muslims as cowardly and covetous, in his *History of Bosnia and Herzegovina* actually gives a complex and objective view on Islamisation. He takes into consideration numerous factors, such as the absence of a strong Orthodox or Catholic church organisation in Bosnia, political divisions on the eve of the Turkish invasion, economic motives, the migration of Muslims to Bosnia in later centuries, etc.⁹⁴

In assessments of Islamisation some contemporary Serbian scholars make economic, cultural, and status arguments.⁹⁵ Olga Zirojević writes about Islamisation in an analytical and impartial way, without drawing parallels to current events.⁹⁶ The historian Vladimir Stojančević treats Islamisation as part of the process of ethnic symbiosis.⁹⁷ Milorad Ekmečić suggests that Islamisation was the result of insufficiently sophisticated social organisation; the areas inhabited by cattle-breeders who lacked state structures and strong nobility, and consequently also a firm cultural and territorial base, were most vulnerable to Islamisation.⁹⁸ Some observers on the Union, like Bogumil Hrabak, indicate the complexity and ambivalence of the Union throughout history, and with respect to Dalmatia concludes that:

The people were to a large extent ignorant of religious matters, and faced with turbulent times they isolated themselves and adjusted to the new situation to the necessary extent. People were happy for not having too many priests in their midst, for until the late XVIIIth century they were principal instigators for entering the Union.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

The myths on religious conversions in the Serbian context transcend the clusters of myths proposed in the introductory section of this paper, or rather encompass several of

⁹⁴ Vladimir Ćorović, *Bosna i Hercegovina* [Bosnia and Herzegovina]. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1925.

⁹⁵ Though not the main topic of his work, Boris Nilević synthesizes scholarship on Islamisation without bias in his *Srpska pravoslavna crkva u Bosni i Hercegovini do obnove Pečke patrijaršije 1557. godine* [Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina until the Restoration of the Peć Patriarchate in 1557]. Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1990, pp. 116-120.

⁹⁶ See 'Pitanje islamizacije Jevreja' [The Issue of Islamisation of Jews], *Istorijski časopis* XLII-XLIII 1995-1996, pp. 49-61, and 'Alahovi hrišćani' [Allah's Christians], *Republika* 282-283, 2002.

⁹⁷ Vladimir Stojančević, 'O nekim istorijskim faktorima kao uzrocima u procesima etničke simbioze na balkanskom poluostrvu u prvoj polovini 19 veka' [On some historical factors as cause of processes of ethnic symbiosis in the Balkan Peninsula in the first half of the nineteenth century], *Istorijski časopis*, XL-XLI, 1993-1994, pp. 153-162.

⁹⁸ Milorad Ekmečić, 'Language and Religion as the Integrating and Disintegrating Factors in Modern Yugoslav History', *Istorija XX veka*, Vol XI 1-2, 1993, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁹ Bogumil Hrabak, 'Srbi u Dalmaciji i Boki Kotorskoj od početka XVI do kraja XVIII veka' [Serbs in Dalmatia and Boka Kotorska since the early XVI to late XVIII Century], in *Srpski narod van granica današnje SR Jugoslavije*. p. 79.

them.¹⁰⁰ By de-emphasising or explicitly denying any cultural or other common trait with a convert they give a perfect example of a *sui generis* myth. However, in a different interpretation of conversion, it is suggested that the act of conversion does not constitute a major change at all, and all those who converted are essentially Serbian, albeit with no say. Equally suitable is the *antemurale* myth, one of the most influential among Serbian myths, the one of redemption and suffering evident in the much-researched Kosovo myth. Conversions are evidence of the sorrowful history and also a justification for the special rights and mission of unconverted Serbs, and these rights have been invoked several times over the last two centuries. In brief, the Serbs have allegedly suffered for centuries from an aggressive conversion campaign; the world should recognise this and acknowledge their present moral and cultural superiority as well as their right to expansion. Finally, mythologized perceptions of the religious conversions are an important part of the myths of ethnogenesis and antiquity as well as myths of kinship and shared descent. Depending on the interpretation or the political project behind them, different views on religious conversion are called up to prove the right to a contested territory, as in the case of the Albanians, or to deny exclusive nationhood or rights to the Bošnjaks or the Croats - since they are nothing but converted Serbs.

My research has shown that the events and processes associated with Islamisation and the Union with the Catholic Church are predominantly viewed as forced and as part of a wider conspiracy against Serbs. When the view about other religionists as craven and treacherous converts gained ground, the converts were banished not only from the popular, but also from the wider human community, as established by universal ethical categories. Thus, the imperatives of nationalism have transformed the antagonism that existed in premodern times into antagonisms of nations that appropriate and reinterpret religious notions to the benefit of their own political projects. The nationalist discourse that dominates Serbian history writing has tended to deny the kind of historical change of which the conversions are a perfect example, or they have insisted on the ultimate irrelevance of these changes. The typical anti-historical feature of the religious discourse was enriched with an empiricist 'scientific' search for 'facts' by historians and ethnologists. Insisting that they were detailing 'hard facts', these narratives were, in the manner of myths, arranged with the logic of the imaginary - namely ideological purposes and imperatives. Furthermore, the secular

¹⁰⁰ George Schöpflin, 'The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths', in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin, eds., *Myths and Nationhood*. London: Hurst, 1997, pp. 19-35.

background of most writers prompted them to see conversion exclusively as a change of identification without any regard for the subjective beliefs of the people themselves. In this way they reduced religion to a mode of social and political organization.

In the Serbian case, the myth of religious conversion has acquired the significance of a paradigm, building a framework of reference that has been used for all kinds of dissension and opposition to the 'national imperative'. It was also essential in the construction of stereotypes of the converts' character, and these stereotypes were later extended to include entire 'converted' nations. Stereotypes and myths about religious conversions were in the Serbian case crucial in constructing the image of neighbouring peoples as renegades, dissidents, and cowards, with all the detrimental consequences that followed.