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CHRIST'S ETHNONATIONALIST CRUCIFIXION: SACRALISATION OF ETHNONATIONALIST AGENDAS WITHIN CROATIAN CATHOLICISM AND SERBIAN ORTHODOXY – CAUSES AND EFFECTS

By Zoran Grozdanov and Branko Sekulić

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Abstract

In this article, the authors look into the theological background of the support that nation-states in the Western Balkans received during their formation at the end of the 20th century. Although many articles were written on the causes of the wars for national independence, and on the relationship between religious narratives and ethnic exclusion, very few were written on the theological support of the ethnic exclusion. The authors show that the roots of making ethnos and affiliation with certain nations in Eastern Europe can be found in the writings of late Pope John Paul II and Serbian Orthodox Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. By analyzing their writings in which they turned ethnic and national affiliation into a religious value, the authors shed new light on the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe, which is tightly connected to theological discourse.

Keywords: nation, ethnicity, ethnonationalism, John Paul II, Croatia, Serbia, Nikolaj Velimirović.

1. The Effects of Sacralization of Ethnonationalist Agendas

Scene 1

It is August 1995. In this extremely hot month in the Balkans, Croatia is celebrating the reclaiming of the areas that were under siege for years.¹ This victory after a war, in which a third of Croatia was under occupation by Serbian paramilitary units and the Yugoslavian National Army, was made possible by an expeditious battle led by the Croatian Army in the areas of Central and South Croatia. The battle, called *Operation Storm*, was completed on August 7 with the liberation of Knin, the capital of the Serbian territorial unit called The Republic of Serbian Krajina—formed in 1991. This territory was a home to Serbs who had settled there during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to serve as keepers of the border with the Ottoman Empire. As Knin was reclaimed by the Croatian Army, hundreds of thousands of Serbs, former soldiers, old people, women, and children were walking in endless lines and some were travelling by tractors towards the Republic of Serbia, careful not to cross over to Bosnian territory, where at the time, war was raging. To celebrate the victory, Croatian state officials and a number of Church dignitaries, headed by the then president Franjo Tuđman, organized the so-called Freedom Train, which took them from Zagreb all the way to Split on August 26. This all took place only three weeks after the liberation of occupied Croatian areas, three weeks after the exodus of thousands of people of Serbian nationality from areas that were under occupation, and only a couple of days after the crimes Croatian soldiers committed against 361 Serbian old people and women, who decided to stay on their properties following Tuđman's propaganda that those who stay would suffer no harm.²

At the Knin railway station, Tuđman gave a speech in which he, among other things, stated that the Serbs who had fled Serbian Krajina during and after the Operation Storm, “didn't even have time to collect their dirty money and their dirty underwear.”³ Right behind Tuđman stood dignitaries of the Catholic Church in Croatia. They participated in the whole event and in the voyage of the Freedom Train. The presence of dignitaries of the Catholic Church in Croatia at this event meant that, finally, the Croatian “centuries-old dream” came true, though covered in blood and crimes that took place around that time. The

¹ Croatia restored its full territorial integrity in 1998 through peaceful re-integration of the eastern part of Croatia.

² Croatian NGO Documenta extensively documented the crimes at <https://www.documenta.hr/en/vra-olujka-24-godine-poslije.html>.

³ See full speech at https://hr.wikisource.org/wiki/Govor_Franje_Tuđmana_u_Kninu_26._kolovoza_1995.

Croatian Bishops' Conference, as well as Cardinal Franjo Kuharić, condemned the crimes and called for forgiveness, inviting the Serbian people not to leave their homes. At the same time, Serbian refugees on their tractors and wasted cars arrived at their final destinations in Serbia, hoping that their “home country” would provide shelter, food, and safety.

Scene 2

It is the year 1991, the end of autumn. Endless lines of men, women, children and old men carrying bags are walking down the streets of a city almost completely destroyed by recent bombings. The city is Vukovar, situated at the very border with Serbia. From August 1991 to November 18, 1991, the city was under continuous shelling by the Yugoslav National Army and Serbian paramilitary units.⁴ Images of the city destroyed and lines of refugees as well as wounded soldiers being taken from the Vukovar Hospital to be executed on the site of a mass grave, Ovčara, deeply disturbed the international public, which recognized Croatia's independence only two months later.

The famous Serbian publicist and intellectual Mirko Đorđević tells us more about the atmosphere in Serbia in those days:

I remember one such incident, Vukovar was totally destroyed, it was horror, it looked like, as you may well know, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not a stone was left standing, it was done by Yugoslavian National Army. Edition of *Pravoslavlje* (“Orthodoxy”)⁵ came out and I met the chief editor in the street. “Well,” I tell him, “there is not a word in *Pravoslavlje* about what took place in Vukovar.” “Take a closer look,” he tells me, “we do mention it.” “Well then, I must read it closely, I've only just bought the issue.” On that day, in *Pravoslavlje* it was said that the children of Vukovar now breathe in joy and happiness for they have finally been liberated.

Đorđević goes on to say:

Believe it or not, we can now safely say, and it has been backed up by evidence that the Church participated in the war and in that sense, those who claim it do not exaggerate much, was a sort of a war profiteer, although it all ended badly... But the worst thing was that our Church did not take a good stand towards the whole thing, so that the suffering that our people have endured in Kosovo, Bosnia, Croatia and Slavonia fall into oblivion in the face of our indifference towards the suffering of others.⁶

⁴ It is estimated that 1800-2000 defenders and around 30000 attackers participated in the battle of Vukovar. Around 1000 defenders and around 8000 attackers were killed. See <https://www.24sata.hr/news/vukovar-najveca-tragedija-hrvatskog-naroda-u-brojkama-447403>.

⁵ *Pravoslavlje* is an official journal of Serbian Patriarchy in Belgrade.

⁶ On Đorđević's statements see <https://pescanik.net/zasto-se-u-crkvi-sapuce-2/>.

Every year, on August 5, Croatia remembers Operation Storm in Knin with huge celebrations and a solemn mass. Every year, on August 5, Serbia mourns ethnic cleansing of its people, with an obligatory *parastos* (memorial service) for Serbian victims.⁷ Croatian bishopric refers to the Operation Storm as the final realization of the Croatian dream, whereas Serbian bishopric calls it a crime.⁸ Croatian bishopric places Vukovar in the context of Croatian victimhood, while Serbian bishopric speaks of it as a Serbian victimhood. The contradictory representations of Vukovar and Operation Storm can certainly be seen as a case study of unreconciled and conflicting memories in which religious imagery played an important role.

The influence of religious imagery on the culture of memory is hardly a novelty not only in theological but also in cultural research. We are attempting to shed some light on the causes and sources of the support Croatian and Serbian clergy offered to the respective state's politics. Many articles have been written on this topic, from the ones that deal with 'atavistic, centuries-old hatred,' or with the relationship between the religious and the national, which played an important role in the Balkan Wars in the 1990s.⁹ However, very few, if any, tackle the theological background of the support, so amply provided by religious institutions in the process of making the nation-states in the Balkans.¹⁰ This paper deals with theological support dominant Christian communities provided in the making of nation-states, as well as the role this support played on notions, such as a people, ethnicity, and the Christian faith. In Croatia and Serbia, as well as Eastern Europe, these notions are of recent origin, dating from the end of the 1970s onwards, and their beginning can be traced to encyclical letters by Pope John Paul II and the theological interpretation of Orthodox Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. In the context of former Yugoslavia, the consequences of transforming the concept of a people as *ethnos* into a theological category have yet to be adequately explored. These consequences stretch from the narrative used by religious communities to strengthen ethnonationalist

⁷ On memory culture of Operation Storm, see Gordana Đerić "Semantika ćutanja" in *Intima javnosti*, ed. Gordana Đerić (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2008).

⁸ See for example the statement of the Serbian Patriarch Irinej who stated that "Operation Storm was an organized crime by Croatian state, with tacit approval of the Croatian Catholic Church." <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/patrijah-irinej-oluja-je-bila-zlocin-koji-je-planirala-hrvatska-drzava-foto-20190805>.

⁹ See for example recent research on the role of religious leaders in the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Stipe Odak, *Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding: The Role of Religious Leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (New York: Springer, 2020).

¹⁰ Many authors (e.g. Tomislav Tomasevich, Ivo Banac, Paul Mojzes, Vjekoslav Perica, Srećko Džaja, Darko Hudelist, Pål Kolstø, Boris Buden, Slavica Jakelić, Dejan Jović, Snježana Kordić, Mitja Velikonja, Davor Džalto, Srđa Popović, Ivan Pađen, Srđan Vrcan, Siniša Malešević, Željko Mardešić, Hijancid Bošković, Ivan Macut, Zvonimir Bono-Šagi, Luka Vincetić, Stipe Odak and the like.), whether through historical, cultural, legal, sociological, philosophical, theological or some other aspect have dealt with the topic of religious and national issues in the former Yugoslavia, whose work we are familiar with, but due to lack of space, we will mention only a few of them who are essential for the purposes of this paper.

narratives of political communities all the way to the influence they had on the way collective memories of the main traumatic episodes in the recent war were built. This is a consequence of both understanding the ethnic and national aspect in primordial and perennial frameworks as two concepts that prevail in the social consciousness in the former Yugoslavia—especially in the Croatian and Serbian case—and understanding the church institution as a constitutive ethnic and national element.¹¹ In other words, we shall attempt to shed some light on the fact that although dominant theologians and the Catholic and Orthodox Church dignitaries respectively advocated forgiveness and condemned violence, they did so within a pre-established ethnic-national matrix, which was embodied in already formed nation-states, the matrix which began with the position of ethnicity, intertwining its religious narrative with the ethnic one.

2. The Causes of Sacralization of Ethnonationalist Agendas

2.1. John Paul II and the Theology of Nation

Within the Catholic theology, John Paul II made a key step towards a theological appreciation of the notion of (ethnically understood) people, which had a significant influence on the conceptualization of the relationship between religious and national affiliation in Eastern Europe, especially among peoples without a sovereign state. Originating from Poland, with its rich history of the struggle for independence with Germany and Russia, in his encyclicals, and in his book, *Memory and Identity*, published in 2005, Pope

¹¹ See Duško Sekulić, “Građanski i etnički identitet: Slučaj Hrvatske [*Civic and Ethnic Identity: The Case of Croatia*]”, *Politička misao* 40, 2 (2004): 145–51.; Jasna Milošević-Đorđević, “Primordijalističko značenje nacionalnog identiteta u Srbiji [*Primordialistic Concept of National Identity in Serbia*]”, *Psihologija* 40, 3 (2007): 385–97.; Srđan Vrcan, *Nacija, nacionalizam, moderna država* [*Nation, Nationalism and Modern State*] (Zagreb: Golden marketing-Tehnička knjiga, 2006), 123.; Neven Budak, “Hrvatski identitet i povijest [*Croatian Identity and History*]”, in *Identitet kao odgojno-obrazovna vrijednost* [*Educational activity and values*], ed. Valentina Blaženka Mandarić i Ružica Razum (Zagreb: Glas koncila, 2011), 105–20.; Neven Budak, “Hrvatski identitet između prošlosti i moderniteta [*Croatian Identity between the Past and the Modernity*]”, in *Hrvatski nacionalni identitet u globalizirajućem svijetu* [*Croatian National Identity in the Globalizing World*], ed. Neven Budak i Vjeran Katunarić (Zagreb: Centar za demokraciju i pravo Miko Tripalo-Pravni fakultet, 2010), 3–4, 10.; Petar Korunić, *Rasprava o izgradnji moderne hrvatske nacije: Nacija i nacionalni identitet* [*A Discussion on the Development of Modern Croatian Nation: Nation and National Identity*] (Slavonski Brod: Hrvatski institut za povijest, Podružnica za povijest Slavonije, Srijema i Baranje, 2006), 209, 271., 351-352, 376; Mate Suić, “Pristupna razmatranja uz problem etnogeneze Hrvata [*Access Considerations Related to the Problem of Ethnogenesis of Croats*]”, in *Etnogeneza Hrvata* [*Ethnogenesis of Croats*], ed. Neven Budak (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske i Zavod za hrvatsku povijest-Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 1995), 16.; Sima Ćirković, “Srednjovjekovno razdoblje u tzv. etnogenezi balkanskih naroda [*Medieval Period in the so-called Ethnogenesis of the Balkan Peoples*]”, in *Etnogeneza Hrvata* [*Ethnogenesis of Croats*], ed. Neven Budak (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske i Zavod za hrvatsku povijest-Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 1995), 35–36.; Ivo Žanić, “Simbolični identitet Hrvatske u trokutu: raskrižje-predziđe-most [*Symbolic Identity of Croatia in the Triangle: Crossroad-Bulwark-Bridge*]”, in *Historijski mitovi na Balkanu* [*Historical Myths in the Balkans*], ed. Husnija Kamberović (Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju, 2003), 196.

John Paul II's theology of people certainly reflects the history of the Polish people throughout the centuries. Along with the aforementioned book, this Pope built his theology of people in encyclicals, which we will briefly touch upon. Special attention will be given to the following encyclicals: *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and finally *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

The problem of the relationship between nature and supernature, that goes back to Thomas Aquinas' theology, with John Paul II gains its communitarian dimension, where that which is particular (human nature) gains its theological dimension. Individual human nature is no longer solely seen as redeemed and complemented by grace, but also, the Polish Pope tells us, it is reinterpreted as being *social*. In other words, one's personal fulfillment is to be found in relationships which are not part of one's accidental properties, but of one's essence. But, the question arises: which relationships are essential to one's nature? From the point of view of biology, the first socialization takes place in one's immediate family. The theology of John Paul II is positioned between nature and grace, and is, in our opinion, the most elaborate representation of assigning theological importance to biological givens, which he no longer limits to immediate family, but spreads to culture, and therefore to one's nationality. On the other hand, he uses the universality of the Church as a corrective in lifting the particularity of natural givens to the level of the absolute. It is important to note that, although he stresses the inalienability of an individual's dignity and, referring to Second Vatican Council, "transcendence of the human person"¹² which cannot be reduced to natural particularities, John Paul II holds that one's dignity itself is inseparable from one's culture and nationality. The Pope opens his encyclical letter *Redemptor hominis* with the notion of the nature of Incarnation where "the Son of God in a certain way united himself with each man"¹³ and so "what is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing here with the 'abstract' man, but the real, 'concrete', 'historical' man."¹⁴ This Incarnation into a real, historical person, serves John Paul II as the foundation for his argument that a person is embodied with all the important elements comprising of "... his personal being and also of his community and his social being in the sphere of his own family... in the sphere of his own nation or people... in the sphere of the whole mankind," whereas these elements are determined as "the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission; he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself, the

¹² John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html

¹³ John Paul II, *Redemptor*, §8.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptor*, §13.

way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.”¹⁵ By transforming the elements such as family, society, and nationality into the categories that constitute the nature of Incarnation itself, John Paul II assigned theological significance to all the above mentioned identity markers, and in that way outlined a theology we shall name ethno-theology. He elaborates these insights in his encyclicals to come.

In *Laborem exercens* (1981) he bases human labor on family “one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work.” Family is “the first *school of work*, within the home, for every person.”¹⁶ But, in the next instant, the Pope places the subject of labor, the human, into a wider community, that of “great society to which man belongs on the basis of particular cultural and historical links,” the society whose values “make up the culture of a given nation.” By associating the values that comprise the wider community of a human with nation, the Pope makes perhaps even the most important claim within his theological assessment of temporal identities. This claim has to do with the idea that “man combines his deepest human identity with membership of a nation.”¹⁷ This sentence may well be the most articulate theological evaluation of human nature which he, within the context of social nature of human, does not only associate with one's family, i.e., one's biological connections. With this evaluation of the nation, the Pope also transforms the qualities that make a nation into a spiritual dimension pertinent to human being. This dimension is a part of one's core identity in need of salvation.

Along these lines, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* from 1987, speaking about the Declaration on Human Rights and the principles of human rights and dignity, he takes the notion of dignity and applies it to nations and peoples “as entities having a specific cultural identity, are particularly sensitive to the preservation, free exercise and promotion of their precious heritage.”¹⁸ Because people and nation are the core components of an individual, who has the inalienable dignity and rights, the Pope goes on to say that: “Peoples or nations too have a right to their own full development, which, while including the economic and social aspects, should also include individual cultural identity and openness to the transcendent.”¹⁹

Centesimus Annus from 1991 calls for our special attention. Written right after the

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptor*, §14.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html, §10.

¹⁷ John Paul, *Laborem*, §10.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html, §26.

¹⁹ John Paul, *Sollicitudo*, §32.

breakup of the Communist regime and the birth of nation-states in the East and East-West of Europe, in it the Pope elaborates on the relationship of cultural, national, and personal identity with the state's role. In the chapter "State and Culture" he condemns the totalitarian character mainly of communist states which aim to "absorb within itself the nation, society, the family, religious groups and individuals themselves."²⁰ He affirms not only the dignity of an individual, but also, bearing in mind the aforementioned Pope's stance on identity, the dignity of a nation giving it anthropomorphic traits, e.g., the search for truth: "Man remains above all a being who seeks the truth and strives to live in that truth... From this open search for truth, which is renewed in every generation, *the culture of a nation* derives its character."²¹ Having ennobled the nation with a spirit and collectivity, the Pope claims that the message of the Gospel refers not only to an individual but also to nations: "... it is appropriate to recall that evangelization too plays a role in the culture of the various nations, sustaining culture in its progress towards the truth."²²

The subject of action is not only an individual, although John Paul II sees him/her as supreme value. Because the individual is not *abstract* but *concrete*, the subject of history, the object of evangelization and an integral part of human identity is, according to the Pope, the culture of nation as the basis of a state, which is an integral part of people's right to self-determination.

He sees the culture as possessing a kind of genius, development, a destiny, and a set of distinctive features. This view greatly resembles the romanticist notion of "folk spirit" (*Volksgeist*).²³ In this context, a special attention should be paid to his book, *Memory and Identity*. Apart from the encyclicals, this book offers the best choice for studying the religious, cultural and national identity as espoused by the Polish Pope. In the chapter, "My Country: Native Land–Nation–State," with the experience of Poland joining the EU in mind, the Pope formulates the following question: how does the joining of countries into a supranational unity reflect on "internal attitude highly regarded in Polish history–patriotism?"²⁴ In order to arrive at the understanding of John Paul II's view on the relationship between Christian identity and the identity acquired in the state and the nation, we shall first look at some of the definitions of key concepts found in his work.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html, §45.

²¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus*, §49-50.

²² John Paul II, *Centesimus*, 50.

²³ Dorian Llywelyn, *Toward a Catholic Theology of Nationality* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 164.

²⁴ Ivan Pavao II, *Sjećanje i identitet* (Split: Verbum, 2005), 63. (English translation: John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, Rizzoli, 2005).

Native land. Unlike state, native land has a spiritual, rather than just legal or technical meaning: “native land, heritage... as well as the situation resulting from the heritage,” and also “the concept of native land includes values and spiritual content which make a nation's culture.”²⁵ But his definition also defines territory as a spiritual category: “a territory forcibly taken from a nation in a sense becomes a plea, a cry even, addressed to the *spirit* of the nation itself.”²⁶ The spiritual values held by a nation and their territory form an unbreakable unity. The Pope founded these claims, strangely enough, on the Gospel itself, in which “Jesus' teachings contain deepest elements of theological vision of be it native land or culture.”²⁷ This is supported by Jesus' reference to the Father as the fundamental word by which that which is pertinent to culture and native land, i.e., the heritage, is conveyed. Nevertheless, Jesus' theological vision of native land, according to the Pope, is relatively unclear since on the one hand, he says that “the heritage given to us through Christ guides the native land inheritance and human culture towards the eternal Native land” whereas, shortly after, he goes on to say that “Christ's return to the Father inaugurates a new Native land into the history of all native lands and all people.”²⁸ The dialectic between the eternal and temporary, where it is unclear if the Native land is built into native land or ultimately, native land is to be abolished in the Native land, appears to be one of the stumbling blocks in the Pope's analysis of the notion of native land. However, it seems that in further text, the Pope advocates the latter option by which, as we shall see, native land gains eschatological significance: “Without losing its temporal sense, the notion of native land was opened to dimensions of eschatology and eternity by Christ's ascension.”²⁹ He supports this eschatological view of native land with many examples from Polish history where people sacrificed their lives on the altar of native land but with their hearts firmly set on their Native land in Heaven.

Patriotism. When defining patriotism, the Pope claims that its root is to be found in the heritage received from the fathers. He takes the next theological step and bases patriotism on “the Fourth Commandment (which) obliges us to honor our father and mother.”³⁰ Moreover, in relation to native land, he introduces the notion of piety, *pietas*, as the founding element of the relationship towards “spiritual heritage kept for us by native land and passed on to us by our fathers and mothers.”³¹ Once again, he uses his native land as an example and

²⁵ Ivan Pavao II, *Sjećanje*, 64.

²⁶ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 65.

²⁷ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 66.

²⁸ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 67.

²⁹ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 67.

³⁰ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 69.

³¹ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 69.

says that Polish individualism and private interests “weaken the willingness for sacrifice in promoting the values and ideals that have to do with the concept of native land.”³² Native land is, like nation and biological family, “irreplaceable reality”, and with this claim the Pope identifies one's cultural affiliation with biological one. He also subjects the individual to the communal identity of the nation. This he finds to be a justification of “great sacrifice for protection of that good (native land)” as testified by “countless graves of soldiers who fought for Poland.”³³

Nation. In the process of biologization and spiritualization of native land and therefore patriotism, the Pope takes it a step further with his definition of nation which “is connected to birth.”³⁴ The roots of this primordial³⁵ notion of homeland and nation the Pope finds in the Catholic social doctrine where “the family and nation are natural societies,” and once again calls forth the Polish experience which supports his claim that natural societies “according to their nature, have an inclination to found themselves in the state.”³⁶ The notion of state equals the notion of nation-state, where state is founded on one's affiliation with a people as ethnos since nation is “where a state is being born.”³⁷ The basis for this claim the Pope finds not only in the Old Testament and God's election of Israel, but also, again, in the mystery of Incarnation which “belongs to the theology of nation.”³⁸ The Incarnation, he goes on to say, is the beginning of the creation of a higher order, the order in which they are “born of God,” but which does not abolish the national identity but transforms it into eschaton in which “the history of all nations enters the history of salvation.”³⁹ In order to move away from nationalism, the Pope claims that history of all nations enters the history of salvation by saying that nation has a historical rather than eternal meaning, and that in eschaton there will exist one, God's nation. On the other hand, he does not abstract the God's nation from the national identity of the eschaton inhabitants but argues that the eschaton is comprised of the totality not only of individuals “born out of Spirit” but also of their nations. The Pope claims that “people, and not nations, face God's judgment,” but because he takes a biologicistic stance on nation he claims that “the judgment imposed on an individual somehow applies to nations

³² Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 68.

³³ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 71, 70.

³⁴ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 72.

³⁵ On primordial understanding of nation see Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nation and Nationalism* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998), 146-152.

³⁶ Ivan Pavao II, *Sjećanje i identitet*, 72, 73.

³⁷ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 73.

³⁸ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 74.

³⁹ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 75.

as well.”⁴⁰ According to him, it is not only the individuals that receive baptism but the salvation and transformation in the spirit of Christ extend to the nation itself. This can be seen in his thoughts on the baptism of the Poles which refers not only to the “sacrament of Christian initiation received by the first Polish sovereign,” but also to the “event crucial for the birth of a nation and formation of its Christian identity.”⁴¹ The nation and culture are Christianized by individuals who fundamentally belong to a nation so the Pope can establish the existence of Christian culture and civilization.

2.2. Croatian Application of John Paul’s II Theology of the Nation

John Paul II's biologicistic approach to the question of nation, ethnic belonging, and culture found a fertile soil in Yugoslavia and other Eastern Europe states. It should be noted that the Pope's theory of nation was not simply translated in the context of Yugoslavian circumstances. In the 1970s in Croatia, the theology of Incarnation was the backdrop against which national, native land or ethnic affiliations were interpreted as theological categories.

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of national awakenings took place mainly in Croatia and Serbia. In this context, one of the most influential Croatian theologians in the last 50 years, Tomislav Janko Šagi Bunić, a Capuchin, published a collection of essays on the national question and the Christian faith with a significant title *The Catholic Church and the Croatian People*.⁴² In it, Šagi Bunić insists that nationalism, defined in a “strong sense, i.e., as invasive, chauvinistic and exclusive,” cannot be related to Christian faith. “Such nationalism exists if a people wish to take others’ territory or goods or attempt to economically, culturally, politically, even nationally, subjugate others, abolish their national identity, absorb and alienate them.”⁴³ With this definition of nationalism in a strong sense, Šagi paves a way for a positive view on nationalism proclaiming all form of non-nationalism to be patriotism. In his words, patriotism is, very simply, love towards native land, which “wishes to do no harm or injustice... but wishes and strives for the flourishing of its people in solidarity with other nations”⁴⁴ comparing it to what he, along the lines of Pope Pius XII's thoughts, calls *healthy nationalism*. Šagi keeps placing people, and not the state, as the subject of interest to the Church, and breaks up with the tradition of aligning the Church with

⁴⁰ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 78.

⁴¹ Ivan Pavao, *Sjećanje*, 79. This is also obvious in his encyclical letter *Laborem exercens* where he greets the Christianization of the Slavic nations. Cf. Llywelyn, *Toward Catholic*, 162.

⁴² Tomislav Janko Šagi Bunić, *Katolička crkva i hrvatski narod* (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1983). Although published in 1983, the collected texts in the book were written before John Paul II became the Pope.

⁴³ T. J. Šagi Bunić, „Kršćanstvo i nacionalizam,“ in Šagi, *Katolička crkva*, 13.

⁴⁴ Šagi, „Kršćanstvo,“ 14.

the state order, which was very important for the Croatian context at the time. It is also important to note that the relationship with the state order was simply replaced by the relationship with a people. Native land is, in his opinion, a place where a people dwell and which fulfills them, the place suitable for “one's personal development.”⁴⁵ It is like a mother because it is “truly like a mother's arms in which one grows safely.”⁴⁶

Having defined native land and people⁴⁷ as the only places of safe development for a person, one's talents and abilities, Šagi, entirely along the lines of Pope Wojtyła's thought, identifies people to be a theological category and perceives it as a sort of preparation for accepting God's calling. He thinks that the only way to answer God's calling is the one made in freedom and “freedom's maturity is found in native land.”⁴⁸ Native land and people thus form kind of preconditions for being a Christian. In other words, it is by birth that one enters people, and so the affiliation with people, which forms one's core identity, is regarded as a crucial “testimony for God and Christ.”⁴⁹

Uncommon to the then Croatian and Yugoslavian religious context is Šagi's belief, and he emphasizes it in a number of instances, that Croatian people are not solely defined by their affiliation with Christianity but that there are cultural, political, economic, and other elements that influence the formation of people. However, although Šagi never clearly and openly identifies Catholic faith and Croatian people, he is still caught in another trap when he identifies Christianity with affiliation to a particular people. It seems that he, even before John Paul II, made a claim that there can be no Christianity without a people, and in the case of Šagi's text, it is not seen as *demos* but as *ethnos*.⁵⁰ A Christian is “with his heart and the whole of his being deeply rooted in his people,”⁵¹ and it is his role to enrich and ennoble his people with the Gospel in order to escape chauvinistic and exclusive nationalism. Although explicitly condemning nationalism, the identification of ethnically defined people and Christianity was a basis for further development of ideas. The Croatian nation-state, established in the 1990s, and Christianity are founded on people and their culture.

⁴⁵ Šagi, „Kršćanstvo,” 15.

⁴⁶ Šagi, „Kršćanstvo,” 17.

⁴⁷ In this text, Šagi doesn't work through these two dimensions although at one point he states that homeland, nation and people are “different but mutually inter-connected concepts,” 14.

⁴⁸ Šagi, „Kršćanstvo,” 17.

⁴⁹ Šagi, „Kršćanstvo,” 19.

⁵⁰ *Ethnos* the identity politics based on blood ties, while in *demos* it is based on universal territorial citizenship. On these issues in the context of East Europe, see John Nagne, „Ethnos, Demos and Democratization: A Comparison of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland“, in *Democratization*, 4 (1997) 2, 28-56.

⁵¹ Šagi, „Kršćanstvo,” 19.

In Croatia, the emphasis on incarnational nature of people and culture was soon turned to a program surpassing purely theological interests. During the late 1980s turmoil, those interests were the means by which the Catholic Church, which “in its nature must be rooted in every particular people and every particular nation in order to be able to fulfill its mission,” must have “not only national but also national-political orientation.”⁵²

The Church’s national-political orientation was mainly seen in the support it provided to all the means for the establishment of an independent state. These means were based on the idea of exclusive ethnic origin of people as well as strong emphasis on cultural distinctiveness with regards to the surrounding peoples. The ethnicization of Christ is reflected in the following thesis by Živko Kustić: “when one people, like us Croats, in their majority accept Christianity, then Jesus becomes the member of that people. With Christian conversion of Croats, Jesus became a Croat in a sense. When I received baptism, Jesus in me became a Croat.”⁵³ Regardless of the Pope’s relativization of a people and its culture against what he called “heavenly homeland” which surpasses and encompasses all peoples and cultures, the ethnicization of both Christ’s and Church’s mission provided strong support to cultural and ethnic programs which regarded members of other peoples as the “other” not only in the sense of ethnicity, but also religion. This “otherness” called for significant revision of the history of peoples who shared heritage for centuries, at the same time abolishing the role of culture as a means of transcending ethnic borders and turning it into what Terry Eagleton, writing about the Balkans, describes as: “what you kill for.”⁵⁴ The key theological concepts in a conflict, such as solidarity with victims, took the form of solidarity with one’s own victims or, in the words of a prominent Croatian priest in a publication funded by the Croatian Government: Croatia’s spiritual renewal consists of “solidarity towards the victims, those who have suffered and those who fought for the wounded Croatia.” Showing solidarity only to one’s own victims makes it a part of “overall Croatian unity and overall Croatian reconstruction.”⁵⁵

It is precisely in this that the paradox of Church and theology during the war years becomes clear. Croatian clergy, along with the Pope and theologians, did call for forgiveness, non-retaliation and reconciliation, but the ethnicization of the mission of the Church and the

⁵² Darko Hudelist, *Rim, a ne Beograd: promjena doba i mirna ofenziva Katoličke Crkve u SFR Jugoslaviji 1975.-1984.*, [Rome, and not Belgrade: change of the ages and the peaceful offensive of the Catholic Church in SFR Yugoslavia] (Zagreb, Alfa, 2017), 236.

⁵³ Hudelist, *Rim*, 233.

⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000), 41.

⁵⁵ Anto Baković (ed.), *Duhovna obnova Hrvatske* [Spiritual Renewal of Croatia], (Zagreb: Vlada Republike Hrvatske-Agencija za obnovu, 1992), 39.

nature of peoples laid a foundation for the construction of the ethnic and religious “other.” During the war, this paradox provided a theological framework for the creation of the “other” based on ethnicity and religion. After the war, it resulted in silence towards the victims and the suffering of other peoples, as well as the rise of populist movements in the past couple of years.⁵⁶

2.2. Serbian Orthodoxy and Ethnonationalism

2.2.1. Source: Saint Sava and Christian Nationalism

Synecdoche is a class of metonymy where a part is taken to refer to the whole.⁵⁷ In the case of the relationship between ethnonationalism and Serbian Orthodoxy, the synecdoche which defines the whole is the thought of the Serbian Orthodox Church’s Saint Nikolaj Velimirović. His thought is largely understood on the basis of his two major works, “Nationalism of Saint Sava” and “Words to the Serbian People through the Prison Window.” Nevertheless, in order to grasp the problem of nationalism in modern Serbian theology, one must take into account his essay “Serbian People as Theodulos.” In that book, Bishop Velimirović lays the groundwork for what is today considered to be one of the greatest controversies on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia—the so-called Saint Sava's nationalism. It represents the dominant concept governing the relationship of the institution of Serbian Orthodox Church towards socio-political movements.

In his essay, “Serbian People as Theodulos,” Velimirović presents an organic view of nationalism, according to which he sees the Serbian people not as a plural, heterogeneous community in a modern, civil context, but as a single, homogeneous body whose essence is found in the Orthodox tradition.⁵⁸ This unique, religious-national organ, in Velimirović’s opinion, is formed according to the principles of so-called *Christian nationalism* on the basis of which the Serbian people are seen as *theodulos*.⁵⁹ Christian nationalism, as espoused by Velimirović, does not entail discrimination of others, but is primarily oriented towards one’s inner life and living space in order for every Serb to form a clear idea of himself or herself as

⁵⁶ See Zoran Grozdanov, „From Incarnation to Identity: The Theological Background of National-Populist Politics in the Western Balkans,” in Joshua Ralston and Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2021) (to be published).

⁵⁷ In his book *Hrvati i crkva* [Croats and the Church] (Zagreb-Sarajevo: Profil Knjiga-Svjetlo riječi, 2013), 94, Ivo Banac stated, for instance, that the synecdoche in the case of the Catholic Church in Croatia is the Ustaša regime, because this Church has never resisted the mentioned ideology in an adequate way.

⁵⁸ “Srpski narod kao teodul,” in Nikolaj Velimirović, *Sabrana dela - Knjiga V* (Soko: Manastir Sv. Nikolaja, 2016).; Cf. Branko Sekulić, “The Pretense Veil of Christian Vulgarism: The Phenomenon of Ethnoreligianity in the Contemporary Societies of the Former Yugoslavia” (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 2019), 164–65.

⁵⁹ Velimirović, “Srpski,” §16; Cf. Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 164–65.

being a *theodulos*. A *theodulos* is someone who serves God the way Christ did, primarily contributing to the prosperity of one's home and then attempting to spread the prosperity to other people (*Völker*) if they ask for it.⁶⁰ According to Velimirović, it is only in such nationalism that the nationalism of a true Serb is witnessed because it is developed for the glory of Christ who is the basis of a *theodulos* state.⁶¹ *Theodulos* as a means of serving God is taken to be the only path and purpose of both the Church and the state alike.⁶² In Velimirović's words, Serbs have advocated this belief for 800 years since the Serbian state was founded by Stefan Nemanja and given the breath of life by his son, Saint Sava.⁶³ "It is typical, so it seems, for Serbian medieval state and Serbian Orthodox Church, that both resulted from heroic deeds of a father and a son, two saints and two guides of Serbian national history."⁶⁴ Stefan Nemanja, also known by his ecclesial name of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-streaming, united warring tribes that lived in the area of Raška (present-day south-east Serbia) and successfully negotiated independence of that area with the Byzantine Empire in 1168. In that way, he laid the foundations of that, which is in today's Serbian historiography, known as the predecessor of the Serbian state.⁶⁵ Stefan Nemanja's son, Rastko Nemanjić, known by his church name of Saint Sava, laid the foundations of the present-day's Serbian Orthodox Church and was the first Serbian Archbishop. In 1219, he negotiated autocephaly with the Emperor of Constantinople and the Patriarch of Constantinople in the area which was previously set free from Byzantine rule by his father.⁶⁶ With these facts in mind, it becomes clear that in Serbian Orthodox imagery, a state cannot be regarded as a politically abstract formation but it is necessarily something increasingly personal.⁶⁷ *Christian nationalism* is thus personalized and takes on a more intimate form of *Saint Sava nationalism*, which becomes the backbone and *modus vivendi* of Serbian Orthodoxy.⁶⁸ However, this shift from Christianity to *Saint Sava nationalism*, according to Bishop Velimirović, does not imply narrow-mindedness or chauvinism, because even though it is

⁶⁰ Velimirović, "Srpski," §52, 83.; Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

⁶¹ Velimirović, "Srpski," §16. Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

⁶² See Velimirović, *Srpski narod kao teodul* [The Serbian People as a Theodule] (Beograd: Evro Book, 2001), § 22.; Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

⁶³ Velimirović, "Srpski," §2-6, 20; Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 73.

⁶⁴ Đoko Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve I* [History of Serbian Orthodox Church] (Beograd: BIGZ, 2002), 34.

⁶⁵ Sima M. Ćirković, *Srbi među europskim narodima* [Serbs among European Peoples] (Zagreb: Golden marketing-Tehnička knjiga, 2008), 38–40.; Slijepčević, *Istorija*, 34–35.; Vladimir Ćorović, *Istorija srpskog naroda* [History of Serbian People], (Beograd: Janus, 2001), 110–11, https://www.rastko.rs/rastko-bl/istorija/corovic/istorija/index_1.html.; Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense Veil," 73.

⁶⁶ See Ćirković, *Srbi*, 42–43.; Ćorović, *Istorija*, 125.; Slijepčević, *Istorija*, 49–50.

⁶⁷ Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

⁶⁸ Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

manifested through *Saintsavaism* (*svetosavlje*) as Serbian and Orthodox, it is still universally Christian.⁶⁹ “His nationalism is Christian Orthodox nationalism and his State is a *theodulos* state.”⁷⁰ With that, *Saintsavaism* became a unique religious-national framework in the world history within which a true nature of Serbian Orthodox people can be generated. Velimirović found the existence of a national church to be the right of every people, but according to him, a national faith was inconceivable since every version of belief that would lead to the reduction of the universality of Christ's faith on the political and historical grounds of a people (Volk) would be seen as impious and unacceptable.⁷¹ In that sense, one should understand his controversial speech at the Kolarac People's University in 1935 when he drew a parallel between Saint Sava and Adolf Hitler. In that speech, he said that Adolf Hitler attempted to give Germans what Saint Sava gave Serbs—a national church.⁷² Along those lines, Velimirović makes a claim in his text, “National Church But Not National Faith,” that Hitler had every right to establish a German national church, but if that was to turn into a claim for the establishment of national faith, that would be both a heresy and a mistake.⁷³ To call religious dogmas and religious truths national, for Velimirović, is equally dangerous and ridiculous.⁷⁴ A church, on the other hand, Velimirović goes on to say, must be national, because it is a testimony of a commitment to a certain language, culture, and customs within which the spirit of the Gospel is manifested.⁷⁵ In other words, Serbian Orthodoxy is true Christianity which reflects the essence of Serbian people.⁷⁶ With this, in a paradoxical but also dangerous way, the idea of religion, state, and people is identified. This is also Velimirović's summary of *Saintsavaism*, which he defines as the Serbian-style Christianity and experience embodied in pious persons, mainly in the person of Saint Sava himself.⁷⁷

2.2.2. Reception: Saint Sava and the Chetnik-Monarchist Movement

⁶⁹ Velimirović, “Srpski,” §52; Cf. Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 164–65.

⁷⁰ Velimirović, “Srpski,” §16.

⁷¹ Velimirović, “Nacionalna crkva ali ne nacionalna vera,” in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela - Knjiga XIII* [Collected Works--Book XIII] (Soko: Manastir Sv. Nikolaja, 2016), 92.; Cf. Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 167.

⁷² Velimirović “Nacionalna,” 92; cf. Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 167.

⁷³ Velimirović, “Nacionalna,” 92; cf. Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 168.

⁷⁴ Velimirović, “Nacionalna,” 93.

⁷⁵ Velimirović, „Nacionalna” 93; Thomas Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Augustinus Verlag, 1992), 155–58.; Cf. Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 167-168.

⁷⁶ See „Predgovor knjizi Svetosavlje kao filosofija života“, in Nikolaj Velimirović, *Sabrana dela - Knjiga X* (Soko: Manastir Sv. Nikolaja, 2016), 90..

⁷⁷ Sekulić, “The Pretense,” 167-168.

However, the understanding and reception of these seemingly acceptable theses about faith and nation led to some grave problems as manifested in the following two aspects: the first, as Thomas Bremer rightly noted, that Velimirović is primarily a pastor and not a theologian in the academic sense of the word;⁷⁸ and the second aspect testifies to a close relationship between Velimirović and Dragoljub (Draža) Mihailović, the leader of the Četnik-Monarchist movement.⁷⁹ In the light of the first aspect, Velimirović's position on topics such as faith, people (Volk) or nation does not provide a clear vision of the position the Serbian Orthodox Church might occupy in the modern world. His concepts of faith, people (Volk) or nation become supple forms used in manipulation of the Christian doctrine for political ends. This is best exemplified in the notion of *Saintsavaism*, originally a universal Christian idea based on the person and work of Saint Sava, which was then transformed into a synonym for Serbian radical ethnonationalist Četnik ideology.⁸⁰ The responsibility for this transformation lies solely with the institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church which was, according to Jozo Tomasevich, as a national Church naturally inclined towards the affiliation with Draža Mihailović's Četnik movement.⁸¹ During the Second World War, the Četnik movement was supported by King Peter II of Yugoslavia and the Government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Exile led by Serbs.⁸² On top of that, according to Radmila Radić, Mihailović's movement and the institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church shared the same views about practical political activities and the connection to the monarchy, and there are some indications of the Holy Synod financially supporting the movement throughout the WWII.⁸³ The main idea was the creation of some sort of Serbian counterpart to the Byzantine *symphony* in which the Serbian Orthodox Church would be the social center of the Serbian Orthodox state of the monarchist type, and where General Mihailović was held to be the main actor in the realization of that goal. That should not come as a surprise since Draža Mihailović's Četnik movement was the official army of the Government of Yugoslavia in Exile and was named the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland or the Ravna Gora Movement.⁸⁴ It was established as a form of resistance by a small group of Yugoslav Kingdom soldiers who, loyal to their King,

⁷⁸ See Bremer, *Ekklesiale*, 115.; Cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

⁷⁹ Sekulić, "The Pretense," 164–65.

⁸⁰ Sekulić, "The Pretense", 87, 171–77.

⁸¹ Jozo Tomasevich, *Četnici u drugom svjetskom ratu 1941-1945* [Četniks in WWII] (Zagreb: Sveučilišna naklada Liber, 1979), 163.

⁸² Tomasevich, *Četnici*, 163; cf. Sekulić, "The Pretense," 80.

⁸³ Radmila Radić, *Država i verske zajednice: 1945-1970*. [The State and religious communities, 1945-1970] (Beograd: Institut za Noviju Istoriju Srbije, 2002), 82.

⁸⁴ See Jozo Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija u Jugoslaviji 1941-1945*. [The War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945], (Zagreb: EPH Liber, 2010), 575.; Tomasevich, *Četnici*, 160, 163, 171, 173.; Holm Sundhussen, *Geschichte Serbiens: 19.-21. Jahrhundert* (Wien-Köln-Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2007), 320–22.

refused to surrender to German occupation forces in April 1941 after their own country was occupied.⁸⁵ However, the fact that Mihailović's movement fought the Nazi occupation does not make it an anti-fascist movement as some present-day historical revisionists claim. It was, as Tomasevich says, a Yugoslavian membrane filled with ideas of Greater Serbia and directed towards the cleansing of ethnical and religious groups—Croats, Catholics, Bosniaks, and Muslims.⁸⁶ With the leader of such movement Velimirović nurtured a close relationship, which was, according to Vladimir Dimitrijević, like that of a father and son.⁸⁷ This, of course, left a permanent stain on Velimirović's name and sainthood. The magnitude of Velimirović's feelings for Mihailović can be seen in his posthumous speech (Homily on Draža) given in 1954, nine years after Mihailović was convicted and executed for war crimes and collaboration with the occupation authorities. In that speech, Mihailović is given a certain form of holiness and piety, he is seen as a martyr, a *theodulos* and a guidepost to Serbian people and as unjustly sentenced.⁸⁸ This relationship, as well as the sympathy of the Church structures towards Mihailović's movement, made the Chetniks, in a general sense, a backdrop against which Serbian Orthodoxy is viewed, especially since the institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church never really disputed it. In that sense, Velimirović became, *nolens volens*, the icon of that symbiosis.

2.2.3. Consequences: Saint Sava and Contemporary Serbian Ethnonationalism

Aware of the synecdoche of Velimirović for the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the burden that the idea of nation carries in Orthodox Churches in general, Radovan Bigović—a theologian whose thought can indisputably be taken as paradigmatic for the position of the institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church on this issue—starts his speech on this topic with a reference to the central position the unity of all humankind has in the Orthodox doctrine.⁸⁹ The unity takes place within the eschatological community which transcends all historical

⁸⁵ Tomasevich, *Rat*, 575.; Tomasevich, *Četnici*, 160, 163, 171, 173.; Sundhaussen, *Geschichte*, 320–22.

⁸⁶ Tomasevich, *Četnici*, 178–79, 161, 235.; Tomasevich, *Rat*, 576, 863–68.; Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin: Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji* [Punishment and Crime: Collaborationist Powers in Serbia], (Beograd: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2015), 45, 99, 129–31, 406, 500–501.; Dejan Đokić, *Nedostižni kompromis* [Unachievable Compromis], (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2010), 327–28.

⁸⁷ Vladimir Dimitrijević, *Oklevetani svetac: Vladika Nikolaj i srbofobija* [Defamed Saint: Bishop Nikolaj and Serbophobia], (Gornji Milanovac: LIO, 2007), 74.

⁸⁸ “Beseda o Draži“ in: Velimirović, *Tri srpska mučenika: Dimitrije, Draža i Milan* [Three Serbian Martyrs: Dimitrije, Draža and Milan], (Beograd: LIO, 2014), 19.

⁸⁹ Radovan Bigović, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century* (Beograd: Foundation Konrad Adenauer-Christian Cultural Center, 2013), 37-38.

differences and where the faithful become God's people.⁹⁰ This belief made it possible for Orthodox theology to develop the concept of *providential people*, which is based on the idea of equal value of all people in the world because they all play an important role in God's plan of salvation and, according to that, their material and spiritual growth must not be impeded.⁹¹ In Bigović's words, this is the key argument why Orthodox peoples refuse all kinds of socio-political development which would lead to the loss of national awareness.⁹² Such development would mean the negation of Church *unity manifested in diversity* and *diversity in unity* in which every single nation (Volk) establish their own, earthly value system but in the spirit of the Gospel and with the ultimate goal of the realization of God's plan.⁹³ In line with these ideas, Orthodox theology developed an *ideal of church-state*, a state that provides a people (Volk) with a system of secular values and a church which makes sure that the people (Volk) develop in the spirit of the Gospel.⁹⁴ According to Bigović, this ideal was formed as a result of the experience of the Balkan Orthodox peoples ruled by the Ottomans.⁹⁵ In the Ottoman times, without their own state and due to legal regulations on the protection of minorities, the non-Muslim population started identifying with the Orthodox Church as the only institution which provided them with an opportunity to come in contact with *their* ethnic identity.⁹⁶ This gradually led to strong intertwining of the Orthodox Church and certain people (Volk) and to the belief that Orthodoxy was one of the key factors in the formation of Balkan national states.⁹⁷ However, as Bigović points out, this was taken to the extreme in countries where the idea of nation was placed before faith and where the Orthodox Church was used for nation's ends.⁹⁸ This was condemned as a heresy of *ethnophiletism* in Constantinople on September 10, 1872. In that sense, Bigović adds, the Orthodox Church cannot be seen as national, non-national or super-national, but due to the variety of peoples (Völker) and nations it includes, it is undisputedly multinational in character.⁹⁹ This is so, Bigović goes on to say, because the Orthodox Church is defined not by its nation, but by the territory it occupies.¹⁰⁰ However, he emphasizes the fact that today, almost every local

⁹⁰ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 38.

⁹¹ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 38.

⁹² Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 38.

⁹³ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 38–39.

⁹⁴ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 38–39.

⁹⁵ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 41.

⁹⁶ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 41.

⁹⁷ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 41.

⁹⁸ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 44–45.

⁹⁹ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 46.

Church is uniquely defined by its ethnic or national community.¹⁰¹ This puts a very serious question to Orthodox churches: whether to stick to the principle of territory or to affiliate exclusively to a nation?¹⁰² According to Bigović, this should not be regarded as an *either-or* issue since the church economy contains both of these concepts but in a way that none of them essentially define it.¹⁰³ In this sense, Bigović quotes Velimirović himself who says that all nations can dwell under the common roof of the Church, but the Church cannot be comprised by one nation because the essence of the Church goes beyond worldly divisions.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, although little fault can be found with this theoretical understanding of ethnonational aspect within Serbian Orthodoxy, in the practice the former question is seldom answered with an *either-or* attitude and more often from an *and-and* perspective. This points to the fact that the phenomenon of nation in Southeastern Europe is seen neither in the French Civil nor German Romantic sense, but in a purely post-Yugoslavian ethnonationalist sense. The institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church thus violated certain principles of Orthodoxy. Namely, during the war on the territory of former Yugoslavia, under the pretext of defending Serbianhood and Orthodoxy, the church structures supported pro-Serbian ethnonationalist agendas, whose aim was to unify all the areas on the territory of Yugoslavia with Serbian Orthodox population into a Serbian national state.¹⁰⁵ This on the other hand is in accordance with the theory with the very popular Serbian Church Circles—the one which claims that all former Slavic Yugoslavian peoples have the same Serbian ethnic roots but, due to Islamic and Catholic proselytism, were cut from their matrix and now appear as separate ethnic communities.¹⁰⁶ These views and aspirations, found on all levels of the Serbian Orthodox Church, tell us how deeply the ethnonationalist ideology has permeated Serbian Church structures themselves. If we add the behavior of certain priest circles, whose views clearly evoked the historical memory of the closeness between the Church and the Četnik movement and whose ideology was often used as a blueprint for political activities, the problem is

¹⁰¹ According to Orthodox theology the local Church refers to the territorial identities and not to the church of a village or town. Thus, theoretically within Orthodoxy, the Church is organized on a territorial basis, but yet, in practice, those territorial aspects usually coincided with the place inhabited by certain ethnic identity such as Bulgarian, Greek, Russian, Serbian, and the like.

¹⁰² Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 46.

¹⁰³ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Bigović, *The Orthodox*, 46.

¹⁰⁵ There are numerous sources that can be found on this topic, both on the internet and in other written material. See for instance: Ivan Čolović, *Smrt na Kosovu polju* [Death on Kosovo Field], (Beograd: Biblioteka XX. vek, 2016), 290.; Sundhaussen, *Geschichte*, 290–92.; Srđan Barišić, “Srpska pravoslavna crkva i Jugoslavija,” *YU Historija*, 2017, http://www.yuhistorija.com/serbian/kultura_religija_txt00c5.html;

¹⁰⁶ There are numerous sources that can be found on this topic, both on the internet and in other written material. See for instance: Bigović, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century*, 43.; Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkanski idoli* [Balkan Idols], (Beograd: Biblioteka XX. vek, 2006), 169–70, 182.; Vjekoslav Perica, *Sveti Petar i Sveti Sava* [Saint Peter and Saint Sava], (Beograd: Biblioteka XX. vek, 2009), 110.

additionally, even radically, aggravated. Of course, this problem does not pertain to the overall corpus of the Orthodoxy of all Serbian cultural circles, but solely to its certain clerical structures. Therefore, facing this is the primary task of Serbian Orthodoxy if it wishes to get rid of the ideological burden of Saint Sava, who is reduced from a universal Christian saint to an icon of radical ethnonationalist circles under whose direction crimes of Vukovar, Škabrnja, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, and Drenica took place. It is for this reason that a constructive-critical confrontation with ideological constructs which resulted from Velimirović's socio-political gibberish must take place. Without it, the appropriate de-sacralization of the Serbian ethnonationalist agenda will not be possible, thus leaving space for certain Church structures to use Serbian Orthodox spirituality for attaining worldly ideological goals.

3. Conclusion

Reducing the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church to an ethnonationalist common denominator is simply not possible. They are way too heterogeneous within themselves for their church communities to be strictly labeled as ethnonationalist and such line of thought would simply imply analytical narrow-mindedness. However, it is impossible to ignore the consequences of sacralization of ethnonationalist agendas by the church structures. They were, and partly still are, too homogenous in their efforts of the aforementioned sacralization not to be recognized as such. To argue the opposite would reflect analytical blindness. We are left with facts and they point towards ethnonationalist coloring of the dominant theological discourse present in the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Within this discourse, Christian love towards one's neighbor is being filtered through the ideal of patriotism and redefined on ethnonationalist grounds. Thus, the inclusive nature of Christianity is reduced to a single ethnic community whereas patriotism ceases to be simply devotion to one's native land and people and becomes elimination of the "other." The combination of these two concepts is best reflected in the policies of ethnic cleansings which took place during the 1990s on the territory of former Yugoslavia. These policies were partly enacted with the blessings from key Catholic and Orthodox Church figures respectively. This led to a kind of a paradox mirroring the inversion of God's plan. Namely, within God's plan, in the beginning, the Earth was empty and without form, whereas in the case of Croatian Catholicism and Serbian Orthodoxy as outlined in this paper, the emptiness is the ultimate goal. In that sense, Vukovar and Knin can be perceived as the holy toponyms of sacralized ethnonational discourse of

creation where God's all-encompassing love, under direction of ethnonationalized Croatian Catholicism and Serbian Orthodoxy, is reduced to the members of respective ethnic groups, whereas the elimination of the "other" is the ultimate consequence of the sacralization of ethnonational discourse.