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THE RELIGIOSITY OF RADOVAN KARADŽIĆ

by Paul Mojzes

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Few people catapulted themselves so quickly from the obscurity of a local psychiatrist to a global "household-name," admired by his followers but widely despised elsewhere as Radovan Karadžić. His followers hail him as the resolute leader in the Bosnian Serbs' aspiration to unite all Serbs in a single country with the state of Serbia. His detractors see him as one of the major war criminals in a century that is brimming with them. This fame has brought about some inquiries into his personal life, his psychiatric practice (as well as the state of his own psyche), his poetic accomplishments (he published several books of poems), and most of all his political, international, and military views. Practically nothing was known about his religion.

Finally some evidence appeared in an interview Karadžić gave to an unidentified journalist in the official monthly magazine of the Cetinje (Montenegro) Orthodox metropolitanate, Svetigora. While some scholars may later do a thorough analysis of Karadžić's real rather than alleged religiosity, this article will present merely Karadžić's own claims.

The interview began with his statement that for thirty-four years he has observed in Sarajevo and its environs (which he claims to be entirely Serbian) that the Serbian soul was exiled and had to crouch somewhere at the bottom of the person and that Serbs were retreating into their innermost selves and suffering on account of their daily public behavior so at odds with their inner experiences. Yet Bosnian Serbs, he said, had been more courageous in following religious rites especially burials. Karadžić claims that the rulers [it...
is unclear whether he means Communists or Muslims] paid off some Serbs to keep their own compatriots in meekness and subordination.

In 1975 or 1976, Karadžić maintains, he and another renowned Sarajevo Serb carried a Christmas tree on the main street in Sarajevo at Christmas, and this was regarded as "a drama" which was reported even at his clinic as an act of impertinence.

The interviewer then asked, "Thus we are to understand that Communism was only a masque for Islamization?" Karadžić responded: "Absolutely correct. Communism was used by non-Serbian peoples to keep the Serbs in subordination, while elsewhere the national and religious programs of the Roman Catholic Church and Islam were being promoted." Further, he maintains that the proportion of atheists was not larger among Serbs, but that it only appeared so because "Serbs could be devoted to their God and their own soul only in their own homes and in their solitude."4

Further Karadžić discussed the fate of Muslims who regard themselves Serb by nationality. Karadžić claims that those who had greater religious interest turned to Islam and thereby became lost or "failed" Serbs while those who retained a collective memory of the Serbian past functioned as Serbs whose family turned Muslim. While these did not have an Orthodox spirituality, they did have "an Orthodox anguish with God." "It is clear that the path to salvation of Serbs of the Muslim faith is the return to Orthodoxy. I am saying this completely responsibly; I know that not everyone can do this and that it is not easy, but I know that it is the only way to overcome the dualism in their soul. They were temporarily—in respect to eternity what is a few hundred years—of another faith either because of the pressure of the occupiers or personal comfort . . . it does not mean that they do not have in them much of what is Serb, Christian, and Orthodox. As it is now, they will be neither Muslims nor Serbs."5 Then Karadžić reveals his plan for all Bosnian Muslims:

Therefore I think that the Serb people will recuperate entirely and wholly only when the majority or all of them— I am speaking in the sense of a peoplehood (narodnosnom)—including Serbs who are of the Islamic religion, experience healing of their soul and enter into the wholeness of their being. This of course, must and cannot be coerced.6

Karadžić goes on to claim that there were conversions of Muslims to Orthodoxy prior and during the current war but that Orthodox priests do not wish to baptize them during this war, so some of them have to travel as far as Germany to be baptized and then return to Bosnia.

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3Ibid., p. 15.

4Ibid.

5Ibid., p. 16.

6Ibid.
Some of these converts are now close to the top of Bosnian Serb leadership having become loyal Serbs and Orthodox. Then Karadžić reveals that Patriarch Paul I blessed the establishment of a foundation named "Saint John the Baptist" which will work toward the Christianization of the Serbs and all others who want it.

When asked about his own role in the "national rebirth" of the Serbs, Karadžić humbly declines any role of his own and his party except that they restored freedom to the people and removed barriers so that "spirituality of the folk and Orthodox spirituality started to flow quite naturally like a river that can’t be stopped by anyone except by God and, of course, God won’t do it because God is the one standing behind it."7

Karadžić claims that politically they can be proud that they restored freedom to the people, all else is God’s work. And God probably brought us freedom because he taught us what to do, and the Holy Spirit whispered to us what we should say, of which I am personally convinced because frequently I went to gatherings without a prepared concept--actually this is so always with the exception of three-four important historical gatherings--and I always went according to the Gospel "Do not worry what you will say. The Spirit alone will tell you what should be said."8

Karadžić then claims that it was intended to keep the Serbs in servitude by being tricked to promote "brotherhood and unity."9 Now the Serb transfiguration is generally most fervently fostered by the very same people who fell victims to the Titoist propaganda, which, here Karadžić the psychiatrist claims, is entirely understandable because they are angriest at having been most deceived. He states that most chetnik-like (i.e. aggressively nationalist) behavior, is displayed by the children of Tito's partizans.

In regards to Roman Catholics, especially Croats, he feels that they were clever when they turned defeat in World War I to their advantage by embracing the Serbs only to at once wish to break up the country taking with them all that the Serbs had won in the war. The same happened in regard to World War II. "And this [current] war was conceptualized in the same manner, a politics that came under the same flags, same emblems and heraldry, same rhetoric, same desires and aspirations, but God wanted this time for us to stop being misguided and to be ready."10

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7Ibid., p. 17

8Ibid.

9The implication here is that Tito’s Communist system kept Serbs in servitude; "brotherhood and unity" was a favorite slogan of Tito promoting interethic harmony.

10Ibid., p. 19.
Asked how traditional enemies, Serb chetniks and Serb partizans, can be reunited, Karadžić advocates the Orthodox answer of "repentance and reconciliation." Repentance need not be public, but if everyone repented in his or her heart then the division between chetniks and partizans will remain only in the sphere of jokes and laughter.

Karadžić stated that Bosnian Serbs are now aware of their historical role of being the spearhead of rebirth not just for Serbs everywhere but even for the Russians. "We have a firm belief that we are on right path of God and that this folk will pay their debt to Serbdom and Orthodoxy; our deaths, suffering, and endurance we accept as God's grace, that he gave us the gift of destiny to accomplish this and, if God permits, that we save Serbia and Montenegro from devastation." 11

Karadžić believes it is high time for Bosnian Serbs to show pride in and knowledge of their local Orthodox heritage in Bosnia which was formerly suppressed. "We should work on having every Serb know the details of his faith, and especially what regards God's temple." 12 Any separation from Serbdom will lead to national annihilation. Karadžić believes that this is also the case with current attempts to proclaim the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and that Macedonian separation from Serbia threatens Macedonia's survival.

Their salvation would be to return to the Serbian folk corpus, and if they don't want to federate, they could be a sovereign state within a confederation. That would save them and bring reconciliation with Serbs and Greeks and preserve a mighty Athens-Belgrade axis via Skopje. That would be a real solution. 13

Karadžić sees himself as the defender of "our tribe and our Church hoping to God that we used only as much force as was necessary." As to his own historical role and burden he said,

God graced me to do something in my life that is significant, so significant that I think it was worth being born, live, and die to help my people. . . . God gave me good health . . . . It is only difficult to make a decision--then I ask many people even children and even more importantly we ask our Church. Not a single important decision was made without the Church. 14

Karadžić rejects the charge coming from Serbia that the Bosnian Serbs are clericalists saying that the Orthodox Church simply cannot be clericalist but rather that they are blessed with

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11Ibid., p. 20.

12Ibid. The original sounds equally awkward and ambiguous. In the Serbian language hram generally indicates a church building. Karadžić may be referring here to the need to know the meaning of liturgy which is taken by many Orthodox as the quintessence of Orthodoxy or else he may be simply running out of ideas as to what the "details of the faith" might involve.

13Ibid., p. 21.

14Ibid.
having an outstanding metropolitan [probable reference to the hard-liner, Amfilohije Radović] and bishops [e.g. the equally hard-line Atanasije Jeftić] who do not impose their views but wait to be asked. Since the Serbs had suffered for centuries for Orthodoxy, Orthodoxy is now their defense and way of salvation; the Church is with the Serbs.

Karadžić claims that it is their enemies both in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina who actually led the Serbs to the "complete restoration of the Serb empire, restoration of the Serb state" because such is God's will.\footnote{Ibid., p. 22.} "I am convinced that God will show me which way to take and what to do. And that will certainly be good unless I insert some human ideas of mine own."

Under no circumstances will they agree to the termination of the Republika Srpska [Serb Bosnian republic] unless it is by merger with Serbia which is Karadžić's aim and his conviction that it will take place sooner or later.

Then Karadžić shared his conviction that the Orthodox Church should play the same role as it does in Greece and that he favors the retention of the old [Julian] calendar in order to be distinct from Western Christians. He also claimed that children are ecstatic that Orthodox catechism is now being taught in schools. Yet, the parents who have little religious knowledge find that it is the only school subject in which they cannot help their children.

Mr. Karadžić finally ended the interview by saying, "We aim at healing, and healing requires wholeness. There is no wholeness without spiritual and worldly unity."\footnote{Ibid., p. 23.}

Is Mr. Karadžić to be believed? As to the claims of his intentions toward the Muslims and unification of all Serbs in a single state, the answer seems to be "yes." In regard to the claims of his personal religiosity and divine guidance only he and God knows. Lord David Owen, the European Community negotiator who had met with Karadžić on numerous occasions answered the question of some Dutch journalists as to whether he believed Karadžić with whom he had numerous encounters with a simple: "No."\footnote{Peter Mikelson and Robert van de Roar, "Srbima treba pokazati zube" [Serbs ought to be shown teeth] in Interijer (Belgrade), No. 364 (July 7-21, 1995), p. 26. Original title, publishing data, and translator are not indicated in the Serbian version.} Let the reader decide whether to believe Karadžić's claims.

A greater concern to this author is not whether to believe Dr. Radovan Karadžić's religious claims but why an official Serbian Orthodox publication such as Svetigora would carry an interview in which the interviewer is coaxing Mr. Karadžić to make provocative and menacing ethnoreligious claims (not that he needed much prompting!) and that the editors nowhere indicate any reservations about the views expressed. To the contrary, the
other articles in Svetigora are equally strident. There seems to be an emergence of an
Orthodox fundamentalism and militancy usually not unveiled to ecumenical visitors. I
believe that the main stream of Orthodox believers and other church communities need to
become aware of the rise of such militancy within the Orthodox Churches.