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Living acts of Dead Bodies¹

Death and Religion of the Nation in Serbia in 19th Century

It is widely known and has been more or less elaborated in scientific literature that return to religion in the area of former SFRY was conducted hand-in-hand with the development of the new national states and establishment of new/old ethnic borders and identities. This is why it is logical that this phenomenon is frequently qualified as the religion of the nation and nationalism. However, this qualification frequently lacks insight into the fact that return to religion also meant increased interest in religious teachings and dogmas, as well as greater attendance at Church rituals. Even though it is certain that, among the large percentage of those who declared themselves as Orthodox Serbs during the last Census, a very small number of them are actually *active believers*; thus, the evident restoration of the internal, liturgical life of the Church suggests certain issues and advises prudence in labeling modern forms of religiousness and the role of the Church in their development. Historical conditions which led to the phenomenon of religion of the nation in Serbia in 19 century justify the hypothesis that religion of the nation was not, and still is not, something to have sprouted out under the auspices of the Church, but that it has occurred as a state/secular ideological project, whose links to religion are of purely non-religious nature. In order to corroborate this statement, I will try to determine and show what was in the basis of this secular religion of 19 century, and answer the question relating to the manner in which its content was shaped. I will do this based on an analysis of political use of dead bodies, i.e. relocation of mortal remains of Vuk Karadžić from Vienna to Belgrade, and restoration of the grave of Dositej Obradović, which was performed on the same occasion.

Key words:

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History of human belief and religious ideas unambiguously testifies about religions as dynamic systems, based on which and through which human societies and individuals establish balance between the limited time of personal existence and eternity, and look for their place in the coordinates of physical and meta-physical reality. This dynamism is reflected primarily in establishment of new forms of religiousness and development, spreading, or narrowing of spheres and areas in which and through which religion occurs and relates to. Having in mind that the most major important, institutional religious systems base their right to dispose of truth on continuity with teachings of the founders, what is susceptible to change, apart from the aforementioned relationship, is also the attitude towards key dogmatists (which are, by principle, static and unchangeable), characteristic for certain epochs. Thus, for instance, within Christian civilization, it is possible to generally follow the line of development, connecting/separating religious rapture and uncompromising belief of the first Christian communities, religiousness of Christians from the period of legalization and institutionalization of Christianity, and multiplication and interpretation of religious dogmatists which became intensified in the 1054 Schism to be further radicalized by the emergence of reformation. Throughout this period, the position and role of Church and religious institutions in the life of the society were changeable, but the same was with inter-religious relation with sacrament. This process was most directly reflected in the development of ritual practices, which, on the one hand, was a consequence of dogmatic-canon adjustment, while, on the other, it was a reflection of living interpretations conditioned by spirits of different epochs (Velkovska 2002; Worthly 2002; Popović 2010.). In one of my previous studies dedicated to this issue, I intended to point out that one of the key phenomena for following this multiple process was development of Christian funerary ritual which indicated to a modified attitude towards death, which that is, in the shape of initial Christian dogma, believed to be a pledge and precondition for resurrection (Pavićević 2011, 210 etc.). From teachings about the communities of the living and the dead in the Church, via separation of funeral from the Eucharist and its transformation into a private act, to the modern situation depicted in a text by Ernst Bernz,² modifications in the attitude towards the phenomenon of death testify to about both external and internal de-sacralization of Christian culture and religion.

Certainly, the beginning of the modern age is believed to be one of the most important turning points in the position of religion in the life of the society. Industrial, social, and political revolutions, enlightenment ideas, scientific and medical discoveries caused a deep-rooted changes in social and cultural relations, which would almost be impossible to imagine without a change in the manner of interpretation interpreting of world. This turning point is nowadays most frequently referred to using the term of secularization, which is defined as “a complex socio-historic process, in which religious thinking, practices and institutions lose their social im-

² In this text, he explains that “even in Church dogmas, the teaching on the last rites became an appendix to dogma textbooks, and this content is nowadays hardly ever lectured in theological education, while the belief in resurrection became but a traditional ornament to the unreal sermon; some advanced priests almost believe they could give it up entirely.” (Bernz 1998, 52) ,

portance, i.e. in which the society, culture and people disentangle from religious influence” (Đorđević 2003, 379).

At the time of its *discovery*, secularization was observed in sociology as an irreversible process of social changes and spiritual transformation which brought about an “increasingly rational state of mind” (Đorđević 1995, 15). The first secularization theories of certain impact were developed in the first half of 20 century (Berger 2008, 12), thus, in the period of *great promises* and expectations, triggered by accelerated technological development, and even more by accelerated conquering of various kinds of freedom: political, social, sexual, gender-related, etc. The time of their emergence may explain the fact that the first *secularists* failed to perceive important historical facts, which largely contested the possibility of entire separation from religion. Namely, simulateneously with the weakening of classic, institutional religions, there occurred flourishing of so-called secular religions, which, using *classical* religious rhetoric, promoted their deities and manners of worship. The emergence of secular religions did not imply disappearance of the *sacred* but, primarily, change of its content. It was, in turn, separated from the earlier conception by the fact that the objects of worship, as well as promises to the faithful, belonged only to historical, but not eschatological time.

One of the most influential secular religions, and one with furthest-reaching effects, is the so-called religion of the nation, which owes its *success* and distribution to the fact that it was based on equation between ethnnc and confessional affiliation (Toynbee 1998, 34). This connection provided, using some rhetorical and political skills, that the properties of the *sacred* should be transferred to the very body of the nation, and that the sacrifice for its benefit become a necessary prerequisite for *eternal life*.

It is well-known that rekindling of interest in religion, which in global terms started to take place in the 1980s, was manifested in different manners in different parts of the world – starting with increased interest in Oriental cults and alternative forms of religiousness, to restoration of *traditional* connections with major religious systems and Churches. It is also well-known and elaborated to a greater or lesser extent in scientific literature that return to religion in the territory of former SFRY was performed hand-in-hand with development of the new national states, and establishment of *new/old* ethnic borders and identities. Thus, it is logical that this phenomenon is frequently qualified as the religion of the nation, and nationalism. However, this qualification frequently fails to provide an insight into the fact that return to religion also implied increased interest in religious teachings and dogmas, as well as increased attendance to Church rituals. Even though it is doubtless that there is a large number of these who declared themselves as Orthodox Serbs, only few of them are *active believers*;³ the evident restoration of the internal, liturgical life of the Church suggests new issues and advises prudence in labeling modern forms of religiousness and the role of the Church in their development.

³ By *active believers* I consider those who regularly attend church services and participate its sacraments.

Restoration/development of confessional and ethnic identity and return to active Orthodox religion were (and still are) simultaneous, and, in public life of the Serbian society, frequently interlinked phenomena. However, the religion of nationalism and its devastating consequences occurred as an unwanted child of this intertwining, and even more as a consequence of ambivalent historic trends: on the one hand, as a consequence of the process of development of an artificial unity between the Church and the secular state, and a consequence of divisions within Serbian Orthodox Church on the other. Both sources of problems date back to the period of establishment of the modern Serbian state – the period of time in which this relation was achieved through real diminishing of both political and social competences of the Church, and the time in which Serbian Orthodox Church, considerably weakened in the previous period, was faced with multiple *probations*, from the impossibility to adjust differing theological-intellectual-culturological traditions, via the issue of the innumerable and poorly educated clergy, to the challenges and necessity for modernization (Slijepčević 1991). Due to this force of circumstances, the claim which I will here try to analyze (if not prove), that religion of the nation did not sprout out of the auspices of the Church, but that it emerged as a state, i.e. secular phenomenon, whose connections to religion are of entirely non-religious nature, seems justified. Even though this may sound as a well-known fact, I believe that a critical analysis of this phenomenon may contribute to a more detailed approach in studying the process of rekindling of interest in religion in Serbia at the end of 20th century. In order to corroborate my hypothesis, I will try to determine and show what was the basis of religion of the nation in 19 century, and to answer the question of how its content was shaped.

What is of special importance for us here is the fact that secular religions, especially religion of the nation or nationalism, largely rested on the test of death, which is the central issue and event in creation of the central corps of (Christian) religious beliefs and practices. As many times before, death turned out to be a phenomenon with the largest sacral capital, recognizable to all and everyone, regardless of the level and type of religiousness. Graves, graveyards, tombstones, and memorials became the shrines of the new religion. (Cvitković 2003, 398) – shrines which gave the promise of eternal life, but from *this* side of reality – eternal life of remembrance, memories, ideas, worldly glory, and gratitude of offspring (Timotijević 2004; Pavićević 2009). The sacral calendar of this religion implied periodical commemoration of days of big battles, mass deaths, and war victories, which helped create the sacred moments in time of the nation, inconceivable without past, which unambiguously determined and gave meaning to present reality.

Tombstone culture was conceived in the 19 century Serbia, while the process of restoration of statehood and development of a new state was accompanied by rituals related to establishment of sacral places in the secular environment, as well as rituals relating to manipulation with dead bodies. Namely, exhumation, transport, handling, and consequent burial of important individuals of (Serbian) history were rituals known from previous ages (D. Popović 2006, 240; Mileusnić 1989; Verdery 1999.). The fact that the content of the national Pantheon was significantly changed occurs as a specificity of that historic moment. As of 19 century, it

no longer comprises only the individuals connected with Serbian church and political history, but, even more often than not, *the leading figures* of Serbian culture – teachers, writers, poets, and artists. Apart from this, this century is characterized by establishment of separate memorials and graves outside church yards and monastery grounds, to which, until that moment, patterns of collective memory, were connected. Thus, in 19 century, the first official memorial of the kind was designed – the Memorial of the Liberators of Belgrade from the first Serbian Uprising; the first monument showing a human figure was erected – the monument of Prince Mihailo; mortal remains of poet Branko Radicevic were relocated; he had died in Vienna in 1853, and his body was moved and buried in Strazilovo in 1883; and the body of Vuk Karadžić was also relocated; he had also died in Vienna in 1864, and his body was moved and buried in the churchyard of Collegiate Church in Belgrade, in 1897; the grave of Dositej Obradović was refurbished in 1897, on the occasion of the second and final burial of Vuk; and the monuments of Djura Danicic, Djura Jaksic, and many other members of Serbian intellectual elite of the period were erected (Timotijević 2001, 188).

Even though each of these events deserves separate attention, we shall focus on a more detailed analysis of two of them only: relocation of the mortal remains of Vuk Karadžić, *the father of modern Serbian literacy*, and restoration of the grave of Dositej Obradović, *the great Serbian enlightener*.⁴

Lives of both Vuk and Dositej were marked with struggle for national awakening and renaissance. Introduction of the popular language in literature, easier access to education, and reliance on European scientific tradition were common denominators of their endeavour. On the other hand, these two intellectuals were mutually considerably different. Namely, while Dositej was a supporter of the ideas of European enlightenment and rationalism, and a fervent critic of any *traditionalism* – starting from *primitive* folk customs to the church *formalism* and *petrified church dogmas*, Vuk's thinking and acting were characterized by a high level of romantic attitude to folk life and institutions (Gavrilović 1898; Novaković 1911). Apart from this, while Dositej enjoyed considerable reputation while still alive, and was even the first Minister of education after the post-revolutionary Serbia in 1805, Karadžić was mainly forced to rely on friends and the like-minded for support and understanding, and was only occasionally financially supported by the institutions of the emerging state. The afterlife story of these enlighteners was, however, largely counter-proportional to the first one. Dositej died in 1811 and was buried by the old Metropolitan Church in Belgrade. His grave was marked by just a modest tombstone, and the data on his funeral may not be found in available sources. Based on this, it may be conferred that his funeral was not marked as an event of special, public importance, which could be explained by two important facts relating to the time of his death and his life. Namely, the life of Dositej Obradović was largely marked by the fact that he spent some time of his life in a monastery, where, having become a monk, he was named Dositej. His real name was Dimitrije, but he never used it

⁴ These attributives are in italic because these are usual attributives ascribed by the names of these two celebrated Serbian intellectuals.

again, even after he had left the monastery and cast away monastic vows. The name he lived under for the most of his life and under which he became famous was actually his monastic name. It is well-known that Obradović left the monastery because of failed expectations he had had from of monastic life, and that this experience was a significant reason for his critical attitude to the Church (Radović 1993, 247). The Serbia of his time still used just a certain prototype of saints, which this kind of life certainly did not fit in. Apart from this, at the moment of his death, Serbia still did not have a clear vision of the future state, let alone organized institutions which could organize an event worthy of collective memory, as Dositej's funeral could possibly be. It appears that even almost 30 years later the situation was not considerably different. In 1837, on the occasion of restoration of the Collegiate Church in Belgrade, Dositej's great friend and publisher of his work, book-binder Grigorije Vozarevic, opened Dositej's grave, collected his bones, consecrated them, put them in a linen bag, and buried them again, together with a bottle containing a message on that act. It appears that this event was also not separately marked in public life of the capital of the period. Obradović *experienced* posthumous glory only in 1897, in relation to the bringing of the mortal remains of Vuk Karadžić from Vienna.

It is not entirely clear who initiated transport of Vuk's body to Belgrade, but its realization would certainly be impossible were it not for the support of state institutions of Kingdom of Serbia and Serbian Orthodox Church. This *project*, which was doubtlessly an important strategic move in the process of development of the new, autonomous Kingdom of Serbia, was supported by Ministry of education, Serbian Royal Academy, Serbian Cultural Centre, and King Alexander himself (Gavrilović 1898, 6, 15). Even though Dositej Obradović was not much favoured in church circles (Slijepčević 1991, 79), when arranging to transfer his bones, at one of the meetings of the committee in charge of the issue, the decision was passed that his grave in the churchyard of Collegiate Church in Belgrade should be refurbished on that occasion. However, as some committee members believed that this would imply that Dositej was of lesser importance compared to Vuk, it was agreed that stone sarcophagi should be commissioned for both of them, as well as tombstones with epitaphs (Gavrilović 1898, 9–10).

Before the casket with Karadžić's mortal remains was sent off from Vienna, identification of Vuk's body was performed in the presence of Austrian state authorities. The coffin contained a well-preserved fez with a tassel, socks and parts of clothing. Mortal remains of Jernej Kopitar, Slovenian linguist and reformer of Slovenian literary language were also supposed to be transferred to the fatherland simultaneously with Vuk, which was prearranged in the contacts between Serbian Royal Academy and Slovenian Cultural Association in Ljubljana. This joint transfer, as well as joint church rituals performed to see off these two colleagues of different religious and national affiliation from the graveyard church at Mark's graveyard in Vienna, was primarily based on the pan-Slavic idea and vision of a joint state of close nations. Here it needs to be mentioned that Kopitar's pan-Slavism was frequently aimed against Orthodox religion, especially against russophilia permit the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is why he was in conflict with some of the

most prominent figures of Serb church history, such as, for instance, Metropolite Stefan Stratimirovic. Stratimirovic also regarded Vuk's reforms with suspicion, as they were greatly supported by Kopitar (Slijepčević 1991, – 146). The joint project of posthumous celebration of these two intellectuals thus reflected the positions and attitudes of new political authorities in Serbia considerably more than the opinion of Serbian Orthodox Church.

In any case, the train carrying the coffin with mortal remains of Vuk Karadžić was solemnly welcomed in all major towns it passed through: Subotica, Novi Sad, Karlovci, and Zemun. At each of these stations, many people, who wanted to give the last farewell to this newly-celebrated giant, would enter the train; in some towns, the solemn occasion of this post-funerary procession was ornamented by choir singing of mostly spiritual songs (Gavrilović 1897, 51–52). Speeches given on the occasion of Vuk's reception and welcoming mostly rested on glorification of his contributions in the area of education, and, certainly, language, while religious terms of eternity and *celestial immortality* were mentioned only in the speech given by academician Stojan Novaković, at the grave of Jernej Kopitar, which was opened at the same time as Vuk's. Glorifying Kopitar's work and bringing it in close relation to the work of Vuk Karadžić, Novaković ended his speech with the words: "There should these respected remains go, to await for the judgment day in the middle of the new century" (Ibid, 44). On the other hand, the writer of the *Spomenica o prenosu Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića* (Remembrance of the transfer of the dust of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić) himself, the grammar school teacher Andra Gavrilović, member of the committee for organization of the transfer, compared this event with the event of bringing the mortal remains of St Sava to Serbia (Ibid, 57).

Apart from a large number of people from Belgrade, the solemn welcoming of Vuk Karadžić at Belgrade railway station was also attended by the highest representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, members of the Royal Government, state advisors, military generals, and intellectual elite. Numerous organizations, associations and individuals, welcomed Vuk with flower wreaths, and members of the choir of Serbian school for Teachers from Sombor were wearing black ribbons on that day as a sign of mourning for this "immortalized" hero.⁵ On the way from the railway station to Collegiate Church, the funeral procession was passing through unbroken ranks of Vuk's worshipers, followed by clergy, students of theology, youth, military orchestra, singing societies, and church bells.

The funeral itself was performed after the rules of Orthodox Church service, and last speeches were delivered by Serbian Archbishop and Belgrade Metropolitan Mihailo, and Minister of education and religious affairs Andra Nikolić. During the laying of wreaths on the grave, a mixed choir of joined singing associations "Obilić" and "Stanković" were singing a song by Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, composed for the occasion after a composition of Josif Marinković.

⁵ This was the epithet written down at the paper scarf on one flower wreath made for Vuk's funeral (Gavrilović 1898, 230).

This second funeral of Vuk took place on September 30th 1897. Dositej's remains had already been consecrated some 20 days earlier, on September 12th. Interestingly, on September 25th, the grave of Djura Daničić, important Serbian philologist, who died in Zagreb in 1882 and was ten days later brought to Belgrade and buried at the state expense in Tašmajdan graveyard, was refurbished on 25 September same year at the same expense. The grave itself was not opened, but it is interesting to mention that before this it had been in a sorry state. It appears that this grave was yet another one proclaimed as an important place of collective remembrance thanks to the romantic rapture of national restoration.

Certainly, Vuk's and Dositej's sarcophagi are still located in the church yard of Belgrade Collegiate Church, one on the left, and the other on the right side of the main entrance. Establishment of the grave of Vuk Karadžić and restoration of the grave of Dositej Obradović were intended as celebration of these important figures in the history of Serbian culture; however, we may also say that this project was characterized by strong political-strategic-ideological background, and that it primarily aimed at establishing and presenting Serbia as an advanced, civilized, and modern European state. Even though these funerary ceremonies, resembled the model of transfer of bones of holy men, such as, for instance, the transfer of mortal remains of St Simeon and St Sava, unlike the first ones, they had quite a limited range and consequences. This, in a certain manner, may be concluded from the fact that unlike the graves of Serbian saints revoking Church history, the graves of Vuk and Dositej have for a long time ceased to have an important role in collective remembrance of these celebrated Serbian intellectuals. Their statues, memorials and museums, erected and founded much later, have a considerably more significant role in this.⁶ The cults of these secular saints (it we may speak about the cult at all) may have been established using funerary rituals of transfer and consecration of their mortal remains, but it appears that their significance and impact on the lives of people is considerably smaller than the one relating to Serbian saints before the age of enlightenment.

The historic moment in which the described ceremony took place was fully complex – both for the young state of Serbia, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Political conflicts about the organization of the state affected the attitude of the authorities towards the Church. Its ability to exert significant influence on the direction of the state policy was not diminished only due to the necessity for modernization of the society, but also due to the fact that the government of the day (the Government of Prince Milan Obrenović) was seriously inclined to alliance with Austro-Hungarian Empire. The attempts of the state to have a say in the issues of Church organization and appointment of the Archbishop, especially the secret Convention Milan Obrenovic concluded with the Habsburg Monarchy, resulted in serious conflicts between the government and top Church officials. This conflict even resulted

⁶ The first monument erected in Belgrade was the one of Dositej Obradović, in 1911, than of Vuk Karadžić in 1934, while the Museum of Vuk and Dositej was established in 1949. (Timotijević 2001, 39). <http://sr.wikipedia.org>, enquiry: Monument of Vuk Karadžić and Museum of Vuk and Dositej.

in deposition of one of the most respected and most meritorious figures of the Serbian Orthodox Church of the period – Belgrade Metropolitan Mihailo on 1881 (Slijepčević 1991, 389).

Thus, it is clear that the ritual of posthumous celebration of Vuk and Dositej was primarily a state projects in which the Church however took part for three reasons. The first and foremost reason for this ceremony to be performed only in the presence of representatives of the Church was the fact that this was about manipulation with dead bodies and ideas of death, and *eternal* life/glory. At the time the ritual took place, the experience of death was still solely connected to religious thinking and acting, which is why the Church appeared as a sort of *professional service* whose services opened *the door to eternal life*. Secondly, it is clear that the Serbian Orthodox Church of the period was practically the only institution with the assets of continuity, reputation and symbols linked to history and popular-religious tradition. Even though declaratively opting for modernization, establishment of fundamental values and orientation, the new state could not have been imagined without those assets. Finally, even though it was neither the initiator nor the creator of this ceremony, the Church *benefited* from it, confirming by its presence its social role and its future that had already started to be uncertain.

Apart from testifying about the complexity of historic events and their protagonists, the whole set of circumstances described also testifies about intensification of the process of secularization of both the society and the Church itself, which was most obviously manifested in development of new forms of religiousness. Development of culture of memorials, mentioned earlier in the paper, as well as rituals relating to death of new *heroes of the nation* rested upon the concept of death which was significantly different than the one preached by Christian religion. This concept hinted at the beginning of separation of the phenomenon of death from the umbrella of religion, which was, probably without a separate plan and intention, assisted by the Church itself.

This practically opened the way for separation between collective and personal religiousness, which until the present date has been an increasing trend. This trend implies increasing social marginalization of the importance of individual religion on the one hand, and increasingly intensified manipulation with collective identities based on different ideological constructions of relation between religion and nation on the other.

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