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Persons, peoplehood, and religious nationalism in post-Yugoslav Serbia

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Abstract

Drawing on extensive fieldwork amongst practising Orthodox Christians in the central Serbian town of Kraljevo, this article draws attention to the issue of peoplehood. The people (*narod*) – understood as a moral-cum-ethnic collectivity – functions as a framework within which these Orthodox Christians situate themselves as persons, and through which they make eschatological claims. That is, a this-worldly collective identity works as an essential conduit from which Orthodox persons approach God's eternal realm. And – by logical extension – actively retaining a national identity in the face of its potential loss is a pursuit caught up with spiritual implications. This view of the world is not fully captured, the article argues, through the analytical lens of 'religious nationalism'.

One does not have to spend long in central Serbia before hearing references to the history and peculiarity of the 'Serbian people' (*srpksi narod*). Serbians frequently characterise, critique and champion the collective national body, summoning up multiple adjectives to capture its essence. The people is variously construed as tragic, ancient, intelligent, fucked, naïve, really naïve, weird, forgiving, vital, long-suffering, hospitable, tormented, warm, consecrated, or even stupid. Sometimes, an objectifying gaze is invited from outside, from foreigners: 'So, what do you think of us?' 'What sort of people are we?'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my attempts to interrogate local understandings of peoplehood per se were met with bafflement and irritation. On one occasion, after I had somewhat glibly described nations as 'social constructs', Miroljub – an unemployed man in his mid-fifties and a very observant Orthodox Christian – pointedly stated that: 'You make everything theoretical, you bring everything back to relativity … I believe that some things can be *real*.' On another occasion, mocking my apparent lack of national rootedness, he accused me of being a cosmopolitan 'butterfly' (*leptir*), playfully flapping his arms.

Historically speaking, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has seen itself as the protector of the Serbian people. Glossing the core message of a homily given by the renowned Serbian bishop Atanasije, *Blic*, the Serbian tabloid, once ran with the headline *We must sustain the people – fewer children are being born*. 'In a world in which everything is advancing', the paper reported the octogenarian cleric as saying, 'a person will not find himself if he does not return to the origin of his spiritual and cultural being'. Logically, within church circles, a sensibility for the essence and contours of Serbian peoplehood feels especially acute. My interlocutors – like Miroljub, practising Orthodox Christians in the central Serbian town of Kralejvo – were especially fluent in evoking the character and history of their people, as well as their own place as constituent Serbian persons within it.

From a liberal, Western perspective the Orthodox Christian Churches are frequently scrutinized by commentators looking for their 'ethno-national' element, for an apparently unhealthy overlapping of faith-based and ethnic identities – a concern that is not unwarranted. Certainly, it is frequently observed that in contemporary Serbia, as in other traditionally Orthodox countries, national and confessional identities are deeply entwined. Today, being Serbian and being Orthodox has effectively become 'mutually interchangeable' (Aleksov 2010: 178). And when I told

colleagues about my fieldwork it was not long before the term 'religious nationalism' appeared in our discussions. The SOC in particular is beleaguered with the legacy of its aggressively nationalistic stance during Yugoslavia's bloody demise in the 1990s (see Iveković 2002; Perica 2002), and has struggled to deal critically with that past (Vukomanović 2005).

However, during my fieldwork I became increasingly unconvinced that speaking solely in terms of 'ethno' or 'religious' nationalisms fully illuminated the ethnographic phenomena that I witnessed in present-day, postsocialist central Serbia. Despite the early belief that 'religious nationalism' was 'a contradiction in terms' (Gorski & Türkmen-Dervişoğlu 2013: 194), scholars have emphasized how apparently 'secular' nations and 'religion' can indeed drive each other (Van der Veer 1994: x; Van der Veer & Lehmann 1999). But even whilst scholarly analysis demonstrates their compatibility, the underlying assumption is that 'religion' and 'nation' are inappropriate, potentially violent bedfellows (see Armstrong 1997). From an outside perspective, the intermeshing of apparently universalist 'religion' and particular 'national' identity smacks of contradiction. From the viewpoint of my interlocutors, however, those modes of belonging are harmonious. As a lens, 'religious nationalism' misconstrues and secularizes the ultimate *ends* they had in mind, and wrongly politicizes a sprawling network of people who, in quite mundane, everyday settings, elaborate their Orthodox faith within the framework of Serbian peoplehood.

Broadly speaking, within these socially conservative, churchgoing networks 'the Serbian people' was viewed as a historically and geographically rooted moral-cum-ethnic collectivity.[i] That is, more than being a purely objective sociological category, my interlocutors understand the people as a living entity sitting in relation to God, an entity which can be evaluated morally in terms of how well (or not) it lives up to Christian standards of virtue.[ii] Thus, my central claim is that peoplehood functions as a more and less implicit framework within which these Orthodox Christians situate themselves as persons, and through which they make eschatological claims. That is, a this-worldly collective identity works as an essential conduit from which Orthodox persons approach God's eternal realm. And – by logical extension – actively retaining a national identity in the face of its potential loss is a pursuit caught up with spiritual implications. Overall, then, following Michael Herzfeld's reflection on Greece, I argue that it is necessary to explore 'a very different understanding of the relationship among personhood, religion, and national identity' (2002: 201) to ones with which we may be more familiar in Protestant settings in the West.

Since Yugoslavia's collapse 'manifestations of the Serbian national feeling' have not faded into the background and are, in fact, rather present, fraught and 'self-conscious' (Spasić 2017: 37). And, imagining oneself as an Orthodox person who is part of a people is but one version of belonging available to contemporary Serbians; one way of being an 'interlocutor' engaging with a 'great conversation', to borrow Michael Carrithers's formulation (1985: 255).[iii] Certainly, the very fact that my informants were so vocally assertive about their particular version of peoplehood suggests that it is a version which is perceived as endangered and so needs to be argued for and defended (see also Skey 2010: 721). 'Natural' national givenness has to be justified and shored up rhetorically (see Domínguez 1989: 189) and in Kraljevo this is done – occasionally – through conversations with anthropologists. Faced with the 'anti-Serbian' socialist past and the onslaught of globalization my interlocutors – similarly to the Croatian Catholics Michaela Schäuble studied – strive to 'create a sense of certainty, stability and belonging in what is perceived as an insecure and transitory world' (2014: 6). But, if anything, it is precisely that very anxiousness about national extinction which keeps in the foreground the collective body as the prime site for Orthodox flourishing, a collective body which is seen as suffering through historical time on earth, against the relief of God's eternity. Otherwise put, perennially under threat, the moral-cum-ethnic framework of peoplehood is crucial for Serbian Orthodox identities, generating particular, emotive commitments both to this world and the next.

Serbia and its Orthodox faith

That Serbian peoplehood can be evoked in such spiritual as well as ethnic terms is the product of history. Thanks to the diplomatic agility of Prince Rastko Nemanja (known to posterity as Saint Sava, Serbia's patron saint), the Serbian Church gained autocephaly from Constantinople in 1219. And under the medieval Nemanjić dynasty (which bore twelve monarchs between 1166 and 1371), Church and state structures developed alongside each other. Later, the period of Ottoman rule – under which the Serbs lived from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries – further compounded the equivalence between faith and ethnicity. The Orthodox peoples of the empire found themselves under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople. And, with the structures of the Serbian state eradicated, it was the Church which thus

'became the chief organizer of political and civil life at every level' (Bakić-Hayden 2005: 68). Serb ethnic and confessional identities became increasingly entangled.

The Yugoslav socialist state established in 1945 was – given its Marxist atheism – naturally disinclined towards religion, which it saw as obstructive to human progress. And the close association of Orthodoxy with Serbianness was naturally concerning for a regime keen to mask over past divisions and impose its new, all-encompassing ideology of 'Brotherhood and Unity'. The regime viewed the SOC as a nationalist institution, promoting Serb interests; it was seen as a political, just as much a spiritual, operator (see Ramet 1989: 312-318). Whilst the constitution guaranteed freedom of conscience, in practice religious expression was significantly restricted. However, as Yugoslavia crumbled in the 1980s and 1990s the SOC reasserted itself in the public sphere. Orthodoxy became for many a newly credible expression of national belonging.

In 2017, the Pew Research Centre found that 88% of the Serbian population identify as 'Orthodox Christian'[iv], whilst an earlier more specialized study found that a majority of respondents either believed in God, or at least had beliefs in the transcendent (Mladenović 2011: 207). But, as in other traditionally Orthodox countries, only a relative minority engage in regular church-centric liturgical practice. In large part my fieldwork focused on the demographically-diverse network of people who – beyond claiming a confessional Orthodox identity through ethnic affiliation – seek to live their lives 'in the faith'. That is, they try to cultivate themselves as Orthodox Christians by living lives centred around regularly attending the Divine Liturgy, receiving Divine Communion, and fasting. However, my fieldwork also reached beyond church circles – to civic settings, cultural events at local museums and libraries, and to people who – whilst happy to identify as 'Orthodox' – were sceptical of the institutional Church, and rarely engaged with liturgical practice. What all of my interlocutors shared, however, was a keen sense that they were 'Serbian' and 'Orthodox'.

Highly influential in sacralizing the Serbian collective identity was the prolific Serbian theologian and bishop (now saint) Nikolaj Velimirović (1880-1956). In his text *The Serbian People as the Servant of God* he claimed that 'The heavenly world has forever been closer and more intimate to the soul of the Serb than the earthly world.'[v] 'Heavenly Serbia', he argued, would be achieved through Serbian society's 'complete devotion to Church and Christ' (Falina and Velimirović 2009: 220). Thus, against a history of apparently relentless oppression and hardship, the 'long-suffering' Serbian

people could be construed as forever pitched heavenwards. As Yugoslavia collapsed the idea of Serbia being 'celestial' or 'heavenly' re-emerged into public discourse (Radić 2000: 254).

Serbian evocations of their own national specificity – about their self-ascribed status as a 'heavenly', 'godly', or 'chosen' people – have not gone unnoticed (Bandić 2010: 52, 62-63; Hastings 1999). And earlier scholarship focussed (sometimes tendentiously) on the idea of 'Heavenly Serbia' with its Christian overtones of national resurrection (Anzulovic 1999; Dawson 2009; Judah 2009). However, whilst the heavenly trope should not be overlooked, it is not necessarily useful as a lens through which to analyse contemporary ethnographic data. Although my interlocutors emphasize the specificity of the Serbian people, its historical trajectory and extraordinary suffering, contemporary liturgical life in Kraljevo cannot be said to be characterised by a 'missionary type of ethnic election ideal' (Smith 2003: 7). In other words, whilst the people is imagined as bounded, created and real, it is *not* consistently imbued with messianic telos. That is not to underestimate potentially violent views of Serbian superiority which exist and have existed, nor to deny that they could emerge in the future within the overarching structure that I am describing. But, for practising Orthodox Christians – who emphasise *personal* transformation in Christ and sincere repentance as the path to salvation – a person is never saved simply by dint of their nationality or through claiming ethnic allegiance to a 'chosen' people. Both priests and laity are critical of their compatriots for asserting a 'traditional' Serbian Orthodox identity *without* the attendant liturgical practices.

In Kraljevo – in and around of which much of my research was based – almost 96% of the urban population identify as 'Orthodox'. The town was not characterised by multi-confessional co-existence (as elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia), nor was it subjected to the horrors of ethnic cleansing during the 1990s. And, despite their many (often far-fetched and uncompromising) *ideas* about Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant 'sects', for the most part my interlocutors were not negotiating ethno-religious otherness in quotidian settings in their daily lives. My arguments about peoplehood draw on ethnography from this homogenous Serb context, not a post-conflict, contested setting (cf. Jansen 2006), or one where communities are making sense of more proximate national others (cf. Bringa 1995).

Religion, nation, and 'religious nationalism'

In post-Yugoslav Serbia, the role of the SOC has been scrutinized by academics, with suggestions that its newfound influence has stretched beyond that which is acceptable in a modern, democratic society. Questions are asked about societal 'desecularization' (Blagojević 2008) and whether Serbia has effectively become 'clericalised' (Aleksov 2008: 369). And, alongside suggestions that Orthodox symbolism has produced an ethno-centric, homogenous 'us', blind to ethnic minorities (Malešević 2006: 116-118), the SOC has stood accused of longing for etatization, obstructing social reform, and slowing the process of EU integration (Vukomanović 2008).

Such questions (frequently asked by Serbian academics in Serbia) are part of a more general trend. Since the fall of European communist regimes in the 1990s there has been considerable scholarly interest in the interconnections between ethnic and religious identities (Rogers 2005: 9-10) and in how newly democratizing states shore up their authority through co-operation with religious actors and institutions (Hann 2006). Often, such work has been framed at the level of the state, posing overarching questions about emergent religious intolerance and extremism (Ramet 2014; 2019) or about the ways in which national churches deal with religious plurality (Wanner & Steinberg 2008: 13-17). The Orthodox Churches, in particular, have been scrutinized for how they relate to new regimes and the political sphere (Köllner 2019; Leustean 2014*a*; Ramet 2019). For instance, criticizing the SOC's failure to engage constructively with secular, civil society, the sociologist Milan Vukomanović laments that its clergy 'do keep talking about *the people*, but this is an almost metaphysical category, an undifferentiated collective, a "mass"' – a view which reflects what he sees as the Church's tribalism (2008: 258, original emphasis).

Whilst such critique is justified, it does sometimes fail to capture modes of national belonging which are compelling to those who practise religion in their everyday lives. The anthropological point is that – in attending to 'the place of religious groups in studies of Christianity' (Handman 2014: S206) – the 'people' is precisely a concept which merits further interrogation. How does this 'metaphysical' collective category resonate in Christian terms?

Part of the issue arguably lies in the peculiarly *Western* genealogy of the concepts of 'nations' and 'nationalism' (Smith 1986: 144-145) and the potential limits of such concepts for illuminating phenomena in places with different historical experiences. Anthony Smith observed that the Western, civic mode of nationhood,

with its emphasis on '[t]erritoriality, citizenship rights, legal codes and … political culture' is different to the 'ethnic' mode, where the emphasis is placed on 'descent, populism, vernacular culture and nativism' (ibid.). Without arguing for a simplistic typology, I would claim that overly focussing the analysis in terms of Smith's Western mode (nation-state, civil society) risks eclipsing the sort of claims that are made within understandings of national belonging more akin to his ethnic mode. It eclipses the *intimacy*, the symbiosis, which some actors perceive as existing between person and people. And it can fail to illuminate how seeing oneself as an Orthodox person who is part of a people may imply commitments which stretch *beyond* the secular, political realm.

One way to develop this point is to consider how different versions of peoplehood are temporalized. In his seminal account of the emergence of 'the imagined community of the nation' Benedict Anderson (2006) famously emphasized the transition away from a medieval religious conception of time. There was a break with a perception of 'simultaneity along time' (wherein past and present were not radically distinguished) and a shift towards simultaneity that is 'transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar' (ibid.: 24). The nation came to be imagined as moving through 'homogenous, empty time' (ibid.); it is a 'secular, historically-clocked, imagined community' (ibid.: 35). But the Serbian people – as construed by the Orthodox persons who see themselves as belonging to it – is *not* imagined as travelling through 'homogenous, empty time'. Indeed, peoples (unlike Anderson's secular nations) are credible collective entities to those who evoke them precisely because they exist in the face of eternity, a dimension which – anything but 'empty' – is understood as being characterised by hope, expectation, and promise.[vi]

In his own engagement with Anderson's work, Talal Asad points us back to pre-national temporal regimes where loyalties were primarily to faith, and not to nation. If, in the 'modern doctrine of secularism' the world is dualistically split into reality versus an imagined religious dimension, by contrast 'the complex medieval Christian universe' was characterised by 'interlinked times' where the eternal could irrupt into the world (2003.: 194). To get closer to the perspective I encountered in Kraljevo one has to understand that, the 'Serbian people' which my interlocutors describe is *not* divorced from those 'interlinked times', nor is it split off from the cosmos, relegated to a worldly existence. Otherworldly allegiance is not a bar to peoplehood, it can drive it.

Needless to say, reference to the 'eternal' is fairly commonplace in academic discussions of nationhood. For instance, Herzfeld argues that the nation-state 'is ideologically committed to ontological self-perpetuation for all eternity' (2016: 27; see also Llobera 2004: 8-9). And, in one sense, the Serbian Church is also deeply concerned about the biological survival of the Serbian people – a point to which I return in the final section. But here the 'eternal' does not mean perpetuity in this world. The 'self-perpetuation' of the people is compelling precisely because Orthodox persons see the peoples they constitute as sitting against the relief of *God's* eternity; everything is viewed within the prospect of salvation.

It is worth considering scholarly terminology in this regard. My interlocutors generally talk about their 'people' (*narod*) and ('our') 'faith' (*vera*) – emotive categories with etymologically Slavic roots which are awkwardly glossed with the analytical, Latinate terms of 'nation' and 'religion'.[vii] For one, both of those latter categories, Asad (2003) shows, are derivative from processes of secularization. A nationalist's loyalty is primarily to the nation, not religion, meaning that this-worldly nationalism actually 'requires the concept of the secular to make sense' (ibid.: 193). Arguably, the secular baggage of 'religion' and 'nation' renders them lumpy analytical tools for grasping the Orthodox liturgical world.

Overall, then, my broad point is that whilst my interlocutors were acutely nationally aware – it is central to their being Orthodox persons – the ultimate ends they had in mind were always more than the temporal, earthly people. My account thus stands in contrast to Bruce Kapferer's thinking on the 'religion of nationalism' where nationalists 'declare nationalism to be a higher religious form than those erstwhile universalistic religions they appear to supplant' (ibid.: 5). Theological ideas may feed the nationalist project but 'the religion of nationalism is in nationalism per se and not in the religious ideas it may incorporate' (ibid.). My interlocutors are not 'nationalists' in Kapferer's sense: their version of peoplehood and derivative forms of personhood do not 'supplant' religious ideas, but are in themselves a core part of their Orthodox worldview. Thus, if one approach to 'religious nationalism' is to examine how 'religion helps explain nationalism' and has contributed to its symbolic repertoire and development (Brubaker 2012: 5), then here I suggest that the reverse approach is also illuminating. That is, how can taking 'national' commitments seriously reveal something about 'religion'? In central Serbia, faith can be understood through the prism of peoplehood, rather than 'nation' being understood through 'religion'.

Nations and peoples in Christian thought

The Orthodox theological view of nationhood has been termed 'primordialist', insofar as nations are seen as existing since the beginning (Leustean 2014*b*: 10), with the 'concept of the nation' appearing 'in the earliest writings of the Christian church' (ibid.: 11). Indeed, the historian Adrian Hastings advanced the bold argument that the nation – and thus nationalism – are 'characteristically Christian things' (1997: 186); Christianity 'has shaped national formation' (ibid.: 187; see also 1999: 394). Hastings makes sweeping claims that are beyond the scope of this article to evaluate, but he nevertheless illustrates why a people-centric view sits so comfortably within Orthodox Christian discourse. The Bible has worked 'as the mirror through which to imagine and create a Christian nation' (1997: 195). If the Old Testament showed 'what a God-centred nation would look like and the way God would treat it if it was faithless', then the New Testament, with its frequent invocations of 'peoples' and 'nations', champions 'the full diversity of nations, customs and language' subsumed in 'the unity of the Christian faith' (ibid.). In short, the scriptures (and subsequent theological writings and teachings extrapolated from them) provide a sense that the national collective entity is a legitimate Christian category. A people is an entity that may be in a relationship with God throughout its history (some of my interlocutors explicitly pointed to the model of Old Testament Israel), but it is also an entity which is, by its nature, replicated across the world. One priest, apparently echoing Herder, spoke of the world as being like a 'garden' of different peoples. And my interlocutors generally viewed national identity as a basic, essential and universal trait, 'a precondition of existence' (Holy 1996: 65). As one young man said, nationality is important 'to everybody' [in the world], it is 'implanted' (*usađeno*).

To better illustrate how such view of the world is expressed, let me turn to Ana. Ana is a married, retired woman in her early fifties who – when she is not at home, cooking, cleaning, and tending her garden – spends much time attending church services. On one occasion, I enquired about the recurrent insistence on Serbian peoplehood within church circles. Why, I wondered, did it *matter* when the Orthodox emphasis was so frequently on the eternal, on salvation, on the fleeting *transience* of this worldly life. She explained things lucidly, if not with a little exasperation:

> Do you understand? You know who you are and where you're from – you can't say "I'm a world citizen (*građanin sveta*) and a citizen of heaven (*nebeski građanin*)". Understand? You have to have an identity – who you are, where

> you're from. And we've lost who we are. Do you understand what I'm telling you? Now it's not enough to idealize the people, but it's a step that you can't skip … You have to go through it. You have to know who you are, where you're from. You mustn't remain at that step – it's not the final step. But you can't skip over it, otherwise you'd be air, not a person.

Her explanation is obviously intended to be didactic, for my benefit; my interlocutors did not need to explain such things to each other. In Ana's understanding, peoplehood is an unavoidable, mediating step on the way to eternity. Living well as an Orthodox Christian (and thus working on one's salvation) does not imply rejecting God's created world, but rather accepting and operating in its terms for the duration of one's earthly life. Since God created the world in a particular way, one approaches Him not by trying to circumvent that order of things, but by living in harmony with it. As the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky wrote, '[e]schatology becomes present at the moment when man becomes capable of cooperating in the divine plan' (1974: 224). Striving for 'deifying union' with the Divine is not an abstract pursuit, but a process rooted in the 'terrestrial universe' (ibid.: 223). Thus, in the view of people like Ana, the specificity of where you are from, your local identity, is not antithetical to striving for the Divine, but rather a means to get there.

Recent work within the Anthropology of Christianity has also considered the issue of the 'Christian nation' (Haynes 2015, 2018) and 'Christian nationalism' (Bialecki 2017). Drawing principally on ethnography from American Evangelicals and their responses to demographic change, Jon Bialecki argues that 'Christian nationalism is not a pre-given structure but rather a problem that people find themselves inhabiting' (ibid.: 44). Particular external circumstances interact with inherent Evangelical ethics and thus 'trigger a crystallization' of nationalist feeling (ibid.: 45) which is marshalled within the nation-state at given historical moments. It is a 'politics and ethics of pure opposition', driven by *ressentiment* (ibid.: 52).

At one level, the dynamic Bialecki describes works well in an Orthodox context. Given the historical development of its organizational structures, Orthodoxy is 'particularly prone' to nationalism (Makrides 2013). And in the Serbian case, the recourse to ethno-religious identities during the collapse of the Yugoslav system in the 1990s were conditions which 'contributed to the instrumentalization of the church towards nationalistic and other ends' (Radić 2000: 271; see also Hofmeisterová 2019).

Consequently, striking the correct relationship between confessional and national belonging is a thorny issue within Orthodox circles – though there is no space here to pursue the theme in depth. Theologically speaking, in 1872 'ethnophyletism' – the conflation of Church with ethnic group – was declared to be a heresy (see Leustean 2014: 11). And my interlocutors often engaged in a historically aware, self-conscious discourse about the nature of 'nationalism' per se. In part they wanted to clarify that it was 'healthy' and natural to love one's own people, but that this should not imply hatred for others. But they also emphasised that faith should always *precede* national sentiment. One should, they insisted, be 'Orthodox Serbian', not 'Serbian Orthodox'.

However, as I read Bialecki, he is also implicitly saying that Evangelical culture can effectively exist in a non-nationalist mode; it is just one expression of Evangelical Christianity. In central Serbia, by contrast, Orthodox Christianity is always conceived of in national terms in an everyday way. Being an Orthodox subject implies simultaneously being a national one, and vice versa. Sometimes, my interlocutors were politically-oriented, highly critical of the contemporary Serbian state and the apparent contempt with which it treated the Serbian people and its cultural heritage. But, even when they are not, peoplehood is the framework within which eschatological claims are made. In what ways does the people provide this framework, and how do persons claim to be derivative from it?

The people and its Orthodox persons

Drawing on her fine-grained ethnography from late-Soviet Russia, Nancy Ries observes that to 'invoke' the idea of *narod* means invoking a whole saga and – note – '*one's own identification* with *narod* in that saga' (1997: 29, my emphasis). In churchgoing circles at least, discussions about peoplehood are always implicitly discussions about personhood. The former defines the latter and the sort of commitments and priorities a person is expected to have in the world. Of course, the view of personhood whereby 'individuals can only be defined in references to the whole' (Strathern 1992: 26) is well established within social theory. And I am not the first to explore a setting in which individuals are not 'autonomous', but only 'brought into being only as parts of a nation' (Holy 1996: 65; see also Taylor 1985: 280).

But what I am showing here is how the view of the person as derivative from a people implies an Orthodox Christian commitment. As Jon Bialecki and Girish Daswani observe, 'questions of personhood are not quantum grids constituting fixed

and mutually irreconcilable positions; nor are they entirely plastic flows, capable of taking any form whatsoever' (2015: 273). Rather, such questions are better understood as 'responses to specific problems' (ibid.). Insofar as my Serbian-born interlocutors wish to cultivate themselves as Orthodox Christians *in Serbia* it is for them taken for granted that they do so within the framework of Serbian peoplehood. The Serbian people is seen as the organic bearer of Orthodox faith. But, being the perceived victim of both Ottoman and socialist repression, it is a faith tradition which needs to be constantly asserted by those who claim to be part of it. As Bishop Atanasije argued in his homily, finding oneself as a person involves a return to the locus of one's 'spiritual and cultural being', a return to peoplehood.

Milan, a freelance translator in his mid-fifties, expressed such thoughts lucidly one morning after the Liturgy:

> A Serb would be purely a statistic if he didn't adhere to his historical heritage, tradition. There would be just some statistic – a name and surname on paper. Every people has its meaning of existence… If we keep to why God determined us then our existence has meaning. But if we depersonalize and live in something international, empty … You can take on a lot [of different influences] but your base, your root, is a sort of matrix. And your ancestors existed for centuries before you.

A person's purpose involves holding onto their God-given Serbianness, and not allowing that identity to become dissipated in the advance of faceless globalization. Such a view of this world presumes that one's own people is the privileged framework within which a person can blossom. Or, to speak in Charles Taylor's terms, Serbian peoplehood represents the 'space of disclosure' within which a person can achieve full human subject status (1985: 280).

However, whilst the people is conceived of as existing object-like in time and space it is not completely separated from the persons who claim to constitute it. In conversations, those I spoke with would often present person (*čovek*) and people (*narod*) as entities which are symbiotic and situated on a singular sliding scale. The two are presented as distinct, yet intertwined. Just as persons have characters, so too do peoples, I was told. Once – in a conversation about historical Croatian grievances against Serbia – a middle-aged woman assured me that 'peoples (*narodi*) can have complexes, just like people (*ljudi*) can have complexes.' Moreover, both are capable of

being forged by historical experience: One man explained that knowing history is crucial since it 'directs every person, every people'. And both are capable of particularity: In a book of homilies that I was given by an interlocutor the author wrote that '*Svetosavlje*' (literally 'Saint Savism', the uniquely Serbian expression of Orthodox Christianity) is 'in essence Christ's Gospels experienced with the soul of the Serbian people – just as each person experiences faith in his own personal way' (Vladika Stefan 1998: 82). Nation and individual may be 'mutually reducible', and the person can embody the nation (Kapferer 2012: 187). But the reverse is also true: the people is actually a person writ large (see also Grdešić 2019: 67).

The implication of such a view is that, like a person, the people can – like in Marko Grdešić's socio-political account – emerge as 'an agent that can come to life and begin to act on its own' (2019: 67). It can be ascribed characteristics and evaluated in moral terms, against a scale of virtue, before the eyes of God. Take, for instance, Vladan – a self-employed painter-decorator in his early forties who attends church regularly with his family. During one conversation he lamented what he saw as the declining moral condition of Serbian society – a common enough concern amongst churchgoers. In particular, he claimed to be shocked by the teenage girls who walked through the town centre wearing provocative, revealing clothes. Continuing his trail of thought he mused that it was, in his view, perfectly understandable that Serbia had lost control of Kosovo after it declared independence in 2008. The Serbs, he said, had 'forgotten to be the sort of people (*narod*) that they ought to be', and God was punishing them for this. He spoke with a shrug, as if this was a self-evident fact. Having lapsed morally, the Serbs were obliged to witness the consequences. Ivan – an insurance salesman in his thirties – once made a similar critical point stating that he did not think that the Serbs 'are a people to be praised (*za pohvalu*)'. Just as much as it can nurture fervent pride, the perceived greatness of a national past can also produce disillusionment and disappointment in the present when the people's constituent persons feel that they have failed to meet those standards. [viii]

One should not automatically assume, then, that defining oneself in terms of one's people and faith inevitably reinforces a feeling of national superiority and righteousness (though it most certainly can). Critique can also be turned *inwards* to temper nascent messianic fervour.[ix] Several interlocutors stressed the importance of humility and the danger of hubris. 'In our faith', Ana explained to me once, 'the first thing to get rid of is pride'. She made jab at her more nationalistic compatriots: 'It's a bit conceited to say that you're a heavenly people.' But, using the discourse of

Orthodox Christianity to assert Serb exceptionality or to enact withering self-criticism are really two sides of the same coin. The underlying structure is that people see themselves as belonging to a broader moral-cum-ethnic collectivity which is, in turn, seen as being in a formative relationship with the Divine.

Arguably, the recurrent insistence on *Serbian* peoplehood implicitly presumes the existence of comparable and yet distinct peoples around the world (Čolović 2002: 64; see also Herzfeld 2016: 112). And my interlocutors could be said to hold a 'polycentric' worldview (Smith 1983: 158-159), assuming humanity to be characterised by divergent national histories, traditions, and 'mentalities'. And the people I encountered in Kraljevo are not, of course, somehow blindly and romantically bound into an organic group, incapable of thinking expansively. Relational notions of personhood are not 'an obstruction to rational action' (Hann 2012). My interlocutors – at different times and in different places – readily identify with other, wider collectivities, such as Christendom more generally, or else the former Yugoslavia, 'the Balkans', or 'Europe'. And, at the level of liturgical practice, 'Serbian' Orthodoxy is not immune to outside influence; it is, in fact, rather porous and open to transnational flows. Ideas, icons, literature, and relics circulate between Orthodox sites in the region; people travel on pilgrimages to Greece, Romania, Russia and Jerusalem. However, openness to otherness is nevertheless mediated from the position of peoplehood; national identity is 'the primary lens through which Orthodox view one another' (Demacopoulos & Papanikolaou 2013: 11). And approaching God's eternity from the vantage point of peoplehood relies upon the physical continuation and survival of the people in a biological sense.

Peoplehood under threat

Within Church circles concerns that the 'Serbian collective identity might be lost' (Buchenau 2011: 129) feel especially pronounced. And part of what lends the framework of peoplehood such poignancy is the very fact that it is construed as being constantly on the brink of destruction. 'We are', Smith noted, 'probably never so aware of phenomena and objects as when we are about to gain or lose them' (1986: 7). Curiously, then, the 'people' as a living organism is often most convincingly imagined in terms of its potential death. Being an ethnic just as much as a moral collectivity, the people perennially faces the risk of not being biologically reproduced.

'We are a small people', people in Kraljevo say matter-of-factly, recalling the threats to survival in a globalizing world dominated by the 'Great Powers'. And, in taking peoplehood as an irreducible organizing principle (one that can be used to make sense of humanity the world over) my interlocutors are able to throw the particular plight of the Serbs into relief. I became accustomed to hearing issues faced by the 'Serbian people' being couched in relative terms: 'a people needs to know its history', 'every people must preserve its identity', 'every people has its own myth'. Issues are thus shown to be weighty because they are implied to be universally true of *all* peoples, not just Serbs. And, precisely because my interlocutors construe 'peoples' as natural and given, it makes it all the more shocking that their own people is seemingly faced with the threat of extinction and corrosive 'Western' influence. There remains an overwhelmingly bleak perception that the Church was a victim of socialist repression, that a precious tradition was interrupted, and that – despite Orthodoxy's historical rootedness – 'the people fell away from the faith'.

Ivan Čolović characterizes Serbian 'national time' in terms of its double nature (2002: 20). It is imagined as repetitive and enduring, but also 'as a new beginning', a feeling that suffering must 'never again' befall the people (ibid.). This sentiment was vividly illustrated at a very well-attended public lecture by the literary historian Prof. Dr. Milo Lompar in the parish house of the Saint Sava temple in Belgrade. Lompar is a well-known champion of Serbian national concerns and a fierce critic of globalization. (He is also perceived by some fellow academics as being extremist, too right-wing, and drawing on fascist ideas). Following an introduction by a priest, Lompar delivered a talk entitled *The Serbian people after the dissolution of Yugoslavia*. It was a blistering attack on the legacy of Yugoslav communism and, more generally, a reflection on the dire consequences of the Twentieth Century for the Serbs. It was a century during which, Lompar reminded the audience in a hushed, even dramatic tone, the Serbian people had experienced *genocide*. He was referring to the experience of Serbs living in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during the Second World War. Pursuing racial policies akin to Nazi Germany, the regime sought to cleanse the country of non-Croatian elements, most infamously at the Jasenovac concentration camp.[x] Lompar emphasized the Serbian 'cultural idea' and the vital need for unity. 'It is key we understand that an integralistic consciousness about our people is necessary' he argued, because, once lost, 'the process of de-nationalization (*denacionalizacija*)' will go ever more quickly. If to a Western audience such statements may sound

provocative and distasteful, in more conservative Serbian circles these predictions are not only quite commonplace but also taken in all seriousness.

However, the sense of the people's fragility is not only brought forth in academic interventions such as Lompar's. In more everyday settings my interlocutors evoke the Serbian population in a strikingly corporeal sense: in terms of babies which need to be born, or which have been sinfully aborted, in terms of men killed in conflict and the time needed for reproductive 'renewal' afterwards, or in terms of people who physically leave, emigrating abroad. The massive Serbian death toll in the First World War – about a third of the population perished – is a recurrent, emotive point of reference.

At times this discourse feels routine and mundane, not belligerent. Father Dragoljub – a parish priest in his sixties, approaching retirement – expressed demographic concerns explicitly in an interview. 'We were killed, we suffered, we were slaughtered', he said. We sat outside the church, and he mused that, since the Serbs had not 'renewed' themselves after the Second World War, 'we're facing a problem that we may no longer exist, the danger of extinction'. He spoke calmly, routinely. At other times, such discourse is assertive. One young man I met at a monastery in southern Serbia impressed on me the importance of progeny (*potomstvo*) for national survival. He expressed what was undisguised disgust for the idea of gay marriage which – he said – could not bear offspring and so not contribute to the reproduction of the people (see also Schäuble 2014: 187).

However, just as peoplehood is seemingly eroded in a physical, biological sense, so too my interlocutors claim that the people's moral core is damaged by the recklessness of the Serbian elite and the encroachment of Western values. Concretely, the example often given is the pernicious influence of reality television and the tabloid press. Ana stated that the highly popular reality television programme *Parovi* ('Couples') was effectively an attack on the traditional family. Another woman – a schoolteacher in her late forties – explained that Pink TV, a privately-owned entertainment channel showing telenovelas and music variety programmes, was 'how they destroy us'.

Challenges to the 'being of the nation' are simultaneously attacks on 'the person at his or her ontological depth, at the very source of being and existence in the world' (Kapferer 2012: 83). And, with the potential destruction of the Serbian people, so too the implicit erasure of the context within which Orthodox Christian personhood supposedly flourishes. Thus, the prospect of the national extinction produces in

churchgoing circles a vocal commitment to retaining and cherishing 'that which is ours' – that which one has been given by the Lord and which has subsequently been preserved and nurtured by one's ancestors.

Consider Jovana, a secondary school teacher in her late twenties. She was baptized as a baby, but her Yugoslav-generation parents did not bring her up attending church. Her interest in Orthodox spirituality was sparked whilst she was at university. Unlike her parents, Jovana now attends church every Sunday, observes all of the fasts, and cultivates her interest in Orthodox spirituality. Now identifying herself as a 'believer' (*vernik*), she claims that she has never been able to fathom how her own grandfather – who had been a committed communist in his younger days – had been able to stop celebrating his family patron saint day (*slava*) during socialism.

> But that root… I can't understand, I can't understand my grandad. I asked him: 'how could you not celebrate your *slava*?' Or 'How could you stop doing it?' But he said 'I had to'. And he literally cut that root of ours, and our root is faith.

It is almost a perversion, in her view, to turn away from the faith that is given to you at birth. Jovana talks a lot about rootedness, about the need to remember that one was born in Serbia, to Orthodox parents.

> I would never change my faith. I don't know who would renounce their faith … Recently I was watching a TV programme where some [Serbian] singer converted to Buddhism. And I was like – is that possible?! [laughing]. He explained it, he had a real explanation, but it's still strange. At least it is for me; I'm more traditional.

Now, Jovana recognizes that her views are not necessarily widely held in Serbian society, describing herself as 'traditional'. But she was amused that somebody born in Serbia could turn away from that Serbian Orthodox root, demonstratively incredulous that anyone could reject a given identity. As Liisa Malkki has argued, 'commonsense assumptions' which link 'people to place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical' (1992: 27).

In such accounts, the connection of person to people is presented as immutable, given, and good, the intrinsically *right* constellation of whole and part in the cosmos. But it is a constellation which gains traction precisely because it is seen as being

constantly under threat from political attack and people's own indifference. There is, thus, always a tacit urgency to this 'natural' view of the world.

Conclusion

Despite the repeated of insistence of social scientists that nations are imagined constructs, 'people still believe in the naturalness of ethnic nations' (Kharkhordin 2005: 100); 'criticizing' their 'unnaturalness' hardly changes commonly-held opinion (ibid.: 101). And sometimes, to indirectly ridicule my question about an 'obvious' concept, my interlocutors would cast aspersions on my grasp of (what they took to be) the core concepts of my own discipline: 'Well, you're an anthropologist, *you* should know what a "people" is'.[xi] Tacitly assuming the Serbian people to be a natural, organic entity – and also assuming my approach to ethnography to be of a more positivistic bent – my interlocutors were generally surprised at my eagerness to explore the category of peoplehood per se. But it is precisely their surprise which reveals the centrality of the concept in structuring their lives, and which justifies it as a focus of ethnographic analysis.

However, rather than simply deconstructing local claims about 'the people' – 'conceptual representations masquerading as objects' (Domínguez 1989: 190) – it is anthropologically fruitful to consider how a sense of belonging to a moral-cum-ethnic collectivity generates powerful ramifications for people's spiritual commitments. Scholarly discussions of 'national characterology' (Trencsényi 2012) and the 'politics of national peculiarity' (Mishkova 2013) are well established in the Eastern European setting. But, beyond considering how these seemingly primordial identities are politically produced, we should also ask how they shape the daily lives of the persons who claim to be derivative from them. In my fieldsite an understanding of peoplehood offers the framework within which Orthodox Christians position themselves, a framework simultaneously binding them to the earthly contingencies of this physical world but also indexing the eternal realm beyond it.

Reducing such versions of peoplehood to a discussion of nationalism – in the sense of the 'invocation' of the nation 'toward political ends' (Verdery 1996: 78) – clearly flattens out the multiple affordances of collective identity in this context. Certainly, my interlocutors had political convictions and were vocal in pitching the interests of the 'people' against the machinations of the state. But their sense of belonging implied commitments which extended beyond the worldly, temporal state

– to their deceased ancestors and forebears, to national history, to saints, to God. And, precisely because an omniscient, judgmental God shaped their perception of peoplehood, feelings of self-critique and dejection emerged, just as much as messianic fervour.

More broadly, the discourse of these Christians raises wider questions about how we think about emerging assertions of collective identity and ensuing forms of personhood in postsocialist Europe and beyond. David Schneider's argument that, in Judaism, 'kinship, religion, and nationality are all a single domain' – each sphere premised on 'diffuse, enduring solidarity' (1977: 70) – is clearly illuminating in the Serbian Orthodox context, too. We need to grasp such understandings of belonging, where ethnic and spiritual dimensions are mutually implicated, forming – to borrow Josep Llobera's gloss on Schneider – 'an inseparable totality' (2004: 48). This means appreciating how striving for the Divine cannot necessarily be abstracted from the retention and cultivation of apparently worldly identities. In other words, enquiring about how people assert themselves as 'believers' means also asking about the wider entity which affords them this possibility and within which they can make eschatological claims. And it also means recognising that the 'people', just as much as the person, may bear considerable moral weight in the eyes of God.

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[i] In Serbian, the word '*narod*' is multivocal, evoking human collectivities at different scales which are pitched in relation to (and against) various different others. Depending on context it could bear the English translations of 'the people', 'the folk', 'nation', 'the masses', or 'ethnic group'. *Narod* could also refer to a group of people clustered in a particular space, such as a church congregation. In this article I translate '*narod*' as 'people' to evoke the bounded, ethnic group.

[ii] Thus I am not considering 'the people' in a Marxist sense, in terms of the masses pitched against the ruling elite. Anthony Smith prefers the term 'ethnie' precisely to avoid the ideological overtones of 'the people' (1986: 229-230, n.1). However, I retain the term 'people' since it is germane to the discourse of my interlocutors. But for an excellent analysis of the populist construction of 'the people' in 1980s Serbia, see Marko Grdešić (2019).

[iii] I focus primarily on the person as it relates to the people, and not on the Orthodox theological view of the person per se. Scholars have noted that the Orthodox understanding of personhood is profoundly relational (Hirschon 2010; Agadjanian & Rousselet 2010). Humans were created in the 'image and likeness' of God, and they achieve fullness only in communion with Him. In church circles, emphasis is placed on the term *'ličnost'* (person) (which can be achieved only through interconnection with others) as opposed to '*individua*' (individual). This is a theme which needs to be explored in depth elsewhere.

[iv] https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/ (accessed 26 May 2020).

[v] The original title is *'Srpski narod kao Teodul'*. For the full text in Serbian see: https://svetosavlje.org/srpski-narod-kao-teodul/ (accessed 15 August 2019).

[vi] For another critique of Anderson's secular, modernist understanding of the nation, see Smith (2003: 20-23).

[vii] The word 'nation' (*nacija*) is, of course, sometimes used by my interlocutors, though less frequently. I speak of 'peoplehood' to distinguish it from the Western, civic connotation of 'nationhood' and to capture the ethnic rather than administrative connotations.

[viii] Following the feast of Saint Sava in 2017 the Serbian anthropologist Aleksandra Pavićević (2017) published a short piece in *Politika,* the Serbian national daily, entitled *Can we call ourselves the heirs of Saint Sava?* In it she pointed to (what she saw as) the dissonance between Sava's great legacy and the

poor state of the contemporary Serbian Church and state. The structure and tenor of the question is similar to the ones posed by my interlocutors. There is the assumption of 'we', the Serbian moral community with a shared past. But simultaneously the recognition that 'we' are unworthy of that heritage.

[ix] Joel Robbins discusses 'negative nationalism', where 'one can both hold a national identity and harbor extremely negative views of the nation of which one is a part' (1998: 104). Although I have avoided framing my analysis purely in terms of 'nationalism', such an inverted, negative relationship towards a perceived national core is basically the same as the dynamic that I am describing here. However, whilst for Robbins' informants this negativity appears to be a perennial state, in my fieldsite it is just one mode – evocations of peoplehood are not solely associated with self-criticism and negativity.

[x] Between 80,000 and 100,000 Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croatian political prisoners were executed there in horrific conditions.

[xi] Given the history of the disciplinary development of Anthropology and Ethnology in southeastern Europe, this is not a peculiar assumption. As Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ilia Iliev and Slobodan Naumović show, anthropologists came to be closely associated with processes of nation-building in the region, and, through their ethnographic expertise, were seen as 'national scientists', experts on all matters pertaining to the ethnic people (2008: 11).

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