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SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN KOSOVO AND METOHJIA: BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE*

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Abstract:
The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija has a long history that is rich in detail, so it is difficult to grasp it in its entirety. Therefore, only a few key points are presented in this paper, points which will hopefully lend insight into current events and future prospects. In this paper, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija is observed through discussion about Orthodox belief, the priesthood and monasticism, and places of worship. The research was conducted in 2012, when we visited Kosovo and Metohija and interviewed bishops, monks, priests, lay believers, and pilgrims. Places mentioned in the paper are: Gazimestan, Gračanica, Prizren, Dečani, Patriarchate of Peć, and Kosovska Mitrovica.

Key words: Serbian Orthodox Church, Kosovo and Metohija, religiosity, pilgrimage, territory, suffering.

Introduction
I started this research on the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija first by estimating the number of citizens and believers in Kosovo and Metohija, and then estimating the number of registered cultural properties and religious architecture. The second step was to visit the library of the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, where I was told that a lot had been written about Kosovo, and that the literature was so numerous and various that it was doubtful that there was anything left to be written on the subject.

I looked through some recently published books (e.g. Jokić, 2004) that were printed in color, so that fire and ruins can be easily seen. The message was clear: Kosovo always evokes an association with suffering and resistance. From the perspective of the Serbian Orthodox Church, this suffering is also presented in the book Crucifies Kosovo (1999), the preface to to which was written by the then Serbian Patriarch, Mr. Pavle. The introduction is illustrated with the picture of the Patriarch in front of a cross, which identifies the Church with the crucifixion and suffering of Christ.

My next step was to better inform myself about current events in Kosovo through the Church dignitaries. The most frequent answer was: “Come and see for yourself, don’t write a book sitting in your office.” Others said: “What kind of life is this that you don’t have freedom of movement?” Professor Radovan Bigovic¹ told me that the Earth belonged to God, not to us, and that the issue of Kosovo should be approached from that perspective. The image of Kosovo and Metohija is covered with many veils and, like a casualty, it is waiting for the future.

Dimitrije Bogdanović writes that the meaning of the past is based on artistic monuments of medieval Kosovo; it is written that such monuments cannot be erected in a foreign land, amidst people speaking another language, such as the Albanian people. “These monuments were not erected on other people’s land that would later be populated by one’s own people, so that only afterwards favorable and safe conditions would be created around them, on the contrary, they were built where peace could be provided for relics of sainted kings and archbishops, but also for monks who had to live there and fight for their spiritual world” (Bogdanović, 1986, 47).

In the preface to the Serbian edition of Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo, Ger Duijzings begins with these words: “This book was published five years ago for the first time. In the meantime, the situation in Kosovo has changed drastically, which means that most of the chapters could appear 'out-

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¹ Interview with Radovan Bigovic in Zemun, 6. May 2012.
dated,’ i.e. like a reminder of the long-gone days. Many people described in the book – Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins – are not there anymore, or they remain in a very small number; many described locations have changed so much that they are unrecognizable, and the political situation is essentially different from what it was at the time I published this research” (Duijzings, 2005, 5).

However, the value of such studies remains, because they are already historical documents about past realities. Since the 1990s, changes have gone from cultural complexity and duality to a process of homogenization. Ethnic divisions within the Islamic community disappeared almost entirely. “Violence, the war, and international intervention have finally destroyed the heterogeneous and multicultural Kosovo, and today, this province is almost entirely populated by Albanians” (Duijzings, 2005, 6).

In this context, Kosovo is seen as a border region where two parallel societies – Islamic and Christian – exist, with frequent conflicts and parallel lives. Ever since the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 between Ottoman Turkish and Balkan Christian forces, there have been established ethnic and religious borders that are now also territorial. Tension in religious life was the very subject of Duijzings’ research, along with a pilgrimage to Kosovo (Gracanica, Zoëšte, and Letnica).

It seems the key words to start with when writing about Kosovo and Metohija are: time stopped when it was turned into a sacred land. The history of the Serbian Orthodox Church is found more in places of worship than in people, probably because the human life span is too short, and man is a fragile creature. However, in this paper the past, whether distant or recent, is mentioned no more than is needed to mark the context of the present moment.

**Religious affiliation, religiosity, and places of worship in Kosovo and Metohija**

Statistical data (Kuburić, 2002; Kuburić, 2006; Kuburić, 2010) for the territory of Kosovo and Metohija is not totally reliable, because censuses have faced resistance and boycott. According to the estimation made in 1991, only 359,346 persons were counted in the census from a total of 1,956,196. The religious composition of the counted population in 1991 was as follows: Orthodox – 216,742 (60.32%); Muslims – 126,577 (35.22%); Catholics – 9,990 (2.78%); atheists – 1,036 (0.29%); unknown – 4,417 (1.23%). Since that time, the number of Serbs has been decreasing in Kosovo and Metohija, and so has the number of Orthodox believers.

According to the Office for Statistics in Kosovo and Metohija, the number of Serbs has decreased from 11% in 1991 to 7% in 2001, and finally to only 5% in 2007. Their minority status in a hostile environment is one of the reasons for their emigration, other reasons being the lack of tolerable conditions for living, working, and obtaining education.

When asked whether religion was an important part of their everyday life, 66% answered affirmatively in Kosovo and Metohija (Kuburić, 2009). According to a study conducted in Kosovska Mitrovica on a sample of 89 adolescent respondents, 94% of Orthodox believers in Kosovo and Metohija believe in God and observe slava. Other indicators of religiosity are as follows: 16% fast regularly, 28% go to church regularly, 34% pray at home regularly, 33% regularly follow advice from a priest. An important question among those concerning dogmatic issues was belief in Jesus Christ. The vast majority of young people – 97% of them – believe that Jesus existed; 89% of the respondents believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God; 53% believe in life after death; 35% believe in resurrection. A particularly interesting question was “What is more important to you: belonging to a nation or to a religion?” 44% answered that belonging to a religion was more important. Concerning their attitude toward other religions, an important question was: would you marry a person of a different religion? The adolescents were divided: 52% would not marry a person of a different religion, 25% probably would, and 24% definitely would (Aritonović, 2009).

Statistical data about registered immovable cultural heritage was gathered in 1994, when the list of all such properties in the territory of the SR Yugoslavia was made (Radovanović et al., 1996). Among those buildings that have not been moved or destroyed, Orthodox religious architecture is the most numerous in Central Serbia, immediately followed by Kosovo and Metohija. It is those buildings that act as embassies today – not only embassies of God, but national embassies as well – and it is in those churches and monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church that Orthodox life in Kosovo and Metohija takes place.

It took a long time to build these sacred places, and they have lasted even longer, like symbols of

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Diocese of Raška and Prizren

The website of the Diocese of Raška and Prizren is updated almost daily with news about events in churches and monasteries, but there is also historical information about the Diocese. Events that are important for the Serbian Orthodox Church happened during the reign of Stefan Nemanja, founder of the Serbian state, and during his conquest of Prizren in 1189. The conclusion is that the Diocese of Raška and Prizren has almost a thousand years of history, and that in this diocese which has always been a bulwark against those of different faiths, non-Slavs, and non-Serbs, it is impossible to separate the history of the Church from the history of the nation. It was at its peak during the time of the Nemanjić history of the Church from the history of the nation. Slavs, and non-Serbs, it is impossible to separate the history, and that in this diocese which has always been a bulwark against those of different faiths, non-Slavs, and non-Serbs, it is impossible to separate the history of the Church from the history of the nation. It was at its peak during the time of the Nemanjić history, and that in this diocese which has always been a bulwark against those of different faiths, non-Slavs, and non-Serbs, it is impossible to separate the history of the Church from the history of the nation.

Another cry for protection, with proofs of recorded violence, is found in a monograph published by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia and the Museum in Pristina. It is a book written in Serbian and English, titled March Pogrom in Kosovo and Metohija, March 17–19, 2004. There are pictures in the book showing burned down buildings, as well as pictures of violence (Jokić, 2004). Atanasije Jefić (1987) was the editor of a book about the legacy of Kosovo, and the monuments and bearers of Serbian people.

The Orthodox Diocese of Raška and Prizren encompasses the territories of Kosovo and Metohija and Raška. It is one of the oldest dioceses within the Serbian Orthodox Church; its seat is located in Gračanica Monastery. The head of the Diocese was bishop Artemije until his retirement in 2010, when Bishop Teodosije took his place.

Bishop Artemije (Rdosavljević) was born 1935 in Lelić near Valjevo; he graduated from the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade, and earned a Ph.D. in Athens. He held the position of diocesan bishop from 1991 to 2010. The Serbian Orthodox Church stripped him of his rank as bishop at the November session of the Holy Assembly of Bishops in 2010, due to his attempts to take over the Diocese of Raška and Prizren with violence, and because of other uncanonical activities. Activities of the group that supports the former bishop Artemije can be followed on their website. I wrote more about the theological grounds and the attitudes of the priests in Serbia about this issue in my book Religious Communities in Serbia and Religious Distance (Kuburčić, 2010).

I had an opportunity to attend a press conference which was organized by this group in the Media Center in Belgrade on 20 April 2012. The group has also started a journal—The Orthodox Voice. The former bishop Artemije says: “As a bishop, I lived in Kosovo and Metohija for 19 years, and I saw, experienced, and overcame all kinds of terror that happened to this Serbian Jerusalem, a cradle of Serbian spirituality, Serbian culture, and the Serbian state. Our roots are in Kosovo and Metohija; the spiritual identity of the Serbian nation has been created there. There are numerous holy places (1,300 churches and monasteries) that have been built and erected for almost the entire millennium; and today, because of NATO activities, there is a threat, in that holy land of Kosovo and Metohija, that all the last traces of our thousand-year existence may disappear” (Artemije, 2011, 9).

Bishop Teodosije (secular name Živko Šibalić) was born on 29 Jun 1963. He graduated from the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade. On 6 January 1978 he decided to become a novice in the monastery of Crna Reka near Novi Pazar, and he continued his spiritual life under the guidance of the

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5 http://www.eparhija-prizren.org/ (accessed on 14 October 2012)
then hegumen and future bishop Artemije of Raška and Prizren. In March 1992, he went with several monks to the monastery of Visoki Dečani, where he became a head of the monastery and was ordained a hegumen. In 2004, hegumen Teodosije was chosen as the bishop of Lipljan, vicar of Raška and Prizren, with a seat in the monastery of Visoki Dečani. By the decision of the Synod of Bishops, Teodosije became the Bishop of Raška and Prizren and Kosovo and Metohija in 2010.

The diocese has six episcopal governorships: Prizren, Priština, Peć, Gnjilane, Kosovska Mitrovica, and Novi Pazar. According to what is necessary (and what is possible), there are 31 church communities, with 42 priests (and the same number of parishes) and 3 deacons. The information about the priests shows that most of them come from Kosovo and Metohija, and that most have graduated from the Prizren Seminary. Of those who did not graduate from Prizren, one graduated from Cetinje Seminary, two from Karlovac Seminary, four from the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade, and one from the Faculty of Theology in Libertyville. There are 11 male monasteries with 120 monks, and 5 female monasteries with 53 nuns – in total 16 monasteries with 173 ascetics. Each of the monasteries provides regular monastic life for its fraternity or sorority (Pregled, 2006, 370–376).

Having attended liturgies and talked with ascetics in Gračanica and Visoki Dečani, I am going to present some information about these monasteries. There are 24 nuns in the Gračanica monastery. In Pregled (2006, 380, 381) there are given names, years of births, and years of joining the monastery. The oldest nun was born in 1915, the second-oldest in 1923, then 1928, 1935, and 1940; the youngest one was born in 1984, and she has been in the monastery for 12 years. The longest stay in the monastery is 63 years (two nuns), then 57 years, 54 and so on up to the shortest stay of 7 years (two nuns). There are 32 monks and novices in the monastery of Visoki Dečani. The oldest was born in 1921, the second-oldest in 1931, and the youngest monks were born in 1983 and 1982. They have been in the monastery since 2002 (Pregled, 2006, 376–381).

**Pilgrimage**

Monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija are pilgrimage sites for Orthodox Christians, but also places that are visited by members of other religions, as well as tourists from all over the world. I am going to describe a pilgrimage that I have made with a group of pilgrims of the Serbian Orthodox Church, organized by the Independent Students Association. Our visit to Kosovo and Metohija happened from 8 to 10 June 2012, with the blessing of His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Irinej; during the visit, we brought humanitarian aid to believers in Kosovo and Metohija.

**Gazimestan**

We began our trip from Belgrade, from the Cathedral of Saint Sava on Friday evening (8 June 2012). From the moment we entered into the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, we had a police escort – two cars, one in front of our bus, the other behind. On Saturday morning (9 June) we came to Gazimestan. All travelers went toward the monument – Remembrance of the year 1389.

There are whole libraries of studies, books, and articles written about this event. One of them is dedicated to six centuries from Vidovdan 1389 (Jefić, 1987). It is the central point of the Serbian folk tradition, and Vidovdan is a state holiday. During this visit, dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church urged people not to sell their properties and not to leave Kosovo. Father Sava stressed that Vidovdan, the one ahead and every future one, had to be a lesson to sober us up to realize who we are, what we are and where we are, what our role is here and now. The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, came to visit Gračanica the day before Vidovdan. Greeting those present, Patriarch Irinej said: “Vidovdan has to sanctify, enlighten, and inspire by the Holy Spirit the spirit of Saint Prince Lazar and of those innumerable great-martyrs who gave their lives and shed blood as the holiest sacrifice a man can offer.”

**Gračanica**

The pilgrimage route brought us to the Gračanica monastery, where we attended the liturgy celebrated by Bishop Teodosije, and then we went to the Fortress of Prilep. The trip took us further to Lipljan, Staro Gracko, Prizren and Bogorodica Ljeviška, Zočište and Dečanska Vinica in Velika Hoča. We had supper and stayed overnight in Velika Hoča and Orahovac, where we could also socialize with locals.

I spoke with Bishop Teodosije in the Gračanica monastery. I asked the Bishop to record our conver-
sation. He said he was not prepared to be recorded, but I could find a lot of material on the website of the Diocese of Raška and Prizren, including his press statements and interviews.

My question to Bishop Teodosije was: “How does it feel to be here?” He replied with a smile: “As you can see, it feels fine.” I can single out, from my memory, several observations from the conversation that we had in an upstairs room of the monastery residential building. The bishop was honest and open, ready to hear every single voice out of many, and to answer to everyone. He was quick in noticing details and never failed to reply directly and promptly. There was a monk named Nikolaj in our group, so the bishop told us immediately that the monk did not have permission to teach or give out his books – the Church had enforced such prohibition because he had spread fear among people, foretelling future suffering.

Our time is a period of difficult social problems, but also of attempts to discover truth. Truth is undoubtedly subjective, and spread through particular cases of real experiences of facing life. My research is primarily aimed at reading and searching for written testimonials and opinions, while in the second part I write down my personal feelings while meeting with the Church in Kosovo and Metohija, attending services, talking to people, and directly observing events in Kosovo and Metohija in June 2012. I recorded all that happened – from the liturgy to interviews – with my digital camera.

I talked to a member of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who lives in Priština but came to Gračanica to buy newspapers and talk with people. “It is hard, they do all kinds of things to us: they turned off the television, the radio, they stopped transport, they want to close a doctor’s office.” I asked her: “Are you scared to go to their doctors?” She said: “Their doctors – no way! Where are their doctors? All the good ones have gone. They can live anywhere – in Novi Sad, in Belgrade – only we are not allowed to leave… Once, I used to go on foot to anywhere I needed to go. Now, we get on a bus with them. They look at me as if I am some kind of wild beast, a black sheep.” I asked her again if she was afraid. “Of course I am, many things happen here. Many of them came from primitive villages.” Answering my question about the number of Serbs living in Priština, she said there were 50 of them, scattered around the city.

“Where do you go to church?” – I asked.

“They destroyed our church, but they have rebuilt it now. We go twice a year without fail, on important holidays, or once a week. We have two holidays – Saint Nicholas of Winter and Saint Nicholas of May. There is the Church of Holy Savior (Crkva Svetog Spasa). They tried to destroy it once or twice. Once they planted five kilos of explosives, but, believe you me, we felt nothing. The power of God! But we do not know about the future. And look how beautiful it is here, you’re a witness. You know, no one dared to enter into the church until 1963; there were only nuns here, and they had to sleep in a stable. So, in 1963 the nuns made a decision and went to Tito. The Church and Communism don’t go together, but we cannot sleep in stables anymore, we want our residential buildings back, we left our youth there. They didn’t want to give up, and they just waited in front of the office; when it became obvious that they would stay and even sleep there, Tito gave in – they spent only four hours there, and they got their residential buildings; and at the place where they had slept before, where stables had been, they built an apiary. That’s how it was, just so you know, but you have to come on Vidovdan. You know what it’s like when people come to Gazimestan in caravans, on foot, a million people come.”

We can learn a lot from this confession, primarily about interpersonal relations and life in Priština, about divisions, about the struggle of people to stay and survive in someone else’s land. Their backbone is the Church, where they cherish fellowship, speak their language, and control their fear. During this pilgrimage, we had an opportunity to visit Velika Hoča. We were received by a local priest, who gave a speech and reminded us about the Christian faith and its fundamental teachings. He especially pointed out the community of the living and the dead in this territory: each church has its graveyard. The priest said that there were 700 of them on the ground, but many more lay beneath. We could conclude from his words that it was the ancestors and their graves that urged the living not to desert them.

Dečani

On early Sunday morning, we were already in the liturgy in the Dečani monastery. After the police patrols and protective walls, it was an overwhelming
feeling finally to find ourselves inside the monastery space. Every detail had its story to tell, even lilies on windows of monastic cells. The monks appeared powerful, strong, with long groomed hair and beards, and with calm looks. Around thirty monks and novices filled the liturgical message with their voices. Intense sunlight, coming through monastery windows, shone upon the altar and made this moment truly special. The pilgrims approached the service very seriously, each and every one of them, even a little boy, the youngest among us, who, after being noticed by the monks during the liturgy, was given a chair to sit on.

After the liturgy, one of the monks addressed us. He spoke about the history of the monastery and its current affairs. Having expressed the difficult of including seven centuries of the monastery's history into a single presentation, he urged anyone interested to ask him a question. What I would like to mention as typical for the Orthodox Church, and also for this place in particular, are the miraculous healings on the grave of “the holy king,” founder of the church in Đečani. The church was finished in 1335; everything that existed then is still preserved, even the frescoes. It took five years to build, and another ten years to paint the church. There were several groups of painters working on the church, which can be seen through the style of the frescoes. Around 1,000 frescoes are still preserved – all details from the New Testament and the history of the Church. It is painted in accordance with Orthodox canons, but the exterior resembles Romanesque cathedrals, which was not strange during the Nemanjić dynasty. This is an example of the so-called Rascian architectural school, a style only found in Serbian monasteries. Everything is made of expensive materials, which made it durable. Experts from Belgrade are engaged in cleaning and conservation of the frescoes, and the exterior is maintained by the Italians, who are responsible for the cleaning and conservation of the statues and the façade. There used to be a lot of gold and silver, but only several pieces have survived frequent robberies.

The Dečani church has the second largest treasury next to the Hilandar monastery. People bring gifts in gratitude for miraculous healings and births. There are many liturgical books and old icons. At first there used to be hundreds of monks, but the number decreased with time. After World War II, about 800 hectares of the land was taken from the monastery, and the monastery itself was treated like a museum (it used to have only 3 monks). After the 1990s, the monastic life was revived, and a younger brotherhood came. They continued the monastery traditions of wood carving, icon painting, and calligraphy. They also revived the monastery's economy: they breed sheep, cows, goats, and keep bees – the monastery is completely economically independent. They ask for financial support from the state only for major construction projects.

After this presentation on the church and the monastery, I asked the monk to describe the healings, and whether they happen on their own or as a result of some ritual. He said that there was no rule:

“Someone says a prayer before the holy king, someone passes three times under it, and to someone a prayer is read. I write down everything, with the date and the disease. A group of Serbs came yesterday, and a woman told me that she had been here in 1972; she hadn’t been living according to the Church back then, but a voice had told her in her dreams to come here and to bring her son, and her son had been cured of asthma. Last week an Albanian woman, a travel guide, came and told me – she used to pray for her sister on her every visit. Her sister had been suffering from venous congestion of the brain; she had had a stroke, which had left her blind. This sister of hers used to pray every time before the holy king, and the sister had been treated in Greece, she had been married there to a Greek man. Doctors were amazed when she completely recovered – her hematoma disappeared, and she could see again.”

Does one feel the presence of God here; do you feel it too, even if you are here all the time?

“Not only do we feel it, but tourists feel it too, when they come for the first time. On some occasions, there were women who couldn’t stop their tears.”

Do groups come frequently?

“Yes, they do. For example, there have been ten buses of Japanese tourists since the beginning of this year. It is an opportunity to get to know the Orthodoxy and the Serbian culture.”

Do you like it when people come?

“Yes, we do. On one hand, it is important for the current political situation that they can see that we are guarded by Italians, it is important when we can tell them that, since the war, the monastery has been attacked with grenades four times. It is good that it becomes clear to them. On the other hand,
they make contact with the Orthodoxy, with the true Christianity.”

Are there Albanians who are attached to the monastery, who love it, who show respect to the holy king?

“There are Orthodox Albanians from Albany, who are our people. Even their facial features look different when they enter the monastery.”

Patriarchate of Peć

The Patriarchate of Peć\(^8\) consists of four buildings from the 13\(^{\text{th}}\) and 14\(^{\text{th}}\) century. After World War II, the Patriarchate of Peć has been turned into a female monastery. Although this monastery does not officially belong to the Diocese of Raška and Prizren, its history is closely connected to the history of other monasteries in this Diocese. As a stavropegial monastery, the Patriarchate of Peć is under direct jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch in Belgrade, where the seat of the Patriarchate is located.

Today the monastery of the Peć Patriarchate remains an important spiritual center, with a sorority of 25 nuns. The sorority is engaged in humanitarian work, and it maintains the economy of the monastery. Budisavci Metochion belongs to the monastery, and two nuns stay there under the protection of Kosovo Force (KFOR).

We arrived in the Peć Patriarchate during lunch time. Two nuns came out to open the door and to sell things at the counter in the entrance. Among the first pilgrim women who entered the church was a woman wearing a Pioneer uniform, with the Titovka on her head, and the flag of Yugoslavia with the five-pointed star. A young nun noticed instantly this unusual sight and asked the women who she was. She asked her immediately to take the flag out, because the five-pointed star had no place in the church: “The time of the five-pointed star is gone, now it is the time of the cross.”

There was a girl from our group who caught our eye in the Patriarchate of Peć – a tall, pretty student at the Military Academy in Belgrade. Her openness and behavior implied she was one of the organizers of this trip. A conversation began spontaneously after a man from the group asked a nun for permission to film inside the church. The girl got involved and said that filming was forbidden. The man did not give up: he was born in Kosovo, he spent his working years in Slovenia, and now, being retired, he filmed Serbian monasteries. When the nun went to ask the hegumenia for permission, the girl told me that the year before, precisely on 23 April 2011, she had been christened there where we stood at that moment, and that it had not been allowed for them to film. She told me she had been born in Obilić, near Kosovo Polje and Gazimestan; but she lived in Belgrade at the moment. Her parents had never been married. She said:

“I realized I had to take care of myself, and I found godparents, sent by God, and so I was born again, spiritually. It all came spontaneously: not being christened, I was ashamed to go to church – I felt like a foreigner among other believers. While I was laying on my deathbed, I had a premonition, and I realized that He really exists. I saw for myself that miracles were possible, that God exists. I know I have my guardian angel. And I got these rosaries that I carry for my first communion. I didn’t think about that, either – I went to Prizren on Đurdjedan (St. George’s Day) a week after the christening, and I took my first communion there, and this Rosary is a memory of that day. I used to come alone here while visiting my family, but I have relatives here as well, there in the Serbian territory. It was only once that I passed the border crossing at Merdare, by Albanian bus. They tried to kidnap me then. They know our faces, as we do theirs. I needed to use a toilet, but I knew I was in danger. Others were also frightened for me; a Shqiptar followed me, and when a car came after him, people just drew me into the bus. It was all strange to me, but I was so happy to go there on Đurdjedan that I didn’t realize they wanted to kidnap me. Maybe it is good that I have experienced that, because now I know what can happen and how to avoid it. I come here with all my heart, this is my country, and they can never take that from me. That is what makes me strong and not afraid. One has to be brave, but those who say you can go freely around here, they lie. Any moment something bad can happen.”

Kosovska Mitrovica

According to a report of Draško Denović (2012), on Wednesday, 13 Jun 2012, a monk from the monastery of Crna Reka, father Mitrofan (secular name Miloš Bulajić) was beaten up in the

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\(^8\) The Peć Patriarchate/Patriarkana e Pejës is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In April 2012, the Serbian monasteries in Kosovo were listed among the five most important holy sites of the Mediterranean along with Jerusalem, Mt. Athos, Mecca, and Vatican. http://www.transconflict.com/2012/10/kosovo-time-for-reconciliation-110/
southern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, which is mainly populated by ethnic Albanians. Father Mitrofan, who was born in Kosovska Mitrovica in 1955, where he also grew up, went to the town hall to deal with administrative matters regarding the recent death of his father Jovan, one of the few Serbs who still lived in the southern part of the city after 1999. Monk Mitrofan had been living in the monastery since 1997. Bishop Teodosije visited the attacked monk, and afterwards sent a written statement to leading diplomats and KFOR officials in Priština, in which he said that the attack showed that the priests and monks of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija still lived under constant threat and without freedom of movement.

I spoke with Petar Jenkić,9 a psychologist and former journalist, about life in Kosovo and Metohija. He said:

“When I came to Priština in the summer of 1999, it wasn’t difficult to see that different rules applied in this territory. Kosovo was ruled by paradoxes and illusions, no matter how much effort the officials put into proving otherwise. That was discussed reluctantly, because that practically meant admitting the impossibility of acting rationally. On the other hand, whenever I wanted a quiet afternoon, I used to go to Janjevo. I spoke enthusiastically about that village in the Lipljan Municipality to KFOR Commander Reinhardt and his spokesman, Henning. Finally, there is a place where the Albanians, Bosniaks, Serbs, Gorani, and Romani live together, without friction. I was wondering if that was because the closest Serbs lived in the village of Gušterica, several kilometers to the west, or because Jarinje was not on the transit route. Then, I met a priest of the Saint Nicholas Parish in the village, Father Mata (Matej Palić), and an imam (I have forgotten his name, but I went to his house once). I realized that the dialogue between these two men, and their influence on people, overcame potential problems, mostly because of their peace. In a discussion with the KFOR Commander, we reached an agreement not to make a reference to this village as a good example of cohabitation in order to protect it from extremists. It would be enough to talk positively about a certain topic and that could put it into danger (attacks in the Kamenica Municipality are the example for this, because it is assumed to be the result of promoting this place as a place of peace and tolerance).”

After such a response – saying that no one is certain about anything – I asked about his opinion on the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Here is what he said:

“The Serbian Orthodox Church in the northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica has an ambivalent role: on one hand, the role of a victim is the dominant one, bearing in mind that the St. Sava Church has been burnt down, and the cemetery in the southern part of the city has been demolished. But on the other hand, there is a capability to survive, which is symbolized by the new church of St. Dimitrije, whose name this city bears, and who is the patron of the city. The church was built on the rock, which symbolically says that this is the last line of retreat before the New World Order, understood in the Balkan way. The symbol of the rock as Christ, on which the church is built, cannot be found in known interpretations of the location of this marvelous building. However, besides this mostly symbolic role, the Serbian Orthodox Church in the northern part of Kosovo, and even in the northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, does not have the ability to gather, organize, or lead an articulated program of self-defense and life-improvement. The time when it was the most possible was between 18 and 22 March 2004, during the pogrom of Serbs, after two Albanian boys from the village of Ćabra had drowned – and even then only Bishop Artemije was able to gather all the “leaders” and fractions of Serbs in this part of the city and to organize a resistance against potential threats of spreading the crisis to the right bank of the Ibar River. With Bishop Artemije gone from the political life of Kosovo Serbs, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church is over.”

Conclusion

There are numerous and almost unthinkable challenges in Kosovo and Metohija. The backbone of the Serbian community is the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has been present there ever since its foundation, and which has built its identity in opposition to Islam. Accepting Christianity as the faith of

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9 Interview with Petar Jenkić in Kosovska Mitrovica, 11 October 2012.
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their forefathers, priests and members of the Church are willing to scarify this “earthly kingdom” for the sake of the “heavenly kingdom.” They are willing to take on the role of victims: the role of those who suffer, who endure the hardship of isolation and dependence in a foreign country, simultaneously thinking it to be their own territory.

The overlapping of the religious and national identity, as well as the connections between the Church and the state, makes it difficult to separate religious issues from political ones. The process of establishing interreligious dialogue has a different meaning here. It is the reason why within the Church in Kosovo and Metohija, there is a fraction which advocates absolute dissociation from the Catholic Church and ecumenical tendencies, while the bordering position of the Church in relation to Islam makes the former very conservative (for the sake of preserving identity). It can be expected that a dialogue would be easier outside Kosovo and Metohija.

As for spiritual considerations, the position of a loser of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija paradoxically seems to provide religious strength to resistance, as well as determination in spiritual values and a willingness to rely on God’s power. The spirituality of the monks and pilgrims depends, it appears, mostly on the miracles of healing different diseases in the monasteries, which is attributed to holy remains. Believing in the miraculous power of remains of the saints sends a message about following the tradition. The members of the Serbian Orthodox Church are determined to protect their graves, to not betray the faith of their ancestors, and to not leave the country which is both their home and their tomb. The power of the collective unconscious rises from the Kosovo pledge. The circumstance of being isolated within a hostile environment makes group cohesion stronger, as well as group spirituality, which is admired by those who live outside Kosovo and Metohija; visits and pilgrimages fill them with the sense of blessings in their lives, while, at the same time, they give support to those who stayed to live as a religious minority.


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