

# Peoplehood and the Orthodox person: a view from central Serbia

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Practising Orthodox Christians in central Serbia live their liturgical lives within the idiom of Serbian peoplehood. This article probes the ‘people’ (*narod*) – perceived locally as an historically and geographically rooted ethno-moral collectivity – as a core concept of belonging which is key for understanding post-Yugoslav Orthodox life. The ‘people’ functions as a this-worldly collective identity within which my interlocutors situate themselves as Orthodox persons, and through which they approach the Divine. Threats to Serb identity serve to foreground peoplehood as the supposedly prime site for Orthodox flourishing. Moving beyond state-oriented analyses of ‘religious nationalism’, the article demonstrates not how ‘nationalism’ can be understood through ‘religion’, but how, to use Orthodox Serbs’ own terminology, faith can be understood through the prism of peoplehood.

One does not have to spend long in central Serbia before hearing references to the history and peculiarity of the ‘Serbian people’ (*srpski narod*).<sup>1</sup> Serbs frequently characterize, 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 a people are we?’

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has traditionally seen itself as the foremost protector of the Serbian people, its guardian throughout a tumultuous history. That protective sentiment was captured by *Blic*, the sensationalist tabloid, when it reported a homily given by Bishop Atanasije (Rakita) in 2017. The newspaper 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 cleric as saying, ‘a person will not find himself if he does not return to the origin of his spiritual and cultural being’. Like Bishop Atanasije, my interlocutors – practising Orthodox Christians in and around the town of Kraljevo – are fluent in evoking the ‘people’ as a nexus of rooted spirituality, a collective body that is perennially under threat but crucial for defining the Serbian Orthodox person. In churchgoing circles, there is an acute sensitivity about the essence and contours of Serbian peoplehood.

*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 00, 1–19

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Western commentators have frequently scrutinized the Orthodox churches for their unhealthy overlapping of religious and ethno-national identities. When it comes to the institutional Serbian Church in particular, this is a legitimate concern. The SOC is beleaguered with the legacy of its aggressively nationalistic stance during Yugoslavia's bloody demise in the 1990s (see Perica 2002) – as well as its struggle to confront that past (Vukomanović 2005). The genocidal massacre of more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys by Serb forces at Srebrenica in 1995 has been analysed and interpreted through the lens of Orthodox symbolism and its violent potential (Anzulovic 1999). Since the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the SOC has faced criticism that its newfound influence significantly over-reaches democratic norms. Questions have been asked about the rapid 'desecularization' (Blagojević 2008) and 'clericalization' (Aleksov 2008) of Serbian society, and the SOC stands accused of longing for etatization and obstructing social reform (Buchenau 2011; Vukomanović 2008). This body of work generally focuses on how the institutional church strives for influence in Serbian society.

What such studies do not reveal, however, is how Orthodox laity perceive the connections between ethnic and confessional identities at a grassroots level. Criticizing the SOC's failure to engage with civil society, the sociologist Milan Vukomanović observes that its clergy 'do keep talking about *the people*, but this is an almost metaphysical category, an undifferentiated collective, a "mass"' (2008: 258, original emphasis). However, if 'the place of religious groups in studies of Christianity' is an anthropological concern (Handman 2014: S206), then the 'people' is an emic concept which demands investigation. How – and why – does this 'metaphysical' collective category resonate in lived Orthodox terms?

This article explores contemporary Serbian Orthodox liturgical life by engaging with the idea of peoplehood – the sense of being part of a people.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Serbian peoplehood is the framework within which my interlocutors situate themselves as Orthodox persons, and through which they work towards the Divine. They perceive a this-worldly collective identity as an essential conduit through which to approach God's eternal realm. In the Greek Orthodox context, Michael Herzfeld pushes for '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 some Protestant settings in the West. In that spirit, I move beyond reading Orthodox liturgical life through the distinct analytical categories of 'religion' and 'nation' (see Østebø 2020: 546), with their particular bias and baggage. Rather, I outline how understanding oneself as an Orthodox person who is part of a people (*narod*) simultaneously evokes extended kinship ties *and* the (Christian) cosmos.

In churchgoing circles, the feeling of being part of a people is implicit and given, and my attempts to interrogate peoplehood per se were understandably met with bafflement. Sometimes, assuming my ethnography to be of a positivistic bent, my interlocutors cast aspersions on my academic credentials: 'Well, you're an anthropologist, *you* should know what "a people" is'. Once, after I had glibly referred to 'social constructionism', Miroljub<sup>3</sup> – an unemployed man in his mid-fifties – 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', playfully flapping his arms. Miroljub's riposte begs consideration. Whilst I am not making a primordialist argument (reifying nationalist claims about 'organic' proto-national communities), it is also true that intensely constructivist approaches miss how – as Miroljub cautioned –

collective identities are experienced as real, embedded in social relations in the material world (Østebø 2020: 547; also Kharkhordin 2005: 100). As such, I like Terje Østebø's invitation to think of religious and ethnic identities as *primary*, not primordial (2020: 548).

To capture the primary nature of peoplehood, I gloss local understandings of the 'Serbian people' as *an historically and geographically rooted ethno-moral collectivity*. Let me unpack what I mean by this. My interlocutors assert what they see as the historical and territorial embeddedness of Serbs in and around Kraljevo – a point to which I return below. I use 'ethno' because peoplehood is articulated in terms of descent, consanguinity, and extended kinship ties. However, in this context, 'the Serbian people' is considerably more than a sociological category, and I signal this by using the term 'moral'. My interlocutors see peoplehood as providing the overarching context within which to cultivate themselves as Serbian Orthodox Christians (just as they imagine that people around the world should cleave to their national identities). Liturgical discourse has a centripetal dynamic, insisting that deeper truths are to be found by focusing on – and retaining – that which is 'one's own' (*svoj*). When – over dinner – I asked a married couple why a priest had mentioned 'homeland' (*otadžbina*) in his homily, they stressed the importance of defending borders, before elucidating the need to cherish *one's own* 'saints', 'territory', and 'Tradition'. Timothy Carroll shows how local Orthodox aesthetics allow people to 'push beyond the aesthetic threshold', to access a 'sublime', divine dimension (2017: 369). My argument follows a similar logic: the cultural specificity of one's own people and its faith tradition is seen as *enabling* – not hindering – development as an Orthodox person. Orthodox believers experience the soteriological aspirations of their faith through the framework of Serbian peoplehood – the specific is the conduit to the universal.

An influential approach to the interweaving of 'religion' and 'nation' has been to examine how 'religion helps explain nationalism' and has contributed to its symbolic repertoire and development (Brubaker 2015: 106–9). The central Serbian context pushes us to reverse that framing. That is, how can taking 'national' commitments seriously reveal something about 'religion'? Or, in the terms of my interlocutors and this article: how can faith be understood through the prism of peoplehood?

When I use the word 'people' (or 'nation'), I mean it in the sense of *ethnos*, an entity conceptually distinct from the state. In contemporary usage, 'nation' is often implicitly understood to be coterminous with the 'state'; references to the 'nation' are actually references to the 'nation-state' (Connor 1994: 40). Frequently, studies of religious life after socialism exemplify that trend, considering processes of inclusion and exclusion within the parameters of the nation-state. However, to get closer to local perspectives means seeing people (*narod*) and state (*država*) as separate entities which move in and out of relation with one another. The feeling of belonging which resonates in lay Orthodox terms is not to state structures, but rather to the Serbian people as an historically and geographically rooted collectivity. Of course, churchgoers relate to the Serbian state and are confined by its regulatory authority. They welcome state initiatives which protect church interests, they may lobby the state to protect ecclesiastical property, and some long to see church and state entwined in an idealized symphonic harmony (see Köllner 2018). However, Serbian liturgical life cannot be reduced to 'religious nationalism', understood as a form of 'politicised religion' whereby religious movements 'engage in political projects that make the state not only a medium, but an object, of collective action' (Friedland 2011: 66; also 2001: 139). What motivates

my interlocutors to practise Orthodoxy in their daily lives is not the state, but rather concerns which stretch beyond it. By thinking about peoplehood – which indexes connections both to a place in the world and to the eternal realm beyond – we can better understand Serbian Orthodox belonging.

In the years following Yugoslavia's collapse, 'manifestations of the Serbian national feeling' have been fraught and 'self-conscious' (Spasić 2017: 37). Needless to say, understanding oneself as an Orthodox person who is part of a people is but *one* version of belonging available in contemporary Serbia; *one* way of being an 'interlocutor' engaging with a 'great conversation' (Carrithers 1985: 255). Many Serbian citizens are dismissive of what they see as such nationalist Serbo-centric rhetoric, and may rather identify with other collectivities, such as the former socialist Yugoslavia. The fact that my churchgoing interlocutors are so vocally assertive and defensive indicates that their version of belonging is one which they see as endangered. They have to justify the normative peoplehood/personhood connection *rhetorically* (Domínguez 1989: 189) – sometimes in conversations with anthropologists. But it is precisely such anxiousness about the extinction of the collective body which keeps it in the foreground as the supposedly prime site for Orthodox flourishing – a collective body which they see as suffering through historical time on earth, against the relief of God's eternity. Forever threatened, peoplehood is crucial for structuring Serbian Orthodox life, generating urgent, emotive commitments both to this world and to the next.

To advance my argument, I draw on interviews and observations collected in and around Kraljevo during eighteen months of fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, and then during shorter subsequent trips in 2018 and 2021. In contemporary Serbia, ethnic and confessional identities are, in effect, 'mutually interchangeable' (Aleksov 2010: 178), with the majority of the population identifying nominally as 'Orthodox Christian'.<sup>4</sup> However, only a slim minority (6 per cent) attend church weekly – a trend which is true across other Orthodox countries. During fieldwork, I engaged with a range of people who identify as both 'Serb' and 'Orthodox' (some of whom were extremely critical of the institutional SOC), as well as observing civic ceremonies, and attending cultural events at museums and libraries. In this article, I predominantly focus on the network of people who – beyond claiming a nominal Orthodox identity – seek to live liturgically 'in the faith'. Since the fall of socialism, the demographics of such churchgoers have diversified significantly. Congregations are composed of graduates and professionals, as well as unemployed people, students, doctors, and manual labourers. What they share is that they try to cultivate themselves as Orthodox believers (*vernici*) by living lives centred on participation in the Liturgy, receiving Divine Communion, and fasting. Kraljevo boasts a vibrant liturgical life, with three parish churches, a hospital chapel, and a 'Spiritual Centre', housed in the wooden townhouse of a former bishop. There are also coach trip pilgrimages organized to monasteries in the region. To begin to appreciate why the idea of peoplehood resonates in Kraljevo, we need to contextualize central Serbia more fully.

### Orthodoxy in central Serbia

In central Serbia, commitments to peoplehood are driven by multiple historical and geographical factors. Sitting on the river Ibar, Kraljevo is a sprawling urban settlement surrounded by smaller villages, with a population of about 110,000 in its overall administrative area. Throughout socialist Yugoslavia, the town was a major industrial centre, though much of this economy collapsed in the 1990s, leading to mass unemployment. Historically, the area around Kraljevo has been overwhelmingly

inhabited by ethnic Serbs. Unlike the contested regions of Croatia, Bosnia, and later Kosovo, central Serbia was not directly ravaged by the violence and ethnic cleansing that characterized Yugoslavia's collapse. Whilst there are small Protestant and Catholic communities in the town, the 2022 census found that around 93 per cent of the population identify as 'Serb' and, of those, around 93 per cent (predictably) identify as 'Orthodox'.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, my interlocutors are not negotiating ethno-religious difference regularly in their daily lives (cf. Bringa 1995).

However, local claims about Serbian peoplehood are sharpened against *perceptions* and prejudices about non-Orthodox communities and ethnic others. Kraljevo sits about 100 km to the north of the Kosovo border. Despite the ethnic Albanian majority declaring independence in 2008, Serbia does not officially recognize the Kosovar state, perceiving Kosovo as its historic heartland. Recalling the Kosovo War of 1999, my interlocutors periodically disparage and essentialize (Muslim) Albanians as a 'wild people' with a fundamentally different 'mentality'. Similarly, the Sandžak region – to the southwest of Kraljevo and largely inhabited by a Muslim population identifying as Bosniaks – is a foil against which churchgoers assert Serbian (Orthodox) distinctiveness. When I travelled by car through that area, fellow passengers occasionally rebuked me if I referred to 'Sandžak' (an Ottoman term), insisting on calling it *Raška oblast* (Raška region). By invoking Raška, they are foregrounding the traditional territorial base of the medieval Nemanjić dynasty, which bore twelve monarchs between 1166 and 1371.

Under Nemanjić rule, the structures of the church and the early Serbian state developed alongside each other. Pivotal in this process was Rastko Nemanjić (c.1174–1236), the third son of the dynasty's protogenitor, Stefan Nemanja (later canonized as Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing). Rastko took the name Sava upon becoming a monk, and is known to posterity as Saint Sava, Serbia's patron saint. Today, icons of Sava hang unobtrusively above the whiteboards of school classrooms. Sava negotiated a royal crown for Serbia from Pope Honorius III, and, in 1217, his elder brother (also Stefan, canonized as Saint Simon the Monk) was crowned 'King of the Serbs' at Žiča monastery, a few kilometres to the southwest of present-day Kraljevo. In 1219, Sava achieved further Serbian autonomy by securing self-rule for the Serbian Church from Nicaea.

Serbian Orthodox Christians often idealize the Nemanjić period as the exemplary historical epoch, one characterized by *symphonia* – the harmonious entwining of church and state. Since the Nemanjić monarchs were all (bar one) canonized, they are not only revered ancestors but also models for how to lead an exemplary Orthodox life (see also Fomina 2018). Smiling, Father Jovan, a middle-aged priest, proposed that since God had bequeathed the Serbs such a saintly dynasty, it was that dynasty which was the 'paradigm' (*uzor*) they should follow: 'the path that will lead us to true meaning, and that is the Eschaton, that is the Kingdom of God'. The eschatological potential is there – so the argument goes – in the history of the Serbian people. The Nemanjić monarchs were prolific church builders and their material legacy remains rooted in the landscape around Kraljevo. In attending a vigil at the monastery of Žiča, or travelling down the winding Ibar highway to participate in the Liturgy at the monasteries of Studenica or Sopoćani, churchgoers claim to feel a sense of connection to their own history rooted in a particular territory.

The Serbian empire reached its zenith in the mid-1300s, before crumbling under the advance of Ottoman forces. During the centuries of Ottoman rule, non-Muslim religious communities were placed under their own legal jurisdiction, with the

Orthodox Christians of the empire becoming part of the so-called *Rum Millet*. With the structures of the early Serbian state eradicated, the church became central in organizing social and religious life amongst the Christian population which would later come to firmly identify in ethnic terms as *Serbian Orthodox*. In the nineteenth century, as ideas about national liberation percolated into the Balkans in the wake of the French Revolution, the Orthodox Church became closely wedded to the Serbian nationalist project, ensuring the conflation of ethnic and confessional identities (see Ćirković 2004: 204–51; Kitromilides 2010).

In the interwar period, preachers and ideologues sacralized the Serbian collective identity. The prolific theologian Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956, canonized in 2003) referred to ‘Heavenly Serbia’ (*Nebeska Srbija*). Despite the controversial aspects of his biography, Nikolaj is widely read and cited by churchgoers in Kraljevo, where he briefly served as the Bishop of Žiča Eparchy.<sup>6</sup> In a text entitled *Srpski narod kao teodul* (The Serbian people as a servant of God), Nikolaj insisted that the Serbian soul had always been more intimately bound to the ‘heavenly world’ than to the ‘earthly’ one, and that ‘Heavenly Serbia’ would be achieved by society’s ‘complete devotion to Church and Christ’ (Falina & Velimirović 2009: 220; Velimirovich 1999). Nikolaj situated the Serbian people cosmologically, in relation to eternity, to God. Nikolaj also spoke of ‘*Svetosavlje*’ – literally ‘Saint Savism’. Etymologically, the term blends the Serbian for ‘Saint Sava’ (*Sveti Sava*) and ‘Orthodoxy’ (*Pravoslavlje*). *Svetosavlje* thus evokes the Christianity that Saint Sava nurtured, ‘our’ Serbian expression of Orthodoxy. Later, the theologian Justin Popović (1874–1979) penned *Svetosavlje kao filozofija života* (Saint Savism as the philosophy of life), insisting that Serbs aspire to follow the path of Jesus Christ, just as Saint Sava had done (see Popović 1953). In short, these accounts – familiar to my interlocutors, since they read such texts – construe the Serbian people as a bounded moral entity, one that needs to be guided, taught, and addressed.

Following the Second World War, Serbia became part of the socialist Yugoslav state, headed by Marshall Josip Broz Tito. The regime’s ideological commitment to Marxist atheism made it disinclined towards religion, which it saw as anachronistic. Despite the Yugoslav constitution officially guaranteeing freedom of conscience, overt religious expression was, in practice, significantly restricted. Desperate to quell wartime divisions – and promote an inclusive ideology of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ – the regime was wary of the SOC’s nationalist agenda, and sought to limit its influence. Today, practising Orthodox Christians (angrily and retrospectively) elaborate their defence of peoplehood against what they see as ‘anti-Serbian’ Yugoslav ideology. With the weakening of socialism in the 1980s, the SOC began to re-establish itself in Serbian society, reasserting its role as the self-proclaimed guardian of Serbian interests. Before continuing, I will position Orthodox ideas about peoplehood in relation to other scholarship which deals with the issues of religion and nation after socialism.

### Religious nationalism?

Since the collapse of socialist regimes, there has been extensive scholarly interest in the relationship between Orthodox churches and secular, democratizing polities (e.g. Leustean 2014a; Ramet 2019; Veković 2020). If earlier anthropological work evaluated the emerging place of religion in postsocialist civil society (Hann 2006; Wanner & Steinberg 2008), then more recent studies have assessed the ‘entangled’, complex connections between Orthodox and state authorities at different levels (Köllner 2018; 2020). Understandably, ‘religious nationalism’ has been a productive lens for

exploring how religious and state actors co-operate to forge bounded, exclusionary versions of belonging. Orthodox churches can both organizationally (Metreveli 2020) and affectively (Wanner 2020) advance religious agendas vis-à-vis postsocialist polities, just as Orthodoxy can be co-opted into projects of state patriotism (Benovska 2021; Köllner 2016). However, the institutional focus of 'religious nationalism' (cf. Friedland 2001; 2011) obscures understandings of belonging to an ethno-moral collectivity which may be imagined as preceding, opposing, and sometimes reaching beyond the secular state. The widespread attention to how the state forges religious identities (which it undoubtedly does) has been at the expense of appreciating embodied, located forms of belonging (Østebø 2020: 563), and the fact that what motivates people to live liturgically is not state infrastructure.

For the people who carefully follow the fasting calendar and receive Divine Communion regularly, the salvific potential of Orthodoxy matters. This is *not* a 'religion of nationalism' where nationalism itself is 'a higher religious form', where 'the religion of nationalism is in nationalism per se and not in the religious ideas it may incorporate' (Kapferer 2012: 5). The liturgical version of peoplehood and its derivative forms of personhood do not 'supplant' religious ideas but are a core part of the Orthodox worldview. Believers are defensive of national interests and they take their faith very seriously. But to speak of 'religious nationalism' would secularize their Orthodox eschatological aspirations, and wrongly politicize a (sometimes disenfranchised) network of people who, in mundane, everyday settings, 'work on' their salvation within the implicit framework of Serbian peoplehood.

The analytical problem partly boils down to language. The categories of 'nation' and 'religion' – both derived from processes of secularization (Asad 2003) – are awkward tools for illuminating the Serbian Orthodox liturgical context. In local discourse, one generally hears references to 'people' (*narod*) and 'faith' (*vera*). The Slavic root of *narod*, *-rod*, has to do with birth, lineage, and descent. Of course, the Latin root *natio* also indicates birth and shared origins. However, contemporary usage of the word 'nation' – frequently conflated with the state (cf. Connor 1994: 40) – arguably attenuates the emphasis on shared descent. *Vera* translates more closely and intimately as 'faith', not 'religion'.

Despite the scholarly consensus that 'secular' nations and 'religion' drive each other politically (Brubaker 2015: 102-18; Van der Veer & Lehmann 1999), the underlying assumption is that there is an inherent *tension* which makes their combination noteworthy and disconcerting. The interweaving of universalist 'religion' and particular 'national' identity seemingly smacks of contradiction. From the viewpoint of my interlocutors, however, those modes of belonging are homologous, not fraught with the contradiction that our analytical lens implicitly inscribes into their lives. Now, some of my interlocutors insist that one should be 'Orthodox Serbian', not 'Serbian Orthodox'. This is their attempt to insist on their primary identity as practising, believing Christians and to distance themselves from people who they see as exploiting Orthodox symbolism to advance a nationalist political project. That said, they nevertheless claim that nurturing an attachment to one's own people is healthy, as I explore below.

The broader point is that perceiving oneself as an Orthodox person who is part of a people implies commitments which stretch *beyond* the secular, temporal, and statist realm – a crucial point which is overlooked by some of the classic theory on nationalism. In his seminal account of the nation as an 'imagined community', Benedict Anderson emphasized the transition away from a medieval conception of time (wherein past and



present were not radically distinguished) and a shift towards a temporality that was ‘transverse’, successive, and ‘measurable’ (2006: 24). The nation came to be imagined as moving through ‘homogeneous, empty time’ (2006: 24), a ‘secular, historically-clocked, imagined community’ (2006: 35). But the Serbian people – as construed by thinkers like Nikolaj Velimirović and the Orthodox Christians who see themselves as belonging to it – is *not* imagined as travelling through ‘homogeneous, empty time’. 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 is understood as being characterized by hope, expectation, and promise. Exclusive loyalty to one’s people is not enabled because that collectivity is split off from pre-secular commitments to transcendental powers (cf. Asad 2003: 193–4). On the contrary: peoplehood becomes compelling precisely because it is *connected* to the cosmos. Otherworldly allegiance is not a bar to peoplehood; it can drive it. We can now start to consider in more depth how peoplehood makes sense in Orthodox terms (Hann & Goltz 2010).

### Peoplehood in Orthodox thought

Orthodoxy has a primordialist view of national collectivities and peoples, seeing them as existing since the beginning (Leustean 2014b: 10). The historian Adrian Hastings advanced the bold argument that nations (in the sense of *ethnos*) are ‘characteristically Christian things’ (1997: 186), making sweeping claims that are beyond the scope of this article to evaluate critically. However, in noting that the Bible has worked ‘as the mirror through which to imagine and create a Christian nation’ (1997: 195), Hastings illuminates why a commitment to peoplehood sits so comfortably within Serbian Orthodox discourse. If the Old Testament offered a model for a ‘God-centred nation’ and how it could be punished, then the New Testament champions ‘the full diversity of nations, customs and language’ (1997: 195). In short, the scriptures (and subsequent theological teachings) establish the national collectivity as a legitimate Christian category (see also Haynes 2015).

The people who participate in Kraljevo’s Orthodox networks argue that national identity is a basic, essential, and universal trait, ‘a precondition of existence’ (Holy 1996: 65). As one young man said, a sense of national belonging is important ‘to everybody [in the world]’, it is ‘implanted’ (*usađeno*). The recurrent insistence in Kraljevo on Serbian peoplehood is implicitly premised on a ‘polycentric’ worldview (Smith 1983: 158–9), with the presumed existence of comparable peoples around the world possessing divergent histories, traditions, and ‘mentalities’ (Čolović 2002: 64). Father Dalibor, apparently echoing Herder, spoke of the world as being like a ‘garden’ of different peoples. What matters is holding onto that which is ‘implanted’.

Let me introduce Ana – a married, retired woman in her late fifties. When she is not at home, cooking, reading, and tending her garden, she spends much time attending church services. On one occasion, shortly after the morning Liturgy, 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 eternity, salvation, and the transience of worldly existence. She clarified 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 [Serbs] lost who we are ... 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 was obviously didactic, for my benefit. 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, the ethical response of an Orthodox Christian should be to approach Him, not by trying to circumvent that order of things, but by living in harmony with it. 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. Not embracing this given collective identity, Ana adds, rather dramatically, leads to a loss of personhood – one would just be 'air'.

Ana's views reflect a wider Orthodox assumption that a person finds the tools and techniques for approaching the Divine in their own immediate cultural context. For example, I visited the medieval monastery of Gradac (to the south of Kraljevo) with Dragoljub, a middle-aged schoolteacher. As we strolled around the grounds, he explained that, when he was a teenager, he was preoccupied with 'looking for spirituality (*duhovnost*) in the East', in seemingly more distant, exotic religious traditions. Only later had he realized that it was not necessary to seek elsewhere. Gesturing towards the monastery church with a wave of his hand, he told me that he had eventually understood that 'our [Serbian] spirituality is here'. As Liisa Malkki has argued, 'commonsense assumptions' which link 'people to place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical' (1992: 27).

Are these examples simply another instance of 'Christian nationalism'? Thinking through the Evangelical context, Jon Bialecki argues that 'Christian nationalism is not a pre-given structure but rather a problem that people find themselves inhabiting' (2017: 44). External circumstances interact with inherent Evangelical ethics and 'trigger a crystallization' of nationalist feeling (2017: 45) which is marshalled within the nation-state at given historical moments; it is a 'politics and ethics of pure opposition' (2017: 52). At one level, the dynamic Bialecki describes is obviously applicable to the Serbian context. Given the historical development of its organizational structures, Orthodoxy is 'particularly prone' to nationalism (Makrides 2013), and during the Yugoslav wars the SOC was clearly instrumentalized towards nationalistic ends (Radić 2000: 271). Moreover, my interlocutors *do* sometimes make explicitly political claims, lambasting the Serbian state under the leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić and the apparent contempt with which it treats the Serbian people's cultural heritage. For instance, in 2016, there was outrage when the mediaeval monastery of the Saint Archangel Michael was submerged during the construction of a new reservoir near the town of Valjevo. However, as I read Bialecki, he is inferring that Evangelical culture can exist in a *non*-nationalist mode; Christian nationalism is just *one* of its expressions. The point I am making from my own data is that, in central Serbia, Orthodoxy is *always* implicitly conceived of in terms of peoplehood – it is the framework within which being a Serbian Orthodox person makes sense, even when politically oriented nationalist anger dissipates.

In Kraljevo's liturgical world, reminders of being part of an ethno-moral collectivity are perennially present. For example, the chapel of the Spiritual Centre hosts a colourful fresco depicting an erstwhile assemblage of (overwhelmingly male) protagonists from

Serb history. The faces of revered Serb clerics, monarchs, and military leaders gaze down at the congregants as they stand in the Liturgy. A Serbian tricolour flag flutters from the Holy Trinity Church on feast days, just as a large Serbian standard is permanently draped over the balcony of the Spiritual Centre. The tricolour recurs elsewhere: at the kiosks that grace church entrances, people can sometimes purchase woven, beaded prayer ropes – not only in the generic black, but also in the red, blue, and white of the national flag. In churchgoing circles, Orthodoxy is seen to be not only universally true, but also a collective Serbian possession: It is *'our'* faith. Note the refrain of a popular ethno-pop song, 'Eternal faith, glorious faith, our faith is Orthodox!' Everyday liturgical life is enacted in the tenor of Serbian peoplehood.

Arguing that Serbian Orthodoxy is lived in terms of peoplehood is not the same as suggesting that liturgical life is characterized by a 'missionary type of ethnic election ideal' (Smith 2003: 7). My interlocutors *do* emphasize the specificity of the Serbian people, its historical trajectory and extraordinary suffering (ignoring the suffering of other parties and the Serbian responsibility for causing it). I witnessed multiple instances of xenophobia – attitudes towards Kosovar Albanians being a case in point. However, my interlocutors do not repeatedly evoke an imperialist notion of 'Heavenly Serbia' (cf. Anzulovic 1999; Dawson 2009; Judah 2009) or proclaim themselves to be part of a 'chosen people' (cf. Bandić 2010: 52, 62-3; Hastings 1999). This is partly because, simply put, contemporary Kraljevo is not locked in a nationalist echo chamber. Liturgical life is shaped by 'translocal connections' (Pop 2018: 220): pilgrims, icons, relics, and translations of spiritual literature filter into Serbia from other Orthodox countries, such as Romania and Greece, whilst some of my interlocutors admired the 'real efforts' of converts to Orthodoxy in the United States. What is more, for practising Orthodox Christians – who emphasize *personal* transformation in Christ and sincere repentance – a person is *never* saved by dint of their nationality or through claiming allegiance to a 'chosen' people. As we will see, evocations of specificity are not always evocations of superiority. What matters is belonging to one's people, since, as part of it, one can develop as an Orthodox person.

### Peoplehood/personhood

Mentioning *narod* necessarily implies invoking 'one's own identification' with it (Ries 1997: 29). Amongst practising Serbian Orthodox Christians, discussions about peoplehood are almost always – implicitly, at least – discussions about personhood. My interlocutors claim that the former defines the latter and the sort of commitments and priorities an Orthodox person should have in the world. To begin to unpack this claim, let me turn to Milan, a freelance translator in his mid-fifties, who enjoyed bullishly intellectualizing about such themes in his living room. He expanded:

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.

In this view – similar to Ana, whom I cited above – a person's purpose involves holding onto their God-given Serbness, and not allowing that identity to become dissipated in the advance of faceless internationalism. One could say that Milan effectively claims Serbian peoplehood as the 'space of disclosure' within which a person achieves full

human subject status (Taylor 1985: 280). What he claims is not simply rhetorical, but enacted in practice by my interlocutors. When they lovingly venerate an icon of Saint Nikolaj Velimirović, or prostrate themselves before the cool stone tomb of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing at Studenica monastery, they see themselves as drawing on the accumulative faith tradition of the Serbian people to cultivate themselves as Orthodox. The same is true when they extol the exemplary monastic rigour of Saint Sava, or when they express joy at living close to the monasteries built by the Nemanjić rulers. 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.

The family *slava*, or patron saint day celebration, is another context in which practising Orthodox Christians claim to cultivate themselves as part of a people. The legend goes that Saint Sava introduced the practice as a means by which to harmoniously integrate pagan idolatry and Orthodoxy, though the historical origins remain unclear. The basic idea of the *slava* is that each family celebrates the feast day of their patron saint, a saint who is passed down the generations patrilineally. Families who celebrate, say, Saint Nicholas do so on 19 December, whilst those celebrating Saint George do so on 6 May. At the heart of the ritual is the *slava* bread which is taken to church in the morning to be blessed and cut by a priest, before it is later shared with guests who come to the family home throughout the day. In the Orthodox world, the *slava* is overwhelmingly practised by Serbs (inscribed even on the UNESCO list of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage') and is increasingly presented as a marker of ethnic identity (Bakić-Hayden 2019). Regular churchgoers tend to self-consciously integrate liturgical elements to the celebration, perhaps with the host censing the house and guests and more extended prayers before the meal. For believers, the *slava* is a way of developing oneself as Orthodox within the tradition of one's own people.

The Orthodox theological model of the person is understood as relational (Agadjanian & Rousselet 2010; Hirschon 2010). And, in more theological discussions, my interlocutors insist on the term *ličnost*, which connotes a relational person, as opposed to 'individual'. Marko – a construction worker in his sixties whom I met at church – dismissed the term 'individual' (*individua*), insisting that a person could not strike out alone, but needed the togetherness of *narod*. The ideal Orthodox person is also imagined as being imbued with conservative, patriotic moral values (Fomina 2018). In striving to situate the Orthodox person in relation to the Serbian people, my interlocutors arguably try to combine both of those modes – the relational and the patriotic. In their view, a person is not autonomous but only 'brought into being' as part of the national collectivity (Holy 1996: 65).

The claim that peoplehood defines personhood leads to hegemonic claims about authenticity. Similar to the normative assertions made about the Polish-Catholic identity (cf. Pasięka 2015: 10), in central Serbia, one encounters the idea that 'real Serbs' can only be *Orthodox* Serbs (Bandić 2010: 19). The point my interlocutors like to make is that, in rejecting one's own given faith tradition, one is effectively rejecting a true and genuine sense of self (see also Ghodsee 2009: 234). Jovana is a schoolteacher in her late twenties. Following a trend which is increasingly common in post-Yugoslav Serbia, she was baptized as a baby, receiving a nominal confessional identity. She became interested in active Orthodox practice only later, during her university studies, and now identifies herself as a 'believer' (*vernik*). Jovana claimed to be surprised after seeing a televised account of a Serbian singer who converted to Buddhism. It was, she giggled,

'strange'. When I asked a priest in a neighbouring village whether somebody could 'be Serb and *not* Orthodox', his response was to briskly comment that 'today we have a lot of former Serbs'. He was rehearsing the nationalist argument which proposes that Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and Catholic Croats are essentially ethnic Serbs, but that they abandoned their Orthodoxy and so lost that Serbness.

The narrative that Bosniaks, in particular, 'gave up their faith for dinner' has particular traction. That is, Bosniaks supposedly betrayed their Orthodoxy and converted to Islam to secure material benefit under Ottoman rule. This is a historically dubious idea (see Bringa 1995: 14-18), but one which reveals essentialist understandings of personhood in this context. Over beers in a smoky bar, several young men who attended Liturgies together discussed the importance of not forgetting one's roots, leading to a string of jokes about Bosniaks being 'confused'. Dejan, an engineer, insisted: 'I cannot go against myself' (implying that this is what Bosniaks had done in converting), before elaborating: 'If I'm born Dejan Simić, then I can't stop being Dejan Simić ... I'm *always* Dejan Simić'. He intended his performative indignation to make a point about the defining power of the cultural identity that you are given at birth. As Dejan said in a later conversation, non-Orthodox Serbs cannot be Serbs 'in the fullest sense'. Disaggregating the confessional and ethnic aspects of identity risks dissolving a sense of self (Bakker Kellogg 2019: 484).

One extension of this logic is that the people must be protected to preserve the context within which Orthodox Christian personhood supposedly flourishes. A challenge to the national whole can also attack 'the person at his or her ontological depth' (Kapferer 2012: 83). Amongst Serbian Orthodox Christians, one hears a vocal commitment to cherishing 'that which is ours' (that which was given by the Lord and subsequently nurtured by the ancestors) and scandalized accounts when it is felt to be threatened. For instance, Jovana claims that she cannot fathom how her own grandfather – who had been a committed communist in his younger days – had been able to stop celebrating his *slava* during socialism. She framed it as retrospective, disbelieving outrage, demanding of him how it was possible: 'He literally cut that root of ours, and our root is faith'. At this point, let us consider in more depth the threat which Serbian Orthodox Christians see as facing their people.

### Undeserving people

Part of what lends the framework of peoplehood such poignancy is the fact that my interlocutors imagine it as being constantly on the brink of destruction. If we become most acutely aware of 'phenomena and objects' at the moment when they are to be lost or gained (Smith 1986: 7), it follows that the 'people' as a living organism is often most convincingly imagined in terms of its potential death. Within church circles, concerns that 'Serbian collective identity might be lost' (Buchenau 2011: 129) are especially pronounced. 'We are a small people', my interlocutors say matter-of-factly, recalling threats to survival in a world dominated by the 'Great Powers'. Relative smallness begets feelings of vulnerability (Gingrich & Hannerz 2017: 32-3).

By taking peoplehood as an irreducible organizing principle (one that can be used to make sense of all humanity), churchgoers throw the particular Serbian plight into relief. They sometimes couch specific issues faced by the 'Serbian people' in relative and general terms: 'a people needs to know its history', 'every people must preserve its identity', 'every people has its own myth'. They thus show issues to be weighty because they are supposedly *universally* true of *all* peoples, not just Serbs. Precisely because my

interlocutors construe ‘peoples’ as natural, it makes it all the more shocking that their own people is seemingly faced with the threat of extinction and corrosive ‘Western’ influence – as well as dealing with the repercussions of the traumatic twentieth century.

Being understood in terms of descent, the people is threatened in a demographic sense. In everyday settings, my interlocutors evoke Serbian demographics in strikingly corporeal terms: in terms of babies which need to be born for the population to grow, or foetuses which have been sinfully aborted. Demographics are evoked in terms of men killed in conflict, or of people who physically leave, emigrating abroad. Father Dragoljub – a parish priest in his sixties, approaching retirement – expressed demographic concerns placidly in an interview. ‘We were killed, we suffered, we were slaughtered’, he said, in a way that felt rehearsed. He mused that, since the Serbs had not ‘renewed’ themselves after the Second World War, they faced ‘the problem that we may no longer exist, the danger of extinction.’ A young man whom I met at a monastery in southern Serbia articulated the importance of progeny for national survival. After discussing Ana Brnabić – Serbia’s openly lesbian Prime Minister – he expressed unmitigated disgust at the idea of same-sex marriage, which, he said, could not bear offspring and so not contribute to the reproduction of the people.

Just as the people is eroded in a biological sense, so, too, its moral core can be damaged. My interlocutors argue that the encroachment of Western values is having a pernicious effect on Orthodox life. Concretely, churchgoers mention the harmful influence of reality television and the tabloid press. In one conversation, a friend explained that Pink TV – a privately owned entertainment channel showing telenovelas and music programmes – was ‘how they destroy us [Serbs]’. Meanwhile, Ana stated that the highly popular reality television programme *Parovi* (Couples) – a *Big Brother* genre series in which contestants are observed (sometimes licentiously) living together – was effectively an attack on the traditional family unit.

Urban Kraljevo itself helps to stoke Orthodox complaints about the declining moral condition of Serbian society. The raucous bars and cafés along the main pedestrian street provide ample material for claims about sexual depravity and decadence. For instance, Vladan, a self-employed painter-decorator who attends Liturgies regularly with his family, claimed to be shocked by the teenage girls who walked through the town centre wearing provocative, revealing clothes. Continuing his trail of thought, Vladan mused that it was perfectly understandable that Serbia had lost control of Kosovo. 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, they were obliged to witness the consequences. Whilst Serbs often claim that the loss of Kosovo is a massive injustice (cf. Bošković 2017: 197), it is also noteworthy that, for some people, the Kosovo situation can actually be justified in divine terms. Ivan – an insurance salesman in his thirties – voiced a similar criticism. The Serbs, he argued, ‘are not a people to be praised (*za pohvalu*)’.

Serbian Orthodox liturgical practice channels such feelings of dissatisfaction with the collective self. A vivid illustration is the practice of repenting for the people as a whole. During Wednesday Vespers at the Spiritual Centre, the congregation prays the ‘Prayer of people-wide repentance’ (*Molitva svenarodnog pokajanja*), penned by Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. Following the lead of the priest, the congregants lower themselves to their knees and perform a full prostration – heads touching the floor, hands clasped in front. It is a penitential prayer imploring God to forgive the misdeeds of people from across Serbian society, featuring the powerful line: ‘We repent for the sins of our national

champions and leaders, who have forgotten that Serbian saints founded this state and that this is a holy land ...'. Just as much as the perceived greatness of a national past can nurture fervent pride, it can also produce disillusionment and disappointment in the present when the people's constituent persons feel that they have failed to meet the standards of their saintly forebears.

We should not assume, then, that defining oneself in terms of peoplehood only and always reinforces feelings of collective superiority and righteousness. Critique can be turned *inwards* to temper nascent messianic fervour. Several interlocutors stressed the importance of humility and the danger of hubris. 'In our faith', Ana explained, 'the first thing to get rid of is pride'. She made jab at her more (secular) nationalistic compatriots: 'It's a bit conceited to say that you're a heavenly people'. Again, the Nemanjić monarchs come into play – churchgoers point to their exemplary piety and then bemoan the fact that, despite having such ancestors, the majority of the Serbian population do not 'live liturgically'. But using the discourse of Orthodox Christianity to assert Serb exceptionality or to enact withering self-criticism are two sides of the same coin. The underlying structure is that people see themselves as belonging to a broader ethno-moral collectivity which is, in turn, in a formative relationship with God.

## Conclusion

As well as being able to bow before the tomb of Stefan Nemanja/Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing, visitors to Studenica monastery can venerate the relics of his son, Stefan the First Crowned/Saint Simon the Monk. I once chatted with Vlado, an iconographer, who had helped to restore the ancient frescoes in the monastery church. During the works, it was necessary to temporarily move Simon's relics, which rest in an ornate casket to the right of the altar. Vlado told some foreign tourists (who happened to be visiting) that he and his colleagues had just 'moved a king'. The tourists were reportedly very impressed. But, in retelling this episode, Vlado downplayed the awe of royalty, shrugging it off, nonchalantly. He wanted to emphasize respect, certainly, but a more loving, intimate relationship: It was, he said, 'like moving my grandfather'.

Vlado's evocation of extended kinship ties is illuminating. In suggesting that he relates to Saint Simon like a beloved ancestor, he reaffirms how the Serbian people, as an ethno-moral collectivity, is the implicit framework within which Serbian Orthodox persons practise their faith. Peoplehood is not potentially extrinsic to the liturgical experience – as in analyses which recoil at the idea that 'religion' could be imbued with a 'national' element – it is one of its assumed, organizational categories. In overly focusing on state-centric religious nationalism, we risk missing a sense of relational and situated belonging (Østebø 2020: 562) which people ascribe to 'natural-cultural landscapes' (Østebø 2020: 549).

In conclusion, I draw out two broader issues which are raised by the data on Orthodox life in post-Yugoslav central Serbia. The first is to underline how the perception of belonging to a bounded group can help some people move towards eternity. Discussions of the 'politics of national peculiarity' (Mishkova 2009) are well established in postsocialist contexts. However, as well as considering how seemingly primordial identities are politically produced, we must ask how they shape the daily religious lives of the persons who claim to derive from them. Belonging to an ethno-moral collectivity generates powerful ramifications for people's spiritual commitments, offering a framework simultaneously binding them to the earthly contingencies of this physical world but also indexing the eternal realm beyond it. However peculiar

it may seem in light of Western, individualist conceptions of piety, striving for the Divine cannot necessarily be abstracted from the cultivation of apparently worldly identities (cf. Keane 2006). Enquiring about how people assert themselves as ‘believers’ means also asking about the wider entity which affords them this possibility. By extension, it also means recognizing how the ‘people’ – just as much as the persons who see themselves as constituting it – may bear considerable moral weight in the eyes of God.

The second point is a reflection on anthropological categories. Anthropology is strong when it critiques and refines recurring concepts: ‘ethics’, ‘values’, ‘neoliberalism’, say. But terms such as ‘ethno-nationalism’ and ‘religious nationalism’ often get by uncritiqued. They are deployed without the same precision, perhaps because what they signify is deemed unpalatable. At one level, more conceptual clarity is needed when using such terms: who, *exactly*, is a ‘religious nationalist’ (see also Kurtović 2011)? Furthermore, we must also ask about the extent to which framing social phenomena in terms of ‘nation’ and ‘religion’ truly illuminates local perceptions of belonging. In much social science writing on ‘postsocialist Eastern Europe’, ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’ are distinct, separate categories which inform each other. The analytical task then becomes establishing how they do this (cf. Brubaker 2015). As interesting as this may be, in keeping those distinct categories, we inscribe a tension and contradiction into the analysis, where our interlocutors do not necessarily see one. David Schneider argued that, in Judaism, ‘kinship, religion, and nationality are all a single domain’ – each sphere premised on ‘diffuse, enduring solidarity’ (1977: 70). Similarly, for much of the population in central Serbia, ethnic and spiritual aspects of belonging are homologous or – to borrow Josep Llobera’s gloss on Schneider – ‘an inseparable totality’ (2004: 48). To grapple with such popular and powerful identities emerging in postsocialist space, we need to theorize all-encompassing perceptions of belonging, wherein ethics, faith, and ethnicity are not potentially distinct spheres, but meshed together.

### Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to my friends and interlocutors in Serbia for making this research possible. Joel Robbins, Julian Sommerschuh, Timothy Carroll, Ori Mautner, Bojan Aleksov, Miloš Jovanović, Clayton Goodgame, Marko Barišić, and Jennifer Cearns offered careful and constructive readings over the course of the article’s development. I also appreciate the critical engagement of the four anonymous reviewers for the *JRAI*. A very early version of the article was given at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle – I am grateful to Chris Hann for the initial invitation and for his helpful feedback since then. This research was supported by the UKRI (Grant Ref: MR/S031669/1) and the Leverhulme Trust.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 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’. In this article, I translate *narod* as ‘people’ to evoke the bounded ethnic group.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Peoplehood’ is my abstract analytical term to talk about the way my interlocutors speak about their people (*narod*).

<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms. In some instances, minor biographical details have been changed to further protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>. Pew places the percentage identifying as 'Orthodox' as 88 per cent.

<sup>5</sup> See the 2022 Serbian census data especially, 'Population by nationality, age and sex' (<https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3104020303?languageCode=en-US>) and 'Population according to religion' (<https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3104020301?languageCode=en-US>).

<sup>6</sup> For detail on the accusations of anti-semitism levelled at Nikolaj, see Byford (2008).

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## Le peuple et la personne orthodoxe : regard du centre de la Serbie

### Résumé

Dans le centre de la Serbie, les chrétiens orthodoxes pratiquent leur liturgie dans l'idiome du « peuple serbe ». Le présent article sonde le concept de « peuple » (*narod*), perçu localement comme une collectivité ethnique morale enracinée dans l'histoire et la géographie. Cette notion exprimant l'appartenance est cruciale pour comprendre la vie orthodoxe post-yougoslave. Le « peuple » fonctionne comme une identité collective ici-bas, au sein de laquelle les interlocuteurs de l'auteur se situent en tant que personnes orthodoxes et par l'intermédiaire de laquelle ils approchent le divin. Les menaces pesant sur l'identité serbe servent à mettre en avant le peuple comme lieu supposément premier de l'épanouissement orthodoxe. Au-delà des analyses du « nationalisme religieux » axé sur les États, l'article ne livre pas le moyen de comprendre « le nationalisme » par le biais de « la religion », mais montre comment la foi, pour employer les mots des orthodoxes de Serbie, peut être comprise à travers le prisme du peuple.

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