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A technology of re-enchantment: reading, referencing, and redistributing Orthodox 'spiritual literature' in post-Yugoslav Serbia

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ABSTRACT


This article explores the issue of 're-enchantment' through an ethnographic analysis of 'spiritual literature' in post-Yugoslav Serbia. Following the anthropologist Alfred Gell, it argues that Orthodox texts can be understood as 'enchanted technology' which, in turn, allows them to work as a 'technology of enchantment'. Spiritual literature – distributed as physical objects between bags, bookshelves, bookshops, and kiosks, as well as digitally via social media – can propel some people to grow as Orthodox Christians and relate to society in Orthodox terms. After situating the re-emergence of Orthodox publishing in historical perspective, the article shows how people defer to books and how texts circulate. Overall, the article reveals the mechanics of one form of re-enchantment.

KEYWORDS

Alfred Gell; Orthodox Christianity; postsocialism; Reading; re-enchantment; Serbia; spiritual literature

On my desk is a crumpled plastic bag, crammed full of booklets, papers and pamphlets, some well-thumbed, others flat and pristine. It was given to me by Natalija, a devout Orthodox Christian woman in her mid-sixties.¹ Sifting through the bag's contents I find – amongst many other things – a pamphlet entitled *On Women's Behaviour in the Lord's Temple*, a glossy card with the heading *About Mental Prayer and Prayer Ropes*, a yellowish booklet of fasting recipes written by a nun called Anastasija, and a copy of the late Patriarch Irenej's Christmas address for the year 2017. There is a paperback of John of Kronstadt's *Great Lent* (a Serbian translation from the original Russian), as well as several printed leaflets of spiritual advice from the Rukumija monastery near Požarevac. I also discover *Notes on Ecumenism* by Justin Popović – a gift to Natalija from her friends, evidenced by the handwritten dedication on the front page – with a newspaper clipping of the words to the Serbian national hymn, 'God of Justice' (*Bože Pravde*), tucked inside. The bag is, in short, a somewhat eclectic mixture of Orthodox reading materials amassed over the years.

Insofar as people's ordinary reading practices can mark wider societal transformations (Rosen 2015), Natalija's bag of materials is significant. It reminds us that the re-emergence

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¹All names are pseudonyms. Some biographical details have been changed to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.

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of Orthodox Christian practice after Yugoslav socialism has been assisted – in part – by the mass production of spiritual literature. Socialist regimes varied in the severity of their anti-religious policies, but they generally created atmospheres in which the free expression of faith was significantly stymied, along with the formal study of religious traditions. In the years after socialism, and faced with an apparent vacuum of knowledge, some people have looked to reading as a way to rectify the apparent break in the transmission of religious learning. Monastic presses, independent Orthodox publishers, and publishing endeavours funded by certain churches or Eparchies have generated a wealth of reading material for those who wish to consume it. Many of the practising Orthodox whom I got to know in central Serbia are – and have been – prolific readers. Worn pamphlets and photocopies circulate after Liturgies, texts and quotations from spiritual elders are widely shared on social media chat groups, churches and monasteries run well-supplied bookshops. There are parish magazines and nationwide Church-oriented publications. On its website, the official shop of the Serbian Orthodox Church sells a wide range of books, organised into categories such as ‘Patristics’, ‘prayerbooks’ and ‘hagiographies’.² Reading is, in other words, entangled with what this thematic issue refers to as ‘re-enchantment’.

Richard Jenkins has suggested that ‘enchantment’ involves ‘understandings and experiences of the world in which there is more to life than the material, the visible or the explainable’, where rational analyses and standard spatio-temporal conceptions are insufficient (2000, 29; see also Testa 2017, 26–27). An ‘enchanted’ world is significantly greater and fuller in every sense than it seems at first glance. Postsocialist contexts, which experienced concerted political projects aimed at eradicating such ethereal versions of transcendence, beg particular questions: How does social life become ‘re’ enchanted or reimbued with the qualities described by Jenkins? How do people provincialise the rational and challenge materialism? How do they learn the categories with which to frame everyday life in terms of mystery and divine agency?³ Re-enchantment is, after all, a process of ‘active re-acquisition’ in the face of perceived cultural loss (Testa 2017, 26).

In this article, I turn to the reading, referencing, and redistribution of spiritual literature as one way of addressing some of these questions. Reading has provided a generation of people, who grew up without formal religious education (*veronauka*) at school, what is effectively ‘how-to’ advice about Orthodox practice (see also Weichert 2007). But reading ‘spiritual literature’ is more than instructions about when to wear a headscarf, whether tattoos are a ‘sin’, or how to venerate an icon properly. Through reading, people develop new conceptual repertoires with which to narrate, analyse, and respond to the reality of living in post-Yugoslav Serbia. Understanding ‘enchantment’ means appreciating, not only how wonder and mystery become present, but also how the world is given fresh ‘order’ and ‘purpose’ (Landy and Saler 2009, 2).

As an ethnographer, I am unable to gauge the extent to which reading has affected people’s interiorised states or make normative claims about people’s increased religiosity. Rather, my intention is to theorise how spiritual literature functions as a technology which contributes to the re-enchantment of social worlds in the wake of ideologically atheist regimes. To that end, I find it useful to draw on the thinking of Alfred Gell

²See <https://spcprodavnica.rs/eprodavnica/knjige/> (accessed June 2023)

³Of course, despite the attempts of socialist regimes to eradicate non-rational forms of the transcendent, socialist ideology itself accrued a transcendental character (Hann 2006.: 4). Yugoslav socialism – with its overarching maxim of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’, and the series of rituals and practices enacted to reinforce this idea – was obviously no exception.

(1998; 2005), an anthropologist who employs the term ‘enchantment’ in reference to art, gardens, and other material cultures. Gell is not concerned with ‘enchantment’ or ‘re-enchantment’ in ‘postsocialist’ settings. His thinking about art and agency is useful, however, because it gives us a language to think about how material forms draw people in and produce particular effects. By ‘technology of enchantment’ Gell (2005) means that ‘art’ (broadly conceived) is a technical system which reproduces society by generating social consequences, securing people’s unwitting acquiescence to be part of wider social dynamics. The efficacy of such ‘technology of enchantment’ is, in turn, due to the ‘enchantment of technology’ (Gell 2005, 44). That is, an art-object is rendered captivating for the viewer by the high, unattainable technical skill and expertise which went into producing it. Now, the books, pamphlets, and leaflets I describe are not ‘enchanted’ in that technical sense; their power does not lie in the skill and technique with which a craftsman produced fantastic bindings or intricate designs – in their capacity as beautifully crafted art-objects. Spiritual literature is an ‘enchanted technology’ through the Orthodox concepts, ideas, and revelations which are printed on its pages. For people who wish to see it in such terms, those words are *truth*, divine revelation, the message of the Holy Spirit mediated through the Church Fathers, monastics, and beloved bishops. Orthodox spiritual literature is a socially consequential ‘technology of enchantment’ because people can see its contents as enchanted. In Gellian terms: the ‘index’ (the material object, in this instance: Orthodox reading material) represents the ‘prototype’ (that which is represented through the index, in this instance: God.)

This article takes as its object the entire, ever-expanding body of ‘spiritual’ and ‘church’ literature which shapes and influences the post-Yugoslav Serbian Orthodox world: Books by spiritual elders and monastics, parish magazines, and leaflets with Orthodox readings – a taste of which I gave with the contents of Natalija’s plastic bag. Indeed, spiritual literature is not a singular object – like a vase, icon, or sculpture – but what Gell would call a ‘distributed object’. As such, I am less concerned with reading techniques (cf. Irvine 2010) or the experience of reading (cf. Reed 2004) as I am with how spiritual literature – distributed as physical objects between bags, bookshelves, bookshops, and kiosks, but also digitally via social media – functions together as a technology of enchantment, propelling some people to grow as Orthodox Christians and relate to society in Orthodox terms.⁴

Now, processes of ‘re-enchantment’ in Serbia have obviously not rested solely on reading and printing practices. There are numerous material forms through which people enchant social life. Anthropologists have considered this regarding church building projects (Tateo 2020; Köllner 2014), the increased circulation of Orthodox objects, such as crosses and prayer ropes (Stefanović-Banović 2014), and wonderworking icons (Hanganu 2010). Enchantment happens sonically, too, through learning to sing and chant the right way (Engelhardt 2015). The arguments I make about the enchanting properties of reading material should be imagined alongside these other technologies of enchantment which make religion ‘public’ after socialism (Wanner 2018). Before

⁴It might be reasonably asked why an ethnography of Christian reading does not consider people’s engagement with Holy Scripture, as in other studies which have analysed Gospel reading or ‘Bible Study’ (cf. Bielo 2009; Engelke 2009; Malley 2004). The Orthodox relationship to Bible reading is complex, one that I do not have space to go into here. The key point is that the primary reading activity of my interlocutors is *not* directed towards the Bible itself, but rather towards other writings through which truth is made known.

returning to contemporary reading practices, in the following section I situate the publishing and consumption of Serbian Orthodox publications in historical perspective.

The vicissitudes of ‘*verska štampa*’

In October 1994, a small but significant event occurred at the Belgrade International Bookfair. The bookfair – first established in 1956 – is the major literary occasion in Belgrade’s cultural calendar, a week-long event showcasing hundreds of publishers from Serbia, the former Yugoslavia, and the wider world. 1994 was noteworthy because, for the first time, the fair hosted a stand organised under the auspices of the *United Orthodox Publishers*. A photograph of the event shows white display shelves bearing books, icons hanging on the wall, and members of the public perusing the publications.

If you were to visit Belgrade bookfair today you might be struck by the sheer number of Orthodox publishers represented, the quantity of Orthodox material available (from books, to icons, to calendars), and by the occasional priest or monastic browsing the stalls. Not only would you find the official stand of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), but the stands of numerous other Orthodox publishing houses and monastic presses. In fact, ‘religious publishers’ (*verski izdavači*) have become such a fixture that, in 2017, *Pravoslavlje* (the magazine published by the Serbian Patriarchate) dedicated an article to assessing the number of Orthodox publishers represented at the fair and commenting on their new titles (Redakcija Pravoslavlje 2017). Such an abundance of Orthodox publications was not the norm in 1994. The presence of those first books and icons in a very public setting indexed a shift in ideological mood after socialism, a re-enchantment, one could say, of what had been secular publishing space.

By the end of the 19th century, the Serbian clergy was keenly aware of the powerful influence of printed material on the spiritual and cultural development of the Serb population. Numerous journals were published and circulated (Vukotić 1996: 198). During the interwar period, the God-Worshippers (*Bogomoljci*) – a charismatic piety movement which sought to revive grassroots Orthodox practice with an emphasis on fasting, hymn singing, prayer, and collective worship – made extensive use of pamphlets to convey its message. The movement set up reading rooms and established printing presses for producing its brochures and texts (see Radić and Milovanović 2017; Subotić 1996). Up until the Second World War, the Serbian Orthodox Church was itself an active publisher, with its own presses and a range of periodicals, pamphlets, and journals. During the war, these publishing activities all but ceased, with the exception of *Glasnik* – the official journal of the SOC, founded in 1920 and still published today (see Sando 2020).

With the advent of Marshal Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia in 1945, the SOC had to orient itself within a new socio-political context, one which was considerably less conducive for the circulation of its printed message. The regime was premised on Marxist atheism and overt religious practice became undesirable, especially for those in uniformed or state positions. Officially, the *Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities* of 1953 guaranteed freedom of conscience and faith, clarifying that religion was a ‘private’ matter for citizens. The printing of religious literature was not banned outright. The SOC continued to publish pocket calendars and *Glasnik*, and, by the end of the 1950s, printing began to expand more rapidly (Radić 2002a: 198-202; Vukotić 1996: 199).

In 1958, for instance, the SOC published *Spiritual Songs* (Duhovne Pesme), with a print run of 3,100 copies, and launched a new periodical, *Pravoslavni Misionar* (see Radić 2002a: 198–202). *Pravoslavlje* – the magazine cited above – was, in fact, launched in 1967.⁵

The overall ideological climate nevertheless presented significant difficulties for the circulation of religious literature, especially in the early years when the regime's anti-religious sentiment was stronger (Radić 2002b: 93). One logistical challenge came from the fact that, with the regime change, the SOC's printing presses were nationalised, forcing it to rely on presses not owned by the Church. Secular printers could significantly hamper the SOC by refusing to print literature with which they disagreed (Alexander 1979: 310; also Radić 2002a: 201). What is more, Serbian law prohibited religious literature being distributed in shops or newspaper stands, meaning that it could only be sold on church premises or purchased by subscription (Alexander 1979: 312). Beyond such practical issues, the SOC was restricted in terms of content. The regime only allowed it to print material that was exclusively 'spiritual'. It regarded deviations into the political with great suspicion, especially any attempt by the SOC to advance a nationalist agenda. For instance, a 1959 edition of *Glasnik* was dedicated to Saint Sava, Serbia's patron saint. It featured an article which invoked 'Orthodox Serbia' where the author claimed the Serbs to be 'a people of many martyrs', chastising those who had fallen away from Serbian Orthodox identity. The ideological commission of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia was outraged, and the edition banned for 'fanning nationalism and chauvinism' (see Radić 2002a: 199).

As socialism waned in the late 1980s, the mood changed. The SOC increasingly asserted its authority in the public sphere, reclaiming what it saw as its traditional place of prominence in Serbian society (see Perica 2002; Radić 2000). Church publications adopted an increasingly nationalistic and belligerent tone. Specifically, they focused on the suffering of the Serbian people during the Second World War and the 'genocide' it experienced at the hands of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), 1941–1945 (see Radić 2002b). Such texts began to re-enchant Serbian history, framing it in divine and moral terms, in terms of victimhood – interpretations which had been unacceptable under socialism.

Bojana Vukotić observes that the very existence of a reading public ready to consume '*verska štampa*' is indicative of wider cultural transformations (1996: 203). Indeed, as Serbian society evolved in the 1990s, academic researchers took the growing list of Orthodox publications as evidence of how 'religiosity' was re-entering the public sphere. As well as considering factors such as how often people 'fasted' or 'attended church', a sociological study by Dragana Radisavljević-Čiparizović (2006: 92) examined the frequency at which people read 'spiritual literature'. Whilst it would be incorrect to suggest that the masses suddenly took to the fervent, regular consumption of 'religious' publications, her work showed that between the 1980s and 1990s there was a dramatic shift in people's awareness of – and curiosity about – such reading material (ibid.: 93). A wide-ranging survey entitled 'Religiosity in Serbia 2010' suggested that, since the

⁵For a comparative overview of the affairs of the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia during the same period, see Radić 2002a: 539–544.

1990s, this interest has increased. If, in 1999, only 16.8% of those questioned ‘sometimes’ read spiritual literature, by 2010 this had jumped to 28.2% (see Radić 2011: 31).⁶

Churchgoers who grew up under socialism – and who became practising Orthodox relatively late in life – periodically express concern that they were never properly educated about Orthodoxy. As in other postsocialist Orthodox contexts (see Benovska 2021: 37), they feel that their knowledge of their ‘own’, Serbian faith tradition is incomplete, sometimes claiming to be ‘beginners in the faith’ (Radulović 2012: 153). The printing of Orthodox literature is one way of making that knowledge available, and reading is a way of re-acquiring it. As Yugoslavia collapsed in the chaos of the 1990s – as Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo descended into ethnic warfare, and the rule of Slobodan Milošević forced the Serbian population to endure Western sanctions, spiralling inflation, and the 1999 NATO bombing in response to the actions of Serb forces in Kosovo – many of my interlocutors told me that they read copiously.

The broader point is that, after socialism and conflict, published material was a means through which to, quite literally, type out the conceptual contours of a ‘world in which there is more to life than the material’ (Jenkins 2000: 29). Some texts, especially those dating from the early 2000s, reveal the mechanics of re-enchantment in a time before the Internet provided ample information at a click. One book, presented to me by a friend as a spiral-bound photocopy, is *An Orthodox Glossary (Pravoslavni Pojmovnik)*, published by the *Besjeda* publishing house in Banja Luka in 2006. The foreword characterises the book as a handy resource for finding ‘the most frequent concepts linked to Orthodoxy and Christianity more generally, terms which have been used throughout history, but which are present in everyday communication’ (Novaković 2006: 5). With entries ranging from ‘Akathist’ and ‘Alexandria’, to ‘Martyr’, ‘Schism’ and ‘Wisdom’ the book reminds readers of the ‘essence’ of terms whose meanings have become distorted. Also revealing is a cheaply printed, purple-coloured booklet, on sale at a monastery near the town of Čačak – an image of Christ’s Resurrection on the front cover, a monochrome photograph of the Tomb of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem on the back. Published in 2005, it is entitled *It is a Lie that after Death there is no Life*. It is a densely packed, didactic text with numbered subtitles such as ‘Where is the soul?’, ‘Can we help the deceased?’ and ‘How will God judge those who are not Orthodox?’ With its answers to these questions the book effectively urges an all-encompassing reframing of the cosmos in Orthodox Christian terms, from the sanctity of the human body, to the sanctity of the Serbian people. Spiritual literature, in other words, emerged as a technology of enchantment.

Reading in Kraljevo

In contemporary Serbia, the majority of the population identify as ethnically ‘Serb’ and confessionally ‘Orthodox Christian’.⁷ The data for this article is drawn from extensive fieldwork conducted in and around the central Serbian town of Kraljevo, a place

⁶The ‘Religiosity in Serbia 2010’ survey was a joint project undertaken by the Centre for European Studies (Brussels), the Christian Cultural Centre (Belgrade), and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. It was supported by the Ministry for Faith and Diaspora of the Republic of Serbia. The survey drew on a representative sample of 1219 respondents. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of writing, there is not an equivalent, more up to date survey.

⁷See the Pew Research Center report on ‘Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe’: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (accessed May 2023).

which follows the national trend – about 95% of the local population identify as ‘Serb’ and ‘Orthodox’.⁸ Within this nominally Orthodox urban context, I will primarily focus on the network of people who are, we could say, especially receptive to spiritual literature as a technology of enchantment. These people, like Natalija and her husband, often self-identify as ‘believers’ (*vernici*). They integrate aspects of liturgical practice into their daily routines: attending the Divine Liturgy on Sunday (and sometimes other services throughout the week), receiving regular Communion, and carefully following the fasting calendar. They are also enthusiastic about reading on Orthodox themes.

Wandering through Kraljevo, one can encounter a rich topography of spiritual literature and reading material. In churches and at the town library there are copies of *Žički Blagovesnik*. This is a glossy, professionally produced magazine, funded and published by the Eparchy of Žička, the local diocese. Each edition generally features texts on a particular ‘theme’ (such as the ‘Good News’ of Christmas) as well as various contributions under headings such as ‘Theology, Church History, Culture’ and ‘Religious Education’ (*veronauka*). Entering the Saint Sava temple, the largest of Kraljevo’s three churches, visitors can pick up a copy of *Hram* – the parish newsletter. It is a folded A5 leaflet which – as well as giving church announcements – reprints excerpts of longer theological texts. One such text – ‘Worrying leads away from God’ – was an extract taken from a book by the much revered Saint Paisios of Mount Athos, a Greek ascetic whose writings are appreciated in church circles. Another reprints the late Patriarch Pavle’s reflections on ‘fasting and communion’. In 2017, on a stand near the icon in the small hospital chapel, congregants could find *The Life and Akathist of Saint Nektarios of Aegina* – a bright booklet with colour photographs and biographical detail, priced at 170 dinars (about 1.40 euros). Unique to Kraljevo is a ‘Spiritual Centre’ (*Duhovni Centar*), a place to which I return below, and which hosts an exceptionally well-stocked bookshop: multiple shelves of monastic writings, spiritual reflections, theological texts, books on church history, as well as advice literature on practising Orthodoxy. Nationwide publications such as *Pravoslavlje* (which offers church news, interviews, photo essays, and theological articles) can be consulted in the library reading room or purchased at one of the kiosks on the town’s street corners. There are periodically launches at the library for books on Orthodox themes, almost always with clergy in attendance. During fieldwork, the publisher ‘*Duhovni Lug*’ (literally, ‘Spiritual Grove’) gave a relatively well-attended presentation at a public hall in Kraljevo about their recent publications. On their smartphones, people often scroll through excerpts of spiritual texts and snippets of patristic wisdom, thanks to the numerous social media group chats which thrive on the circulation of such content. The overall point is that reading material on Orthodox themes is widely available.

⁸See the site of The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia in the documents ‘Population by ethnicity and sex, by municipalities and cities’ and ‘Population by religion, by municipalities and cities’: <http://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/oblasti/popis/popis-2011/popisni-podaci-eksel-tabele> (accessed May 2023). Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for 18 months between 2016 and 2018, and then on subsequent shorter trips in 2021 and 2022.

Deference and reference

The wider literary context informs how people think about themselves as Orthodox and pattern the ways in which they speak. Timothy Carroll has argued that theology ‘should be read as *part of ethnography*’ because ‘theology is a dynamic process that not only is produced by the culture, but also produces the culture, and engages as a social force within the culture’ (2017:7; original emphasis). In Serbia, the eclectic range of books and texts which are consumed and circulated are not ‘outside the network’ (ibid.) but rather an integral part of people’s self-development as liturgical Christians. When my interlocutors speak about their personal journeys as Orthodox, they sometimes refer to a particular book that moulded or propelled them. Several people reflected that the right book with the right answer can come along at the right time, showing up in the right place; ‘nothing happens by accident’. When I returned from fieldwork for the first time, I brought with me what was, quite literally, a small suitcase packed with material which people had given me to consult.

Here I will introduce Marko – an insurance salesman in his early forties who did not grow up in a churchgoing family but came to the faith while he was studying at university. In a discussion about his experiences, Marko reminisced about discovering *A Vision of Heaven and Hell: My Spiritual Renewal* by Dušan Jovanović, a slim volume which details the author’s profound personal transformation, originally published in 1986. Marko reminisced that he had picked it up at a fair and that the book’s effect on him had been massive. After reading it he claimed that his behaviour changed and he started attending church regularly, fasting, and making efforts to learn about Orthodox practice. By way of another example, we can turn to Ana, a very practising woman in her sixties. During a conversation in her living room, she recalled a book entitled *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* by the Athonite monk Archimandrite George. The book describes the process of developing ever-closer communion with God. Like Marko, she claimed that the text had catalysed an intellectual shift, the ability to see everything differently, from an Orthodox perspective. The book had, she reported with enthusiasm, helped her to understand ‘the point of Orthodoxy’ – ‘it made everything clear for me!’ I can, of course, only take my interlocutors’ word for the intimate transformations they describe. That said, it is clear that these books provided them with a means to retrospectively re-enchant the narrative of their life trajectory in Orthodox terms, with key texts as a turning point. What is significant, then, is not only the *content of this reading material*, but also the *practice* (Rosen 2015) of referring to it.

Frequently, my interlocutors answer ethnographic questions about an aspect of Serbian Orthodox practice by reference to a particular text or book. On a coach trip to Ćelije monastery near Valjevo, I found myself in conversation with a middle-aged woman, a schoolteacher, who frequently participated in such pilgrimages. Knowing that I was a foreigner conducting research about Serbian Orthodoxy, the woman expounded at some length about how the international reputation of the Serbs had been maligned and grossly distorted by the Western media. I made several unsuccessful attempts at asking *why*, exactly, she thought this was so. Eventually, after evading the question for a while, she urged me to consult *See that you not be Troubled: The Spiritual Meaning of our Age*. There – in that book which derives its title from Matthew 24:6, and which explores Orthodox responses to globalisation and the ‘New World Order’ – I

would find all my answers; ‘you will see’, she said, decisively. On a different occasion, I clumsily asked a friend about how he imagined the End Times and his perceptions of the Second Coming of Christ, topics on which he was not overly forthcoming. A few days later, when I met him again, he produced a fairly tattered booklet – *The Biblical Holy Prophecies about the Last Globalization of Humanity*, by an author referred to only as ‘Monk Nikolaj’ – about the prophecies for the end of the world. He had read it and felt it would tell me everything I needed to know.

Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston (2014) argue that Orthodoxy is a ‘community of deferral’, where people are untroubled by not necessarily knowing the answer, confident that the source of that knowledge is further up the hierarchy. In this logic, deferring to authoritative texts written by spiritual elders is – in itself – an enactment of Orthodox practice. In interviews, my interlocutors were occasionally cautious of presenting themselves as prideful or self-adulating in their responses. Many felt that, as laity, it was not their place to explain doctrinal matters. This was surely due, in part, to the dynamic produced by the presence of a foreign, seemingly knowledgeable, researcher. But we cannot disregard the more Orthodox explanation, either: Through referring to texts, people deflected the potentially pompous act of explaining *away* from themselves, and felt reassured that I would get a theologically-grounded and authoritative response. Spiritual literature enchants, not only through its transformative content, but also by enabling Orthodox Christian practices of deference and reference to such truth. In Kraljevo, this act of deferring is especially well illustrated by the relationship that my interlocutors have to Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović.

As our Nikolaj said ...

Nikolaj Velimirović is a towering figure in the imaginary of Orthodox Christians in Serbia, and maybe especially in Kraljevo. That reverential sentiment is captured by a man called Danilo, whom I met after a Liturgy. Mirroring a rhetorical structure that occasionally appears in printed form, he declared that, after the time of Saint Sava, the Serbian soul had struggled and ‘stammered’ until, through the words of Nikolaj, it finally ‘spoke out’. For Danilo, there was ‘no clearer expression’ of the Serbian soul than in Nikolaj’s works – a fact which, he felt, effectively rendered it unnecessary to read any other books. Whilst not everyone used such superlative language, it is fair to say that Nikolaj’s influence is immense. In the mid-1980s, there was not a single Church publication which did not, in every issue, publish texts by Nikolaj, or his spiritual child Justin Popović (Radić 2002b: 98). When *Žički Blagovesnik* (originally founded by Nikolaj) was relaunched in 1997 one of the contributions declared it essential ‘to read the wisdom of this Serbian Solomon whose books should be, alongside the Holy Scripture, instructional literature, books on the tables of priests, intellectuals and workers, the worried and joyful, rich and poor’. In 2021, a journal – *Nicholai Studies* – was launched in Belgrade with the express purpose of publishing scholarship on Nikolaj’s theological and ecclesiastical contributions.⁹ His oeuvre has, simply put, provided ample resources for the re-enchantment of post-Yugoslav Serbia insofar as some people take it to express truth about the cosmos and the place of the Serbs within it.

⁹See: <https://nicholaistudies.org/en/> (accessed June 2023).

Velimirović was born in 1881. By the time he entered monastic orders he had managed to complete two doctoral degrees in both Philosophy and Theology. He travelled widely, spending time in England and the United States, before being made Bishop of Žiča Eparchy in 1919. After being transferred to the Eparchy of Ochrid and Bitola, he eventually returned to Žiča in 1936. Velimirović was also a pivotal figure in the God-Worshipper movement, mentioned above. When Germany invaded Yugoslavia in 1941 Velimirović was arrested, confined in several monasteries, and later deported to Dachau in 1944. After the war, Velimirović did not return to what was by then socialist Yugoslavia, but emigrated to the United States where he died in 1956. He was canonised by the SOC in 2003.

Given his personal association with the town, Nikolaj is held in particular affection by my interlocutors who sometimes refer to him as ‘our Nikolaj’ or simply ‘*Vladika*’ (Bishop). The ‘Spiritual Centre’ is housed in the building where he once lived. As well as colourful frescoes on the walls depicting scenes from Vladika’s life and some of his possessions on display in glass display cases, the small chapel hosts part of his relics which people lovingly venerate after the Liturgy.

From a secular, critical perspective, some scholars have found Nikolaj’s legacy extremely problematic. Notably, in 1985, long after Nikolaj’s death, *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* was published in West Germany. The book’s editor claimed that Nikolaj wrote the text whilst incarcerated in Dachau – and this is certainly the popular, widespread opinion. But the true origin of the text has since been strongly disputed and numerous questions remain (Petrović 2020). Either way, as a text it is controversial. It raises questions about Nikolaj’s antisemitism and his apparent openness to fascist thought and sympathy for Nazi Germany (see Byford 2008). However, as important as these debates are for the academic study of Serbian Orthodoxy, from an ethnographic perspective one has to appreciate that such controversies do not impact how Saint Nikolaj is revered locally. Aware of external scholarly critique, my interlocutors consciously deflect criticism, defending Nikolaj not only as an influential writer, but also as the people’s Bishop, a man who understood, helped, and could speak to ordinary folk – an exemplary model of how to lead a Christian life.

Velimirović’s appeal partly stems from the accessibility of his language. Over coffee, a theology lecturer praised Nikolaj’s writing, explaining that his far-reaching influence was ‘because he writes in a really simple language, the people’s language’. This view was echoed in the 1997 issue of *Žički Blagovesnik* mentioned above. The writer noted that ‘If we take any one of Vladika’s books – which are most frequently written in the simple language of the people – we get the impression that he is speaking to us now’. A defence of Nikolaj’s approachable style was made pointedly by Miroljub, a man who frequently referred to Vladika’s writings and kept a full collection of them on the bookshelf in his living room. I had asked Miroljub about the concept of ‘*metanoia*’ – a Greek term, but one which was sometimes used by a few men I met at church. Miroljub rebuffed the question, claiming not to understand a ‘foreign’ Greek word. He added that: ‘Saint Nikolaj made these things simple. He never used the word “*metanoia*”’. Whether Nikolaj used that word or not is beside the point. What matters is that Miroljub was able to defend and defer to the Bishop’s accessible style, framing it as a legitimate way of accessing Orthodox truth.

Nikolaj's words percolate into Kraljevo's liturgical soundscape. At one moment during fieldwork, the circle which gathered in the Spiritual Centre would listen to the writings of Saint Nikolaj – 'our Nikolaj' – after the Liturgy. People quietly drank coffee as a man read aloud from Nikolaj's writing. Once, after finishing a passage from *Spiritual Lessons* (*Duhovne Pouke*), the reader added, as if to underline its significance, 'That was, of course, from Nikolaj Velimirović, our host (*domaćin*) here.' Sometimes, in the hushed pause before Divine Communion is served, a woman would stand at a lectern and read passages from what is simply referred to as the *Prolog*. Or, to give it its full title in English: *The Prologue from Ohrid: Lives of Saints, Hymns, Reflections and Homilies for Every Day of the Year*. It is a weighty, authoritative tome compiled by Nikolaj which allows a person to navigate the liturgical cycle.

Jonathan Boyarin has argued that a literature Tradition is not a fixed block of 'cultural traits' but rather a 'relative possession' which offers a group of people the symbolic and institutional means 'to interpret their lifeworld' in personal and collective terms (1992b: 228-229). Likewise, through reading – and then recalling what they have read – churchgoers furnish themselves with plentiful intellectual tools for enchanting the world and structuring the liturgical imaginary in Kraljevo. Consider Bojan, a freelance translator in his sixties. On a bus ride back from Belgrade he mused on the meaning of God's Will, about why things never happen 'accidentally'. Bojan framed Serbian history in Divine terms, suggesting that the Ottoman occupation of the Serb lands from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries was precisely because the Serbs had fallen away from Christ, leading God to permit the invasion of foreign forces. He recalled Nikolaj's *War and the Bible* which, he said, had shaped his thinking on this matter. On another occasion, Bojan explained how suffering and persecution are highly formative for Christian self-development. 'Without beating there is no Orthodoxy!', he pronounced, stridently, before attributing the line to Nikolaj: 'It's in *Missionary Letters*, though I'm not sure where exactly.' Bojan's last point is interesting because he reveals the extent to which his reading of Nikolaj has percolated into his imagination: he knows roughly, but not exactly, where he first read it. The same was true of other interlocutors who had incorporated writings and quotations into their discourse, but could no longer remember the precise origins. As a technology of enchantment, spiritual literature allows Orthodox ideas to circulate, off the page and into the mind.

Circulating texts and ideas

In a purely physical sense, spiritual literature moves around, passing through different hands. Reading is, after all, a 'tactile' as much as it is a cognitive process (Boyarin 1992a: 8). It is significant, for instance, that Miroljub's copy of the second tome of *Missionary Letters* by Vladika Nikolaj was missing from his collection. He had lent it to someone – he could not remember whom – and it had not made its way back. The active circulation of texts – and the photocopying of battered sheets – is, arguably, the very stuff of re-enchantment. Texts and papers materialise Orthodox thought, it becomes a tangible papery presence in the public space.

In Kraljevo, spiritual literature is often there to be consumed, to be read and passed on further. In contrast to the reverence for holy books which Vlad Naumescu (2010) beautifully documents amongst Old Believers in Romania, the relationship of my own

interlocutors towards reading material can be more utilitarian, partly reflected in the low-grade paper and the frankly dogeared condition of some of the texts which passed through my hands. Jelena – an elderly woman who regularly attended Liturgies – had a plastic file in her handbag filled with crumpled texts that she had picked up over the years. One of the pamphlets was in the series published by Rukumija monastery – *On Keeping the Old Calendar and the Holy Orthodox Faith*. Another – presumably copied from a book – described the wonderworking vine at the Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos in Greece.¹⁰ She gave me the duplicates – and then crossed the road to the copy shop to make copies of the others.

Ivan, a mechanic, was also quite an active circulator of material. One morning, as congregants were sipping coffee after a Liturgy at the hospital chapel, he walked around with a plastic bag filled with books, leaflets, and back issues of Orthodox magazines. He had read it all and was now distributing it to others so they could read it, too. Ivan revealed that he takes the leaflets from the Saint Sava temple to distribute at his workshop. He reported with contentment that his colleagues – who sometimes tease him for his seemingly zealous commitment to churchgoing – ‘read them’. Through redistributing the leaflets he allowed the material to circulate beyond an exclusively ‘church’ environment, attempting to enchant secular, sceptical, space.

Sometimes, publications are primarily geared towards the circulation of a set of ideas as opposed to the reproduction of an entire text, per se. One morning, for instance, I spoke with a woman employed in an Orthodox bookshop who explained that in today’s fast-paced world people do not have time to read full books. She was in the process of transcribing sections of a longer book into a Microsoft Word document so that excerpts could be reprinted as short pamphlets. Many of the texts available for purchase in the Spiritual Centre are excerpts of longer pieces. For example, *Lessons about Sincere Repentance according to the Holy Fathers* is an A5 booklet of just under fifty pages of composed of texts from four different sources, though bibliographic details are sparse.

The anthropologist Adam Reed has shown how a British literary society promotes their beloved Henry Williamson by seeking to get his work ‘activated in different places and reproduced in new book forms’. Similarly, through citing and circulating the words of spiritual fathers, publishers ‘activate’ those ideas in different places and ‘reproduce’ it in new locations. This approach is particularly evident with the oeuvre of prolific Orthodox writers. A book I was given by a friend is entitled *On God and People (O Bogu i o ljudima)* by Vladika Nikolaj. In fact, whilst the text in the book is purportedly written by Nikolaj, according to the frontispiece the material was ‘selected and prepared’ by a Milenko Radović. The book is arranged alphabetically and essentially consists of bullet-pointed snippets of Vladika Nikolaj’s thinking on different topics, taken from various different sources (though these are not listed). Under ‘A’, say, we find ‘America’ and ‘astrology’, under ‘E’, ‘Europe’, ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘ethics’. The same practice occurs with the work of Saint Justin Popović. One book is conceived as an *Alphabet* of his thoughts, ‘chosen and prepared’ by Nevenka Pjevač. What matters is that the ideas are made to circulate, that they are published, set down on paper, made available. Gell

¹⁰Hilandar is the Serbian Orthodox monastery on Athos, founded in 1198 by Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja and his son, Sava.

might have said that since readers abductively assume the words to be written by Vladika or Justin they have confidence that they point to the prototype, God.

Another revealing example came from Marija, a woman who reads copiously and periodically forwards relevant citations and articles to her friends on social media. One morning, she texted me a reflection on the ‘true meaning’ of fasting: ‘The best fast is to endure everything which God sends’. In response, I enquired about who had written those words. Marija’s reply was extremely instructive. She explained that whilst she appreciated the academic need for exact references, for her what mattered was the pursuit of ‘truth’ (*istina*) and that ‘one of the Holy Fathers said it’. Who precisely, when and where, was less important, in her view, to the precious idea it disclosed. What mattered was less the specific writer, and more that the words belong to the canon of Orthodox thought and reveal truth.

Serbian churchgoers do not only consume material by Serbian thinkers such as Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović. Through reading, they partake in an Orthodox intellectual commonwealth which stretches far beyond Serbia. As Simion Pop has shown in the Romanian context, contemporary Orthodox parish life – far from being parochialized – is, in fact, influenced by ‘translocal connections’, with parishioners taking part in global flows (2018: 220). If we take even a cursory glance at some of the books which resonate with my interlocutors, we see that they are often translations of foreign language publications. Marija recalled the excitement of being able to find, for the first time in the 1990s, books in series called *Hilandarski Prevodi* (Hilandar Translations), Serbian language versions of important Orthodox spiritual texts, translated by the Hilandar monks. Works by the English theologian and bishop Kallistos Ware (such as *The Inner Kingdom*) and the American monk Seraphim Rose (such as his *God’s Revelation to the Human Heart*) are amongst those which periodically come up in conversations. Along with icons, relics, and clergy, translations of Russian, Greek and English theologians also circulate through Serbia’s liturgical space.

The free flow of ideas does not always pass without commentary, however. There are sometimes concerns within church circles about the legitimacy of some of the material in circulation. As a rule, Church publications are only ever undertaken with the blessing of the relevant bishop. In a book’s frontmatter one can normally find the words ‘*with the blessing of*’ followed by the name of the bishop. Ana, whom I mentioned above, urged me to ‘always make sure’ that any book I consulted had a blessing. As she put it, she could theoretically find funds to put together a publication, but it would not be right since she has no training in interpreting scripture. I also recall the priest of the church where Jelena distributed her photocopies expressing some concern about the practice. He did not know a great deal about the content, nor under whose blessing they were produced. In short, the circulation of texts periodically stimulates a discourse about the validity of the material and the extent to which its influence should reach.

A technology of postsocialist re-enchantment

In conclusion, let me introduce Nevena, a woman in her early forties who is baptised but who prefers to practice her Orthodoxy privately, visiting churches on her own as and when it suits her. One day, she drew my attention to a copy of *Žički Blagovesnik*, with some amazement. She asked, incredulously: ‘Have you *seen* these topics [in the

journal]?! About abortion ... Saying what the Church thinks about it. It looks like a real scientific journal!’ It is a fair observation that current editions of *Žički Blagovesnik* look considerably more professional than the older versions from the 1990s. What struck Nevena as surprising is that the SOC should have found the confidence to publish its thoughts on sensitive, bio-ethical themes, like abortion. Of course, what Nevena was inferring is that *Žički Blagovesnik* is *not really* a real scientific journal at all, and the SOC is out of order in publishing such material. To couch Nevena’s reaction in the more theoretical terms of this thematic issue: processes of ‘re-enchantment’ are not uni-linear, single irreversible shifts from socialist forms to postsocialist Orthodox ones. After socialism, religious literature is free to circulate just as people are free to resist it. There can be tussles over the extent to which people think that enchantment should reach. To be enchanted one must see the technology as enchanted.

Attempts at ‘re-enchantment’ in contemporary Serbia are twofold: they simultaneously promote a ‘negation of the values of atheistic ideology’ (Pavićević 2014: 8) and actively reinscribe an Orthodox worldview. This article has suggested that Orthodox spiritual literature can be fruitfully understood as a technology of enchantment, a distributed object which circulates in public space, drawing people in and affecting their behaviour. What makes spiritual texts so potentially powerful to those who read, reference, and redistribute them is that, as indexes, they point to a prototype (Gell 2005) which, in this instance, is believed to be ultimate truth. For receptive readers, spiritual literature is a glimpse, however partial, of wholeness, of God. As we saw with the collated volumes of the thoughts of Serbian theologians, the specifics of titles, writers, and sources are sometimes of secondary importance to the higher Christian truth which the index is abductively taken to reveal.

The broader point is that, to understand how people ‘re-enchanted’ their social worlds, we need to examine the material forms – churches, shrines, prayer ropes, books, and icons – which assist them in this endeavour. These are technologies which are seen as intrinsically ‘enchanted’ and which can thus have considerable social efficacy. They are forms which offer glimpses of a transcendental moral order, one which some people see as encompassing social life in the present.

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