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Have you visited our monasteries? Serbian monastic heritage as religious infrastructure

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ABSTRACT

In Serbia, monasteries are shared points of reference, permeating everyday life in banal ways. This contribution considers the extensive network of Serbian monasteries as a form of 'religious infrastructure'. Monasteries sit in a recursive, mutually formative relationship with ideas about the Serbian collective self. Just as monasteries shape claims about the historical rootedness of the Serbian people, so discourse about Serbdom positions monasteries in particular ways. Proof of monasteries' encompassing power lies in the fact that monasteries – and ideas about them – allow diverse actors to make different (sometimes contradictory) claims about history, territory, heritage, and sincere faith. In ways that are at once inconspicuous and flagrant, monasteries provide an infrastructure that frames, contains, and compounds ethnic and confessional belonging.

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> Throughout the tumultuous centuries of our history, it was monasteries that were the spiritual centres of Serbdom (*Srpstvo*). Beside them we prayed for victory and freedom, for them we died, in them are preserved treasures of Serbian literature, culture, history, and tradition; they were the torches of Orthodoxy and of the Way of Saint Sava (*Svetosavlje*), candles in the darkness of time to which we always returned in the end, the light which sustained us as a people.
>
> *All the Serbian monasteries: a guide to every monastery* (Radovanović et al. 2014)

Introduction

Aleksandra works as a cashier at a small supermarket in the central Serbian town of Kraljevo.[1] Once, as I was paying for groceries, she gave me some advice: 'You know where you should go, since you study Orthodoxy – Ćelije monastery'. Ćelije is a thirteenth century monastery in Western Serbia, not far from the town of Valjevo. Aleksandra had not actually visited the monastery herself, and was vague about its exact location. She longed to go, however, having heard about the miraculous relics of Saint Justin Popović which reside there. Aleksandra was not the only person who suggested that I visit a particular monastery. During fieldwork,

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the advice to visit monasteries was a standard response when people heard about my research on Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Serbia. A few months after our first conversation, I asked Aleksandra why she felt monasteries held such significance. 'They are our endowment (*zadužbina*)', she replied, simply, recalling the rich tradition of Serbian medieval rulers establishing (or 'endowing') monasteries and churches.

In Serbia, like in other Orthodox countries which have well-established monastic traditions (such as Romania or Georgia), monasteries are a core dimension of the national imaginary.[2] There are over 300 on the territory of the Republic of Serbia alone, nodes of monastic life recurring across the landscape. Monasteries are shared points of reference, permeating everyday life in banal ways. Walking around Belgrade one will see advertisements for coach trips to monasteries taped to walls and lampposts. At news kiosks, one can purchase a monthly magazine – *Our wonderworking monasteries* – packed with images and stories about 'the shrines which bring health and happiness'. Images of Serbia's UNESCO-listed monasteries have appeared on a set of commemorative postage stamps, but also on individually wrapped chocolates, set in presentation boxes, destined for the tourist market. Amongst the glossy brochures available from the National Tourism Organisation of Serbia is a full-colour, poster-sized 'Serbian Monasteries Map'. It depicts 'monasteries of great importance' – identified as such by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia – noting that monasteries have been 'national anchorages and hotbeds for education and art'. Certainly, during the centuries of Ottoman rule, monasteries helped to preserve the ethnic and confessional identity of the Serbs (Radić 2016, 210). In 2015, the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade captured the social dimension of monastic centres with an exhibition – *The life of the people and the thriving of temples* – showcasing monochrome photographs which depicted the 'uninterrupted flow of life' around Serbian monasteries and churches over the years.

Following the guest editors of this collection, I examine ethnographic material on monasteries through the lens of 'religious infrastructures'. 'Infrastructures' have been defined as 'extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations' (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017, 5). Monasteries constitute one such 'extended material assemblage' insofar as they are a network of built sites which generate ideas and ubiquitous representations throughout Serbian society. As concrete points of reference associated with particular holy relics, monastics, and miracles, a monastery functions as a 'centripetal force' within a given locality, a 'living presence' which draws people in (Du Boulay 2009, 306). In this contribution I reflect on the agency and affordances of the *entire network* of such 'living presences', the interconnected spiritual landscape. Interestingly, a popular book, which explores the 'wonderworking places and holy objects in the belief of the Serbs' frames things in similar terms, noting that the 'Serbian land' was 'networked (*premrežena*) with significant monasteries' (Tomić 2016, 12).[3]

At first glance, turning to the anthropological literature on 'infrastructure' to theorise Orthodox monasteries might seem a little off the mark. Monasteries do not provide oil, gas or electricity, or sustain widespread technological, transport or drainage networks (cf. Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018). Nor are they normally associated with projects of progress and 'modernisation'. Nevertheless, monasteries can be productively viewed through the theoretical lens of 'infrastructure'. They structure social and spiritual life in concrete ways. They 'excite affects and sentiment' and 'produce a sense of belonging,

accomplishment, or loss' (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018, 26). As material infrastructure, monasteries affect people's conceptual worlds (Humphrey 2005).

Infrastructures are not 'external' to 'bounded' socio-political spheres (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017, 11). The relationship is 'recursive'; there is a mutually-formative, 'looping relation' between society and infrastructure (12). Monasteries are likewise recursively entangled with the societies of which they are part: across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, monasteries have consolidated national identities and nation-state projects (Murzaku 2016). Monasteries, Aleksandra said, are '*our* endowment'. She claims, like some of my other acquaintances, that Serbian monasteries are not any endowment, but the collective national endowment, a base upon which ideas about 'us' and 'ours' can be constructed. As religious infrastructure, monasteries bolster discourses about the Serbs as a historically and geographically rooted Orthodox people. Simultaneously, social and political actors manipulate and politically position monasteries in ways ranging from the discreet to the grandiose.

Monasteries also have the 'potential' to afford numerous imaginative possibilities to a range of different people (Jensen and Morita 2017, 620). They 'figure simultaneously in multiple different fields of cosmological significance' and can be engaged by a wide demographic (Manning 2008, 328). As in other predominantly Orthodox countries, most Serbs identify nominally as 'Orthodox', but only a slim minority engage with liturgical practice regularly.[4] Monasteries are undoubtedly potent liturgical nodes for active churchgoers, but they are *also* meaningful for self-avowed atheists and people sceptical of institutional religion. Monasteries – or *ideas* about monasteries and monastics – allow different people to make diverse claims: about the quality of 'true faith' and deep religious feeling, about precious cultural heritage, as well as about rightful territory and historical rootedness. In short, monasteries provide a flexible and yet firm framework within which to enact belonging in both rigorous and relaxed ways.

My contribution proceeds with a brief historical, geographical, and methodological overview. It then explores how monasteries dynamise liturgical life for regular churchgoers, before considering how monasteries constitute an affective landscape more broadly, even for those with few attachments to the institutional church. The following section analyses monasteries as religious infrastructure by showing how they sustain divergent ideas about – and practices of – tourism, heritage, and spirituality. The final section discusses the ways in which perceived threats to monasteries are read as attacks on Serbdom in its entirety, thus further revealing the recursivity between religious infrastructure and the socio-political sphere.

Serbia and its monasteries

Whilst there are traces of earlier monastic heritage in the region, it was the era of the Nemanjić dynasty from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, that saw a flurry of monastery building activity. In the medieval period, monasteries were considerably more than just spiritual centres. They were administrative centres, too, with an important role in the feudal economy (Radić 2016, 191–192). In addition to being social gathering and trading points, monasteries were used as schools and libraries, and sometimes housed printing presses and hospitals. In times of conflict, they provided refuge and shelter. The epigraph to this contribution is lyrical, but it captures a truth about the role of medieval

monasteries in everyday life. Just as elsewhere in the Balkans, where monasteries were involved in the construction and maintenance of roads (Greene 2021), so too they were part of the infrastructure of the early Serbian state in a real socio-economic sense.

As the Serb principalities fell to Ottoman rule in the fifteenth century, the status of monasteries changed. No longer established as imperial endowments by wealthy rulers to cement their legacy, monasteries were impoverished, frequently deserted, and their lands were sometimes confiscated (Radić 2016: 192). Female monasticism all but disappeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bakić-Hayden 2021, 183–184). Monasteries nevertheless retained – and perhaps even increased – their basic social significance for the Serb population. Throughout the eighteenth century, they were effectively 'the only basic centres of learning' and the focal point of communal and economic life in the villages (Aleksov 2014, 83–84). By the end of that century, monastic elders were increasingly taking on political leadership (Radić 2016, 194). In the nineteenth century, as the Orthodox Church became staunchly wedded to the Serbian nationalist liberation project, monks and priests were actively involved in uprisings against the Ottomans (197; see also Aleksov 2014). Later, under the Yugoslav socialist regime which was established in 1945, the Church had much of its land confiscated and monasteries were primarily viewed as 'places of cultural and historical interest and value', not as spiritual communities (Radić 2016, 204–205; see also Bakić-Hayden 2003, 24). With the collapse of Yugoslav socialism in the 1990s, the previously marginalised Serbian Orthodox Church sought to reassert its power and authority. Monasticism saw something of a revival amongst the younger generation (Bakić-Hayden 2003). Today, monastic infrastructure is arguably expanding, as Serbian bishops permit the construction and development of new monasteries – especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

But what, exactly, is a monastery? Concretely, a 'monastery' is a place where monks or nuns – who have taken vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and stability – strive to live a communal liturgical life fully dedicated to prayer and worship. In Orthodoxy, unlike in Catholicism, monastics do not belong to different orders, but male and female monasteries tend to be distinct. Monastic communities – headed by an abbot (*iguman*) or abbess (*igumanja*) – vary in size, from two or three monks or nuns to communities of forty or more, with novices. As built structures on the landscape, monastery complexes also vary considerably in terms of size, age, and wider spiritual significance. A principal church invariably sits at the heart of monastic life, though in larger monasteries there may be several chapels and churches in which liturgies can be served. Surrounding the church are the monastic cells, washrooms, a refectory and kitchens, as well as accommodation for pilgrims. There is almost always a shop where visitors can purchase beeswax candles, religious accoutrements, as well as the produce of the monastic community. Depending on scale, a monastery might also possess arable land, fishponds, and orchards, as well as housing icon painting workshops, a library, a bakery, brewing facilities, and a museum or 'treasury'. Monasteries are sometimes located in complete isolation, at the end of winding dirt tracks. In other instances, they are in urban environments – the Vavedenje monastery, for instance, sits in a Belgrade neighbourhood.

It is the concerted spiritual work undertaken by monks and nuns that arguably imbues the monastic network with much of its power and potential. Paradoxically, monastic ascetism renders monasteries 'the foundations of the social world' (Hann and Goltz 2010, 13; see also Du Boulay 2009, 306). However, whilst recognising the role that

monastic lifestyles play in bolstering the significance of monasteries, this contribution does not examine the lives of those who reside in them. Nor does it consider practices of Christian monasticism per se (Jonveaux, Pace, and Palmisano 2014; Jonveaux and Palmisano 2017).[5] Rather, the contribution explores monasteries as overarching religious infrastructure, a material assemblage.

I build my argument on fieldwork conducted in central Serbia, often in and around the town of Kraljevo.[6] As such I primarily draw on examples of monasteries which were proximate, the places which my interlocutors visited regularly and to which they referred. This is not to suggest that these monasteries are distinct from the wider network – they are not. Fieldwork in central Serbia offers an ethnographic perspective onto the infrastructuring capacities of Serbian monasteries more generally.

The monastic heritage surrounding Kraljevo is of towering historical and spiritual significance, intimately connected with the Nemanjić period. About one hour to the south is the monastery of Studenica, founded in 1190 by the dynasty's progenitor Stefan Nemanja, and referred to by one writer as 'the spiritual centre of the Serbian people' (Gavrić 2017, 61). A few kilometres to the southwest is the monastery of Žiča, founded in 1208 by two of Nemanja's sons – Sava Nemanjić (later known as Saint Sava) and his brother Stefan. The latter was crowned King of the Serbs there in 1217. When the Serbian Church gained autocephaly from Constantinople in 1219, Žiča served as the head of the archbishopric until 1253.

Further south, down the Ibar river valley towards the town of Novi Pazar, is the UNESCO listed thirteenth century monastery of Sopoćani, as well as the monasteries of Đurđevi Stupovi and Crna Reka. To the west, towards the town of Čačak, is the so-called 'Serbian Mount Athos' – a network of over 30 monasteries nestling in the Ovčar Kablar Gorge. To the east, around the town of Kruševac, are other monasteries of historical and architectural renown. Thanks to coach trip 'spiritual travel' (*duhovno putovanje*) organised by churches and other organisations, monasteries that are further afield become accessible (see also Anđelković 2019). The Fruška Gora monasteries in the northern Vojvodina region – pivotal in the development of Serbian monastic culture (see Klekot 2014, 33–34; n.d.) – are one of those pilgrimage destinations, as are monasteries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

Serbian monasteries nest within a wider, transnational Orthodox landscape. In the summer months, churches organise pilgrimages to monasteries in Greece, such as those at Meteora and on the island of Aegina. Those with the financial means travel to monasteries in Romania, Russia, and the Holy Land. People also invoke a monastic landscape beyond their physical reach. Hilandar, the medieval Serbian monastery on Mount Athos, holds profound significance, even if women cannot travel there, and financial constraints may prevent some men from going. The monastic landscape of Western Europe and North America also feels proximate. Given my own connections to the United Kingdom, the Saint John the Baptist monastery in Essex, England, was a recurring point of reference in conversations, though nobody I met had ever visited. Just as monasteries allow people to make claims about the geographical rootedness of the Serbs, so too monasteries help them to physically and imaginatively traverse the wider Orthodox world.

Spiritual centres of liturgical life

Monasteries hold particularly special value in the demographically diverse circles of men and women who seek to actively practise Orthodox Christianity. These self-identifying 'believers' speak about striving to live a 'liturgical life'. That is, beyond asserting a nominal Orthodox identity, they try to cultivate themselves as good Orthodox subjects, taking regular Divine Communion, attending church services, fasting, and praying. All of this can be achieved within an urban parish, but monasteries can enhance a liturgical life. Practising Orthodox generally receive Communion at their nearby church, but also have a 'spiritual father' (*duhovnik*) in a monastery who offers guidance and to whom they confess. Some churchgoers are also attracted to the lengthier, more rigorous services served at monasteries, in contrast to the shorter ones in their town parish. For instance, my interlocutors speak highly of the mystical, candle-lit, all-night vigils (*bdenje*) served at Žiča monastery on the eve of major feasts.

As religious infrastructure, monasteries lend a chronotopic, spatiotemporal dimension (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018, 17) to Orthodox life. It is common practice to visit a monastery for its patron saint day celebration (*slava*). One might go to Studenica for the feast of its founder Saint Simeon on 26 February, or the monastery of Ježevica near Čačak, say, for the summer feast of St Nicholas (*Mali Nikola*) on 22 May. In this way, monasteries afford temporal coordinates just as much as spatial ones, and a monastery can become associated with a specific feast on the liturgical calendar. One married couple, for example, visits the Vavedenje monastery in the Ovčar Kablar Gorge each year on 4 December, for the Feast of the Presentation of Mary to the Temple.

The structure of such trips is always basically the same. The day begins at dawn, with people being collected by car or bus at around 5am. Monastic liturgies generally start earlier than those in parish churches, the monastery in question is not always nearby, and it is necessary to arrive in time to find a place to park. Upon arrival, people purchase candles which they light for the health of the living and the solace of the departed. They wait patiently to venerate any notable relics and icons which rest in the monastery. Then they participate in the liturgy itself, most frequently receiving Divine Communion. For such festal celebrations, the liturgy may be embellished, perhaps with numerous priests in attendance or the bishop himself serving. What follows is a collective meal (*posluženje*) served in the monastery's refectory. My interlocutors enthusiastically anticipate these meals (normally featuring soup, stuffed cabbage rolls and fried fish) sometimes claiming monastic fare to be unrivalled in its tastiness because it has a 'blessing'. Afterwards, buoyed by the good food and wine, the participants mill around taking photographs and chatting, eventually returning to their cars. Sometimes people go on to visit other monasteries in the area.

For those who participate in such events, monasteries produce and sustain a particular sociality, bringing clergy and laity into relation at specific times and places. Planning arrangements can take place weeks in advance, and there may be real excitement about seeing a beloved spiritual father. As other anthropologists have noted, practising Serbian Orthodox engage in expansive, trans-local networks covering the whole region, coming into interaction with similar people at monasteries and encountering familiar faces (Forbess 2013, 50; Raković 2013, 114). At a trip to a monastery near Leskovac – about a three hours' drive from Kraljevo – I observed the delight of my travelling companions (a

man and woman in their late fifties) when a bishop (originally from near Kraljevo) recognised and greeted them, giving them his blessing. Similarly, at the Patriarchate of Peć in Kosovo, two women were excited to see an abbot whom they knew personally. They rushed to get his blessing and later enthusiastically reported this fact to the rest of the group. Such interpersonal connections perdure even when people are not physically at a monastery. The mere *mention* of a monastery can generate recollections of a personal association. When I mentioned to my friend Gordana that I was to visit a renowned monastery about an hour to the east of Kraljevo, she beamed, clasped her hands to her chest, and gazed ahead; 'It's beautiful! And you'll see Father Petar! [the abbot]'. In short, monasteries afford the maintenance of extended interpersonal social webs that are not restricted to a particular parish.

The liturgical appeal of monasteries described above cannot be disembedded from their role in the 'construction and commemoration' (Poujeau 2010, 186) of the Serbian collective identity. As Biljana Anđelković (2020) demonstrates, whilst pilgrimages to monasteries strengthen 'religious' identities, so too they shore up ideas about belonging to the Serbian people. My interlocutors cite monasteries as a historical testament to the presence of Serbs in the region. Father Dragoljub – a parish priest in his late sixties – suggested that 'Serbian history' was possibly richer than that of neighbouring peoples, such as the Greeks. Conceding that the Greeks have Mount Athos, he continued that 'generally they do not have as many old monasteries as we do – they are all more recent'. Whilst most Greeks would obviously take serious issue with what is a demonstrably false version of history, Father Dragoljub calmly presents monasteries as guarantors of historical pedigree. Similarly, it is not uncommon to hear people recalling monasteries that were founded at a time 'when America wasn't even discovered'. Interestingly, then, the affordances of monastic infrastructure derive in part from its perceived *antiquity* – and concomitant guarantee of 'authenticity' (Kormina 2010, 275–277; Manning 2008) – not associations with technological advancement and modernity that have characterised other anthropological discussions of infrastructure (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018; Larkin 2013, 337).[7]

The liturgical discourse about the joys of ancient monastic heritage has a negative inflection, one which posits that most Serbs are *oblivious* to that same heritage. I recorded melodramatic lamentations about how people living close to monasteries are, in fact, ignorant of them. A nun at one of the Ovčar Kablar monasteries said, reproachfully, that the local population rarely attended liturgies at the monastery – a trend which she thought to be true more widely. A man who had worked abroad for many years criticised his compatriots, suggesting that – because of socialism – Serbs had lost an appreciation of what mattered: 'If only we knew how much Žiča monastery is worth!' In a similar vein, Father Dragoljub claimed (rather drastically) that 'people living in England and France know more about Žiča monastery than somebody living in a village right next to it'. The broad accusation is that whilst self-respecting Serbs *should* engage with monastic heritage, they do not and wrongfully neglect it. For believers, monasteries are thus a means of diagnosing the spiritual ill health of the Serbian people. At the heart of their complaint is, of course, an implicit assumption about the defining importance of monasteries for Serbs, about the recursive dynamic between the two.

Such negative claims are, arguably, quite cynical. In truth, monasteries are recurring points of reference for people with weaker relationships to the church. What is more,

many people hold up monasteries and monasticism as a direct *corrective* to the liturgical life that some of my churchgoing interlocutors enjoy. The 'religious' aspect of the 'religious infrastructure' that monasteries provide must be understood broadly, and not restricted to liturgically-oriented piety.

Places of peace on the affective landscape

At the beginning of fieldwork, as I suggested above, people frequently drew my attention to monasteries. Over coffee, Goran, a bank manager in his mid-forties, described the monasteries near his native town of Kruševac. He carefully sketched out their location in a black biro pen on the back of a receipt; 'I'm telling you this because you're interested in Orthodoxy'. People sometimes imagine monasteries as metonymic – representative parts which speak for Orthodoxy as a whole. One man, an engineer, said: 'I will take you to Saint Roman monastery – there you will see the real spirit (*duh*) of Orthodoxy'. In the Kyrgyz context, Yanti Hoelzchen (2018) has observed that 'one is educated in Islam solely by walking through a mosque entrance'; the core tenets of the faith are understood as all being there. Likewise, the Saint Roman monastery, the engineer wanted to suggest, captured the essence of what Orthodoxy was all about; it was a concrete, emblematic example of the real thing.

As discussed in the previous section, I spent time with committed networks of churchgoers who were eager to talk about their praying, fasting, and liturgy-going. But not all my interlocutors immediately grasped the ethnographic interest of studying urban parish life. Some explicitly proposed *monasteries* as the proper unit of study. Consider Maja, for instance. She is an art historian in her mid-thirties who has a critical attitude to what she sees as the hypocritical Serbian Orthodox Church and its clergy. As such, she advised:

> You won't find the real meaning of faith in Kraljevo churches on a Sunday morning. You know where you'll find it? In monasteries. There are really devout (*pobožni*) people there.

Parish priests would vehemently dispute this view, arguing that their spiritual guidance is just as valid as that offered in monasteries. But Maja is not alone in holding up monastic spirituality as superior. Ethnography from Orthodox contexts repeatedly shows that people imagine monasteries as guardians of a purer, more deeply authentic form of Orthodoxy, set in opposition to the mundaneness and tensions of everyday parish reality (Hart 1992, 98–99; Klimova 2011; Poujeau 2010, 182). Against the vicissitudes of modern life, monasteries are seen as consistently upholding what Orthodoxy actually *is* (see also Bakić-Hayden 2021, 194; Klimova 2011), powerful centres of spiritual striving and healing (Du Boulay 2009, 305–306; Pop 2017, 78). People's eagerness to deflect away from parish churches to monasteries is indicative of the infrastructural work monasteries do in grounding ideas about faith and authenticity.

How, though, do people imagine and interact with such a rich monastic landscape? One summer's evening, after returning from a visit to the Ostrog monastery in Montenegro, I called in to see my neighbour, Dragana – a woman in her sixties who works as a cleaner. Two of her friends, Slavica and Milena, had also come to drink coffee, chat, and smoke. During our conversation – interspersed with extended glances at the reality television drama unfolding in the background – I mentioned my trip. Ostrog is a highly revered and much visited monastery. Sitting impressively in the rock face of the

Ostroška Greda mountain ridge near Nikšić, it is home to the relics of its founder, Saint Basil of Ostrog. Framed pictures of the monastery can be found adorning the walls of living rooms, cafes, and even police stations. The fact that I had visited met with the women's approval, but it led to further interrogation. Slavica, originally from near Novi Pazar, asked about which monasteries I had visited in southern Serbia and Kosovo: 'Have you been to Crna Reka? Have you been to Sopoćani? Have you been to Dečani?' For her part, Milena enquired whether I had visited the monastery of Saint Petka, in Stubal, not far from Kraljevo. The monastery was built during the 1970s on the site of an ancient church – of which part of the (purportedly wonder-working) stone altar remains. Stubal was, Milena said, the most beautiful monastery in the area. She recalled it, struggling to find the words. 'It's beautiful. I can't quite describe it. You feel … calmness (*smirenje*)'.

There are two points to highlight from this spontaneous conversation. The first is that the 'peculiar ontology' of infrastructures is in 'the facts that they are things but also the relation between things' (Larkin 2013, 329). A mention of a monastery elicits mentions of more monasteries. Monasteries are valuable as individual sites, but also in their connectedness and multiplicity; they can be listed and enumerated (see also Poujeau 2010, 182). By way of further example, recall the tourist guide, cited in the epigraph, which presents Serbian monasteries in their entirety. The book methodically lists every monastery, including those outside of Serbia's administrative borders (in Australia, for instance). Each entry features the name of the monastery, its diocese, a short historical paragraph, a detailed map showing its precise location, and a national map showing its relative country location. There are geographical coordinates, and even QR codes to locate the monastery on Google Maps. The monasteries are catalogued, made equivalent to each other as potential destinations – an extensive network to be explored and visited.

The second point is that monasteries evoke feelings, sometimes strong ones. Monastic infrastructure shapes embodied experience (see Larkin 2013, 336), and people recall how they felt in particular places. In this case, Milena spoke of the 'calmness' that she experienced at Stubal. I documented numerous similar examples. Valentina, a retired history teacher, described the unparalleled 'peace' and the connection with 'heaven' (*nebo*) that she found at Žiča. A hairdresser said that she went to monasteries to get a sense of 'peace', akin to what one might feel 'at home', making a downward gesture with her palm to indicate serenity.

Precisely because monasteries are *multiple* affective points on the landscape, people navigate between them, ranking and evaluating. The monasteries a person visits can depend on deeply personal preferences (Anđelković 2019, 217–219). Ivana is a single mother in her late twenties who runs a small business. In contrast to her own mother's regular churchgoing, Ivana describes herself as 'picky' (*birljiva*). In a monastery, she said, one 'shouldn't feel nervous or stressed', but rather feel 'warmth' and 'spirituality' – 'There are monasteries where I don't feel pleasant'. Jovan, a schoolteacher, stated emphatically that he only went to places 'where it is strong (*jak)* … where I feel energy'. He gave concrete examples from elsewhere in Serbia, but was very non-committal about the monastery closest to Kraljevo: 'I just don't *feel* it at Žiča'. By contrast, a mutual acquaintance expressed surprise at Jovan's view, telling me that: 'My legs just carry me to Žiča'. On the Montenegro trip, the coach also stopped at the neighbouring Zdrebaonik monastery. A teenage girl from the coach approached me, smiling: 'You should know that this is the second strongest monastery after Ostrog' – a point later reiterated by her boyfriend.

By 'strong' they were referring to the healing powers of the relics which rest there – particularly good for helping with female infertility. People perceive monasteries in their multiplicity and grade them, quite literally weighing them up against each other. On this affective landscape – characterised by monasteries associated with specific feelings and wonderworking relics – some stand out as especially powerful. Beyond healing, monasteries structure other aspects of recreational and spiritual life, sometimes conflating the distinction between the two.

Day trips, candles, and heritage

If Western European monastic heritage has arguably not received extensive archaeological interest (cf. Gilchrist 2019), in Serbia the reverse is true. Five Serbian Orthodox monasteries are listed on UNESCO's World Heritage list. In Serbia: the monasteries of Studenica and Sopoćani; in Kosovo: the monasteries of Visoki Dečani, Gračanica, and the Peć Patriarchate. The preciousness of this artistic heritage is repeatedly flagged in professional academic publications (for instance, Danilović and Gavrić 2019; Gavrić 2017; Prodanović Ranković 2017) as well as in numerous pamphlets (sometimes in different languages) that visitors can purchase in monastery shops. In the 1960s, the Yugoslav state began to position monasteries as touristic destinations, at one stage even introducing ticket sales (Radić 2016, 206). Today, their touristic appeal remains. In the shiny brochures for the towns of, say, Kraljevo and Kruševac, monasteries are prominent, just as the 'Serbian Monasteries Map' also confirms their marketable touristic potential.

Whilst there has been considerable debate about the intersection of the 'touristic' and the 'spiritual', from an anthropological perspective it is impossible to disentangle them; the two are deeply entwined (see Della Dora 2015, 68). Consider Anja, a woman in her late twenties who works at one of the new factories in Kraljevo. When she was a child she attended church regularly with her parents, an experience which she recalls vividly. Over time, her enthusiasm waned. These days, she is of the widely-held, sceptical view that the clergy are hypocrites for preaching modesty and driving expensive cars. She sees churchgoing as having to do with 'rules', preferring to talk about her faith in terms of 'love' and having a 'clean spirit'. During our conversation, Anja introduced the possibility of visiting monasteries as an alternative to rule-based Orthodoxy: 'It would be beautiful for me to maybe have a day out, a lunch, and then maybe visit some monasteries'. Later she clarified: 'I'm not sure if this is to do with faith or looking at the architecture'.

Being perceived as outside of the strictures of parish life, monasteries withstand Anja's ideas about faith in a way that churchgoing cannot. Anja mentions them in an almost offhand way and – note – in their plurality ('some monasteries'). But monasteries were apparently the natural continuation of her thought after her direct criticism of churchgoing and the clergy. As infrastructure, monasteries facilitate flexible ways of engaging with Orthodoxy and celebrating the history of 'our faith' in a way that does not hinge exclusively on 'belief' or doctrinal commitment. The friend who proposed joining the Ostrog trip had frequently participated in such church-organised pilgrimages over the years, but – like many of the other passengers – almost never attends the liturgy. Ethnography from Russia points to similar trends. Jeanne Kormina (2010) shows how pilgrimages to ancient monasteries and churches allow Russian pilgrims to embrace Orthodoxy without being tied institutionally to a parish; it is 'user friendly' (280).

Similarly, Ksenia Medvedeva (2021) demonstrates how Orthodox monasteries accommodate a whole range of pilgrims, tourists, and believers with very different religious aspirations. Even for those who distance themselves from the institutional Church, monasteries remain a context in which they can express an undefined, non-liturgical religiosity, and appreciate the monastery as a material form.

If Anja is quite vague about her motivations, monastics themselves may believe that there are clear distinctions to be made about people's reasons for visiting monasteries, reading the perception of 'tourists' as being different to their own (Della Dora 2015, 77–81). The Abbess of Žiča monastery told Milica Bakić-Hayden (2003) that, from the mid-1980s – as Yugoslav socialism weakened – people were visiting 'monasteries as monasteries', as spiritual centres, not as 'museums' (24). By contrast, in 2021, a nun suggested to me that the reverse trend was under way. She had been at her monastery for fifteen years. In the first five she estimated that many had come seeking spiritual advice, often concerning financial problems. However, in the last ten years she noted that people primarily visit as 'tourists'. They want 'a nice day' – a trip to nature where the children can be outdoors, somewhere pleasant to drink coffee, and then a monastery where they can call in to 'light candles'. From an anthropological perspective, the point is that monasteries make both the touristic day trip and the lighting of candles (whatever the meaning attached to it) *possible*. Anja's uncertainty about her reasons for monastery visits is pertinent – perhaps her motivations are both the 'architecture' and 'faith' at once. Monasteries become part of the fabric of everyday life, percolating into leisure time, affording both recreational and spiritual sensations.

Monasteries retain significance for people who are adamant that the spiritual dimension is not important for them. Milica is a primary school teacher in her mid-thirties who got married at Žiča monastery a few years before we met. She explained that although she respected Žiča's spiritual significance in historical terms, that spirituality was not something which touched her personally.

> When I say Žiča, I'm not speaking about it as a religious temple (*verski hram*), I'm not talking about it as a place where we go because of our religious practice. But I'm speaking about it as a cultural-historical monument (*spomenik*). It's an exceptional place. It's a pillar, a base of Serbian spirituality. . . . Our culture derives from there. It is part of our holy tradition. . . . And that's why it's important for me. Culturally, historically, nationally – however you say. And less as a religious building.

Simply put, as an ancient place, Žiča allows Milica to situate herself as a Serbian person, with a particular national history of which she seemed to be proud.

For those who engage with liturgical practice regularly, Milica's view is extremely problematic. As mentioned above, a recurrent criticism made by churchgoing Orthodox is that many Serbs do not respect monasteries as 'holy' places. Churchgoers draw distinctions between those who are 'in the Church' and those (the majority) who assert a nominal Orthodox identity. In a conversation about this distinction, one woman in her sixties noted, disdainfully, that 'They [i.e. non-churchgoers] say that monasteries are our *historical* monuments'. That is, 'they' fail to recognise their *spiritual* dimension.

A striking example came when I participated (as an extra) in the filming of a historical drama series which was shot at some of the monasteries surrounding Kraljevo. My fellow extras (who were closely involved in parish liturgical life) were disturbed by what they saw

as the disrespectful attitude shown by the production company towards the monastic contexts. Upon entering the monastery churches to shoot scenes, my interlocutors would cross themselves, making disparaging remarks about the people who they felt failed to display adequate reverence. As one man put it: 'This is not a [film] studio, it's a holy site'. But, for many Serbs, monasteries are primarily places of cultural and historical interest, touristic destinations – and, sometimes, stellar locations for shooting films.

The relationship between the Serbian Church and cultural preservation bodies has also not always been straightforward (see Klekot n.d.). On the one hand, professionals interested in preservation make arguments in a universal discourse of 'culture' and 'heritage'. On the other, the church has framed its interests in soteriological terms, wherein 'culture' (in the sense of arts and entertainment) is an obstacle to salvific ends. Informally, I heard about tensions where monastic communities were willing to paint over frescoes that the cultural heritage experts would preserve. However, if such friction occurs, it is precisely because monasteries as historical and spiritual sites are deeply meaningful to a range of powerful actors. As Klekot (n.d.) rightly notes, both the cultural professionals and the Church are concerned with the construction of national identity. The importance of monasteries in recursively generating ideas about Serbdom becomes especially clear when people feel that those same monasteries are threatened.

The destruction of monastic infrastructure

In March 2016, as part of the construction of a new reservoir to serve the town of Valjevo, the medieval monastery of the Saint Archangel Michael was submerged. Striking photographs of the church tower rising out of the water circulated widely and the decision provoked considerable outcry. In response, protest marches were organised, including the establishment of a permanent stand outside the Serbian government buildings in central Belgrade. On a wet autumnal evening in 2017 I spoke with two of the women at the stand. In their view, the submersion of the church was nothing short of a methodical government 'plan' to destroy one holy shrine (*svetinja*) per year. It was part of a concerted effort to destroy Serbian historical consciousness and replace it with a new 'technological' one. Such voices are hardly representative, but what is noteworthy is how the destruction of *one* monastery was linked to the potential destruction of the *entire* network. For those women, this was not merely an attack on a single historical monument – they placed it in relation to the others which would inevitably follow.

In contemporary Serbia, ideas about the destruction of Orthodox property recur frequently. A Serbian-English publication (Mileusnić 1997), on sale at the Serbian Orthodox Museum in Belgrade, is provocatively entitled *Spiritual Genocide*. In the words of its title page, it is 'A survey of destroyed, damaged and desecrated churches, monasteries and other church buildings during the war 1991–1995'. It documents the damage done to Serbian ecclesiastical property in Croatia and Bosnia during Yugoslavia's violent collapse. The book – filled with images of mined and torched ecclesiastical edifices, with dates and descriptions – states that the destruction of Serbian Orthodox property and iconography during the wars amounts to 'a genocide of art and spirit against an entire nation, its culture and heritage' (9). Given the recursivity between the two, attacks on monasteries are read as attacks on Serbdom as a whole. As Christina Schwenkel (2018) has argued, following Michael Taussig, seeking to destroy an icon is to effectively 'enhance its

vitality', to make it more 'potent' and 'resistant' than before (104). In this instance, perceived destructive intent does not only enhance the vitality of the singular icon, but also the whole network of which the icon is part. Damage to a segment reveals the importance of the whole.

The question of monastic heritage is especially sensitive when it comes to Kosovo. Serbia sees Kosovo as the cradle of its civilisation, the spiritual heartland of its medieval kingdom, and an integral part of its territory (for detail, see Ejdus and Subotić 2014). Those in church circles refer to 'Kosovo and Metohija', not just 'Kosovo'. Metohija – which derives from the Greek for 'monastic estates' – refers to the southwestern part of the region, much of which was under the control of Serbian monasteries during the Middle Ages (see also 169). Thus, monastic heritage is presented as proof of Serbia's territorial claim. Demographically speaking, ethnic Albanians have long been the majority in Kosovo, and the 1999 war resulted in Belgrade effectively losing its control. In 2004, serious inter-ethnic violence flared up between Serbs and Albanians, resulting in the widespread destruction of Serbian Church property. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence – a declaration that Serbia has yet to formally recognise.

The practice of visiting monasteries in Kosovo simultaneously reveals Serbia's loss of control, but also how monasteries function as infrastructure in a practical sense. In Kraljevo and its environs people freely go to monasteries as and when they please. However, given the political situation, group trips to monasteries in Kosovo are not so simple, and require more regulation and planning. In such instances, monastic infrastructure affords particular journeys at particular times.

Take, for example, a coach trip to the monastery of Visoki Dečani on 24 November 2017 for the feast day of its founder, Saint Stefan Dečanski. Participants had booked their places on the coach in advance, over the phone, from an organisation that had been coordinating such trips since the 1990s. The coach left not long after midnight. Once everybody was seated, the man coordinating the trip took a microphone and told the passengers in frank terms that nationalistic provocations were strictly forbidden. That is, once in Kosovo, the waving of Serbian flags and making nationalist signs were off limits. The coach drove through the night and stopped in the Serb dominated district of Kosovska Mitrovica, in North Kosovo. Following standard protocol for such trips, we disembarked from the Belgrade-registered coach, boarded a different one with Kosovar number plates, then proceeded to drive directly to Dečani. The coach crawled up to the main gates of the monastery, past the roadblocks and the check points of the NATO-led KFOR (Kosovo Force) troops that protect the site. The passengers descended and entered the monastery compound. People lit candles, crowded into the church for the Divine Liturgy, and later consumed the food and homemade wine that was distributed outside in the crisp December sun. After a few hours, everybody boarded the coach again, which drove north for about 30 minutes to the Peć Patriarchate. The group spent an hour admiring the architecture of the monastery complex and taking photographs. Then, the coach drove without stopping back to Kosovska Mitrovica where, after a brief pause for coffee, we changed coaches and continued back to Kraljevo.

Despite the stern warning of the coordinator, on this trip, everything went smoothly. There were no incidents, none of the participants felt moved to provoke, and nobody threw stones at the coach. But it was blatantly clear that monastery compounds were the only places we could go, and the sole reason for our trip. We drove around a network of

monasteries, those specific points on the map where it was deemed relevant and safe for Serbs. Despite Serbian claims to Kosovo in its entirety, it was only monastic infrastructure which afforded travel around that space on that day.

Notwithstanding the hard truths of geopolitics, monasteries allow people to make powerful and symbolic territorial claims. When Kosovo considered applying for UNESCO membership in 2017 (having failed in its 2015 bid) there was outrage in Serbia at the idea that 'Serbian' historic sites could be transformed into 'Kosovar' heritage. An expensive, illustrated volume – widely circulated as an electronic 'Flip Book' – is entitled: *The Christian Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija: The historical and spiritual heartland of the Serbian people*. The book (at just over 1000 pages) features contributions from historians, theologians and art historians. In his introduction, Bishop Maxim is crystal clear: 'the monuments and objects of material and spiritual culture in Kosovo and Metohija constitute an indisputable 700-year old proof of the Serbs' rightful ownership of the sacred land' (2016, 16).

There is, of course, a mismatch between medieval material heritage and the demographic and political reality of contemporary Kosovo, where Serbs are the ethnic minority. The introduction to the 'All Serbian monasteries guidebook' laments that today monasteries are sometimes 'the only lamps (*svetiljke*) left in the territories where we have disappeared as a people' (Radovanović et al. 2014). However, in the explicitly nationalist view, monastic buildings outweigh demographics. The anthropologist Ivan Čolović (2002, 27) cites the poet Matija Bečković: 'There is so much blood and so many Serbian shrines there that it will still be Serbian even if not a single Serb remains there'.

The political scientists Filip Ejdus and Jelena Subotić (2014) articulate an interesting argument about Serbia's political relationship to Kosovo. In a practical, administrative sense, Serbia has lost control of the territory and recognised the authority of the Kosovar government (177). As such, Serbia's policy is not to defend 'physical security' but rather to defend the population's '*ontological* security' by controlling a 'religiously infused master-narrative' (160, my emphasis). Serbia's 'strategy of governance' is through the 'sacralization of Kosovo' (161). The religious infrastructure of monasteries is one way of sustaining this 'ontological security'. Serbia has effectively ceded power to the infrastructure of the Kosovar state, but monasteries are a means by which people imagine a different symbolic geography, one where sacred Kosovo remains integral to Serbia. Despite the material realities of border posts, in the Serbian Orthodox imaginary, the monasteries in Kosovo are not in a different country.

Mapping practices help to reify such political imaginings (see Navaro-Yashin 2012). The 'Serbian Monasteries Map' – like others produced in Serbia – indicates the border between Serbia and Kosovo as *regional*, not international. In this way, the monasteries of, say, Visoki Dečani and Gračanica are merely a continuation of the network. Religious infrastructures are not necessarily contiguous with the internationally demarcated borders of the nation state; they can stretch beyond them (see also Heck 2016). Monasteries can symbolically undermine administrative boundaries.

Conclusion

In one conversation during my doctoral fieldwork, a monk emphasised the role of monasteries in the 'Christianisation' of medieval Serbia. He advised that my PhD thesis should 'absolutely include a chapter on monasticism'. As it turned out, the thesis which

emerged from that initial period of research, did not include such a chapter. My oversight is revealing and effectively reinforces the overall claim of this contribution. Visits to monasteries – and references to monasteries and monastics – are such recurring aspects of Orthodox life that I did not initially delineate 'monasteries' as a discrete area of analysis. Monasteries were *infra*-structure in the pure etymological sense – something concealed 'beneath' that which is immediately visible. Their ubiquity as a religious infrastructure sustaining Serbian Orthodox life rendered them inconspicuous.

Monasteries are infrastructurally effective because they stimulate and sustain 'a range of sensibilities' (Schwenkel 2018, 105) and contain those divergent views and sensibilities within a broad sense of belonging to a shared Serbian Orthodox cultural tradition. Depending on context, monasteries help different people to formulate (sometimes seemingly contradictory) ideas about ethnicity, history, territory, architecture, and spirituality. They are places of powerful relics and renowned spiritual fathers, sites of miracles and strong feelings. They are places at which the less liturgically-inclined express their spirituality, but also where some people seek out extended monastic liturgies, prayers, and lengthy vigils. Looked at anthropologically, monasteries as religious infrastructure do not enforce a singular way of being 'Orthodox', but rather encompass and subsume local level debates and divergences about what practising faith in Serbia is all about. Monasteries sit in recursive relationship with broader, sometimes secularised, notions of Serbdom in society at large. Indeed, monasteries and ideas about the Serbian collective self are so tightly intertwined that, when part of the monastic network is threatened, people can construe it as an existential threat to the Serbs as a whole.

The Serbian case pushes us to speculate about what is at stake in this collection's guiding concept of 'religious infrastructure'. That monasteries perform infrastructural work would seem to be beyond doubt. The critical question is more about the preceding adjective than the noun. To what extent are monasteries specifically '*religious* infrastructure'? Of course, at one level, monasteries create spaces and structures for activities which would be commonly recognised as 'religious' – praying, censing, bowing, genuflecting, confessing. And they help some people to define what 'Orthodox faith' actually is. But if infrastructures are 'recursive' (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017, 11–12; Larkin 2013, 330), the question becomes about the wider social forms with which monasteries are in formative, ever shaping dialogue. Monasteries impact social life in ways that stretch beyond facilitating fervent, embodied piety. Not only can they be marshalled rhetorically by those who are indifferent to the institutional Church and who resist identifying in doctrinal terms, so too they can be used, by parishioners and politicians, to make broad claims about nationality and territory. Monasteries are a reminder of the near impossibility of disentangling the 'ethnic' from the 'confessional' in this context – and thus the difficulty of disembedding the 'religious' from other aspects of social life (see also Kirby, in this collection). Can the extensive infrastructural work undertaken by monasteries be delimited as 'religious'?

The issue has to do with how much we are willing to subsume under the conceptual rubric of 'religion'. If we take 'religion' as significantly more than a connection with the divine, but as broadly indicating people's sense of belonging to a social whole, then 'religious infrastructure' seems to fit. What is clear is that in ways that are simultaneously inconspicuous and flagrant, monasteries provide an infrastructure that is holistic – framing, containing, and compounding ethnic and confessional belonging.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms and, in some cases, biographical details have been changed slightly to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors. Some toponyms have also been changed for the same reason. Participants gave their consent to be part of this research. My research was conducted under the ethics guidelines of the University of Cambridge and then under UKRI Grant MR/S031669/1.
2. This contribution focuses on Orthodox monasteries in Serbia, but monasteries as 'religious infrastructure' is not a uniquely Serbian phenomenon.
3. The book explores the 'belief of the Serbs' and the holy sites from which the 'Serbian people' have historically drawn solace. Monasteries, relics and holy springs are presented as part of a bounded, national faith tradition.
4. See the Pew Research Center report on 'Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe', especially the section on 'religious commitment and practices': https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-commitment-and-practices/ (accessed June 2023).
5. For ethnographic accounts of monastic spirituality and training see (Hämmerli 2014); (Naumescu 2012); (Paganopoulos 2012). For extended discussions of Serbian Orthodox monasticism specifically, see (Bakić-Hayden 2003, 2021); (Forbess 2015).
6. For 18 months between 2016 and 2018, and then on shorter subsequent trips in 2021 and 2022.
7. Scholars have generally used the term 'religious infrastructure' to describe emergent, newly built networks of facilities and buildings that have shaped religious subjects in a way that was different than before (Heck 2016). 'Christian infrastructure' has also been described a desired *future* prospect (Handman 2017).

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