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THE ROLE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN ANTI-ALBANIAN POLICIES IN KOSOVA

The division of the single Christian Church in 1054 into the Orthodox Church of the East and the Roman Catholic Church of the West was mirrored by a corresponding division within the territories of the Albanians, who were under the influence of our Greek and Slav neighbours on one hand, and of Rome and Venice on the other. Western influence was exerted by the Archdiocese of Tivar, formed by Pope Gregory VII in 1077, which included the dioceses of Shkodër, Ulqin, Drisht, Shas, and Shurdhah. In Kosova, especially in its eastern part, most Albanians - were Orthodox, under the administration of the Patriarchate of Peje, and with mixed Albanian Slav personal names, or Orthodox Slav and occasionally Byzantine names¹. In the course of time, the Orthodox Church divided into several national churches corresponding to the region's states or peoples. Thus, the Serbian Orthodox Church acquired an independent identity in the 13th century, becoming closely tied to the power of the state and a strong supporter of state policies. The autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church was founded by Sava Nemanjic, whom the church declared a saint. However, this church displayed narrow-mindedness and belligerence from the very start, even harassing Orthodox clergy if they were not Serbs. Saint Sava himself dismissed the bishop of Prizren and appointed a Serb in his place. This intolerance was condemned by the archbishop of Oher as an act contrary to Christian morality².

The Orthodox Church thus became national church, while the Catholic Church did not take this path but remained international and based on universal principles, recognizing the Pope of Rome as its supreme authority. The Serbian Orthodox Church has been and remains a powerful factor not only for achieving national unification and raising the national awareness of the Serbs but also unified with the Serbian people all those non-Serbian people living in the mediaeval Serbian kingdom³. In other words, the church was pressed into the service of Serbian expansion in the Balkans, especially in Albania, and thus became an instrument of Serbian state policy⁴. The Law Code of Tsar Dusan provided harsh punishments for those embracing "the heretical faith", i.e. Catholicism. Catholic priests were persecuted and Catholic churches were seized and turned into Serbian Orthodox churches⁵.

The Serbian state and church assimilated Albanians indifferent ways, besides outright terror and violence, the church also used the holy sacraments in order to accomplish its diabolical mission. It gave Slavic names to Albanian infants, and imposed wedding ceremonies and liturgies in the Slavic language. Under such pressure from the Orthodox Church, many Albanian families in Kosova, Macedonia, and Montenegro were Slavicized. In Montenegro, entire tribes such as the Kuc, Bjelopavliq, Palabardha, Piprraj, and Vasovic tribes were assimilated. The process of assimilation, with Albanians becoming Slavicized, continues even today⁶. According to historical sources, the Catholic faith dominated in the independent Dioclaea (Montenegro) of the 11th-12th centuries, while the Nemanjic dynasty imposed Serbian rule and the

Orthodox faith on the population of this area. Since the state and religion in the Middle Ages operated together and had a common meaning, the Orthodox faith also acquired the meaning of allegiance to the Serbian nation; those who were Orthodox at the same time took themselves to be Serbs. Thus, as the Serbian state expanded, so did the Orthodox Church and a sense of Serbian identity. However, there were so many Catholic Albanians in Serbia that missionary reports sent to the Pope in the 17th century state that "Albanians make up the core of the Catholics in Serbia, to the extent that people call the Catholic faith *la fide Albanese*"⁷. In 1332, the French friar Borchard visited what was then Serbia, and in his report sent to the king of France said that Raska (Serbia) was a land where Catholics were subjected to insults and violence. He suggested that the king should attack Serbia, which would not be difficult, because he would have the support of the two Catholic peoples living there, the "Albanians and the Latins". "These peoples, both the Latins and the Albanians, are harshly oppressed in cruel and intolerable servitude by their excessively hateful and disgusting Slav overlords". Some historians believe that this report was written by Guljem Adami, archbishop of Tivar. It stresses that the Albanian feudal lords would play the main role in this war on Serbia, and that they could "call on 15 000 horsemen, strong men, brave, and good warriors"⁸.

In order to erase every trace of Catholicism in the Albanian territories, the Serbian Orthodox Church even cast its eyes on Catholic churches and monasteries, which it seized by force. Thus, a large number of ancient, once-Catholic churches on the Adriatic coast, on the shores of Lake Shkoder, in Kosova, and in Macedonia are today Serbian Orthodox. What is more, Serbian expansionist policy has, in the course of history and still today, used these churches "as an historical argument to justify the invasion of foreign soil, and particularly Albanian territories in Kosova. However, it is known that the Serbs began to descend into Kosova from the state of Raska for the first time toward the end of the 12th century, after the war against Byzantium of 1189, while these religious monuments were built long before the arrival of the Serbs in this area, which had always been inhabited by Albanians, but was governed by Byzantium until 1180, when emperor Manuel Komneni died"⁹.

The Serbian overlords, mainly the Nemanjic dynasty, enlarged or repaired some of these ancient monasteries, but built very few totally new ones. This is admitted by the well-known historian Konstantin Jirecek, who has written the best history of the Serbian people so far, and who was a long-standing friend of the Serbs. He explicitly states that "King Stefan Uros II Milutin and his brother Stefan Dragutin rebuilt [repaired, M.K.] the monastery of Banjska between Raska and the Plain of Kosova. The same king restored the Monastery of Our Blessed Lady at Gracanice, at the centre of the diocese of Lipjan". In Macedonia too, the Nemanjic dynasty restored many monasteries from Byzantine times (Nagoricani near Tetove, at Gostivar, Prilep, etc)¹⁰. However, the Serbs considered all such monasteries as monumental works of the mediaeval Nemanjic dynasty, thus appropriating to themselves the works of others. The Serbian historian Pero Slijepcevic states this bluntly: "It has been proved that only a small number of the many old Serbian monasteries were really founded by the Serb who lent his name to the church... The Serbs had no tradition of their own in either building or painting"¹¹. By usurping Catholic churches on the coast, especially in Boke and other areas in modern Montenegro, militant Orthodoxy succeeded in

eliminating the previous Catholic majority¹². Thus the Albanians in these regions were assimilated. However, the Serbian Church and Serbian research also deprive the Montenegrins of their nationality and treat them as a mere Serbian tribe, adherents of the Serbian Orthodox state religion. This policy of church and state persists to the present day¹³.

Faced with such Serbian Orthodox pressure, many Albanian families were forced to abandon their age-old territories in Kosova as early as the Middle Ages and took refuge in the remote mountains of the Highlands; traditions of these forced migrations have been handed down the generations¹⁴.

Major political, economic, and social, but also religious changes took place with the Ottoman invasion of our ethnic territories in the 15th century. During the five centuries of Ottoman servitude, the empire used many methods in order to Islamicize and assimilate the Albanian people¹⁵. Although the larger part of the Albanian people changed from Christianity to the Moslem faith, the Albanians were still not assimilated. An Albanian Moslem remained an Albanian, and even a stubborn enemy of the Turkish occupier. Thus the second forced religious division of the Albanian people took place, imposed that one faith was better than another. Albanians have never been good believers in any religion. Their faith lies in a high traditional morality, not in religious dogmas. Even their clergy have often been without religious knowledge and convictions. Only rarely have religious differences led to quarrels, incited by foreigners. Thanks to national awareness and tribal, family, and local ties, the national ideal has always prevailed over religious allegiances. This is evident from a report written by Benedict Orsini, whom the Pope appointed archbishop of Lezhe in 1621. This foreign-born priest wrote to the Pope that "The Albanian priests have jointly vowed not to accept any archbishop who is not of the Albanian nation"¹⁶. There are similar examples among the Albanian Moslem and Orthodox clergy. As for the professional skills of some of the clergy, we may cite the report of Pjeter Mazreku, archbishop of Tivar, who wrote in 1633 that "In these mountains there are priests who are so ignorant that they are only priests in name"¹⁷. Some Moslem and Orthodox clergy were at an even lower level. This situation among the Albanian clergy also led to wavering among believers and to conversions. The men of our national renaissance were therefore right to consider our people as possessing their national faith before all others.

The Serbian Orthodox Church continued its anti-Albanian activities even under Ottoman rule. Used to serve the state authorities, it servilely scuttled under the protection of the sultan, from whom it obtained sweeping authorities in supervising all the Christians in the ethnic Albanian territories that had once been occupied by Serbia. This was especially the case in Kosova and other northern areas of Albania. Moreover, the Turkish authorities supported the Serbian Church in this matter and burdened the Albanian Catholics with high state taxes, subjecting them to thorough discrimination. Thus the Orthodox Serbs paid 40 groshe tax per family, while Albanian Catholics paid 60 groshe, and moreover paid a special tax on all males over the age of twelve. The Turks punished Albanian Catholics if they bore their religious or national names. This also favored the Serbian Church, by forcing Catholics to convert to Orthodoxy. Many Catholics adopted Moslem names and passed as Moslem in public, while keeping at home the customs and rules of the old religion. These were called laramane or crypto-Catholics¹⁸.

Andreja Bogdani, archbishop of Shkup, wrote to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide on 10 August 1670, complaining that the Albanian Catholics suffered more from the Orthodox Serbs than from the Turks, to the extent that they would finally be compelled to convert to Orthodoxy. The patriarch of Peje had to be given a certain sum of money every year not to compel the Catholics to convert to Orthodoxy, with the help of the Turkish authorities¹⁹. The Serbian Orthodox Church not only compelled Albanian Catholics to change their names and to become Slavicized, but, together with the Serbian state, even Slavicized Albanian place names, especially in areas where it owned property. "It considered everything that had been Orthodox to be Serbian; even the names of villages had to be Serbian without fail"²⁰. The Patriarchate of Peje took one ducat per person from the Catholics, obliged them to marry in the Serbian Church, and took five to ten ducats as a marriage fee²¹. In order to reward the friendly stance of the Turkish authorities to the Orthodox Church, the Serbs joined en masse the Turkish Army that invaded the Banat and southern Hungary in 1551-1552²². The attitude of the Orthodox Church towards the Albanians was also hostile in Toplice in the sancak of Nis, from where hundreds of thousand of Albanians were expelled from the centuries-old homes by military terror in 1877-1878. All their mosques and religious buildings were destroyed.

The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in anti-Albanian policies has been extremely prominent in all periods of history from the 11th century down to the present day. Its role was particularly extreme in the Balkan Wars and during World War I and its aftermath, when the Serbo-Montenegrin Army perpetrated unprecedented genocide against the Albanian people in Kosova, especially in the Plain of Dukagjin in 1913, compelling Albanian families to convert to the Orthodox religion and to become Slavicized. In 1913, 4 000 Albanians in the vicinity of Peje and Gjakove alone, and 8 000 in Plave and Guci, were shot after refusing to renounce their Moslem or Catholic religion and their Albanian nationality²³. Edith Durham, the well-known English writer and journalist and a great friend of the Albanian people, was an eye-witness to the tragedy of the Albanian people in those years. "In 1913", she wrote, "the Serbs stabbed with their bayonets the women and children of Luma... They forced the Moslems to choose between baptism and death by shooting. They tore off the women's veils and sent them to church to be baptized together with their children. "We will slavice this people within one generation", they said. No Turk ever behaved worse with the Armenians than did these two Serbian peoples with the Albanians in the same of the Holy Orthodox Church... From Gjakove there came news that at Palicin they had stabbed to death with a bayonet a brave Franciscan, whom I had met in 1908, because he had refused to make the sign of the cross in the Orthodox manner... In Montenegro, four Montenegrin batallions continued to wage terror. The Moslems were offered the choice between baptism and death... The men were slaughtered, while their wives' veils or kerchiefs were torn away and they were baptized, and in some cases also raped"²⁴. Serbian and Montenegrin priests also took an active part in these massacres, holding a cross in one hand and a Karadak revolver in the other. Despite this, the Albanians in Kosova have guarded and protected several famous mediaeval Orthodox churches, so that they remain untouched even today, solely thanks to the care the Albanians have shown toward them²⁵.

The Serbian-Orthodox Church remains today in the service of anti-Albanian

policies, identifying itself totally with the Serbian occupation regime in Kosova. It even plans to build many churches in the towns and villages of Kosova in order to establish the Serbian identity of these areas. The Orthodox Church has usurped land belonging to the university in the centre of Prishtina and has started building on it the largest church in the Balkans.

Thus it exerts pressure on the Albanians to leave Kosova. These churches are not being built for the needs of Orthodox believers or for the glory of God but to suit the requirements of expansionist, chauvinist, and anti-Albanian Serbian policies and to the glory of the shortsighted leaders of these policies.

From what has been presented here, it is evident that the Serbian Orthodox Church is not a national but a nationalist church and is a political organization rather than a religious institution that has consistently been in the service of the idea of Greater Serbia and of imperial policies, thus violating the very principles of religious morality regarding respect for the rights of others.

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