Video footage of a September 2023 armed incident in Kosovo shows Serbian paramilitaries sheltering in a Banjska monastery, before abandoning to Serbia.[1] This latest escalation of violence in Kosovo, which left one Kosovar policeman and three Serbian paramilitaries dead, again brought into focus the role the Serbian Orthodox Church plays in stirring and sustaining the flame of Serbian nationalism. Its role in the 1990s wars of Yugoslav succession was reasonably criticized because of its silence about atrocities committed in the name of faith or, in more extreme cases, of its direct support of and participation in (para)military operations in Bosnia.[2] Moreover, the church was often perceived as the chief defender of the Serbian identity, which, as conservatives claim, had been under attack, first by irreligious communism and, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, by the forces broadly labeled as “globalism,” which include such issues as modern parenting, school programs, and LGBTQ rights.[3] To fend off these secular onslaughts, many in the church and among its lay supporters called for the return to svetosavlje (the cult of Saint Sava) as a safeguard against evils of modernity.[4]

“In this sense, the story repeated itself, and svetosavlje of the twenty-first century is as much a product of its political context as it had been in the 1930s,” argues Maria Falina in her book Religion and Politics in Interwar Yugoslavia (p. 149). These latest efforts to confront the challenges of modern times, she shows, are part and parcel of a larger history of the Serbian Orthodox Church’s attempts to address the problems of modernity. As Falina demonstrates in her timely book, the Serbian Orthodox Church was not “prone to anti-modernism,” as its recent wading into the murky waters of Serbian “culture wars” suggests. Rather, Falina convincingly shows, the church’s connection with Serbian nationalism and “engagement with modernity” were more ambiguous and complex than previously thought (p. 3).
The ambivalence in Orthodox churches' relations with the West is not a new topic. Other scholars have pointed out that Western ideas “demanded responses from ... Orthodox Churches and clergy.”[5] As Falina shows in her book, this issue gained extreme urgency for the Serbian Orthodox Church during the tumultuous interwar years. The birth pangs of the new South Slav state—the product of modernity in itself, envisioned as a supra-national and supra-religious state—and the turbulence of political, social, and cultural life in post-World War I Europe demanded answers from the Serbian Orthodox Church. Serbian clergy's distaste for secularization and individualism found its expression in the critique of the West, often seen as the source of these dangerous tendencies.

“This critique often took the form of criticism of the generalized ‘West’ or Europe, and—within Yugoslavia—of the Catholic areas, which were historically associated with the Habsburg monarchy and ‘Europe’” (p. 82).

One of the problems was the Yugoslav state's uncertain position toward religious communities, even if, in Falina's words, the kingdom was “primarily a Christian state” (p. 86). Even if the state did not promote secularization, it remained suspicious toward religious communities and public use of religion. In his pathbreaking work on Yugoslavia's interwar history, Christian Axboe Nielsen shows that the government, particularly after the establishment of the dictatorial January Sixth Regime in 1929, was particularly sensitive toward the mixing of religion and politics and actively worked on suppression of political organizations with strong religious overtones like the Yugoslav Muslim Organization.[6] Yet religious expressions were allowed only under the state's watchful eye, confirming what Falina describes as “the ambivalent character of the state's policies toward religious communities” (p. 85).

The Serbian Orthodox Church responded to this ambivalence by trying to carve a space for itself that would allow it to act autonomously without state interference, and yet to remain present in the public space. The outcome of the Russian Civil War added a new sense of urgency to this task. First, the Bolshevik victory led to a “self-imposed burden of responsibility” of protecting East Orthodox Christianity. Second, the influx of Russian religious scholars led to the “intellectual evolution” of the Serbian Orthodox Church toward more conservative positions (p. 88). This shift to the right was a transnational phenomenon in the East Orthodox world, where exchanges of ideas and concepts were common. In particular, Falina shows, teachings of Greek, Russian, Bulgarian, and Romanian theologians, especially those who sought separation from Western theology, found a receptive audience among the ranks of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

This increasingly anti-Western stance complicated the Serbian Orthodox Church's relationship with other religious communities in Yugoslavia, specifically its main rival, the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the state's effort to encourage interreligious cooperation, Serbian clergy recognized the Catholic Church as its “arch-rival” (p. 91). The main organ of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Glasnik, compared the baleful influence of the Croatian Roman Catholics to that of Bolshevism—“by products of a-religious liberalism” (p. 92). Moreover, its alleged association with Croatian nationalism further contributed to this mistrust.

Ironically, by the mid-1930s, the Serbian Orthodox Church itself assumed a firmly nationalist position by “fusing” Serbian nationalism and Eastern Orthodoxy in the form of svetosavlje. A number of external factors led to this “political Orthodoxy,” including the death of King Alexander in 1934 and the subsequent easing of restrictions that had tightly regulated political activities (pp. 101-2).

Falina dedicates considerable attention to svetosavlje. She calls it “one of the most curious responses to the challenges of modernity as
presented by the Yugoslav state, ideology of Yugoslavism and secularization” (p. 123). Falina argues that the commemoration of the 700th anniversary of the death of Saint Sava in 1935 (“Year of Saint Sava”) signaled the Serbian Orthodox Church’s departure from the Yugoslav project. The same year, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović defined svetosavlje as the symbiotic relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian nation. In Velimirović’s original thinking, the Serbian Orthodox Church, established by Saint Sava, provided the “true and only possible foundation for the Serbian national culture and the Serbian nation.” In this view, the Serbian nationality was inseparable from Orthodoxy. In one of the most controversial statements, Velimirović praised Adolf Hitler who “saw that nationalism without faith is an anomaly” (p. 125).

Other Serbian theologians further developed the ideology of svetosavlje, reinforcing the idea of religious nationalism. Any attempt to “secularize” Saint Sava by emphasizing his political and diplomatic accomplishment at the expense of his spirituality was harshly criticized by Velimirović’s followers. The cult of Saint Sava culminated in public religious rituals in 1939, which further cemented sacralization of the Serbian nation. The occasions were the 550th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle and the laying of the foundation of the Cathedral of St. Sava in Belgrade.[7] Falina sees the ideology of svetosavlje and public ceremonies complementing it as the Orthodox Church’s need to “pursue a public campaign in the face of the crisis of modernity” and “the response to secular Yugoslav nationalism” (p. 132). This politicization of religion pitted the Serbian Orthodox Church against the Yugoslav state in the late 1930s.

The conflict between the church and the state escalated during the so-called Concordat crisis. The agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, finalized in 1935/6 under the government of Milan Stojadinović, caused outrage in the ranks of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Varnava (Rosić) sent a letter to Stojadinović voicing his discontent, which the prime minister ignored. In 1937, the ratification discussion in the Yugoslav Parliament was met with liturgy on the streets of Belgrade that quickly turned violent (“the Bloody Liturgy”). The same day when Parliament voted in favor of the agreement, Patriarch Varnava died, sparking rumors that he was poisoned by the government. Under pressure, the government had to withdraw from the Concordat, and in early 1939 the Stojadinović government fell.

This intertwining of the history of ideas and political history is one of the main strengths of this book. Even if the book is based on limited archival resources—the archive of the Patriarchate is notoriously inaccessible to researchers—Falina’s command of the existing literature and close readings of church publications offsets these archival gaps. Scholars of the interwar Balkans will find it an invaluable resource. Moreover, those interested in the role of the church in modern Serbia will gain important insights from her book. Falina argues that svetosavlje reemerged in the late 1980s and that the “popularity of svetosavlje in Serbia had been growing since” (p. 149). One only wishes that she further elaborated this trend.

Notes


[3]. Miloš Jovanović, “Homoseksualnost i Srpska pravoslavna crkva: Transformacija odnosa u poslednjih 20 godina” [Homosexuality and the Serbian Orthodox Church: Transformations of relations in the last 20 years], Sociologija 63, no. 3


[7]. Construction of the cathedral continued in the late 1980s with reemergence of Serbian nationalism. Also, Slobodan Milosevic affirmed his leadership role by appearing on Gazimestan during the commemoration ceremony that marked the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle.


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