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Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National – Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850-1914

My study deals with the Nazarenes – the first Protestant Serbs – in South Hungary and Serbia, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the so-called age of modernization and nation-building. It portrays the origins and the spreading of a new religious movement as an indicator of social change among the Serbian people, whose demands and needs the Orthodox Church had failed to meet. Looking at the social, economic, cultural and historical motives of conversions to Nazarenes, I examine the Nazarenes' challenge to the Orthodox Church and the latter's belated response in the form of the so-called re-Orthodoxization (in line with newly invented tradition of Serbian version of Orthodox Christianity – Svetosavlje) and the development of the mass Bogomoljci movement with its implications for the formation of Serbian national identity observed in the changes of the notions of Church, religion and piety. I claim that the appearance and spread of the Nazarenes constituted an important segment in the development of the Serbian national self-identification, which finally (during the interwar period) resulted in a discourse that combined and fused the nation and the Orthodox Church and that closed the long lasting and by historians mostly ignored gap between the Church and the people/nation. These changes are exemplified not only by the most by the obvious use of modern nationalist rhetoric but in the introduction of the vernacular language, lay singing, improving of pastoral activity, Church press, etc.

In view of the fact that there are hitherto only very few studies on folk religiosity among the Serbian people in the nineteenth century and on the psychological effects of the penetration of the modernity into the old peasant patriarchal society I aim at filling this gap by "reading behind" the "contaminated" sources produced by the Nazarenes's adversaries, and by combining the "usual" historical sources with a "history from below". In the absence of autobiographies and testimonies written by Nazarenes I pay special attention to inimical observations written by outsiders and to the analysis of the structural factors of social, political and cultural change since the 1850s (modernization, urbanization, appearance of nationalist ideology, power and legitimacy questions in the Serbian community in relation to the Hungarian and Serbian state). In order to account for the success of Nazarene missionaries among the Serbs my study illuminates the strategies employed by Nazarenes in expanding and maintaining their communities which range from communalism (community administration and networks, regulation of sin, role of women and family, etc) to communal mores and practices (baptism and communion, marriage, funeral rites, everyday life), internal economic organization of the Nazarene communities and their attitude towards economic change and finally the appeal of the Nazarene faith and worship (direct participation in worship, collective singing of hymns in vernacular, distribution of the Bible and religious literature in Serbian vernacular, etc). The Nazarene "folk society" was highly attractive to those who were irritated by the money economy and the transformation of a segmental to a complex society on the one hand and by the pastoral neglect on behalf of the Orthodox Church on the other hand. From this perspective the Nazarenes do not fit into the dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" society. They were a part and result of the modernization process but tried to preserve or reconstruct some elements of (alleged) tradition. The most striking effect of the Nazarene threat as it was perceived by the Orthodox clergy was the development of a spontaneous grass-root religious movement among the Orthodox believers, which attempted to regulate the lives and practices of their members according to their understanding of the Bible, a phenomenon that Catholic and Protestant churches also experienced in the same or a bit earlier period. The movement in question here was the Bogomoljci (God worshippers),

who developed an independent life from the Church, but continued to consider themselves Orthodox. In the interwar period the Bogomoljci came under spiritual guidance of bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, the most outstanding figure in the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the twentieth century who succeeded to introduce nationalism to thousands of mostly peasant believers, which frequently congregated on Bogomoljci open-air meetings. Popular piety and Velimirović's ideology blended in a sort of popular nationalism branded as Svetosavlje in which the identification of nation and religion, of Serbdom and Serbian Orthodox Church was completed.