

## **Tihomir Popovic: 'So there be Lords in ye Land with us even in olden times' The Church, the Serbs, and the Kosovo**

Many Central and Western Europeans apparently believe that today, nationalist mythological thinking in Europe is mainly the part of the Serbs, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) being regarded as partly responsible for this situation: Many believe that the Church is a bulwark of Serbian nationalism, promoting the mythologisation especially of the Kosovo as the birthplace of today's Serbian nation.

This author feels obliged to present a more differentiated view of the facts, with a special emphasis on investigating the way in which the Serbs perceive and deal with their history. There are at least three reasons why the SOC is interested in the Kosovo: One is the large number of Serbian Orthodox places of worship in the region, including the monastery of Pec, the historical and spiritual centre of the Serbian patriarchate. Of special importance in this context, however, is the Kosovo Polje situated close to Pristina, on which a battle took place between an Ottoman and a Christian army in 1389, the former led by Sultan Murat I and the latter by the Serb Lazar Hrebeljanovic. The winners of the battle, in which both army leaders were killed, were the Ottomans who, however, did not immediately take possession of Lazar's principality: Under Lazar's son, the despot Stefan Lazarevic, it even experienced a cultural boom. It was not until seventy years after the battle of the Kosovo that the territory of today's Serbia south of the the rivers Danube and Save passed to the Turks. But how did the events of 1389 turn into a myth? And why do the Serbs still perceive this defeat as the most painful in their history?

Noel Malcolm states that in contemporary Serbian texts about the battle of the Kosovo, 'celebration [is] more important than grieving', but that one should keep in mind that the monks who wrote these texts depended on Stefan, the despot, and, therefore, probably played down the catastrophic dimensions of the battle. Moreover, he argued that many people are not aware that in Orthodox Christian texts, 'celebration' plays a more important role than 'grieving' anyway, the reason for this being that the church thinks along eschatological lines and views things *sub specie aeternitatis* in its own liturgy. Nevertheless, even Stefan revealed his pain in, for example, his *Belgrade Charter*, in which he emphasised that his people had been 'enslaved' by the Ismaelites or, in other words, the Ottomans.

After 1389, the mood in the Kosovo remained divided for a long time. It was not before 1402, when he won the battle of Angora, that Despot Stefan again considered himself the ruler of his country and expanded his dominion. Malcolm is certainly right in saying that at the time, people perceived the outcome of the battle of Kosovo not as the end of the Christian Serbian state but as an extremely painful wound – the wound of regicide which in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century became a political tool, although with other connotations than those prevailing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The battle of 1389 did indeed entail great losses; it may have been the biggest battle the Serbs ever fought on their own ground. It must have moved the hearts of the population – at a time when religion played a decisive role. The memory of this battle was passed on carefully, particularly in the mountain regions that were difficult of access, almost free from the Turkish presence, and dominated by clan organisations that cultivated their own genealogy well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, the historical wound was felt deeply. Today, the event is no longer acute – the pain of the wound, however, remains.

The centralisation of the authorities that took place in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, just as it did during the development of the European nation states, was associated with, among other things, a cultural degradation in the conquered regions. However, there also were differences:

Unlike in Europe's proto-national states, the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire was allowed to keep its faith, church, and culture. What had to be sacrificed was the aristocracy. It may be assumed that the remaining nobility blended with the Christian civil service and gave up their specific culture, the only exception being the clan aristocracy in the mountains of Herzegovina and Montenegro.

When the Ottomans developed their *millet* system, under which the leaders of religious communities also were in political control, ethnic groups gathered around their respective religious communities. To the Christians subordinate to him, a person who had converted to Islam was probably more of a stranger than a religiously and ethnically rootless courtier in western Europe could ever be. Benedikt Curipeschitz, who travelled through Serbia as imperial interpreter in 1531, introduces us to the Serbs' attitude towards life under Ottoman rule. He teaches us that to the Kosovo Serbs, the loss of their Christian dynasties must have come very close to losing their own cultural father.

It goes without saying that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Serbs ruled by the Ottomans gathered around the church, since it was the spiritual and political power that gave them an identity. In a figurative family, the church would be not only the mother but also the father, endowed with political prerogatives which strengthened the unity between the church and the ethnic groups during the Ottoman rule, ingraining at the same time this unity in the consciousness of all Serbs, including those who fled to southern Hungary.

The allegation that it was the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church which introduced the Kosovo myth at the time of the Ottoman Empire and cultivated it to maintain its own supremacy is certainly wrong. The Church did canonise Serbia's prince Lazar who was killed in battle, but given the circumstance that he had sacrificed himself for the cause of the faith, this does not at all appear unusual against the background of contemporary thinking.

The saga of the Kosovo itself probably found its way into the songs of the *guslari*, the Balkan bards, and was passed on to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was written down by Vuk Karadzic, a Serbian language reformer. In his work, he tried to concentrate on the suppressed pain of those who were humiliated by the Ottoman rule. This process of coming to terms with the past experienced a renaissance during the uprisings against the Turks and the formation of a modern Serbian state. Then, the Serbian intelligentsia began to identify itself with the myth. Thus, Jakov Ignatovic in 1874 recommended using the national epic the way it was used at the time of the conquest, i.e. as a spiritual refuge from potential attacks.

Not only Serbia but also the rest of Europe knows this kind of process from the era of nationalism. In Serbia, however, this trend continued even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With an incident of 1908 in mind, in which the bard appears in the form of a schoolteacher, the poet Vinaver related in 1951 an epic about a hero tortured by the Turks, playing the part not of an enlightener but a mystagogue. According to Vinaver, the urban intellectual of his time tried to play the role of the lost father of the nation played by the bard and his battle cries throughout the centuries of statelessness: The transition from the bard to the urban intellectual in Serbia is fluent.

Ignatovic and Vinaver agreed on another point: Neither in the 19<sup>th</sup> nor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are there any signs that the church might be the alleged bulwark of nationalist thinking. Nationalism fed on other sources: The disputes among church members that revolved around Vuk Karadzic, the 'father of Serbian culture' and grandfather of later Serbian nationalist thinkers, had their reasons. His quarrels with church authorities are still proverbial. In the centre of Karadzic's thinking you find the people and not the church. The SOC may not be accused of

being the author of Serbian nationalist tendencies – that much is clear.

There certainly are voices in the Serbian Orthodox Church that preach romantic nationalism instead of the gospel – the voices of the *guslari* bards. More representative of the church itself are those voices that criticise romantic nationalism within the Serbian culture – such as the vicar general, Milan Pejic, as well as the archpriest and professor at the theological faculty in Belgrade, Radovan Bigovic.

Unfortunately, these voices are often ignored in the West. Thus, even the meeting between the ethnic Albanian president of the Kosovo and bishop Teodosije of Liplijan at the Decani Monastery at Easter 2005, a milestone of Serbian-Albanian reconciliation, was not covered by the media to the same extent as the blessing of an armed force that was partly responsible for the killings in Srebrenica by the hand of a priest who was a highly controversial figure anyway.

The West wants to talk with an enlightened Serbian Orthodox Church but it does not listen when the Church talks to it. Such an attitude is hardly helpful in the abolition of a traditional enemy image. However, the Serbs are also called upon to overcome their problems. They are called upon to stop looking for lost fathers that might free them from foreign rule or secure for them a place in today's world. And, finally, they are called upon to look their own history straight in the eye and to deal with it honestly at long last.