



The Freedom from Passions and the Freedom for All:

St Nicholai Velimirović on Democracy^{*}

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyse the sermons and writings of the bishop and recently canonized saint of the Serbian Orthodox Church Nicholai Velimirović in regard to democracy. Due to his critique of Europe for abandoning Christianity as its centre of civilization, and slipping into the barbarity of the two world wars, some scholars maintained that Velimirović condemns European democracy. The analysis is focused on two periods from Velimirović's life, the first one that comprises the period of his studies abroad, the WWI and interwar period, and the second one which includes the period of the WWII and Velimirović's subsequent emigration in the USA.

Key words: Orthodox Church, democracy, freedom, monasticism, Europe.

Many scholars, as well as politicians today perceive the Orthodox Church as the main obstacle for consolidating the democracy in the traditionally Orthodox countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia in the Balkans, as well as in Russia. However, the problem is not the role that Orthodox Church has

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played in the past by legitimizing various autocratic rules, because other churches also at a certain moment in history raised their voices against democratization and modernization, e.g. the Roman-Catholic Church. The spirit of catholicity (*sobornost*) of the Orthodox Church, usually interpreted as single-mindedness, is perceived as the main hindrance to the plurality of democratic values and positions.¹

The Orthodox Church encountered modern democracy during the nineteenth century when the democratic ideas of French Revolution and American Republicanism have spread among intellectuals and political actors in traditionally Orthodox environments.² Most of the Balkan Orthodox people were at the beginning of the nineteenth century under the rule of two non-Orthodox empires, the Muslim-dominated Ottoman Empire and the Roman-Catholic Habsburg Empire. In both empires the functioning of the Orthodox Church was regulated by law, which entrusted to one ecclesial centre jurisdiction over all Orthodox believers in the empire. The Greek Constantinopolitan Patriarchate exercised the role of the supreme spiritual, but also legal authority for the Orthodox people in the Ottoman Empire. In the Habsburg Empire, this role was assigned to the Serbian Metropolitanate, later elevated to the Serbian Patriarchate of Karlovci. The Orthodox hierarchs in Ottoman and Austrian Empire did not only supervise their Orthodox subjects, but also safeguarded the political order, which assumes that the Sultan's and the Kaiser's power is of divine origin. In the national emancipation from the foreign rule, and the ecclesial emancipation from patriarchal hegemony, the Orthodox lay-people and lower clergy employed the narratives of modernization and national liberation.³ For example, on a

¹ Radovan Bigović, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century* (Belgrade: Foundation Konrad Adenauer — Christian Cultural Center 2013), 70.

² Cyril Hovorun, *Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles on Church Awareness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 21.

³ Idek K. Yosmaoglu, "From Exoticism to Historicism: The Legacy of Empire and the Pains of Nation-Making in the Balkans," in *Beyond Mosque, Church, and*

number of Serbian church councils of the second half of the nineteenth century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in spite of the opposition of conservative political and ecclesial structures, Serbian liberals managed to introduce some democratic practices in the Patriarchate of Karlovci.⁴ By the decision of the Annunciation Council from 1861 and of the subsequent state law from 1869, the rights of the bishops in the council of the Serbian Patriarchate were limited and became equal to the rights of the laymen.⁵ In the independent Serbia after the Congress of Berlin (1879), the clergy embraced modernization and democratization in order to keep pace with their secular counterparts, and even entered the Serbian political arena being members of parties and national parliament. Their democratic ideals are usually identified with the Serbian national goals, and their notion of democracy was reduced to the rule of majority, with no sensitivity for individual and minority rights.⁶

The generation of Serbian church intellectuals raised and educated at the end of the nineteenth century adopted nationalism, liberalism and anti-clericalism as core values of both the Church and the society.⁷ One of these intellectuals was a bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church Nicholai Velimirović (1881–1956). Nationalism, liberalism and anti-clericalism, as well as democracy are ideas present in his voluminous work. However, his ecclesiology, as well as his overall thought, is

State: Alternative Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans, ed. Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashimova (Budapest: Central European Press, 2016), 57–79: 64.

⁴ Thomas Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1992), 24–34.

⁵ Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur*, 74.

⁶ Dubravka Stojanović, *Srbija i Demokratija 1903–1914: istorijska studija o 'zlatnom dobu srpske demokratije'* (*Serbia and Democracy 1903–1914: A Historical Study on the 'Golden Age of Serbian Democracy'*) (Beograd: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2003), 116–117.

⁷ Klaus Buchenau, "Orthodox Values and Modern Necessities: Serbian Orthodox Clergy and Laypeople on Democracy, Human Rights, Transition, and Globalization", in *Civic and Uncivic Values. Serbia in the Post-Milošević Era*, ed. Ola Listhaug, Sabrina P. Ramet, and Dragana Dulić (Budapest — New York: Central European Press, 2011), 111–142: 112–113.

perceived as a step backwards in the democratic modernization of the Serbian Church and state, achieved previously through the participation of the laypeople in the church councils of Karlovci Patriarchate.⁸ Moreover, inspired by the spiritual revival taking place in late imperial Russia and by Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Orthodox messianism, Nicholai Velimirović, according to Klaus Buchenau, began to preach that post-Ottoman Serbia had been on a wrong path in trying to become a modern Western-type democracy.⁹ Buchenau's claim makes us wonder what was the purpose of Velimirović's praise of democracy and which kind of democracy he had in mind. In the following lines I aim to examine Velimirović's sermons, letters and writings about democracy, with special focus on its European democratic tradition. I intend to analyse first his works, written mostly during the WWI and in the interwar period in which he tackles the question of democracy from the perspective of ongoing war and the future of Europe. I will shift then my attention to the late works written during the period of WWII, followed by his emigration in USA, including also the work *Nevercoming Land (Zemlja Nododjija)* from 1950. Finally, by comparing his early account of democracy with the late one it will be possible to conclude which elements in his view on democracy are permanent, and which emerged and disappeared due to the historical circumstances in which he found himself.

The early years and the interwar period

Velimirović spent the decade preceding the WWI as a student in Switzerland, Germany and England. He commenced his studies of philosophy and theology in Halle in 1905. He acquainted himself with the political and religious situation in western Europe, mainly in Germany and France. In his early

⁸ Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur*, 275.

⁹ Buchenau, "Orthodox Values and Modern Necessities," 115.

report essay published in 1906 'The Religious Social Movement in the West' (Versko-socijalni pokreti na Zapadu), he focused on the French Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State from 1905. Velimirović portrayed the events in the Roman-Catholic Church that preceded the promulgation of the law. His sympathies were undoubtedly on the side of the French Republic and against the Roman-Catholic Church, or precisely against the Vatican, which opposed this law. However, the reason for such a stance is not an Orthodox hatred of the Roman Church, as one would assume; it was rather Velimirović's concern for the Roman Church as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Velimirović argues that the new law will deprive the Roman Church of its traditions, privilege and pretensions to rule over people. In a 'single-lawful and democratic' environment, the Roman Church has to learn how to serve and how to 'wash the feet of the lowly and sinful'.¹⁰

Velimirović agreed with Roman-Catholic theologians and intellectuals of that time who thought that the new law offers a chance to the Roman Church to adapt itself to 'the new time and the cultural life of its people'.¹¹ In the same vein like Velimirović, on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council, Johann Baptist Metz commended the rapid secularization of the world for setting the Roman-Catholic Church in dialogue with the contemporary world.¹² Both thinkers have seen the democratization as the process that brings church to its true nature. However, at the beginning of his report Velimirović claims that small nations, such as the Serbian nation, should observe the historical changes that occur among large nations, but should not necessarily follow these tendencies and adopt

¹⁰ Nikolaj Velimirović, 'Versko-socijalni pokreti na Zapadu' (The Religious Social Movement in the West) in Nikolaj Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 2 (Himmelsthür, 1986, reprint Šabac: Manastir Svetog Nikolaja, Soko 2014), 167–180: 180.

¹¹ Velimirović, 'Versko-socijalni pokreti na Zapadu', 179.

¹² Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 19.

them.¹³ This raises the question of why the Roman Church would benefit from the separation from the French State, whereas the Orthodox Church in Serbia would not profit by its separation from the Serbian state?

The situation in Serbia was quite different from the one in France. While in France the clerics and the Republic were on opposite sides, in Serbia many clerics were members of political parties and of the national parliament. According to the Constitution from 1869 (article 45), all Serbian bishops and several priests were automatically members of the Serbian parliament.¹⁴ The number of priests in the national parliament increased in the following decades, and many of them deemed party politics a higher call than their Christian ministry.¹⁵ Since clerics dominated Serbian political arena, they hardly thought of the separation of the Orthodox Church from the state, albeit the socialists demanded it. Nevertheless, even if such separation would have taken place, this would rather led to the devastation of the Serbian church, because many priests preferred party politics to pastoral work. In comparison to France where the Church was not secular enough, in Serbia, during the period of the so-called golden age of Serbian democracy (1903–1914), the Church was too profane and secular. Velimirović highly esteemed democratisation and its results, as the case of the French Law of separation proves, but at the same time, he despised the party politics regarding it as perversion of democracy. At the end of his report, Velimirović mentions that while the protestants in Europe exult because of the defeat of the Roman Church in France, the socialism acts on the destruction of both.

In 1906 Velimirović enrolled at the University of Bern, where he continued his theological studies. He had at least

¹³ Velimirović, 'Versko-socijalni pokreti na Zapadu', 168.

¹⁴ Živan Živanović, *Politička istorija Srbije u drugoj polovini devetnaestog veka* (*Political History of Serbia in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*), knjiga 1 (Beograd: G. Kon, 1924), 246.

¹⁵ Buchenau, "Orthodox Values and Modern Necessities," 114.

two reasons for the decision to continue his studies at the Old-Catholic theological faculty. The first reason was a very cordial relation of the Old-Catholics with the Orthodox after their split from the Pope subsequent to the First Vatican Council.¹⁶ The second reason pertains to Velimirović's personal conviction, which he shared with the Old-Catholic, that papacy in its form of ruling and not of serving subjects is a burden to Christianity, especially to Catholicism. In Bern he obtained two doctorates, one in theology, in 1908 and another in history, in 1909.

In 1911, Velimirović became a tutor at the Orthodox Seminary in Belgrade.¹⁷ There he wrote his work *Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky* (1911–1912), in which he criticizes Friedrich Nietzsche for attempting to reintroduce the master morality. According to Velimirović, Nietzsche attacks Christianity, democracy and socialism because they all proclaim the slave morality.¹⁸ As for Velimirović, Nietzsche perceives in the contemporary individual the exemplification of the slave morality, he proclaims the superhuman (*Übermensch*) as the epitome of the master morality. In opposition to Nietzsche's superhuman Velimirović posits not the subhuman (*Untermensch*) like Nietzsche, but all-human (*всечеловѣк*) evoked by Dostoyevsky in his famous speech to Pushkin from 1880. The concept of all-human as 'the ideal in reality, the gold in the mud, the grandeur among the despised',¹⁹ was for Velimirović based on brotherhood and love among people and on serving to Christ.²⁰ Although for Velimirović, as the propagator of the slave morality, Dostoyevsky is the opposite of Nietzsche, he is close to Nietzsche in his diagnosis of the western society. According

¹⁶ Klaus Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren. Orthodoxe Antiwestler in Serbien, 1850–1945* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 149.

¹⁷ Jovan Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism. Post-Communist Remembrance of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), 22.

¹⁸ Nikolaj Velimirović, 'Niče i Dostojevski' (*Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky*), in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 2, 2014, 559–575: 563.

¹⁹ Velimirović, 'Niče i Dostojevski', 565.

²⁰ Velimirović, 'Niče i Dostojevski', 570–571.

to Velimirović, Dostoyevsky predicts the total collapse of the western world, whose decline commenced with Catholicism, continued with Protestantism, and will finish with atheistic and egoistic Socialism.²¹ Velimirović's interpretation of Dostoyevsky's view on Europe was adopted by his student, Justin Popović, who attended the St Sava's Seminary in Belgrade, at the time when Velimirović wrote his essay on Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. Dionisios Skliris rightly observes that Justin Popović's view of modern European history is in agreement with the views on Europe promulgated by Carl Schmitt.²² The same is possible to say for Velimirović's view because both authors are indebted to Dostoyevsky. Similarly to Velimirović, Carl Schmitt argues that all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.²³ For example, according to Schmitt, the concept of the sovereignty of the state order has its origin in the concept of the infallibility of the spiritual order, or the Pope.²⁴ The doctrine of the absolute sinfulness and depravity of human nature that is promulgated by the Catholic Council of Trent as the dogma of Original sin, is taken by the Enlightenment in order to justify the education of human being ignorant and rough by the nature.²⁵ Thus, according to Schmitt, it appears that both Catholicism and socialism have the same role, to make humanity better through a form of 'legal despotism'.²⁶ When Velimirović criticized Catholicism and socialism, his critique was not directed against the Christian morality or the equality

²¹ Velimirović, 'Niče i Dostojevski', 569.

²² Διονύσης Σκλήρης (Dionisios Skliris), "Αγαπώ άρα γνωρίζω: Η κριτική του αγίου Ιουστίνου του Νέου (Πόποβιτς) στη Δυτική Φιλοσοφία και οι Πατερικές της προϋποθέσεις" ("I love so I know": St. Justin the New (Popović's) Critique of the Western Philosophy and its Patristic Presuppositions), Αντίφωνο: Επιστήμες — Φιλοσοφία — Τέχνες — Θεολογία, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://antifono.gr/αγαπώ-άρα-γνωρίζω>.

²³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1985), 36

²⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 55.

²⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 56–57.

²⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 56.

in distributions of goods, but rather against their attempts to introduce the master morality and to subjugate humanity.²⁷

With the beginning of the WWI, the Serbian Government sent Velimirović to the UK and the USA to promote the Serbian cause. In the lecture '*Serbia in Light and Darkness*' delivered in the Canterbury Cathedral in 1915, he praised the British Empire because of its democracy and foundation based on the Christian philosophy of democratic equality and brotherhood, and considered England the champion of democracy. He urged Britain to protect Serbia and other oppressed European nations from German dominion by spreading democracy and Christian values.²⁸ Velimirović valued the idea of democracy and accused the Habsburgs of profanation of democracy.²⁹ He was very proud of the fact that prior to the WWI, Serbia was the only democratic state among the four independent Slavic states, namely Russia, Montenegro and Bulgaria.³⁰ According to Velimirović, the Serbian democracy has grown in the Serbian villages first and this fact differentiates it from British democracy, where democratic movements have developed in towns.³¹ In the lecture '*The Soul of Serbia*' delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1915, Velimirović considers England to be the home and heart of European democracy.³² In describing Serbian democracy, Velimirović compares it with the American democracy, because both were unplanned, unprepared, spontaneous, genuine and existed for a long time before people become aware of its name.³³

In his '*Sermon on Freedom*' written in 1918, on the occasion of Skopje's liberation by the Serbian army, Velimirović praises

²⁷ Velimirović, 'Niče i Dostojevski', 563.

²⁸ Nicholas Velimirovic, *Serbia in Light and Darkness* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1916), 8–9.

²⁹ Velimirovic, *Serbia in Light and Darkness*, 16.

³⁰ Velimirovic, *Serbia in Light and Darkness*, 16.

³¹ Velimirovic, *Serbia in Light and Darkness*, 53

³² Nicholas Velimirovic, *The Soul of Serbia*, (London: The Faith Press, 1916), 19.

³³ Velimirovic, *The Soul of Serbia*, 19.

Christianity and democracy as the two pillars on which the newly liberated country should be built.³⁴ For Velimirović, democracy goes hand in hand with Christianity, because the newly acquired political freedom cannot be fully realized if there is no spiritual freedom, or freedom in Christ. According to Velimirović, the spiritual freedom is dependence on God, not perceived as slavery, but as sonship.³⁵ Only the people liberated within themselves and free internally from the tyranny of sin, can also be free externally from the tyrannies of nature or other human beings.

Faced with the catastrophic consequences of the WWI, Velimirović's enthusiasm for a better European future gradually vanished. In his lecture given in 1920 at London's Kings College, he states that Europe has abandoned Christianity as the centre of its civilization and that it is doomed to decay unless it returns to its centre.³⁶ In his post-war essay 'The Anglo-Saxon Politicians and Faith' from 1923, Velimirović attempts to show that democracy and Christianity are closely associated, and that different ideological positions in Europe should not cause religious and political hostilities. Velimirović writes about the democratic determination and deep personal faith of American and British politicians whom he knew personally, commencing with the US presidents Woodrow Wilson and Warren Harding and the US state secretary Robert Lansing, and continuing with the British noblemen and lords, such as Lord of Salisbury and the British Labour party politicians Ramsey McDonald, the first Labour party prime minister, and George Lansbury, a socialist and the leader of the Labour Party.³⁷ For Velimirović, the ideological positions of politicians are irrelevant, as long as

³⁴ Nikolaj Velimirović, 'Iznad greha i smrti' (*Above Sin and Death*), in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela* (*Collected Works*), Vol. 4, 289.

³⁵ Velimirović, 'Iznad greha i smrti', 288.

³⁶ Nicholai Velimirovic, *The Spiritual Rebirth of Europe* (London: The Faith Press, 1920), 20.

³⁷ Nikolaj Velimirović, 'Anglosaksonski političari i vera' (*The Anglo-Saxon Politicians and Faith*), *Hrišćanski život* (*The Christian Life*) 7 (1923): 351–355.

they comply with Christianity and democracy, two ideals on which the modern Europe should be built.

In the book *The War and the Bible*, written in 1931, while residing as the bishop of Ohrid (in contemporary North Macedonia), Velimirović reflects on the reasons of a future war. Although he does not mention democracy and democratic order, his reflections linger over the problems of contemporary Europe. He points to atheism as the main reason of the future war, arguing that atheism opens a door to five modern idolatries: materialism as the idolatry of matter, egoism as the idolatry of self, nationalism as the idolatry of nation, imperialism as idolatry of empire and culturalism as the idolatry of culture.³⁸ According to Velimirović, these five values, given to humanity by God, are good in itself, but when employed independently of the love and service to God, they become idols. The worshiping is not focused on a single idol, but on several ones at the same time. For example, materialism, egoism and imperialism go together with the public admiration for nation and culture.³⁹ Although the future war seems to look like a divine punishment for worshiping idols, Velimirović maintains that the war is an external consequence of the inner war with vices, that is lost.⁴⁰ Being waged against idols in each individual soul and lost, the war finally materialises itself as a war of one human being against another in the name of material goods, nation, empire, individual freedom or culture. Although Velimirović does not mention democracy, a similar reasoning may be applied to it, as it was applied to matter, nation, empire, individual freedom and culture. Only the democracy that serves higher principles such as love for God and for a fellow human being is deemed worthy of admiration.

In 1936, Velimirović resumed the bishopric of Žiža in central Serbia, where he previously served as bishop in 1919 and 1920.

³⁸ Nikolaj Velimirović, *Rat i Biblija (The War and the Bible)*, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 5, 181–251: 234.

³⁹ Velimirović, *Rat i Biblija*, 235.

⁴⁰ Velimirović, *Rat i Biblija*, 246–248.

In his writings of this period, he attempted to offer solutions to social and political problems of pre-WWII Yugoslavia. In the article 'Between Left and Right', Velimirović stands against internationalism and fascism, two most powerful movements and political orders in Europe at this time. The internationalism was unacceptable for Velimirović due to its negation of nation and national self-determination. On the contrary, fascism does not only glorify its own nation, but it also considers other nations as lower to and not equally worthy to one's own nation.⁴¹ He proposed a middle way between these two directions, which he elaborated at length in his article 'The Middle System', from the same period. For Radovan Bigović, Velimirović's concept of middle system was his theoretical attempt to reconcile political and social extremes in Europe, and to bridge the gap between individualism and collectivism.⁴² In this book Velimirović developed his thesis about the Serbian village-grown democracy and wealth distribution, roughly outlined previously in his work *Serbia in Light and Darkness*. In his opinion, the Serbian agricultural cooperatives that originated from small Christian communities were stumbling blocks to both plutocracy of cartels and aggressive communism.⁴³ As a result of these cooperatives, the human being is neither enslaved by other fellow human being nor by the state, and she remains free, what is the main precondition for democracy.⁴⁴ He restricted his explanation to simple forms of work associations mainly connected with agricultural production, originating in the Christian past. However, he hesitated to ponder on the desirable processes of work organization and distribution of goods in modern times from the Christian point of view. As

⁴¹ Nikolai Velimirović, 'Izmedju levice i desnice' (Between Left and Right), in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela* (Collected Works), Vol. 9, 711–712: 711.

⁴² Radovan Bigović, *Od svečoveka do Bogočoveka* (From Allman to Godman) (Beograd: Raška škola, 1998), 331.

⁴³ Nikolai Velimirović, 'Srednji sistem' ('The Middle System'), in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela* (Collected Works), Vol. 5, 687–700: 696–697.

⁴⁴ Velimirović, 'Srednji sistem', 697.

a theologian and not as an economist, he was not focused on work, capital or profit, but rather on the freedom of human being that was endangered in this process by other human beings or by the state. According to Velimirović, the successful application of the middle system is preconditioned by the link between divine *oikonomia*, such as the providential unfolding of the history according to the eschatological model, and the modern capitalist economy. Velimirović's attitude reminds of the contemporary studies of Giorgio Agamben, who draws the analogy between the Christian *oikonomia*, i.e. the redemption of the corrupted world by God as saviour, and the modern economy, i.e. the administrative praxis of government or state that 'governs the course of things, adapting at each turn, in its salvific intent, to the nature of the concrete situation against which it has to measure itself'.⁴⁵ Velimirović's intention was to root the economy, mostly based on agricultural production in the divine economy of salvation, and he was against the phenomenon, explained by Agamben, of replacing the kingdom and glory of God with a glorified and deified economy and government.

The idea about economy based on agricultural cooperatives (*zadruga*) was neither new nor original. It was shared by some Yugoslav right-wing politicians during the 1930's, the ministers in Yugoslav Royal Governments and the chief collaborators to the Nazis during WWII, such as Dimitrije Ljotić and Milan Nedić. However, their motives were completely different. For Velimirović, the *zadruga* system maintained the link with the ancient form of Christian communities that shared their wealth, properties, food and prayer and were kept together by the common faith,⁴⁶ while for Dimitrije Ljotić the *zadruga* system allowed a better state control of labour and capital, than the control that exists in liberal capitalism.⁴⁷ For Milan

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2011), 50.

⁴⁶ Velimirović, 'Srednji sistem', 697.

⁴⁷ Dimitrije Ljotić, „Kakvu politiku hoćemo“ ('What Kind of Politics We Want'),

Nedić, the *zadruga* system originated, not from Christian communities like for Velimirović, but from racial-biological and ethnic realities and is the best expression of Serbian national socialism.⁴⁸

The treatise ‘Middle System’ is probably the last work dealing with modern European issues, written by Velimirović in the interwar period. The interwar period represented the pinnacle of Velimirović’s career both as an ecclesial and political figure and as an author. He developed his well-known literary style in this period and promulgated many of his pivotal ideas. Many scholars consider his appointment as bishop of Ohrid in 1920 as a major turn in his outlook, and the beginning of his transformation from an European gentleman into an Orthodox hermit.⁴⁹ According to Buchenau, Velimirović turned his back to intelligentsia and its European role models in this period and balanced between ‘harmless’ traditionalism and right-wing dictatorship.⁵⁰ However, in my opinion the major changes in his views happened not in the early period of his career, when he began to enrich his school knowledge of Christianity gained at the world universities with an authentic Christian life and experience, but rather with the beginning of the WWII and the dismemberment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Thus, Velimirović recalled seldom and always with remorse and sorrow the ideas in regard to Yugoslavia and the unity of south Slavs or the ecclesial unity between Orthodox and Catholic Church or the Christian type of socialism and communism, vigorously supported during the WWI and interwar period. This raises the question of

in Dimitrije Ljotić, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 5 (Minhen: Iskra), 61.

⁴⁸ Milan Nedić, *Srpsko selo (Serbian Village)*, 29 May 1943. Retrieved from Olivera Milosavljević, *Potisnuta istina: Kolaboracija u Srbiji 1941–1944 (Suppressed Truth: Collaboration in Serbia 1941–1944)* (Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava 2006), 303–304.

⁴⁹ Dimitrije Najdanović, *Tri srpska velikana (The Three Great Serbian Figures)* (Minhen: Svečanik-Verlag, 1975), 142; Bigović, *Od svečoveka do Bogočoveka*, 52.

⁵⁰ Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren*, 143.

whether he abandoned the idea about democracy and its value and this will be discussed in the following lines.

WWII and the Exile

The Europe known to Velimirović from his studies in Germany and Switzerland drastically changed during the 1930's. At the dawn of the WWII war, many European intellectuals maintained that Europe is sick unto death due to various reasons, from the disappearance of traditional values and rapid secularisation to nationalism and uncontrolled technical development,⁵¹ and Velimirović shared this view. The beginning of the WWII caught Velimirović as the bishop of Žiža. Due to his cordial relations with the British political establishment, Velimirović was deemed by Nazis as a potential treat, and he was arrested and put under German surveillance in the summer of 1941 at Ljubostinja monastery.⁵² One of the works written by Velimirović in this period was *The Serbian People as Theodule*.

Velimirović does not mention democracy particularly in this work, but he reflects on many important societal issues. He develops some ideas from the 'Middle System,' about the head of the family (*domaćin*) and agricultural cooperatives (*zadruga*) as the backbone of Serbian economy, substantiating them with examples from Serbian ecclesial history. It is evident Velimirović's motive to ground these popular ideas in the Christian ethos. Thus, in order to be a good head of the family (*domaćin*), one has to be a good servant to God, what Theodoulos in Greek originally means. The perfect examples are St Sava Nemanjić, the first Serbian archbishop and his father Nemanja, the ruler of medieval Serbia and founder of

⁵¹ Bogdan Radica, *Agonija Evrope: Razgovori i susreti (The Agony of Europe)* (Beograd: Geca Kon, 1940).

⁵² Rastko Lompar, "Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahauu 1944. godine" (The Incarceration of Patriarch Gavrilo and Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović in Dachau in 1944), *Studije Istorije Ilarion* 3 (2018): 9–29: 14.

the Nemanjić dynasty.⁵³ Velimirović introduces a relatively new element, i.e., monastic practice, broadly understood as ascetical rules, as the constitutive feature of social life. Therefore, according to Velimirović, the Serbian agricultural cooperatives (*zadruga*) do not originate from relationships based on blood, but from service to God by adhering to ascetical practice preserved in the Orthodox monasteries, especially the Athonite monasteries.⁵⁴ For Velimirović, asceticism was the true philosophy. For him the ascetic life was not a reduction of the whole ancient philosophical legacy to several repetitive practices, but a perfect synthesis of Platonic cosmology, Stoic ethics, Aristotelian logic and Parmenidean ontology.⁵⁵ For Velimirović, the Greek philosophical and cultural legacy is in the best way embodied by Christianity, and the Month Athos was the perfect embodiment of the ancient political ideal. While serving as the bishop of Ohrid, Velimirović visited the Month Athos almost every summer and he established a strong bond with the Athonite Fathers and ascetics, especially with St Silouan the Athonite.

In the *Indian Letters*, another work written during his detention in Ljubostinja in 1941/1942,⁵⁶ and inspired by India and its deep culture and religiosity, Velimirović describes the Holy Mount of Athos. Seen through the eyes of an Indian envoy sent to Europe by Indian rulers to find out the reason for the great war and the European crisis, Velimirović describes the Holy

⁵³ Nikolaj Velimirović, *Srpski narod kao Teodul (The Serbian People as Theodoulos)*, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 5, 651–684, 660.

⁵⁴ Velimirović, *Srpski narod kao Teodul*, 671–672.

⁵⁵ Bigović, *Od svečoveka do Bogočoveka*, 129–130.

⁵⁶ Srećko Petrović, “Prilog proučavanju srpsko-ruskih crkvenih odnosa: Povezanost srpske jerarhije sa crkvenom misijom u Indiji tokom 1930-ih godina sa posebnim osvrtom na eventualnu ulogu Episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića” (A Contribution to the Research of Serbian-Russian Church Relations: The Connection of the Serbian Hierarchy with the Orthodox Church Mission in India during the 1930’s, With Special Reference to the Plausible Role of Bishop Nicholai Velimirović), *Teološki pogledi (Theological Views)* 53/1 (2020): 79–128: 97, n. 63, <https://doi.org/10.46825/tv/2020-1-079-128>.

Mount as “an empire without a crown, a state without an army, wealth without money, wisdom without school, cuisine without meat, prayer without ceasing, connection with heaven without interruption, worship of Christ without fatigue, death without sorrow”.⁵⁷ Finally, the Indian envoy concludes in his letter sent back to India that Europe would be much more peaceful and happy with the spirit of the Mount Athos.⁵⁸ Therefore, the fruits of the ascetic life and practice, especially Athonite, such as peace and happiness, inspired Velimirović to model his Christian agricultural cooperatives in according to monastic rules.

The German soldiers that searched Ljubostinja Monastery, where Velimirović was detained, found a radio transmitter, by which he allegedly communicated with London.⁵⁹ This caused Velimirović's transfer to the monastery of Vojlovica (near Belgrade) on the 16th (the 3rd according to Old Style) of December 1942, where a much stricter surveillance was imposed. Velimirović was detained there together with the Serbian patriarch Gavriilo Dožić, until the 14th of September 1944, when they were both transferred to the concentration camp Dachau near Munich.⁶⁰ This period was extremely harsh for both church dignitaries, as Velimirović testifies in his later works.

In 1986 a text entitled ‘Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window’ was introduced in the *Collected Works of Bishop Nicholai*, volume 13, published at Himelsthür in Germany. The publisher, Lavrentije Trifunović, then the bishop of Central European Diocese of the Serbian Church attributed the text to Velimirović. The original manuscript was allegedly found in the attic of the Serbian church in Linz and it was published for the first time by the parish of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Linz

⁵⁷ Nikolaj Velimirović, *Indijska pisma (Indian Letters)*, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 5, 701–792: 783

⁵⁸ Velimirović, *Indijska pisma*, 783.

⁵⁹ Lompar, “Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahauu 1944. godine”, 15–16.

⁶⁰ Lompar, “Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahauu 1944. godine”, 17.

in 1981. As a proof of authenticity of this work the publisher has included in the *Collected Works* the photography of one page from the *autograph*. In the short introduction to the text, Trifunović claims that Velimirović was cautious to hide this text from German guards and he even wrote the letter G instead of the full noun, when referring to Germans and Germany. There are many spurious facts in regard to this work of Velimirović. First, the printed text in the *Collected Works* occupies more than 160 pages, and could at least occupy the same number of pages in the *autograph*. Therefore, producing a text of such length for more than a month of his imprisonment in Dachau,⁶¹ under constant surveillance and hiding it from the German guards looks like a hardly feasible endeavour. Second, the nouns ‘Germans’ appear only twice in the whole text and both times in reference to the WWI. Moreover, the German people appear in not such a negative context as being the instruments of divine punishment of the Serbian people for their sins during the WWI. However, the nouns ‘Jews’ and ‘Jewish’ appear around 150 times in an extremely negative context, which determined some scholars to investigate the motives of Velimirović’s alleged anti-Semitism.⁶² The author accuses Jews that they are inventors of all evils that came upon Europe and responsible for its tragic destiny. The question raises why would Velimirović hide this text from German guards if it contains the worst anti-Jewish propaganda, which almost justifies the German treatment of Jews during the WWII. Finally, there is no mention in any of Velimirović’s latter works in which of his writings from Dachau.⁶³

⁶¹ Lompar, “Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahauu 1944. godine”, 18.

⁶² Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism*.

⁶³ In several letters to Fr Aleksa Todorović, Velimirović mentions his works written during the WWII, including some writings from Dachau but he never refers to the particular book. See letters to Aleksa Todorović, one is undated, but probably written in early 1951, and another is from 19th of March 1953 in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 659–660; 693–694.

It may be assumed that the editors of ‘Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window’ assembled the text written by Velimirović in Dachau and the material from his earlier writings, but also interpolated some of the anti-Jewish propaganda composed by the members of political movement Zbor.⁶⁴ There were many examples in Velimirović’s letters written during the 1950’s, in which he wanted to distance himself from the actions of the pro-fascist movement Zbor in the emigration, which he labelled as “national godlessness” in order to differentiate it from the communist godlessness.⁶⁵ Velimirović’s sympathies for religiosity of Dimitrije Ljotić, the leader of Zbor movement, encouraged Ljotić’s adherents to interpret Velimirović’s words as the support for Zbor’s political goals, not only after the WWI, but also in the interwar period.⁶⁶ On several occasions, Velimirović himself tried to prevent Ljotić’s political adherents to usurp and exploit the publishing house “Svečanik” in Munich founded by Velimirović for their political goals.⁶⁷ Therefore, it would not be difficult to imagine that some of them forged Velimirović’s writings by interpolating the political agenda of the Zbor movement.

The term ‘democracy’, for example, appears only three times in the purported writings from Dachau. The first two appearances are along the line of Velimirović’s earlier expressed attitude, that democracy should go hand in hand with religion, and that the atheistic democracy is not long lived.⁶⁸ This attitude

⁶⁴ Jovan Čulibrk is also suspicious of the authenticity of this work. See Jovan Čulibrk, “Izraelci nas odlično razumeju” (The Israeli People Understand Us Well), *Jevrejski pregled (Jewish Review)* 2 (February 2009): 6–8: 7.

⁶⁵ Nikolaj Velimirović, Letter to Fr Aleksa Todorović from the 30th of April 1952, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 677.

⁶⁶ See for example Nikolaj Velimirović, Letter to Milan from 8th of October 1937, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 652–653.

⁶⁷ Nikolaj Velimirović, Letter to Fr Aleksa Todorović from the 2nd of April 1953, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 699.

⁶⁸ Nikolaj Velimirović, “Govori spskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor” 54 (Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window), in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 181–350: 293.

is in compliance with his earlier ideas that only if the people are freed from the tyranny of sin by worshiping God, they will opt for democracy and not for the tyranny. The third mention of democracy appears in an anti-Semitic context:

“All modern European ideas were invented by the Jews, who crucified Christ: democracy, strikes, socialism, atheism, tolerance of all faiths, pacifism and universal revolution, capitalism and communism. These are all inventions of the Jews, or of their father the devil”.⁶⁹

It is very surprising that Velimirović, who had hardly mentioned Jews in all his previous works,⁷⁰ attacks them suddenly and furiously from the concentration camp, in the same place and at the same time when thousands of them have been killed on a daily basis. It is also less probable that democracy, uprisings, socialism and religious tolerance that earlier Velimirović highly valued, all of a sudden are proclaimed as the inventions of the devil. Therefore, due to the unproven authenticity of this work, one should exercise if not scholarly suspicion, then at least some caution in referring to it.

After his release from Dachau by the end of 1944, Velimirović together with the Patriarch Gavriilo Dožić were transferred

⁶⁹ Velimirović, “Govori spskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor” 77, in Velimirović, *Collected Works*, Vol. 13, 340.

⁷⁰ Velimirović’s earlier references to the Jews pertain mostly to the biblical context. Velimirović often refers to Jewish nationalism and Roman imperialism as two dangers that early Christianity had to avoid. Thus, the polemics Velimirović had with the chief rabbi the Kingdom of Yugoslavia Isaak Alcalay in 1928 was provoked by Velimirović’s remark that Jewish religious leaders condemned Jesus out of nationalism and clericalism. See Miloš Timotijević, “Dunuli su vihorni vetrovi”: Stavovi episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića o Jevrejima, liberalizmu, komunizmu i nacizmu u štampi Žičke eparhije pred Drugi svetski rat” (“Whirlwinds Have Blown”: Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović’s Attitudes towards Jews, Liberalism, Communism and Nazism in the Publications of Žiča Eparchy before the Second World War), in Dragan Drašković & Radomir Ristić (eds.), *Naša prošlost (Our Past)*, Vol. 8 (Kraljevo: National Museum Kraljevo and Historical Archives Kraljevo, 2007), 97–119: 102.

first to Schliersee (south of Munich), and then released to go to Vienna, in order to meet with the representatives of Serbian anti-communist troops that collaborated with the Nazi Germany.⁷¹ They waited for the war to end in Kitzbuhel in Austria and from there they fled to London. While Patriarch Gavrilo Dožić decided to return in 1946 to socialist Yugoslavia, Velimirović chose to go to the USA, where he lived until his death in 1956. He visited Europe just once, being briefly in London, but he never again wrote about Europe. By abandoning Christianity and democracy, at least in its parts under the Communist rule, Europe was for Velimirović doomed to slow death. However, due to its Christian faith and democracy, values Velimirović highly esteemed, America became for him not only the land of great material progress and scientific discoveries, but also a land of spiritual awakening and Christian power and grandeur.⁷²

Upon his arrival to USA, Velimirović stayed in New York, living in the attic of the Serbian cathedral St Sava in Manhattan. He travelled frequently across America preaching and lecturing. In June 1946 Columbia University in New York awarded Velimirović an honorary Doctorate of Sacred Theology. His American period was very fruitful for Velimirović as an author. One of the books written in this period, that will be in our focus, is *The Nevercoming Land: A Modern Tale (Zemlja Nododjija: Jedna moderna bajka)* from 1950. This was the first book of a trilogy he planned to write on the topics of Hitlerism, atheism and the need for repentance.⁷³ The plot of the book *The Nevercoming Land* was located in the concentration camp, where Gestapo interrogated Serbian officer Spasa

⁷¹ Lompar, “Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahau 1944. godine”, 23.

⁷² Nikolaj Velimirović, Sermon ‘To Be and To Do’ delivered at the Grace Church, New York on the 6th of March 1946, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 512–515: 515.

⁷³ Nikolaj Velimirović, Letter to priest Aleksa Todorović from the 26th of June 1951, in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela (Collected Works)*, Vol. 13, 662.

Spasić. This book was not very well received among Serbian political emigration in the USA which collaborated with Hitler during the WWII.

Velimirović's modern tale takes place in July 1944 after the unsuccessful assassination of Adolf Hitler in the imaginary concentration camp Tannenwald. In the course of seven days the imprisoned Yugoslav officer Spasa Spasić, a commander of the prisoners' barrack 99, was trialled under the charge that he allowed his fellow prisoners to celebrate the alleged assassination of Hitler.⁷⁴ The seven days of trial correspond to the holy week in the life of Christ, and it ends with the metaphorical resurrection of Spasić and removal of all charges against him. There is a strong identification of Velimirović's attitudes with the attitudes of his imaginary character. The records from each night of trial are followed by the Velimirović's reflections on societal phenomena, like ethics, technics and freedom. The fourth night of trial and Velimirović's reflections on freedom, truth and love open a window for understanding Velimirović's late views on democracy. On this night of the trial the devil appears, explaining to Spasić that he rules the world through six demons: the misuse of knowledge, of power, of wealth, of physical beauty, of art and of food and drink.⁷⁵ The view on these six misuses serves as an introduction to the reflections on freedom and democracy, because for Velimirović the inner freedom from passions is crucial for establishing outer political freedom. In the short tractate about freedom, Velimirović overviews different political systems, from tyranny to democracy, arguing that democracy is the medicine against tyranny, because it extended freedom from one tyrant to all citizens.⁷⁶

By analysing Athenian democracy, Velimirović remarks that it fell prey to lie and selfishness. Therefore, he argues that for the

⁷⁴ Nikolaj Velimirović, 'Zemlja nedodjija: Jedna moderna bajka' (The Nevercoming Land: A Modern Tale), in Velimirović, *Sabrana dela* (Collected Works), Vol. 12, 11–57: 11–12.

⁷⁵ Velimirović, 'Zemlja nedodjija', 34.

⁷⁶ Velimirović, 'Zemlja nedodjija', 36.

perseverance of democracy as freedom for all it is required to be guarded by truth and love. Velimirović argues that the freedom secured by democracy is proclaimed a public good, while the truth and love are restricted to private sphere. This, in his view, endangers democracy and exposes its vulnerability. Velimirović concludes that religion, and especially Christianity, which is based on the principles of truth and love is inseparable from democracy. The truth liberates human beings from passions and opens a path towards love. According to Velimirović, only in conditions where the truth and love are fastened by faith in God the democracy can flourish, because truth directs and guards democracy by giving it a meaning, while love and mercy inspire good deeds.⁷⁷ The account on democracy from this book may be considered as Velimirović's final word about this issue.

Conclusion

Velimirović is known for changing his opinions on numerous occasions, adopting vigorously certain ideas and abandoning them abruptly. Some of the ideas he adopted or developed in his early period, like the political ideas related to Yugoslavia and the unity of Orthodox and Catholics in one Yugoslav Church or about India as the most promising land for the Christian mission are abandoned, while some other ideas were developed in the course of his life and never renounced, like the idea of democracy. Velimirović was preoccupied by the idea of democracy with other ideas, which if it is paired with Christian faith, provides equality and brotherhood among the people. For Velimirović democracy directly opposes the war, which is the consequence of the lost internal battle with the passions. As a completely opposite extreme to the war was democracy, because it refers first to the war won over the passions and to

⁷⁷ Velimirović, 'Zemlja nedodjija', 38.

the achieved state of internal freedom, which is then displayed as political freedom.

Velimirović's understanding of democracy is inseparable from spiritual practices mostly connected with the Mount Athos, as cradle of Christian, and particularly Byzantine asceticism in Europe. He related ascetical practices to democracy and economy because only by winning over the idols, or perverted values of material goods, nation, empire, individual freedom or culture in the human heart through ascetism will prevent of developing from values the collective idols.

For Velimirović, only democracy may provide freedom for majority of people if not for everybody. However, even such democracy is vulnerable, because it can easily fall pray to lie or selfishness. By being supported by Christian faith, which is based on the principles of truth and love or mercy, the modern democracy can survive. Every attempt to establish the foundation of modern Europe on other issues than democracy and Christianity is doomed to failure. It is also unacceptable for Velimirović to break these two apart. Therefore, democracy remains in the works of Velimirović highly praised as the best expression of human freedom, in which are all human beings free from passions, collective idols or other human beings.

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