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Why Religion Matters: Montenegro's Sacred Nationhood in a Time of Contestation

Book review: Emil Hilton Saggau, *Nationalisation of the Sacred: Orthodox Historiography, Memory, and Politics in Montenegro*. New York: Peter Lang, 2024. pp. 218. ISBN 978-1-4331-9741-3 (hardback)

Abstract

This book review offers a critical assessment of Emil Hilton Saggau's *Nationalisation of the Sacred*. Although Saggau's work seems to propose a concise history of Montenegro through the lens of Orthodox historiography, the main argumentation provides sobering perspectives that unravel a wealth of religious and political issues in Montenegro and South-East Europe in general.

Keywords: Montenegro, Serbia, Montenegrin Orthodox Church, Orthodox historiography, memory, identity politics.

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Decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the enduring legacies of war continue to cast a dark shadow on the nation-building of some of the successor states. Kosovo and Montenegro undoubtedly remain hotbeds of Serbia's ubiquitous nationalism and political interference despite having proclaimed independence in 2008 and 2006, respectively. The "myth of Kosovo" and the ideology of *Svetosavlje* (Eng. Saintsavaism) cause alarm in both neighbouring countries, as Serbia considers Kosovo to be the cradle of its civilisation and Montenegro part and parcel of *Srpski sveti*, the Serbian world. Either way, the Serbian Orthodox Church (herein SOC) has historically played a pivotal role in promoting a "people-church ideology" whose embodiment into a would-be "Greater Serbia" haunts the former Yugoslav space.

In *Nationalisation of the Sacred*, published by Peter Lang (2024), Emil Hilton Saggau goes straight to the roots of the discord. Delving into Orthodox historiography and related religious ideologies of the post-Yugoslav space, he focuses on Montenegro and the role of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (herein MOC). Unlike most pundits and experts, Saggau successfully avoids a simplistic recollection of religious disputes and political divisions that have never historically ceased to spark outcry in the Western Balkans. To do so, the author shifts the angle of investigation by employing a comparative approach aiming to turn away from reproducing an ultra-Montenegrin or ultra-Serbian nationalist narrative. Against this pitfall, the author interrogates Montenegrin Orthodox historiography in comparison with the SOC and other ecclesial and theological traditions across the Balkan region.

The bulk of the book is taken up by Michel de Certeau's notion of historiography (1988), which allows Saggau to identify the nodal points around which contrasting and overlapping theological narratives have developed and eventually come into conflict on the ground of history, memory politics, and the political arena. Throughout the different chapters, Saggau coherently follows Certeau's methodological guideline, which resides in recognising a religious ideology invested in history, whose very role and nature could produce a historicity vacillating between social praxis and discourse that, at times, turn history into a myth.

The first chapter is a stepping-stone for the whole investigation. The contemporary MOC is depicted as an active national agent in the latest developments of the political history of Montenegro. Saggau shows how the MOC adjusts the everyday activities of the clergy and commemoration events to claim ownership over the historical figures of saints and symbolic places in the country. At the same time, the author diverges from

the old-fashioned paradigm of the *sacralisation of the nation* that often places religion beneath the power structures of politics, economics, and culture. As the title states, the *nationalisation of the sacred* is first and foremost the process of a social and collective movement taking possession of a specific religious praxis and set of beliefs and values, which, in turn, shape a specific form of nationalism. Therefore, Saggau argues that a more nuanced and numinous power does not only inform the political realm *from the outside* but also shapes the process of nation-building *from the inside*.

In other words, Saggau notes that a religious system may be adopted internally by (or integrated into) a nationalist system to resolve problems *from within* the nation. The case of Montenegro is instructive here as the MOC's Orthodox historiography seeks to provide a coherent and legitimate continuum along which both old and present rulers provide credibility to "the sacred".

The second chapter takes the reader on a journey through the history of Montenegro and its Orthodox communities. By recalling the East-West split across the historical Montenegrin hinterland, the author harks back to the ruling dynasties of Serbia, the Nemanjić, and Albania, the Skanderbeg, whose kingdoms ruled until the Ottoman takeover. Then, the author pays particular attention to the controversial history of Islamic conversion among the Orthodox Slavs and their complex return to Christian Orthodoxy, as well as to the tight relationships that Petar II Petrović-Njegoš (1813–1851) established with the Russian Patriarchate and how the political legacies of both figures have taken a toll on the region. Despite these historical events remaining a subject of contention, they have nonetheless set the scene for the rise and official constitution of the MOC in Montenegro. In this regard, Saggau further problematises the theological dispute between the MOC and Metropolitan Amfilohije, which follows hard on the heels of the lack of a clear distinction between "Montenegrins" (*Crnogorski*) and "Serbs" (*Srpski*) among the local clergy in the history of the Montenegrin hinterland.

Needless to say, the post-Yugoslav predicament has been paramount for the MOC to seek credibility among believers and attach its religious ideology to the emerging national identity of today's Montenegro. Two crucial periods are identified here: the early 1990s when the MOC and the SOC entered a series of legal and cultural conflicts, and the 2006 declaration of independence following the 2001 census. Throughout, Saggau notes that a fully independent state of Montenegro was still about to emerge and that the MOC was a church in a minority position. This

condition was due to the unrecognised status of the MOC itself, which caused many citizens to align with the SOC and, as a result, outnumber Montenegrins also on an ethnic basis. Since then, however, Montenegro's *nationalisation of the sacred* shifted gears once and for all. According to Saggau, these two periods led to a seminal event: the so-called "2019 debate". It sparked a public outcry as the MOC and the ruling parties, along with other Montenegrin nationalist factions, put forward a legal framework for recognising the shrines built before 1920 as part and parcel of the MOC's heritage, thereby granting the right to ownership to the MOC. Tellingly, this special law was not only essential to disempower the SOC's attempts to undermine "Montenegrinness" from the religious heritage of the country, but it also set apart the SOC from the "national sacred" and the Orthodox historiography of Montenegro.

Saggau's methodological coherency is worthy of remark here. The political dynamics that heightened the debate over the 2019 special law are well explained in the final section of the second chapter. By drawing on Silvio Ferrari's model of a "pyramid of priority" (2003), the author visualises the process of *nationalisation of the sacred* in Montenegro through the inversely proportional relations of engagement/cooperation of the MOC and the SOC *within* and *outside* the state. Put simply, he shows how the 2019 special law paved the way for the MOC to climb through Montenegro's power structures and political hierarchies via mutual agreements *within* the state. In contrast, the SOC's rare and conflictual cooperation blocked its access and support in different settings of religious and public life.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Saggau further scrutinises the Orthodox historiography of the MOC and the SOC by investigating how their theological and ecclesial views diverge from each other. Saggau here refers to the *nationalisation of the sacred* to explain the role of the state and the church in the fabrication of the idea of "Montenegrinness" and, in contrast, to the *sacralisation of the nation* to highlight the rationale behind Serbia's myth of *Svetosavlje* shaping a primordial model of an ecclesial society, the *Sobornost*. Therefore, the main difference occurs along an "ideological" divide. While the MOC relies on the form of the Eusebian symphonic relationship between state and church, the SOC's *all-man* model of ecclesiology stems from the Ignatian tradition. In the case of the latter, the state never plays a crucial role in the church but, rather, invokes the possibility of the revelation of God's kingdom on earth. The SOC embodies the local community of the baptised, and the Eucharist is celebrated as the primary intent to serve God exclusively. The Serbian

nation is thus chosen by (and is the servant of) God, and it should grow into a church. The Eusebian notion of state–church developed in opposition to the Ignatian one, dating back to the time of the emperor and the church dealing with the secular and the spiritual world, respectively. Both actors strive for the same "common good" to secure a bond up to the point where they cannot be understood separately.

By highlighting this profound divide, Saggau not only manages to justify his theoretical approach to the two competing religious ideologies. He also unravels the theological differences within yet another area of harsh contention: memory politics. In the second part of the book, he argues that history and memory are hard to separate in scholarly attempts to explore the historicity of saints and religious sites in Montenegro. In Chapter 5, he contends that history and memory can be selectively included *into the sacred* and contribute to the memorialisation *of the sacred*. Myths become a historical alternative to looking at the highly contested past and providing an ethnogenesis and political significance to antiquity. This is the case of Saint Vladimir, Prince of Duklja, who in today's Montenegro is considered a distinct and significant figure whose church and kingdom were alive and independent even before the Serbian takeover. Relatedly, St. Basil of Ostrog, the Cathedral of Bar, the monastery in today's Albanian Muslim-majority area of Krajina, and the city of Šas constitute the memoryscape that sanctifies the centuries-old borders, cities, cultures, and traditions of the country throughout history.

After defining Montenegro's religious identity as ambiguous and debatable in the first part of the book, Saggau once more restates his doubts over the historical assumption of presenting the kingdom of Duklja/Zeta church as the ethnogenesis of the contemporary national and spiritual identity of the MOC and Montenegro. In addition, the author argues that the MOC's *nationalisation of the sacred* appears debatable because it seemingly derives from the Western Christian notion of a connected sovereign community over history, rather than diverging from the competing yet overlapping and parallel traditions within Orthodox historiography.

The above brings Saggau to further interrogate the historiography and religious ideology of the MOC and Montenegro compared to the historical development of other Christian Orthodox churches in South-East and Eastern Europe. The final section provides a sobering comparative perspective beyond the post-Yugoslav region. To begin with, the author likens the current rivalry between the MOC and the SOC to the turmoil between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox

Church (herein UOC and ROC, respectively) in the post-Soviet period. Recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2019, the UOC's autocephaly was de facto accelerated by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, while the relations between the two churches worsened in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Although this scenario resembles the historical diatribe between the MOC and the SOC, relevant differences on a religious and (geo)political ground deserve to be pointed out. Above all, Kyiv was the first home of both the UOC and the ROC. It follows that the UOC's claims to self-identify along the historical continuation of Vladimir's or Volodymyr's baptism in the Dnepr in 988 are historically more coherent than the MOC's alignment with the cult of the Duklja/Zeta church. However, this twofold comparison brings to light the ROC's and SOC's political messianism: just as the Kremlin seeks to provide moral guidance (in its topological sense) and doctrinal guidance (in its allegorical sense) within the orbit of its (geo)political influence through the role of the ROC, so does Serbia by drawing upon the SOC's legacies in both Montenegro and Kosovo, which remain similarly connected to the history and memory of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch of Peć. This might explain Serbia's cognitive dissonance in coming to terms with the political state of affairs and why the breakdown of Ukraine and Montenegro from their former "religious motherland" happened in parallel to a historiographically renewed form of an ecclesial-centred idea of nationhood.

Of particular interest are the comparisons with the Macedonian Orthodox Church (herein MaOC) and Orthodox Christian historiography in Bulgaria. Saggau mainly focuses on the noticeable differences among the "religious ideologies" of Montenegro and North Macedonia. While the MOC hinges its ethnogenesis on the cult of Duklja and the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty (16th-19th centuries), the MaOC claims to descend from the Ohrid Church. That said, Saggau notes that the MOC underwent a *nationalisation of the sacred* out of the need to legitimise its ethnic belonging to Montenegro's former rulers and distance itself from the SOC's claims over the religious heritage in the country. Instead, the MaOC is unlikely to face political organisations close to the SOC that advance claims over the Ohrid Church, nor would any of the latter's adherents identify themselves as "Serbs".

If anything, Saggau identifies Greece and Bulgaria as North Macedonia's major rivals despite the denial of any pan-Slavic, Bulgarian, and even Greek influence over the Ohrid Church. If anything, the MOC's Eusebian religious ideology more likely resembles the state-church relations in Bulgaria. What is different is the ethnoreligious identity of the "former motherlands": while

Montenegro's *nationalisation of the sacred* occurs to counteract the pressuring and patronising tradition of another Orthodox church, Bulgaria's national awakening took place against the Ottoman Empire, i.e. against "the Turks". Even before 1878, the Bulgarian church was (and continues to be today) the main guardian of the Bulgarian nation, whose martyrs are at the same time national heroes who heroically fought and defeated the Ottomans and their heirs, i.e. Islam and, by extension, those Muslim Turks who are not considered indigenous to the nation.

To conclude, does Saggau's book provide an alternative angle of investigation over the former Yugoslavia's nation-building processes obstructed by ethnoreligious disputes? To answer this question, it should be pointed out that Saggau neither investigates an under-researched historical event in Montenegro nor adds unpublished materials to the existing literature. Yet *Nationalisation of the Sacred* cannot be solely understood as a concise review of the history of Montenegro executed through the lens of religion. The novelty of this study lies in the theoretical approach that distances Saggau from most (Balkan) scholars who, falling into the identity politics trap, reinvigorate the ubiquitous nationalist narratives circulating at all levels. Against this backdrop, Saggau has not proposed an exclusive form of "Montenegrinness" or dealt with the latter uncritically. Throughout the book, he constantly compares and contextualises the religious and political *zeitgeists* of the MOC and Montenegro in order to debunk identities and heritage that are instrumentally reconstructed from Orthodox traditions and selectively attached to their historiography. The methodological guideline by which Saggau does so allows him to contend that a religious system existed before the rise of nationalism and determines *where* and *how* national identities can be brokered. Here, Saggau's critical viewpoint does not aim to undermine Montenegro's statehood and institutional landscape. Nor does his book take a stance on the latest dispute between Montenegro and Serbia on political grounds.

Nationalisation of the Sacred achieves a goal that perhaps Saggau himself could not imagine at first. Given the current geopolitical upheavals, his choice to delve into different historiographies of theology-based "religious ideologies" does not only pay off for analysing unharvested comparisons across South-East Europe and Eastern Europe, but it also reaches out to a broader audience of scholars and readers outside the field of cultural and religious studies. Many would benefit from understanding how the *nationalisation of the sacred* is deeply embedded in the nesting relations within the Balkans – a region still in the making and whose political

dynamics can, at times, be deeply embedded in the return of religion and religious ideologies.

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Perché la religione è importante: la sacralizzazione del Montenegro

La monografia di Emil Hilton Saggau, dal titolo *Nationalisation of the Sacred*, pubblicata da Peter Lang nel 2024, ricostruisce i momenti salienti della contestata storia politica del Montenegro. Attraverso una diversa prospettiva di ricerca, non esente da problematicità scientifiche in ambito storico-religioso, Saggau avanza un nuovo paradigma – la "nazionalizzazione del sacro", da contrapporre a quello della "sacralizzazione della nazione" utilizzato dall'ortodossia serba per minare le fondamenta identitarie del giovane Stato balcanico. Tradizioni religiose, interpretazioni storiche e luoghi di culto diventano così i simboli della contestazione tra Montenegro e Serbia, aprendo contemporaneamente a nuove possibilità per studi comparativi all'interno dell'Europa orientale.

Parole chiave: Montenegro, Serbia, Chiesa ortodossa montenegrina, storiografia ortodossa, memoria, politica dell'identità.

Dlaczego religia jest ważna: sakralizacja Czarnogóry

Monografia Emila Hiltona Saggau'a zatytułowana *Nationalisation of the Sacred*, opublikowana przez Petera Langa w 2024 roku, przedstawia rekonstrukcję kluczowych momentów w spornej historii politycznej Czarnogóry. Przyjmując odmienną perspektywę badawczą, która nie jest

wolna od własnych problemów historyczno-religioznawczych, Saggau rozwija nowy paradygmat, który określa mianem „unarodowienia sacrum", przeciwstawiany „sakralizacji narodu", terminowi z koncepcji używanej przez serbskie prawosławie w celu podważenia podstaw tożsamości młodego państwa bałkańskiego. W rezultacie tradycje religijne, teorie historyczne i miejsca kultu przyjmują rolę symboli w sporze między Czarnogórą a Serbią, co jednocześnie otwiera nowe możliwości studiów porównawczych w Europie Wschodniej.

Słowa kluczowe: Czarnogóra, Serbia, czarnogórski kościół prawosławny, historiografia prawosławna, pamięć, polityka tożsamości.

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