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Church and the War. The Vision of the Orthodox Monk Nicola Velimirović about World War I

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Abstract: Using documents, books and articles written by Nicola Velimirović during World War I, this article investigates his attitude towards this conflagration and shows how his Christian views influence his outlook on this topic. Shared during his visits to the USA and England and via lectures given in venues like Westminster Abbey or Oxford University, his ideas make him a militant for peace and, at the same time, a man who defends his country's cause in front of the Austro-Hungarian abuses. Investigating his writings from this point of view is important because he manages to show a different face of the future Serbian bishop and brings to the fore his concerns regarding his contemporary society.

Keywords: *Serbian cause; Serbia in Light and Darkness; Christianity and war; Humanism; Anglican Church; Serbian Orthodox Church.*

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1. Introduction

The commemoration of the centenary of World War I (WWI) has generated, over the past years, the release of a lot of publications about this topic (Mulligan 2017, p. 7). While some authors have investigated its causes, others tried to reconstruct the atmosphere in the trenches, to publish the sources or to describe the generally context of it. Not all the authors had the same success (Clark 2014), but many of them have offered an important contribution to the understanding of the event, its causes and implications.

But despite that serious concern with the topic, there are still important aspects that can be revealed by contemporary research. In the following pages, we will try to emphasize one of them, namely the vision of the Orthodox Saint Nicola Velimirović – a hieromonk, at the time – during the conflagration and during war, in general.

An important theological personality of his time in Serbia, he has been considered, together with Saint Justin Popovitch (Bojovic 2014, pp. 225-237; Bulovich & Jetvich 2009; Djogo, 2012; Popovic 2014), one of the most famous Church personalities from this space. Doctor in Theology at Cambridge University, he was sent there, at the beginning of the war, to plead for the cause of Serbia (Radic 2015, p. 279), in a space where, from the very beginning of the conflagration, there was a wave of sympathy for this people (Chirol, 1914). He preached in some Anglican Churches as well as in the USA and held conferences speaking about the situation of his country. His speeches and activity made him famous all around the world (von Arx, 2006, p. 309). Upon returning to Serbia, he engaged in a rich correspondence with some of his friends on this topic and published a few brochures in which he expressed his views about the war; these brochures were very popular and influenced the literature of those times about the war (Chapman, 2017).

Drawing on such written resources we will try to outline his opinion about the war, to point out its particularities, to show the influence of his religious convictions and how he managed to influence public opinion in England or in other cultural confessional spaces. We will also shortly present, for the readers that are not familiar with his life and activity, the landmarks of his biography and the context of his life and activity.

2. The actuality of the topic in the context of postmodern society

Reading this article, one may rise the question: which is the use of the topic in a postmodern society? The answer is in the same time simple and complex. War was and still is a relevant topic. Approached by the

historians that not only try to investigate aspects like its religiosity (Groza, 2017, p. 215), but also to see its consequences (Morariu 2017) or other elements, the topic is still important in investigations from areas like the social one and useful in understanding concepts like the social constructivism (Sandu & Unguru, 2017, p. 60). In a world where the war is still present and in order to be avoided or prevented is necessary to be understood its inner mechanism, works and opinions of authors like Nicola Velimirović must for sure be investigated. On the other side, their autobiographical content, that often refers also to aspects like the political theology (Morariu 2018, p. 1) can be also used in order to create bridges among spiritualities and domains and therefore, can connect those past times with the postmodern context, so deep influenced by the recourse to the self and therefore, defined by the need for introspection and autobiography. For all these reasons, we consider important to bring again into attention a topic like this one and we see also useful this type of demarche.

3. Nicola Velimirović - bio-bibliography

Born on December 23rd, 1880, in Lelic village from Serbia, 100 km near Belgrade (von Arx 2006, p. 307), Nicolaj Velimirović graduated "Saint Sava" Seminary from Belgrade in 1905 (Bojovic, 2014, p. 206); he studied for a short time in Halle in Germany and then he took his PhD in Bern on July 18th, 1908 (von Arx 2006, p. 312) with the thesis entitled *Der Glaube an die Auferstehung Christi als Grunddogma der apostolischen Kirche* (The Faith in the Resurrection of Christ as Foundational Dogma of the Apostolic Church), written under the coordination of bishop Eduard Herzog, professor of New Testament Studies (Bojovic 2014; von Arx 2006, pp. 312-313), appreciated with *summa cum laudae* and published two years later (Velimirovic, 1910). Shortly after, in 1909, he prepared in Geneva a second thesis about Berkley philosophy (Bojovic 2014; Rogich, 1993, p. 162), and after finishing it he was sent to Oxford, for working on a 3rd one.

In 1909, he became a monk, keeping his name Nicola, and in 1915, he is sent again, by his Church, to England and the United States of America to plead for the Serbian cause, as mentioned. But, about this moment and its implications we will speak later in detail. At the end of the war, in 1919, he went back to his country and was ordained as bishop of Žiča. One year later, he was transferred as bishop of Ohrid, in Macedonia, where he led a very fruitful pastoral activity during the interwar period and WWII.

In the 1930s, he also visited the Holy Mount Athos, considered as the heart of monastic Orthodox life. This visit changed his life and vision

about the world and helped him to meet important spiritual fathers like Silouan from Athos (Ică jr. 2001, p.7); for more information about his life and activity, see also: Larchet (2001); Morariu (2015, pp. 129-133); Morariu (2016); Sacharov (1973). Impressed by the latter, by his presence and how the work of grace was manifested in his life, bishop Nicola ordained there, in the same year, Silouan's disciple, Sophrony, as a deacon. Later, Nicola Velimirović encouraged him to publish his Elder's notes about spiritual life.

For his opinions against Nazism, during World War II, he was imprisoned in Žiça Monastery which, shortly after, was robbed and destroyed by Nazi soldiers. Subsequently, he was imprisoned in Liubostina monastery (Alexaner, 2017; Byford, 2006; Listhaug, 2011; MacDonald, 2002; Vulesica, 2007). On December 14th, 1944, he was sent to Dachau lager, together with the Serbian Orthodox patriarch Gavriil, where he was tortured. At the end of the war, he was released and, in 1946, angry with the Yugoslav communism, he migrated to the USA, where he lived until the end of his life, i.e., March 18th, 1956. During this period, he taught at some Orthodox seminaries, like: the Serbian Orthodox Seminary from Libertyville, Illinois, "Saint Tikon" Orthodox Seminary from South Canaan, where he was also rector, and Saint Vladimir Seminary from Crestwood, New York (Rogich, 1993, p. 164). Because of the political situation of his country and of his attitude against communism, his body was repatriated and buried in Western Serbia only on April, 27, 1991, 25 years after his death (Rogich, 1993, p. 165).

He wrote many articles, studies and books on theology, history and sociology (Velimirovic, 1939, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; 2008a; 2008b), that were translated in other languages during his lifetime and after his death. They are used both for theological research and the practical personal life of the faithful of the Orthodox Church. His homilies were published together with some of his investigations on the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church, essays on politics, religion or social life. Also, his meditations written during the detention period are published in anthologies as well as the moral lessons given to his spiritual sons. Several articles initially published in theological journals will also be anthologized there. As a professor, bishop, writer and spiritual father he was very appreciated both by his spiritual sons, but also by important personalities of the time, like Saint John Maximovitch of San Francisco, the aforementioned fathers from Month Athos, as well as by many other cultural, social and political personalities.

For all his life and activity, for his bravery and courage during difficult moments of his country and Church history, on May 19th, 2003, he was canonized by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

4. The vision of the Orthodox monk Nicola Velimirović about the First World War

Although, from the first use of the term "political theology" in Schmitt's book in 1922 (Schmitt, 1985), it has been said that after the fall of the Byzantine Empire (May 29, 1453) the Orthodox Church has never been involved in political theology (Kalaitzidis, 2012), we consider that the important fathers and writers of the Church were always concerned with aspects of political theology (Morariu, 2017, p. 129) or part of some important events that were linked to them (Meyendorff, 1991, p. 15). An obvious example is Saint Nicola Velimirović and his views on WWI. But before speaking about this, it would be useful to see some details about the context of his writings and his role as a defender of the Serbian cause in England and the USA.

As it was said by some authors who have investigated the problem, WWI was an event that also influenced the Churches during that period (Banac, 2014). While at the beginning of the 20th century, most of the Orthodox Churches, except the Russian one, were almost ignored by the Anglican ones (Chapman, 2015, p. 391), after the beginning of the war they became very open for them. Therefore, as researchers emphasize:

"At the beginning of the First World War, some associations, together with Eastern Churches Association, in 1914, have endeavoured to sustain Serbian cause through educational programs but also through practical initiatives, like the visits of some Serbian leaders, but not only in this way. In this context, Saint Nicolas Velimirovic visited England in October 1915 and had lectures in Margret's Church, Westminster Abbey, about the Serbian's religion and their desire to union." (Chapman, 2015, p. 392).

In this context, some priests and monks were engaged in the mission of promoting the Serbian cause abroad. Among them there were also the hieromonks Nicola Velimirović and Josif Cvijovic (Radic 2015, p. 279). Moreover, the Anglican Churches from London and Oxford allowed the Serbians to celebrate and preach there while a Seminary for Serbians was opened in Cuddesdon been where, together with the two aforementioned monks, there were British teachers too (Radic, 2015, p. 280). In those years,

while people like Leighton Pullan (1865-1940) spoke about Serbia and the war in the Anglican Church pleading for the Serbian cause (Radic 2015, p. 280), England was visited, in May 1916, by prince Alexander and the Archbishop Dimitrije Pavlovic (1846-1930) who visited Clewer monastery from Windor and Oxford. They prayed in "Saint Paul's" Cathedral from Westminster Abbey and contributed to the strengthening of the relationship between the two kingdoms. In this context, British diplomats suggested to celebrate Kosovo day on June 28, 1916. Then, Randal Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, preached about the Asian invaders who occupied the Serbian cruciate, taking their freedom (Radic, 2015, pp. 392-393).

But what was Saint Nicola's role in all this activity? Apart from his teaching activity, he often preached in different Anglican churches impressing local congregations through his knowledge of English, erudition and message (Batakovic, 2004, p. 70). A proof of the respect of this country for him can be considered the fact that in 1920, he received an honorary PhD from Oxford University (Bojovic, 2014, p. 211). He came here in 1915, left the city in 1916 and came back in 1917 when he preached again about the positive influence of the British Empire in maintaining justice and freedom for Christian peoples (Chapman, 2015, p. 392). Between these visits, he also traveled to the USA, where he performed the same activity and where he chose to exile himself after the end of the WWII.

After his last return from England, he had a long correspondence with the Anglican priest Leighton Pullan (Velimirović, 1927) on the topic of the War and its negative effects (Chapman, 2015, p. 209) and published some books dedicated to the conflagration. Therefore, as Bosko Bojovic points out:

"After his return from England, Father Nicola publishes also in English, the works: *The Soul of Serbia; Serbia in Light and Darkness; Religion and Nationality in Serbia; The Religious Spirit of the Slavs; The Agony of the Church*, all of them in 1916" (Bojovic, 2014, p. 209).

Readers could be tempted to think that he felt inspired and wanted to enrich his publication list. But if they read the titles of these books and investigate their contents (and of the other ones dedicated to the war, not mentioned by the Serbian historian), they will see that in fact, the future bishop was speaking not only about the situation of his country, but mostly against the war. While in books like *Symbols and signs* (Velimirović, 2010b) he presents to the English-speaking readers the history of his country highlighting the reasons why the Serbs want to be recognized as an

independent people, keep their identity and save their rights, in *Serbia in Light and Darkness* (Velimirović, 1916), after emphasizing similar aspects, he wrote about the relationships between Serbia and England (Cantuar, 1916, p. 10) and expressed his gratitude towards the English people who helped his country during the conflagration. He mentions in a passage from the beginning of his work:

"I want to thank you (the inhabitants of the UK, n. n.), for the many sacrifices that the people of this country have made for Serbia during the World War. Many of English nurses and many doctors from there have died in Serbia in very brave way, trying to save Serbs life during typhus epidemic. They have lost their lives for saving the ones of the suffering neighbours and they have won a better life. Their work will never be forgotten, and their graves will be respected as relics by us, the Serbs." (Velimirović 1916, p. 16; Velimirović, 1986, p. 437).

But if these passages from his work are peaceful and filled with words of gratitude, it must be said that most of the works dedicated to the war written by him are very tough. Sometimes he accuses there the society and the world for the death of so many innocent people while, in other situations, he speaks about the incompatibility between a Christian's status, understood as a peacemaker, and violence and the use of weapons. According to him, in order to avoid future conflagrations, the society must create pan-humanism (Velimirović, 2008a, p. 16). For this purpose, it must invest in the education of the children, who are the future. He even finds there a reason of comparison with Jesus' words (Velimirovic, 2008a, 11).

But there will also be situations when he does not avoid quoting writers and world personalities who had nothing to do with Christianity or who even were against it, like the Russian writer militant for socialism, Leo Tolstoy (1922, 1953, 2005, 2008, 2014). His reference to the Russian novelist can be found in his correspondence with the aforementioned English priest that was his friend from university. He sends the future bishop a number from *Everybody's Magazine* with an article entitled: *If Christians are fighting, are they still Christians?*, (Velimirović 2010a, p. 2) which makes him think seriously about that and write several letters that will be published in a small booklet. This is the piece in which Saint Nicola writes about Tolstoy:

"Who is against the war? I couldn't tell you, my friend. When, in 1908, the War between Serbia and the Austro-Hungarians seemed imminent, Tolstoy was still alive. We wrote then very passionate against

the war. During the discussions about the war, many authors have strongly opposed it. But now, when we were released in a World war, I could not give you there no one's name of a big man who was strongly against the war. I don't even know it Tolstoy, if he would be alive, would be against the war." (Velimirović, 2010a, p. 23).

Other important fathers, contemporary to him, like John of Kronstadt (Kronstadt, 2005, p. 483; Kronstadt, 2009, p. 30;) often wrote against the Russian writer, criticising him for his atheist convictions and refusing to see the good parts of it.

For him, it is more important to see the damages of the war and to find the ones who are guilty. Angry, he will say in one of his writings that "the Church should do self-criticism and consider that it is guilty of the war," (Velimirović, 2008a, p. 73); he criticized her weakness manifested in her fear to protest against violence and the fear to speak about the call for unity as about a necessity of those times (Velimirović, 2008a, p. 71). In his opinion, the most important guilt of the Church was that of not emphasizing clearly the incompatibility between the Church and war. As he wrote to his English friend:

"Christianity cannot, in no one way, reconcile with the war. Christianity is white, war is black. Christianity is middle-day, war is middle-night." (Velimirović, 1927, p. 13).

After speaking about the Church and war, about his country and her tragedy rooted in the desire for independence (Velimirović, 2008a, p. 136), he gave a complex description of the situation of the whole Europe during WWI, underlining the fact that:

"The poverty of the European civilisation was highlighted by this war. The ugly emptiness of Europe has been showed for embarrassing those who used to worship it. It was a shiny silk mask which was hiding the emptiness and the poverty of Europe. This mask has been called: culture, civilisation, progress, modernism. Everything was only "vanitas vanitatum" and "povertas povertatum". When her soul has left her, what left was empty, ugly, dangerous. When religion plunged into infirmity, then science became a mask of proudness, the art, a mask of vanity, the policy, a mask of shamelessness, law, a mask of voracity, theology, a mask of scepticism, technical knowledge, a poor surrogate for spirituality, journalism, a desperate surrogate of literature, literature, a sick and meaningless nostalgia, a dwarf of

acrobatics, civilisation, a pretext for imperialism, fight for justice, a misinterpreted formula of some primitive creeds, the morals, the most controversial problem, the individualism, the second name of egoism and ego-tism." (Velimirovic, 1927, p. 52).

His characterization, still valuable today, is important and it shows that the Serbian theologian really understood the meaning of the war and its implications. His other notes confirm this. They are also useful tools for contemporary researchers in the process of understanding and investigating the conflagration.

5. Conclusion

As we have already seen, the Serbian Orthodox bishop Nicola Velimirović is an important source for investigation and understanding World War I both by his activity and his writings. His statute as a delegate of his Church to plead for his country's cause in the United Kingdom and the United States of America will not prevent him from criticizing the war and from seeing the Church guilty for it, because of her weakness, or to militate for the war's end. His conceptions, rooted in the biblical and patristic theology, are still actual and his writings are still important because of their message, of their statute of sources and of the information contained. His advice, such as to invest in young generations and in their education for the future of the world, and his ideas about working at pan-humanism for a deeper communion between the Churches, are also still important and can be used nowadays.

Therefore, the investigation of his works one hundred years after the end of the conflagration, is both a reason to contribute in a different way to the understanding of the war, its evolution, motivations and interior motivation, but also a reason for the restitution of the works of the former bishop of Ohrid and Žiça to the contemporary scientific space.

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