

DISTINGUISHING ‘ANTI-JUDAISM’ FROM ‘ANTISEMITISM’: RECENT CHAMPIONING OF SERBIAN BISHOP NIKOLAJ VELIMIROVIĆ¹

Razlikovanje „Anti-Judaizma“ od „Antisemitizma“: Skorašnja reinterpretacija dela srpskog vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića

APSTRAKT Nakon pada Berlinskog zida u Istočnoj Evropi kontinuitet ideologije krajnje desnice postaje očigledan i to u meri u kojoj obnovu ovih ideja prati reinterpretiranje istorije i rehabilitacija osporavanih istorijskih ličnosti, među kojima su mnoge, 40 godina ranije, bile optužene za antisemitizam, fašizam i naklonost Nacistima. Članak se bavi specifičnim primerom postkomunističkog revizionizma u Srbiji. Glavni cilj rada je istraživanje retorike vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića (1880 – 1956), kontraverznog filozofa Srpske pravoslavne crkve, čija dela sadrže otvoreni antisemitizam. U radu se teži prepoznavanju strategija koje primenjuju promotori njegovih ideja suočavajući se sa prigovorima o antisemitizmu. Autor se fokusira na kontroverze ispoljene u vezi sa Velimirovićevim antisemitizmom u vreme njegove formalne kanonizacije maja 2003. Autor ukazuje da se, za razliku od Rimokatoličke i Protestantske hrišćanske denominacije, istočne crkve, uključujući i Srpsku pravoslavnu crkvu, još nisu formalno odredile prema problemu hrišćanskog antisemitizma iz doktrinarne i eklezijastičke perspektive. Upravo zbog nepromenjenog tradicionalizma promotori Velimirovićevih ideja moraju pribegli opravdavanju i negiranju antisemitizma na način koji njegove stavove čine konzistentnim sa preovlađujućim sekularnim normama etničke tolerancije.

KLJUČNE REČI *Nikolaj Velimirović, antisemitizam, anti-Judaizam*

ABSTRACT After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the continuity in the ideology of the Eastern European far right has been apparent in the extent to which the restoration of right-wing ideas was accompanied with widespread rewriting of history and the rehabilitation of contentious historical figures, many of whom, 40 years earlier, had attained notoriety for their antisemitism and fascist and pro-Nazi leanings. This article examines a specific example of postcommunist revisionism in Serbian society. The principal aim of the article is to explore the rhetoric of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1880 – 1956), a controversial Serbian Orthodox Christian philosopher whose writing includes overtly antisemitic passages, and elucidate the strategies that his supporters have been deploying to promote him and maintain

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his popularity while countering objections of antisemitism. The paper focuses on the way in which the controversy surrounding Velimirović's antisemitism was managed around the time of his formal canonisation in May 2003. The author argues that unlike the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations, eastern churches, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, have as yet not formally addressed from a doctrinal or ecclesiological perspective the problem of Christian antisemitism. Due to the unwavering traditionalism justifications and denials of antisemitism must be constructed in such a way that they present the bishop's views as consistent with the prevailing secular norms of ethnic tolerance.

KEY WORDS *Nikolaj Velimirović, Christian antisemitism, anti-Judaism*

Postcommunist transition in Eastern Europe included the revival of right-wing political extremism and the resurfacing of racist and antisemitic ideas (Ramet, 1999; Hockenos, 1993; Volovici, 1994; Shafir, 2002). The emergence in the early 1990s of Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party in Russia, Tudor's Romania Mare in Romania and Sladek's Republican Party in the Czech Republic are cases in point. The revival of the far right frequently consisted of the revitalisation of the ideas and values of the fascist movements of the 1930s and 1940s. After more than 40 years of marginalisation, the discredited antidemocratic, anticommunist and antisemitic ideas which had reached a peak of popularity in the decade preceding the Second World War were revived in the post-Cold War ideological 'thaw' (Irvine, 1995). In other words, after the fall of the Berlin Wall ideologues of the right often picked up where their predecessors had left off in 1945.

The continuity in the ideology of the Eastern European far right is apparent in the extent to which the restoration of right-wing ideas was accompanied with widespread rewriting of history and the rehabilitation of contentious historical figures, many of whom, 40 years earlier, had attained notoriety for their antisemitism and fascist and pro-Nazi leanings. From the late 1980s biographies of the likes of Pavelić in Croatia, Antonescu in Romania, Tiso in Slovakia and Horthy in Hungary were subjected to a comprehensive makeover as their public status was transformed from that of villains to heroes, perpetrators to victims (Shafir, 2002; Ramet, 1999; Volovici, 1994).

The revival of antisemitism in Eastern Europe and the rehabilitation of contentious historical figures with demonstrably anti-Jewish views are particularly noteworthy in light of the strong moral norm against the public expression of antisemitism which developed in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Over the past halfcentury blatant racism and antisemitism have become subjects of criticism and matters of shame, banished from mainstream discourse and everyday conversation. As Michael Billig notes, in contemporary society 'there are taboos, which restrict what can be uttered. Overt uninhibited antisemitism and racism are not to be spoken in polite company. Those who wish to criticise non-whites or Jews from the outside, must find complex, indirect and apologetic ways of doing so' (Billig, 1999, p. 259).

Negative talk about minorities is today often seen 'as biased, prejudiced or racist, and as inconsistent with the general values of tolerance' (van Dijk, 1992, p. 115). As a result, any criticism of the racial, ethnic or religious other tends to be hedged, mitigated, excused, explained and otherwise managed in such a way that it will not 'count' against the speaker or writer. Face-keeping, positive self-presentation and impression management are the usual strategies that language users have recourse to in such a situation of possible 'loss of face': they have to make sure that they are not misunderstood and that no unwanted inferences are made from what they say. (van Dijk, 1992, p. 115)

The norm against bigotry has been shown to be so pervasive that it is 'even shared by the Fascist writer who is at pains to deny his own prejudice but to pin the label upon liberal opponents' (Billig, 1990).

The taboo surrounding the public expression of antisemitism has left its mark on the discursive dynamic of postcommunist social remembrance. Restoration of the credibility of right-wing historical figures necessitates the reworking and re-presenting of potentially embarrassing biographical details and ideological positions by the relevant 'memory-makers', in compliance with the rules that govern contemporary interethnic and interfaith relations. Memory transformation thus rests on the successful attendance to issues of moral accountability and the denial of prejudice.

This article is part of a larger project that examines a specific example of postcommunist revisionism in Serbian society. The research explores the changing representation, over the past 20 or so years, of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1880 – 1956), a controversial Serbian Orthodox Christian philosopher whose writing includes overtly antisemitic passages. Having been vilified by the communist authorities in Yugoslavia as an antisemite, a traitor and a fascist, over the past two decades Bishop Velimirović has come to be revered within Serbian Orthodox circles as the greatest national religious figure since medieval times (see Byford, 2004a). Velimirović is today routinely compared, in religious circles, to the Serbian national saint Sava and to St John Chrysostom. The metropolitan of Montenegro and Primorska Amfilohije Radović recently referred to Velimirović as a 'prophet and missionary of the rarest kind' (cited in Kuburović, 2003, p. 22). The bishop of Šabac and Valjevo Lavrentije Trifunović called him 'the greatest Serbian son, cleric and thinker after St Sava' whose work is a 'spiritual skyscraper, a mountain of natural wealth yet to be discovered and explored' (Trifunović, 2002). According to unofficial estimates, over a million copies of Velimirović's books have been sold in Serbia since the late 1980s, making him the country's most popular author of the postcommunist period. The widespread public adulation of Nikolaj Velimirović culminated in May 2003, when he was formally canonised by the Serbian Orthodox Church (Byford, 2004b).

The principal aim of the project is to explore the rhetoric of Velimirović's postcommunist rehabilitation and elucidate the strategies that his supporters have been deploying to promote him and maintain his popularity while countering objections of antisemitism. The recently published examination of the early stages of Velimirović's rehabilitation has revealed how in the late 1980s and early 1990s supporters within the Serbian Church and the country's nationalist establishment aggressively promoted a sanitised biographical narrative which strove to keep the antisemitic aspects of the bishop's religious philosophy away from public discourse (see Byford, 2004a). This wilful forgetting of the controversy surrounding Velimirović's personal history was a means of renegotiating for the bishop a credible position in a broader social context where his views would be seen as violating established moral norms.

The present paper focuses on the way in which the controversy surrounding Velimirović's antisemitism was managed around the time of his formal canonisation in May 2003. The decision by the Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church to canonise Velimirović revived the dispute surrounding the merits of his controversial writings, and in turn led to a rise in the public availability of unsympathetic appraisals of his life and work. The liberal media, the intellectual elite, civil rights groups and other critics actively 'reminded' the public of the new saint's well documented animosity towards Jews and questioned the wisdom and the motives behind the church's decision. As a result, the embarrassing and damaging aspects of Velimirović's personal history became regular currency in discussions and debates about his reputation. In the face of rising criticism, repression was supplemented with a complementary strategy, one involving denial and justification. In the spring and summer of 2003 Bishop Nikolaj's supporters openly refuted, negated and dismissed the allegations of antisemitism directed at him.

In examining the strategies of denial, I focus on those aspects of moral accountability management which have a manifestly religious component and which stem from Velimirović's status as a religious figure and an Orthodox Christian thinker. Unlike the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations, eastern churches, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, have as yet not formally addressed from a doctrinal or ecclesiological perspective the problem of Christian antisemitism (Đorđević, 1998; Tabak, 2000; Hackel, 1998; Rudnev, 1995; Gurevich, 1995). The striving towards what Hellig (2002) calls 'responsible theology' which has been apparent among the western churches since the Holocaust has bypassed the Orthodox churches. Unwavering traditionalism and a staunch belief in the immutability of the Holy Tradition ensures the persistence of 'medieval preconceptions' of Jews within contemporary Orthodox culture (Tabak, 2000). Although traditional 'teaching of contempt' (Isaac, 1964) for Jews is for the most part implicit (or repressed), and thus cannot be said to play a significant part in the

everyday religious life of the faithful, Christian antisemitism persists in Orthodox Christianity's official religious doctrine and liturgical practice.

The presence of Christian antisemitism in the teachings of the Serbian Orthodox Church imposes significant rhetorical demands on Velimirović's followers. Justifications and denials of antisemitism must be constructed in such a way that they present the bishop's views as consistent with the prevailing secular norms of ethnic tolerance, without at the same time undermining the church's traditionalist position on the Jews. The dominant strategy for dealing with this 'ideological dilemma' (Billig et al., 1988) will be shown to involve the renegotiation of the boundaries of the term 'antisemitism' and the management of a semantic distinction between, on the one hand, the seemingly unobjectionable creed of Christian anti-Judaism and, on the other, the antinormative ideology of secular Nazi antisemitism.

Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and his Controversial Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window

Nikolaj Velimirović was one of the most highly regarded Serbian Orthodox dignitaries of the first half of the twentieth century, famous for his patriotism as much as for his personal charisma, erudition and oratorical skills (Radosavljević, 1986; Stanišić, 1976; Bigović, 1998). Velimirović was a prolific writer whose opus comprises over 25 volumes of work, a great deal of which is of indisputable theological merit. In the early stages of his clerical career, Velimirović was widely perceived as a progressive young theologian and a liberal force within the Serbian Orthodox Church. He was a champion of ecumenical dialogue and maintained close links with Protestant churches in the UK and the United States, where he is still very highly regarded.

Significantly, however, the widespread popularity which Nikolaj Velimirović enjoys in Serbia today is attributable mainly to the importance attached to his later writing, which is manifestly nationalist and antiwestern. In the 1930s, at the pinnacle of his clerical career, Velimirović's political outlook underwent a fundamental transformation. The admiration for western Christianity and culture and the sympathies for the ecumenical movement which he harboured in his youth gave way to a xenophobic strand of Serbian clerical nationalism and populism. Velimirović propagated the rejection of individualism, equality, religious tolerance, democracy and other values of modernity and Enlightenment in favour of a society founded on Orthodox Christian traditions and a uniquely Serbian form of clerical nationalism and monarchism (Subotić, 1996; Radosavljević, 1986; Đorđević, 1996). Today, Velimirović is revered in Serbia above all as a *national* religious figure. His nationalist writings such as *Nacionalizam Svetog Save (The Nationalism of St Sava)* and *Srpski narod kao Teodul (The Theodule Serbian People)*, written in the 1930s,

are among his most widely known and cited works. Velimirović's political ideas have become an intrinsic part of contemporary Serbian nationalist rhetoric, which has Orthodoxy and antiwesternism at its core. Even some mainstream Serbian politicians on the right cite Velimirović as an indisputable moral and intellectual authority. In January 2003 the Serbian prime minister Vojislav Koštunica endorsed Velimirović's nationalist writings as a suitable blueprint for the post-Milošević version of Serbian nationalism (cited in Jevtić, 2003, pp. 321 – 22).

The strong antiwestern and antimodernist streak which permeated Velimirović's writing in the 1930s was suffused with antisemitic sentiments. Anti-Jewish references in his religious thinking consisted of a blend of traditional Christian antisemitism and the antisemitic conspiratorial tradition which reached its peak of popularity across Europe in the 1930s. In Velimirović's work Jews are portrayed as Christ-killers, a cursed people who betrayed God, and a powerful satanic force behind modernity and secularism, engaged in a conspiracy against Christian Europe.

In the decades preceding the Second World War Velimirović's nationalist ideology provided an important source of inspiration for the forces of Serbian fascism, epitomised by the movement *Zbor*, founded in 1934 by the pro-Nazi politician Dimitrije Ljotić (Stefanović, 1984; Martić, 1980; Parežanin, 1971). In the 1930s, Velimirović openly supported Ljotić's political platform, and considered himself the spiritual leader and *éminence grise* of Serbian right-wing populism exemplified by *Zbor* (Popov, 1993; Subotić, 1996). There was also significant overlap between the membership of *Zbor* and that of the *Bogomoljci* (the Devotionalists), an evangelical movement which operated under Velimirović's patronage. According to some sources, from 1935 onwards leaders of *Zbor* were the 'backbone' of the Devotionalist movement (Subotić, 1996), while according to others the Devotionalists collectively joined Ljotić's organisation in the late 1930s (Stefanović, 1984). Velimirović and Ljotić broke off relations in 1941 due to disagreement over the issue of Nazi collaboration, although they appear to have overcome their differences in the spring of 1945, when they were reunited in Slovenia. At Ljotić's funeral in April 1945 Velimirović spoke of the deceased – by that time an undisputed Nazi collaborator and war criminal – as a 'politician bearing a cross', and an 'ideologue of Christian nationalism' whose importance 'transcends the boundaries of Serbian politics' (Velimirović, 2001, p. 58).

Following the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, *Zbor* became the most enthusiastic and active collaborationist organisation in Serbia. Velimirović resisted pressures to join Ljotić in active collaboration and instead sided with the Chetnik nationalist insurgents who were faithful to the exiled King Peter II of Yugoslavia (Radosavljević, 2003; Džomić, 2003; Radić, 2002). For this Velimirović was arrested by the German authorities in the autumn of 1941. He was held under surveillance in Serbian monasteries for three years before being transferred, in the

autumn of 1944, to the concentration camp at Dachau. Velimirović spent two months at the camp as one of the few privileged 'honorary prisoners'. Historical evidence suggests that Velimirović's incarceration in Dachau was motivated primarily by the desire among the German authorities in Serbia to use him as a pawn in negotiations with Serbian collaborators, among whom he wielded considerable authority. Velimirović was freed in December 1944, following a political deal struck between Dimitrije Ljotić and the German envoy for South-Eastern Europe, Hermann Neubacher (Petranović, 1983; Parežanin, 1971; Radić, 2002).

Because of his right-wing nationalist credentials and especially because of the links with Dimitrije Ljotić, the postwar communist rulers of Yugoslavia declared Velimirović *persona non grata*. The bishop spent the last decade of his life in the USA, where he died in 1956. During the 40 years of communist rule the publication of Velimirović's work in Serbia was banned and he was subjected to a fierce campaign of public denunciation. Condemnations in the press, which focused primarily on Velimirović's anticommunism and links with Nazi collaborators, referred to him as the 'lackey of the Germans' (Anon., 1950, p. 1), a 'fascist' (Miletić, 1972, p. 31) and even a 'war criminal' (Jakšić, 1981, p. 3).

This state of affairs persisted until the rise of Serbian nationalism in the late 1980s, when a small group of Velimirović's supporters within the Serbian Orthodox Church, led by three ambitious nationalist theologians, Amfilohije Radović, Artemije Radosavljević and Atanasije Jevtić, emerged as a prominent force within the ecclesiastical establishment (Tomanić, 2001; Radić, 1996; Perica, 2002). Together with other nationalist institutions such as the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Serbian Union of Writers, these men became the principal voice of Serbian ethnic nationalism. By 1991 Radović, Jevtić and Radosavljević had all been ordained as bishops, and since then they have been wielding considerable influence within the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The newly acquired status of Velimirović's supporters enabled them to embark on an intensive public campaign aimed at rehabilitating their hero (see Byford, 2004a, 2004b). The campaign consisted of measures aimed at placing positive interpretations of Nikolaj's life in the public memory. In 1985 the bishop of Šabac and Valjevo, Jovan Velimirović (the nephew of Nikolaj), founded with the aid of his assistant deacon Ljubomir Ranković the religious journal *Glas Crkve*, which was devoted to the popularisation of his uncle's writings. In the late 1980s 'Glas Crkve' became the first publishing house in postcommunist Serbia to print Velimirović's books. In 1986 Archimandrite Atanasije Jevtić published, privately, *Novi Zlatousti (The New Chrysostom)*, by Artemije Radosavljević, the first affirmative biography of Velimirović written since the Second World War.

In addition to various publishing activities, the Diocese of Šabac and Valjevo organised regular commemorative ceremonies dedicated to Velimirović, including the transport, in May 1991, of his remains from the USA to Serbia. All these events

were endorsed, attended and publicised by the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as by the country's nationalist political and cultural elite.

In the mid-1980s, as the campaign for Velimirović's rehabilitation gradually gathered pace, the topic of antisemitism attained a particularly dominant position in the controversy surrounding his life and work. In 1985, at a time when Velimirović's books were still formally prohibited in Yugoslavia, the then Serbian bishop of Western Europe, Lavrentije Trifunović, published in Germany a previously unknown collection of Velimirović's sermons. The work, published under the title *Poruka srpskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor (Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window)*, was said to have been written surreptitiously, on scraps of (toilet) paper, during Velimirović's brief internment in Dachau (Trifunović, 1985).

The principal message of Velimirović's prison writing, which proved to be his most infamous work, was that the Second World War was the inevitable consequence of the secularisation of 'godless Europe' and that the tragic fate of Serbs during the war was the result of their collective betrayal of God and Christian traditions in favour of communism and the much-maligned secular European culture. Behind the de-Christianised European values anathemised in this book, Velimirović cited a Satanic, Jewish conspiracy, the aim of which was to 'place a Jewish Messiah on Christ's throne' (Velimirović, 1998, p. 194). He wrote:

Europe knows nothing other than what Jews serve up as knowledge. It believes nothing other than what Jews order it to believe. It knows the value of nothing until Jews impose their own measure of values . . . all modern ideas including democracy, and strikes, and socialism, and atheism, and religious tolerance, and pacifism, and global revolution, and capitalism, and communism are the inventions of Jews, or rather their father, the Devil. (Velimirović, 1998, p. 194)

In *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* antisemitic themes typical of the conspiratorial ideological tradition (see for example Cohn, 1957; Pipes, 1998) occur side by side with traditional Christian conceptions of Jews as murderers of Christ, Sons of the Devil and a people 'inspired by the stinking breath of Satan'. Velimirović writes that Jews

Showed themselves to be worse enemies of God than the godless Pilate, because in the fury of their malice, they uttered those terrible words: Let his blood be on us and on our children! So innocent blood became the whip that drove them like cattle through the centuries, from land to land, like fire that burns their repository of schemes against Christ. Because that is what their father, the Devil, teaches them; the Devil taught them how to stand against the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Devil taught them through the centuries how to fight against the sons of Christ, against the children of Light, against the followers of the Gospel and eternal life. (Velimirović, 1998, p. 193)

Words to the Serbian People instantly acquired a special status in critical literature on Bishop Nikolaj. Practically every unsympathetic article or commentary about his work published since 1985 includes a quotation from this book, frequently

highlighting the fact that Velimirović wrote it in Dachau, while being well aware of the real face of Nazism and the true consequences of its ideology (see for example David, 1991; Đorđević, 1996; Lebl, 2002; Tomanić, 2001; Byford and Billig, 2001). In religious publications and in ecclesiastical discourse, the status of *Words to the Serbian People* has been more complex. In the early stages of Velimirović's rehabilitation, in line with the dominant strategy of repression, references to the bishop's Dachau writings tended to be omitted from commemorative discourse. Remembrance was dominated by favourable and selective representations which concealed his antisemitic leanings (see Byford, 2004a). Occasional references to the book focused exclusively on its anticommunist and anti-European message while ignoring allusions to Jews (Byford, 2004b). In the context of direct polemic about Velimirović's antisemitism, followers tended to distance themselves from the book by minimising its significance. In 1986 Archimandrite Atanasije Jevtić noted that *Words to the Serbian People* was not 'actually uttered as a message to the Serbian people', but was 'merely' a 'collection of casual notes, written on toilet paper, notes which Nikolaj never intended for publication' (Jevtić, 1986, p. 11). The antisemitic passages in the book were also set aside as a marginal aspect of the bishop's overall work, which had been taken out of context by malicious detractors. Jevtić wrote that 'the claim about Velimirović's so called "antisemitism" is based on a few extracts from his writings at Dachau, which were ripped out of context' (Jevtić, 1986, p. 12). At a commemorative ceremony in 1987 the nationalist historian Borivoje Karapandžić argued that Velimirović's critics, the 'atheistic journalists in Yugoslavia, out of the 172-page book, quote just one sheet of paper, two pages, which the communist press satanically picked out in order to denigrate the bishop as an antisemite and an enemy of Judaism' (cited in Janković, 2002b, p. 205).

Distance from the controversial message of *Words to the Serbian People* among Velimirović's supporters has been for the most part equivocal. In the same article in which he referred to the work as a collection of 'casual notes' for private consumption, Atanasije Jevtić described it also as a work whose 'theological, philosophical, historiographic and literary value should not be undermined by politically motivated misinterpretations' (Jevtić, 1986, p. 12). On other occasions too, and this includes the decade and a half-long campaign for Velimirović's canonisation, *Words to the Serbian People* has been attributed considerable importance, and is still regarded, in some prominent circles within the Serbian Church, as occupying a privileged position in Velimirović's opus, albeit not for its antisemitic content (see Byford, 2004b).

Around the time of Velimirović's canonisation, in May 2003, the controversial antisemitic invective found in the bishop's prison writing came once again under close public scrutiny. Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and all those who have taken on the role of defenders of the bishop's reputation

found themselves under acute pressure to account for their hero's controversial views. The analytic sections in this article explore these responses in detail.

Data Analysed in the Study

The primary source of material used in this study is a collection of recorded conversations, conducted specifically for the purposes of this research, with 12 public figures in Serbia known for their active involvement in the campaign for Velimirović's rehabilitation and for their continuing public admiration for the bishop and his work. Respondents included active members of the Orthodox clergy, publishers of religious literature, editors of religious journals, a well-known nationalist poet, and leaders of three Christian right-wing movements which have emerged in recent years as the most controversial exponents of Velimirović's clerical nationalist philosophy (Byford, 2002, 2003). Because of the respondents' public status, they are identified in the analytical sections by name, rank and occupation. Conversations, which lasted between one and four hours, were held in the Serbian cities of Belgrade, Kraljevo and Valjevo in July and August 2003.

The interview data are supplemented with material from Serbia's mainstream and religious press and electronic media. This material includes favourable representations and recollections of the bishop's life and work which appeared in the Serbian media around the time of the canonisation (May to June 2003). The analysed texts cover a wide range of journalistic forms including newspaper interviews, commentaries, editorials, serialised texts, debates and readers' letters as well as a small amount of radio material.

Some of the media material examined below was overtly argumentative in that denials and justifications of Velimirović's antisemitism were produced in response to direct questions from journalists, or in the context of organised polemics and debates between supporters and critics. On the other hand most of the material, including the interviews, occurred in a context that was not openly adversarial or confrontational. Prior to the interviews, respondents were told that the topic of research was the 'the role of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović in contemporary Serbian Orthodox culture'. This vague description of the study's aims was intended to allow the respondents to produce their own recollections and representations of the bishop without having the controversy imposed onto the agenda by the interviewer. And yet most respondents spontaneously invoked and addressed the topic of antisemitism, pointing to the fact that the controversy and the argumentation about the merits of Velimirović's work have become an unavoidable topic of the language of his remembrance. Because of the similarity in the rhetoric of justification and denial found in media material and the interviews, the two sources of data are examined jointly in the forthcoming sections.

The interviews were conducted in Serbian, the native language of the respondents and the author of the study. Similarly, the media material examined below was originally published in the Serbian language. In subsequent sections the English translation of relevant extracts is provided, although when examining details of rhetoric, the original Serbian form of key terms and expressions is also included.

The Two Kinds of Antisemitism: the Rhetoric of Interpretative Denial

Research on the rhetorical and argumentative aspects of language and communication frequently points out that terms used to label and categorise social phenomena should not be regarded as predetermined, or as having decidable and demonstrable referents in empirical reality, but as contestable, fluid and locally contingent entities, which are constituted in social interaction (Edwards, 1997; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Billig, 1987; Billig *et al.*, 1988). The socially constructed nature of categories reflects their inherently argumentative quality. Categories are invoked, negotiated and disputed in the context of discursive acts the aim of which is to accomplish particular rhetorical goals such as to legitimise or to contest a particular version or description of reality.

The argumentative nature of categorisation has been shown to have important implications for the study of prejudice. Because prejudice depends on the existence of categories, allegations and denials of prejudice inevitably involve a debate about the meaning of relevant social objects such as 'gender', 'race', 'ethnicity' and so on (Billig *et al.*, 1988). Moreover, terms such as 'racism', 'tolerance', 'discrimination' and 'equality', around which the language of intergroup relations revolves, are themselves topicalised in discourse. Their meaning is constructed and their relevance negotiated in the context of manufacturing accusations, refuting criticism, apportioning blame, or positioning a view in relation to prevailing ethical norms (Edwards, 1997; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Billig, 1987; Rapley, 2001).

The term 'antisemitism' is a good example of a disputed and negotiated social category. In recent years, scholars, journalists, commentators, politicians and intellectuals in the West have debated the meaning of the term in the context of the controversy surrounding the distinction between the 'old' antisemitism of the Right and the 'new' antisemitism of the liberal Left (see Chesler, 2003; Iganski and Kosmin, 2003; Foxman, 2003). At the heart of this often heated dispute has been another contested categorisation, that which distinguishes the critique of Jews from the critique of Israel (see contributions on the topic in Rosenbaum, 2004 and Iganski and Kosmin, 2003). Public attention has recently focused also on some older distinctions related to the problem of antisemitism. The release in 2003 of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* revived the debate about the persistence of Christian antisemitism and its status in the moral universe *vis-à-vis* twentieth- and

twenty-first-century variants of antisemitism (USCCB, 2004; Lawler, 2004; Pawlikowski, 2004).

An impassioned debate about the nature and the meaning of the term 'antisemitism' also dominates the argumentative context surrounding Velimirović's remembrance in present day Serbian society. As we shall see, in affirmative accounts of Velimirović's position on Jews – articulated in public discourse around the time of the canonisation – denials and justifications of his contested stance centred around the discussion of what antisemitism 'really' is and how Velimirović's viewpoint fits into the negotiated definition of the term.

Shortly after the canonisation was announced by the Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Church, Archdeacon Ljubomir Ranković, co-founder of the publishing house 'Glas Crkve' and a leading player in the campaign for Velimirović's rehabilitation since the 1980s (see above; also Byford, 2004a), discussed the bishop's contentious views in a debate on Radio Free Europe. He argued that

The antisemitism, let's accept that term, of Bishop Nikolaj was on a theological (teolos'koj), or rather biblical level (biblijskoj ravni). That kind of antisemitism is present in the Bible itself, from the beginning, namely the Book of Moses, all the way through until the arrival of Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament. (Ranković, 2003a)

Writing in the moderately nationalist Belgrade daily *Glas Javnosti* a week earlier, Ranković similarly noted that 'the mention of Jews in *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* is a purely theological question (čisto teološko pitanje)' (Ranković, 2003b, p. 12). Matija Bećković, one of Serbia's best known nationalist poets and a regular participant in commemorative activities devoted to Nikolaj Velimirović, remarked in the interview conducted for the purposes of this study that the controversial writings on Jews are

. . . purely biblical discussions (čisto biblijske rasprave), and the 'antisemitic' phrases [in his writing] are actually far more common in the writings of Jews themselves, in the Old Testament . . . you could call them [antisemitic] only in the context of a malicious interpretation.

Apparent in these quotations, which are characteristic of the material examined in the study, is first of all the attempt at distancing from the term 'antisemitism'. The qualification is accepted reluctantly ('let's accept the term' – '*da prihvatim taj termin*') or placed in inverted commas (whether literally, in writing, or by intonation in interviews and audio records). On other occasions, the word antisemitism is prefaced with the word 'so-called' ('*takozvani*'). The opening sentence of the apologist *Episkop Nikolaj i Novi Zavet o Jevrejima (Bishop Nikolaj and the New Testament on the Jews)*, recently published by the Serbian Orthodox Church, defines its subject matter as the 'so-called "antisemitism" of Bishop Nikolaj' ('*takozvani "antisemitizam" Vladike Nikolaja*') (Samardžić, 2004, p. 5). The use of inverted commas and the word 'so-called' suggests that the validity and

the appropriateness of the term 'antisemitism', as the descriptor of Velimirović's position on Jews, are treated as problematic. The insinuation that the bishop was antisemitic is attributed, in the words of Matija Bećković, to disingenuous, 'malicious interpretation'. At the same time, accusations are not rejected outright. It is not denied that Velimirović was critical about Jews, but the nature of the alleged offence is 're-categorised as something less negative or more excusable' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992, p. 212). Speakers employ the tactic of particularisation (Billig, 1987) or what Stanley Cohen (2001) calls 'interpretative denial': Velimirović's stance towards Jews is offered as a special case, a specific type of antisemitism ('biblical' or 'theological'), which is understood to be different, in terms of both substance and consequence, to that against which there exists an implicitly acknowledged social norm.

The emphasis on the 'theological' or 'biblical' nature of Velimirović's antisemitism implies that a contrast can be drawn between this legitimate form of criticism of Jews and some kind of *real* antisemitism that warrants moral censure. Velimirović's stance is repeatedly referred to as 'purely theological' or 'purely biblical'. The notion of 'purity' ('čisto', 'čistoća') in this case suggests that Velimirović's views are confined to the acceptable category of criticism of Jews and therefore unpolluted by elements of other discredited antisemitic traditions. During the conversation with the author of this study held in August 2003, Deacon Ranković revealed that the 'other' kind of antisemitism is that propagated by the Nazis:

[Velimirović's] antisemitism is, in the real sense of the word, of the only kind that it can be, namely biblical . . . The Old Testament criticises the Jewish people for rejecting God, while the 'antisemitism' of the New Testament is when Jews are criticised for crucifying the Lord Jesus Christ . . . All of this – shall I say animosity – that may exist among Christians towards Jews is there because they are enemies of Christ. That and such [antisemitism] exist in the writing of Bishop Nikolaj. We might say that that is anti-Judaism (*antijudaizam*), a critique of Judaism (*kritika judaizma*), but in no way is it antisemitism. When one says antisemitism, the allusion is to Hitler, crematoria, etc. This is not the case at all in Velimirović's writing.

Similarly, in the article 'Serbi i Jevreji' ('Serbs and Jews') published in 2001 in the Christian right-wing magazine *Dveri*, publicist Vladimir Dimitrijević contested the view that Bishop Nikolaj was antisemitic on the grounds that he had nothing to do 'with Nazi theories of race', or with the 'crazy, pagan racism of Hitler's followers' (Dimitrijević, 2001).

The differentiation between antisemitism and anti-Judaism, alluded to by the defenders of Velimirović's reputation, is common across Christendom. Carroll (2002, p. 40) writes that the demarcation between 'antisemitism and anti-Judaism, with the clear meaning that the latter [is] an appropriate part of the defence of faith' had been a common feature of Catholic education prior to the Second Vatican Council. The declaration *We Remember: Reflection on the Shoah* issued by the

Vatican in March 1998 also distinguished between traditional Christian anti-Judaism and the 'late 18th and early 19th century racist theories which provided the foundations of National Socialism', although on this occasion the Vatican expressed regret over the 'longstanding sentiment of distrust and hostility' towards Jews implicit in 'anti-Judaism' (cited in Carroll, 2002, pp. 381 – 82).

This exercise in the redrawing of boundaries of antisemitism can play an important role in the denial of prejudice. Billig *et al.* (1988) have demonstrated how, in the discourse of the Right, a controversial political position on matters of race and ethnic relations can be effectively justified by means of a favourable comparison with a more radical view that is unambiguously extremist (see also Billig, 1990). For Velimirović's supporters contrasting 'theological antisemitism' with a more extreme and widely discredited position, namely 'Nazi antisemitism', constitutes an easily accessible and convincing means of constructing the bishop's stance towards Jews as acceptable. Wodak (1991) documents a similar phenomenon in contemporary Austria, where equating antisemitism with Nazi racist theories is used to divert attention away from other antisemitic traditions, including that rooted in Christianity.

It is also noteworthy that in Christian rhetoric, both in Serbia and elsewhere (see Goldhagen, 2002), the veracity of the distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism tends to be assumed rather than supported with suitable empirical or historical evidence. This feature of the argument is also of rhetorical significance. Van Dijk (1992, p. 105) has shown how the absence of corroboration can be used to present a version of reality as 'self-evident' and 'based on common sense'. In the present case, this strategy of 'apparent denial' (van Dijk, 1992, 1993) is rhetorically designed to attract support via the appeal to some imagined consensus about the differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable critique of Jews. In the discourse of Velimirović's remembrance the claim that the ideas of Christian anti-Judaism have nothing in common with Nazi antisemitism is invoked and presented as so normal and obvious that it does not require elaboration or validation.

Repeating the Word of God: Authority of the Gospels and the Reification of Antisemitic Discourse

The distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, which is constitutive of denial of prejudice, rests on the assumption that the former is an acceptable ideological position. This assumed legitimacy and acceptability needs to be worked up discursively. In the case of the management of Velimirović's moral accountability, by far the most common strategy of legitimisation involves the argument that anti-Jewish proclamations apparent in the bishop's writing originate directly from the Holy Scriptures.

Mladen Obradović, leader of *Otačastveni pokret Obraz* (Patriotic Movement Dignity), one of Serbia's most notorious Christian right-wing movements (see Byford, 2002) argues in the interview conducted for this study that, in writing about Jews, the bishop 'merely states some historical truths' (*'samo konstatuje neke istorijske činjenice'*).

I will remind you for instance that in the Old Testament you have their own, Jewish Old Testament prophets, therefore members of that same people, who said many [similar] things about their own people who rejected God . . . Also, you have the very words of the Lord Jesus Christ when he says to the Pharisees that they are a 'brood of vipers' or that their father is the Devil; Bishop Nikolaj merely quotes the Gospels (*samo citira Sveto pismo*).

Archdeacon Ljubomir Ranković wrote in the daily *Glas Javnosti* that

When he says of Jews that 'their father is the Devil', the bishop quotes and interprets (*citira i tumači*) the words of the Lord Jesus Christ – a Jew in body – words which were noted down by a Jew, the apostle and evangelist John: 'Your [Jews'] father is the devil, and you choose to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and is not rooted in the truth; there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie he is speaking his own language, for he is a liar and a father of lies' (John 8:44). (Ranković, 2003b, p. 12)

Ranković made the same claim on Radio Free Europe, when he said that 'when Bishop Nikolaj speaks of Jews that their father is the devil, he is practically quoting the words of Christ the Lord (*praktično citira reči gospoda Hrista*)' (Ranković, 2003a).

A similar argument was invoked by Protopresbyter Milan Janković, secretary of the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church and editor of a three-volume collection of documents about Nikolaj Velimirović (Janković, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Janković declined to be interviewed for the study but instead provided a written response to five questions submitted to his office. In response to the invitation to comment on the controversy surrounding Velimirović's writing on Jews he noted that references to Jews in *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window*

were not invented by Bishop Nikolaj, but were uttered by Lord Jesus Christ, so the bishop merely cites (*samo ističe*) them [Jews] as a bad example which the Serbian people should not follow. Those who do not believe this should read the words of the Holy Evangelists, especially John the Evangelist (John 18:12 – 19:24), who concludes 'It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes, we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands . . . we have seen it and bear our testimony; we declare to you the eternal life which was with the Father and which was made visible to us'. (1 John 1:1 – 2)

The cited extracts maintain that Velimirović's controversial claims are a paraphrase of the Bible. Claims about the biblical origins of Velimirović's antisemitism are accompanied by words such as 'practically' (*'praktično'*) or

‘merely’ (*samo*): Velimirović is practically quoting Christ’s words and ‘simply quotes the Gospels’. The use of these terms is not haphazard. ‘Just’, ‘merely’, or ‘only’ marks a response as a defence, by means of which the speaker rejects, in this case, Velimirović’s culpability for making a potentially criticisable claim (Shweder and Much, 1987; Billig, 1999). By suggesting that Velimirović was ‘merely’ quoting the Gospels, his supporters shift the responsibility for his controversial stance to the most reliable of sources, Christ’s apostles.

In the above examples, speakers often quote the New Testament and refer to the authors of the Gospels as eyewitnesses who directly experienced the described events. Archdeacon Ljubomir Ranković emphasises that Christ’s words – which he quotes from the Gospels – were ‘noted down’ (*zapisuje*) by an observer, ‘the apostle and evangelist John’. In Janković’s case, the effectiveness of corroboration is enhanced with the passage from the First Letter of John, which stresses the three modalities by which the ‘truth’ of the New Testament had been experienced by the apostles: ‘we have *heard it*; we have *seen it* with our own eyes, we looked upon it, and *felt it* with our own hands’ (emphasis added).

Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović himself resorted to a similar defensive strategy when fending off attacks on his reputation. In 1928, shortly after the Belgrade rabbi Isaac Alkalai accused him of promoting antisemitism, Velimirović defended his position by citing, as the greatest authority, ‘a very small book, called the New Testament, and the unparalleled drama described in it’:

That book was written by four Jews, followers of Christ. Why four and not just one or two? For courts in this world, two witnesses are enough. Through God’s providence, four witnesses wrote this book: twice the number required by any court of this world – so that people would believe in the truth of the testimony. All four witnesses described the trial of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem . . . Each stage of the trial of Jesus Christ is described in detail in the Gospels. (Velimirović, 1928, p. 43)

By emphasising that there were *four* witnesses, Velimirović not only attended to the requirement for corroboration, which is essential for establishing factuality of potentially disputable claims (see Wooffitt, 1992; Potter, 1996), but also incorporated within it the rhetoric of quantification (Reeves, 1983). *Four* witnesses is twice the number required by ordinary courts, suggesting therefore that even the greatest of sceptics ought to be convinced.

The effort to build up the credibility and reliability of the New Testament as a historically accurate story of Jesus’ life and death acts as an ‘externalising device’ which turns the attention away from Velimirović as a morally accountable agent and exonerates him from culpability for the ‘mere’ description which he produces. As Billig (1990), Wetherell and Potter (1992) and others have noted, because definitions of prejudice, both lay and scholarly, are so closely linked to the notions of bias, inaccuracy and irrationality, denials of prejudice are frequently articulated so as to present a criticisable view as a solid and unproblematic representation of the

world and therefore as separate from the speaker's potentially biased motives and intentions. For the same reason, around the time of the controversy surrounding his film *The Passion of the Christ* Mel Gibson defended his contentious portrayal of Jews by noting that he merely conveyed the story as it was told by 'reliable sources', 'eyewitnesses', 'guys [the apostles] who were there' (Boyer, 2004, p. 324). Gibson also called for the inclusion in the film of the controversial passage from Matthew 27:26 ('his blood be upon us and upon our children') by suggesting that 'it happened, it was said' (Boyer, 2004, p. 316). Defenders of *The Passion* frequently cite the verdict about the film 'it is as it was' attributed (inaccurately, according to official sources) to Pope John Paul II as absolving the film from criticism. Just as in Velimirović's case, these arguments against accusations of antisemitism rest on the conjecture that something that is 'true' cannot be prejudicial, and consequently that everything found in the Gospels is *a priori* above suspicion.

In the above examples from the Serbian context, the speakers also seldom fail to observe that the authors of the New Testament were themselves Jews. Ranković, for instance, mentions that Christ was a 'Jew in body' ('*Jevrejin po telu*'), while Velimirović alludes to the fact that the Gospels were written by 'four Jews'. This feature of the account presents the controversial stance not as indicative of the bishop's prejudices and ideological commitments but as a common view, shared even by the very people against whom he is alleged to be biased (see Edwards, 2003). This point is sometimes made explicit. In a letter published in the liberal daily *Danas* in August 2002, Deacon Radoš Mladenović, founder of the spiritual centre devoted to Velimirović based in the town of Kraljevo, defended Velimirović's antisemitic passages on the grounds that they are comparable to the writings of apostles Paul and John 'who were themselves Jews, and therefore cannot be branded "antisemites"' (Mladenović, 2002, p. 8). Velimirović's views are compared to the Old Testament tradition for the same reason. Matija Bećković was cited earlier as stating that the bishop's position on Jews is to be found 'in the writing of Jews themselves, in the Old Testament'. Mladen Obradović also noted during the conversation with the author of this study that 'in the Old Testament you have their own, Jewish Old Testament prophets, therefore members of that same people, who said many [similar] things about their own people who rejected God'. The rhetorical value of the comparison with the Old Testament prophets relies also on the exceptional attributes traditionally ascribed to biblical prophets who are treated by Jews, as well as by Christians, as possessing superior knowledge about the nature of the world, which originates directly from God (see Byford, 2004b).

An extension of the comparison between Velimirović's writings on Jews and the biblical texts is the portrayal of the bishop's 'theological antisemitism' as motivated by divine love for the Jews and a righteous concern for their spiritual wellbeing. In a recent commemorative speech, Metropolitan of Montenegro and Primorska Amfilohije Radović – one of the most influential and highly regarded

religious dignitaries in Serbia – likened Velimirović's views to the lamentations of 'Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel' and interpreted them as motivated not 'by hate, but by the most profound love, pain, suffering and concern' for the Jews (Radović, statement broadcast on Radio B92 News, 25 May 2003). On another occasion Radović noted that 'the bitter and crude things' (*'sve ono oporo i gorko'*) that Nikolaj said about 'the people of Israel' (*'izraelskom narodu'*) were an attempt to 'sober up (*otrijezni*) those he addressed and return them to the path of Christ' (Radović, 2003, p. 510).

Implicit in the motive of 'divine love' is one of the main tenets of Christian antisemitism, namely that Jews are collectively responsible for the death of Jesus and that their only hope of redemption lies in the acceptance of Christ and conversion to Christianity (Hellig, 2002; Carroll, 2002). In Velimirović's remembrance, the ideological and prejudicial undertones of this claim are moderated and concealed by the language of love. The bishop's supporters are drawing on the representation of love that assumes that sometimes one must be 'cruel to be kind'. Velimirović's words are presented as a necessary pedagogical method, because, as Radović put it, Nikolaj 'criticised those he loved, because he loved them' (Radović, 2003, p. 510). Branimir Nešić, leader of the Christian right-wing youth movement '*Dveri*' (who since the interview conducted for this study has become editor-in-chief of *Pravoslavlje*, the main publication of the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church) compares the bishop's conduct to that of a 'parent', who 'chastises those he loves'.

'Then We are All Antisemites!': 'Anti-Judaism' and Orthodox Christian Identity

The invoked parallel between Velimirović's position on Jews and that of the Jewish protagonists of the Bible not only reifies the affirmative interpretation of the bishop's views, but also ironises critical opinion. Archdeacon Ranković proposes that if Velimirović is to be considered an antisemite then 'the Old Testament, which is in fact a Jewish book, [is] the biggest antisemitic pamphlet ever'. Branimir Nešić suggests that if Nikolaj is an antisemite then 'we are all antisemites and the New Testament ought to be banned'. Protopresbyter Radovan Bigović, a well respected Serbian Orthodox Christian theologian, mentioned in the conversation with the author of this study that 'They claim that he was some kind of ideologue of antisemitism. I always say: if you follow that logic, then all Old Testament prophets would be branded antisemites. Jesus Christ would be an antisemite.'

In these instances condemnations of Velimirović's views are reinterpreted in an exaggerated and overstated way that makes them look biased and unreasonable. Hutchby (1992, 1996) and Edwards (2000) identify this as a common strategy for undermining a claim in an adversarial situation. By 'upgrading and taking to

extremes' an opponent's view, radical reformulations set that view up 'for irony and disagreement' (Edwards, 2000, p. 359). Critical appraisals of the bishop's stance on Jews are presented as attacks on the fundamentals of the Christian faith and therefore as excessive, intolerant and spiteful. At the same time, the amplified representations of criticism reinforce the analogy between Velimirović's work and biblical writings, thereby reaffirming the bishop's controversial stance as being no worse or more criticisable than the contents of the Christian Bible.

Once Velimirović's position on Jews is constituted as part of Christian common sense, it becomes promoted not only as acceptable, but also as a normative feature of Orthodox identity. Branimir Nešić was cited earlier as stating that if Velimirović is an antisemite then 'we', namely Orthodox Christians, 'are all antisemites'. Later in the interview, Nešić explains:

It is a clash of two religions, the Jewish faith on the one hand and Christian faith on the other . . . Jews believe that Christ was not the Son of God. We are talking simply (*prosto*) about a clash (sudaru). It is a fact (*fakat je*) that we, Christians, believe that Jews crucified Christ. This is a fact and it is obvious (*to je činjenica i to je evidentno*). Christ said: my blood on you and your children, but he never said that Jews should be murdered, and neither did Bishop Nikolaj, although he did say that the Jews had betrayed Christ. One cannot expect an Orthodox bishop to say that the Jews were right and that Christ was not the Son of God. Of course he will condemn the crucifixion. From that standpoint I think that the criticism of Jews is correct. I as a Christian (*kao hrišćanin*) believe that what they are doing confirms the story of the New Testament ...

A few sentences later, Nešić once again misattributes the words 'my blood on you and your children' (*'moja krv na vas i vašu decu'*) to Jesus, before stating again, in a matter-of-fact way, that 'they crucified him, he was not crucified by some other people, Jews crucified him' (*'oni su ga raspeli, nije ga raspeo neki drugi narod, Jevreji su ga raspeli'*). Essential to Nešić's argument is that anti-Judaism, which stems 'simply' from the clash between two religious beliefs, is embedded in Christianity and is an issue of profound theological significance. The deicide accusation is introduced as common sense. Collective Jewish culpability is presented as apparent, a 'fact' and as something that is 'obvious'. Moreover, the belief in the collective guilt of Jews is to be expected of an Orthodox bishop and is something that Nešić himself, 'as a Christian' believes in.

Archdeacon Ljubomir Ranković also notes that the reference to Jews as 'sons of the Devil' in *Words to the Serbian People* is 'merely a repetition of Christ's words' (*'Nikolaj samo ponavlja Hristove reči'*) and as such is 'to be expected of a priest who upholds Christ and his teachings' (*'što jeste primereno jednom duhovniku da se drži Hrista i njegovog učenja'*). In the end Ranković shows signs of frustration with having to account for Velimirović's views on Jews:

Let's cool down (*oladimo malo*) this whole 'antisemitism' story! So I am an antisemite, so what? He was an antisemite, against a people like that (*protiv takvog naroda*), of course he was and he had to be (*morao je biti*), if he was a Christian. They are totally anti-Christian and anti-Evangelical . . .

He was against a concept and a doctrine of Jewish religion (*jednog koncepta i doktrine jevrejske religije*).

The term 'antisemitism' – invoked here in a dismissive and defiant way – is constructed as a position that Velimirović, as 'a Christian', had to embrace, *because* he was a Christian. Importantly, the utterance contains two contrasting interpretations of what it is that Christians are supposed to be against. While arguing that Velimirović was against a 'concept and a [religious] doctrine' Ranković also claims that Velimirović had to be 'against a *people* like that'. Also it is the people ('they', '*oni*') not the religious dogma that is interpreted as being 'anti-Christian and anti-Evangelical'. The distinction between the 'sinner' and the 'sin' implicit in the old Christian adage 'love the sinner, hate the sin' thus shows itself to be not entirely impermeable.

The defiance apparent in Ranković's tone is noteworthy also because it constructs the persistence of antagonism towards Jews in Orthodox Christian teachings – and the resulting conflict with secular political morality – as a testimony to the Orthodox Church's unquestionable devotion to traditional and genuine religious values. A comparably categorical and uncompromising stance towards the issue of religious tolerance is articulated in the aforementioned article 'Serbs and Jews'. Its author, Vladimir Dimitrijević, notes that '*in the domain of religion there can be no concessions: there is either only one Truth, revealed in God, or no truth at all*' (original emphasis). He then goes on to criticise the legacy of the Second Vatican Council by condemning the readiness of the Catholic Church to 'wear sackcloth and ashes, and even reject Christ himself, just to prove that it is not "antisemitic"' (Dimitrijević, 2001; original emphasis). In the interview conducted for this study Archdeacon Ranković interprets the Jewish-Catholic *rapprochement* over the past 50 years as indicative of Catholicism's unpardonable 'tendency towards pragmatism' which stands in stark contrast with Orthodoxy's exemplary traditionalism.

Such constructions confirm not only that the 'teaching of contempt' for Jews has come to be regarded, within the conservative circles of Serbian Orthodox culture, as constitutive of Christian identity, but also that among contemporary champions of Nikolaj Velimirović the rejection of interfaith dialogue has itself been elevated to the status of a *sine qua non* of the Orthodox Christian religious creed. Velimirović's remembrance and the ideological dispute that surrounds it thus appear to have brought the traditional derision of Jews out of the woodwork and transformed the justification and the rationalisation of antisemitism into a viable means of 'being a Christian' in contemporary Serbian Orthodox culture.

Questionable Boundaries between Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism

So far it has been argued that the discourse of the justification of Velimirović's controversial stance towards Jews rests on the distinction between on the one hand the seemingly legitimate doctrine of Christian anti-Judaism – said to be rooted in the Holy Scriptures and motivated by the divine love for the Jews – and on the other hand the antinormative ideology of secular, Nazi antisemitism.

Scholarly literature on Christian-Jewish relations acknowledges the possibility and even the necessity of preserving the formal, theoretical distinction between anti-Judaism – as a theological abstraction – and the secular variants of racial and conspiratorial antisemitism (Ruether, 1974; Hellig, 2002). At the same time, Christian anti-Judaism and modern antisemitism are said to be tied by a profound historical connectedness, which undermines the relevance and appropriateness of this differentiation *in practice* (Goldhagen, 2002; Carroll, 2002; Hilberg, 1985). Baum (1974, p. 7) for instance argues that

While it would be historically untruthful to blame the Christian Church for Hitler's anti-Semitism and the monstrous crimes committed by his followers, what is true, alas, is that the Church has produced an abiding contempt among Christians for Jews and all things Jewish, a contempt that aided Hitler's purposes. The Church made the Jewish people a symbol of unredeemed humanity; it painted a picture of Jews as a blind, stubborn, carnal and perverse people, an image that was fundamental in Hitler's choice of Jews as a scapegoat.

Similarly, Norman Cohn describes 'the [conspiratorial] fantasy' which characterises contemporary antisemitism as a secularised version of medieval Christian 'demonological terrors [that became] blended with anxieties and resentments which are typically modern' (Cohn, 1957, p. 27). Zygmunt Bauman takes the same view when he writes that

The age of modernity inherited 'the Jew' already firmly separated from the Jewish men and women who inhabited its towns and villages. Having successfully played the role of the alter ego of the Church, it was prepared to be cast in a similar role in relation to the new, secular, agencies of social integration. (Bauman, 1991, p. 38, original emphasis)

The link between the two traditions has led Ruether (1974, p. 116) to propose that in practice Christian anti-Judaism inevitably 'takes social expression as antisemitism'.

The association between 'antisemitism' and 'anti-Judaism' is not merely historical. In the decades preceding the Second World War, in churches around Europe, traditional conceptualisation of Jews inherent in the Christian ceremonial and religious doctrine was not propagated in a social vacuum, isolated from the more contemporary variants of antisemitism that were rapidly becoming part of everyday discourse. Christianity, even if only inadvertently, assimilated the

emerging racial and conspiratorial antisemitic perspectives into its culture. Using examples from the Catholic and Protestant contexts, Goldhagen (2002, p. 79) has demonstrated that Christian 'anti-Judaism' of the prewar period was 'far more "modern" and far closer in precept and practice to the Nazi antisemitism than has been acknowledged'.

The work of Nikolaj Velimirović provides an illustration of this trend within Serbian Orthodox culture. As was noted earlier, in Velimirović's *Words to the Serbian People* references to Jews as the reprobate people who rejected Christ are interspersed with claims about Jewish power, which belong to the more recent ideological tradition of conspiratorial antisemitism. In his writing, the two supposedly distinguishable sets of arguments are so closely intertwined that they cannot be plausibly and convincingly separated.

The blurred nature of the boundaries between 'theological' and modern secular antisemitism is apparent also in the rhetoric of those among Velimirović's supporters who insist on preserving the distinction. In the aforementioned letter published in *Danas*, Deacon Radoš Mladenović, having worked up the argument about the inherently and exclusively biblical nature of Velimirović's verdict on Jews, notes that

Nikolaj talks of Jews (in *Words to the Serbian People*) to the extent that some of them took part in the secularisation of Europe, and especially of Russia. (Were not Trotsky, Zinov'yev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Sverdlov all Jews? Was the leader of the Union of Militant Godless not called Yaroslavsky-Gubel'man? To be fair, Osip Mandelstam, who said that 'every cultured man is a Christian', and Boris Pasternak, who wrote some of the finest Christian verses of the twentieth century, were also Jews, but they were not the ones running Russia, nor did Nikolaj know about them). (Mladenović, 2002)

The justification of Velimirović's position is extended to aspects of the bishop's argument which concern twentieth-century politics. Although the quotation starts by undermining the overall importance of the portrayal of Jews in Velimirović's writing (he talks of them 'to the extent that': 'utoliko što') the antisemitic references are defended on the grounds of factuality. The rhetorical question about the ethnic background of the leaders of the Russian Revolution asserts not only that they were Jews, but also that this is common knowledge, and therefore not something that can be either prejudicial or controversial. Also, while acknowledging that not all Jews were responsible for the secularisation of Europe (see the reference to 'some of them', and the praise of Mandelstam and Pasternak) the allusion to Jews who were 'running Russia' ('upravljaju Rusijom') is a clear reiteration of one of the most notorious and inherently false (see Poliakov, 1987) conspiratorial myths of 1920s subsequently utilised with great enthusiasm by the Nazis (Cohn, 1957).

Similarly, Ljubomir Ranković follows a description of Velimirović's antisemitism as being 'of the only kind that it can be, namely biblical' with the claim:

One ought to read Dostoyevsky's *The Jewish Question*. Did you see what he writes? He says they have no home, they have nothing, they only save money. Why do they save money – in case one day they are called upon to start a war against all people and create their own state. Imbued with hate towards everything around them . . . towards the Russian peasant . . . they are using him. I don't believe that Dostoyevsky lied (ne verujem da je Dostojevski lagao). I really don't know them well at all (ja ih stvarno malo poznajem), but through Dostoyevsky . . . also I read their (njihove) – they say that it is an apocryphon (kažu da je to apokrif) – *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. That is monstrous. Even if just one per cent of what is in there is true, then it really is horrifying. I can admire their unity, their national consciousness and devotion to their nation, but I will always be against their anti-Christian endeavours, call them whatever you want. If they are decent, loyal citizens of this country, and I am all for that, I wouldn't mind if one became the president of the state. As for everything else, a barrier needs to be in place. I believe that was Bishop Nikolaj's position too. What does that mean: they can do to us what they like, and if you object, you are an anti-Semite . . . as if! There is no logic in that.

On this occasion, the truthfulness of Velimirović's verdict on Jews is not substantiated through an analogy with either the Old Testament prophets or the protagonists of the Christian Bible. Instead Ranković cites Dostoyevsky's 1876 antisemitic pamphlet as well as the notorious work *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Ranković displays an attempt at partial distancing from the evaluation of Jews which he produces by noting that the assessment is not derived from personal experience ('I don't know them well at all'), but from secondary sources of which one (the *Protocols*) might be of questionable authenticity. At the same time, Dostoyevsky is cited as a reliable source ('I don't believe that Dostoyevsky lied') and the forgery claim is attributed to unknown others ('they say') thereby implying that it is merely an allegation, not an established fact. Also, Ranković refers to the alleged apocryphon as 'their' *Protocols*, thereby implicitly attributing authorship of the pamphlet to Jews. Most importantly, the forgery claim and the notoriety of the *Protocols* are not seen as undermining the usefulness of this document in substantiating Velimirović's views. On the contrary, the notion that the *Protocols* might be a fake is invoked in a way that supports the overall antisemitic message. Even if it is an 'apocryphon', Ranković maintains, at least 'one per cent' of it might be true and even this would be enough to indict the Jews. By stating that the view expounded in Dostoyevsky's pamphlet and in the *Protocols* was 'Bishop Nikolaj's position too', Ranković effectively extends the boundaries of the 'purely' Christian anti-Judaism to include claims and sources which fall within the ideological traditions and practices of modern fascistic antisemitism from which he attempted to distance himself earlier in the interview.

The porous nature of the distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism is also apparent in the way in which Velimirović's supporters account for the fact that their hero wrote his most antisemitic work while imprisoned in Dachau during the

Nazi Holocaust. Archdeacon Ljubomir Ranković argues that Velimirović's antisemitic invective was provoked by the fact that at Dachau he witnessed 'how the curse under Christ's cross was being realised: His blood be upon us and upon our children'. He explains in his interview with me:

I must once again quote their book, the Bible, the verse: 'he who sows wind will reap a storm'. Therefore that wind that they sowed while fighting against Christ, they reaped during the Second World War, in the storm of the Holocaust which they endured.

Branimir Nešić, who is today the editor-in-chief of Serbia's most widely read religious publication, in his interview with me also depicts the Holocaust as divine retribution for the Jewish sins of deicide:

You know the Holocaust was an awful thing. Evidently, God punishes, and he merely used the Nazis to punish Jews. I would stand in defence of any Jew, but I gather that that's how God punishes people, in the same way that he punished us with Ustashe and the Turks.

In arguing that Hitler was God's rod against the Jews, Ranković and Nešić are following the religious logic of Velimirović's prison writing: 'So [the] innocent blood [of Christ] became the whip that drove them like cattle through the centuries, from land to land, like fire that burns their repository of schemes against Christ' (Velimirović, 1998, p. 194).

The *deicidal justification* of the Holocaust (see Shafir, 2002; Hellig, 2002), which portrays the tragic fate of Jews as part of a predestined divine plan, projects religious and ethnic prejudices onto the will of the Almighty and presents the anguish of Jews as expected and natural. According to the Jewish theologian Richard L. Rubenstein (1966), this misguided reading of Jewish history reveals that Nazism not only inherited from Christianity the image of the Jew as the perennial villain, but also that Christian logic is capable of providing a justificatory account for the crimes of the Nazis. By 'blaming the victim', the rationalisation of the Holocaust diverts attention away from the responsibility of the Nazis and their collaborators. The identity of the murderers and the legacy of hatred that made their crimes possible are sidelined by the preoccupation with Jews as transgressors who must 'reap' the consequences of collective sin. Rubenstein goes so far as to suggest that this interpretation of the Holocaust exposes Hitler's policy towards Jews as 'the terminal expression of Christian antisemitism' (Rubenstein, 1996, p. 46). This conclusion is simplistic insofar as it overlooks the complexity of the historical relationship between Christian anti-Jewish tradition and Nazism. At the same time, it accurately identifies deicidal justification of the Holocaust as an important manifestation of the ideological link that binds the seemingly legitimate biblical anti-Judaism and the modern secular racial antisemitism. The presence of this type of argument in the discourse of Velimirović's remembrance can therefore be taken as further evidence of the haziness of the invoked differentiation between two

categories of belief about Jews and of the boundaries between Velimirović's 'purely' biblical antisemitism and the more recent ideological traditions.

Conclusion

In examining the representations of Nikolaj Velimirović in Serbian Orthodox culture at the time of his canonisation in May 2003, this article has explored the rhetorical strategies which the bishop's admirers, as morally accountable agents, have used in order to construct their hero, and the whole of Serbian Orthodox culture, as devoid of anti-Jewish prejudice. In doing so, the article has exposed the broader ideological implications of denial of antisemitism. The strategy of interpretative denial, which rests on the rhetorical management of the distinction between 'biblical' anti-Judaism and antisemitism, removes Velimirović's political outlook from the ideological context of the political culture of the 1930s, and elevates even its indisputably 'modern' features onto the level of decontextualised and dehistoricised biblical texts. Velimirović's stance towards Jews is made to appear not as an objectionable, obsolete and historically contingent political position, but as something that belongs to the 'eternal Truth' proclaimed in the Holy Tradition, and therefore as beyond criticism. By justifying, excusing and rationalising Velimirović's antisemitism, the dynamic of denial legitimises contempt for Jews and perpetuates it as a satisfactory, unproblematic and even normative aspect of Christian identity.

The view of 'anti-Judaism' as an immutable aspect of Orthodox Christianity, worked up in the discourse of Velimirović's remembrance, is sometimes acknowledged even by those who do not belong to the Serbian Orthodox culture. In a recent essay the Serbian-Jewish author David Albahari reflected on Christian-Jewish relations in Serbia and called for the Serbian Orthodox Church to respond more decisively to manifestations of intolerance towards Jews. Albahari also provided advice to the representatives of the Jewish community in Serbia, to

... recognise the inevitability of different interpretations (as in the case of antisemitic claims in the work of Bishop Nikolaj), because religion and culture, just like history, often have two points of view which, apparently, must coexist. What is good for one side might not be good for the other, but if both sides are aware of what this means for the other side, and respect the differences, then coexistence is possible. And this is what Serbia needs the most: quiet coexistence, marked by mutual respect accompanied by the readiness to understand others so that they would understand us. (Albahari, 2004, p. 95)

Albahari thus proposes a compromise solution: the church is to stand up in defence of Jews in the face of increasing antisemitic incidents in Serbia, while in return Jews would turn a blind eye to the favourable 'interpretation' of Bishop Nikolaj's views, and accept it as an intrinsic aspect of Orthodox Christian religious

dogma and 'culture', which 'must' be tolerated in the name of liberal open-mindedness and intercultural understanding.

The examination in this article of the porous nature of the boundaries between anti-Judaism and antisemitism has, it is to be hoped, demonstrated the unfeasibility and undesirability of this particular 'conciliatory' approach. The hero-worship of Nikolaj Velimirović and the favourable interpretation of his controversial work within Orthodox culture are not peripheral to the problem of antisemitism, and are therefore not something that can be simply overlooked for the sake of 'mutual respect'. Analyses of Serbian antisemitism suggest that there is very little anti-Jewish prejudice in Serbia other than that which is rooted in the right-wing populist culture of the 1930s, epitomised by Nikolaj Velimirović (Sekelj, 1997; Byford and Billig, 2001; HCHRS, 2001). In fact, the remembrance of Bishop Nikolaj and his uncritical reverence are the most powerful ideological source of anti-Jewish prejudice in Serbian culture from which contemporary antisemitism derives much of its legitimacy and authority (Byford, 2002, 2003). In drawing a distinction between the type of antisemitism that the church ought to condemn as unacceptable and that which the Jewish community ought to accept as inevitable, Albahari fails to recognise that, in practice, such a clear distinction does not exist in contemporary Serbian anti-Jewish rhetoric. In addition, the acceptance of the inevitability of Christian antisemitism upholds the ideological status quo by helping to keep the reevaluation of the doctrinal stance towards Jews off the agenda of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Most importantly, because of the large amount of cultural space which the celebration of the life and work of Nikolaj Velimirović occupies in Serbia today, the outdated and intolerant Christian perspective on Jews and Judaism is no longer a latent aspect of Serbian Orthodox culture. Antisemitism is not a dormant characteristic of religious ceremonial concealed in the symbolism of the Holy Liturgy or in esoteric theological writings. The spontaneity with which Velimirović's supporters invoke the themes of denial suggests that justifications, trivialisations and denials of antisemitism, which contribute to its legitimisation and perpetuation, have become woven into the routine of Velimirović's remembrance. Antisemitic rhetoric has thus become part of a 'lived ideology' (Billig et al., 1988) regularly disseminated in speeches, books, articles, sermons and everyday talk devoted to Serbia's new saint and the country's most popular religious author and spiritual authority.

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