ADAMANT AND TREACHEROUS: 
SERBIAN HISTORIANS ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS*

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Ever since the inception of their discipline historians have tried to distance their work from myths, disentangle them and interpret them historically. But historical narratives, while certainly not myths in the ancient form and meaning, nevertheless often perpetuate mythic features—history has not been immune to fiction, stereotype, distortion, exaggeration, and omission. Like myth, history tends to reduce the diversity and complexity of events to a single model of interpretation or to provide answers without ever clearly and explicitly formulating the problem. Most important, historical narrative, like myth, exercises a strong cognitive dynamic in the definition of a community’s ethical and political principles.

Emerging in ‘the age of nationalism’, modern history writing was more often than not tangled in the web of ‘nationhood myths’. In his famous speech at the Sorbonne in 1882, Ernest Renan asserted that to get one’s history wrong is an essential part of the making of a nation.¹ Historians figure prominently among the architects of nationalism; they are able to provide meaning to the projects of the present through an interpretation of the past. Erich Hobsbawm has pleaded for the exposure of nationalist history as myth to safeguard the objectivity of the history profession;² The historian of Eastern Europe Hugh Seton-Watson has criticized historians for “excesses of patriotic myth-making,” which he sees as a result of the influence of the times and ‘the compulsions to which [historians] were or still are subjected’ in their effort to define a national identity.³ This compulsion

of a nationalist political agenda increases scholarly production of myths about a nation’s alleged antiquity, cohesion, solidarity, virtues, exceptionality—and most harmful are the myths that serve to delineate boundaries between nations.

This essay analyzes representations of religious conversions in Serbian historiography that make up some of the core Serbian nationhood myths. Within the context of the traditional understanding of religious identity and religious conversion, historically speaking the most important cases of conversion among Orthodox Serbs were Islamization and (to a much smaller extent) Union with the Catholic Church. Change of religion is undoubtedly one of the most unsettling and destabilizing events in a society. It threatens the cohesion of a community and reactions to it are universally defensive, because it necessitates a change of balance between members of different faith communities. In the context of centuries-long religious segregation and firm identification between ethnic and religious identities—as has been the case in the Balkans—religious conversions have evoked a long history of distrust and intolerance that has been the topic of numerous studies. My focus here is on conscious efforts, undertaken mostly from the nineteenth century on, of adoption, employment, and deepening of inherited religious divisions through mythologized portrayals of conversions in the past.

My principal source material in studying the genesis and the dynamic of the transformations of these conversion myths and the factors and forces behind them has been the works of historians whose position is well established in Serbian society. They were, or are, university professors, academicians, textbook authors, ministers, and ambassadors. Assessing the creation and employment of these myths over time, I analyze history writing and teaching in the Serbian context within the general context of cultural production and public opinion formation. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of historical production. The elaborations and endless adaptations of the stock of history imprinted in the collective consciousness are also the result of oral and family tradition, literature, school, church, media, and political discourse, and in this discourse historians are both producers and products. Also the writers Petar Petrović Njegoš and Ivo Andrić, cornerstones of Serbian literature and culture, were powerful producers; both had

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