

The Role of the Icon in the Serbian *Krsna Slava* Celebration - Ecclesiastical and Missiological Challenges

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The misunderstanding of the use and meaning of icons has been a great hindrance to the evangelical appreciation of Orthodoxy. In fact, the controversy surrounding the use of icons has divided the body of Christ to the extent that many in the “East” and “West” do not even consider those on the other side to be brothers or sisters in Christ. Throughout the centuries, Christian leaders have theologized on the subject of icons, proposing various solutions for reconciling the second commandment (Ex 20:4–6 and Dt 5:8–10) with the incarnation of Christ. On one hand it has been argued that since Christ has come in the flesh, He may therefore also be painted and portrayed in pictorial form. On the other hand, arguments have been made for the rejection of icons in the Orthodox Tradition in much the same way as arguments have been made for the rejection of statues in the Roman Catholic tradition. On the issue of icons, Orthodox and evangelical Serbs stand at polar ends of the theological continuum. The complexity of this issue becomes most clear in the discussion of the role of the icon in the Serbian feast of *Krsna Slava*.

Krsna Slava or *Slava*, is an annual Serbian Orthodox feast, a family reunion involving relatives, godparents, neighbors, and friends. While the *Slava* of an Orthodox temple is a common characteristic of Orthodoxy, the family celebration of *Krsna Slava* is a distinctively Serbian religious holiday. Each Serbian family gathers together annually on the day of “their” *Slava*, a day that corresponds (according to the “old” Orthodox calendar) with a particular saint (or saints). The festivities on the day of *Krsna Slava* honor the name of a family’s particular saint(s). The saint(s) of a family’s *Slava* is considered to be the patron saint of that family and are “transmitted” patrilineally. By means of elements and ritual procedures, I argue that the feast of *Krsna Slava* is a means to worship God, venerate the patron saint(s), and confirm the

family's Christian identity and kinship ties. Consequently, *Slava* has become the symbol of national and religious identities and is as significant to the Serbs as is the Passover to the Jews.

Since one of the main purposes of *Krsna Slava* is to commemorate the family's patron saint(s), a particular saint is usually represented at the feast by his or her icon. In the celebration of *Krsna Slava*, the icon itself is generally placed in a prominent place in the home. Everything that is needed for the ritual is prepared ahead of time and placed upon the table, which faces East where the icon is located. The icon serves as the focal point for the rest of the elements of the Feast¹ such as the incense that is burned around it. The importance of the icon is also evident when it comes to the kissing of the icon, as is often the custom.

During other times of the year the icon symbolizes God's presence within the Church. When the Serbian family prays, it is done in front of the icon. The part of the *Slava* candle remaining after the feast stands before the icon all year long. At special occasions during the year, the candle is lit for short periods.

Icons and the Church

The issues relating to the use of icons have caused dissension throughout Church history. Iconoclasts have traditionally opposed icons for three reasons. First, they equated icons with idols and all the baggage that implied. For example, the icon of Christ has often been misinterpreted to mean that it was Christ *Himself*. Second, iconoclasts have argued that Church tradition does not support the use of icons; and third, it has been asserted that icons are not consistent with Church Christology since the divine 'part' of Christ is impossible to represent with paint.

¹ Dimitrije Kalezic, *Krsna Slavas among the Serbs*, Belgrade 1992:50.

Historically the leading theologians of iconography have agreed on the basic doctrinal points regarding icons. John of Damascus (c. 655–749), Theodore of Studios (759–826) and Nicephorus of Constantinople (758–828)² have all argued that there is an essential difference between an *image* and its *prototype* and they have distinguished between the two. Theodore of Studios argued, “The mind does not remain with the materials, because it does not trust them. That is the error of the idolators. Through materials, rather, the mind ascends toward the prototypes. This is the faith of the Orthodox.”³

In that sense “An icon is more like the Bible. A Bible is not ‘identical in essence’ with the living Word, Jesus Christ, yet the Bible mediates the grace of Christ as we read it.”⁴ As Bishop Nikolaj poetically expressed, “That which is written of Him in the gospel, the same is presented to our sight in colors, in paintings on the walls of the church, or on wood, or linen, or some other material. What our ears hear from reading, the same shall our eyes see by looking.”⁵ These theologians recognized that the Church fathers (e.g., Athanasius and Basil) who supported the use of icons, argued convincingly that it was and is possible to have icons of Christ because His humanity was and is true. Instead of denying His divinity, it actually confirms His Incarnation.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council made a strategic distinction between veneration (*proskunesis*) and worship (*latreia*) of icons. *Latreia* means ‘absolute worship,’ which is reserved exclusively for God. *Proskunesis* refers to the bodily act of bowing and means ‘relative honor’ that is offered to saints worthy of honor. Hence the physical act of bowing to an icon and kissing it is “not inherently idolatrous but a legitimate, cultural expression of respect.”⁶

² Ibid. p. 22.

³ *First Refutation of The Iconoclasts*, 13; translated by Catharine Roth.

⁴ Bradley Nassif, “Kissers and Smashers: Why the Orthodox Killed One Another Over Icons,” *Christian History*, 1997, 16(2): 22).

⁵ Velimirovic Nikolaj, *Collected Works*, 1984, 12:348.

⁶ Nassif, Op. Cit. 23.

Serbian Orthodox theologians make a clear distinction between *worship* and *veneration*. Bishop Nikolaj, one of the leading Serbian Orthodox theologians of this century, was asked the question, “Do we worship ikons [icons] as material things?” He replied, “Of course not. We worship no-*thing* and no-*body* but the Holy Trinity in Unity—One God. But we venerate the saints as the best children of God and followers of Christ, and we highly respect their faces as...children respect the portraits of their parents, or their brothers.”⁷ [emphasis added] To worship an icon would be idolatrous. To venerate it as outlined above, I believe, is theologically acceptable. Atanasije Jevtic (_____) explained that in the feast of *Krsna Slava* we celebrate the glory of God and honor the saints.”⁸ Kalezic (_____) recognized that “everything that a host has prepared for *Slava* . . . [is for] God’s glory, and in honor of the protector of his home. . . .”⁹ Everything which the host has prepared for the feast is prepared for “God’s glory and in honor of saint (name of the saint) . . . and in remembrance of those who finished their lives in faith and piety.”¹⁰

The Serbian Hero Cultural Theme

⁷ Nikolaj, Op. Cit. 12:348.

⁸ Atanasije Jevtic, *God Come in Flesh*, Vrnjacka Banja, 1992:64.

⁹ Kalezic, Op. Cit. 56.

¹⁰ Kalezic, Op. Cit. 53.

Heroes have a special place in the Serbian oral tradition: _____ (stories), lyrics, and particularly the epic folk poetry. The Serbian epic _____ has lines and syllables that typify the literary style of this genre. It overflows with sympathy, warm emotions, and adoration while exalting honesty, wisdom, integrity, and the courage of a long list of Serbian heroes such as St. Sava, King Lazar (_____), Prince Marko (_____), many of the _____ (Serbian guerilla fighters), etc. Due to five-centuries of Muslim oppression that threatened Serbian national and Christian identities, the Serbs have had an urgent need for inspiring examples of heroic resistance. Serbian heroes are typically characterized by strong Christian conviction. They are ready to lay down their lives for the honorable cross (_____), and many of them have. Though they appear to possess supernatural strength (some are thought to be able to jump as high as fifty feet), the focal point of their heroism is their integrity (most commonly linked with loyalty to both the Christian faith and the Serbian nation), and feats of bravery.

The Serbian oral tradition often brings these heroes together in the feast of *Krsna Slava*. In the folk song, _____, “How *Krsna Slava* Should Be Celebrated” (literally, “served”), the Serbian King Stepan’s patron, St. _____, (Archangel Michael), teaches King Stepan to stand and to serve others throughout the feast of his *Krsna Slava*. The folk song, _____, “The One That Celebrates *Krsna Slava* Is the One That Gets Help,” speaks of how St. “_____” (George) came to the aid of Duke Todor--the prisoner of Petar Mrkonjic (_____. The latter made special effort to celebrate his *Krsna Slava* St. George in such circumstances, and bring Duke Todor back to his home. In the song, _____, “Prince Marko and Beg Kostadin,” _____ (Prince Marko) rebukes Beg Kostadin for the injustices (misbehaviors toward the poor, the elderly, and parents) that he observed during his celebration of *Krsna Slava*. From the content of the song “Musi_ Stefan” (_____), the Serbian landed gentry had the image (icon) of their saint of *Krsna Slava* on the war banner. For the Kosovo battle (as the song explains) Stefan’s servant prepared “the silk flag/the silk flag with twelve crosses/all twelve made of pure gold/and the icon of St.

John/*Krsno Ime* of Musi_ Stefan. . . .”¹¹ Here, the saints of *Krsna Slava* were the heroes of the Serbian heroes themselves. Consequently, the saints of *Krsna Slava* themselves became heroes to the Serbian people.

¹¹ Cited in Grujic Radoslav, “Church Elements of *Krsna Slava*” in *Herald of Skopje’s Scientific Society*, Skopje, 1930:59.

In *A Study in Balkan Civilization*, Traian Stoianovich addresses the expectation of the Serbs since the second half of the fifteenth century for a salvation-like return of St. Sava. Understanding this, the Turks quenched the Serbian uprising at the beginning of the sixteenth century by removing the relic of St. Sava from the monastery of Mileševo (_____) and burning it in Belgrade. Stoianovich notes that, in spite of this incident, the Serbian folk belief in the saving return of St. Sava still lives on. According to Stoianovich, the Serbian folk poetry foresees the return of yet another cultural hero, _____, (Prince Marko).

Analyzing the ethnological aspects of *Krsna Slava*, Veselin Cajkanovic (_____) compares the function of the toasts of the *Slava* to the Old-Hellenistic custom of drinking to Zeus. Accordingly, the first toasts of both feasts are dedicated to a national god, and second to the heroes that are, as it is fairly well known, none other than saints or ancestors.”¹² Again, such an overstatement of Cajkanovic needs to be understood in the light of his original intent to reconstruct ancient Serbian beliefs. He was exploring the origin of *Krsna Slava* and was not addressing the modern day characteristics of the feast. Nevertheless, his scholarly work has pointed to the twilight of the Serbian pagan subconsciousness that has surfaced in the theme of hero veneration.

In his attempt to explain the origin of the custom of decorating icons in Serbian homes, Cajkanovic points out that icons were usually decorated with a towel. Cajkanovic believed that, in the beginning, these decorations had a different meaning: “one of sacrifice”.¹³ It signified that certain things such as trees, for example, are “occupied.” They already belong to someone (soul, spirit, or supernatural being). “A cross [wooden, for a tomb] must be surrounded by a towel. The icon and a cross, however, are (_____) “shadowed;” that is, someone’s soul resides within them, or someone’s _____ (*numen*). The icon is the

¹² Cajkanovic Veselin, *Collected Works in the Serbian Religion and Mythology*, Belgrade, 1994, 2:477.

¹³ Ibid. p.412.

home of the saint that it represents (i.e., it is present in that icon since the moment of consecration).”¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid. 413.

A “shadow” is, according to folk beliefs, the same as the soul. Though Cajkanovic’s perspective of the relationship between the icon and the saint that it represents differs from the Serbian Orthodox Church’s interpretation of that relationship, his comment hints that laypersons may quite possibly have misinterpreted the meaning and purpose of the icon. Throughout my ethnographic research, however, I did not come across anyone whose viewpoint included an understanding of icons, as a place inhabited by the saint that it represents. Nevertheless, in the light of the heritage of the traditional Serbian culture, it is safe to say that there is continuous need for pro-active teaching and clear communication by the Serbian Orthodox Church in this regard.

The Icon as a Means of Mission

During the Communist era many Serbian families, especially those in urban areas, removed the icon of their *Krsna Slava* and hid them—typically in basements and attics. Very few destroyed them. Since the fall of communism, however, the Serbs have begun to dust off their icons and to put them back upon the walls of their homes. The icon thus has become symbolic of the Serbian return to Orthodoxy.

Some evangelical groups have doubts and question how it is possible to speak of icons and the veneration of saints and Christian mission at the same time. Believe me, it is possible. The distinction between veneration, *proskunesis*, and worship, *latreia* made by both the Seventh Ecumenical Council and Serbian Orthodox theologians and churchmen is key to gaining insight in terms of the definition of the boundaries of biblical/theological acceptability of both icons and the veneration of saints. In other words, I believe that icons themselves and the kissing of the icon are acceptable as cultural expressions of respect. If and when evangelicals judge Orthodox believers to be idolators, they are imputing their own interpretations of icon usage to the Orthodox family. It is the view of the evangelicals that gets superimposed upon the behavior and attitudes of the Orthodox during the feast of *Krsna Slava* (and apart from it). This meaning may differ significantly from the attitude and understanding that the Serbian

Orthodox family itself has to the icon and its use. When evangelicals do not explore the meaning in both Orthodox theology and in the participants' views of it, they are guilty of misjudging. Moreover, if Orthodox participants' perspectives and understanding of the icon and the kissing of the icon are inconsistent with proper Orthodox theological interpretations, then *those participants* are confused and evangelicals may be correct in their judgments. *However, it is the Orthodox Church that has the legitimate right to criticize and correct potential and serious deviations of some of their church members not the right of evangelicals!*

Within canonically defined iconography, each icon is the pictorial representation of “the historical event . . . that it represents.”¹⁵ For example, John the Baptist is represented in his icons either in the process of baptizing Jesus in the Jordan, or as he stands with his right hand pointing towards heaven and holding a rod with the inscription, ‘Repent...’ in his left hand. Or...he is holding a plate with a human head as a symbol of his martyrdom.”¹⁶ The icon of St. Stefan carries the symbol of incense, intercessory prayers of the saint, and the Word of God that is worthy to die for. Consequently, the icon here is seen as an educational tool. (This was of particular significance throughout the centuries when literacy was the privilege of a few.)

Bishop Nikolaj believed that icons are more than pictorial representation of Christ and his saints because they “are the channels of God’s powerful grace, healing, restoring [restoration], enlightening [enlightenment], encouraging [encouragement] and warning...” The proof for this is “the accumulated experiences of the Church in all the past generations as well as in our own, concerning the miraculous effects of ikons [icons].”¹⁷ Therefore, icons should serve not just as a means of stimuli (visual, artistic and affective) to enable people to make decisions for Christ and Christianity, but they should also serve

¹⁵ Zivkovic Vasa, *On Serbian Slava and on Days that are Celebrated*, Pozarevac, 1908:5.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 142.

¹⁷ Nikolaj, Op. Cit., p. 349.

as a point of reference for powerful encounters with the Divine, (i.e., healing and miracles).

The icon of the Saint of *Krsna Slava* tells the story of faith, the power of God, the grace of God, heroism, and martyrdom or whatever the story of the particular saint's life and service to the Lord might be. The icon of *Slava* saints confirms and illustrates the call to discipleship to Christ since it reminds the _____ (*Slava* host family) of the specific life committed to God. That call has an intimate nature: a particular saint is the patron of a particular family; he or she is 'our' saint, 'our' hero, and 'we' are called to remember and to imitate him or her in Christ-like devotion. That affective dimension of *Slava* and the identity that it provides are the most significant motivations for decisions to devote one's life to Christ or to continue to follow Christ.