

# Traces of the Virgin Mary

Tatiana  
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Ed.



# in Post- Communist Europe

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# 08 Travelling Through the Battle Fields. The Cult of the Bogorodica in Serbian Tradition and Contemporary Times

Aleksandra Pavićević

This chapter presents the special role of so called *Bogorodica* [Gr. 'Theotokos']<sup>1</sup> which is the Serbian Virgin Mary, history of her cult but also her role as a national symbol and the belief in 'miraculous icons' as a special form of belief characteristic for Orthodox Christianity.

Contrary to its expectations, as well as the logic of evolutionary development, the modern era has brought along revitalisation of the religious view of the world. Although it has been relatively uninterrupted to date, the intense *secularisation* of culture at the end of the second millennium gave rise to and provoked the expansion of *religious cults* of various forms and contents (Blagojević 2018; Sinani 2014).<sup>2</sup>

As a reflection of global ambivalence of (Christian) civilisation, these 'cults' rarely appear in their 'pure' and unambiguous form, but much more frequently as phenomena in which both pagan and Christian, traditional and modern, 'realistic' and 'constructed' worlds of individual and collective religiosity are mixed (though not always united). On the other hand, superficiality, as an important characteristic of modern interpretations of religious dogmas and knowledge, the dominance of magical views, as well as simplification and specialisation of certain 'cults', possibly evokes the closest designation of religiosity of the modern age as *neopaganism par excellence*.

The beginning of the process of religious revival in Serbia coincided with the beginning of the social, economic and political crisis in the former Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, which took place at the beginning of the 1990s (Pavićević 2014). The painful sobering caused by the end of the 'Yugoslav idyll', as well as the insufficiency of the value system of modern society,

1 *Bogorodica* [Gr. 'Theotokos'] = etymologically - 'One who gave birth to God [Sr. Bog]'.  
2

The religious revival in Serbia was not only about revitalisation of Christianity, which became the main point of collective identity, but also about increased interest in different religious and spiritual forms and cults. They were very often based on the New Age concept of religious syncretism (for instance, combining Christian feast with meditation and spiritist practice).

not only stirred the long-suppressed desire for finding a 'higher sense' of existence in this world, but also for finding a *new collective identity*, since the earlier one had been reduced to rubble. On the *individual level*, this process primarily implied increased participation in rites within the life cycle of an individual (baptism, wedding, and funeral), followed by popularisation of the practice of celebrating family's patron saint days and only in the end, and on the smallest scale, by an increase in the number of believers taking an active part in regular church services.

On the *collective level*, the traditional closeness of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serb people and the state was the basic paradigm of such restructuring. The attempt to establish continuity with the tradition of the medieval Serb state, which implied active participation of the Church in both social and political matters, as well as the grafting of this relationship in the secular state and civil society in Serbia at the end of the second millennium, turned out to be a multi-tiered issue (Jevtić 1997), with innumerable negative consequences to society and the Church, and mostly to the reputation of the Orthodox faith.

Due to tightness and internal division in the Serbian Orthodox Church, the spiritual potential of the national and religious revival was not used for promoting the basic ascetic principles of the Orthodox religion, but rather as a field for manipulation with feelings of national and religious belonging. The Serbian Orthodox Church was not fully ready to face its inner problems, such as arbitrariness of some priests and bishops, deposits of superstitious, as well as magic practices and naïve interpretations of dogma.

The trump card in criticism of counter-religiously oriented intellectual and political groups, i.e. that religiosity must be the matter of the individual, not of the state, served to conceal the basic fact that more than ever in the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 'pure faith' became a matter of the personal and almost entirely non-interceded relationship between human beings and God.

The estrangement of the shepherds from their flock enabled the creation of an alternative to the 'Orthodox spectacle', which emerged as a form of modern, mostly urbane anchoritism and asceticism of those who managed to recognise the traps of superficiality and political constructivism.<sup>3</sup>

However, an alternative remains an alternative. On the official political (and social life) scene during the 1990s and the 2000s, religious symbols were used liberally (Tomanić 2001). Nowadays, casinos, brothels and new cars are consecrated and religious paraphernalia has become a fashion accessory,<sup>4</sup> icons are used to decorate premises of political parties, tycoons and businessmen, while images of saints entice customers to buy consumer goods, such as paper napkins, towels, key rings, spirit bottles, etc.

Non-everyday, holiday, transitional and critical situations are frequently characterised by mass gatherings under religious texts or implications, however, certainly using religious paraphernalia, but this time evoking collectivism and Serbian national unity.

Thus, while it is usual to see in public premises an icon of St Sava, the first Serb archbishop, as well as the icon of the *White Angel*, a detail from the painting *The myrrh-bearers on Christ's grave* (Pavićević 2005),<sup>5</sup> at mass celebrations, as well as at revolutionary street protest rallies (which were plentiful in the capital during the last dozen years or so) and at celebrations of the town's patron

3 The rhetoric of many mass gatherings was impregnate with ethnic-religious-confessional terminology, the Church representatives participated in many popular manifestations, they were consecrating football teams, gambling houses, banks, and were sometimes very close to businessmen with questionable social reputation. The majority of the self-declared 'orthodox' population were not active churchgoers. Just a small portion of them were familiar with Church teaching and tried to organise their everyday life according to it.

4 An example is the trend of wearing prayer beads, which used to be a religious accessory, transformed into jewellery.

5 With its uncontrolled and lay/naïve reproduction of part of the fresco painting from the Church of Mileseva Monastery, the Serbian Orthodox Church provided its contribution to the 'promotion' of the *White Angel* from the herald of Resurrection to a worldly good luck amulet. See Pavićević 2005.

saint days and various festivities, the image of the 'Bogorodica' appears. Leading the processional walks of the towns, it emerges as a symbol which manages to mobilise the nation with its fullness and multi-layered meaning. Why the 'Bogorodica'? This is the main thesis of the paper, to explain the historical roots of her cult and her embeddedness into the national history and identity in Serbia.

### The Cult of 'Bogorodica' – Historical Roots

The answer to the question why Her, and not some other holy image appears in the aforementioned situations, directs us to have a look through the 'window' of national history and local traditions.

The latter is certainly to be perceived in the context of the Serbian popular religion. It is well-known that it used to be a special syncretic system of beliefs of pagan, Christian and oriental origin, which had an impact on the historic conditions under which Serb people lived (Bandić 1992: 11, 12). The Orthodox religious identity was an inseparable part of the national identity, and the truths of Christian religion, as they were taken for granted, significantly determined the general direction of spiritual seeking, both on the individual and collective level.

However, everyday life demanded a search for concrete and fast solutions for specific life situations, which were found in the traditions of non-Christian religious views and behaviour.

The cult of the 'Bogorodica' has always had greater importance on the macro, rather than on the micro level. This is corroborated by the fact that a relatively small number of families celebrated some of the 'Bogorodica' holidays as their Patron St Day, while a large number of monasteries and churches, as well as village Patron St Days were dedicated to one of them (Grujić 1985: 436).<sup>6</sup> Apart from this, the Nativity and Dormition of the *Presveta Bogorodica* [The Most Holy Mother of God]<sup>7</sup> were the most frequent dates for organising large fairs and gatherings, so-called 'country fairs', in all regions (Nedeljeković 1990).

On the other hand, some authors believe that, with the acceptance of Christianity, it was the cult of the 'Bogorodica' which was the most developed among the Serb population, because her main and most widely recognisable epithet *Baba*, connected to giving birth, was directly associated with the powerful female pagan divinities such as the Great Mother, Grandmother etc. (Petrović 2001: 55; Čajkanović 1994a: 339).

Over time, the missionary activities of the Church, as well as the fight against pagan customs and beliefs, most likely contributed to deep entrenchment of the cult of saints. In particular, it is possible that the Church tradition and teachings about the 'Bogorodica' turned out to be too abstract for a Serb peasant, who found it much easier to connect an image of a saint to a certain *specialisation* of his activities and the type of assistance to be expected (Bandić 1992: 65). This was suggested through details from a saint's life or details from folk legends on the saints. Apart from this, saints were assigned certain days to be celebrated in the church and folk calendars, while the Church connected celebrations of the 'Presveta Bogorodica' to certain events during and after her life, which made the establishment of a clear association linked to Her even more complicated.

However, having been sifted through the sieve of folk perception, the 'Presveta Bogorodica' is unambiguously connected to the phenomenon and process of birth-giving, thus becoming a 'saintess' with a clearly determined role (Kulišić et al. 1998: 42). This determination was stronger and more important than the message of her holidays, and so the people celebrated them as the holiest of

6 R. Grujić states the statistical data that in the 1920s, out of the total number of monastery churches, one third was dedicated to the 'Bogorodica', along with one sixth of the total number of parish churches (Grujić 1985: 436).

7 The Dormition is celebrated on August 27 and Nativity on September 21. Many regions in Serbia have monasteries or churches dedicated to these holidays and, throughout the history, they became important points for collective gatherings of people from these regions. People then meet to drink, eat, sing and dance together, but also exchange goods and information.

days, but without a clear connection to any historic and church traditions in terms of the very event behind the holiday.

It was barren women who most frequently addressed the 'Bogorodica' for assistance. The fear of not being able to fulfil the most important role assigned to women (in a traditional society), as well as the wish to become a mother were in favour of creating a whole ritual complex both to prevent and cure possible female infertility. The burden of excommunication was too much for a barren woman. For instance, they were not allowed to attend wedding celebrations so that their 'sin' would not infect the new bride (Tolstoi 1995: 166).

It was believed that the 'Bogorodica' and St Paraskeve<sup>8</sup> took special care of marriages and women in confinement, and the holiday of the Dormition (27<sup>th</sup> of August) in the folk calendar was therefore believed to be a favourable day for new marriages (Čajkanović 1994a: 341).

The holidays of Annunciation (7<sup>th</sup> of April) and Entrance of the 'Presveta Bogorodica' into the Temple (4<sup>th</sup> of December) were strongly associated with childbirth, and so, in all of the regions of Serbia, they were celebrated especially by young women who had already given birth, as well as those who were yet to become mothers. They strictly observed the prohibition of work during those days, and in Leskovacka Morava (South Serbia) barren women used to go to the local monastery dedicated to the 'Bogorodica' to spend a night there.

This cult also had pagan contents, which implied that after having spent a night at the monastery, at very dawn before sunrise, the women would get up to go to the old beech tree and crawl under it (Nedeljeković 1990: 45, 28). They believed they could become pregnant after doing this.

8 St Paraskeve (October 27) is widely celebrated in Serbia as a healer of difficult diseases, in particular those related to woman fertile health.



In the vicinity of Boljevac, pregnant women used to celebrate a less widespread holiday dedicated to the 'Bogorodica', i.e. the Belt of the 'Presveta Bogorodica' (13<sup>th</sup> September) in order to facilitate birth-giving. Another primarily female holiday is the so-called Shroud of the 'Presveta Bogorodica' (14<sup>th</sup> October). On this day, women frequently fasted, thus offering a form of sacrifice to the 'Bogorodica', who was supposed to assist them in becoming mothers (Ibid.: 184, 185).

Thus, even though four days in the Orthodox calendar were dedicated to the large holidays of the 'Bogorodica' and to as many as ten less important events related to her life and the reverence of her icons (Velimirović 1991), they were most frequently connected mainly to seasonal rituals in the folk customs calendar, without any direct or even indirect connection to celebrating the 'Bogorodica'. The day of the Annunciation was also dedicated to fortune-telling related to the weather and the custom of driving snakes away. Nativity was celebrated as a holiday of cattle farmers, while the customs characteristic of the Entrance of the 'Bogorodica' into the temple were associated with protecting the village from wolves (Nedeljeković 1990: 28, 45, 145).

In certain areas, the ritual of addressing the 'Bogorodica' was part of the local folklore, often regardless of the seasonal cults. Thus, in churches with painted walls for instance, the images of the 'Bogorodica' opened the possibility of establishing 'direct' contact with her life-giving power. Women, again mostly barren ones, even the ones from remote parts, came to these churches in order to pay reverence to the holy image, touch it, or even scratch some mortar on which the fresco had been painted. They would later dissolve the powder in water and drink it, believing that the powerful maternal principle of the 'Presveta Bogorodica' would act in their favour as well (Kulišić et al 1998: 42).

### Miracle Icons of 'Bogorodica'

The observance of the image of the 'Bogorodica' was specifically connected with the so-called *miracle icons*, that is, her paintings

linked to some miraculous event, either locally or generally. This was most frequently related to the icons which were famous for discharging myrrh (fragrant substance similar to oil, which would be discharged from the surface on which the icon of the 'Presveta' was painted), as well as icons which would 'cry' in certain situations, and those that changed the place of residence in a miraculous manner. The entire Serbian lyric and epic poetry bears witness of acceptability of this metaphysical part of reality. In the epic story 'Savo and the Turkish emperor', the folk poet thus describes the *wonderful tears* St Sava managed to get from the icons praying with his monks (Karadžić 1969: 54).

It is important to emphasise that this veneration or 'cult of icon' mainly concerned the icons situated in churches and monasteries. According to some records, the attitude of the Serb peasant towards an icon resembled the attitude towards 'idols' in pagan times. The view of icons was closest to the animistic principles according to which inanimate objects were believed to be alive, so that they were periodically taken to springs to perform their ritual washing (Čajkanović 1994b: 102). Apart from this, Grujić claims that the icon was not a mandatory accessory in a rural house (1985: 454), so it may be concluded that, in general, the practice of icon veneration concerned the elite strata of society. Where icons became a compulsory part of home 'altars', these were most frequently icons of saints who were celebrated by the family as family holidays – *slava* [Patron St Day].

I believe that it is at this point that the whole spool of answers to the question of why icons of the 'Bogorodica' are used in modern, political and religious-political mass gatherings begins to unravel.

### *Bogorodica Trojeručica* [Gr. 'Theotokos Tricherosa']

On the one side of this long and surprisingly continuous thread, there is most certainly the tradition of the icon of the *Bogorodica Trojeručica* [The Three-handed Mother of God] (Fig. 8.1 and 8.2), which, from the period of St Sava till the present day, appears as the metaphor of Serb



statehood and national unity. The story of miraculous healing of the arm of a fighter against iconoclast heresy, St John of Damascus (7<sup>th</sup> century), was only the beginning of a wonderful (meta)history connected to this iconographic image of the Virgin Mary.<sup>9</sup>

Fulfilling the prophecy of St Sava the Sanctified (6<sup>th</sup> century) seven centuries later, St Sava of Serbia arrived in Jerusalem, where, according to the ancient prophecy of his name-sake, he was given the abbot's pastoral staff and two miraculous icons of the 'Bogorodica' – *Mlekopitateljica* [Gr. 'Galaktotrofusa', i.e. The Milk Feeder] and *Trojeručica* as a gift.<sup>10</sup> The first Serb archbishop took the icon of the 'Mlekopitateljica' to his hermitage in Karayas, to the Holy Mountain Athos, and brought the icon of 'Trojeručica' to Serbia and gave it as a gift to his brother, Stefan the First-Crowned (1196–1223), the first Serb king, to assist him in justice and honourable ruling of the state and the nation.<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, St Sava assigned the 'Trojeručica' the role of a *fast assistant*, so that it would 'always be taken to war for the purpose of protecting the military and monarchy' (Tatić 2007: 568).

The 'Trojeručica' was also taken to wars by Stefan Vladislav (1233–1242), the second son of Stefan the First-Crowned, and there is a story from his war-waging that the icon was once shot in its right arm and began bleeding at once (Ibid.). Certainly, the 'Trojeručica' was kept in the home of all descendants and rulers from the Nemanjić bloodline, to arrive miraculously once more, at the Chilandar monastery once the dynasty ceased to exist.

9 It is known that John of Damascus' arm was cut off due to his fight against iconoclasts. As he was praying before the icon of the 'Bogorodica', a new arm grew from his body, and so, in order to express his gratitude, he put an arm-shaped silver overlay on the icon (Velimirović 1991: 968).

10 St Sava, the Sanctified of Jerusalem, as mentioned in some sources, predicted that his name-sake would arrive and that the monks would recognise him as the abbot's pastoral staff would fall on the ground on his bowing in the church. The monastery brotherhood was appointed the task of presenting the 'holy visitor' with the staff, as well as the icon of the 'Bogorodica Mlekopitateljica'. St John of Damascus added to this appointment the icon of the 'Trichersa' (Ibid.: 29).

11 In iconographic terms, the icon of the 'Trojeručica' belongs to the type of *Putevoditeljica* [Gr. 'Hodegetria', i.e. Pointer of the Way].

This event was subject to various traditions and theories. Some data point to the conclusion that this occurred during the rule of king Milutin (1281–1321); according to others, it happened right after the collapse of the Serb state of independence, while the tertiary sources connect this event to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid.: 583, 585; Stanojević 1929: 613). However, all these sources contain a similar story on how the icon of the 'Trojeručica' travelled from Serbia to the Holy Mountain.

Predominantly, monks, most likely those from the monastery Studenica, in which the icon arrived at the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century according to local tradition, realised that the monastery was a frequent target of Turkish attacks, so they loaded a donkey with the icon and other holy objects and released it 'where the will of the 'Bogorodica' would take it'. Nobody knows how, but the donkey arrived in the Holy Mountain and stopped close to Chilandar. When the monks unloaded the precious load, the donkey dropped dead.

When Chilandar was faced with a crisis regarding the appointment of the Prior at the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century, the 'Trojeručica' took the abbot's throne and took over the role of Mother Superior and the patroness of this Serb monastery,<sup>12</sup> which it never left for the following three centuries (Stanojević 1929: 613).

The use of icons in wars, either those of conquest or defensive, appears to be a widely spread practice in the Orthodox world. It was noted that Serb noblemen carried standards with images of various saints to wars, and that the cities were frequently placed under the protection of certain icons (Grujić 1985: 455). The city of Belgrade was thus under the standards of the 'Trojeručica'; the icon of the *Putevoditeljica* [Gr. 'Hodegetria', i.e. Pointer of the Way] was the famous patroness of the city of Constantinople, while during the conquering of the town of Smederevo in 1688, the Bavarian Duke Maximilian the Second Emmanuel brought along

12 According to the tradition, the icon moved at night on its own from its position intended by the monks to the abbot's throne three times.

an icon of the 'Bogorodica' which turned out to be miraculous (Tatić 2007: 534, 569; Timotijević 2000: 222). In 1905, upon the request of senior officers from the Russian military, which was at that time at war with Japan, a copy of the icon of the 'Bogorodica Trojeručica' was made and sent to the battlefield as assistance to the Russian military. The fortune of war then shifted, and the Russians began to win.<sup>13</sup>

Travelling through towns and battlefields, throughout the decades and centuries, the 'Bogorodica' appeared through its holy image at the end of the second millennium as the protectress, advocate, *Pointer of the Way* and foster mother of those who were, possibly more than ever, in need of miracles and waymarks.

Its manifestations and epithets were once again numerous, but the most important for Serbia was the one of practically 'everything began with' – the 'Bogorodica Trojeručica'.

The return of the 'Trojeručica' to secular space and time likely began in 1993, when, despite prohibitions, it was taken from the Holy Mountain and exhibited in the church of St Demetrius in Thessaloniki. It stayed there for a short time and approximately one million believers bowed before it, and the whole event gained further effect with the miraculous healing of a 33-year-old man who had been blind from birth.<sup>14</sup>

The story of this event, as well as everything that took place in Serbia in the 1990s, fits in the Christian concept of interpreting miracles, which, as a rule, announce some important and crucial historic events. Of course, the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was fraught with such events. They culminated in 1999 with the NATO bombing of Serbia. However, the first significant appearance of the image of the 'Bogorodica Trojeručica' took place on the occasion of students' protest in 1996–1997. The Serbian Orthodox Church not only generally supported this protest but took an

13 For more information, see <http://www.znanje.org/> (accessed on April 15, 2019).

14 Ibid.

active part in it as well. Priests and bishops joined the students on the streets of Belgrade, while monks from the monastery of Chilandar sent their blessing in the form of a reproduction of the 'Trojeručica', as well as Yule logs and honey for the protestors, who spent their Christmas Eve on the streets of the capital. In January 1997, the street protest rally was practically transformed into the largest procession ever seen in Belgrade. This was the procession on the day of celebration of St Sava (January 27), which started from the Collegiate Church and ended at St Sava's church, headed by church officials as well as students carrying the Jerusalem cross, an icon of the 'Bogorodica', *koljivo* [boiled wheat] and traditional cake (Gligorijević 1997).<sup>15</sup>

In June 1997, a special copy of the icon of the 'Bogorodica Trojeručica' arrived in Serbia. It had been painted in a monastery in the Holy Mountain (it took one year to paint it) and sent to the people of Serbia for their spiritual regeneration and renewal (Kuburović 1997: 16).

However, the rhetoric accompaniment of its arrival suggested not only spiritual but also state and national rebirth, insisting on continuity of the medieval and modern state of Serbia (Jurišić 1997: 3). A rough clash between the holy and the profane occurred not farther than the Belgrade airport, upon arrival of the delegation of monks who brought the icon. Namely, a service was held on the very spot, in the VIP lounge, as a token of welcoming of the 'Presveta Bogorodica' (Ibid.).

From the airport, the icon set off to another journey through 'Serb lands': Rakovica monastery and the Collegiate church in Belgrade, followed by another magnificent procession on the streets of Belgrade to the church of St Sava, then through the Serbian countryside, Romania, Hungary, Bosnia... and then once more to Belgrade, to the sacral centre of the capital, the church of St Sava,

15 See also the text 'Svetosavska litija ulicama Beograda' [St Sava procession at Belgrade streets]. In: *Glasnik Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, February 1997(2): 21–22.

where it is kept today. The processions organised in the towns in which the icon used to stay were attended by most varied social strata. In some towns, the 'Trojeručica' was escorted by special military units, in others it was carried by students, and also by girls dressed in traditional folk clothes in some others.

In Krusevac, for example, the main protagonists were members of the municipal council, who, upon having taken the icon over in front of the council building, stated that they felt that *it gave them power!* (Tomović 1998: 4). The welcome of the 'Trojeručica' in Sokolac was also full of symbols. It was welcomed in front of the hotel 'Romanija' by soldiers who carried the flags of the medieval Serb state, accompanied by girls carrying flowers and candles (Ibid.).

The same or similar iconography adorned the 'religious spectacles' which also took place in Serbia during the first decade of the third millennium. This is when the custom of celebrating the town's Patron St day was revived in most Serbian towns. In Belgrade, this was done for the first time in 2003, and numerous city and state officials took part in the event, i.e. the procession which was organised for the occasion. They joined the masses walking along the streets of Belgrade for a short time and in quite a disorganised manner, showing ignorance and lack of interest in the sense and function of this Christian rite. Certainly, leading the procession and carried by the priests, were the icon of the Ascension (Patron St day of the City of Belgrade) and a copy of the icon of the 'Bogorodica Trojeručica'.

## Conclusions

I believe that everything described above provides sufficient material for drawing conclusions at various levels. In conclusion, however, I will concentrate on what I deem the foundation of all other and future constructions and reconstructions.

The complexity of the personality and image of the 'Bogorodica' lies in the comprehensiveness of her powers and in the fact that

they are used to summarise and balance seemingly irreconcilable layers of historic and spiritual heritage. In time, the maternal principle as the fundamental and most recognisable epithet of the 'Mother of God' turned out to be the one associated with all the others (the Pointer of the Way, the Foster Mother, the Merciful One, the Sad One, the Joy of all the sad, the Wider than the Heaven... are but a few of her titles and manifestations). This could possibly represent counterbalance to the strict love of the Father which (European) civilisation finds so hard to cope with.

On all her travels, She was to make various wishes come true through the power of Her love and prayer. And, as we have seen, wishes were most varied – from those relating to motherhood through wishes for peace and abundance, rescue from misery and illnesses to wartime and political victories. This 'Fast Assistant' (which is also one of her epithets) was possibly as fast in making a wish come true as the wish was just... and a wish is just as long as it contains the recognisable principles of humanity embodied in love and mercy.





Fig. 8.1



Fig. 8.2

Fig. 8.1 Recent welcoming of the Three-Handed Theotokos icon in Kalenic Monastery, Serbia, 2009; personal archives of the author (personal archives of A. Pavićević).

Fig. 8.2 Icon of the Theotokos Tricherousa (Three-handed) which appears to be one of the most important icons in Serbian

→ popular and church tradition and history (personal archives of A. Pavićević).



Fig. 10.1



Fig. 10.3



Fig. 10.2

Fig. 10.1 Place of apparition of the Virgin Mary on the wall inside Kristina's house, Hermanovce (photo by T. Zachar Podolinská, 2006).

Fig. 10.2 Kristina's chapel of the Virgin Mary inside her house, Hermanovce (photo by T. Zachar Podolinská, 2006).

Fig. 10.3 Private chapel on the façade of a family house, Žehňa (photo by T. Zachar Podolinská, 2006).

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## **01 ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ, Tatiana**

### **Traces of the Mary in Post-Communist Europe**

The Virgin Mary as such cannot be examined scientifically. We can, however, examine her 'apparitions' in the world, as well as the innumerable variants of Marian devotion and cult. This volume focuses on her manifestations in the post-Communist region with some geographical spillovers. It is either because post-Communist transformation concerned not only the former socialist countries, but also had an impact on the entire European region and was part of the overall post-modern and post-Communist reconfiguration of the European area. Another factor is that Marian worship is not controlled by political borders of present-day nation states. It has a wider transnational potential and impact. Nevertheless, we focused our viewfinder primarily on the post-Communist region, as we believe that thanks to its geographical and symbolic location and economic position in Europe, as well as its historical roots and traditions and common Communist history and heritage, it not only shows different traits of modernity compared to 'Western Europe', but we also face specific features and forms of worshipping of the Virgin Mary. We therefore decided to present in this volume the traces of the Virgin Mary by means of more in-depth analyses from selected countries of the post-socialist region.

By means of this publication, we can observe how the Virgin Mary is manifested in the faces of seers and pilgrims and how audio-visual means are becoming a direct part of Marian apparitions in Germany in the modern era (H. Knoblauch and S. Petschke); how she speaks through the mouth of a blind Roma woman and pacifies the ethnic and religious tensions between various groups in Romania (L. Peti); how she attributes meaning to meaningless places on the map by reallocating her presence through the geographical and time distribution of Marian dedications in Slovakia (J. Majo); how, after the fall of Communism, she revitalises the old places of her cult with new power, bringing together traditional

and non-traditional forms of worship in the secular Czech Lands (M. Holubová); how her messages are spread on the websites of new non-traditional Marian movements and how their apocalyptic warnings are being updated and localised into the specific national environment in Czechia (V. Tutr); how she addresses the readers of Marian literature differently on the shelves of bookstores in Slovakia and Austria (R. Kečka); but also how the Virgin Mary absorbs ultra-modern millennial and spiritualistic concepts of Mother Earth and Mother of the Universe, becoming the speaker of the great unified Hungarian nation (J. Kis-Halas); how she is becoming the re-discovered herald of Serbian national identity (A. Pavičević); how she absorbs the local forms of faith and folk Christianity in modern era and is thus the manifestation of grass-root Christianity and local religious culture in Bulgaria (V. Baeva and A. Georgieva); and how the path from a private to an officially recognised apparition depends not only on the Virgin Mary and the seer, but also on the overall constellation of the audience and the ability to offer a *religious ready-made event* (T. Zachar Podolinská and L. Peti).

This publication observes the current diversity of the forms of Marian devotion in post-Communist countries through different national and geographically defined contours and, in particular, the ability of the Virgin Mary to satisfy the hunger for modern spirituality and authentic religiousness, give voice to unofficial and popular religions, revitalise and redefine old places of cult and add new ones, appease war conflicts, speak out on behalf of nations and marginalised ethnic groups, and guard national and conservative values. The post-modern and post-Communist Mary thus restores ruptured traditions with love, and enchants the violently atheised European region with new miracles and apparitions, regardless of whether top Church and state representatives like it or not.

## 02 KIS-HALAS, Judit

### **Sacred Sites Reinterpreted: New Age Phenomena at a Hungarian Marian Shrine**

Marian shrines were always the sites of miraculous healings and spectacular apparitions. Nowadays, they have also become the crystallisation points of the New Age phenomena. Several studies have already pointed out this trend with regard to popular pilgrimage destinations. As far as the Hungarian Marian shrines are concerned, none of them have been systematically examined from this perspective. This chapter aims to provide a deeper insight of how a Marian shrine is being re-orchestrated as a specific 'power place' in the context of alternative spiritualities, such as New Age religiosity or ethno-paganism at one Marian shrine at Máriagyűd.

From the wide-ranging New Age phenomena and religious practices that the author observed during the past decades at Máriagyűd, she chose the prominent example of an esoteric group called *Magyar MAGok* [Hungarian Seeds], which deals with diverse religious and healing activities. Their programmes include shamanic drumming sessions, tours to 'sacred sites' in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin (mostly Romania), weekend meditations, esoteric workshops, readings on the history and culture of the ancient Hungarians, such as direct kinship between the Hungarians and the Huns, or the identification of the Ancient Hungarians with the Scythians, or the Hungarian origins of the Christian Father God. In accordance with the millennial narrative, they use the elements of the alternative history of the Hungarians as well as other motifs which recall UFO-religions and ET-spiritualities, and last but not least, the idea of healing and cleansing as the basic means leading to universal well-being. The description of their unique rituals and other religious practices is followed by an analysis of the discourse on the contested authority of the shrine.

The author of the chapter focuses on the role of the Virgin Mary within their discourse. She found it interesting that Mary

is connected with the so-called *Boldogasszony* (literally [Blessed Woman]), which is a special Hungarian denomination of the Virgin Mary and, at the same time, the alleged goddess of the ancient Hungarians. 'Boldogasszony' has been used as a synonym for the Blessed Virgin Mary since the Middle Ages (cf. Madas 2002). The quest for a lost epic and a missing mythology of the Hungarians, which was inspired by national romanticism, resulted in the term gaining an ethnic taste by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. 'Boldogasszony' was the most emblematic female figure of the pantheon in the re-invented Ancient Hungarian religion – the Mother Goddess (Kálmány 1885). With regard to its contemporary use, 'Boldogasszony' is also interpreted as the Hungarian equivalent of the Goddess (Bowman 2009), and is also considered Mother Earth (Gaia) and the galactic patroness of all Hungarians *par excellence*. The author put the manifold interpretations of the Virgin Mary's figure in the centre of attention, highlighting the Catholic Church's standpoint on the emergence of New Age spirituality at Catholic devotional places.

### 03 HOLUBOVÁ, Markéta

#### Manifestations of Marian Devotion in the Czech Republic – the Past and Present

According to the author of the chapter, Marian devotion in the Czech Republic should be seen not only in the light of recent highly secularised climate of Czech society. For the current dislike for official Catholicism and de-Christianisation of Czech society, we have to go back in history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Czechs became liberals, nationalists or socialists. At the same time, religion ceased to play its former role and was assigned only the role of an occasionally sought-after, yet unnecessary 'folklore' anachronism, typical for village population. Religious identity was substituted primarily by national identity, as well as by class identity and a 'scientific' worldview. The rise of the Communist dictatorship after 1948 bolstered these trends and used them – mostly unmod-

ified – for its own benefit. The non-religious and anti-religious components were accentuated, while the forms of 'implicit religiosity' stayed preserved and Church organisations were forced to face systematic repression. The years 1989 and 1990 brought about radical changes in the political and spiritual history of the Czech Republic. Religion lost its principal enemy – Communism. Innumerable forms of religiosity appeared, from versions of classical and modern Christianity to the spiritual schools of the Far East.

In this context, it is very interesting that the worshiping of the Virgin Mary has remained virtually unchanged. Just like in the past, emphasis is placed today on spirituality and emotional experience, thereby fulfilling the main conditions for survival in the modern era *de facto*. In addition to the traditional forms of cult and pilgrimage rituals, there are also new forms of religiosity brought about by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in abundantly visited places of pilgrimage. Due to the widespread use of the internet and e-mail communication, after centuries of pilgrimage tradition, there is for the first time no need to receive the written *votum* personally or even in representation. After 1989, visits to Czech and foreign places of pilgrimage began to appear in the catalogues of many travelling agencies. Also, bike pilgrimages represent a very popular form among young people.

On the other hand, it can be also mentioned, that despite the strong Marian tradition, the general public and as well as the religious discourse on Marian devotion connected to private apparitions in the Czech Republic is at a certain point 'marginal'. This can have two principal reasons. Firstly, the import of apparitions is caused by the absence of such apparitions at home. Secondly, the import of greater movements and groups represents a reaction to the delay of the Communist era and a smaller membership of believers.



#### 04 TUTR, Vojtěch

##### **The Reception of Recent Marian Apparitions in the Czech Republic in the Field of Popular Religiosity – Two Examples**

Marian apparitions have always emerged throughout the history of the Catholic Church. However, they have never been given a lot of attention and have never met with so much public acceptance as has been seen since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The development of *mass communication* and increasing population *mobility* have partly contributed to this phenomenon. These apparitions have a new function – providing *public messages*. The Virgin Mary is no longer speaking only to the visionary; she is pronouncing prophecies and messages to all believers, laying claims to the hierarchy.

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of two examples of ‘popular religiosity’ in the Czech Republic as a spontaneous religious activity produced and operated by their charismatic leaders and opinion-makers: *Vérité* centre founded by František Mráček and *Mariánské nakladatelství* [MANA, Marian publishers] founded by František Press in Brno. Both cases are based on modern Marian apparitions and are contextualised in the current global situation and in the Czech Republic. According to the author, this goes hand in hand with the trend of modernisation and the era of mass communication.

Marian devotion plays a central role in both studied cases and is crucial for understanding the portraying her as the *Loving Mother* and *Hope of the Mankind*, as well as the *Guardian of the World* coming as the (last) *Living Warning* before the expected global catastrophe. The apocalyptic, chiliastic and millennial tone presented by both interpreters of modern Marian apparitions is being explored as well. The main issue in both cases is the expectation of the *end of the current world* order. This element was certainly activated by the approaching end of the millennium. Even though this stimulation of thoughts on the end of the world is now out of play, the charismatic leaders flexibly postponed their prediction in this re-

gard and, according to them, we should expect some global threat in the future, the outbreak of WWII, nuclear or ecological catastrophes, globalisation or total control by means of information technologies.

Another nodal point is the reference to *globalisation* as an instrument of Satan's rule over the unified world. According to the author, both studied cases are examples of modern adaptation of Christianity to the post-modern religious landscape of post-socialist Czech Republic and represent a form of *popular religiosity* which is transformed and adapted to the context of modern society and ‘Western culture’.

#### 05 KEČKA, Roman

##### **Contemporary Models of Marian Discourse in Slovakia**

According to the 2001 census, the majority of Slovakia's population statistically follows the Catholic confession of Roman or Byzantine rites. In both rites, the Marian devotion has a considerable place in religious reflection and spirituality. This study explores the religious discourse of the Marian devotion as it appears in available books and booklets on this topic. The main focus of the chapter is a comparison of the Marian discourse in Slovakia (representing a post-socialist country) and the Marian discourse in neighbouring Austria (representing a ‘Western’ country with no socialist history). For this purpose, a sample of Mariological reflections and spiritual texts was created based on their availability in all Catholic bookstores in the capital of Slovakia (Bratislava) and the capital of Austria (Vienna). The reason for this choice is that these bookstores offer books that mirror the living intellectual and religious brainstorming and reflect Christianity, in particular the pattern of the Marian discourse of the recent decades in both countries. The study comments on the absence of modern Marian literature in Slovak bookstores. The author also analyses the Marian vocabulary and topics in the both samples. The author distinguishes three existing models of the Marian discourse in

Slovakia, all of traditional origin, portraying Mary as an unselfish and patient mother, Mary loving conditionally and restraining God's anger; Mary leading the legions against Satan and crushing his head. All three models are based on the traditional images of Mary and, within the Christian communities, are not understood as contradictory, but complementary.

Compared to Western Christianity, the Marian discourse in Slovakia lacks two recurrent models: (1) the progressive 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century model, and (2) the traditionalist and fundamentalist model. The first model has created a Marian vocabulary and contents representing a self-confident, social and communicative model of Mary. This model presents an alternative to the old models combining mild or triumphant vocabulary with mild or triumphant contents. The second model which is absent among Slovak believers is the Marian discourse of the traditionalist and fundamentalist groups of each age tolerated by official Church structures. These traditionalist and fundamentalist groups return to the old Marian vocabulary and contents that is triumphant, militant and – in this modern version – has an offensive character. This form of discourse, created as a reaction to progressive Christian groups – did not emerge in Slovakia, since there were no progressive Christian movements.

Based on the research of the author, the Slovak Marian reflection and spirituality result from traditional beliefs, having no affinity to Western progressive and traditionalist models. In this regard, it can be stated that Slovakia's isolation from the European spiritual development, which has caused traditional devotion to be fixed in its forms, is, paradoxically, continuing also after the fall of Communism in the era of religious freedom. The comparative discursive analysis of Mariological literature in Slovakia and its Western neighbour – Austria has showed that the Slovak religious landscape is far more traditional (but not traditionalist) than the current trends in the 'Western' religious discourse.

## 06 MAJO, Juraj

### **Marian Dedications within the Current Cultural Space of Slovakia**

Cultural geography (as the main field in geography with no connection to religion) is strongly influenced by constructivist approaches today. Geographer Doreen Massey wrote in 2010 (Massey 2010: 107) that space is always being made and always, therefore, in a sense, unfinished. The 'always' is rather that there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction, or not, potential links which may never be established. Loose ends and ongoing stories. With these ideas she perfectly outlined the relationship of space, time, and social world. In the field of religious identity and its expression it indicates not just variability of its representations but can also work as a hub to the local projections of identity interactions and how this space is formed within local actors and local circumstances.

All interactions within the various scales forms two paradigms of how place and space can be analysed – as politics and poetics of space. If the cult of the Virgin Mary prevails within the Catholic religious practice, then the poetics and politics of space can have vast forms of expression and impacts. This chapter attempts to outline the spatiality of this cult represented in dedications of sacred buildings, and open up questions on forming such distributions and regional specificities in Slovakia.

Research on the spatial aspects of dedications of sacred buildings provide interesting intersections of relations between sacred and profane as well as various levels of research resulting in a relationship between the 'politics' and 'poetics' of place. This chapter introduces such relationship within cultural geography. Although this approach is fully applicable in local or regional research, we have outlined the spatial aspects of the cult of the Virgin Mary as embodied in the dedication of sacred buildings, introducing the differences in the types of such dedication within regional and denominational aspects (such as Roman and Byzantine Catholics).



The link between time and space is observed in living as well as obliterated dedications, which helps us understand in a very broad sense the dynamics of construction and maintenance of sacred space and the projections of initiatives at various levels of political administration with an impact on the poetics of space and community.

Research on the spatial distribution of dedications in Slovakia is still a little explored field, even though the extensive data sources are relatively high in quality and quantity and enable the interpretation of different relations in various scales. In the context of important dedications, it is the Marian ones that have a significant position in church life and are the most common ones, reflecting the intensity of the worship of the Virgin Mary within the Slovak environment. The research also indicates that the importance and popularity of Marian dedications are accompanied by great diversity with growth over time. It also reflects on the background based on social changes, such as the extinction of the Kingdom of Hungary, the declaration of Our Lady of Sorrows as the patron of Slovakia, etc.

## **07 KNOBLAUCH, Hubert – PETSCHKE, Sabine**

### **Vision and Video. Marian Apparition, Spirituality and Popular Religion**

The chapter demonstrates that *spirituality* and *popular religiosity* are built into the Marian apparitions, thus turning them into a contemporary 'modern' phenomenon. The study refers to a series of apparitions which happened during 1999 in Marpingen, a German village close to the Western border with France. This village was the setting for a series of Marian apparitions back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These earlier apparitions have recently been subjected to a very thorough study by British historian David Blackbourn (1993). Whereas Blackbourn based his analysis on written documents mostly stored in archives, the authors had not only access to written documents, newspapers and books, but also the

exceptional chance to collect video-tape records from the event, and they could also rely on audio-taped statements by the seers. These data, supported by ethnographic field data, are subject to a fine-grained video-analysis provided in the chapter.

In Marpingen, it was Marion who began to have visions on May 17 and 20 near the chapel (built by the above-mentioned association) where the earlier apparitions had happened. Thereafter, the three women together had various apparitions near the chapel, mostly in the company of an increasing number of pilgrims. The sixth apparitions on June 13, 1999, was already witnessed by about 4,000 visitors, and on the ninth day of the apparitions, on July 18, 12,000 visitors turned up. The final apparitions were said to be attended by 30,000. As a hundred years before, the incident not only attracted masses, there was also some turmoil accompanying the apparitions: television stations turned up and reported critically on the event, the Church prohibited any proclamation by the seers, the seers were threatened and, finally, the village administration and the chapel association got into a conflict.

The authors pointed out that when talking about the apparition, we must be aware of the fact that this notion refers not only to a subjective experience by the seers. In order to become an apparition, it needs to be communicated. The communication of the apparition does not only draw on the verbalisation by which the apparition is being reported, i.e. reconstructed. In addition, the apparition is also being performed by the body of the seers who form part of the setting which includes the visitors in relation to the seers and the spatial constellations of other objects. Thus, the authors interpret apparition as a *communicative performance of religious action*.

However, the verbalisation of the cited vision is not, as in other cases, reconstructed *after* the vision. On the contrary, the seer (Marion) talks into a dictograph which is held by another visionary – Judith – while having the vision. In this way, the apparition is turned into a *live report*. It may be no accident that this kind of

live report is not directly addressed to the live audience. Rather, it is recorded so to be accessible to a larger media audience via audio tapes, transcripts of the visions and a number of books based on these reports. According to Auslander (1999: 39ff.), it is the '*technological and aesthetic contamination* of live performance'. The authors noted that the media are not only added to the event but are imparted in the event to such a degree that they transform it into something different. Thus, the use of the dictograph results in a format of the 'live report' on the inner visions. The microphone allows coordinating the actions of the seers with those of the crowd – a phenomenon that was virtually impossible at earlier apparitions.

According to the authors, the Marian movement is not only a static remnant of earlier periods but also a form of modern expression against rationality and secularism. The Marian apparition in question, according to the authors, is an example for the modernity of this form of religion by exhibiting the essential features of popular religion. It is not that religion has changed its contents: it is still the realm of the transcendent as the subject matter of religion. However, this subject matter is not an element of cognitive or moral belief; it is something to be experienced subjectively, the reasserting subject being the major instance and locus of religiosity. This way, the analysis of Marian apparitions is a case for the thesis of the modernity of religion and a case that demonstrates what is modern about religion.

## 08 PAVIĆEVIĆ, Aleksandra

### **Travelling through the Battle Fields. The Cult of the Bogorodica in Serbian Tradition and Contemporary Times**

The chapter deals with the role of the Virgin Mary in the nation-state building process in Serbia. The beginning of the process of religious revival in Serbia coincided with the beginning of the social, economic and political crisis in the former Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, which took place at the beginning

of the 1990s. There was an urgent need to find *new collective identity*, since the earlier had been reduced to rubble. At the *individual level*, this process primarily implied increased participation in rites within the life cycle of an individual (baptism, wedding, and funeral), followed by popularisation of the practice of celebrating family's patron saint days and, only in the end and on the smallest scale, by an increase in the number of believers taking an active part in regular church services.

On the *collective level*, the traditional closeness of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serb people and the state was the basic paradigm of such restructuring. The attempt to establish continuity with the tradition of the medieval Serb state, which implied active participation of the Church in both social and political matters, as well as the grafting of this relationship in the secular state and civil society in Serbia at the end of the second millennium, turned out to be a multi-tiered issue (Jevtić 1997).

At mass celebrations, as well as at revolutionary street protest rallies (which were plentiful in the capital during the last dozen years or so) and at celebrations of the town's patron saint days and various festivities, the image of the 'Bogorodica' [Gr. 'Theotokos', i.e. The Mother of God]; appears. Leading the processional walks of the towns, it emerges as a symbol which manages to mobilise the nation with its fullness and multi-layered meaning. The main thesis of the chapter is to explain the historical roots of her cult and her embeddedness in the national history and identity in Serbia.

The cult of the 'Bogorodica' has always had greater importance on the macro than on the micro level. This is corroborated by the fact that a relatively small number of families celebrated some of the 'Bogorodica' holidays as their Patron St Day, while a large number of monasteries and churches, as well as village Patron St Days were dedicated to one of them (Grujić 1985: 436). On the other hand, some authors believe that, with the acceptance of Christianity, it was the cult of the 'Bogorodica' which was the most developed

among the Serb population, because her main and most widely recognisable epithet *Baba*, connected to giving birth, was directly associated with the powerful female pagan divinities such as the Great Mother, Grandmother etc. (Petrović 2001: 55; Čajkanović 1994a: 339). In the folk perception, the 'Presveta Bogorodica' [The Most Holy Mother of God] is unambiguously connected to the phenomenon and process of birth-giving and, that is why, barren women most frequently addressed the 'Bogorodica' for assistance.

The observance of the image of the 'Bogorodica' was specifically connected with the so-called *miracle icons*, that is, her paintings linked to some miraculous event, either locally or generally. This was most frequently related to the icons which were famous for discharging myrrh, as well as icons which would 'cry' in certain situations, as well as those that changed the place of residence in a miraculous manner.

The use of icons in wars, either those of conquest or defensive, appears to be a widely spread practice in the Orthodox world. It was noted that Serb noblemen carried standards with images of various saints to wars, and that the cities were frequently placed under the protection of certain icons. The author shows how, travelling through towns and battlefields, throughout the decades and centuries, the 'Bogorodica' appeared through its holy image at the end of the second millennium as the protectress, advocate, Pointer of the Way and foster mother of those who were, possibly more than ever, in need of miracles and waymarks.

## **09 BAEVA, Vihra – GEORGIEVA, Albena**

### **The Worship of Mary in the Region of Asenovgrad**

#### **(Central Southern Bulgaria): Sites, Rituals and Narratives**

The chapter presents Marian worship in one of its specific local manifestations – the cult to the Virgin in the region of Asenovgrad, Central Southern Bulgaria. The fact that it is the most representative example of the vital and well-developed Marian cult with in present-day Bulgaria, as well as authors' long-term fieldwork

in the region (started 1996), influenced the choice of Asenovgrad as the focus of their attention. The methodological framework is based on the concept of local religion (Christian 1989: 3), reformulated by the authors into the concepts of *local religiosity* and *local religious culture*. The local Marian cult in Asenovgrad region is used as an example of how to understand this local and cultural embeddedness of religiosity, presented via (1) devotional sites and the images belonging to them (in this case, miracle-working icons of the Virgin); (2) local feasts and ritual practices; and (3) local and personal religious narratives. The authors regard places, rituals and narratives as basic elements which complement, influence and support each another, constituting a complex system of local religious culture. Following this pattern, the authors pinpointed for their analysis the three most important places of Marian worship in the region: the Dormition of Mary Monastery of Bachkovo, the Annunciation of Mary Church in Asenovgrad, and the Dormition of Mary Church in Gorni Voden. Besides the contextual information, the authors also focused on a more intimate, individual dimension of Marian worship, exploring the presence of the Virgin in personal narratives about miraculous recoveries, dreams, visions, etc. and delineating the connection between individual experience and cultural background. According to the authors, the local worship of Mary in Asenovgrad region is a brilliant example of the ways in which local religiosity exists and develops in the intersection of universal religion and local traditions, folklore and cultural specificities. On the local level, the general Christian figure of the Virgin acquires characteristic features, associated with her motherly aspect and her quality of a divine patroness and immediate helper in every need. Her intercession is achieved by means of sacred intermediaries that have the power to connect the common devotee with the celestial power: holy places, miracle-working icons, springs and caves. Apart from the well-known Marian feasts, idiosyncratic local holidays are observed, too, and the related ritual actions span from the canonical to the folkloric

and ‘magical’. Specific symbols, such as the apple, the water, and the fish, come to the fore as a material representation of Mary’s sacred power and assistance. Local and personal narratives add a private, sometimes even intimate aspect to the Marian devotion, binding the universal sacred figure of the Virgin with the history and geography of the local community, as well as with the individual life trajectories of the believers.

## 10 ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ, Tatiana

### ‘From Periphery to the Centre’: Private Apparition of the Virgin Mary (An In-depth Qualitative Analysis of the Apparition’s Narrative with Field Journal Notes)

The overall research dataset used for the purposes of this chapter is part of ongoing research of the author on Roma folk beliefs (2006–2007), as well as on the activities of both traditional and non-traditional religious movements among the Roma in Slovakia (2003–2004, 2010–2011).

In the framework of the previous outputs from this research, the author attempted to create, with some generalisation, a typology of the elements of traditional rural *Romani Christianity* in Slovakia, elucidating the phenomena of the cultural and ethnic reinterpretation of mainstream Christianity into a Roma cultural context (Podolinská 2009). In particular, she pointed out the phenomenon of *inculturation* in which the ‘White’ Virgin Mary is culturally and ethnically ‘transcribed’ and ‘translated’ into the ‘Chocolate Mary’ that physically, mentally and spiritually fits better and corresponds to the hopes and needs of particular ‘peripheral’ ethnic community.

As Viktor Turner (1974) pointed out that what is interesting about apparitions is that they occur on the *periphery* not only from the geographical point of view (peripheries of cities, rural areas) but also at peripheral levels of society: the seers are mostly children or (illiterate) women from a socially deprived background. This chapter offers an in-depth qualitative analysis of a narrative

on private Marian apparitions of one Romani woman living in a segregated Roma settlement in Šariš region, Eastern Slovakia. The seer perfectly fits into the ‘periphery’ concept: she is an illiterate woman from a socially deprived settlement and is a member of the ethnically stigmatised community of *Cigáni* [Gypsies]. Her visions are private ones, and since they started to appear, she started her struggle for collective and public recognition. The story of her apparition thus contains the well-known part of the path of other ‘successful visionaries’ – ‘from periphery to centre’ (i.e. from marginal private/individual apparition to the central public/mass recognition). As far as visions are ‘cultural products’ (Christian 1998) produced in the process of communication (Knoblauch 2009; Knoblauch and Schnettler 2018), they are not only embedded in a particular cultural context but also in the language and aesthetic taste. For every apparition, the crucial point is to achieve collective consensus and to attract masses. This is the way from private/individual apparition to public/collective acknowledgement. This is the way from ‘periphery to the centre’. In the described case, however, the seer was able to achieve recognition only within her own family. The response of the local Roma community to her apparitions was mostly negative. Quite interesting about this case is that, according to her, she has support from the side of non-Roma local religious authorities. Based on the author’s qualitative analysis, the struggle for *collective consensus* and *ethnic code* are the most important themes of the analysed narrative on apparition.

According to the author, the peripheral and deprived life situation of the seer is embedded in her visions. In her narrative, the attempt to achieve ‘centrality’ in a marginal position is central and the recognition theme is more frequent than the description of the apparition itself. In order to offer the reader a holistic picture of research situation, the author uses not only the qualitative analysis and thematic coding, but also the perspective of multi-vocal ethnography (Tobin 1988; Clegg 2017). The interview is thus embedded in the synchronous context of field journal notes

of the author, as well as in the diachronic context of her recent memories. The qualitative analysis also includes a wider context of the thematic search of media reports on local apparitions among Roma households in Eastern Slovakia.

## **11 PETI, Lehel**

### **The Marian Apparition of Seuca/Szőkefalva in the Context of Religious and Ethnical Interferences**

Seuca became a known place for pilgrimage due to a blind Gypsy woman's public visions about the Virgin Mary in the first years of the new millennium. The author presents both the history of the ethnical and confessional co-existence in the village and the economic and social problems which affected the whole community. Then, the attitudes towards the apparition of the different denominations are highlighted by also presenting the way the seer attempts to question the different denominational opinions. The legitimating strategies of a Gypsy woman significantly influenced the aspects of the vision of the Virgin Mary from Seuca. In the history of Seuca, we find the practice of ethnic groups making well-defined boundaries between them, functioning as important parts of the communities. The artificial change of the ethnic structure during the Communist dictatorship changed the patterns of relations between the ethnic groups and made ethnic coexistence more problematic. The local parish that tried to expropriate the Marian apparitions has successfully integrated their messages into the ideology of ethnic reconciliation. The traditional ontological systems of religion in the communities still work and the frequent crossing of the ethnic and denominational boundaries have also promoted the strategies of the Church. In addition, the apparitions in Seuca earned the village a distinguished reputation in the region where enormous changes have taken place and where people have been forced to develop more complex strategies, or ways of life, without any pre-existing concrete models.

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