

Chapter 8: Patron Saints

“Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

*‘You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honor and power;
For You created all things.’”¹*

The Bible as God’s revelation given to people from its first to last page asserts that God alone is worthy of veneration and praise (that is, people should give God alone reverence and praise). Numerous verses of the Old and New Testament confirm this truth.

However, our Serbian people, among other pagan customs and celebration adorned in the guise of Christianity, adhere to one that is unique to Serbians. This custom pertains to patron saints. This observance is unknown to other Eastern Orthodox nations, and celebrated only within the Serbian Orthodox Church (“the Church of Holy Praise”). Before reading some excerpts from several Orthodox authors who admit that the custom of “veneration of saints” was yet another example of adapting pagan rites to Christianity, and before arriving to correct conclusions based on the Bible, I want to read some statements of colleagues they respect. In fact, a number of theologians of the Serbian Church are reluctant to admit that the custom of “veneration of saints” does not belong to the Christian revelation of the New Testament, but rather it belongs to syncretism.

For example, the back cover of the booklet *Cults and False Prophets* by Ranko Jovic (an Orthodox priest from Negotin), published in 1994 with the blessing of Bishop Justin Timok Stefanovic, displays “the Seven Serbian Commandments” compiled by the monk Theodore. These commandments state: “Do not commit treason!”, “Help every Serb!”, “Keep your Serbian vows!”, “Learn from great people!”, “Do not help the enemies of Serbia!”, “Do not forget to give veneration!”, and “Only unity can save the Serbs!” Thus, among these commandments, we find the instruction to strictly preserve the veneration of “patron saints” and passing it down through the generations. The monk Theodore probably reasoned that veneration of patron saints would bring great spiritual blessing just as much as the teachings of Christ and the apostles.

The monk Athanasius records precisely this point. He claims that the worship of God and the saints has been observed since the beginning of the Christian era. Under the heading “On the veneration of saints”, he writes:

¹ Rev. 4:9-11.

“The early Christian faith given by God and passed onto us by the Holy Apostles has mandated that we venerate God and his Saints. This includes reverence unto God and God’s Chosen Ones: Angels, Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs, Saints, Most Reverent Ones, and all the Righteous Ones. Our Orthodox Christian life is based upon confessing our faith in the true purpose and meaning of our human life here on earth and in eternity... **Thus Christians have venerated God and His saints from the beginning,** because of which many of the living themselves died and became saints... Therefore we, Orthodox Christians, who have received from Christ the Lord Himself the light of faith and the holy covenant, worship and venerate God and His holy and Immortal Chosen Ones: the Most Holy Mother of God, the Holy Apostles and Martyrs, the Holy Father and the righteous, whom God Himself celebrates because they worship God, celebrate, and so we receive the eternal glory of God and inherit eternal life.”²

The text above addresses in much more detail the Orthodox belief on veneration of the saints, on which we will elaborate in a future chapter. However, the mention of this teaching (which all other Orthodox churches around the world confess) in the text on patron saints definitely paves the way for justifying the existence and practice of this particular cult of the Serbian national psyche. This cult includes some special elements. Namely, in addition to the veneration of and prayer to the saints, Orthodox Serbs venerate a patron saint as protector of their homes and families, with a peculiar worship ritual. The monk Athanasius below assumes that the celebration of patron saints is compulsory for every member of the Serbian people who believes in Christ:

“But the Serbian Holy Father, Sava Ravnoapostolni, gave us Orthodox Serbs one special Serbian domestic glory - our baptismal name, that is, he blessed our Serbian families with the holiday, that every Serbian family, every home and household, celebrated the day on which the saint of our forefathers and ancestors received faith in Christ and were baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. That is, thus, our Serbian Patron Saint, or Baptismal Name, for which our faithful people rightly say: ‘Whoever venerates his baptismal namesake will receive help from him.’ **Our Patron Saint, whom is venerated in every home and every family (presuming you have not renounced the faith of Christ and the name of Serbia), where the prayers of the Holy Veneration revive in us and our souls the light of the world and the memory of the day when all of our family members were baptized and became Christian,** when we united with our ancestors, and we followed them through faith and baptism into Christ and we were adorned and taken into Christ, when we were brought and joined into the church, just as we were united with God and made immortal as new beings, as Justin the Chosen One of God said.”³

This excerpt claims a direct connection between confession of faith in Christ with the observance of patron saints by the Serbian people, which should mean that every Serbian Christian should honor his local patron saint, otherwise he is neither a Serb nor a Christian. The monk Athanasius makes a number of historical errors. Namely, in a text

² Excerpt from “Regarding the Veneration of the Saints” by Monk Athanasius, cited in Justin Popovic, *Lives of the Saints*, (Hilander Monastery, 1995), 65-7. Author’s emphasis.

³ *Ibid.*, 67-8. Author’s emphasis.

we will see later, we will note that the monk says that the “first Christians venerated the saints in the same way as we do today.” He includes holy grain, holy cake, holy water, candles, incense, etc. Yet, we know that the early Church never used any of these elements in worship during the first few centuries. Take note of the following claim:

“The first Christians venerated the saints in a way similar to what our holy Monasteries and Churches do today: after the completion of the sacred Liturgy in the temple, all the congregants assemble at one Agape feast table. Everyone together with the priest prays to God **with holy water, candles and incense. The priest blesses the Holy Grain and breaks it in pieces. He pours the holy wine on the holy cake** and then makes mention of all of our relatives on the earth and in heaven. Then everyone together, with love and prayerful intentions and honor, partake of the general feast that God has given and the host family prepared. And all this is done for the glory of God and in honor of the Saint to whose sacred memory the day is commemorated.”⁴

The Meaning of Patron Saints in Serbian Orthodoxy

“Above all, this is a holiday of prayer for the local Church. The holidays of the Patron Saint include several symbolic representations:

Holy Water is consecrated a few days before the saint’s holiday by a competent Orthodox priest in the Orthodox home that will venerate the saint. The participants will take a little sip from this and the rest will be used by housewives for kneading the dough that eventually will be cooked into the Holy Cake.

Holy Cake is made of pure wheat flour and decorated with various ornaments. The middle of the cake will be decorated with the letters **IS HS NI KA** which mean “Jesus Christ conquers.” The cake symbolizes Christ who is the bread of life and the wine which is poured on the cake before it is cut up symbolizes the blood that flowed from Christ’s wounds.

The Holy Candle is lit just before cutting the cake. Its light symbolizes the holy teaching of Christ and will burn from sunrise to sunset during the saint’s holiday.

Holy Grain (wheat or barley)... The grain is offered to the glory of God and the veneration of the saint who will be commemorated and **for the peaceful rest of the souls of deceased relatives.**”⁵

Now that we have considered briefly some elements present in the holiday of the saint, let us examine their symbolism. However, these religious ceremonies include a few more events. They include prayers to the icon of the saint being celebrated, the consecration of the cake and grain in the church or house of the people celebrating. The priest also consummates the so-called “exaltation to glory” (or “the one to whom they drink in

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69. Author’s emphasis.

⁵ Lyubomir Rankovic, *Life of the Serbian Church*, (Voice of the Church: Valjevo, 1989) 181-2. Author’s emphasis.

honor”). According to Dimitri Kalezic, the icon of the Saint at the time of the holiday takes supremacy over all other icons venerated in the home, even including the icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary.⁶ The “exaltation to glory” is performed by everyone present. They gather around the table where the Holy cake, candles, and wine are arranged. They remove their hats and stand up. After the host crosses himself, he mentions God and the saints who are to be honored. He kisses the Holy candle and puts it down. The priest or host then breaks or cuts the Holy cake in the form of a cross and pours wine over it. After that, one of the guests (called the “Dolibasha”) crosses himself and with deep piety begins to pronounce a prayer in honor of the “exaltation of the saint.”⁷

Catechism for the Home gives more details on what occurs during the celebration:

“On the day of the holiday, the priest cuts the cake at the church or at the home of the host. After the troparion or songs **in honor of the saint**, the priest utters a prayer to the Holy Spirit for the health and prosperity of the host and his family. He lifts up the cake and cuts the sign of the cross into it. He then pours the wine on the cake. The host or a member of the family cuts the cake while everyone sings, ‘**Holy Martyrs** who have suffered have overcome, **please pray for the Lord** to have mercy on our souls...’ Then he breaks the cake into pieces. While he kisses the cake, he sings, ‘Christ in our midst.’ The others present respond, ‘Amen, let it be!’ Then the priest recites a prayer that the Lord God would grant the host and his family health and every blessing.”⁸

At the end, after having considered the range of blessings that come to Orthodox Serbs who venerate their patron saint, some priest named Jovic got the nerve to ask:

“How could it be possible that we Orthodox Christians dare to ask for any new preachers from any of the cults that reject faith, Serbs, **patron saints**, and the entire history of the Serbian nation?”⁹

It is because of these claims and statements by the aforementioned Orthodox writers that many Serbs believe that commemorating patron saints is one of the most basic features of the Christian (read: Orthodox) confession. However, in the Orthodox Church and secular literature, many articles prove that the traditional Serbian Orthodox Church, which supports and advocates the veneration of patron saints, realizes the purely pagan origin of patron saints. Protodeacon Ljubomir Rankovic says this about the origin of patron saints:

“One of the most prominent features of Serbian Orthodoxy, which is unknown to the Christian world, is patron saints. Before accepting Christianity, Serbs were a polytheistic people. In addition to the chief god Perun, **each home worshiped its own local deity**. Sentimental by nature, **Serbs were offended the most when Christianity rejected their local deities**. The wise son of Nemanja, **Saint Sava, replaced their demonic and**

⁶ See Dimitri Popadic, *The Serbian Orthodox Example of the Contextualization of the Gospel*, (Novi Sad, 2002) 51.

⁷ See *Life in the Serbian Church*, 182-3.

⁸ *Catechism in the Home*, 94. Author’s emphasis.

⁹ Ranko Jovic, *Cults and False Prophets*, 59. Author’s emphasis.

polytheistic gods and idols with the great saints of the Church of Christ, who became the guardians of Serbian homes, families and homes. Thus arose patron saints.”¹⁰

Probably the most interesting statement of the above text is that the Serbs were reluctant to renounce their local pagan patron gods, because they were sentimental in nature (i.e., too sensitive for “soft souls”). This refusal to fully submit everything to the Lord and His Gospel and give up everything that offends God is deemed “sentimentality” instead of lawlessness. Such “sentimentality” has never been a characteristic of true Christians, as showed in previous chapters. We will later demonstrate through further research on the subject of the Serbian veneration of patron saints that even though the Serbs replaced the object of worship with the names of Christian “saints”, in fact, all the ceremonies remained completely identical to their pagan origins!

In ancient times, centuries before Christ's birth, when the people of Israel were supposed to enter the promised land after departing from Egypt, God warned them with the following words:

*“...then beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. **You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you), lest the anger of the LORD your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth.**”*¹¹

God's command was very clear. By no means were the Israelites allowed to accept the pagan gods and honor them in any form. Such prohibition included the banning of renaming these idols and venerating them as “saints” of their own religion. Such a “renaming” of the Egyptian god Apis (or Afis, with which the Israelites had the opportunity to meet while they were in slavery and that was presented in the form of a calf) with the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob led to the near destruction of the entire Jewish people by the wrath of the Lord God. Moses was so angry because of this sin that he smashed into pieces the written tablets with the commandments that God had previously given him.¹²

New Testament Christianity also affirms this Old Testament principle. Citing from the ancient holy texts, the apostle Paul writes this:

*“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? **And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?** For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God,*

¹⁰*Life of the Serbian Church, 180-1. Author's emphasis.*

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6:12-15. Author's emphasis.

¹² See Exodus 32, particularly verses 1-4. These verses reveal that the Israelites did not intend to invent an Egyptian god, but rather a Hebrew god. They did so, but they used a polytheistic image (idol) to which they have the name of their God.

And they shall be My people.’ Therefore ‘Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.’ ‘ I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.’”¹³

Scripture makes it very clearly that any potential rival to the Lord must be completely eradicated. Worshiping God must be separated from everything that belongs to “darkness and lawlessness”, that is, idolatrous religion is equivalent to Belial (Satan). It is impossible for a person to be a true follower and disciple of Jesus Christ while at the same time refusing to surrender his family patron gods along with the customs and ceremonies that comprise their worship.

The next section will elaborate on the true meaning of the commemoration of patron saints that comprise the Serbian polytheistic cult from which these holidays originally came.

Patron Saints in Ancient Serbian Religion

Veselin Chaykanovic offers accurate and detailed answers regarding these holidays and concurs with the conclusions of various Orthodox authors that patron saints originate from ancient Serbian religion (from the period before the acceptance of Christianity):

“Regarding the origin and significance of patron saints, researchers do not agree. Some claim that patron saints have a Christian background and simply derive from ‘the name under which the first people were baptized’; other researchers consider these holidays to derive from ancient Serbian religion, they **originated from the old faith**, intended originally to be the mythical ancestor, the founder of the family (a la Roman *lar familiaris*), or else **some ancient deity, which was later replaced with a saint by the Christian church.**”¹⁴

The Serbian people have several names for patron saints. The most common is of course, “patron saints”, but there are names such as “glorious ones”, “baptismal names”, or simply “saints”. According to Chaykanovic, patron saints (baptismal name) essentially referred to the glory of one’s ancestors (which of course has no Christian origin, but rather derives from very unchristian beliefs and practices):

“The ritual is very simple and consists in the **sacrifice** of grain and cakes, drinking wine (‘exaltation to glory’). The sacrificing is brought only by male relatives, generally by the host of the home, followed by the oldest male descendant... **In the cult of the ancestors**, the baptismal name is the most important sacrificial fact. But if it happened that the male offspring were to die in such a way celebration the baptized name is lost, it would be the biggest disaster.”¹⁵

¹³ 2 Cor. 6:14-18. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁴ Chaykanovic, Vol. 2, 473. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁵ Chaykanovic, Vol. 5, 150. Author’s emphasis.

Explaining that the church originally rejected holidays for patron saints, this author concludes that the celebration of the feast for patron saints derives from ancient Serbian paganism. Speaking of the sacrifice of grain and the drinking of wine (exaltation) for glory, he claims that this is a well known ritual from the cult of Mithra, which is known in ancient pagan religions of other nations. In fact, the conclusion to be performed at the end of this celebration actually stems from the feast of the mythical ancestor of a family, and all other ancestors. And what is even more interesting, is the origin of the name “patron saint”.¹⁶

Veneration of the Cross in Ancient Serbian Religion

According to Chaykanovic and other authors that he cites, the name “Patron Saint” actually comes from the word for “glory”, that is, “veneration” of the red symbol (a wooden cross). This symbol was used to commemorate a mythical ancestor or an ancient deity. This author believes that the names “the glory of God”, “red day and red night”, and “red cake and red candles” undoubtedly indicate that the victim that day was sacrificed on the cross. Responding to the question of what function the cross served, Chaykanovic explains:

“So what about the cross? There exists only one answer: the saint’s holiday is purely a local holiday, a local mystery, and having, as such a divine meaning intended. Can anything else come to mind but the simple, wooden cross, which, as the largest holy object, is located on the wall in each Serbian house? That Cross, which is older and more important than mere portraits and icons... Namely the cross is the glory of the sacrificial feast. Of course it is now of utmost interest to know what in fact the cross actually represented. Immediately we can say that **it originally was not a Christian symbol**, at least that it could not be identified with the crucifix¹⁷, which the cult of the Orthodox Serbs had not known. The domestic cross **originated from the pre-Christian cult of ancient Serbian idol worship.**”¹⁸

As evidence that the ancient baptismal (or red) symbol represents a Serbian god or mythical ancestor, Chaykanovic cites specific regulations enforced for making and preserving the cross. In fact, as a rule, the cross could only be made of holy wood, such as for example chestnut, spruce, willow, or yew. Also, like the ancient Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Indians, who bathed and dressed idols of their gods, the same practice applies to the domestic Serbian cross. During the funeral in some parts of Serbia, the cross carried in front of the funeral procession and then is stuck over the head of the corpse, e.g. the coffin, and is dressed in a “Kitty” towel, which actually should

¹⁶ Translator’s note: the Serbian word for “patron saint” literally means “red glory”.

¹⁷ “Crucifix” means the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. The cross was used by the Romans to carry out executions for major political crimes. Otherwise, apostolic Christianity never ascribed great importance to the cross, and certainly not as a symbol which required worship. Whenever the apostles (and Jesus) in the New Testament mentioned the cross (Eph 2:16, Col. 1:20, 2:14, 1 Cor. 1:17-18, Phil. 3:18, Gal. 6: 14), they did so in order to highlight the importance and positive effects of Christ's suffering and death for the salvation of believers and their devotion to God. Neither Christ nor His apostles taught that a wooden cross where their Lord was crucified would merit anyone’s veneration or worship.

¹⁸ Chaykanovic, Vol. 5, 155-6. Author’s emphasis.

be the corpse's dress. The same practice applies to crosses, which are set as scarecrows on cereal boxes to ward off birds. The crosses are also adorned with clothes - even if they were old and torn (the "Scarecrow", in fact, once represented idols which provided protection for crops and lives. After all, everyone knows that these birds do not fear scarecrows at all).¹⁹ As for the ritual bathing of the cross (and icons), in some parts of Serbia, according to Chaykanovic and Savate Grbic, they observed the days of St. John and the Transfiguration (6th and 7th of January under the Old Style Calendar). "People would carry their domestic icons and crosses into the river, dust them off, and wash them again before returning them to their place."²⁰ According to the same author, on that day, in addition to bathing the Cross, people also believed that the previous "unbaptized" day was contaminated by the presence of demonic spirits who came to visit their homes.²¹ This practice certainly reminds us of events which take place in Serbia each year during Transfiguration, when dozens of swimmers (both boys and girls) would jump into the icy water of the Danube (and other bodies of water) to touch first the cross that the Orthodox priest had lowered into the water. It is obvious that this custom was adhered to by the church and others, despite the danger that some of the participants (especially girls) could ruin their health for the rest of their lives.

The Saint as Defender of the Household

Before concluding this chapter, I want to say a few words about the "defenders of Serbian homes, families, and communities", i.e., saints in this role that have replaced the very ancient gods and mythical divine ancestors (in the words of protodeacon Rankovic).

Dr. Veselin Ilich, professor of philosophy at the University of Nish, agrees with Chaykanovic's conclusions and adds:

"The religious culture of the Serbs continues to follow the rituals of ancestor worship that worships the mythical, divinized ancestors, according to Cajkanovic and other researchers (S. Kulisic, S. Zecevic, S. Trojanovic). This is preserved in the cult of patron saints. **In the culture of Serbian Orthodoxy, the mythical ancestor appears to have been transformed into the character of the Christian saint**, and the general holiday for dead souls."²²

According to Cajkanovic, one year after the death of the deceased, the cult of the dead elevates the deceased relative to the status of a hero. In other words, the dead relative became included in the circle of divine ancestors who serve the role as protector of the family and tribe. This mythical divine ancestor, the protector, during the celebration which will be organized in honor of him (holiday of patron saints), will be given food and drink (Holy cake, cooked grain, wine, etc.). In return, the deceased relative is expected to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Chaykanovic, Vol. 5, 382.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 385-6.

²² Veselin Ilich, *Religion and Culture*, (Prosveta: Nish, 1995) 202-3. Author's emphasis.

protect and support the entire family at all times and especially the blessing of fertility and material well-being.²³

Conclusion

We can make the following conclusions:

- The holiday of patron saints was originally a pagan festival for worship of deities from ancient Serbian religion
- Saint Sava is attributed as having replaced these deities with Christian saints
- The entire ceremonial and material elements used in the pagan worship rites are completely identical to those used in contemporary Serbian Orthodoxy.

Lazar Milin in his book *The Scientific Justification of Religion* openly admits that ethnologists have proven the links between patron saints and ancient paganism. Despite this admission, Milin assures Orthodox Serbs that they “should not worry about it, because they rightly glorify Christ.”²⁴ Nonetheless, I think that those who speak for themselves that God’s true servant would never give “glory” to God “rightly” through rituals that are neither “right” nor “glorifying”, especially when such rituals have their origins from ancient ancestral worship and pagan religion.

²³ See Chaykanovic, Vol. 5, 123-32.

²⁴ See Lazar Milin, *The Scientific Justification of Religion*, Apologetics, Church and Cults, vol. 6, (Romanov: Banya Luka, 2001), 435.