


## EVOKING ETERNITY: Orthodox Co-presence in Post-Yugoslav Central Serbia

NICHOLAS LACKENBY  
University College London  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3692-2536>

*In the Eternal . . . nothing passes away, but the whole is simultaneously present*

Augustine, *Confessions*

*Nek' se peva, nek' se vino pije / u ovom životu ništa večno nije*

*Let us sing, let us drink / in this life nothing is eternal*

Serbian folk song

On a damp morning in October 2017, a small crowd gathered outside an Orthodox church in the central Serbian town of Kraljevo. Eventually, the blue flashing lights of a police car fractured the gray autumnal drizzle, prompting the crowd—clustering patiently beneath umbrellas—to turn with quickening interest. Behind a slow-moving police escort purred a silver van with tinted windows. Inside—lying in an ornate, velvet-lined casket—were the relics of Saint Simon the Monk. Or, to give him the name he bore before taking monastic vows, King Stefan Nemanjić, the first crowned (c. 1165–1228). The year 2017 marked 800 years since Stefan had been coronated King of the Serbs. In honor of this anniversary, his relics were ceremonially brought to the town from Studenica, a medieval

monastery about an hour's drive to the south. Stefan/Simon rarely travels, making his visit, in church circles at least, an event of great significance. For churchgoers, it was not that some holy relics had been brought to town, but that Stefan/Simon himself had come—a royal visitor who deserved to be received as such. At the end of a Divine Liturgy served in his honor, Marija,<sup>1</sup> a schoolteacher in her late forties, caught my arm, smiling. “I feel such joy, I’m so happy that he’s here! You can see what great love he has, *he came!*” Saints are alive, Marija enthused, comparing them to “lightbulbs” connected to God; “they have already arrived in eternity [*večnost*].”

Orthodox relics are well known to afford temporal gymnastics. In her classic work on postsocialist dead bodies, Katherine Verdery (1999) argues that relics bring about a “compression” of time; parading them around makes it feel as if historical events happened only a few days before. But the analogy of time compression, of the past coming close to the present, does not capture the events in Kraljevo on that rainy morning. The people who awaited Stefan/Simon did not suppose that he had died a few days earlier. Nor did they imagine themselves re-enacting a historical event. As a saint, Marija said, Simon *had entered eternity*. Orthodox Christians see eternity as coterminous with the presence of God and the Heavenly Kingdom: a potentially attainable and habitable dimension that is timeless, infinite, mysterious, and good, and one that encompasses the temporal, worldly order. Given his place in eternity, the crowd responded to the monarch-saint as a real, living, and emotional presence, more as a *contemporary* than a historical figure. Eternity, the historian Carlos Eire (2011, xiii) pithily observed, “can make a hell of a difference.” This article explores the difference that evoking eternity makes.

Conceptually, eternity proves problematic, challenging, and contentious (Melamed 2016, 11), a notion conjuring up dimensions beyond the reach of the human imagination. But, for all the connotations of boundlessness and ineffability, visions of eternity are inextricably connected to the social, political, and intellectual conditions producing them—and on which they recursively impact (Eire 2011). Interrogating eternity anthropologically means thinking about how people—from their embodied position in the present—imagine dimensions beyond time to affect their spatial, temporal worlds.

This article explores one iteration of eternity, one that emerges in a nominally Orthodox, postsocialist society in contemporary southeastern Europe. Specifically, I consider self-identifying Orthodox Christian believers in central Serbia—a diverse network of women and men fluent at evoking the eternal. In the Orthodox theological view, eternity encompasses human history, history here imagined as a linear, irreversible movement from Creation to Final Judgment. Within history,

Christians work toward the Eschaton (Djakovac 2015, 229). While eternity can only be experienced in its *fullness* at the end of time, it is not relegated to the climax of a chronological timeline, as it is in some Protestant understandings (cf. Webster 2022). This world and the divine are “not separated in a temporal sense . . . but are coexistent” (Hirschon 1989, 245).

I capture how such abstract theological ideas function in everyday social life by speaking about the *alongsidedness* of eternity. What I mean is that my interlocutors perceive eternity as a mystical dimension outside of sequential time and bounded space, one that sits *alongside* social life in the present. In this dimension, forebears (like Saint Simon) and beloved kin are seen as alive, co-present, and able to engage with the living. Being alongside, eternity is always at hand, a resource to be called on when needed. James Bielo (2017, 134) writes that a central capacity of religious life is the management of people’s relationship to time—religious practices are, in effect, “responses to the problem of temporality.” Evoking eternity constitutes a response to temporality par excellence, one that does so by reaching beyond time altogether, to a dimension alongside it, allowing people to momentarily re-imagine and re-orient the everyday. By evoking eternity, my Orthodox interlocutors—limited, like all humans, by their bodies, frailty, and socioeconomic conditions—imbue life with increased imaginative possibility.

We can get a better grasp on how eternity renders chronology irrelevant by thinking through ethnography from a wholly different context. Studies of the Dreaming in Australian Aboriginal cosmology intersect in revealing ways with the Orthodox material. Rather like eternity, the Dreaming offers “a different order of reality” (Myers 1986, 51), the precondition of existence, which encompasses—and can be revealed in—the world (Elkin 1969, 88). The Dreaming is “not limited by considerations of space and time” because “*all space is here and all time is now*” (Elkin 1969; emphasis mine). As with eternity, we should not imagine the Dreaming as a “horizontal” line, “extending back chronologically through a series of ‘pasts’” (Elkin 1969, 93). Instead, the line is vertical, where the past “*underlies and is within the present*” (Elkin 1969; emphasis mine). Scholars have consequently described the Dreaming as “compenetrative” (Hume 2002, 38; Stanner 1998, 18), with the past, present, and future mutually infused rather than sequentially ordered, the living and dead interconnected. In Kraljevo, King Stefan thus did not “return” from a distant past—the eternal realm alongside simply allowed him to be *there*, co-present.

The ethnographic record also suggests that the Dreaming established the “fundamental ontology of all things ordained once-and-for-all” (Myers 1986, 54): it

is set down, fixed. However, my argument about the evocations of eternity that I documented in Serbia is not about fixity. On the contrary, I suggest that eternity is *dynamic*. Stefan/Simon had not always been in eternity—he *arrived* in it, as Marija reminded me. What makes eternity socially generative is its accumulative nature; it can be populated. As a habitable dimension alongside the everyday, eternity facilitates intimate bonds of co-presence (Williamson Fa 2022), allowing a range of physically departed people to remain at hand, ready to engage in social life.

Despite such socially constitutive potential, eternity has rarely emerged as an explicit object of anthropological interest. The idea sometimes becomes tantalizingly employed to scaffold arguments (e.g., Tomlinson 2012; Teitelbaum 2020), but, beyond studies of monasticism (Lester 2005, 210–28; Scherz 2013) and ritual (Rappaport 1992), eternity remains infrequently interrogated in and for itself. This seems strange, especially given a proliferation of work considering non-Western forms of historical consciousness (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Palmié and Stewart 2016; Stewart 2016) and the unpredictable and affective ways in which past/present/future fold into each other (e.g., Bryant and Knight 2019; Ringel 2016). One could, of course, object to the irony of considering eternity in relation to the temporality literature, since eternity does not concern time at all, but *timelessness*. However, as a dimension outside, and yet alongside, time, eternity is intrinsic to people’s “temporalizations” (Munn 1992), helping them speak about and situate themselves within time. To study eternity, then, means to think about how people situate complex pasts in relation to their present. It means to ask how humans strive to profit from the insights, empathy, and agency of deceased people they did not necessarily meet in person. And it means to inquire how people locate human transience, frailty, and finitude within a vast cosmological picture.

The first half of this article explores the ways in which Serbian churchgoers evoke eternity and its relation to time, as well as how they speak about having to “earn” it. In particular, I describe how eternity is entangled with the existential problem of death. Scaling upward, I then consider how extended Serbian kin are remembered unto eternity, and the ways in which ancestors and saints are experienced as remaining alongside the present. Ultimately, I speculate about the social possibilities afforded by eternity.

### ORTHODOX LIFE AFTER YUGOSLAVIA

Under the leadership of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1992) held together Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. After Tito’s death in 1980, the

multinational state weakened, eventually splintering in a much-studied series of wars (see, for instance, [Glenny 1992](#); [Jović 2009](#); [Cohen and Dragović-Soso 2008](#)). In Serbia, the population lived through spiraling inflation, economic sanctions brought against the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević, and the NATO aerial bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999—an intervention in response to the actions of Serbian forces against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. After Milošević was toppled in 2000, resentment and disappointment swiftly replaced hope for a brighter future ([Greenberg 2014](#)).

Unsurprisingly, such shattering experiences of ethnic violence, societal disintegration, and economic turmoil deeply impacted local perceptions of time. Across the former Yugoslav states people were pushed to simultaneously inhabit multiple temporalities—of transition and European integration, of capitalist striving and ethno-national teleology ([Gilbert et al. 2008](#), 11; [Živković 2011](#), 252). Religious temporalities re-emerged, too. Under socialism, Yugoslavia's constitution had officially guaranteed freedom of conscience, but the regime was underpinned by ideological atheism—a secular, unifying creed of “brotherhood and unity”—discouraging overt expressions of religiosity. As the system crumbled, religious institutions became increasingly vocal (see [Perica 2002](#)), proffering new temporalities with which to navigate the transition.

In Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church reasserted its authority in the public sphere, positioning itself as the traditional protector of the Serbian people and fanning the nationalism of Milošević's regime ([Radić 2000](#)). Beyond the machinations of institutional politics, Orthodox Christianity offered a reaffirmed sense of identity and moral direction to the population at large. No longer the preserve of rural, elderly women, the church and religious practice began to attract and affect an increasingly diverse range of people ([Radulović 2012](#)). Today, as in other majority Orthodox countries, ethnic and confessional identities blend into one. A majority of Serbs (about 80 percent, according to the 2022 census) identify nominally as Orthodox.

This article is based on fieldwork primarily conducted in and around the town of Kraljevo. Sitting on the river Ibar, Kraljevo is a sprawling urban settlement, with a population of about 125,000 in its overall administrative area. During the Yugoslav period, Kraljevo was a booming industrial center, with many of the town's residents employed in its factories. The economic infrastructure crumbled during the 1990s, leading to mass unemployment. Despite tentative signs of economic regeneration and foreign investment, people often point to Kraljevo's decay, either by recalling better times during socialism or noting that “everything has

gone under [*sve je propalo*].” Demographically, Kraljevo follows the national trend: around 95 percent of the population identify as both Serb and Orthodox.<sup>2</sup>

It is well known that only a relative minority of the Serbian population engage regularly with religious practice.<sup>3</sup> This article largely draws on conversations, observations, and interviews with the extended networks of women and men who inhabit Kraljevo’s liturgical world, people who often self-identify as “believers” (*vernici*). What distinguishes these people (who vary considerably in age, education, and employment) is that they seek to live “in the faith” and claim to be “working on” their salvation. They do not constitute a homogenous, isolated community set apart from mainstream society. Some have spouses—or parents—uninterested in and sometimes skeptical of what they see as excessive piety. Many of my interlocutors only come into interaction with each other at church events. But believers are connected insofar as they try to follow the church’s calendar of fasts and feasts, attending the Divine Liturgy on Sunday and receiving Holy Communion regularly. It is worth noting, then, that while the eternity Orthodox imagine is *not* cyclical (a point to which I return in the final section), the calendar which draws them closer to it *is*.

As a rather large town, Kraljevo offers a vibrant liturgical life, perhaps best imagined as an extended spiritual landscape through which people circulate. There are three parish churches and a chapel in the local hospital. Groups meet to learn about Orthodox tradition, and, in the summer months, priests and friendship groups organize numerous coach-trip pilgrimages to monasteries in the region. Unique to Kraljevo is the so-called Spiritual Centre, housed in the townhouse of Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956). A former bishop of Žička Eparchy, prolific writer, and theologian, Velimirović was canonized in 2003. While critics have described his writings as antisemitic and deeply problematic (see [Byford 2008](#)), in church circles he is read uncritically and with broad appreciation. In sum, my interlocutors are open to seeking “eschatological solutions” to the present predicaments of Serbian life ([Raković 2013](#), 108)—which makes them good collaborators for thinking about what eternity can do.

### IT WILL PASS!

In church circles, the ideas of eternity and eternal life (*večni život*) recur with frequency. Homilies dwell on the fleeting, transient nature of this earthly existence and its eternal counterweight: God came to this world “to give us life, not only for today and not only for tomorrow, but for all eternity!” ([Episkop Jovan \[Purić\] 2008](#), 19). Lay evocations of eternity do not prove intellectually consistent

in a theological or doctrinal sense. Everything depends on the speaker's positionality: references to the eternal are partial, contextual, and hopeful, sometimes laced with uncertainty and ambivalence. What matters is that when people face untimely bereavements, divorce proceedings, or unemployment, as an utterance, *eternity* returns people's focus (however briefly) to the Heavenly Kingdom, to the impermanence of this world, and to the nearness of the celestial realm.

The Serbian theological tradition offers a rich conceptual apparatus for eternity-thinking, the idea finding particularly strong voice in the work of Justin Popović (1894–1979). Contrasting the “Spirit of Eternity” with the “Spirit of Time,” Popović (2005, 147) characterizes time as but a “fragment” of the eternal realm, a fragment that becomes meaningless when disconnected from eternity. In vice-ridden modernity, the enfeebled human condition needs eternity, described not as a mere “transcendental possibility” but as “real,” “living,” and “tangible” (Popović 2005, 147). As the theologian Bogoljub Šijaković (2013, 207) has noted, reading history through the perspective of eternity reveals the eschaton as “potentially present” at every single moment.

The perception of eternity's aloneness percolates into conversations. Between sips of herbal tea in a monastery refectory, Sister Anastasija insisted that eternity and the temporal world were not “parallel universes.” She gently placed her palms on the table to illustrate two separate, untouching spheres. Rather, she clarified, the temporal and eternal “are unified”; there should be “no obstacle [*prepreka*] between God and us.” Miloš, a translator in his early sixties, expressed a similar view. We sat in his book-filled living room while he mused that “this earthly life is a sort of entrance [*ulazak*] into eternal life. It means that here [in this world] one can taste some sweetness [*slast*].” Following this logic, a person living a “liturgical life” can glimpse the eternal realm. People claim that the Divine Liturgy—that intensely sensorial ritual during which the congregation experiences shared movement, incense, and chant—is the moment at which eternity breaks into the present, at which a believer glimpses God's Kingdom, the not-yet-in-the-now (Vasiljević 2014; Carroll 2017, 2018). Monastic accounts describe experiencing the “uncreated light” of God as being like “the touch of Divine Eternity” (Ladouceur 2019, 166). Despite their awareness of such theological explanations, churchgoers do not easily proffer experiential reports of what eternity itself looks or feels like (cf. Lester 2005). Eternity is a discursive framing, an idea that allows for imagining new possibilities.

David Henig (2020, 93) observes that much of the anthropological scholarship on temporality in post-Yugoslav spaces focuses on secular, future-oriented

projects. He makes a fair point: to challenge the image of post-Yugoslav citizens as inescapably defined by historic violence, anthropologists have (rightly) insisted on people's capacity for visionary, future-oriented thinking (Petrović-Šteger 2020a, 2020b), their yearnings for normality (Jansen 2015), and how, through hope, they reach toward better futures (Jansen 2016; Jovanović 2018). Henig (2020, 93) offers the crucial insight that we must consider such secular temporal reasoning together with conceptions of time deriving from religious thought, since both intersect "in a given historical-political nexus" (see also Gilbert et al. 2008, 11). Evocations of eternity make sense in—and cannot be extracted from—the context of daily life in twenty-first century Serbia, a place whose mood has been described as one of sheer psychological, economic, and political exhaustion (Petrović-Šteger 2020a).

It is important to underline, then, that despite their eloquent eternity-thinking, my interlocutors do not lead lives devoid of future-oriented aspiration, oblivious to temporal constraints. I stress this in the face of tendencies in popular journalistic accounts to essentialize supposedly Balkan (and especially Orthodox) time as characterized by deterministic, inescapable spirals of violence (for instance, Kaplan 1994, 58). The journalist Victoria Clark's (2000, 75) travel writing about Serbia provides a vivid example:

Orthodox time has its own dynamic. Its motion is spiral, not linear, which means that Orthodox history moves in divinely ordained circles, as pleasingly repetitive as the patterns on church vestments. Empires and lands are lost and regained . . . until the end of the world. The past is never forgotten because it comes around again, and the future is never new.

Living and working in contemporary Kraljevo, believers are not driven by time cycles that somehow sit counterfactually to "reality," nor do they exist in a timeless vacuum oblivious to sociohistorical transformation and future-oriented aspiration. Older couples carefully make retirement plans. Unemployed male laborers search for paid work to support their families, sometimes desperately. Some learn German and English to apply for visas in the hope of finding better employment outside Serbia. People consider what to study at college, envision where to raise a young family, and undertake extensive home improvements. Their evocations of the eternal do not equal a denial of historical change, but identify historical change as *historical*, as something happening *in time*. As Petar, an insurance salesman, expressed it: "Time exists with us [i.e., in this world]. . . . With God, Time does not exist."



Serbian Orthodox express eternity relationally, by counterposing it to the here and now. Ana is a nurse in her fifties, a willing conversationalist. One morning, over coffee in her kitchen, she said, wistfully: “With God, I think that the dimension of time doesn’t have any influence. God has his own perspective on that dimension. In relation to eternity, what is a year?!” Let’s visit a different kitchen, that of Miodrag and Jelena—a retired couple who live in an apartment filled with icons and spiritual readings. Jelena explained that “we’re not created for a sojourn [*boravak*] on earth, we’re created for eternity. Here [in this world] it is temporary.” Expanding on his wife’s thoughts, Miodrag recalled a citation he attributed to Velimirović: “We’ve come here to serve our term [*rok*] . . . and then we return home.” Life in linear time becomes but a passing segment of an all-encompassing dimension (see also [Cannell 2013](#), 232).

I mentioned eternity to Bojan, a taxi driver, as we careened down the highway back into town. Flicking through his phone, he directed me to a video by Father Gojko Perović—a priest who has found considerable success on YouTube with his witty yet sage anecdotes and homilies. In the clip, Father Gojko recounts the tale of an unhappy man who confides in a priest that his personal, financial, and family life is falling apart. The priest instructs him to put up a sign with the words *proći će!*—“it will pass!” Sure enough, after a year the man returns with the good news that everything is indeed going better. At this, the priest promptly tells him not to remove the sign—it will pass! In this life, both economic woes and good fortune are transient. Much as Buddhist thought emphasizes impermanence ([Cas-saniti 2022](#)), eternity reminds people that worldly existence—with its suffering, uncertainty, elation, and joy—is, after all, only temporary.

In short, evoking eternity allows people to throw their future-oriented activities—if only momentarily—into high relief (see also [Stewart 2012](#), 214). One of [Maja Petrović-Šteger’s](#) (2020a, 174) Belgrade informants recalled the wisdom of Patriarch Pavle (1914–2009): “Time is only a duration” that ultimately becomes tiring, the woman paraphrased, “so the right thing to do is to step out of it once in a while. To be able to look forward and backward.” Alongside the everyday, eternity puts things in perspective.

### EARNING ETERNITY

The challenge, in a fleeting world filled with distracting pleasures, is keeping the eternal in mind. A Belgrade priest made this point starkly in a homily about the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12: 16–21). The homily—drawing on material previously published in a book—assessed a greedy, insatiable person as a “thief,”

stealing not only from God and those around him but also “from himself, from his eternal life” (Radojević 2018, 310). The rapacious quest for “this-worldly treasures” leads *away* from the eternal, not toward it (Radojević 2018, 313). One friend criticized her neighbors for slaughtering a pig in December, during the Nativity fast, a time when eating meat is prohibited (see Lackenby 2023a, 875). Such indulgent, festive behavior, she muttered darkly, clouded a view of eternity.

My interlocutors speak often about having to “earn” (*zaslužiti*) eternity by trying to live well, according to the Gospels. A woman at an icon procession in Belgrade expressed it like this: “Our time here is short, but it’s important, because with it we determine our eternity [*određujemo našu večnost*].” Zdravko, a retired military man and believer, shared a similar view. He suggested that eternity “is what we are fighting for in this world, through the way we live and with our virtues so as to earn eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven!” Zdravko was certainly committed to his churchgoing, on one occasion canceling our planned coffee meeting to attend Vespers because he had overslept and missed the morning service. Eternal life depends, in other words, on a person’s conduct in the worldly one.

And this worldly life is not meant to be easy. Draško, a civil engineer in his late twenties, expounded on this idea as we meandered home after a few beers. Crossing the deserted town square, he characterized Orthodoxy as a constant struggle, of which the overall purpose is to reach “salvation.” People should not focus, he proclaimed, on anticipating miraculous transformations in this life: “The point isn’t that a disabled person gets up and walks, but that he gets to heaven.” Warming to his theme, Draško proffered another, more poetic example: “The point isn’t that the blind can start to see [in this life], but that they can see in eternity.” One could reasonably argue that it is rather easy for Draško to lucidly deliver such reflections, since he is neither disabled nor blind. But his logic is instructive. Reaching God’s eternal realm is the goal of this earthly existence, but such striving does not transform this life in the concrete ways we might anticipate from a fallen human viewpoint.

Evoking eternity, then, does not alleviate worldly suffering, though it does momentarily reframe it. A powerful example came on a spring day when Milanka invited me for lunch at Kraljevo’s glistening new retail complex on the outskirts of town. Milanka, a widow in her mid-sixties, used to run a small business. As we paused outside a fishmonger’s, Ivana, our mutual acquaintance, emerged. The previous year Ivana had tragically lost both her mother and father. The two women spontaneously engaged in conversation about coping with grief and loss. Eventually, the time came to take our leave of Ivana. Wishing her well, Milanka seemed

to throw the whole conversation about death into relief, a detectable buoyancy in her voice: “We’ll all go there soon . . . time goes by like this! [she snapped her fingers]. It’s already sixteen years since my husband died!” Milanka was not seeking to trick time, to bend it to her own ends (cf. Ringel 2016). Rather, she was urging an *acceptance* of it, of its forward-moving, unstoppable progression. And with that snap of her fingers, Milanka got to the crux of the matter: evoking eternity is deeply entwined with an ongoing contemplation on death.

### THERE ARE NO DEAD PEOPLE

One evening, drinking wine in a dense haze of cigarette smoke, Miodrag wanted to elucidate for me the process by which the soul leaves the body at death. As he spoke, Jelena shuffled off to the bedroom. She returned holding a small pamphlet printed on off-white paper with an icon of Christ descending into hell on the front cover. It was a copy of the Akathist hymn for the departed, a prayer intoned at the graveside. “Eternity is what Christ promised,” Jelena repeated, several times. The television flickering in the background, she read aloud the passage that implores God to keep the departed in his flock. The living, Jelena reminded me in fetching the Akathist, have a role to play in securing the deceased a place in the eternal realm.

In Orthodoxy, death is not seen as “a final end to the relationship which preceded it” (Hirschon 1989, 207). On dying, a person can no longer repent for themselves, so it becomes incumbent on the living to pray on their behalf. At memorial services, those assembled hold flickering beeswax candles and chant the refrain “memory eternal!” (*vječna pamjat!*). This is not a supplication for the departed to be eternally remembered on earth, in this life. It is an entreaty that *God* remember them, and keep them with him. To that end, people commonly fill in the names of their deceased kin on church-issued paper slips—headed with a cross and the words “*For the Departed*.” At church entrances, one finds small baskets of these slips of scribbled Cyrillic, left along with crumpled dinar bills, so that the priest will intone and thus “remember” the names before the Liturgy. Miloš once directed me to the words of Velimirović: “We want the name of the deceased to be mentioned forever in eternity, in the eternal life and the Kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup>

As part of the social process of death, evoking eternity incurs intellectual work and mental effort (Astuti 2007). An article published in *Pravoslavlje*—the official magazine of the Serbian Patriarchate—proposed that Orthodox should not think of death as an “inevitability” but as an “existential problem” holistically “resolved” by God through his loving promise of eternal life (Bošković 2015, 25).

Similarly, my interlocutors vocally problematize death, minimizing the profundity commonly attached to it, couching it as *but a mere transition* into the eternal. Bojana, a lawyer and widow in her forties whose husband died shortly after the birth of their son, once murmured—with quiet certainty—that “death is only a stage through which we go into eternity.” Jelena insisted on death’s unnaturalness: “Death is not a normal thing—it is only a crossing [*prelaz*].” In Orthodox publications, one encounters euphemistic references to people “falling asleep in the Lord” or “presenting themselves” unto him. The final paragraph of an obituary in *Pravoslavlje* noted that “Stevan will await the resurrection of the dead and eternal life in Jagodina town cemetery.” There is, then, an emphasis on *waiting*, an implicit suggestion that burial marks nothing more than a temporary measure.

As well as disdainfully downplaying the finality of death, people make positive, hopeful claims about the status of those no longer physically present. I am thinking of Miroljub, a charismatic odd-jobs man in his mid-fifties. One afternoon, as he was delicately pouring oil into the lamp hanging before the icons in his living room, he mused: “There are no dead . . . we light candles for the living in this world and for the living in the other world.”

The premise of this claim (widely repeated by laity and clergy) is that, from God’s eternal perspective, all are living. A priest corrected me when I referred to the “dead” (*mrtvih*), suggesting “departed” (*upokojenih*) as more appropriate. Miroljub—ever ready with an apposite maxim—pushed his point further by claiming that there is “no up nor down,” no distinction between the living above and the dead below. He recalled the place where visitors light candles at the Studenica monastery church. On either side of the narthex are two raised marble plinths. Unlike at many churches, where the candles are placed on separate levels, here the thin wax tapers lit for the health of the living or the solace of the departed are indistinguishable, symbolically burning alongside each other on a single plane. The plinths thus symbolically materialize the idea of eternity keeping the departed co-present.

Milanka speaks in similar terms to Miroljub. She lives in one of the apartment blocks overlooking the cemetery where her husband is buried. When she steps onto her balcony to hang the laundry to dry, she looks at the gravestones and says, “Sleep! You’re sleeping in the best bedsheets. . . . I’ll come soon!” Milanka reported her ritual as we were eating lunch, a smile on her face, joking about what her neighbors must think. She leaned across the remnants of the grilled chicken: “I don’t see him as dead. He fell asleep.” And then she repeated that hopeful, recurring statement of belief: “With God, there are no dead people.” In their exchange

outside the fishmonger's, Milanka and Ivana agreed that departed kin "can hear and see us." Milanka waved her arm around, adding that she thought her husband could perceive "everything." This omniscience carries consequences: precisely because the departed remain around us, Milanka cautioned, the bereaved had to take care with how they spoke, avoiding criticism, since their loved ones could not defend themselves. Elsewhere, [Stefan Williamson Fa \(2022\)](#) shows how Shi'i Muslim devotional vocal recitation facilitates relations of co-presence with the family of the Prophet—beings who are unseen and immaterial and yet felt as proximate. Eternity-thinking does similar work, allowing the departed to be ever present.

If the claim that there are no dead is cathartic, then graves actually provide a location for the enactment of co-presence. I have heard the gravestone described as a sort of "reception area" (*prijemnik*) where the bereaved can speak with departed kin. A vivid illustration comes from a trip I made with Miodrag and Jelena at the beginning of Lent, to visit the graves of Miodrag's relatives. It was sleeting and cold, the mist only just beginning to rise from the surrounding hills. We walked to the tomb of Miodrag's parents—a wide, raised plot of earth, encased in marble slabs. After Miodrag had read the Akathist, he and Jelena served the graves with *koliva* (the boiled wheat used in Orthodox commemorations) scooped out into paper cake cups. Miodrag poured red wine onto the graves in the shape of a cross. (At a different cemetery that we visited afterward, Miodrag spoke encouragingly to the occupant of the grave: "Come on, Mila, have some wine!") From small plastic cups, we sipped wine, too. Miodrag walked around the graves smoking, tears in his eyes. "I want to smoke a cigarette with Grandad," he said, lighting one and placing it into the muddy mound. He recalled, slightly choked, that he had started smoking with his grandfather when he was little. "Look how he's smoking," he pointed out, watching the smoke swirl upward. Later, seeing how the cigarette was reduced to a stalk of gray ash right up to the filter, he observed contentedly: "Look, he's smoked the whole thing." Miodrag, visibly moved, experienced his grandfather as intimately and emotionally co-present (see also [Williamson Fa 2022](#)).

Yet however reassuring the feeling of aloneness, however contenting to smoke and drink with the departed, eternity is laced with uncertainty. Unlike in some forms of Protestantism, Orthodoxy gives no assurance that one is automatically saved through baptism, or that good souls go straight to heaven. Only God knows who will be saved. Through their praying, fasting, and participation in Liturgy, churchgoers demonstrably seek to earn eternity—but they never claim to be guaranteed a place. Solely the saints—as Marija so animatedly stated with regard

to Simon the Monk, and as priests periodically remind their congregations—have unambiguously “entered eternity.”

Beyond saints, things remain uncertain. There is ambivalence about the status of departed souls, with different claims emerging depending on the worldly biography of the departed, their perceived saintliness, or the degree of affection the speaker has toward them. Patriarch Pavle, whose passing in 2009 provoked a mass outpouring of grief, is not (yet) officially canonized, though the laity practically reveres him as a saint in eternity. By contrast, when I asked Milanka directly where she thought her husband was, she paused, smiled slightly, and said that she *hoped* that he “is on the side of God,” reminding me that we have to *earn* the Kingdom of Heaven: “I don’t know if he is there. I don’t know whether we will meet. But I try.”

However, pressing people on the specifics of whose soul is where obviously misses what makes evoking eternity compelling. In the sudden throes of loss, profound grief, or in affectionate recollections of a missed family member, my interlocutors derive comfort from situating the departed in God’s eternal realm. Draško lost his father to cancer when he was in his twenties. He admitted that he sometimes feels lonely, though not sad: “I *know* he is in heaven.” A couple whose son had died posted a tribute on social media on what would have been his birthday. One of the supportive comments written by friends read, “Don’t worry, now he’s in a place where there are no years.” Evoking the eternal “contextualises the individual death within a transcendental order” (Seremetakis 1991, 225), however fleetingly. Interestingly, the ethnography on Mormonism also reveals deep concern about the connection between eternity and one’s family members. Fenella Cannell’s (2013, 2017) informants hope to be “forever families,” eternally bound to each other in heaven. Cannell’s work places the focus of attention on the nuclear family unit. In Serbia, the concern for situating kin in eternity also stretches beyond immediate family to more distant ancestors, to the extended kinship ties of the Serbian people as a whole.

### ALONGSIDE OUR ANCESTORS

Central Serbia was not directly affected by the land wars that devastated Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo in the 1990s. Men from the area were drafted, though, and the general trauma of that period lingers. My interlocutors have a self-reflexive awareness that the autocratic Milošević regime was widely held responsible for instigating Yugoslavia’s collapse and the horrific ethnic violence that followed—leaving the Serbian nationalism of the 1990s an utterly tarnished brand. The inhabitants of Kraljevo thus hold a defensive attitude to remembering Serbian

suffering. Particularly pronounced are local memories of the NATO aerial bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999—an intervention in response to the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians by Serbian forces.

Like other nationalist discourses, the Serbian version is shot through with references to the eternal. In 1389, at the much-mythicized Battle of Kosovo, the Serbian Prince Lazar led his troops against the oncoming Ottoman invasion. According to the legend—imbued with Christian symbolism of martyrdom and resurrection—Lazar chose the “eternal, heavenly kingdom” over the earthly one, losing the battle (and his head) and assuring his place, and that of the Serbian people, with God (Bieber 2002; Bandić 2008, 227–38). Velimirović wrote about “Heavenly Serbia” (*Nebeska Srbija*), urging Serbs to reconnect with heaven through their devotion to church. In such narratives, Serbs become a people who, like Christ, lose in this world but win in eternity. In the 1990s, the idea of Serbia being “celestial” or “heavenly” re-emerged into public discourse (Radić 2000, 254).

Scholarly studies of Serbian nationalism pick up on the eternal trope. Chris-tos Mylonas’s (2003) book, *Serbian Orthodox Fundamentals: The Quest for an Eternal Identity*, is perhaps the most obvious (but see also Čolović 2002, 18; Bandić 2008, 237–38). Here, like in other discussions of nationalism, eternity is taken to mean perdurance. For Michael Herzfeld (1991, 3–54), the nation-state seeks to “eternalize” its values and historical status, presenting itself as permanent, “fixed for all eternity” (Herzfeld 2016, 25). Deployed thus, “eternity” captures the nation imagined as organic and everlasting. Yet if we engage seriously with Orthodox cosmology, we see how the national community is not emboldened by the image of itself stretching endlessly into the future, but by the affective alongsidedness of a populated eternal realm.

To make the point, it is illuminating to place the Serbian materials in dialogue with one of the classic discussions of national temporality. Benedict Anderson’s (1991, 24) account of nationalism famously charts the transition away from the medieval idea of simultaneity-along-time, where past and future are compounded in the present. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin, Anderson (1991, 24) contended that the nation came to be imagined as moving through “homogenous, empty time”; it is a “secular, historically-clocked, imagined community” (Anderson 1991, 35). But to appreciate eternity-thinking in Kraljevo means returning to that earlier view of simultaneity. The heavenly dimension is “synchronous” (Forbess and Michelutti 2013, 11). As I have shown elsewhere (see Lackenby 2023b), my interlocutors do not imagine the Serbian people—just as they do not imagine themselves—as traveling through homogenous, empty time. Since God created the world and

the peoples in it, they see the Serbian people as existing in the face of eternity, a dimension that, anything but empty, is imbued with potential and hope. When churchgoers evoke “Heavenly Serbia” they are not, in fact, longing for a sacralized nation-state that will perdure forever in this world (cf. Dawson 2009). They believe that the world—and the political constellations within it—are transient. Instead, they are conjuring the host of Serbian forebears who inhabit the eternal realm alongside the worldly one—the Serbia of heaven, as opposed to the one of earth. This view is not bereft of political affect.

I discussed the issue with Father Stefan, an affable priest in his late thirties, during a conversation in his office. He proposed that the mentioning or remembering of victims and ancestors should be understood in terms of “living alongside” (*saživeti*):

It’s not just remembering and commemoration. It’s not just some custom. But it has essential ontological importance that we, through that remembering, simply live alongside them [*saživimo sa njima*].

For Father Stefan, remembering does not constitute a committed relationship to a historical past. It constitutes a form of ongoing coexistence. In Orthodox commemorative practices, “the past and the present are brought together and the divisive aspect of time is abolished” (Hirschon 1989, 16). To remember, then, is not to recall things that happened before now. It is to recall people against the limitless relief of God’s eternity (see also Du Boulay 2009, 398).

Memorial services reveal the enactment of such remembering in practice. In Kraljevo, there are multiple dates throughout the year at which clergy, civic dignitaries, and the public assemble to commemorate Serbs killed in the wars of the twentieth century. In a different context, that of post-Soviet Ukraine, Catherine Wanner (1998, 168) shows how re-emerging church rituals challenged “the exclusive dominance of a secular sense of temporality.” The cyclicity of the religious calendar clashed with a progressive, secular timeline. In Serbia, too, looping liturgical time can baffle the linearity of the public sphere. But my point here is not just that church rituals challenge secular time, rather that they evoke a dimension *outside* of time all together, one in which the departed are co-present.

To take one example: On June 4, 2017, Kraljevo celebrated its town feast day, the feast of the Holy Trinity. Following prayers at church, priests, town officials, and the congregation processed in a straggling line around the town, bearing icons and banners. The procession arrived at the imposing, gray monument in the



main square, atop which stands a uniformed Serbian soldier, rifle clutched in one hand, a flag in the other. This is the Monument to the Serbian Warriors, which commemorates the soldiers who fell in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 and the First World War. The clergy formed a horseshoe at the foot of the memorial and chanted commemorative prayers. The ritual complete, the crowd slowly walked off, singing “eternal memory.” The procession proceeded toward the monument to those killed in the Yugoslav wars between 1991 and 1999. Again, the clergy gathered around the altar-like stone plinth and remembered the departed unto God.

A similar annual ceremony takes place at the 1991–1999 monument annually on March 24 to mark what locals refer to as the “NATO aggression.” The clergy wear red and golden vestments—the liturgical color-scheme for feasts commemorating martyrs—and a deacon quietly reads out the names of those killed, thus “remembering” them. Members of the public hold candles, and some women grip large, printed photographs of their sons who were killed fighting in the Kosovo War. The priests chant “unto the ages of ages,” into eternity.

In [Anderson’s \(1999, 202\)](#) account, the dead have “responsibility” insofar as they quietly speak of the nation’s “goodness” and “innocence,” but they mark an awkward presence: “Heaven harbors no nations, and the dead are no use to nationalism in so remote a sequestration.” In Orthodoxy, however, the dead are *not* left to tacitly bolster a temporally oriented nationalist project. The dead are understood as “living before God,” and so relationships with the departed *continue* through prayerful remembrance; they are actively *retained* as part of a collectivity that transcends this world. Orthodoxy’s retentive dynamic allows saints and past events to inhabit “the local time horizons of Orthodox presence” ([Carroll 2015, 187](#); see also [Williamson Fa 2022](#)).

Miloš once observed that saints are “so alive, so alive in spirit that it is as if they lived yesterday, as if they live today. In fact, they are always present with us.”<sup>5</sup> On one occasion, I joined a pilgrimage to the monastery of Mileševa in southwestern Serbia, a monastery renowned not only for its frescoes but also for housing the relic of Saint Sava’s left hand. Sava is Serbia’s patron saint, a figure of towering importance, who secured autocephaly for the Serbian Church in 1219. The abbot addressed the small group patiently waiting to venerate the relics. “Saint Sava is here with us now,” he said, dreamily, with a flourish of his arm. More than a brownish hand lying in a silver casket, Saint Sava is seen as alive and co-present. When, on Sunday mornings at the close of the Liturgy, the priest stands before the iconostasis, faces the congregation, and intones the names of saints, those saints are understood to be *there*. Now, the ethnologist [Dušan Bandić \(2008, 234\)](#) wryly

noted that while the Kingdom of Heaven into which Prince Lazar entered through his martyrdom “exists,” it is not “in heaven”—it exists in the “memory of the people,” in their legends. My interlocutors, by contrast, do not understand their saintly forebears as living presences thanks to their fixity in folklore. They see them as “alive and active” (Forbess and Michelutti 2013, 11) given their co-presence in eternity.

To an extent, the alongsidedness of the eternal realm recalls what Naomi Haynes (2020, 61) terms the “expansive present,” a “shared timespace common to both biblical heroes and contemporary believers.” Haynes argues more broadly that in inhabiting this expanded version of the present which broaches past and future, Pentecostals avoid submitting to capitalist time. Similarly, as a dimension alongside the everyday, eternity proffers increased agential and imaginative possibilities to the present.

### ETERNAL POSSIBILITIES

A few days before Saint Simon/King Stefan visited Kraljevo, I attended a public lecture about the history of the medieval Nemanjić dynasty at the town hall. Referring to Stefan/Simon, the lecturing scholar asked the audience: “What will he think of us now? How will he see his people?” Accepting Stefan/Simon as a living saint in eternity, the scholar implied that this revered figure had the capacity to pass judgment on the moral state of contemporary Serbs. Recalling the saint’s judgmental gaze, the scholar effectively invited his audience to partake in collective introspection. In evoking eternity, people can ascribe agency to those no longer physically present.

The COVID-19 pandemic—which decimated the elderly hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church—provides a further example. On October 30, 2020, the metropolitan bishop of Montenegro, Amfilohije Radović, died following complications from the virus. Amfilohije had been an outspoken cleric and theologian, a sometimes controversial yet much loved figure in Serbian public life. People resisted the idea that he was truly gone. Reflecting on the eternal quality of God’s memory, one priest insisted that “remembering Amfilohije makes our relationship with him living and uninterrupted” (Lukić 2021, 37). Among the numerous lamentations that appeared on social media was a text titled “Happy eternity to you, our good metropolitan,” by a young writer, Milan Ružić (2020). Ružić sought to counter the widespread sadness by reminding readers of the joyful fact that the beloved bishop had now entered eternity. From his new place there, Amfilohije would be able to watch “us” and do far more for his people than on earth. Far from

losing his capacity to lobby for the well-being of Serbs, Amfilohije's capacity, Ružić noted, had *increased*. Eternity allows the physically departed to remain as actors in the political community (cf. Anderson 1999).

When the historian Timothy Snyder (2018, 166) introduces the “politics of eternity” as an analytic, he means political projects bereft of forward momentum and innovative content: “Eternity takes certain points from the past and portrays them as moments of righteousness, discarding the time in between.” The nation falls victim to an endless onslaught of fictional problems where “time is no longer a line into the future, but a circle that endlessly returns to the same threats from the past” (Snyder 2018, 8). Snyder's analytical frame draws a direct contrast between eternity and novelty. But such a hegemonic, static reading of the eternal obscures the real socio-political consequences of eternity-thinking, what eternity *does*. How, we might ask, do religious practitioners and politicians reach beyond the flux of time to reconfigure socio-political life in the present? How might we better understand other issues characterized by human finitude and linear time—climate change being an obvious example—by grappling with local iterations of eternity-thinking?

As socialist regimes crumbled, Verdery (1999, 122–24) argues, nationalist politicians discovered different “temporal options” available to them. On the one hand, cyclical timelines of renewal and decay, where the threat of national death had to be overcome. On the other, linear timelines concerned with future economic prospects. She observes that different perceptions of time produce different senses of urgency and ensuing policy priorities. Clearly, evoking eternity also provides options to both persons and polities. Eternity is a dimension that subverts tripartite temporality, a dimension that lets historical figures, events, and glimpses of the future (Vasiljević 2014) sit alongside the everyday. Eternity affords a more capacious version of life, allowing an entire corpus of ideas and actors to be retained alongside the present, ready to be engaged—for peaceful, violent, and political ends—as and when necessary.

When the eternal appears in the anthropological imagination, it generally does not evoke transformational potential, tending to suggest the opposite: stasis, inaction, stagnation, inertia, a striving for hegemony. In his thinking about nation-states, Orthodox Christianity, and cities, Herzfeld (1990; 1991, 3–54; 2009) uses the trope of eternity to indicate perdurance and everlastingness. The eternal also connotes an endless return, a view influenced by Mircea Eliade's ([1954] 2005) description of perennial loops of creation and destruction, constantly reverting to

the same state. For Eliade ([1954] 2005, 189), the “eternal return reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming.”

A recent anthropological move has been to engage with the theological categories of our interlocutors to enhance the concepts that we, in turn, use to illuminate their worlds (Robbins 2020). Ethnographically tracking local expressions of eternity-thinking reveals *večnost* as a category that does something to the social world (Eire 2011). In Serbia, eternity offers a means through which to think about time, a way to perceive and frame it. Feelings of solace and communion with the departed, and the judgment and support of those no longer present, hinge on the perception of a timeless dimension *alongside*. The eternity evoked by Serbian Orthodox is not the change-erasing return popular in essentializing accounts of Balkan time. Their eternity is not devoid of “becoming” (cf. Eliade [1954] 2005, 189)—if anything, it enables it. Some religious traditions, of course, clearly *do* think about the eternal in cyclical terms. And the cyclical metaphor undoubtedly illuminates the intersection of landscape, waiting, ritual calendars (HadžiMuhamedović 2018, 9), and atemporal forms of selfhood (Argenti 2019, 14). But my point is that in reaching beyond time—in striving for a mystical, atemporal, constant, and perfect dimension—people recursively affect their temporal lives. Eternity-thinking dynamizes the temporal world. It is ethnographically revealing to think about eternity—not as the opposite of novelty, but as a dimension that can, in fact, produce it.

## ABSTRACT

*This article approaches the idea of eternity ethnographically. Specifically, it turns to post-Yugoslav central Serbia and the version of eternity (večnost) evoked by practicing Orthodox Christians in their daily lives. In this context, the eternal does not imply the everlastingness of persons and things in this life, or an inevitable cyclical “return.” Rather, eternity constitutes a dimension outside of time that sits alongside the present, a dimension that can be inhabited by ancestors and departed kin. In evoking eternity, people throw temporal life into relief, find solace in the face of death, and engage in the national community those no longer physically present. Against an essentializing view of the eternal as repetition or stasis, the article speculates about how evoking eternity is socially and politically generative, imbuing life with increased imaginative possibilities. [eternity, Serbia, former Yugoslavia, Orthodox Christianity, postsocialism, temporality]*

## АПСТРАКТ

ОВАЈ ЧЛАНАК ПРИСТУПА ИДЕЈИ ВЕЧНОСТИ СА ЕТНОГРАФСКЕ ТАЧКЕ ГЛЕДИШТА. ТО СЕ ОСВРЋЕ НА ВЕРЗИЈУ ВЕЧНОСТИ (*eternity*) ЕВОЦИРАНУ ОД СТРАНЕ ПРАВОСЛАВНИХ ХРИШЋАНСКИХ ВЕРНИКА У СВАКОДНЕВНОМ

животу, а на територији централне Србије, у пост-Југословенском периоду. У овом контексту, вечност се не односи на трајање особа и ствари у овом животу, или на неизбежни циклични повратак. Вечност је пре димензија ван времена која постоји поред садашњости, димензија која може бити настањена прецима или почившим ближњима. Евоцирајући вечност, људи истичу привремени овоземаљски живот, налазећи утеху у суочавању са смрћу и тако повезују са заједницом оне који више нису физички присутни. Противно виђењу вечности – као нечему што је понављање или застој – овај чланак посматра социјални и политички потенцијал евоцирања вечности, као прожимање живота појачаним маштовитим могућностима. [вечност, Србија, бивша Југославија, православно хришћанство, пост-социјализам, пролазност]

### APSTRAKT

*Ovaj članak pristupa ideji večnosti sa etnografske tačke gledišta. To se osvrće na verziju večnosti (eternity) evociranu od strane pravoslavnih hrišćanskih vernika u svakodnevnom životu, a na teritoriji centralne Srbije, u post-jugoslovenskom periodu. U ovom kontekstu, večnost se ne odnosi na trajanje osoba i stvari u ovom životu, ili na nezbežni ciklični povratak. Večnost je pre dimenzija van vremena koja postoji pored sadašnjosti, dimenzija koja može biti nastanjena precima ili počivšim bližnjima. Evocirajući večnost, ljudi ističu privremeni ovozemaljski život, nalazeći utehu u suočavanju sa smrću i tako povezuju sa zajednicom one koji više nisu fizički prisutni. Protivno viđenju večnosti - kao nečemu što je ponavljanje ili застој - ovaj članak posmatra socijalni i politički potencijal evociranja večnosti, kao prožimanje života pojačanim maštovitim mogućnostima. [večnost, Srbija, bivša Jugoslavija, pravoslavno hrišćanstvo, post-socijalizam, prolaznost]*

### NOTES

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1. To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, all names are pseudonyms and some biographical details have been changed.
2. See the site of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia in the documents “Population by Ethnicity and Sex, by Municipalities and Cities” and “Population by Religion, by Municipalities and Cities”: <http://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/oblasti/popis/popis-2011/popisni-podaci-eksel-tabele> (accessed May 2023).
3. See the Pew Research Center report titled “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (accessed May 2023).
4. See <https://svetosavlje.org/misionarska-pisma/62/> (accessed May 2023). Letter 61 of Velimirović’s *Missionary Letters* where he discusses the meaning of “memory eternal.”
5. In another example of how Orthodox Christians perceive the eternal as co-present, Charles Stewart (2012, 181–82) describes a Greek man who dreamt that he inhabited a timeless realm alongside a host of living saints who communicated with him.

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