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## THE ROLE OF THE SERBIAN CHURCH IN THE IMMUNIZATION OF THE POPULATION DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

**Abstract:** In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the formation of the national state, a national church organization was constituted. Public health, control of infectious diseases and sanitation were also in their infancy, and since the 1830s, a legal framework for vaccinating the population against smallpox has been in place. The various then existing healing practices between the magical and the religious are gradually giving way to modern medicine. Suspicion of vaccination, which was an already known practice in the Balkans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has affected epidemics and their scale. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Serbian church organization played a very active role in popularizing vaccination, but also in its implementation. For the first time in recent history, along with the role in religious life, the church became a mobilizing social force that modernized the attitude of the contemporary society towards health, leading it to accept immunization against infectious diseases. Numerous sanitary regulations established at this time radically changed old habits and religious customs, such as funerals as a complex religious and social ceremony. Circulars of Serbian metropolitans precisely determined and ordered the clergy to encourage vaccination. These means are fully incorporated into church life from sermons as old moral-didactic forms of communication to penance or excommunication from the Holy Sacrament of Marriage for those who have not been vaccinated. Knowing the role of the Serbian church in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century affirming the immunization of the population, emancipating it in accordance with modern health science, can be useful as an existing and historically tested model of socially beneficial action. Vaccination of almost the entire population against this vicious disease before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century produced sporadic, small-scale epidemics, during the First World War and the 1970s.

**Keywords:** vaccination, smallpox

Non MeSH: Serbian Orthodox Church, Principality of Serbia, 19<sup>th</sup> century

The treatment of diseases and health prophylaxis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbia rested with old traditions in the sphere of magical activity, folk medicine as well as miraculous cults and healing rites that originated within the Christian religious tradition. Modern medical treatment, pharmacy and hygiene have developed slowly. The first educated doctor arrived in Serbia in 1819, while the people were treated at fairs by “*ćim*s (physicians), barbers, self-taught doctors and folk healers”, which can be summed up by the statement “Disease was treated as it was known. Healthcare and prevention were taken according to the custom.” [1 p149–51, 2 p362–8] The attitude towards health in Serbia has changed almost in parallel with cultural models whose pluralism characterizes the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. [3 p17–53] The gradual change of the Ottoman everyday life and the acceptance of the Central European way of life meant the adoption of new customs and cultures of life that came from the West. However, this relationship was often antagonistic, which was caused by the belief of Europeans themselves that the borders of their hygienic and cultural standards coincide with the eastern borders of Austria-Hungary. Mutual prejudices and cherished stereotypes contributed to the slowness of the adoption of new habits and modern relations towards the preservation of health. [2 p359–84] In the best case, folk healing practices and current medicine functioned in parallel, as the best solutions from both worlds. At the time of the first government of Prince Miloš, the folk healer Ćira Mana and her son Ćim-Toma were famous, the latter receiving pension from the prince. [4 p265–75]. The first educated physician in the prince’s service was the Greek Constantine Alexandridi, who was later succeeded by the famous doctor Vito Romita. [1 p151–68]

It is often quoted as a very illustrative decision of Prince Miloš to carry out the most modern quarantine measures after the outbreak of the plague and cholera epidemics in 1836, calling doctors from Austria, who came from the nearest Zemun quarantine (ger. *Kontumaz*), employing military guards, and ditches along the border, with precisely defined crossing points and quarantine. In addition to this, the prince ordered a secret weaving of a special magic shirt during a single night, made by “nine stark naked old women”; first he himself slipped through this shirt, then members of the prince’s family, all his retinue and soldiers, in total about three hundred souls. [1 p180] The mention of this event and the making of the shirt-talisman, however, are not seen through the ancient practice of creating special apotropaic garments in the Ottoman Empire. Shirts intended for protection in battles, healing and protection from evil forces and spells are preserved in numerous Ottoman collections ranging from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the custom, the shirts had to be woven, cut out and sewn in a single night, and this work was usually performed by forty virgins. This practice is also known in Christian Europe, so “shirts for trouble” are known in the German tradition as “Nothemd”. The name – emergency shirt – comes from the purpose,

because this protective shirt was worn when there was a danger to life and, in general, in some great trouble. [5 p175–93]

The Serbian Church viewed these practices with reproach, but the church organization also faced a thorough reorganization in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [6 p8] The canonical letter signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch and five Greek metropolitans completely determined and regulated the autonomy granted to the Serbian Church in September 1831. After gaining autonomy, a national autocephalous Church was established with elected archbishops and a canonical hierarchy. [7 p148–55] The work on the organization of church life took place in parallel with the constitution of the state and administrative apparatus. The first written ecclesiastical law known as the “Draft on Spiritual Authorities (*Начертаније о духовним властима*)” was passed thanks to metropolitan Peter in 1836, while the basic law delimiting church and state power with the establishment of the diocesan Consistory, Appellate and Holy Synod of Bishops was passed only in 1847, at the time of the Defenders of the Constitution regime. [8 p328–33]

The first half of the 19th century is a period in which the relations between the state and the church can be characterized as intimate or insufficiently particularized. Until then, the role of the church in the health culture and treatment of the population consisted mainly of reading prayers “small or great”, from which priests could earn *marjaš* (*марјаш* – small coin) or a whole groschen (*грош* – silver coin). Sick people were often carried on horses or carts to monasteries so that monks could read healing prayers. [1 p158–9] The role of the reliquary and relics under which the sick spent the night or crawled under them is known, as well as miraculous icons, sacred tombs and natural springs as places of healing within individual sacral topographies of churches and monasteries. [9 p45–9] With the arrival of an increasing number of educated doctors in Serbia, modern science-based medicine gradually took over the social responsibility for public health, which was treated as a state resource that should be taken care of. [2 p361–2] The Orthodox Church enjoyed great spiritual authority among the people, and thus was an important ally whose actions could influence the population in order to accept certain innovations. In the Archbishopric of Karlovac, it was noted that the bishop of Plaška, with his circular from 1803, advised the people, inviting them to “graft (*калемити*)” or vaccinate against smallpox. In the following year, 1804, metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović published a booklet in Pest that taught about the cowpox immunization as a way to eradicate “natural pox”, and was intended for Serbian parents and elders. [10 p364]

The greatest threat to the stability of the state and its economy were unforeseen epidemics of infectious diseases that claimed a large number of human lives in a short period of time. According to the division of Dr. Lindenmeier, the head of the Sanitary Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs from 1874, the great national diseases were classified into domestic and foreign. Infectious diseases such as the plague were considered a danger coming from abroad, while the greatest local threat to the people was a disease that was dormant at first, only to rapidly spread after – the smallpox. The first law on vaccination, the “Rules for the Grafting of Smallpox”, was passed in 1838 and was named “Pacek’s Law” after Dr. Karl Pacek, who passed it. Legally obligatory

vaccination of the population was prescribed as early as 1839 [sic!]. Vaccination was performed with cowpox, and the entire population around 1839 had to be vaccinated by seven doctors who were in the permanent civil service. In addition to this, vaccination was carried out “from hand to hand”, and in 1886, vaccination with “purchased maja” (animal lymph) was introduced in Serbia, which was imported from abroad by Dr. Mihajilo Mika Marković.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, and only after that, the long-assumed goal, the vaccination of the entire population of Serbia was achieved, long before the immunization was carried out by the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary. Smallpox was registered in Serbia at the beginning of the First World War, after the Battle of Cer (August 1914), and it is believed that it was brought by refugees. These cases did not cause an epidemic and were remedied by isolation and preventive vaccination. [11 p126-34]

The origin of the name “pox/pock (богиње)” came from the German word “Pocken” and is of recent origin in relation to numerous folk names by which this disease was named.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the process of immunization was named variously, and the names “grafting (калемљење), inoculation (пелцовање), variolation (цепљење), invariola (уцепане), screwing (навртање) or incision (урезивање) of pox” appeared. The earliest mentions of “grafting pox” by doctors have appeared since 1821, when ećim George “grafted pox” on Obren, the son of Jovan Obrenović in 1822 in Brusnica. Young prince Mihailo Obrenović was “inoculated” by Dr. Vito Romita in Požarevac against the smallpox, on January 27, 1826. There was suspicion among the people about vaccination, but after the epidemic of 1835, it became clear that the disease was not infecting those who had been immunized. [1 p169, 10 p364] It is believed that the custom of “grafting” was first established by the Circassians in order to preserve the beauty of their daughters, who were then sold to Turkish harems, and those “becoming great Turkish ladies, spread this custom throughout the Levant”. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the first books on this process were published by the Greek physician Timonius and the Venetian consul Pigarini of Smyrna. [10 p363] Svetomir Nikolaj already states that in the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while traveling through the Ottoman Empire, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) encountered the practice of vaccination among Balkan Christians, i.e. the direct transmission of infectious material from the sick under the skin of a healthy person. She describes “how in the fall, old women take with a silver needle smallpox matter from a walnut shell and inject it into veins, after which a mild fever develops after eight days, so that after recovery, the children become protected from disease.” On that occasion, she also exposed her three-year-old son to this process. Writing about it, she transferred the said practice to Brit-

<sup>1</sup> “The order on vaccination with animal lymph for the German army was passed only in 1888. The military doctors of the Berlin garrison, enthusiastic about this measure, together with the citizens, gave a standing ovation and a torchlight procession in front of his house to the head of the Prussian military ambulance, Dr. Kohler. Serbian doctor Mihajilo Marković was called a spendthrift the next day because of procuring an expensive preparation from abroad, both by the military and civilian newspapers!” [9 p128]

<sup>2</sup> The following names for pox were in use: „бођиње, бођињке, красте, козе, козице, козјаче, оспе, оспице, осуци, шеше, шеве, мрасе, бопке, непоменуше, штрока, строка, брше, патуле, казамак, сипанице, цвећке.“ [10 p 363]

ain, where it was perfected by Dr. Edward Jenner (1749–1823) using animal lymph obtained from cowpox, where the term (*vaccinatio*) comes from. The safer way of immunization created in this way was later accepted in Serbia as well. [12 p295–6] As it was said, the practice of “variola of pox” or “impfing” was also known north of the Sava and the Danube according to the etymology of German words (*Pelzen* and *Impfen*). Books that affirmed vaccination were also published, and among numerous authors, metropolitan Stratimirović has already been mentioned. The attitude towards public health during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Central Europe was changed and formulated in a new way under the influence of the cultural climate of the Enlightenment. [13 p43–60]

The immunization that was used among the people is confirmed by the “Notes” of Mladen Žujović, who remembers that at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his aunt Ašanka from Gruža, “grafted pox” (transferred biological material) from children’s scabs with a silver needle and thus performed immunization, which she taught many women in the Kragujevac district. In the south of Serbia, the old-fashioned practice of “flower extraction” or immunization by transferring material from a sick to a healthy person was noted by Jovan Hadži Vasiljević, stating that “old women who are called midwives”, barbers and Ottoman hodjas were engaged in this business. According to Vuk Karadžić, bishop Petar I (later canonized as Saint Peter of Cetinje) taught the people “the art of grafting pox” in Montenegro. [11 p364] According to Dr. Vladan Djordjević, the treatment for the vicious disease was done by wrapping the sick person as tight as possible and placing him by the fire where he was given to drink warmed milk with water (*вареника*) or water as much as his heart wanted.” As the best way to protect against of this disease he unequivocally mentioned vaccination. [14 p57–8]

The so-called “Pacek’s” law was tightened at the request of the Ministry of the Interior, and doctors were obliged to report all officials, priests and local elders who did not want to be a good example to the people. This law strictly forbids vaccination with the natural substance of smallpox, while the vaccine against cowpox, which was also known as the Jenner vaccine, was mandatory. The Serbian Church had a very important operational and administrative role in this process and in the implementation of the said law. Priests were in charge of teaching the people about the useful role of immunization with the cowpox vaccine. In addition to the above, the clergy was in charge of compiling lists of unvaccinated persons by parishes and authorized to control and sign protocols on vaccinations kept by doctors. [11 p128]

According to the preserved circular of June 11, 1842, metropolitan Petar Jovanović sent a notice to all proto-deputies that in accordance with the law on vaccination from 1839, an addition to the basic law of the current year was made, and that it was “printed in hundreds of copies” and delivered by the Consistory to the district priests in order to get acquainted with the content of the law and to carry it out among the people with their influence and in part. Metropolitan Petar gave the clergy the task of “understanding the people because the grafting of pox prevents many diseases and strengthens and invigorates physical health and saves life endangered by the pox”, for these reasons priests if they have children had to first and in front of the people their children vaccinate, and give “particles from their children”, i.e. biological material for immunization, and in no way oppose it. [15 p121]

A stricter legal framework foresaw that those who had not been vaccinated after 1843 would no longer be awarded state scholarships, and that older scholars should be immunized. It is also forbidden for a young man to be admitted to a school or other institution if he has not been vaccinated. Masters of any trade are not allowed to accept an unvaccinated student as an apprentice, and those who ignore the ban should be fined in the amount of five silver thalers. It is also forbidden to marry, if the couples have not been vaccinated, with the deadline coming into force in the towns of 1843 and villages in 1844. Priests who violate or disobey this order have been threatened with accountability to church authorities. Finally, it was recommended that officials, priests and local elders, who represent a good example to the people, be praised and rewarded! [11 p129]

Immunization of the population was a long-term job that had to be repeated with each new generation, and the Serbian metropolitans warned and obliged the clergy with circulars to participate in these activities. Metropolitan Petar sent a circular to all the deputies informing them of the decision of the Ministry of Education that the mass vaccination of the population would take place in April 1846. On that occasion, the clergy were obliged to give sermons on Sundays and holidays in the church, teaching the people about the usefulness of vaccines. The clergy also had the obligation to set an example for the parishioners by vaccinating their children in front of the people in the churchyard. [15 p175] In the month of May 1849, Metropolitan Petar informed his clergy with a circular that the vaccination would be carried out in the summer of the same year. On that occasion, the priests had to prepare the people, and the topic of their sermons should be "the happiness of children that parents have to take care of". Vaccination has been highlighted as a cure for many potential diseases as well as deadly smallpox. Priests had to intensify their pastoral work in parishes, and individually with mothers and fathers with children, instructing them in their homes about the need to vaccinate children, and thus protect them from death, and also to warn them of the consequences of pox such as blindness and disfiguration. In all that has been said, the clergy had to corroborate their words with their own example. [15 p206]

Immunization campaigns were usually conducted in the spring and autumn, and those from 1847, 1850 and 1852 are known. [11] On the occasion of the great immunization campaign in the circular of metropolitan Peter from May 1852, he repeats the above, emphasizing that the people must be encouraged to bring their children and those who have not been vaccinated as soon as the district doctor comes to a town or village for immunization. The seriousness of the role of the metropolitan in this process is also indicated by the new obligation imposed on the clergy, which entailed written reports that the priests had to submit to the Consistory about their performance. [15 p240] According to circulars, preparations for vaccination were made every spring, and in May of the following year, 1853, metropolitan Petar again ordered the clergy to participate. In addition to the usual advice and instructions to the presbyters, the metropolitan especially emphasizes to his priests the importance of the church's role in this process, pointing out that by participating in it they will fulfill the great and paternal wish of Prince Aleksandar Karadjordjević to protect the population of the Serbian principality from dreadful diseases. The clergy had to agitate in the churches after the



sermon, and especially at the people's assemblies, and invite people to gladly approach the "grafting of the pox." [15 p244] Vaccination was carried out regularly in all districts after 1852, even in the districts of Rudnik and Užice, which lagged behind in the immunization process, partly due to the very hilly terrain and the fact that there were not always enough available doctors. [11 p128]

Addressing the clergy of the monastic and secular orders in April 1855, metropolitan Petar reminded them of the duty of pastoral action among the people and the obligation to encourage the people to be vaccinated and to set a personal example for them. This circular also explicitly mentions that doctors who perform vaccinations will also examine children, which is an important piece of information for the history of pediatric medical practice. It was also explicitly mentioned, referring to the decree from May 1842, that the church cannot allow marriage between people who do not have a certificate that they survived smallpox or have been vaccinated against it. The consistory ordered its clergy to take care of this, and under the threat of the most severe punishment, to never marry anyone who did not present the requested certificates signed by the doctor for inspection. The priests were also asked to examine the marriages concluded during 1843 and 1844, and whether the future newlyweds provided valid confirmation that they were secured from the smallpox during the premarital examinations. [15 p277] In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, church marriage was the only legal form of conjugal life defined by patriarchal social frameworks, preceding the later defined civil marriage. [16 p219–32] When entering into marriage, the first step was a marital exam which determined the free will of the spouses, non-existence of kinship and other obstacles for the marital union with the necessary blessing to the future spouses by the parents. [17 p274–9] After the law passed in 1842, these regulations were accompanied by a certificate of vaccination or a previous survival of smallpox infection. Marriage was understood by the church as a Holy Secret, and the excommunication from this secret, i.e. penance, had the meaning of a serious church-canonical punishment. Thus, a significant concession was made by the Serbian church towards the secular authorities. By making a serious spiritual punishment available to them, a precedent was set in canon law in order to completely control the vaccination of the adult population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The letter of metropolitan Peter to all proto-deputies in the Principality of Serbia from 1856, reminds them, like the previous ones, of the obligation of the clergy of the secular and monastic order to do everything in the current year to complete the vaccination. The circular also emphasized that marriages between unvaccinated persons cannot be concluded. Detailed reports to the Consistory were requested on all the mentioned obligations. [15 p299] In October of the same year, the Serbian metropolitan ordered priests who took medical certificates of vaccination or past illness for inspection during marriage exams to return them to the bearers after making the records, so that they could have them for some other purpose. [15 p311] It has already been mentioned that the law related to the vaccination against smallpox prohibits the receipt of scholarships, employment and learning a trade for those who have not been immunized. Possession of valid certificates as well as the importance of keeping them, which is mentioned in the circular, shows that these regulations were very much re-

spected. Circulars with similar contents were sent by the metropolitan in the spring, every following year, and that can be considered a common practice. Addressing the clergy, the head of the church called the vaccination “a great treasure for the church and the people.” [18 p28, 51]

The end of the 1850s marked the change on the Serbian throne and the return of Obrenović dynasty after the St. Andrew's Assembly, when metropolitan Petar was forcibly removed and bishop Mihailo Jovanović of Šabac was elected archbishop of Belgrade and metropolitan of Serbia in 1859. [19 p15-49] At the time when he was the temporary acting Serbian metropolitan, bishop Mihailo informed all deputies and clergy with a circular of March 28, 1859, that the regulation according to which newly-weds had to prove at the marriage exam that they were vaccinated is put out of force. The previous decision, in which the church assisted the state, was essentially non-canonical, and the metropolitan put it out of force, noting that in the future heads of families and police authorities will control the implementation of vaccination. [19 p72] A month after that, metropolitan Mihailo sent the usual reminder to the clergy that the time of vaccination had come, of which the faithful should be warned. [19 p75] After his accession to the throne, in the spring of 1860, Metropolitan Mihailo sent a common and extensive circular encouraging the clergy to preach in the church and elsewhere about the benefits of immunization, ordering priests to vaccinate their children again. [19 p105] Already in November of the same year, the metropolitan ordered the priests to submit the exact number of baptized in each individual parish at the end of the year, in order to know how many children should be vaccinated. Thanks to accurate data, this practice should have facilitated vaccination in the future and made it more successful. [19 p131]

Vladan Djordjević speaks about the effect of vaccination, citing the case from 1862, when “some wandering gypsies brought disease to the town of Smederevo” in which a thousand Turks and about four thousand Serbs lived. Among the Turkish population, the epidemic spread quickly and forty people died soon, while among Serbs, even if they were in constant contact with the Turks, there were no cases of illness, except for two people who fled from Turkey and were unvaccinated. [14 p57-8] The last major epidemic of the smallpox was recorded in the Principality of Serbia during 1863. [11 p128]

The Consistory, which took care of the implementation of the decisions of the synod, ordered the clergy to advise the people on revaccination, which was also a novelty in the previous policy of immunization of the population. The circular of the diocesan Consistory from May 1864 states “that one inoculation does not protect against infection for the rest of one's life, but should be repeated after some time has elapsed.” [19 p174] Bearing in mind the above, the new medical knowledge was applied relatively quickly, and the timely application and correction of existing practices in which the church is seen to contribute significantly resulted in curbing the epidemiological danger posed by smallpox. After the 1880s, animal lymph was imported and used in immunization. The use of imported preparations with the increase in the number of doctors and health workers ensured at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the immunization of the population was carried out almost completely. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> centu-



ry, neither the Ottoman Empire nor the Austro-Hungarian Empire could boast of this. [11 p128] The described role that the Serbian church had in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, participating in the popularization of vaccination among the population, defines it as an emancipatory social force. Using the power of preaching as the most important form that could influence larger groups of individuals, the church, in addition to rhetoric, resorted to penances that are a specific spiritual punishment placed in the service of modern health science. Such historical activities of the Serbian Church can be useful as an existing and historically tested model of socially useful activities for the current generation that has considered questionable the current practice of immunization which lasted for three centuries.

### Summary

In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the formation of the national state, a national church organization was constituted. Public health, control of infectious diseases and sanitation were also in their infancy, and since the 1830s, a legal framework for vaccinating the population against smallpox has been created and is becoming mandatory. The various then existing healing practices between the magical and the religious were gradually giving way to modern medicine. Suspicion of vaccination, which was an already known practice in the Balkans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has affected epidemics and their scale. Laws on unvaccinated people were significantly tightened in the 1840s. The Serbian church organization played a very active role in the implementation of immunization during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, popularizing vaccination and actively influencing its implementation among the people. For the first time in recent history, along with the role in religious life, the church became a mobilizing social force that modernized the attitude of the society towards health, leading it to accept immunization against infectious diseases. The preserved archival material, and above all the circulars of the Serbian metropolitans, precisely determined and imposed on the clergy the ways in which vaccination would be encouraged. One of the obligatory measures was to vaccinate the children of priests, in front of the parishioners, in order to give them an example and show that the process is harmless. Affirmation of vaccination was fully included in church life, from obligatory thematic sermons after Sunday and holiday liturgies as old moral and didactic forms of communication to penance or excommunication from the Holy Sacrament of Marriage for those who have not been vaccinated. During 1860s, the church played an important role in the process of affirmation of revaccination, which was then recognized as important. Knowledge of the role of the Serbian church, which popularized the immunization of the population during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emancipating it in accordance with modern health science, can be useful as an existing and historically tested model of socially useful action. Thanks to the vaccination of almost the entire population from smallpox before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only sporadic small-scale epidemics were recorded during the First World War and the 1970s, so that the vicious disease was finally eradicated.

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