

Dragan VELEŠANOV

Protestantism in Macedonia 1868-1922

Theological Institute, Zagreb, 2007, 158 pages

translated by Roger Massey

This year a somewhat unusual topic for a book appeared in the Croatian book market — *Protestantism in Macedonia 1868-1922*. It's unusual first of all because Croatian readers (generally speaking) rarely meet with a book which addresses any kind of topics connected with Macedonia, a dear and friendly land with which we, until not long ago, shared a common country and with whom we cultivate good relations on various levels, but simply didn't impose itself as a popular point of reference in Croatian society. Another reason is that the syntagm "Protestantism in Macedonia" surely sounds strange to the majority of Croatian readers because in the thought processes of a Croatian person, the religious identity of a Macedonian necessarily (and exclusively) supposes Orthodoxy, so that every connection between Macedonia and Macedonians with Protestantism seems strange and completely unimaginable. A third reason is the time frame with which the book is concerned — the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century — a period of time which, to the modern man, accustomed to the swift changes inside even one year, is pretty much far away and often uninteresting. Still, an interest remained for this book to be written and published in Croatian about which there will be more said later.

The author of the book is a young (born in 1979) Macedonian evangelical theologian and pastor whose theological literacy was attained while studying at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osi-

jek, where he graduated in 2002. Upon his graduation, he remained in Croatia (he didn't return to his Macedonian homeland where he lived until he completed high school) and from that time worked as a pastor first in Vukovar (2002-2003) and then in Slatina and Virovitica (2003 until today).

As one can see from the author's Introduction, the book came into being three times in three different places. A specific basis of the book emerged while the author was writing his senior paper at the college of theology, under the leadership of the respected church historian, and professor, dr. Mihael Kuzmič, who passed on before his time.

The author added an important addition to the original work during a short research residence (immediately after graduating) at Wheaton Bible College in the United States, under the supervision of his co-mentors and professors, Dr. Greg Beale and Dr. Walter A Elwell. The book, in its final form, took shape during the author's term of pastoral service in Slatina.

The book is written in the form of a popular-academic work, whose style and simplicity make it approachable reading material for a wide reading audience, while at the same time offers additional biographical references about the sources of the collected information in the footnotes for those interested. It is important to note that the written contents of the book are simplified and richly illustrated by a multitude of

black and white photographs, tables of data and maps.

The book consists of six main parts. In the first part, entitled *Who are the Macedonians?* author, in some 10 pages, explains the origin of the term for Macedonians and their land, pointing out the ancient roots and unique identity of the Macedonian people with a language, culture and all other peculiarities that make a people one-of-a-kind. Beginning from the seventh century BC with King Perdik, who established the ancient Macedonia, and concluding the story with the seventh century AD, when, following the great migration of the Slavs, a very significant mixing of ancient Macedonians (who had already mixed with Greeks in the prior ages) with the newly arrived Slavs occurred. In the second part of the book, entitled *The Religious Picture of Macedonia Prior to the Ottoman Empire*, the author, in several pages, gives an abbreviated look at the development of Christianity in Macedonia from the very beginnings of Christianity up through the Turkish conquest of the region. As a peak of the Macedonian age before the Ottoman age, Velešanov points out the work of the two thesalonian brothers Cyril and Method in the ninth century — they established a Slavic literacy in the entire region of the Balkans, after which a school was established in the Macedonian city of Ohrid, where the students of Cyril and Method, Clement of Ohrid, Nahum of Ohrid and Constantine of Bregalnika came to prominence.

In the third part of the book, entitled *Macedonia During the Time of the Ottoman Empire, 15th-20th Century*, the author, in the first 10 pages, tells the history of Macedonia from the aforesaid age in a general sense, and then in several pages tells the history and condition of the Orthodox Church in the Macedonia of that age. He descri-

bes how, at the end of the 14th century, the country, just like every other country on the Balkan, experienced one of the greatest catastrophes in its history — falling to the Turks, under whose occupation they remained some 500 years – from the 15th -20th century. The Macedonian people, who during that time were constantly oppressed and exploited, in the 19th century began to strengthen their national awareness and by the end of that century, and especially during the beginning of the 20th century, organized themselves into revolutionary organizations for the purpose of raising a general revolt in Macedonia and liberating themselves from the Turks. So, in 1903, the great (Ilinden) revolution was bloodily choked out by the far superior military strength of the Turkish army. As far as the Orthodox Church in Macedonia was concerned during this time, it (institutionally) enjoyed relative peace because the Turkish authorities didn't interfere with Christian faith and practice. Still, that didn't offer the Macedonian people any hope, because the Church, under the influence of Macedonia's powerful neighbors, became splintered into three churches: Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian. Since the clergy of each of the aforementioned churches held their services and preached in their own language, the people became all the more passive and fell into more and more spiritual decay, but no less intellectually as well since schools were most often tied to churches.

In the fourth part of the book, entitled *The Beginnings of Protestant Mission Work in Macedonia*, the author, in some 30 pages, presents the appearance and development of Protestantism, that is Protestant mission in the 19th century in the region of Macedonia (which was then still under Turkish occupation), and mission activity expressed in the opening of schools, work

among (especially political) prisoners and in various humanitarian activities. Since the Ottoman empire, in the 19th century, became increasingly open to various joint activities with other countries, it established, among other things, diplomatic relations with the United States, which made it possible for American Protestant missionaries to freely begin their missionary work in the regions of the empire, and so in Macedonia. Even though the primary goal of the American missionaries was to evangelize Muslims, they quickly reoriented their work to include “nominal” Christians who they happened to find because they saw that there “real knowledge of God didn’t exist” (53).

In the fifth part of the book, entitled *A Chronological Order of the Beginning of Protestant (Congregational) Churches in Macedonia* the author, on some 50 pages, presents the beginnings of Protestant (Congregational) churches, citing the basic figures he was able to obtain and accompanying them with (black and white) photographs of today’s church buildings (in places where they are addressed) and contents which the reader can apply to the pictured buildings. Velešanov includes 15 Macedonian towns and villages in which Protestant churches were established during a period from 1868-1899.

In the sixth (and last) part of the book, entitled *The Division of Macedonia from 1913*, the author, in some 10 pages, presents how the (occupation) division of Macedonia between Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, in 1913, influenced the shutting down of the mission work of Congregational churches in some parts of Macedonia. Then, some of the Congregational Church congregations allowed some other Protestant churches, that were allowed to freely function in other parts of the country, to

move into their property.

I consider that the author, in his presentation of the historical context under the suggested topic, sometimes tried to present the topic too broadly. However, even though it is, in and of itself, interesting to discover some facts (and presuppositions) about the origin and development of a people (especially if it is about a neighboring people, like the Macedonians are), the reader surely won’t expect to be met with such a large amount of information of general historic and geopolitical character when he reaches for a book whose title presents a representation (a history) of Protestantism in Macedonia at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries. Here, it is very necessary to understand the weight of patriotic longing of the Macedonian author to a (especially non-Macedonian) readership to demonstrate the uniqueness and value of the Macedonian people through their millennium-long battle to protect their own identity. That which can, to an extent, justify the wide general-historical introduction, along with the presentation of the battle of the Macedonian people to preserve their identity, is the fact that it was precisely the work of the Protestant missionaries (first the American, and then more and more the indigenous church leaders) that significantly contributed to the preservation (and advancement) of that identity, primarily through establishing schools.

As concerns the relevance of the topic, I consider that the Croatian publisher made a direct hit in publishing this book in the Croatian language market because the Croatian (first of all the intellectual and then the wider) public needs to constantly be reminded and acquainted (even in foreign examples) that Protestantism isn’t “some strange body or dark force that appeared ‘yesterday’ somewhere in the West

and now wants to rip us from our identity and in some way estrange us,” but, just the opposite, that it is precisely Protestantism that was one of the most significant factors in preserving and advancing the unique identity of many peoples (even Croatia’s) over many years and often centuries.

The topic of the book is interesting primarily because it would never come to mind, for the majority of Croatian readers, that Protestantism even existed in Macedonia as early as the 19th century, and even less that it made such a significant addition to the preservation and advancement of the Macedonian identity as a people. As a special point of interest in the book, I would point out that, from the contents, it is obvious that the (in the awareness of the Croatian readership “deeply Orthodox”) Macedonian people through several of their last few centuries (especially the period under the Turks from the 15th to the 20th century) preserved their national identity often *in spite* of foreign interests (unfortunately) actualized in the Orthodox Church, and (from the 19th century) to a great extent *thanks to* precisely “foreign” Protestant missions. Protestant missionaries, first of all, impartially did all they could for the common good and development of the Macedonian people, and just among other things, very unobtrusively proclaimed the Good News.

As concerns the research methods, in spite of using over twenty primary sources, the book is, first of all, an elaborated compilation (until now not published in Croatian, and more or less published in Macedonia) of secondary sources and materials. The author’s sources are well documented, but it would have been even better that if before noting some secondary resources, that he noted (if it was known) the primary sources from which references of the secondary sources obtained the material.

This would greatly simplify the work of future researchers, and it would offer more trustworthy material to more interested readers.

With regard to the composition, along with earlier noted criticism about the overly wide and very detailed general historical introductory piece, it could be said that the book has, in principle, a very balanced view and considering the requirements of the topic and subtopics, an accommodating composition. Here and there one finds some imbalances, especially in the fifth chapter of the book (in which the beginning of individual Protestant churches is developed) where some churches are treated in detail (on several pages) while some others are merely mentioned in passing with less than a page, clearly caused by a lack of source material.

I aim serious criticism at the lector/proofreader who allowed a multitude of grammatical and spelling errors to slip by. The linguistically conscious and sensitive reader would find the errors a source of frustration.

It must be admitted that the author remained true to himself and realized the goals set out and pointed in the *Introduction*. Protestant Congregational missionaries he arguably presented as deserving successors of Cyril and Method’s efforts to see spiritual and intellectual enlightenment of the Macedonian people at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, and his story was enriched by a multitude of old and modern photographs (which I perceive as one of the book’s great values). Even if one could, perhaps, get the impression that my appraisal of the book is largely negative, I would like to state here that I like the book and that I agree with the editor of the book, Dr. Stan-ko Jambrešić, in the estimation (written on the inside cover of the book) that it repre-

sents a “worthy addition to the knowledge of the underdeveloped history of Protestant activity in Macedonia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. So, even though it could always have been better (as some of my negative criticisms witness), the book truly represents a valu-

able and (in Croatian) a unique addition to the knowledge of the mentioned topics and as a delightful starting point, I heartily recommend it to interested readers. To the author, whose first book this is, I congratulate him on his work and wish him every success in his future work.

Tomislav Vidaković

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