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THE ROLE OF METROPOLITAN STEFAN STRATIMIROVIĆ IN HEALTH CARE EDUCATION OF SERBS IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY

Abstract: Cooperation between the state and metropolinate of Karlovci in overcoming various problems that affected Serbs in the 18th century was known throughout the century. It was visible in the process of building awareness on epidemics, for in those periods the Church tried, either on its own or stimulated by the State, to support measures in fighting epidemics. Although many serious problems were encountered in that process, the metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović (1790–1836) never failed to support all state attempts to improve health conditions and awareness of his congregation, and for that reason during epidemics he occasionally deviated from accepted practice of the church he was leading. He propagated vaccination against smallpox for children, actively participated in furnishing temporary hospitals in war times and in restraining spreading of cholera, the disease that with its death toll replaced plague epidemics. This paper indicates significance of metropolitan Stratimirović in health care education of Serbs.

Keywords: plague, smallpox, cholera

Non MeSH: metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović, Habsburg Monarchy

During the 18th century on the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy Serbs were exposed to the ideas and influences of Western civilization, rationalism and enlightenment. This exposure led to changes that were neither easy, nor quick, but the metamorphosis became noticeable already in mid-century. The genesis of society was, on one hand, result of influences coming from the West, primarily from focal point of the state – Vienna, and on the other hand from the need to adapt to different and new political, social and cultural environment. The specificity of Serbian society of that century was that the role of the church was pronounced in all mentioned segments, as a consequence of the fact that Serbs did not have their historic territory in the Habsburg Monarchy, nor they had their political Convention (Diet) or numerous nobility [1]. Besides, the influence of the church strengthened the ruler when he, towards the end of the 17th century, through Privileges gave Serbs the right to publicly practice their religion [2]. Therefore, in the 18th century, the metropolitan of Karlovci became the most important person Habsburg Serbs had, and among those who promoted emancipation of population the most, metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović deserves the special mention [3].

When he took over Karlovci metropolitanate, Habsburg Monarchy already had a century long experience in promoting reformative ideas through Serbian church. That proves as untenable the stereotype depicting the Monarchy as “bad state” that had forcefully imposed reforms to nations that lived on its territory, for those reforms encompassed all achievements of modern civilization, along with ideas for improving quality of life [4,5]. In this endeavor, Karlovci metropolitanate was often a partner with the state, and resistance among people appeared only when some saw a particular reform, deemed as useful by the Court, as a violation of religious rights. It is worth noting, that mostly quite primitive forms of religiousness were in question, frequently with remnants of paganism. So, the first strong resistance appeared when Regulations of 1770 and 1777 were enacted, aimed particularly on the part related to burials. That measure, essentially a very positive one, prohibited carrying of deceased in open caskets and kissing them in case of infection, but it was perceived as a violation of religious freedoms. There was not a similar resistance just a decade earlier, when state prescribed that deceased cannot be buried without coroner’s permission, and that 48 hours must elapse between death and funeral [1,6].

Both mentioned orders were announced to believers through the church, for that was practical manner for state to secure that people will become aware of all its measures. Therefore, it was through metropolitanate that the order on prevention of plague spreading from Ottoman empire in 1762 was announced, with special emphasis on border regions. On that occasion metropolitan Pavle Nenadović was entrusted to inform the people via epistle about all consequences that the epidemic might have and also on preventive measures; along the same lines, metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović had important role in education of people in similar situations during his time (1790–1836) [7]. It was a situation full of challenges, for in his time the last large plague epidemic was recorded, smallpox epidemics were frequent, and first cholera

epidemic occurred. A part of the education was introduction of midwives at births and stricter control over burials. There was not one state order regarding sanitary protection that metropolitan Stratimirović failed to announce, but he also often acted on his own to convince Serbs to abandon superstition and semblance of religion, especially during epidemics.

The metropolitan had the first major challenge of that kind at the time of the plague that spread from Ottoman empire in 1795 and 1796 into Syrmia, region under direct spiritual authority of Karlovci metropolitan. The consequences of this epidemic were most felt in the territory of Irig, where more than 2.500 people died, or half of the population [8]. The chaos that reigned in Irig when epidemic spread prompted doctors to ask metropolitan to help them by influencing believers to abandon their destructive habits [9]. Through exarch Stefan Avakumović, the metropolitan immediately banned bringing of deceased into a church. He ordered (on August 1795) that the deceased should be taken to a cemetery with assistance of funeral professionals, and without presence of family or acquaintances, and that kissing of deceased should be prohibited at any cost. He also banned gathering of people in churches, because presence of many people in one place is favorable for spreading of the epidemic, and eventual liturgies were permitted only outdoors. Since his order was not properly accepted, and people saw those visible manifestations of religiousness as one of the reasons for many deaths, epidemic did not abate. Not even parochial clergymen understood benefits of adhering to his orders. Therefore, at the end of the year, Stratimirović repeated those demands and ordered clergymen that even they should not be in proximity of deceased, and that after holy communion of dying people they should burn the wooden spoon used for it right away [10]. Significant segment of his orders of 1795 was ban of fasting, and also of confessions and communions, except for dying people. Metropolitan considered that each person has duty to do everything in order to survive, and that meant no fasting, for fasting could decrease organism's resistance to infection. So, explaining his position, he emphasized that task of each true believer is to survive, and not to expose himself to epidemic through phony religiousness [11,12,13].

Prevention of plague spreading remained challenge for Stratimirović. When the disease appeared in Belgrade in 1814, the metropolitan was scared it could again be transferred to Syrmia or, due to recklessness, spread even further into Austrian territory, and that was something that had to be prevented at all costs. Almost simultaneously when state order was issued, the metropolitan sent (13/25th May 1814) an epistle in order to raise awareness of people and clergy on necessary efforts to prevent plague transmission. Based on that epistle, the archpriest of Mitrovica Gavriilo Isaković, person quite close with the metropolitan, warned clergymen to read that order to believers, so they could also realize what "fear and horror [from spreading of disease – authors' note] His Excellency has..." and has high hopes that his orders and lessons will be diligently transferred to the faithful [14]. Knowing that the plague appeared in Belgrade, metropolitan Stratimirović insisted on his own that people who

recognize any symptoms of that disease inform secular authorities and physicians immediately. He reminded people that they themselves can remember what it was like when plague spread from Ottoman empire in 1795, and how “irrational and stupid” people spread the disease by trying to hide it. He warned them to remember all those events, death of entire families, quarantines and forcible separation of infected ones, in order to behave more responsibly. He insisted they do not receive things “from the other side of the Sava” even if they were very cheap, and not to believe people saying there is no plague and that sanitary situation in Serbia is good [15].

After metropolitan's epistle in Karlovci a state order arrived, the one that field-marshal lieutenant baron Heinrich von Siegenthal (1762–1831) sent on behalf of the Royal Court War Council, and metropolitan forwarded it to priests as an another epistle. It emphasized that resistance to strict state orders enacted in order to prevent the spreading of plague, even in the least, is serious challenge to defense, i.e. that opens door to the plague. Von Siegenthal requested that people in churches should be reminded of events of 1795/96 when epidemic spread due to exchange of clothes and kitchenware that were left behind deceased people, but also due to funeral customs. Fearing that such deeds might be repeated, von Siegenthal ordered the republishing of the Penal code of 1805. With it came request that the physicians should be informed upon the first symptoms of the disease or death, who will then promptly separate infected from healthy people, while special inspections were envisaged for farmsteads and taverns. No one was allowed to move outside settlements without valid passport, that guaranteed someone's bill of health. Passport compulsorily stated which town person comes from, and data if plague occurrences were recorded in that settlement [16]. Since disease did not abate in Serbia, the fear of its eventual spreading prompted archpriest Isaković in July 1814 to sent an order to priests that under no circumstances deceased might be buried until physician who inspected the corpse gave written permit, while in cases where there were no physicians, deceased could be buried only with a permit from military authorities [17].

The metropolitan Stratimirović was engaged in gathering medical supplies for hospitals during wars, something that was never mentioned for his predecessors. That segment of his efforts is even more important, since he was leading the church during great wars against France (1792–1815), in which significant number of Serbian border guards took part. Already in 1805 the metropolitan announced an order coming from Vienna that priests should motivate people to gather as much as possible canvas and thin thread. It was specified that canvas should be thin and with quality weaving, so wounds could be dressed in adequate manner. At the same time, poor families were to be motivated to produce such canvas, for that activity was paid for [18]. Announcing metropolitan's epistle, archpriest of Mitrovica Gavriilo Isaković indicated in his letter that such a manner of gathering supplies existed before, for caller and priests were visiting villages and gathering canvas, but archpriest emphasized they were gathering supplies of all kinds, regardless of their quality. Therefore in 1805 changes were made so priests were instructed to perform selection. The

archpriest gave them fifteen days to complete the job [19]. The metropolitan sent an almost identical order in 1809, when Habsburg Monarchy began a new war with Napoleon, and when situation required so, the same was done by other episcopos of Karlovci metropolitanate [20,21].

The problem of burials and transport of deceased in open caskets is something Stratimirović inherited from previous period. Maria Theresa (1740–1780) tried to solve that problem, first by specifying that the term for funerals could not be set within 48 hours after the death, and later by ban through Regulations (1770 and 1777), that prohibited carrying the deceased in open caskets [22]. Anyway, discontent forced the Empress to abandon previous decision on April 7th 1778, when funerals according to Serbian customs and church regulations were permitted, while Declaration (1779) left everything to be performed in accordance with sanitary regulations that recommended closing of the caskets. Still, recommendations were not enough. Back from the times of the plague epidemic of 1795/96, it was known that they were not obeyed, even in such critical moments [23].

In 1811, when money was devaluated and population was impoverished, priests were cautioned they must not protract burial of the deceased, in order to benefit from it [24]. When metropolitan was informed that Serbs insisted again on practice that dead should be carried uncovered and that they were sometimes buried just 12 hours after death, Stratimirović issued an order that such practice must be stopped and that priests should closely watch when deceased are buried, whether they are covered while carried to the church, but it also stipulated that he should be informed of each violation of this order. Priests were entrusted with educating people against superstition that insisted that dead should be carried in open caskets [25]. With same request regarding the time of a funeral, threatening that all priests failing to behave in accordance with regulations would lose their parishes, metropolitan was stricter in 1826, and repeated it all in 1827 [26]. Avoiding the covering of dead was considered the principal reason behind many diseases in Military frontier, especially when deceased were kept in open caskets in houses, in small rooms permanently occupied by dead person's relatives, that could easily lead to infection. It was considered especially bad to breathe air in such a room. Metropolitan was obviously against it in his epistle of 1827, and military authorities tried through parish clergy to eradicate these customs with his help [27]. The issue of delay before funeral was also a topic of Stratimirović's address to priests in 1836, when he repeated order that it should not be conducted in less than 48 hours, namely that earlier funeral is possible only if family suspects some communicable disease, but even so only with written order (permit) of secular authorities or a physician [28].

Although plague epidemics in Europe were fatal, the 18th century could be considered the century of smallpox. Some estimates tell that 80% of population was infected by smallpox in that century, and at least 10% of infected died. The smallpox in the 18th century caused death of many noblemen, rulers or members of their families. So smallpox claimed the lives of William II, prince of Orange (1650), English Queen

Maria II (1694), Emperor Joseph I, Holy Roman Emperor (Habsburg) (1711) and Russian Emperor Peter II (1730). Maria Theresa survived the smallpox, but her two daughters-in-law (wives of Emperor Joseph II) Isabela of Parma and Maria Josepha of Bavaria, along with many children and grandchildren were not that lucky [29]. Due to smallpox high mortality rate, the cure was sought even during the 18th century. The first one discovered was inoculation of disease germs into healthy person to make body develop immunity, and that practice was first implemented in Great Britain in 1721. After epidemic of 1767, Maria Theresa exposed several of her children to this preventive measure [30]. This first method was invented by Jan Ingen-Housz, and improved by British village physician Edward Jenner, who realized that women who milked cows and got cowpox from them became immune to smallpox. Jenner tried inoculation in 1796 when he transferred germs from hands of woman infected by cowpox to a boy. The procedure was successful and that was beginning of vaccination (from Latin word *vacca* – cow). The new method of fighting smallpox was brought to Vienna by Pasqual Joseph von Ferro in 1799 [31]. After the first public vaccination in Habsburg Monarchy, inoculation was banned, and vaccination became the only acceptable method [32].

The amount of success that vaccination achieved is best seen from example that in Vienna annually at least 500 children died from smallpox, but that number was reduced to just 5 casualties after vaccination in 1805. Serbs came across smallpox vaccination quite early. It was known in Hungary from 1801, where it was practiced by physicus (chief physician) of Esztergom county Mihály Lenhossék, although it was officially accepted in Hungary just in 1823. In 1804 the state already invited parents to vaccinate their children. This invitation was addressed to Hereditary provinces, but Hungary was not among them [32]. Anyway, since Military frontier applied laws of Hereditary provinces, and the seat of Karlovci metropolitan was in Military frontier territory, he was aware of 1804 invitation, and even then he, as can be seen from later letters, explained to people how useful vaccination was. Still, major invitation came somewhat later in the form of epistle of 19th/31st May 1812 Stefan Stratimirović invited parents to save their children from smallpox by vaccinating them. He insisted that priests should specially use as an example the children of officers, who were exposed to vaccination earlier than Serbian children, and therefore resistant to smallpox that was killing Serbs [33].

The metropolitan repeated invitation for vaccination in 1814, and parish priests announced it in villages [34]. There is a rare testimony from that period on how priests implemented this order, in the form of speech by priest Mihajlo Cikuša from Lačarak on the territory of Petrovaradin regiment, that he himself wrote into circular protocol of his church. Through story about Christian duties of parents the priest implied that their major duty is to do everything to keep their children alive. He equaled smallpox with plague, except that from them children that did not die remain blind or handicapped, incapable to care for themselves. Cikuša highlighted that God sent parents cure for their children in the form of vaccination and that this God's gift

already enjoyed everyone in the world [35,36]. The metropolitan Stratimirović repeated in 1815 the invitation for vaccination and instructed priests not only to invite people when they come to church, but should do that whenever opportunity occurs. He ordered archpriests to support vaccination each time they tour their territory, so “humanity could be released from evil coming from smallpox” [37].

Within regulations of sanitary conditions there was an order that, in each settlement of Military frontier, midwives should be employed to take care at births. In the letter that metropolitan sent on behalf of political authorities to archpriests, there was a list of tasks for a midwife, and instructions for introduction of new village midwives to their duties. It was envisaged that they should come from local population, because it facilitated building of confidence in settlements where they were supposed to work. They couldn't be younger than 20 or older than 36 years of age, they had to be healthy, with no bodily defect, and also literate. That job could be temporarily performed by company or regiment midwives, until convenient candidate was found. At first they were supposed to start in settlements with more inhabitants, especially those further away from company or regiment seats. Once a midwife was employed, everyone was obliged to allow her presence at childbirth, and her name had to be listed in protocols of baptized children [38]. Anyway, this order was not applied properly for a long time.

A part of sanitary education was warning to archpriests and priests to influence the faithful on every occasion to visit physicians when they were ill, rather than attempt self-medication, something that was widespread practice in Military frontier. People were healing themselves or asked help from people with no medical knowledge, and therefore were late to visit local doctors who were subsequently unable to heal the consequences of wrong or inadequate healing [39].

The biggest health care challenge at time of metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović was fight against cholera epidemic, as it spread for the first time on territory where Serbs lived in 1831. In August of that year the metropolitan addressed archpriests to instruct their believers on behalf of “higher authorities”, privately and in churches, how they should behave during cholera epidemic [40]. He was much more voluminous on that at the beginning of September, when it was already clear to everyone that there were not enough physicians for all settlements where cholera appeared. Therefore it was left to priests to teach their flocks how to protect themselves [41].

After that, instructions came that primarily insisted on keeping personal hygiene of living space, then regular washing of clothes and body (once a week), with water containing vinegar. Drying of bogs was also requested, along with airing of rooms and creating vinegar vapor in them. Infected people had to be immediately separated from healthy ones. It was recommended not to sleep outdoors or on humid soil, and special attention was paid to nutrition, where moderation was requested. Products that make people bloat were forbidden, especially fish. Day was supposed to start with soup, warm wine, or rakija with some bread. Excessive use of alcohol was considered as destructive as use of bad water, while disease was also caused, as it

was believed, by vagrancy and immoral life. Specific instructions were given for accommodation and care of sick people; among them significant were efforts to warm up infected person to make him or her sweat. Patients could drink warm water or teas (from elder or lime tree flowers) [41]. Similar instructions, in accordance with up-to-date medical achievements, were transferred later on, but in general metropolitan Stratimirović, due to effective state response, could play lesser role regarding this issue [42,43].

Looking as a whole, efforts that metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović put into sanitary education of Orthodox believers were considerable. Epistles and circular letters he used for that were not always a result of his own endeavors but also of state policy, but he sent them eagerly adding additional ambition to persuade priests and believers to achieve better health protection. Special significance holds the fact that, in order to accomplish greater level of public health, he changed routine Orthodox practice regarding fasting and funerals, and even communions and church services. If that was needed, he exempted believers from fasting, so their organisms would be stronger to fight challenges of epidemics. In that way he succeeded to make contemporary achievements of medicine known to Serbs, such as vaccination against smallpox, so they could behave in accordance with physician's recommendations at time of epidemic, and that in turn decreased mortality rate and enabled progress of the community.

Rezime

Saradnja države i Karlovačke mitropolije na prevazilaženju raznih problema koji su bili aktuelni u srpskom narodu tokom XVIII veka, poznata je tokom tog celog stoleća. Ona je bila vidljiva u procesu podizanja svesti naroda o epidemijama, dok je u vreme njihovog trajanja crkva nastojala što samoinicijativno, što na podsticaj države, da podrži mere borbe protiv epidemije. Iako je u tom procesu bilo često ozbiljnih problema, mitropolit Stefan Stratimirović (1790–1836) nije propuštao priliku da podrži sve državne napore da se poboljša zdravstveno stanje i svest kod njegovih vernika, a povremeno je u tom cilju, tokom širenja bolesti, odustajao od prakse crkve kojoj je bio na čelu. Propagirao je vakcinisanje dece protiv boginja, aktivno se uključio u opremanje privremenih bolnica tokom rata, kao i u sprečavanje širenja kolere koja je po smrtnosti zamenila epidemije kuge. U radu se ukazuje na značaj mitropolita Stratimirovića u zdravstvenoj edukaciji Srba.

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