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“Our Faith Is Good, but Strict”: The Transformation of the Apostolic Christian Church-Nazarene in North America

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Abstract

The number of religious minorities from Central and Eastern Europe prone to migration to the English-speaking world increased considerably during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among them were the Evangelical Baptists, or *Neutäufer*, founded by a former Reformed minister, Samuel Fröhlich, around 1830 in Switzerland. Reviving some of the old Mennonite principles, this newly emerging religious community was emphasizing nonresistance, a refusal of taking oaths, the rejection of infant baptism, and separation from the world. Their expansion to Southeastern Europe in the late nineteenth century attracted new members from various ethnic groups. Because of state oppression and religious persecution, the Nazarenes from Yugoslavia started to immigrate to North America. There, they joined the Apostolic Christian Church, which was the official name of the Nazarene community in the United States and Canada. The material collected for this article is the result of empirical research conducted in Serbia and the United States on the history of the Nazarene migration to North America after the Second World War. The geographical focus of my research is the area of Akron and Mansfield, Ohio, which received the most Nazarene immigrants from Yugoslavia. Based on qualitative interviews with community members and archival research (Virginia Historical Society Archives), this paper addresses several questions: what the migration waves of the Nazarenes were, how the Nazarenes integrated into the new society, and how this religious community transformed in the English-speaking world.

Keywords

Nazarenes; Apostolic Christian Church; Yugoslavia; United States; Migration; Cultural identity

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Introduction

This article addresses the Nazarene community in Eastern Europe and their migration to North America after the Second World War. In the existing Nazarene literature, the subject of community changes in diaspora has yet to be addressed. Applying Hagan and Ebaugh's (2003, 1145-62) framework of six migration stages to the Serbian Nazarene migration to North America, this article analyzes how migration experiences affected new community identity as evident in oral history. Hagan and Ebaugh's sixth stage focuses on post-migratory experiences that are significantly different to life in the old homeland. Impacts leading to post-migratory experiences include trauma in the move, migration routes, encounters with religious communities in the new setting, and interaction with previous generations of migrants. The first part of this article gives a short overview on the history of the Nazarenes and their position as a religious minority in Yugoslavia. The second part presents research results, focusing on the relationship between religion and migration. The aim is to shortly summarize their reasons for migration and address the cultural differences in the new communities they have joined across the Atlantic.

A Short History of the Nazarenes

Few resources are available about the history of the Nazarenes. The most influential work on the Nazarenes to the First World War is the study of historian Bojan Aleksov (2006; 2010). Herman Ruegger published a brief *Apostolic Christian Church History* in 1947 with an accent on their European roots. Perry Klopfenstein's (2008) *Marching to Zion* treats extensively the chronology and historical details of the founding and establishment of the Apostolic Christian Church of America from 1847 until 2007. There are several more important sources, like the unpublished thesis manuscript of Joseph Pfeiffer, entitled *Between Remnant and Renewal: a Historical and Comparative Study of the Apostolic Christian Church among Neo-Anabaptist Renewal Movements in Europe and Americas* (2010), Branko Bjelajac's paper *Persecution of the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia* (2012) and Darrel Sutter's study *The Anabaptist Apostolic Christian Church of America* (1988).

Origins and Development

The Apostolics, from which Nazarenes descend, originated more from Reformed Church members than Anabaptists, although doctrinally it has remained Anabaptist (Gratz 1987). The new religious group, known locally as *Neutäufer* or *Frohlichianer*, began around 1830 in Leutwil (Canton Aargau, Switzerland). The founder of this newly emerging religious group was Samuel Heinrich Fröhlich (1803-1857), a former Calvinist minister from Brugg (Canton Aargau), who was deeply influenced by the Anabaptists. Fröhlich embraced the following Anabaptist teachings: *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone is the sole rule of faith and practical living—separation of church and state, believers' baptism, adult baptism (as opposed to infant baptism), nonviolence, and refusal to take oaths. Similar to Anabaptists, Fröhlich emphasized a need for a

thorough inner conversion experience and insisted on the renunciation of the excesses of the world in terms of personal lifestyle, adornment, and entertainment (Aleksov 2006). Communities practiced strict discipline and rules and all members were equal regardless of their ethnic background, social status, or education. They were considered “brothers and sisters in faith.”

After establishing congregations in different cantons in Switzerland, Fröhlich’s followers spread across those Central European lands under the Habsburg Monarchy. Converts came mostly from the Protestants but also the Orthodox. These converts, called Nazarenes, were mostly peasants from various ethnic groups living in Central Europe. Nazarenes encountered severe problems after the revolution of 1848-49 and the introduction of the absolutist regime. Considered socially subversive, the Nazarenes were persecuted and imprisoned, as Aleksov (2006) describes:

The initial ban and repression of the sect itself was intensified as a result of its members refusing to carry weapons, especially during the Italian war of 1859 and the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, when several executions of Nazarenes from Bácska were recorded and prison sentences of ten to fifteen years were meted out to those escaping the death penalty. (p. 61)

In addition to a strong morality and work ethic, the Nazarene communities held communitarian principles, resulting in high solidarity, which was very important in rural and poor areas of south Hungary and later in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This was one of the keys of their success. Anti-clericalism and a rigid abstention from politics also characterized the Nazarene community, which they inherited as a trait from the Anabaptist-Mennonite’s concern with paradise in heaven and not on earth, according to Jesus’s words, “My Kingdom does not belong to this world” (John 18:36) (Brock.1980).

The turn of the nineteenth century saw the peak of Nazarene expansion in Hungary. It also witnessed the beginning of overseas migration. The Nazarene migration was arguably due to their marginalised status and their doctrine of pacifism, which was the cause of severe persecution (Bjelajac 2012, 79–91).

A Religious Minority in Communist Yugoslavia

Following the end of the First World War and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was formed in 1918 and it existed until 1941. In the newly founded state, the position of the Nazarenes deteriorated. A new Ministry of Religion was established in 1918, and until 1921, all religious communities previously recognized in Austria-Hungary had the same status. Eventually, a new Constitution was proclaimed and legal status granted alone to the Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic and Greek Catholic churches, Lutheran and Reformed churches, the Islamic Religious Community, and the Moses Faith Community (Jewish). The Nazarenes and all of the other smaller Protestant communities were not recognized by the state (Bjelajac 2012, 80). Furthermore, the new 1931 constitution of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia proclaimed that all men up to the age of 50 were to be called into the army in order to

swear allegiance to the king. Nazarenes tried to gain exemptions and were even willing to serve double time in the army as non-combatants (e.g. sanitary service). However, the state authorities did not accept any kind of exclusion from military duties.

The persecution of religious minorities during communism—experienced in many Central and Eastern European societies after World War II—was also present in Yugoslavia. After the war, the Nazarenes came to the attention of state authorities because of certain doctrinal and communal principles, such as their refusal to vote and carry arms, resistance to collectivization and the distribution of land previously owned by Germans, rejection of newly-formed mass political organizations, and disinclination to hand over alleged agricultural surpluses (Aleksov 1999, 26).

The 1946 Yugoslav Constitution proclaimed two main principles: freedom of conscience and religion, and the separation of church and state. Both the Constitution and the Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities (1953, 1978) were more liberal than in other communist countries such as Romania or Russia. However, practice differed from these principles. While religious communities appeared to be tolerated, in reality, religion in the public sphere was forbidden. Despite Constitutional acknowledgement of the freedom of conscience and religion and the equality of religions and denominations, in practice, the state and the party controlled and repressed religion. As Aleksov (1999) stresses, “minority religious communities could be seen as a test case for an analysis of the politics of the Yugoslav state, which was usually perceived as the most tolerant among the Communist countries.” This is especially visible in relations towards Nazarenes and Seventh Day Adventists, which maintained transnational networks and missionary work. Perceived as potential allies of a foreign intervention, the Nazarenes were seen as a threat and were strictly controlled by the state authorities. Members of religious minorities were considered anti-communist—disloyal citizens—and their existence was seen as illegitimate. According to Aleksov: “Ethnic background is a matter of minor if any importance to the Nazarenes who, although originally Magyars, Serbs, Germans, Romanians, Slovaks and others, united in faith and actively sought out a solution to the troublesome nationality question, which had historically rent the region” (Aleksov 1999).

Due to the Nazarene’s unfavorable position in Eastern Europe, their emigration continued throughout the twentieth century, with the highest number leaving between 1945 and 1980.

Data Collection Procedure

My research on the Nazarene community in Serbia started in 2008, with a special focus on Romanian Nazarenes as double minorities. It continued in 2015 with primarily ethnographic research in Ohio, involving semi-structured qualitative interviews with church leaders and members, participant observation, and a review of archival documents (Virginia Historical Society).¹ My informants were members of several Apostolic Christian Church Nazarene churches: Brunswick Hills, Cleveland Romanian, West Akron, Mansfield, Norton, and Ontario

Christian Fellowship. Most of my informants came to the United States during the communist period in Yugoslavia, especially between 1950 and 1975; nevertheless, several families came earlier, so some of my research subjects belong to the second or third generation of immigrant families. I conducted interviews in the Serbian, English, and Romanian languages. The interview narratives were mostly focusing on the memory of past persecution in Eastern Europe and cultural differences after migration experience to North America.

Within the collected corpus of the 25 interviews, I analyzed the migration narratives using the oral history approach. Collected interviews indicate how even for the second and third generation of migrants, the central migration narrative was associated with *memories of the old world*—persecution in Yugoslavia and transnational community ties.

Religion and Migration

“Religion on the Move”

The role of religion in triggering migration is gaining more attention, especially in the past decades (Anderson 2016). However, religiously motivated migration is not a recent phenomenon, since religion has motivated migrants for centuries. The question is, then, how does religion trigger migration? According to sociologist Suna Gülfer Ihlamur (2009),

people could decide to emigrate due to their religious affiliations; escaping religious persecution could be the main motive of the migration journey. Religious beliefs that lead to discrimination or persecution of migrants in their homelands might provide migrants with access to resources and important channels to incorporate themselves into the host country setting. (p. 42).

Within the scholarly literature on different religious communities, the Nazarenes have until recently remained largely invisible, even though Nazarenes have been inclined to migration. In order to examine how immigrants use religion during the migration process, Hagan and Ebaugh (2003, 1145-62) identified six stages. Similarly, I have identified the following stages in the Nazarene emigration through my interview work: (1) persecution; (2) escape; (3) journey; (4) arrival; (5) joining churches in North America; and (6) the role of the congregation in immigrant settlement.

The first stage is a time of hardship (e.g. prison and persecution) in the homeland. In my interviews, the Nazarenes would first mention their reasons for migration, which, before 1965, was mostly illegal (Djurić Milovanović, 2017). By condemning them to serve their sentences in the worst prisons, the communist government was trying to influence the other Nazarene members to accept military service and voting. The regime wanted to frighten them with severe and repeated sentencing for conscientious objection (Radić, 2002, 429). As one Nazarene testified:

I was in prison from 1954 to 1957. I was convicted in Niš and served in Kruševac and Belgrade. We were building a police station near the Danube train station. *You refused to carry arms?* Yes, arms and

oaths. I was with one German brother. *Did they try to convince you to accept arms in court?* Yes, they said, 'take the gun and you go home immediately.' But Nazarenes rarely changed their mind. *How were the conditions in the prison?* In Niš it was good; in Kruševac, we worked on the construction site, so it was better. One of my bothers was sentenced to two five-year sentences and the other even three times. They were both in Goli Otok prison. (MV, male, Mansfield, Ohio)

After being released from prison, Nazarene men feared new imprisonments. The only option they had was to escape from Yugoslavia, since they knew they would be called to serve in the army again. The second stage of the Nazarene migration experience is escape. Many Nazarenes organized border crossings in groups, sometimes with non-Nazarene guides as assistants. Cases of guides reporting escape plans to the local authorities occurred, as the following testimony reveals:

Once again, I got the call [to join the army]: I did not want to go and we were looking for someone who could help us to leave. I was fooled, together with 16 other Nazarenes. We paid this guide and he betrayed us. When we arrived, the police were waiting for us at the train station. I was in prison again for four months. (MV, male, Mansfield, Ohio)

Ongoing pressures from state authorities shaped the Nazarene identity into a closed religious minority group. Furthermore, the Nazarenes became (in)visible migrants. Since there are almost no available records on Nazarene illegal emigration, it is still an open question as to whether the communist government let the Nazarenes flee or whether they were successful in escaping without being caught.²

In the third stage, after crossing the border into Italy or Austria, the Nazarenes sought refugee camps organized especially for those applying for further immigration to the United States, Canada, or Australia. The Swiss Nazarene organization *Hilfe* helped to resettle many Nazarene refugees in Austria immediately after World War II (Pffeifer 2010, 159). Most of my informants were settled in refugee camps in Italy (Risiera di Sam Sabba, Cime Centre Latina, and Capua Casserta) or Austria (Traiskirchen and Asten). Providing documents that proved they had been imprisoned in Yugoslavia, they would be placed on a waiting list. Some waited for several months before their application for entry into the desired country was approved. In these camps, the Nazarenes organized Sunday services and gathered to sing hymns.

The fourth stage is the journey. After they received invitation letters from their sponsors, Nazarenes started their journey, mostly settling in Ohio, California, and Ontario. Industry attracted the immigrants to urban areas, such as Cleveland, Mansfield, and Akron in Ohio.

In the fifth stage, the Nazarenes joined established immigrant communities and started a new congregational life. Their first impressions of the new churches and communities were generally positive since they were joining institutions similar to those they had left behind in Yugoslavia:

When you came to Akron, was it similar to your church in Yugoslavia? The preaching was the same, but some customs weren't; they would dress differently, that's all. There were a lot of people, 115 of them in a weekly children's choir. I have 12 kids and we loved it right away. (BŽ, male, Akron)

A group of people welcomed us, all from the church. They all fled from Yugoslavia before we did. They were our people. I felt sorry I abandoned my country, but there was such crises that we could not live there anymore. (KK, female, Akron)

We have found a better setting here than that which we left behind. From the first day when we were welcomed and [I saw that] it was my people, I had a nice time here. In the church, it was the same. You see, when we were there, no one was looking at nationality. There were Serbs, Croats, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, seven nations! We all sang in one voice during the service on Sunday. (SK, male, Akron)

The sixth stage is the role of the congregation in immigrant settlement. Going abroad, the Nazarenes remained committed to the religious communities to which they belonged, so went to areas where Nazarene churches already existed. Member mobility was especially facilitated by the multiethnic character of Nazarenes, which enabled migrants to join a more extensive network of people living abroad. This was not only important for integration into the new society (finding jobs, housing, etc.), it was also an expression of unity.

The displacement of the Nazarenes from Yugoslavia to North America had a significant effect on the development of the American Nazarene churches and their old/new religious practices. Bringing old traditions and customs from their homelands, the Nazarenes were confronted with many challenges in the new communities they joined, such as some rituals and dress codes. For instance, in America, many grew moustaches, which had traditionally been rejected by the Apostolic Christian Church of America as a symbol of pride and militarism. The influence of Eastern European customs persisted for many years. Closed weddings and baptisms (i.e., not open to non-members) represented the legacy of persecution in Yugoslavia, where religious rituals were held in secret. This practice changed over the years, and some of the ethnic Nazarene congregations now welcome non-members to attend rites of passage.

“Singing in your own language”: Multilingualism in the Apostolic Christian Churches in North America

In his study, *Religion as a Site of Contact*, Bernard Spolsky (2008) argues that “religion is an important contributing factor in language maintenance and loss” (p. 89).³ The use of the mother tongue is very important in both ethnically heterogeneous and homogeneous communities, because it is insisted upon in the liturgy, prayer and hymn chanting. The ethnic structures of the Nazarene communities in Yugoslavia led to the creation of ethnically mixed communities in the Nazarene diaspora. From the very beginning, the use of the vernacular language empowered the early Nazarene community and enabled recruitment of new members. Devotion, piety, and Nazarene hymn singing attracted Orthodox Christians, Serbs, and Romanians.

In the Nazarene communities, hymn singing is one of the most important parts of the religious practice. The origin of Nazarene hymn singing is in German Lutheran hymn singing. Froehlich's followers in Switzerland used various booklets and compilations of Pietistic hymns (such as the *Christian Harmonica*) until 1852, when Froehlich composed the *New Zion's Harp* in German. In the ensuing growth period, several translations of *New Zion's Harp* appeared. The famous Serbian poet Jovan Jovanović Zmaj together with Đorđe Rajković translated the *New Zion's Harp* from German to Serbian; this translation appeared in 1878.⁴ Aleksov (2006a) stresses that "these were the first religious hymns in vernacular since the Orthodox Church in its services used the ninth century translation of hymns, incomprehensible over centuries" (p. 26). This first Serbian version of the *Zion's Harp* included only 800 copies. Ten years later another 2,000 were added while the third edition reached 8,600 copies.

Since communities were usually ethnically mixed, it was important that everybody understands the Word of God in his or her mother tongue. The acquisition of a particular type of religious language concerns the use of theological lexis. A key role in understanding the new religious experience, which begins with the very act of conversion, is played by narrativisation. In her study of Pentecostal Roma communities in southern Spain, anthropologist Manuela Cantón Delgado (2010) defines *narratives of coherence*, which "redirect the sense of belonging based on new connections, reformulating the spaces for recognition, weaving new networks of solidarity, and contributing to managing new local and regional power groups among gypsies throughout Spain" (p. 256). Such narratives nurture the sense of solidarity among community members, especially if the community is ethnically mixed. In this way, it contributes to constructing a new collective identity based on religion.

Singing was an important part of community gatherings. Having a hymn book *Zion's Harp* in the mother tongue was even more important for those Nazarenes who left their communities behind. Alongside Bibles, these hymn books were the only "materialized" symbols of their religion. They would bring them to the church and have their names stamped on the covers.

Some communities would use piano and organ during singing hours, which represented a new practice in North America.

There were several languages; in Windsor, we had four languages. In Barberton, we had service in Serbian and English. Even in 1960. People would go to the church where they could hear the service in their language. In Akron, there was one church, but afterwards, it was divided into four: West, South, North, and East. We went to all of these churches for various events and baptisms. *Did you use the Zion's Harp?* Yes, but mostly in English. (MG, female, Norton, Ohio)

The preservation of their first language and the slow adoption of English was a sign of the existence of ethnic borders within this multi-ethnic religious community. At the same time, it was a symbol of resistance to rapid assimilation.

Towards Community Transformation

The Nazarenes in their homeland were quite conservative, closed, and isolated. New members came mostly from the Nazarene families. This community⁵ identity persisted for years during the communist period and led to the disappearance of many communities due to generational shifts. The youth sometimes saw the conservative practices as unattractive.

Severe prison sentences and years of persecution during the communist period had a catalytic effect on Nazarene decisions to leave the country. Already existing communities with the same religious background in North America and later Australia encouraged a lot of Nazarenes from Yugoslavia to escape. In the collected interviews during my research in Ohio, my informants were often describing their first impressions after visiting their co-religionist churches. One of them said:

Here people from the church were more progressed, something that we in Yugoslavia couldn't have. While I was living in Yugoslavia, the Nazarenes were true believers. In U.S., life standard was different, better conditions. However, I still think that, traditional way of believing, we should keep it as hard as we can no matter of circumstances around. We are, our religion is with God, not with the government of Yugoslavia or the United States. *Was it easy for you to adjust to this new setting?* Oh, definitely. My inner peace came back. This is something you could never explain to someone who is not a believer (ŽI, male, Akron, Ohio).

Comparison and the perception of difference are evident in the narratives of first generation informants. Some remain close to the tradition they used to practice in their homeland:

Did you visit other churches [in Yugoslavia]? No. Rarely. Even in my church I couldn't find the profile of believers that I knew as a child in Yugoslavia. I expected when I join the community here, everything will be perfect. I had four children with my wife and no television. In the beginning, all Nazarenes were like that, but eventually people changed and now almost everybody has television. Our full-time job is to be believers (ŽI, male, Akron, Ohio).

Although the ACCNs still seem quite conservative compared to the rest of American society, modernization has come, slowly but surely. The new immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s brought conservative customs with them, but with time, American communities transformed some of those practices. For example, the practice of taking pictures is almost totally avoided in the Nazarene communities in Southeastern Europe. For migrants, this avoidance softens when they settle in America. As another example, the use of piano and organ accompaniment to singing was a practice not found in Yugoslavian churches.

North American Nazarene churches have specific programs to acclimate immigrants to the new context. Church activities include English classes and youth camps, where younger generations meet and spend time together in choirs and other activities. As one informant related:

They were [a] whole different generation. *So, your parents, every Sunday you were with them in the church?* Oh, yes. Well, we had a youth group. *Or youth camps?* Yes, there were camps; I was probably 10 years old. I went only once and later when I was teenager. (MG, female, Norton, Ohio)

These post-migratory experiences not only brought changes to migrants, but also diversity among the churches, including the development of several Nazarene branches in North America. The lack of new members, ethnic divisions along language-lines, and religious practices stricter than most neighboring religions created tensions with the second generation. In the 1970s, two divisions occurred in historic ACCN churches that were also centers of progressivism. In Mansfield, OH, a group of progressives left in 1969 to form a new congregation in Ontario, OH. This congregation maintained affiliation with the ACCN and became one of the flagship churches of what has come to be known as the “Western Conference.” The Western Conference has adopted contemporary praise and worship music, modern Bible translations, and modern fashions in dress, although modesty in principle would be encouraged. The requirement for a woman’s prayer veiling has been removed (Pfeiffer 2010, 177).

Lake Side Christian Fellowship, also in Ohio, is similar to the Ontario church.

Younger generations reexamine old traditions. This is where the differences appear as well as divisions. Some churches kept more traditional principle. They submit themselves to the leadership. So, on the one hand, you have tradition that persisted, and on the other hand, you have new churches which became more liberal (ŽI, male, Brunswick Hills, Ohio).

Ethnic diversity and various waves of immigration across the 20th century transformed the Nazarene churches in North America into what they are today. But unlike other Anabaptist groups, the Nazarene migration did not rupture ties with their homeland. Transnational religious ties were preserved through letters, travel, and missionary journeys. After moving abroad, many believers sent assistance back to the communities in their home countries—donating money to build prayer houses, buy church buildings, acquire religious literature and Bibles, and provide funds for families with men in Yugoslav prisons.⁶

Conclusion

Nazarene migration history has remained invisible within migration research. This present article has brought the Nazarene case to scholars’ attention. It has especially focused on how Nazarene migration from Yugoslavia / Serbia has resulted in the transformation of North American congregations. The findings here provide a fresh contribution to research about religious renewal and shifts in community identity through migration. This research has also shown how the Nazarene members have a strong collective memory of their European homeland and persecution. Preserving some elements of the “old traditions” but evidently transforming some of their religious practices and teachings over years, the Nazarenes faced new challenges in their new homeland. The relationship between migration and transformation of religious

communities indicates how influences across the six stages of migration led to a new community identity. Constant influx of migrants from Yugoslavia brought changes and mutual influences, the mixing of old and new traditions. The first generation of Nazarene migrants are still preserving their common religious practices, but no longer as a closed and conservative religious minority in Yugoslavia. Rather, they now represent a range of conservative, moderate, and liberal theologies and practices with respect to Fröhlich's original teachings.

Endnotes

¹ Apostolic Christian Church of America Foundation Records is deposited in the Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Department of Manuscripts and Archives, where I have conducted my research in May 2015.

² In the Commission for Religious Affairs reports from 1961-1963 there are some information on the attempts of the Nazarene illegal emigration from Yugoslavia (Archives of Serbia)

³ For more on religious language, see Keane (1997).

⁴ The Serbian Church was scandalized and launched a campaign against Zmaj, blaming him for covetousness and sacrilege committed out of sheer material interest.

⁵ Compared to other neo-Protestant communities that existed in Yugoslavia.

⁶ Prison fund VHS, Mss3 Ap466 a FA2 Manuscripts.

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