

12-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Simić, Radivoje (2020) "The Serbian Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: An Overview," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 10 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss10/5>

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# **THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW**

**By Radivoje Simić**

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## **Introduction**

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is one of the autocephalous Orthodox churches with a status of Patriarchate. In the canonical order established by church tradition, the SOC is ranked sixth, trailing the Russian Orthodox Church in fifth place. Its head office is in the capital of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade. In a jurisdictional sense, it covers both the territory of the state of Serbia as well as the countries of the so-called Western Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Given that the church is not a nationally defined body, it is not bound solely to one specific ethnic group. Rather, its structure is made up of all Orthodox Christians in those areas where a certain church exercises its territorial jurisdiction, regardless of the national affiliation of believers. Although most believers of SOC declare themselves Serbs, it is not only the church of the Serbian Orthodox people, but the church of all Orthodox Christians who fall under its canonical authority. Since becoming autochthonous in 1219 A.D., the SOC has been considered the mother church of all Orthodox Christians, in the aforementioned territories, uniting Orthodox Christians across different state borders, despite their different nationalities. In medieval literature, many priests of the SOC were Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians. In more recent history, Russians are included in this ethnically diverse priesthood, especially after the October Revolution. People should not be confused by its name, since the SOC does not represent the national identity of the church, but solely expresses its local character. Other Orthodox churches similarly demonstrate local culture, but not necessarily national affiliation.

## The Beginnings of the SOC Ecumenical Activity

The history of SOC has been turbulent. Its location within the Balkans has suffered political turmoil and wars since the time of the Middle Ages. The church was not immune to the destruction caused by these events. Upheavals, regime changes, wars, rebellions, and other problems have continually threatened the livelihood of the SOC. In the 18th century, following years of migrations caused by the persecution of the Orthodox population, the SOC was divided into five distinct entities. They were located in territories of two very powerful empires of the time, namely the Turkish and the Austrian-Hungarian Empires. An inability to cooperate led these five entities to function independently for decades. Conditions for the reintegration of SOC into a unified church came about as a result of the First World War, when the Balkan people succeeded in removing the yoke of foreign regimes. On December 1, 1918, the kingdom of Yugoslavia was created. The formation of this new state laid the perfect conditions for unification of the five independent Serbian churches—the Belgrade Metropolitan, the Patriarchate of Karlovci, the Church of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bucovina-Dalmatian Metropolis, and the Cetinje Metropolis. The solemn proclamation of the unification was published on September 20, 1920, thereby reestablishing the Patriarchate of Serbia, which has claimed this rank since 1346 A. D.<sup>1</sup>

In many of the Balkan territories that fell under its jurisdiction, the SOC had to deal with other Christian confessions. These were primarily with the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>2</sup> but also with Protestant confessions, since the other areas that the SOC covers were religiously mixed, with the exception to central Serbia; territories covered by the SOC were Vojvodina (North Serbia), Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. As a result, the first glimmers of inter-church contacts were made. One way a shift toward interreligious dialogue can be observed is through looking at the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on Serbian baroque theology of the 19th century; it began in the territory of the Serbian Patriarchate of Sremski Karlovci.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the first hint of the ecumenical efforts of the SOC dates back to the 19th century, when its canonical jurisdiction began to interweave with the jurisdiction of Roman Catholic Church as well as with other churches.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Đoko Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve, III. knjiga: Za vreme Drugog svetskog rata i posle njega* (Keln: Iskra. 1986), 13-17.

<sup>2</sup> See: Franjo Šanjek, *Povijest Hrvata: Knj. II: od kraja 15. st. do kraja Prvog svjetskog rata* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga. 2005), 186-187.

<sup>3</sup> See: Vladimir Vukašinović, *Srpska barokna teologija* (Vrnjci/Trebinje: Interklima. 2010).

Beginning in the 20th century, more people recognized the need for the ecumenical movement, which brought about a new impetus for inter-church dialogue between Orthodox churches in general,<sup>4</sup> and between the SOC and other churches in particular. One of the first people who participated in bilateral dialogues on behalf of SOC was Nikolaj Velimirović, later Bishop of Ohrid. In 1915, together with a group of Serbian theologians who left the country during the First World War, Velimirović participated in dialogue with representatives of the Anglican Church.<sup>5</sup>

During the first world Faith and Order conference held in Lausanne on August 3-18, 1927, SOC sent a representative, Bishop of Bačka Irinej Ćirić.<sup>6</sup> The participants of the conference discussed Scripture, the Symbol of faith, the unity of the church, the sacraments, and the hierarchy of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Because of different theological views, common agreement about these issues was not achieved. In a joint declaration, Orthodox delegates distanced themselves from the conclusions of this conference, but simultaneously stated that they are willing to cooperate in any social activity that provides a charitable benefit.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, although they distanced themselves from the conclusions of this conference, Orthodox delegates made a clear statement that they would continue to participate in ecumenical dialogue: “Declaring that in the future we shall not cease to devote ourselves to labor for the closer approach of the Churches, we add that we shall pray to God without ceasing that by the operation of His Holy Spirit He will take away all existing hindrances and will guide us to that unity for

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<sup>4</sup> See the letter of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, composed in the year 1902 and addressed to all Orthodox churches. This letter is both the first ecumenical act of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the first ecumenical act of the Orthodox Church in general. As such it marked the beginning of the reunion of Christians, simultaneously opening the perspective for Christian unity. See: Athanasios Basdekis, *Orthodoxe Kirche und Ökumenische Bewegung, Dokumente, Erklärungen – Berichte 1900 – 2006* (Frankfurt am Main – Paderborn: Otto Lambeck – Bonifatius. 2006), 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517 - 1948*, (London: S.P.C.K. 1954), 651; It is also important to mention that since that time, both those churches – SOC and the Anglican Church – have fostered this dialogue and friendly relationships that has lasted for more than a century. This can be seen from many meetings of theologians and church representatives, held at a high church level and in an academic setting. See: Bogdan Lubardić, “Srpski bogoslovi u Velikoj Britaniji: Kadestonski teološki koledž 1917-1919 – prilozi i dopune”, in: *Srpska teologija u dvadesetom veku, istraživački problemi i rezultati, knj. 14*, B. Šjaković, ed. (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet. 2013), 52-127.

<sup>6</sup> The delegation of Orthodox Churches at the first Faith and Order conference in Lausanne consisted of several prominent theologians (of the total number 24) of that time: Archbishop of Greek Orthodox Church in America Michael, Metropolitan Thyatiran German, Metropolitan Evlogie, then Professor at Sofia University Nikolai Glubokovski, Metropolitan Orthodox Church in Poland, Dionysius and Bishop of Novi Sad and Bačka Irinej. See: Radovan Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma* (Beograd: Hrišćanski kulturni centar. 2010), 16; Georgij Florovski, *Ekumenski dijalog 2* (Požarevac: Odbor za prosvetu i kulturu Eparhije braničevske. 2016), 42.

<sup>7</sup> See: Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> See: Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma*, 16-17.

which the Founder and Ruler of the Church prayed to His heavenly Father. ‘that they all may be one as we are one.’”<sup>9</sup>

At the second world Faith and Order conference held in Edinburgh in 1937, SOC, unfortunately, did not have a representative among the 13 delegates who represented the Orthodox Church.<sup>10</sup> Patriarch Varnava Rosić died suddenly on July 23, 1937,<sup>11</sup> and because the conference was held from 3 to 18 August, it can be assumed that due to these unexpected circumstances, the Synod of SOC was unable to send a representative to this conference.

The Orthodox Church was not well represented at the third Faith and Order conference in Lund, Sweden, hosted on August 15-29, 1952, as well as at the fourth Faith and Order in Montreal, Canada, hosted on August 12-26, 1963.<sup>12</sup> This lower representation arose because most of the Orthodox churches were under the Communist regime, and during this time church representatives were not allowed to leave their countries. This was also the case with the SOC.

On the other hand, the other wing of the ecumenical movement during this era — the Life and Work movement — hosted its first conference in Stockholm on August 12-26, 1925, under the presidency of the Ulysses Archbishop Nathan Söderblom.<sup>13</sup> Representatives of Orthodox Churches also participated in this gathering, and SOC was represented by Archimandrite Valerijan Pribičević and Irinej Đorđević, both of whom would later become bishops.<sup>14</sup> At the second conference held in Oxford on July 12-26, 1937, SOC did not have any representatives, since the Patriarch unexpectedly died, as was previously mentioned.

When looking at the period between the two world wars, the Orthodox Church participated in all ecumenical gatherings, with the exception of representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).<sup>15</sup> This ecumenical spirit was also true of the SOC, which sent their well-respected bishops and theologians to attend these gatherings.<sup>16</sup> In 1939, Orthodox churches accepted the invitation

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<sup>9</sup> See: Herbert N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3 – 21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran Company. 1927), 386-387.

<sup>10</sup> See: Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> See: Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve, III. knjiga: Za vreme Drugog svetskog rata i posle njega*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> See: Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Due to the change of government in the Soviet Union and the conflict with the Bolsheviks, the Russian Orthodox Church faced great problems between the two world wars. See: Florovski, *Ekumenski dijalog* 2, 42.

<sup>16</sup> See: Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma*, 17.

of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to officially join the ecumenical movement, which it was in the process of establishment.<sup>17</sup>

### **Participation of SOC in World Council of Churches**

Due to the newly established political situation in Eastern European countries at the inaugural meeting of the WCC, held in Amsterdam in 1948, few representatives from Orthodox churches were able to come. Participants, however, included the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Alexandrian Patriarchate, the Church of Greece, and the Church of Cyprus.<sup>18</sup> The SOC joined the WCC in 1965 and continues to send representatives to both the general WCC assemblies, as well as to all preparatory sessions and consultations of Orthodox Churches.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1990s, following widespread discontent among the Orthodox churches, a crisis arose within the WCC when two Orthodox churches left the ecumenical movement. They were not the only ones expressing displeasure with their lot, because the intention to leave the WCC, caused by strong feeling of alienation, was felt among other Orthodox churches too.<sup>20</sup>

At the eve of this development, the Synod of SOC has sought to contribute to solving the problem. Thanks to the initiative of the SOC and the ROC, an Inter-Orthodox meeting was held in Thessaloniki from April 29 to May 2, 1998<sup>21</sup> to discuss future perspectives of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement.

In the final report, the necessity of further participation in the ecumenical dialogue – as well as the view that no church has the right to leave the meetings – are particularly emphasized.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, at the end of the report, Orthodox churches have been called to send their representatives to the upcoming General Assembly in Harare.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Interim Committee had four Orthodox members who have been entrusted to cooperate at the inaugural meeting of the WCC. See: Florovski, *Ekumenski dijalog* 2, 42.

<sup>18</sup> See: *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> See: Bigović, *Pravoslavna teologija ekumenizma*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Disappointment of Orthodox with the work of the WCC culminated when the Georgian and Bulgarian Church left the WCC. In order to resolve the crisis, the WCC formed a special commission to foster cooperation with the Orthodox Churches. The main purpose of this commission was to review all important Orthodox requirements. Between 1999 and 2002, the commission met four times and drafted a document that was accepted by the WCC, thereby opening a new perspective in the dialogue. See: Dagmar Heller and Barbara Rudolph, *Die Orthodoxen im Ökumenischen Rat der Kirchen. Dokumente, Hintergründe, Kommentare und Visionen* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 2004), 11.

<sup>21</sup> See: Basdekis, *Orthodoxe Kirche und Ökumenische Bewegung, Dokumente, Erklärungen – Berichte 1900 – 2006*, 723-727.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

The 21st century implies a new beginning and a new perspective for the ecumenical movement. The SOC continued to follow these paths by actively participating in large ecumenical gatherings. Besides the engagement in the work of WCC, SOC is an active member within the framework of existing dialogues between the Orthodox Church and Catholic Church, and hosted its 9th plenary meeting in Belgrade from September 18-25, 2006.<sup>24</sup> It also contributed to a more recent General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches held from May 31 to June 6, 2018, in Novi Sad.

In light of these activities, the SOC makes a significant contribution to the engagement of Orthodox Churches in ecumenical dialogue. Since the beginning of the 20th century and the first ecumenical gatherings, the SOC has sent representatives, and through the entire 20th century (with the exception of the Second World War), SOC is ecumenically conscious of, and makes a valuable contribution to, Christian unity.

In the family of Orthodox Churches, the SOC is considered an open and ecumenically engaged Church. This can be seen most notably through its commitment to various ecumenical interreligious gatherings, and in its Inter-Orthodox preparatory meetings. It would not be possible to imagine the Orthodox church engaging in the ecumenical movement apart from the participation of the SOC.

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<sup>24</sup> See: Zlatko Matić, *Da istinujemo u ljubavi – Zvanični bogoslovski dijalog Pravoslavne i Rimske Katoličke Crkve* (Požarevac: Odbor za prosvetu i kulturu Eparhije braničevske. 2013), 23.

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