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PRESENT DAY SERBIAN ORTHODOXY
by Sergej Flere

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1. Introduction

In order to understand present-day Serbian Orthodoxy, neither an analysis of its theology nor the use of a sociological approach will be sufficient. We can best grasp the inner nature of Serbian Orthodoxy, the traditional religion of the Balkan Serbs and Montenegrins, if we focus on a historical and political analysis of inter-ethnic relations in the Balkans where the Serbs are the major nationality, as religious differences are often of greater importance than language or political independence in the constituting of ethnic groups and boundaries. This applies in particular to the relationship between Serbs and Croats, a relationship of central importance in this context.

If we say that an analysis of the theology is not to be the main focus of our study, we are not implying that Serbian orthodox thought has no relevant theological thesis. But, this theology does not have as important a place in the lives of the people who traditionally cling to this religion as it does in most other religions. The bond between the official creed of Serbian Orthodoxy and the beliefs and practices of even religiously devout Serbs is a thin one.

During the period of Ottoman domination in the Balkans, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) played a major role in the survival of Serbian ethnicity. It also sanctified many Nemanjic and Brankovic rulers and beatified the Serbian feudal state as such. Though never canonized, Milos Obilic, who killed the Turkish sultan Murad in the fateful battle of Kosovo on St. Vitus day in 1389, was treated as a mythical hero who would return and avenge. This syncretism of Eastern Orthodoxy with popular legends took on a special meaning and significance in the 19th century during the creation of modern Serbian nationhood and statehood, especially with the recovery of Old Serbia (Kosovo).

The 19th century was the creation of a modern national ideology, but with romanticist traits evoking the mythical continuity of the past, present and future. The central point of this ideology was the renewal of the Serbian Empire and avenging its defeat in the battle of Kosovo. It should be noted that the SOC did not take an active part in creating this national ideology but did accept it as it became a dominant mentality and today styles itself as both its creator and present-day standard-bearer.
In the 19th century Serbian state, the SOC had all the traits of a state church. It was autocephalous, but so where the Serbian Orthodox Churches in Montenegro and Austria-Hungary, whereas in Bosnia and Herzegovina Orthodox Serbs came under the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

After World War I, when the first Yugoslav state was founded as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, an united SOC was organized with the seat of the Patriarchate in Belgrade. Though all "recognized and accepted" religions were in principle equal, the SOC was, in fact, in a privileged position and was more closely tied to the state, in a situation where the principle of separation of church and state was not accepted. The royal family was Serbian Orthodox and under the legal statute of 1929, the patriarch was appointed by the King.

The SOC, though theoretically not demanding the subjugation of the state to the church, wielded a large influence in the political life of the state which was denominationally plural and where there were many unresolved questions regarding the relationship between nationalities and between confessions. The state was often called one of "greater Serbian hegemony". The influence of the SOC was particularly evident during the so-called concordat crisis when it succeeded in stopping the regulation of relations between the Yugoslav state and the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of parity of confessions.

The most prominent spokesmen of Serbian Orthodoxy in this century have been Nikolaj Velimirovic, Justin Popovic and today, Amfilohije Radovic and Danilo Krstic. Their work deals with doctrinal trends which have had little in common with the 20th century consciousness and practice of ordinary Serbs.

This contemporary theological school of thought radically repudiates the central concepts created in the civilization that evolved out of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. It rejects empiricism, analyticism, rationalism, religious pluralism and religious tolerance. Perhaps the most emphatic is its rejection of humanism ("hominism"), which puts the Human Being instead of God in the forefront of values.

The Enlightenment's values are said to have produced a de-Christianing decadence which has downgraded Europe to the level of a "White Demony". Jesus therefore, is understood to have taken his blessings away from (western) Europe. (Western) Europe has responded:

'Instead of love we hold a manly hatred against all who disagree with us, that is our program. your love is just a fable. Instead of it we stress: nationalism and internationalism, scientism and culturalism. There is our deliverance, You (Jesus) leave us alone.' Then Jesus left Europe and in it arrived rage, horror, destruction and annihilation. The pre-Christian barbarism returned. (Popovic, 1974: 210-11).
Reading Popovic's work we find ethnocentric statements: the true victors of the 19th century were "Serbian peasants and Russian muzhiks, because great is the one who is humble. The Serbian peasants showed braveness in carrying the cross, martyrdom, and a fisherman's apostolic wisdom." (Popovic, 1974: 207).

The antimodernist ideology did not have a major impact on the traditional flock of the SOC, though a change in this respect may now be under way. In this vein, D. Bogdanovic, an influential Orthodox thinker, though not formally a theologian, stated publicly in 1985: "He who is an atheist today will be an anarchist tomorrow and certainly a nihilist the day after. The relationship between theism and materialism is a battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, the war between Christ's disciples with Antichrist." (Povratak bogova, 1986: 9). This manichean and militant way of speaking in a society with a secular official culture and in a part of the country that is traditionally Roman Catholic indicates a new aggressive attitude on the part of a segment within the SOC in the 80s.

There is a particularly strong current of pre-Christian beliefs in the empirical consciousness of the traditionally oriented Serbs. It is often to be found in those who adhere to other religions as well—almost as a rule—but its presence can be said to be more prominent here. An example is the ancestor cult christianized into the celebration of the family saint (krsna slava). Krsna slava or the family saint day cannot be found in any other branch of Eastern Orthodoxy. Its function is primarily to strengthen family and ethnic ties. Taking on a Christian form in general is the transformed worship of pagan gods "which can do harm" (Kulisić, 1970; Viahovic, 1968, 1968; Cajkanovic, 1973). The belief in magic is also present in many Serbian Orthodox believers, as are the pre-Christianic taboos (Bandic, 1980). All these elements appear in empirical beliefs and practices as a single syncretism.

2. World War II and Socialist Modernization

During World War II The Yugoslav lands were formally dismembered by the Axis occupying forces and the Serbs and their Church were often severely persecuted, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. And yet, the Holy Synod operated in Belgrade. It is, therefore, difficult to give a full and accurate assessment of the position and activity of the SOC during World War II outside a wider historical study, though it can be said to have been basically divided. The Patriarch was imprisoned and deported by the occupying forces. On the other hand, soon after the occupation of 1941 the Holy Synod stated that the Church "would loyally carry out the laws
and ordinances of the German occupying authorities and that it will, through it organs, influence the upholding of peace, order and subjugation." (Unkonvic, 1986: 76-77)

More important was the new orientation of the SOC's traditional flock after the speedy collapse of the first Yugoslav state. The traditional flock found itself in different situations, though they were all unfavorable from the standpoint of national and social liberty: the greater part of Serbia proper was occupied by German Nazi forces, a smaller part by Bulgarian forces, but many Serbs living in other Yugoslav lands found themselves in different positions. Quite a number found themselves in the puppet "Independent State of Croatia", whereas Dalmatia and Montenegro (where Serbs also traditionally live) were occupied by Italian Fascist forces, and Voivodina (where the majority of the population is Serbian) was occupied by Ungarian forces.

The speedy collapse of the first Yugoslav state largely brought persecution to the Serbs. This was not only a political collapse of the state, but also an economic collapse and the collapse of the idea of Yugoslavhood as based on an, in fact, nonexistent ethnic unity and, therefore, without autonomy for the different ethnic groups and cultural regions.

The traditional Serbian-anti-foreign-domination tendency found itself tied to a secular movement led by communists, a movement with democratic and populist traits. The National Liberation movement led by Marshal Tito—the only one of pan-Yugoslav character and offering the prospect of inter-ethnic reconciliation—was overwhelmingly accepted by Serbs, who also comprised a relative majority of its members. Though the movement actively tolerated religious expression, religion had no part in its ideology, thereby opening a completely different perspective to the Serbian people.

This paved the way for a development wherein the religiosity of the Serbs, as a set of doctrinal beliefs and practices, began to disappear unusually swiftly during and after World War II. Moreover, a growing sense of the irrelevance of religion, and of overt irreligion (often in the form of emotional atheism) occurred much more swiftly among the Serbs and Montenegrins than among traditional Catholics and Muslims in Yugoslav lands.

The Serbs accepted a secular ideology within a communist-led indigenous movement, but this development was also conditioned by the fact that the SOC did not have a particular doctrinal strength nor a strong organizational structure. Its earlier strength sprang from its closeness to the people as an instrument of national emancipation and protection, a function now passed into the hands of secular forces. Furthermore, the Serbs' conscience was not troubled by a national oppression syndrome, the way it was among the Irish, the Poles and to some extent the Croats,
which lends a special strength and relevance to religion as a set of symbols and to the ecclesiastic organization as its bearer.

Religiousness, especially in traditional Serbian Orthodox regions of Yugoslavia—with a purely gnoseological definition of religion in mind—was often regarded as a form of cultural backwardness, so that irreligiosity became part of a socially "emancipated" world-view, and as something which was part of conformist behavior.

With the institutional separation of church and state in Yugoslavia, and with restriction of church activities to spiritual matters, the position of religious organizations was probably the least conducive for activities in traditional Orthodox parts of Yugoslavia. Along with the inner nature of Orthodoxy to accept and submit to a nationally independent regime, the effect was that the traditional SOC flock was the least religious in Yugoslav terms.

The demise of religiosity among the Serbian Orthodox was reported as relatively greater in empirical research. In a 1964 survey of the multiconfessional region of Herzegovina Cimic found that among traditional Catholics 66% were religious, among traditional Muslims 56%, whereas only 28% of the traditional Serbian Orthodox were found to be religious. (1966: 111-31).

Our research, conducted also in a multiethnic and multiconfessional region, in Voivodiana in 1975, found that ethnic Hungarians and Croatians were more frequently believers (37-44%) than were Serbs (28%). (Flere and Pantie, 1977: 157-62).

Orthodox rituals, traditionally practiced by the Serbian and Montenegrin flock, never did become a minority phenomenon, in spite of the changes of beliefs and world view, suggesting that Serbian Orthodoxy is mainly a ritualistic religion. The family saint celebration, marriage, baptism and burial with religious ceremony were still practiced by at least half of the traditional Serbian Orthodox flock. One may speculate that these rituals lost their inner spiritual meaning. Both traditional ritual and doctrinal religiosity remained concentrated in rural areas, especially among women and the elderly.

The secularization-atheization process continued (though it was not systematically followed) until the beginning of the 80s, when doctrinal religiosity was already a rare phenomenon among the Serbs. The stemming of this process could have been noted from research on a Yugoslav youth sample carried out in 1985. S. Vrcan found that 59% of the young were religious (this included those who "were not sure"). Among Croatians 55% were religious, among Muslims (in the ethnic sense) 32%, among Slovenians 41%, among Macedonians 31%, among ethnic Albanians 48%, whereas the number was again the lowest with those who traditionally belong to Serbian Orthodoxy: Serbs 18% and Montenegrins 13%. (Vrcan et al., 1986: 157-63).
3. Contemporary Developments: A Revival

A change in the position of the SOC within its surroundings, and in its activities, can be noticed in the 80s. Construction has begun and fund raising campaigns are under way for the erection of the monumental St. Sava's church and the Orthodox School of Divinity in Belgrade. Nothing of this magnitude has been undertaken since World War II. Beside the upswing in the SOC's activities, certain fermentations within it are also visible, corresponding to changes in its surroundings. These changes have been partly prompted by the renewal and offensives on part the two neighboring religions: the Roman Catholic Church and the Islamic Community. In an ethnically and denominationally mixed society, like Yugoslavia, such changes in the stands of one religion are bound to have repercussions on another.

Probably more relevant in the upswing of activity and influence of the SOC are its origins in Yugoslavia's societal and interethnic conditions. Most Yugoslav sociologists agree that Yugoslav society is undergoing a protracted, generalized and systemic crisis. (Vrcan et al., 1983). Such crises are known to be bases for new solutions in social organization and for cultural change. The present crisis, however, is turning people toward historically established patterns, some of which had been considered long gone and done with. The current economic crisis of Yugoslavia involves soaring inflation, high unemployment, stagnating production, a decline in the standard of living, all of which started with the 80s, following a steady 35-year period of multi-faceted growth and modernization. But the cultural crisis has more than just economic aspects to it, and some of them have a special bearing on the Serbs. The malfunctioning of the federal government system with its protracted decision-making process has led to a feeling of dissatisfaction, particularly among Serbs who are the most numerous nationality in Yugoslavia (though they do not constitute an absolute majority). Some of them obviously feel that their position is deteriorating. The most important reason for the development of such a sentiment, and even a feeling of subjugation and persecution, is probably the situation in the Kosovo region. Kosovo holds a special place in the collective Serbian consciousness, in cultural archetypes, as the land of the historical defeat in 1389, which was to be and in fact was avenged in the Balkan Wars (1912-13) and liberated. In the post World War II period, Kosovo has enjoyed an autonomous status within the Republic of Serbia, with direct representation at the federal level. During this period the demographic picture of Kosovo has greatly changed. Whereas the Albanian population witnessed a demographic explosion, the birth rate among the Serbs was much lower. The Serbs also began to move out of Kosovo, because its underdevelopment—with the highest unemployment rate in Yugoslavia—left little
opportunity for economic advancement. A second reason for the Serbian migration out of Kosovo—now sometimes called the 'exodus'—has been the pressure exerted by the Albanian ethnic majority in the Kosovo region (sometimes in the form of physical persecution and coercion), in an effort to get the Serbs to move out. As a result, at present there are few Serbs living in Kosovo with the prospect of this region thus becoming ethnically homogeneous. Among the ethnic Albanians a secessionist movement is present.

These adverse processes have brought about a feeling of new relevance of Orthodoxy to the Serbs. It is mostly a matter not of rechristinization, of a return to church religiosity in the traditional sense, but of an awareness of the relevance of traditional beliefs and ecclesiastic institutions. There is some return to church religiosity as such, with the Church encouraging this process.

In the last few years the biweekly Pravoslavlje, the main SOC newspaper issued by the Patriarchate, has published letters written at the beginning of this century, before the Balkan Wars, by Serbian priests and consular officials in Kosovo (while the region was still under Ottoman rule). The letters, appearing under the title "Crimes and Transgressions in Kosovo", report of crimes, attacks and assaults committed by Albanians against the Serbs, and of the passive stand taken by the Turkish authorities. They appeal to Serbia, but also to Imperial Russia, for protection. Thus, the paper presents a picture of continuing assaults upon the Serbs, implying that regular means are not enough to solve the problems. the subject is seen as the "unprecedented tragedy of a nation". (Pravoslavlje, no 455, 1986: 7).

Numerous petitions and letters to religious and secular authorities have also been published, one asking the Patriarch what he will be able to say of his labors for the Serbian people when he appears in front of St. Sava. All the hopes of the Serbian people are sometimes portrayed as being pinned on the SOC, as the only historically proven protector of the Serbian people. D. Bogdanovic comments on the stand taken by the SOC regarding the Kosovo situation: "It is simply taking care of its flock. What else should it be doing? Should it hypocritically ponder the subtle questions of religious feelings and visions, while the last Serbian shepherd on Mt. Sara is being wiped out?" (Povratak bogova, 1986: 7).

Empirical research in the 80s reports low levels of religiosity in traditional Serbian Orthodox regions and among the traditional Serbian Orthodox people in mixed areas. Pantie and associates found that in 1985 18% of the adults in the metropolitan Belgrade area declared that they believed in God (Pantic, 1985: 57-60), which is more or less the same percentage as 11 years earlier, pointing to a basic stability. This stability would mean a stoppage of the secularization
process, which would be a change in itself. A more detailed look showed an increase among those who doubted and those who were unsure, as well as an increase among uncertain disbelievers. On the other hand, the number of firm disbelievers, atheists, was down from 58% to 38%. (Pantic, 1985: 110). This led Pantic to conclude that the intensity of irreligiosity was weakening, which in itself could mean the beginning of a religious renewal.

In a 1983 study of religiousness in a less urbanized area (the Nis regions) D. Djordjevic found that 24% of the adults declared themselves as believers. (Djordjevic, 1986: 137). In all cases, religiousness was found to be concentrated among the rural population, the elderly and the less educated. In some cases (Pantic, 1985: 133) it was also found to be more concentrated among those who considered themselves poor. Findings were different regarding the frequency of ritual, which was always significantly more common.

But if changes are to be found, they are not mainly in the field of traditional religiosity, but in the growing relevance of Orthodoxy as a tradition and an institution. The SOC is seen by a growing number of its traditional flock not as a remnant of the past, but as a nationally relevant institution, the most lasting and stable institution of the Serbs through history. In the mentioned survey of religiousness in the metropolitan Belgrade area, 21% of the respondents upheld the statement that "the SOC played an important role, but cannot be elevated above other institutions". (Flere, 1985: 37). The first of these statements has become almost the central tenet of the SOC's creed, appearing repeatedly in its publications. It certainly is true that the SOC played such a role in its earlier history, though the leading Serbian historian V. Cubrilovic offers another interpretation, saying that the SOC acted as an instrument of the Serbian people in safeguarding its ethnic survival, under conditions where only ecclesiastic institutions were recognized as legitimate, and that it should not be regarded as an independent factor. (Cubrilovic, 1958: 26). Such a role was not present in this century, when the Serbian people, by and large, turned to secular factors of progress. On the other hand, during World War II, ecclesiastic factors were connected with extermination, "retributions", against people belonging to other confessions. (Dedijer et al., 1974: ch. 45). Therefore, in the Yugoslav context, claims by a confessional community of serving as a national protector, evoke memories of war, strife and genocide.

The SOC's gaining relevance is stimulated by romanticist and sentimentalist statements: "Few are the nations in the world which have a Studenica (monastery) and which can celebrate eight centuries of its existence. . . Great are those peoples who have built for eternity." The well known Serbian writer D. Cosic goes on to say that "the history of the Serbian people is a tragic one." "Therefore, only by understanding one's own national and social essence, can one master
one's own fate." (Pravoslavlje, 1986, no. 455: 4). Thus, one arrives at the ethnic idealization and idea of "ethnic exceptionalism", as with the "sweet-tongued" bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic. According to him, the Serbs are a people chosen by God, a people who never erred against God or against others (only against their own interests) and "were it not for a special Divine protection this people would have perished from the face of the earth a long time ago." (Velimirovic, 1981: 186).

Voices calling for modernization can also be heard within the Church, but they are few (Gavrilovic, 1986) and with no visible impact upon Church life. The questions relevant in this context are: the democratization of Church government, with a role for the laity and a greater role for the lower clergy, as well as the position of women within the Church. A promodernization attitude goes together with a less militant stand toward dominant institutions and values of secular society.

In the last few years, relations between the SOC and the state—the Republic of Serbia—have become fairly good. This refers to the official SOC, not its radical, nationalistic and fundamentalist wing which has also emerged in the 80s and which calls for a more aggressive stance on the part of the official Church.

The agreement on and actual resumption of the construction of the monumental St. Sava Church in Belgrade is a sign of improving relations. The SOC press has given a favorable assessment of the steps taken by the Serbian Republic authorities to protect Serbs in Kosovo, but not of the activities undertaken by the federal authorities. These improved relations with the state correspond with the inner nature of Orthodoxy, which historically is not prepared to play the role of ecclesia militans in an ethnically emancipated state. Whereas we may speak of relatively good relations between the SOC and the Republic of Serbia, this is not the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro.

Such an overall situation is not particularly conducive to the development of ecumenism in Yugoslavia, particularly regarding relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the SOC. There are some on-going contacts between the two Churches' theologians and students of divinity. There are instances of cooperation in the use of sacral facilities, but basically the SOC still has many reservations regarding the Catholic Church, particularly regarding the question of "union" which is interpreted to mean the domination of Catholicism over Orthodoxy. There is also concern within the SOC as to what is seen as de facto recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Holy See. J. Popovic still spoke of the Pope as a "satanic figure". (1974: 19). In order to
promote the cooperation with the Catholic Church, the SOC demands that the former renounce some of its stands as having been wrong from the beginning.

The SOC takes a very adverse stand regarding the activities of relatively numerous Protestant, sect-type communities on Serbian soil labeling them as extraneous. These groups are concentrated and most active in Vojvodina.

These trends in the development of Serbian Orthodoxy in the 80s and the leveling off of declining religiousness in Yugoslavia in general were not anticipated by Yugoslav scholars writing about religion. Theoretically most of them accepted the view taken by Marx's early writings that religion is a form of alienation and false consciousness which would wither away with the development of self-management as a form of human emancipation, where social relations become transparent and the human being regains control over them. Modernization was interpreted as striving in this same direction. This development was usually seen as being basically unilinear.

New developments have called for taking a broader view in order to offer a plausible explanation for the cessation of the secularization-atheization process. The approach taken toward the latter encompasses ideas on the "crisis of modernization" and particularly on the "crisis of Yugoslav society". This approach was most developed by Vrcan (1986) who recognizes epochal-civilization, socialist and Yugoslav components in the origins of the cessation of the secularization process.

4. Conclusion

The SOC has definitely awakened from this postwar lethargy. Its growing relevance to its traditional floc is not something we can say will be gaining momentum in the future, but it is unlikely to revert back to a marginal position and its activities will probably not drop to previous levels. The trend will depend primarily on the ability to overcome the Yugoslav cultural crisis and particularly on the state of inter-ethnic relations within Yugoslavia.

The SOC is unlikely to become part of the legitimative order, as is the case in Bulgaria, within an ethnocentric ideology. If Serbian Orthodoxy is to gain momentum, it will be as an independent traditionalist and ethnically centered force and more as a cultural than as a political or supra-political force.

Important developments to follow will be internal relation within the SOC, where demands for aggiornamento are present and may be articulated as to forms or organization, role of the laity, the lower clergy and women.
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