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THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN SERBIA

By Branko Bjelajac

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In the midst of “no-war” (a euphemism for the situation in Serbia from 1991 to 1995 when war was raging in Croatia and Bosnia), a friend of ten years opened up to me: “I feel quite safe here in Belgrade,” Peter said. We had known each other well for some time as we both attended a small, local evangelical community, and being of similar age, we had many mutual discussion topics and interests.

I was not sure what he meant with that statement, so I asked. Peter answered: “You know, as a Croat I feel okay in Belgrade [capital of Serbia]—people are friendly and I can feel no hate.” Until that moment I had no idea of his ethnic background. I never asked about his nor shared with him my background, as usually it is a nonissue among the evangelicals in Serbia. One may sense another person’s ethnic background by family or personal name, or by a specific accent and the way certain words are pronounced, but among the evangelicals in Serbia, to inquire about such a thing was and is considered to be in bad taste. We all are children of God and by that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Ethnic, racial, linguistic, and other differences exist, but there is something far more important that binds us together—common
faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. As far as I am able to observe, this is normative among the evangelical believers in Serbia.

The former Yugoslav republics are now seven independent countries, and two are already members of the European Union (Slovenia and Croatia), while others are eagerly waiting to join as soon as possible.\(^1\) Despite the evident progress in the developing democracies and the rule of law, it is generally assumed that people are still being assessed along their ethnic lines, and in some instances, shunned because of it. And yet, ethnic distinction in Serbia is not always cut-and-dried, and this reality can lead to difficulties in identity and group acceptance. For example, a sizable group is that of people from an ethnically mixed background. Apparently, toward the end of “old Yugoslavia,” up to 20 percent of marriages were mixed marriages, and subsequently, the children born had dual ethnicity. My friend Peter, a Croat, is married to a lady from a Serbian background, and their children cannot clearly and easily identify themselves along ethnic lines. However, they do share a regional cultural distinctive: they live in Belgrade and speak “ekavica,” which is the way words are pronounced eastward of the Danube and Drina Rivers—versus “ijekavica,” which is spoken west of the Drina River, --or “ikavica,” which is spoken in Dalmatia (the Adriatic seacoast of Croatia and Montenegro).

Another friend, Tomo, a Baptist believer, was born of a Serbian mother and Croat father. Several years ago he decided to emigrate to Western Europe. When he had lived in “his countries,” he had been hurt a number of times, and he shared with me: “In Serbia, they called me ‘Ustaša’ and in Croatia ‘Četnik’”—both referring to Second World War local nationalist Nazi groups notorious for their hatred toward the Other. In other words, because he was ethnically mixed, not only was he not accepted by either group, but also on both counts he was

\(^1\) Current candidate countries for the European Union are Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.
forced into an extreme stereotype representing the “enemy.”

This reality demonstrates the uniqueness of evangelicals in Serbia, as they are generally more tolerant than the general population. A great proportion of the otherwise small number of evangelicals are members of various ethnic minorities—Hungarians, Roma, Croats, Slovaks, Romanians. A number of them are also either from a Serbian background or from a “mixed ethnicity.” Although the ethnic tension in society has eased in the last decade, those who are Protestant or evangelical believers do not usually consider each other according to their ethnicity, and there are more mixed marriages in these churches than in the wider society. However, history has shown that they have had to change regarding this issue. Ninety years ago, in the newly founded Kingdom of Yugoslavia, ethnic background was quite important. So, for example, the Slovak Lutherans decided to have a separate church organization from the Lutherans who were speaking Hungarian, German, or any of the local Slavic languages. In the 1930s, among the Baptists there was a struggle between the German-oriented connections and the American ones, and while no one was questioned because of his ethnicity, people tended to gather together in church services conducted in German, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, or Serbian/Croatian, following their language preferences.

Interestingly, immigrant churches that were founded in Western Europe (Austria, Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, etc.) during Yugoslavia’s existence in the 1960s to 1980s, either by new converts or believers who had immigrated for economic reasons, continue

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2 In this region, more of a distinction is made between Protestants (traditions coming directly from the Reformation) and evangelicals. In northwest Serbia, an area called Vojvodina, the evangelical ethnic groups consist of Hungarians, Slovaks, Serbs, Romanians, Croats. In mainland Serbia, they are usually Serbs and Roma (formerly known as Gypsies), Bulgarians, and Macedonians. Protestants are mainly oriented toward their historical membership—Lutherans are 100 percent Slovaks, and Reformed almost all Hungarians, which is also supported by their service language—Slovak and Hungarian. There are now two or three new Anglican churches with mixed ethnicity, and the one formal Anglican chapel in Belgrade has a mixed ethnicity as it serves mostly the diplomatic missions staff.
to use the old mixed Serb-Croat language and to talk about “our homeland,” “our language,” and “our traditions.” Even refugees and new immigrants after the civil wars in 1990s who were given an opportunity for a new start in the EU countries, tend to be much more tolerant toward the ethnic Others once they become members of local churches. Most of them, although being minorities themselves in another country than that of their origin, tend not to consider their internal differences. They suddenly become fellow countrymen from “our homeland.”

However, this is not so in the Western Balkans. Distinguishing people in terms of “them” and “us” seems to continue even today—twenty years after the wars in Bosnia and Croatia ended.

Despite the positive evangelical response to the ethnic challenges in the region, evangelicals continue to face many other significant challenges in Serbia. As a result of ethnic and religious identity and nationhood being so tightly interwoven, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the government, and the media have long been negative, dismissive, and even hostile to evangelicals. For more than two decades now, the tabloid press—and in some cases the mainstream and state media—were under the influence of the so-called sectologists who were mistreating and misinforming the public about Protestants and evangelicals. Serbian Orthodox Church theologians call the evangelicals “the sect of the sects’ sect,” referring to when the Catholics separated themselves from the “true” Orthodoxy in the eleventh century, and then the Protestants separated themselves from the Catholics in the days of the Reformation, and then the evangelicals came out as splinter groups from the Protestants. Although some of the churches have existed for around 150 years in Serbia, members still need to work hard to get basic

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3 There is a local saying in the former Yugoslavia that “somewhere else you are a foreigner to everyone.” This means that since everyone coming from the Balkans is a foreigner in Western Europe anyway, others from your region of origin do not care about your ethnic background—you are an immigrant. Back in Southeastern Europe, however, people continue to view each other through ethnic eyes.


5 Ibid.
conditions for otherwise constitutional rights: freedom of assembly, freedom of belief, and freedom to be part of whatever religious community people desire. Even the police officers publish textbooks for the police academy in which they debate whether the Baptists should or should not be considered a “church” or just a legal entity with religious associations—which is the formal status of a religious book store or candle store at a graveyard.\(^6\) When asking for their rights, church representatives are often reminded that their numbers are not significant and, as a result, their voice is heard but not acted upon. This author estimates that all evangelicals, including the members of their families (which is usually how mainstream Christian churches count their membership), do not exceed 40–50,000 in a country of just over 7 million, and there are no more than 100,000 Protestants in all the major denominations.

The social influence and the quantity of aid that has been distributed by Protestants and evangelicals, however, far exceed their minority numbers. During the 1990s, for example, only one refugee and aid agency was permitted to enter besieged Sarajevo (by the Bosnian Serb troops)—it was ADRA, the Seventh-day Adventists’ aid agency. All of us from the former Yugoslav countries were sending help via only one organization, a Protestant one. It was not a problem then and people used this opportunity to help their friends, relatives, and other people. But, since they were Protestants, there was no public recognition, no thanks from the media. Even when doing positive things, Protestants and evangelicals are being deliberately shunned. Similar stories can be found regarding the aid distributed by EHO (Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization),\(^7\) the ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency), the Baptist “Tabitha” and also “Love your Neighbor” Organizations. The general population benefited greatly, but had

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\(^7\) EHO was founded by the following churches: Slovak Lutheran Church in Serbia, Christian Reformed Church in Serbia, Evangelical Methodist Church in Serbia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Serbia, and Greek-Catholic Church in Serbia.
no knowledge regarding who provided help when it was needed the most.

Another example is the “Bread of Life” humanitarian aid agency that was founded by Pentecostals and Baptists in Serbia when the wars broke out in 1991. They have distributed so much aid to citizens of Serbia that they are second only to the International Red Cross. Many have benefited from their help: refugees, internally displaced persons, low-income people, ethnic minorities (Roma and others), and—in the days of international sanctions against Serbia—a number of elementary schools, preschool institutions, hospitals, prisons, and even some universities. However, without media objectively reporting on the aid efforts, the work of Protestant and evangelical aid agencies is almost invisible to the general public. Instead, the media always seem ready to put forth another unsubstantiated attack on the minority churches and organizations—to alert the general population to the “sectarian” danger and aid that “comes to convert people.”

Unfortunately, local civic sector organizations (NGOs and watchdog organizations) are mostly silent when religious minorities are under attack. They tend to extend their attention toward war crimes, political persecution, protection of certain sexual orientations, and the like. Publications (printed and lately online) from Keston News Service, Oxford, UK; Forum 18 from Oslo, Norway; and Center 9 from Belgrade are full of reports of incidents that have occurred

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against Protestants, evangelicals, and other minorities in an otherwise relatively peaceful country. Between the years of 2000 and 2005, there were more than a hundred individual incidents and attacks per year, although in more recent years these numbers have dwindled to 50–70: stoning of buildings, hate speech, insulting graffiti, personal threats, death threats, and in some instances even personal attacks. In most of the cases, local police would declare these to be “acts of minors, or some drunken individuals,” almost never considering them persecution proper based on hate speech or acts on religious grounds. Of course, local prosecutors would subsequently not be involved in such “petty crimes and minor incidents” that the police would report. Several years ago, when the Novi Sad Baptist church was stoned repeatedly—up to five times in a month—police would issue a warrant against an unknown perpetrator for the destruction of property or simply just record an incident with no action. No one was ever apprehended given that, in most cases, police would not investigate such incidents. In some instances, the value of destroyed property was below the minimum amount prescribed by law in order to initiate an investigation. In these instances, police would not even consider such an act to be one of vandalism or destruction. Cases like the one, for example, when the home of a Protestant pastor in eastern Serbia was attacked and bricks were thrown into the bedroom windows in the middle of the night, would not make it into a police report.

Although such stories are still a reality, according to the report from Forum 18 in 2009, surveys showed a decline in attacks, and the media were “less hostile” in their portrayal of religious minorities. This is at least partially a result of Serbia’s desire to enter the European Union, and ongoing attacks were attributed to “extreme nationalists who think that the communities are in some sense traitors to the nation.”\(^9\) Despite this progress, however, negative

media portrayals continue. Those who track violations of religious freedom, public hate speech, and incidents in Serbia can confirm that militant attacks on property and people who belong to religious minorities are usually sparked by printed or spoken words of hate and rage published over the local or even national media. It almost appears as if there is a special war being waged against evangelicals and other minorities whenever it becomes opportunistic to direct the public eye onto some other issues than corruption, the bad economy, and inflation—especially during election time. Governments change, but the attitude does not change very much.\textsuperscript{10}

It was not always this way; some form of cooperation between different religious communities existed in the past. For example, during 1911–1914, the Christian Student Movement was active at Belgrade University, and its international leader and founder John R. Mott visited Belgrade several times and was always welcomed by the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Later, in the period of 1914–1941, the YMCA was also very active in having representatives from various denominations at their meetings and seminars, including Orthodox priests and monks. One of the sponsors of their work was Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, a widely acclaimed Serbian church leader who was also instrumental in bringing together help from the Anglican Church to the Serbian Orthodox Church and the state during the First World War.

Today, the interreligious situation is not good. Evangelicals are shunned at every opportunity—especially by clergy in various dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church—and every bit of their social activity (Christmas gifts, Bible distribution, \textit{Jesus} film showings, and material to help social institutions) is publicly scrutinized and criticized in the media. It is

common for decades to pass before any local congregation gets its building or refurbishing license from a local municipality. Individual clerks stall the processes because of their personal hate and desire to do harm, believing that by so treating a religious minority, they are being loyal to their majority church. Worst of all, no institution or organization looks into changing the situation. A few seminars for journalists of local media in several regions were organized by NUNS, the Independent Journalist Association of Serbia, in 2005–2007, on how to inform themselves and then present accurate facts about religious minorities. However, one can trace no intention from either state bodies or ombudsman offices—a government office that investigates abuses committed by public officials—to try to improve the situation.

One of the few positive examples where representatives of the Orthodox Church and evangelicals worked together in recent history was the Serbian Bible Society. For more than 20 years now, its president has been the Serbian Orthodox Bishop Lavrentije, while the vice-president, for a number of years, was the late Dr. Aleksandar Birviš, an acclaimed Baptist preacher, Bible translator, and renowned book author. Today in the Bible society, this position is filled by Dane Vidović, a Baptist pastor and publisher from Belgrade. Another positive example of collaboration was the participation of several prominent Orthodox laymen in the Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom. Unfortunately, the Association stopped its activities in 2010 and was formally dissolved by the founders in 2012.

A prominent Orthodox theologian, Dr. Radovan Bigović, who died in 2012, argued that the majority church (Serbian Orthodox Church) has a responsibility to protect and help minority churches (Protestants and evangelicals). This was a lonely voice in a desert of bad wishes and no desire for mutual closer relations. A recent survey on religious tolerance in the northern

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multiethnic province of Vojvodina showed that people are not tolerant toward the Protestant religious minorities—against those who are “different.” While they allow them to exist (which they consider the meaning of tolerant), people would not desire them for neighbors, sons- or daughters-in-law, or even friends. In my opinion, this comes as a result of a longer period of a distorted media picture and intolerance spread by the majority church.

In spite of all the challenges and missed historical opportunities, I believe there is a great future for the evangelical movement in Serbian society. As Francis Schaeffer shared, “the Bible-believing” Christians will ultimately engage themselves with the current needs of society, government, and culture. In Serbia, this can take the form of helping the needy, organizing even more rehabilitation centers for drug abusers than we have now, serving in the parliaments and governments on all levels, being productive and excellent representatives of the country in science, culture, sports, and religion to the best of their abilities, and so forth. Evangelicals will also be a witness of Christ and point to him as Savior, doing so as salt and light within the culture in which they are embedded.

12 See the following for the survey and more information: Dr. Zorica Kuburić, Verske zajednice u Srbiji i verska distance [Religious Communities in Serbia and Religious Distance] (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2010); N. Popović and Z. Sordjan, Tolerancija kao potreba [Tolerance as a Need] (Beograd: Centar za toleranciju i medjureliješke odnose, 2011).