



UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ  
The scientific journal FACTA UNIVERSITATIS  
Series: **Philosophy and Sociology** Vol.2, N° 6, 1999 pp. 15 - 22  
Editor of series: Gligorije Zaječaranović  
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## THE ROLE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE PROTECTION OF MINORITIES AND 'MINOR' RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE FR YUGOSLAVIA

UDC: 316:642:281.96

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**Abstract.** *In this paper the author stresses the importance of more prominent social and political-symbolical roles that churches and religious communities in the FR of Yugoslavia (FRY) may and, in this view, should assume, especially in the most recent period after the cessation of armed conflicts in the Balkans. Two major ways have been suggested in which this might be initiated: 1) the significance of serious, in depth, inter-religious and interconfessional dialogues; 2) the need for a more active participation of the churches not only on the behalf of their own believers, but also on the behalf of other (e.g. the so-called "minor(ity)" religious communities). In other words, will religious organizations be able to participate in concrete programs and actions whose goals are the protection of human rights, minorities, democracy and religious pluralism? Unfortunately, this is exactly what is missing today on the public agenda of religious communities in most of the former Yugoslav republics, including the FRY. The author contends that the reasons for such passivity and restraint are political, rather than religious, in their nature. Because of the political reasons, the churches are mainly silent today (with respect of the aforementioned issues) or, at best, they are too formal in their proclamations to be taken seriously enough.*

*In the FRY this applies, in particular, to the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), because it is the most influential religious organization in this country. Considering the significant delay in the process of the political and economic development of the FRY during the nineties, one may expect that the process of modernization and democratization of the country will represent a new challenge for this institution. For many decades after the WW II it has sought to find a modus vivendi between the two ideological alternatives, i.e. communism vs. Serbian nationalism. As a rule, its pendulum gravitated towards the second pole of this*

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Received November 25, 1997

*dichotomy. However, gradual changes in the Yugoslav political culture, economy, family, education, information systems, etc., will inevitably be reflected upon the life of both non-believers and believers, and thus on the SOC as a whole. As a majority religious organization in the FRY and a proponent of the highest ethical principles and standards, it has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in the ecumenical movement of this region by going (at least in its ecclesiastical politics) beyond its traditional, ethnic horizon. This, of course, means that genuine, civic patriotism may prove to be a more fruitful alternative than persistent nationalism: protection of universal human rights in a more general, Christian sense – an alternative to protecting just the rights of the Serbian nation .*

The year 1997 has been pronounced in Europe as the year of the fight against racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, including all other forms of ethnic and religious intolerance and hatred. The Council of the European Union adopted (on July 15, 1996) a document entitled "Common Action" whose aim was to contribute to the development of the culture of tolerance, as well as to prevent discrimination, violence, racial hatred based upon differences in skin color, religion, national or ethnic origin. It might be expected that many churches and religious communities in Europe and elsewhere would get together and support such a cooperative endeavor. In contrast to states and governments which, in this respect, are usually conducted by various domestic and international treaties and legal instruments, the churches express an additional care and sensitivity related to ethical and religious principles guiding their doctrines. Their common, ecumenical activity was certainly visible before 1997, so that - in their more permanent pursuance of better conditions for the dialogue and tolerance between religious- and ethnic-communities - the "Common Action" may have only an additional, symbolic significance.

It is legitimate, however, at the very beginning of this essay, to pose the following question: *How* can the churches participate in the protection of the national, religious, and ethnic rights of *other* religious and confessional groups? The *reasons* for such actions they may, of course, find in some universal principles representing the core of their teachings, their "catechisms". The respect for the freedom of religion, authenticity and uniqueness of other religious traditions, including readiness to protect those freedoms as one's own, are perhaps the ultimate tests of tolerance for every religious organization. They are, indeed, the indicators of their true adherence to religious pluralism and coexistence with other communities. In other words, insofar as religious organizations are ready to support the rights and freedoms of their sister-churches and other religious communities, they do have developed awareness about their own rights and freedoms. The opposite is also the case: the low level of awareness regarding one's own rights and freedoms most frequently results in challenging, or ignoring, the rights of others. Now, how to put that principle in practice in actual situations, in concrete programs and actions whose goals are protections of human rights, minorities, democracy and religious pluralism?

It might be claimed that such an engagement was almost unknown in the public activities of religious communities in most of the formerly Yugoslav republics, including the FRY. The reasons for that passivity and restraint were admittedly *political*, and not religious, in their character. Just because of the political reasons the churches were not

heard with regard to the aforementioned questions or, at best, they were too official and formal in their proclamations to be taken seriously enough. The proverbial passivity and certain (self-imposed) ghettoization of the majority of religious organizations could partly be explained by the fact that they were mainly negatively instrumentalized by the socialist state and some nationalist ideologists. Now they have a habit to delay, or be too official and cautious in their proclamations - especially when they are expected to act publicly. This mode of behavior has, therefore, been maintained, at least in the majority churches, even in the postcommunist period, so that the issues of democracy, pluralism, tolerance, protection of ethnic- and religious-minorities are not yet the objects of their serious preoccupations. But, contrary to the disastrous nationalism, "philetism", clericalism and various other forms of exclusiveness, this is exactly the field in which they (besides other public institutions in the country) may, and must, have a much more active and prominent role.

The changes which took place in the postcommunist societies during the nineties had, as a consequence, an altered role of religion and church in the social and political lives of the citizens in Eastern and Central Europe. This, undoubtedly, applies to religious communities in Yugoslavia. Considering the significant delay in the process of the political and economic development of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) during the 90's (which was accompanied by a certain revival of the social role of religion, especially Orthodox Christianity), one may wonder if the expected modernization and democratization of the society will represent a new challenge to religious institutions. This applies, in particular, to the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), because it is the most influential religious organization in the country. For many decades this Church sojourned in a "ghetto", in a kind of "theatre of shadows"<sup>1</sup>, seeking to find a *modus vivendi* between the two ideological alternatives: communism and Serbian nationalism. As a rule, its pendulum gravitated toward the second pole of this dichotomy. Therefore, it is no accident that, by the end of the second millennium, this religious organization found itself in a state of confusion. The transition of the Yugoslav society which has necessarily been accompanied by some liberalization in the relations between the postcommunist state and the church, led - especially in the period of the strong revival of national myths and deification of the past on the account of democracy and modernization - to the new instrumentalization of Orthodoxy, and religion in general, for political purposes. During the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the SOC most oftenly oscilated between the declarative ecumenical, anti-war position<sup>2</sup>, and true support (of at least part of its church hierarchy) of the ethnonationalist political powers in the Republika Srpska. In this context, I would say, the unreserved support of national interests of the Serbs outside the territory of the FRY prevailed to the protection of universal human rights of all nations. With the more permanent cessation of armed conflicts and the beginning of the peace process in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the SOC - as the major, and most

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<sup>1</sup> See the conversation with M. Djordjevic in: J. Tasic, "Nespremno u novi milenijum", *Nasa borba*, February 1-2, 1997, pp. IV-V.

<sup>2</sup> See the list and chronology of the SOC anti-war statements in D. Steele, "Religion as a Fount of Ethnic Hostility or an Agent of Reconciliation?", pp. 164-66 in: *Religion and War*, European Movement in Serbia 1994.

influential, religious organization in the FRY - got a unique opportunity to actively participate in ecumenical processes in the Balkans through initiating and maintaining interreligious dialogue and tolerance in this region of Europe.<sup>3</sup> The spirit of the new, postcommunist era, could perhaps inspire the Church to go beyond the narrow conceptions of ethnicity and tradition so that an authentic civil *patriotism* may prove to be a better alternative than the persistent, ecclesiastical *nationalism* or philetism. Accordingly, the protection of universal human rights in a more general, pan-Christian sense appears in this context as a powerful alternative to protecting just the rights of the Serbian nation.

Today, this is perhaps best illustrated by the events that followed the second round of the local elections in Serbia on November 17, 1996. On January 2, 1997, the bishops of the SOC issued, at their special assembly, the announcement in which they sharply criticized the present regime in Serbia for neglecting the will of its citizens at the local elections and using force against peaceful demonstrators.<sup>4</sup> The vigour of this criticism was almost without precedent in the recent history of Serbia and Yugoslavia. Although the Serbian Orthodox Synod critically addressed a number of questions related only to the status of the SOC in Yugoslavia (e.g. preventing religious education, destroying the seized property and the church birth certificates, abusing the clergy and faithful of the SOC), the emphasis was, nevertheless, laid upon the protest against the violation of political freedoms. Moreover, an open support was given to the citizens and students who participated in the protest. Such a support was, after all, intensified during the following weeks (January religious holidays), when church leaders very often stood at the forefront of the civil and student processions.

The *more prominent role* of the SOC in those events was embraced by at least part of the students and citizen but, at the same time, it prompted the question of *greater responsibility* of this institution before the demands of Yugoslav citizens. I will refer to only one aspect of that responsibility. Symbolically, if not statistically, speaking, approximately one third of the citizens who participated in the protest by the end of the last and beginning of this year were not necessarily either Serbs or Orthodox Christians, and some of them were not even Christians or religious people. In protecting their civil rights, there is an additional obligation to them as members of other ethnic or religious groups: in a purely ethical sense, this requires a higher level of responsibility of the majority church towards *all* the citizens in this country. For example, what are the religious and political consequences of consecrating the interiors of the city council buildings and taking oaths before the Serbian Orthodox priests - regardless of the religious orientation of the elected council members?<sup>5</sup> Is that a true democracy or

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, one must unfortunately note that this summer (June 1997), the Synod of the SOC directed an appeal to other Orthodox churches in the world to consider - after more than three decades of active participation - the withdrawal from the World Council of Churches. We may only hope that such a proposal will be reconsidered and that the SOC will continue to participate in the ecumenical process both on the broader international level and, more specifically, in the Balkans.

<sup>4</sup> See *Naša borba*, 3.1.1997, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> These events happened immediately after the local election crisis was over, with the opposition assuming power in many Serbian cities.

perhaps, the most recent example of instrumentalization of the SOC for political purposes which might, in this case, be labeled as a unique "intrusion" of the Church in state institutions?

With regard to the religious situation in the FRY, there are several important issues and problems that merit attention. Like the SFRY before it, the FRY is a multiconfessional society in which, besides the majority of Orthodox Christians, there are members of other Christian and non-Christian religious traditions and denominations. Besides Orthodox Christians, there are Muslims, Catholics, Greek-Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jews, members of Oriental cults and others who participate in this country's religious life. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, three major religious communities of the former Yugoslavia (the SOC, Islamic Community and Roman Catholic Church) occasionally participated together in condemning the civil war. As a result, several proclamations were issued:

1) At the end of 1992 the representatives of the Muslim community, Roman Catholic Church and Serbian Orthodox Church signed the common "Appeal for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina";

2) During 1991 and 1992, Patriarch Pavle and Cardinal Kuharic gave several joint and separate statements in which they condemned the war and invited all the believers to pray for peace and reconciliation;

3) Furthermore, in May of 1992 the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the SOC went so far as to criticize the government in Belgrade for failing "to sincerely accept national reconciliation, to heal the consequences of the civil and fratricidal war and create preconditions for the spiritual regeneration and healing of the people".<sup>6</sup>

The Mufti of Belgrade, Mr. Hamdija Jusufspahic also repeatedly called for peace and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

In Serbia itself, the SOC has undertaken, in the last few years, several concrete actions against religious intolerance. For example, the Serbian Patriarch Pavle publicly condemned a series of bombing attacks on the Bajrakli Mosque in Belgrade; he also visited the chief rabbi Mr. Cadik Danon and directed a very touching ecumenical epistle to the Jewish Community after the publication of an anti-Semitic text.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when *Pravoslavlje*, an official journal of the SOC, published an article entitled "The Jews are Crucifying Christ Again", the editor in chief of this journal was soon replaced.<sup>8</sup>

After mentioning these positive examples of the SOC engagement on behalf of the minorities and non-Orthodox religious communities, it would be appropriate in this context to point out those cases in which the SOC, as a majority church, could

<sup>6</sup> See D. Steele, *Ibid.*, pp. 164-66.

<sup>7</sup> See D. Draskovic, "Protokoli ekstremnih teologa", *Borba*, 5.1.1995, p.4.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. Mihailovic and S. Mihailovic, "Anti-Semitism in the Nineties", in: *Ethnicity in Postcommunism*, Belgrade 1996, p. 253. However, one could legitimately pose the question as to why this anti-Semitic article was published just in an Orthodox journal, especially if we know that the journal *Logos* of the Orthodox Seminary students in Belgrade published yet another anti-Semitic pamphlet entitled "The Jewish Games behind the World Stage Curtains" (cf. Draskovic, *Ibid.* and M. Mihailovic - S. Mihailovic, *Ibid.*, p. 252).

demonstrate much more willingness and strength in condemning religious intolerance and discrimination. Besides the SOC, Islamic Community and Roman Catholic Church, a number of small religious organizations (the so-called "sects") is active in Yugoslavia. Notwithstanding the relatively correct attitude of the state authorities towards them, they have recently been exposed to public and media disqualification, including discrimination. Among these communities there is a small number of Yugoslav Protestants (i.e. Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals, Evangelists, etc.) - approximately 1% of all the believers according to the 1991 census. These Christians are often associated, in some Orthodox Church circles and the press, with the unpopular Scientologists, Satanic cults or the "Moonies". As a result of that, one may bear witness to a certain dose of ignorance, intolerance, xenophobia or at least, lack of ecumenical sensitivity, expressed by some representatives of the press or the Serbian Church. Some of the Protestant churches in Serbia received, for example, humanitarian aid during the war. This aid came mainly from abroad, and was often regarded in some Orthodox circles with suspicion, as a form of Western interference in "our own" religious and political affairs. It is estimated that the Protestant churches and their humanitarian organizations in the FRY delivered, during the war, more than 100 tons of medicine and about 8,500 tons of the total humanitarian aid.<sup>9</sup> However, these actions caused the negative reactions of some SOC prelates. In their announcements during the last few years, the predominant was the belief that accepting the humanitarian aid means rejection of Orthodoxy. Furthermore, according to this conception, the international sanctions, as well as the activity of "foreign" religious communities and sects in this country, destroy the Serbian nation both spiritually and biologically. It is interesting that such a unique ecclesiastical nationalism, a kind of Orthodox "fundamentalism", is present both among the laypeople and clergymen, even including the Church hierarchy. In this context, a thesis is often mentioned that no one may be a good Serb if he/she is not an Orthodox believer, and that the Serbs who are not Orthodox are not real Serbs ("as they are supposed to be").<sup>10</sup> What mostly irritates the SOC ideologists is the situation in which the traditional mono-confessional scheme: *Serbs (Serbian nation) - Orthodox (SOC)*, under the influence of the present religious "market", transforms slightly in the pluralist direction, along the line: *Serbs - Orthodox - Protestants (various denominations and sects)*.<sup>11</sup> Besides a significant number of atheists and agnostics in the so-called "Orthodox homogeneous regions", there is a constant fear in the majority church circles that, under the more liberal activity of religious organizations in postcommunism, the Serbian nation could be divided in the confessional sense as well.

We may conclude from the above that in Serbia and the FRY it is necessary to create better conditions not only for interethnic relations, but also for interconfessional and inter-religious tolerance. In the domain of legislation, there is a need for introducing appropriate legislature that would address the problems of religious intolerance and

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<sup>9</sup> See a very illustrative survey of this problem in G. Maksimovic, *Hrista razapinju, zar ne?*, Nis, 1995, p.67ff. Cf. also his article "Polozaj protestantskih crkava u SRJ" in the collection: *Religija-crkva-nacija*, YUNIR, Nis, 1996, pp.152-60.

<sup>10</sup> G. Maksimovic, *Hrista razapinju, zar ne?*, p.36.

<sup>11</sup> See a more elaborate analysis of this problem in D. Djordjevic, *O religiji i ateizmu*, Nis, 1990, pp. 228-229.

discrimination. The only normative act which regulates the position of religious institutions in Serbia today is article 18 of the FRY Constitution claiming, in a rather general manner, that all religious communities are separated from the state and free in performing their religious activities.

However, speaking of religious communities themselves (and, in particular, of the place of the SOC in that process) there are indeed several ways in which inter-religious tolerance and protection could be more effectively promoted: 1) through serious, constructive inter-religious and interconfessional dialogues; 2) through the more active support of the churches not only of their own believer but, even more importantly, of *others*, e.g. the members of the so-called 'minor' (or 'minority') religious communities.

During the last several years, besides the meetings of the religious communities' leaders, one should emphasize the activities of the Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (YUNIR) and the international Summer School for Interconfessional Dialogue and Understanding (SIDU), the two organizations which specifically dealt with the problems of inter-religious dialogue and tolerance, war and religion, ethnic and religious relations in the Balkans and the FRY. The Yugoslav public should, however, be more directly informed about the importance of continual, in-depth religious dialogues, as well as about the significance of the more active participation of the churches in protection of *all* the believers, especially in this critical period after the cessation of armed conflicts in the Balkans. Such an engagement of religious communities could be accomplished through various actions: public announcements, condemnations of governmental or non-governmental acts that are intolerable from either a legal or moral standpoint, various rallies, vigils, a presence in the media, etc. One of the best ways to promote broader ecumenical processes in the Balkans would be, for example, to establish an Ecumenical Council of Churches on the national level,<sup>12</sup> an institution which has achieved remarkable results in some neighboring countries such as Hungary. This Council was founded in Hungary in 1943, that is, even before the World Council of Churches, and is composed of the permanent member-churches and other churches and religious institutions in an observer's status. A special significance of this Council in Hungary is in that it embraced a great number of the so-called "minority churches" (including four Orthodox churches) and enabled Hungary to become, in the postcommunist world, one of the leaders in terms of respecting religious rights and freedoms. Needless to say, the SOC would acquire an immense prestige and influence if such a process could be initiated here in the Balkans, in South-East Europe.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I align myself here with the last year's (1996) proposal of dr Dragoljub Djordjevic (see D. Djordjevic, "Prakticno ekumensko, dijalogosko i tolerantno ponasanje u lokalnim zajednicama", in the collection: *Religija-crkva-nacija*, op.cit. pp.34-38.

<sup>13</sup>First of all, one has to admit that this is not unusual considering the thorny historical road that the religious communities in the Balkans (and, for that matter, in all of Europe) have passed through the centuries. Let me mention only one historical example: the pope in Rome and the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople anathemized each other back in the 11th century, and these anathemas were not revoked until 1965 (when, for the first time since the 15th century, they met again face to face).

## ULOGA SRPSKE PRAVOSLAVNE CRKVE U ZAŠTITI MANJINA I "MALIH" RELIGIJSKIH ZAJEDNICA U SR JUGOSLAVIJI

**Milan Vukomanović**

*U ovom radu više pažnje posvećeno je društvenom i političko-simboličkom značaju koji crkve i druge religijske zajednice u SR Jugoslaviji (SRJ) mogu i treba da imaju, naročito u najnovijem periodu, nakon svršetka oružanih sukoba na Balkanu. Tu je posebno ukazano na dva načina na koje bi se to moglo podstaći: 1) putem ozbiljnih, produbljenih međureligijskih, interkonfesionalnih dijaloga; 2) kroz aktivniju podršku ne samo svojim vernicima, nego i pripadnicima drugih, npr. tzv. "malih" ("manjinskih") religijskih zajednica. Drugim rečima, postavlja se pitanje da li će religijske organizacije biti u mogućnosti da učestvuju u konkretnim programima i akcijama čiji su ciljevi zaštita ljudskih prava, manjina, demokratije i religijskog pluralizma. Na žalost, takav angažman danas upravo nedostaje u javnoj delatnosti religijskih zajednica u većini bivših jugoslovenskih republika, pa i SRJ. Autor smatra da su razlozi za tu pasivnost i uzdržanost, pre svega, politički, a ne religijski po svom karakteru. Upravo iz tih političkih razloga crkve se danas uglavnom ne čuju oko spomenutih pitanja, ili, u najboljem slučaju, one su suviše zvanične, formalne u svojim proklamacijama da bi bile ozbiljnije shvaćene.*

*U SRJ to se naročito odnosi na ulogu Srpske pravoslavne crkve (SPC), jer ona je, svakako, najuticajnija religijska organizacija u ovoj zemlji. S obzirom na ozbiljan zastoj u procesu političkog i ekonomskog razvoja u SRJ tokom devedesetih godina, može se očekivati da bi proces modernizacije i demokratizacije zemlje predstavljao i nov izazov za ovu instituciju. Više decenija nakon II svetskog rata Crkva je, naime, nastojala da pronađe nekakav modus vivendi između dve ideološke alternative - komunizma i srpskog nacionalizma. Njeno ideološko klatno je, po pravilu, naginjalo ka tom drugom polu. Međutim, postepene promene u jugoslovenskoj političkoj kulturi, ekonomiji, porodici, obrazovanju, informacionim sistemima i sl., neminovno će se odraziti na život njenih građana (kako vernika, tako i onih što ne veruju), pa stoga i na SPC u celini. Kao najveća religijska organizacija u SRJ i zastupnik visokih etičkih principa i standarda, ona ima priliku da se istakne u ekumenskim procesima u ovom regionu Evrope ukoliko (bar u eklezijastičko-političkom smislu) bude u stanju da iskorači van usko shvaćenih međa vlastitog etniciteta i tradicije. To, naravno, znači da bi se izvorni građanski patriotizam mogao pokazati i kao bolje rešenje od istrajnog nacionalizma, a zaštita univerzalnih ljudskih prava u jednom širem, panhrišćanskom smislu – kao alternativa zaštiti isključivo nacionalnih prava srpskog naroda*