

The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in National Self-Determination and Regional Integration¹

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Located at the very gate of East and West, the Balkans are a crossroad for the convergence of civilizations and the clash of faiths, cultures, and traditions: beginning with the Byzantine and Latin missionaries to the imperialism of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires; from the creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes to the subsequent Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; through its eventual disintegration into successor states. Given these historical dimensions and the geopolitical implications of Southeastern Europe, everything of necessity is and must be comprehended in its very complexity and nothing can bear overt simplification, national self-determination and regional integration notwithstanding.

Yet, these two and often incompatible trends, self-determination and regional integration, are intrinsically tied to the building of an internationally acceptable, modern civil society. Peace and stability can be fostered only through functional and secure social and economic, political and faith-based institutions. Whenever governments and elements of civil society are at odds with each other, as a source of moral authority the Church transcends such narrow constraints by retaining the unique ability to offer cooperation with other communities of faith and non-governmental organizations and, ultimately, extending itself to the international community.

According to the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas

[i]f peace is to be won for all of southeastern Europe, it is particularly important that the Orthodox Churches of the region assume an active and constructive regional role in spiritual renewal, economic reconstruction, and humanitarian responsibility. It is critically important

¹ Originally presented on the panel “Religious Dimensions of Self-Determination and the State: Concepts, Perspectives And Propositions,” in the presence of Prince Hans Adam II of Liechtenstein, at the Inauguration of the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 10 December 2000).

that the Serbian Orthodox Church be given quick and strong affirmation as a key participant in the process of regional reconstruction and that this involvement of the Church of Serbia be understood as an important starting point for the civil and democratic renewal of Yugoslavia.²

Causes and Considerations

Conflict resolution and the delineation of boundaries, movement towards self-determination, and plausible independence must make sense in their local environment and specific regional context. As internal strife and violence are thoroughly incapable of begetting a just and enduring peace, so also international isolationist policies completely fail in promulgating a healthy foundation for the building of a stable and prosperous civil society. What, therefore, are critical factors that will preserve the delicate balance between considerations of ethnic identity and national self-determination, regional cooperation and external affiliation with the international community?

Nikolas K. Gvozdev, Associate Director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University, who attempts to reconcile Orthodox tradition with modern politics, comments that

[t]he process of de-Christianization and secularization that occurred in Orthodox lands during the twentieth century has helped to seriously erode the Orthodox Christian understanding of nationality and its substitution by totalitarian models.³

Addressing the core of this issue, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople states in a *Time* magazine interview:

The greatest problem for the churches in the hitherto communist countries is that they must encompass whole masses of people who had been saturated with the ideology of an atheistic totalitarianism. Our venerable brother Patriarch Pavle of Serbia has recently spoken to this very point, saying if his country and his church have been living a tragedy as a result of the fratricidal war in Yugoslavia, it is because these same people lived for decades without any Christian ideals.⁴

² Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), *Statement on Kosovo and the Balkans* (New York, 23 June 1999), www.goarch.org.

³ Nikolas K. Gvozdev, *Emperors and Elections* (Huntington, NY: Troitsa Books, 2000), 34.

⁴ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, interview in *Time*, 5 May 1997; quoted in Gvozdev, 34.

His Holiness Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church has emphasized that the wars fought during the past decade in the former Yugoslavia have been civil wars and not religious wars. The Patriarch has attributed much of the violence to the fact that fifty years of Communism have attempted to “strip” the soul of the Orthodox Serb, the Croatian Catholic, and the Bosnian or Albanian Muslim. Accordingly, in his words, there is nothing more tragic than a civil war, as it means “Cain turning against Abel,”⁵ i.e., brother against brother. In any other war, the enemy invades, engages in battle, and then withdraws. However, in a civil war, the enemy, formerly a neighbor, a friend, or even a relative, remains.

In like manner, international arbitration promoted the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia by prematurely expediting the recognition of internal administrative boundaries rendered by the past Communist regime as internationally recognized borders. According to the Serbian Orthodox Church,

[t]his primarily applies to the inter-republic boundaries, which were even for the communistic regime only administrative boundaries, but which are now being accepted in Europe as immutable boundaries between countries, even though they cut across the living organism of the Serbian people, dividing their centuries-old homesteads, holy places, graves, monasteries and cultural monuments.⁶

Following suit, the civilized world remains absolutely silent on the massive expulsion of 200,000 Krajina Serbs from today’s Croatia during the 1–4 August 1995 “Operation Storm” and the right to self-determination for its remnant Serbian population. Similarly, will Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina be permitted to remain, by virtue of the Dayton Peace Accords, as a viable entity that would enjoy the benefits of regional integration with other Serbian lands or remain isolated in an artificially divided nation, consisting of a Federation and a Republic, the latter of which is held together as the sum of its parts by a narrow corridor?

With regard to Yugoslavia proper, the 1999 Rambouillet Peace Accords were destined by inception to diplomatic failure as they promulgated the occupation of a sovereign Yugoslav nation, ultimately violating that sovereignty through the ensuing NATO bombing campaign.

⁵ Patriarch Pavle (Stojčević) of the Serbian Orthodox Church, (Belgrade: 1996–97), quoted by the author, who often translated his public remarks.

⁶ Memorandum of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, (Belgrade: Serbian Patriarchate, 14–27 May 1992), 3.

Reporting on Europe after the Kosovo crisis, Bishop Irinej of Bačka begs the issue:

Does the solution lie in the negation of the sovereignty of a European country? What is the difference between the right of intervention in the name of socialism (Brezhnev's doctrine) and the right of intervention in the name of human rights and "western values" (Solana's doctrine)? Which instance is the one which curbs human rights more, and which one does so less?⁷

Coupled with poor economic conditions which resulted from internal corruption, and complicated by oppressive external sanctions, political radicalism was encouraged, providing impetus for localism as a phenomenon, with its attempts toward resolution through inverted, reduced communities, void of a wider regional context.

Therefore, in reconciliation and recovery, the first step is to recognize that Western notions of civil society are culturally specific to certain social and historical conditions. Merely exporting or imposing Western forms of civil society onto the Balkans, without cultural substance and understanding, is meaningless. An essential and perhaps more productive approach to the region would be based on the comprehension of indigenous forms of social and political association, and on consideration of how Western models of civil society might accommodate local environments, rather than replace them. Given this historical and cultural context, the Serbian Orthodox Church offers unique recourse to the issues of civil society and democratic change as a meridian between East and West. Father Alexander Schmemmann observes that the universalism of the Byzantine Commonwealth, inherent in the theocratic consciousness of Orthodox churches, was in part destroyed by Western influences:

Eastern nationalism ... now merged with a new, Western type of nationalism whose spirit had hovered over Europe since the French Revolution. The Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian kings of the Byzantine era had dreamed of a universal Orthodox empire; now the standard

⁷ Bishop Irenaeus (Bulović) of Bačka, "After the Kosovo Crisis: Implications for the Churches," Report to the Inter-Christian Conference in Oslo, 15–16 November 1999; excerpts published in *For the Peace From Above: An Orthodox Resource Book on War, Peace and Nationalism* (Białystok, Poland: SYNDESMOS, The World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, 1999), 165.

had become self-determination of nations, national culture, and disputes over border provinces.⁸

Nationalism and national self-determination must also be taken into account, as they remain gross misconceptions in Western models of civil society. Clearly, the confusion is exacerbated by the inability to discern acceptable patriotism or true nationalism from blind, self-serving nationalism, which was condemned as “phyletism” by the Orthodox Church in 1872.⁹ Additionally, a greater part of the confusion stems from the understanding of nationalism in post-French Revolution and Enlightenment terms of “nation state.” Nationalism properly understood in an Eastern context is defined as being “of the people.” In the Serbian language, this is literally the case, wherein the term *narodno*, i.e., “national,” is translated as “of the people” and not “of the nation state.” Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew declares:

We want to make it clear that the Orthodox perception of “nation” contains no element of aggression and conflict among people. We condemn all nationalistic fanaticism as it can lead to division and hatred among peoples, the alteration or extinction of other people’s culture and religious particularities, and repression of sacred rights and human dignity.¹⁰

Determination and Resolution

Beginning in 1992, the Serbian Orthodox Church was the first to call upon “the Federal President and his government to resign in the name of the people and for the salvation of the people.”¹¹ Consistently calling for the same in 1996, and again in 1999, the Holy Assembly of Bishops called for a government that would be equally acceptable to those at home and abroad. During the course of the recently held federal elections in Yugoslavia, it was the Serbian Orthodox Church that played a critical role in urging its faithful to vote their conscience and to maintain peace at all times, even appealing directly to the police and the military forces. Ultimately, the Church was a piv-

⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 289; quoted in Gvozdev, 36.

⁹ The Holy and Sacred Pan-Orthodox Synod of the Orthodox Churches, Constantinople: Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1872.

¹⁰ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, interview in *Time*, 5 May 1997; quoted in Gvozdev, 34.

¹¹ Memoranda of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade: Serbian Patriarchate, May 1992, December 1996, and May 1999.

otal factor, which helped usher democracy into Yugoslavia yet again by being the first institutionally to recognize the decisive victory of the then Yugoslav President-elect, Dr. Vojislav Koštunica.

Further, in allowing for the complete self-determination of the Serbian nation, the people must be given the ability to choose their own form of government, whether it remain a republic or adopt a constitutional monarchy. The latter maintains a distinct historical precedent in Serbia, which at the turn of the past century, given its strong liberal intellectual tradition, was distinguished in having freely elected its own indigenous monarch in the person of exiled King Peter I (1903–21). However, in the words of his descendent, the present Crown Prince Alexander: “We must first crown democracy.”¹² Once democracy is fully secured, other relevant issues such as the name of the country, which bears on the very identity of the people, must be taken into consideration, for the Yugoslav experiment has failed.

This in mind, the people of Montenegro, the majority of whom declare themselves Serbian by nationality, must be allowed their freedom of expression beyond the constrictions of their present government, which has chosen to isolate its citizens by boycotting the recent Yugoslav elections and advocating independence. His Eminence Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, commenting on the pro-independence policies of the Montenegrin government, noted:

If new divisions are built on fratricide, then the people who are doing this do not have their own best interests in mind, nor of their people, nor of Montenegro, nor of a common state, nor of Europe. In our region we see the emergence of various splinter quasi-states ... banana republics of which both God and the people are sick and tired. We think that we are doing the people a service and thus entering the democratic currents of the modern world, when in fact the modern world has been laughing all along at this idea and this behaviour.¹³

¹² Crown Prince Alexander (Karađorđević) of the Royal House of Serbia and Yugoslavia, public statement (Cambridge, the Kokkalis Program for Southeastern Europe and the Institute for Press and Politics at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 25 April 2000).

¹³ Translated in *The American Srbobran*, (Pittsburgh: Wednesday, 6 December 2000), 6, (Metropolitan Amfilohije [Radović], “Both God and People Are Tired,” interview published in *OKO*).

In tandem, according to His Grace Bishop Artemije of Raška-Prizren,¹⁴ the only viable solution for Kosovo and Metohija is one and the same as for Serbia proper and the entirety of Yugoslavia, namely, democracy. The issues of self-determination and regional integration cannot be taken into consideration as long as 250,000 Kosovo Serbs and other expelled ethnic minorities live outside of Kosovo and Metohija; those within Kosovo and Metohija's administrative boundaries remain in ethnic enclaves; and a sustained attempt at eradicating the sacerdotal Serbian presence remains by the continued destruction of Serbian shrines. During this present internationally brokered peace, over 100 of the original 1,657 churches, monasteries, and monuments have been destroyed.¹⁵ Accordingly, democratization as a process must begin with repatriation, which is predicated by security and economic stability. Independence for Kosovo would only serve to reward terrorism and hostility, while pinning self-determination against sovereignty. Ultimately, promising to destabilize the entire region by providing impetus for the creation of a "Greater Albania," and luring the substantial Albanian minority in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania proper.

The Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, relative to the same and in light of the principles of "Track II diplomacy,"¹⁶ aptly summons the international community to give credence to the religious communities in terms of equitable recovery:

While war appears to have ended in Kosovo, the peace has not been won. What lies ahead is the painful and difficult work of conflict-resolution and reconciliation, rebuilding and reconstruction in Kosovo, in Yugoslavia as a whole, and in the whole of Southeastern Europe. The religious communities of that region must take a full and active part in the work of building a peaceful and just present and future for all the peoples of the region.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bishop Artemije (Radosavljević) of Raška-Prizren, as quoted by the author, who frequently translated his public statements.

¹⁵ Ljubiša Folić, *Crucified Kosovo: Destroyed and Desecrated Serbian Orthodox Churches in Kosovo and Metohija June–October 1999* (Raška and Prizren Orthodox Eparchy: "The Voice of Kosovo and Metohija" Media and Publishing Center, November 1999), Updated Internet Edition, www.decani.yunet.com/destruction.html; and *The Destroyed Serbian Orthodox Churches and Monasteries in Kosovo*, www.serbian-church.net/Svetinje/svetinje_e.html.

¹⁶ Louise Diamond and John MacDonald, *Multi-track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace*, 3rd ed. (Kumarian Press, 1996).

¹⁷ SCOPA.

Conclusion

National self-determination, as a precept of Orthodox Christianity, is witnessed to in the very nature and structure of the Orthodox Church, which is comprised of fourteen independent and national autocephalous Churches, each as an indigenous expression of faith incarnate in culture, functioning fully integrated as one doctrinally, based on the principle of conciliarity. To which, Sir Dimitri Obolensky concludes:

This concept [national self-determination] was founded on the idea that a language used in the liturgy becomes a sacred language, and that the people who speak it share in the sacred nature. Hence every Christian nation which has its own linguistic culture has a special place and mission in the universal family of Christian peoples.¹⁸

Theologically understood as the fundamental principle of free will, self-determination is given of God as a universal gift in creation. Absolute freedom, however, requires absolute discipline, without which it soon devolves into anarchy and license. Free will and self-determination are priceless gifts, serving to ensure fundamental human rights.

Therefore, in attempting to reconcile national self-determination and regional integration, while advocating peace, the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church stated the following in its Memorandum of 1992:

The Church in the Serbian lands, by her very nature, cannot be identified with any kind of boundaries. She is concerned for her entire people. Wherever they may be, as for all people of our brotherly race of Adam. Acknowledging and respecting the rights of all peoples with whom we live, we call upon them to think about the fact that we shall again be neighbors. The same sun shall warm us, the same land feed us, we shall continue to communicate with the same tongue[s], and the same God will look upon us and judge us.¹⁹

¹⁸ Dimitri Obolensky, *Byzantium and the Slavs* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 252, quoted in 34.

¹⁹ Memorandum, (1992), 3.