

CHURCH AND STATE RELATIONS IN PRESENT-DAY SERBIA

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PART I

A Brief Historical Overview of Serbia: Important Issues of Religious Identity

The last fifteen years in Serbia have been characterized by turbulence, war, and political and economic hardships. The 1990s were a traumatic period for Serbian society. After Tito's Yugoslavia collapsed, violent conflicts ravaged some of its former republics. As a result, floods of refugees crossed over to Serbia, only to find an economy largely destroyed by the combination of international sanctions and the NATO bombing, coupled with an autocratic political regime and the far-reaching hands of organized crime. At the same time the nation was struggling to come to terms with its new identity. In the midst of it all "during the transition our society was faced with a question: What is the place of the church in society and what kind of a relationship exists between the church and the new non-Socialistic state?"¹ The answer to this question in Serbia is still being constructed: the political and legal transformation that has taken place since 2000 has not provided a solution to all outstanding problems in the area of church and state relations.

Serbia is a land exceptionally diverse in the ethnic, linguistic and religious composition of its population. Although the Serbian Orthodox Church is the largest and most powerful religion in the country, and as such plays an important role in society as a whole, Serbia remains a highly heterogeneous nation, with many different confessions of faith represented within its borders.

¹ Dragoljub Mićunović, "Uvodna reč," in Dragoljub Mićunović (ed.), *Crkva, Država i Civilno Društvo*. Collection of presentations from the International Round Table discussion on Church, State and Civil Society, Belgrade, June 5-6, 1998 (Belgrade: Centar za Demokratiju, 2000), 11-12.

I would like to emphasize the fact that I have chosen to write only about the Republic of Serbia and decided not to cover the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Firstly, Montenegro is religiously somewhat more homogeneous, and therefore many societal issues relevant for Serbia are not present there. Secondly, legal regulation and implementation of church-state relations falls under the competence of the constituent republics. Due to the special status of Kosovo I will not include the province in my general observations either, but will point out a few important issues that link it with Serbia Proper. Kosovo is a very special case on its own as it is *de facto* run by the international community, while *de jure* it still forms part of Serbia. Exploring the current church-state situation there merits a study on its own.

The History of Yugoslavia

The end of World War I saw the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The new country united a number of South Slavic lands formerly in Austrian or Hungarian hands (among them territories as diverse as Carinthia, Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia-Slavonia and Bačka) and parts of Macedonia, with Serbia and Montenegro in a constitutional monarchy with Belgrade as its capital and the Serbian Karađorđević dynasty at its helm. This was an ethnically and religiously diverse nation, as the Roman Catholic Church dominated in Croatia and Slovenia (although Croatia had a sizable Serbian Orthodox and smaller Protestant minority); while in Bosnia there was a plurality of Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox. Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia had an Orthodox majority with large Muslim, smaller Catholic (and in the case of Serbia and Macedonia, Protestant) populations. In 1920 Belgrade was chosen as the location of the patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church.² Political dominance by Serbia within the kingdom caused discontent and serious opposition especially among the Croats, and the ensuing parliamentary and general political crisis ultimately led King Alexander I to declare dictatorial rule in 1929, redrawing the traditional provincial boundaries and changing the country's name to Yugoslavia.

² The Serbian Orthodox Church gained autocephaly in 1219. Since 1346 its center was at the Patriarchy of Peć in southwestern Kosovo, which operated (with some forced intermissions) until 1920 and is a functioning monastery even today.

World War II divided the country, as Croatia and Bosnia came under the rule of the Independent State of Croatia (indeed a puppet state of the Axis powers); while Serbia's nationalist *Četniks* and Communist Partisans were fighting against German occupation. It is difficult to find objective accounts and facts about this time period but accusations from all sides are numerous about the involvement of the clergy in incitement for and carrying out of violence. During the war, a large number of Jews, Serbs, Gypsies and others were sent to concentration camps – many of them on the territory of Yugoslavia itself. The most infamous one, Jasenovac, in Croatia, saw the death of tens if not hundreds of thousand Serbs (estimates vary widely here) at the hands of the fascistic Croatian *Ustaša* regime, and this tragedy has fueled one of the most powerful and also most exploited national myths among the Serbs.

The victory of the Partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito, who ruled the new Yugoslavia until his death in 1980, brought about an alliance with Moscow and the Communist system. President Tito soon broke this bond and from 1948 on Yugoslavia became a non-aligned country, trying to balance a Socialist-inspired centralized political and economic system with characteristics of a relatively free market economy and substantial cultural liberty. The structure of Tito's Yugoslavia was based on the relative autonomy of the constituent republics and on the idea of the self-determination of its 'nations'. Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs and Slovenes were viewed as nations and received their own republics but the situation of Muslims, who came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (including Slavs, Albanians, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Turks), posed a problem. As the result of a slow-moving process they were finally recognized as a distinct, constituent nation of the Yugoslav federation (in spite of their ethnic mix, and – at least officially – regardless of their religious loyalty) in 1971. This decision was due in part to an attempt to counterbalance the intensifying ethnic and religious rivalry between the Serbs and the Croats, who were the largest constituent nations in the Yugoslav federation, and formed the other two largest ethnic communities in Bosnia beside the Muslims.³ The Roman Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox

³ Zachary T. Irwin, "The Fate of Islam in the Balkans: A Comparison of Four State Policies," in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 388.

Church were also fueling this enmity, often employing nationalistic symbolism and “modern re-workings of popular memories of independent medieval kingdoms,”⁴ which was not viewed favorably by the Belgrade authorities. Publishing activity by religious communities, however, flourished during this period, as a large number of religious magazines, newsletters and books were being printed in all parts of the country.

The reasons for the breakout of the Balkan wars of the 1990s can be attributed to a combination of factors. After Tito’s death strong central control disintegrated, and political and economic discontent was rising, especially among Croats. A growing xenophobia was fanned by nationalist leaders and often by clergy as well, which led to the secession of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia from the federation. In Serbia, Slobodan Milošević rose to power at the end of the 1980s by taking advantage of growing nationalistic sentiments, revoked the autonomous status of the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina in 1989, and established his autocratic regime, which lasted until 5 October 2000. During this time Yugoslavia fell apart in a succession of wars and armed conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and later Kosovo. In Serbia a new government came to power in 2000, which began to introduce much-needed institutional and economic reforms and personal liberties. The two remaining republics of the federation, Serbia and Montenegro, formed a new union of states in 2003 and the name ‘Yugoslavia’ became history.

The Ethnic and Religious Composition of Serbia Today

TABLE 1

THE POPULATION OF SERBIA ACCORDING TO NATIONAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY
IN 2002⁵

⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 58.

⁵ Source: Results from the 2002 nation-wide census in the Republic of Serbia, excluding Kosovo and Metohija, (Belgrade: Republički Zavod za Statistiku, May 2003), www.statserb.sr.gov.yu, visited on 18 May 2004.

National/Ethnic Belonging	Absolute Number	Percentage %
Total population of Serbia	7,498,001	100
Serbs	6,212,838	82.8
Hungarians	293,299	3.9
Bosniacs	136,087	1.8
Roma	108,193	1.44
Yugoslavs	80,721	1.07
Croats	70,602	0.94
Montenegrins	69,049	0.92
Albanians	61,647	0.82
Slovaks	59,021	0.78
Vlachs	40,054	0.53
Romanians	34,576	0.46
Macedonians	25,847	0.34
Bulgarians	20,497	0.27
Bunjevac	20,012	0.26
Muslims	19,503	0.26
Ruthenians	15,905	0.21
Ukrainians	5,354	0.07
Slovenians	5,104	0.068
Goranis	4,581	0.06
Germans	3,901	0.052
Russians	2,588	0.034
Czechs	2,211	0.029
Did not declare a national/ethnic identity	107,732	1.4
National/ethnic identity not known	75,483	1.0
Others	11,711	0.15
Declared a regional identity	11,485	0.15

When one takes a closer look at Serbia's ethnic composition⁶, it may come as a surprise that it is characterized by such an astounding diversity. This is partly due to the constant changing of political boundaries throughout history, wars, migration, and most recently, the influx of refugees from Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo and Metohija (the province's official name in Serbia and Montenegro). The results from the nation-wide

⁶“Declared a regional identity” - This category was created during Tito's reign, in an attempt to encourage people to identify with the ideals of the federation, which encompassed many nationalities and yet signified one united country. It also proved helpful for those coming from mixed marriages (which was a widespread phenomenon during that time) to identify themselves at times of census.

census, which took place in 2002 in the Republic of Serbia (excluding Kosovo, which is currently under interim UN administration, and from where no statistical data is available on the population),⁷ bear witness to this diversity. Apart from Serbs, who form the majority of the population, the other larger ethnic groups include Hungarians, Bosniacs, Roma, Croats, Montenegrins, Albanians, Slovaks, Vlachs, Romanians, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Muslims, Ruthenians, and many other smaller groups.

TABLE 2

THE POPULATION OF SERBIA ACCORDING TO RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN 2002⁸

Religious Affiliation	Absolute Number	Percentage %
Total population of Serbia	7,498,001	100
Orthodox	6,371,584	84.9
Catholic	410,978	5.48
Muslim	239,658	3.19
Protestant	80,837	1.07
Jewish	785	0.01
Followers of Eastern religions	530	---
Did not declare his/her religious affiliation	197,031	2.62
Religious affiliation not known	137,291	1.83
Not religious	40,068	0.53
Belongs to religious community not listed here	18,768	0.25
Believer - belongs to no religious community	473	---

⁹¹⁰¹¹The greatest number of citizens (84.9% of the total population of almost 7.5 million) declared themselves in the census as Orthodox. Most Serbs, Montenegrins,

⁷ The United Nations Security Council Resolution #1244 of 10 June 1999 placed Kosovo under interim UN administration.

⁸ Source: Results from the 2002 nation-wide census in the Republic of Serbia, excluding Kosovo and Metohija, (Belgrade: Republički Zavod za Statistiku, May 2003), www.statserb.sr.gov.yu, visited on 18 May 2004.

⁹ Includes the Serbian, Macedonian, Romanian and Russian Orthodox Churches.

¹⁰ Includes the Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Old Catholic and Free Catholic Churches.

¹¹ This category denotes a wide range of denominations, naming 41 different ones, but including even more. The larger ones of these are the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Hungarian Evangelical Church, the Hungarian Reformed Christian Church, the Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons were also classified as Protestants for the purposes of this census.

Bulgarians, Romanians, Macedonians and Vlachs belong to this confession. Catholics form the second largest religious community (5.48%), and many among them are Hungarians, Croats and Bunjevac. Muslims are the third largest group (at 3.19%) with Bosniacs, Albanians, Turks, and some Roma belonging to this category, among others. The number of people who declared themselves Protestant is 80,837, which amounts to 1.07% of the population. This category denotes a wide range of denominations, including the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Hungarian Evangelical Church and the Hungarian Reformed Christian Church, which have been present on the territory of Serbia for several centuries. At the other end of the spectrum are small, and mostly multi-ethnic “newer” groups such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals. Those affiliated with Judaism number 785. Most of them are Sephardic, and their ancestors arrived on the territory of Serbia in the 16th century, having been expelled from Spain by the Catholic Kings in 1492. Followers of various Eastern religions amount to 530. Only 0.53% stated explicitly that they are not religious.¹²

As with all statistical data, we need to be cautious with the results of this census for various reasons. As Professor Dragana Radisavljević-Ćiparizović from the Faculty of Philosophy at Belgrade University warns, they do not necessarily reflect the population’s actual religiosity.¹³ Another issue at hand is the relatively large percentage (2.62%) of those who, in accordance with Paragraph 43 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (which was the constitution in power at the time the census was conducted), did not wish to declare their religious affiliation.¹⁴ This may be due to caution or fear of discrimination (especially against persons belonging to religious minorities), as a consequence of the religiously-colored ethnic conflicts and media attacks of the past fifteen years.

¹² Results from the 2002 nation-wide census in the Republic of Serbia, excluding Kosovo and Metohija, (Belgrade: Republički Zavod za Statistiku, May 2003), www.statserb.sr.gov.yu, visited on 18 May 2004.

¹³ Quoted in Branislav Radivojša, “Povratak Tradiciji,” *Politika*, 31 May 2003.

¹⁴ Paragraph 43 of the constitution states that “no one shall be obliged to publicly express his religious convictions.” *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, Službeni List SRJ, No. 1/92.

Some Issues Regarding the Position of Religion

One of the main issues regarding the position of religion in Serbian society, which we can see emerge from this historical heritage is the strong bond between ethnic and religious identity. Although smaller religious communities often strongly identify with one ethnic group, this is most evident in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The structure of Orthodox churches - in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church - made it possible for a real national church to develop. Without centralized authority and a leader residing in another country, the church was able to build on local leadership and clergy and decide freely about its issues being fully aware of the local context. Having a host of Serbian saints also helped reinforce the church's national nature.

The Serbian Orthodox Church played an active role throughout history in the creation of collective myths. These were designed and fanned in order to build and sustain a strong collective national or ethnic identity and sense of community, of which the Church was an essential part. By identifying with the Serbian nation, the Church managed to gain people's trust. This led to the paradigm still held true by many people today that being a Serb means being an Orthodox (and vice versa). Therefore, Orthodox claims in the early 1990s that a religious revival was taking place in Serbia, cannot be easily distinguished from the resurgence of nationalistic emotions. The Serbian Orthodox Church has faced two crises in recent decades. The first one involved the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which declared itself autocephalous in 1966, and which the Serbian Patriarchate has refused to recognize. The second crisis concerns the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which has been struggling to gain independence since the 1990s. These conflicts, however, have only seemed to strengthen the church's foothold in Serbian society.

The most significant myths for the Serbian nation include those of a common origin and a political and geographical continuity throughout history. They have inspired deep veneration of the medieval Serbian royal family, the Nemanjić dynasty (most notably St. Sava), who were not only the founders of a sovereign Serbian state but also the first representatives of a distinct Serbian identity strongly tied to the Orthodox Church.

Perhaps the most powerful myth still active today is the legend of Kosovo, the foundations of which lay in the battle of Kosovo Polje (The Field of the Blackbirds) fought against the advancing armies of the Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1389. The tragic defeat of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and the cream of Serbian aristocracy who fought with him, has come to be regarded as a crucial self-defining moment for Serbian identity, one of the cornerstones of the collective narrative of the nation. Lazar's choice of death and dignity over surrender embodies the heroic spirit of Kosovo.

The important place of Kosovo in Serbian national identity is buttressed by the presence of countless sites of the Serbian religious and historical heritage, such as the numerous monasteries, most importantly, the Peć patriarchate, symbolizing the heart of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Kosovo myth together with that of the Jasenovac concentration camp have come to form what Vjekoslav Perica calls the 'Jerusalem Myth' of the Serbs, emphasizing their glory and martyrdom. The function of this myth, writes Perica, is "to boost national pride and cohesion [and to] strengthen the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church as partner in the national leadership."¹⁵

The Serbian Orthodox Church has also embraced the role of protector of the Serbian culture and language. This was extremely important and often arose out of necessity in the face of foreign oppression, especially during the centuries of Ottoman rule. The reformed Serbian Cyrillic alphabet created by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864), who also translated the New Testament, was first met with strong resistance among the Orthodox clergy, but it eventually gained widespread use and is now regarded as standard. Today the Church still plays a prominent role in the cultural and literary life of the nation. It actively propagates the exclusive use of the Cyrillic alphabet as official script (as opposed to the Latin alphabet, which is quite wide-spread, especially in the northern parts of Serbia).¹⁶

¹⁵ Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 228.

¹⁶ As an interesting sidebar: on 25 September 2003 Microsoft presented 30 copies of the newly finished Microsoft Windows Serbian Cyrillic version to Patriarch Pavle in Belgrade for use within the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Serbia's position on the frontlines of the fault line between civilizations (as Samuel Huntington refers to it), has acted as an intensifying factor for holding on to one's identity, different from that of its neighbors.¹⁷ Serbia has been surrounded with and at times subdued by Catholic and Muslim powers. The so-called religious revival in the 1990s may be in part due to the fact that the church continued to stand for a specific and strong unifying identity among Serbs based on a common ethnic heritage, culture and language, while Communists had been advocating the much less tangible notion of internationalism. Although Tito had made some allowances for national identities to be expressed within Socialist Yugoslavia, nationalistic expressions were usually suppressed.

An important observation one can make about the position of religion in Serbia today is the notion of entangled relationship between church and state. The fact that the Protestant Reformation - and with it the concept of individual faith - did not spread south of Vojvodina, allowed religion to continue to be experienced exclusively in a community. Partly due to the Ottoman oppression Enlightenment ideas were not able to take root in Serbia, although they did influence certain individuals throughout the 19th century. Accordingly, Enlightenment liberalism did not lead to a separation of church and state (and the concept of non- interference by the state in religious affairs)¹⁸ in Serbia, as was the case in many countries of Western Europe.

The interwoven relationship between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church is to be seen even today. For example, the Serbian government has been very active in raising funds for finishing the construction of the St. Sava Memorial Church in Belgrade, described as the largest Orthodox place of worship in the Balkans. The late Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was an ardent supporter of the project and even took on a fundraising role personally.¹⁹

¹⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 159.

¹⁸ See Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper (eds.), *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 3.

¹⁹ Premier Đinđić organized several fundraising dinners, and his success is illustrated by the fact that at one of these events alone, on 22 February 2003, held near Frankfurt-am-Main, 120,000 Euro were collected.

On one hand, politicians in recent years have often publicly participated in Orthodox religious rituals in an attempt to clearly identify themselves with the majority of the Serbian nation. Former Yugoslav President and present Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica is the most well-known example of that.²⁰ On the other side of the issue, there has been a lot of political involvement by the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Ethno-clericalism, as Vjekoslav Perica defines it, consists of “the idea of an ethnically based nationhood and a ‘national church’ with its clergy entitled to national leadership but never accountable for political blunders as are secular leaders.”²¹ The Serbian Orthodox Church has exhibited signs of ethno-clericalism, following its centuries-long tradition. “Initially, the Serbian Orthodox Church gave full support to the Serb nationalist government of Milošević,”²² although they later distanced themselves from him and (especially Patriarch Pavle) sharply criticized him. In recent years their clergy has been very vocal in the political arena once again on issues such as religious education in schools and the spread and danger of religious sects and cults. In August 2004 Patriarch Pavle got involved in the discussion about deciding on Serbia and Montenegro’s new national anthem. The Patriarch sent an appeal protesting the proposed Montenegrin song to the highest-positioned political leaders in the country, urging them to drop their selection.²³ The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church took a strong political stand in the autumn of 2004,²⁴ followed by statements by Patriarch Pavle himself, this time urging Kosovo Serbs to boycott the local elections in the province on 23 October.²⁵

Beside the historical churches, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Roman Catholic Church, we can also see the fusion of national and religious identity

²⁰ Most recently, parliamentary representatives of the Serbian Radical Party, winner of the parliamentary elections of 28 December 2003, demonstrated their commitment to what they perceive as clearly Serbian values, by taking their oath at the Nikolajevska Orthodox church in Zemun (a Belgrade suburb) on 26 January 2004. B92 News, www.b92.net.

²¹ Perica, *op.cit.*, 205.

²² Paul Mojzes, “Religious Human Rights in Post-Communist Balkan Countries,” in John Witte and Johan David Van der Vyver (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspectives* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996), 277.

²³ M. Kuburović, “Apel Patrijarha,” *Politika*, 11 August 2004, 1, 7.

²⁴ I. Lukić, “Bez garancija ne izlaziti na izbore,” *Politika*, 2 October 2004, 8.

²⁵ Tanjug News Agency, “Patrijarh Pavle: Nezaštićen narod na Kosmetu ne pozivajte na izbore,” *Politika*, 4 October 2004, 8.

with other religious groups. These ethnic churches are “national in form without having any chance of playing the role of national guardians.”²⁶ This group includes the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Hungarian Evangelical Church, and the Hungarian Reformed Christian Church. The smaller and often relatively new religious communities, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals form yet another category. Multiethnic in their composition, these “minor Protestant Christian communities were the only religious organizations in Yugoslavia that did not take part in the Yugoslav ethnic conflict.”²⁷

As we can see, the issue of church and state relations is a very important one in Serbian society today. The religious and ethnic diversity of the country complicates the situation, and the presence of a strong ‘national’ church creates a distinctive situation. The present and future governments of Serbia face the challenging task of respecting certain traditions and privileges of the historical majority, while honoring the rights of the religious minorities as well.

²⁶ Pedro Ramet, “Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslavia” in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 300.

²⁷ Perica, *op.cit.*, 221.