

ON INTER-CHURCH DIALOGUE IN SERBIA - CURRENT SITUATION

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I am a doctoral student at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, working on early modern Europe, particularly the second generation of Reformers, but till August 2006 I had been serving in a Lutheran church in the Serbian capital, Belgrade. This is therefore a report on the current situation in Serbia, including my own experiences.

I will begin with what took place on April 20th, 2006 when the Serbian Parliament voted on a new law on religious communities. It was a kind of a bittersweet experience, as there had been no law on religious communities since 1993, when the Parliament and Slobodan Milošević dissolved the previous law which had existed for a long time. So there has been this legal vacuum in the country for thirteen years, when no single church entity knew how to approach the local authorities to do anything. For a long time the Parliament tried to get a new law but was unable to pass it. Finally, on April 20th it was adopted, but what happened was that only seven traditional religious communities are recognized by the new law.

The Parliament gave a kind of historical recognition to those seven communities and those are, of course, the Orthodox, the Catholics (not just Roman Catholic, but the Greek Catholic Church as well), two Lutheran and one Reformed denominations, the Jewish, and Islamic communities. So only those seven are recognized now by the government. Those seven communities have worked together in a unified effort toward this, lobbied the government, and they really grew closer in the process of working together. However, because of that result, it has deepened the existing divide between traditional churches and what you might call more “modern” kinds of religious groups. This new law reiterated the rights of recognized groups, but did not ensure the rights of others. There is the Center for Tolerance in Inter-religious Relations in Serbia which has been very active in trying to unite all religious communities into one platform. They were trying to do this before this law was passed, trying to create a body that could negotiate with the government about the new legislation, because it is affecting everybody.

What has taken place since then? Particularly the Orthodox Church has been negative toward the modern, new church groups like the Adventists and Pentecostals, to church planting and to new groups emerging. They did not want these new religious groups to get recognized because the Orthodox are afraid they are going to re-baptize their Orthodox members. So there was this big fear, with the Orthodox Church having a lot of influence to tell the government not to recognize the others. At least the Lutherans and Reformed have liturgy, they baptize children, and have a lot in common with the Orthodox, even though we Protestants ordain women.

A month after the April 20 legislation, the Parliament approved another law for the return of nationalized and confiscated properties to religious communities. This is a very, very important step in the process of what is taking place, because after the Second World War, many church buildings, hospitals, schools etc. were confiscated. This law is now saying that this nationalized property needs to be returned. So the law was passed, but it really does not work in practice yet. For example, the church where I was ministering was meeting in a building that had formerly been a German Lutheran Church and was confiscated after the Second World War. We got it back somehow and started to use it, but another political party won the election in that part of Belgrade, and even though this law for complete return was passed, now this radical political party is suing the Lutheran Church and wants the building back. So we have a legal battle going on now. This is just to show you that the law is now on paper but it really does not work in practice. The same kind of thing happened in the south of Serbia, in a town called Novi Pazar, a Muslim town. There the Muslim community was going to get their Islamic center back from the government after this new law. But what has taken place actually, is that the mayor is trying to sell this Islamic center. Nevertheless, we have this new legislation.

When it comes to the field of ecumenical, inter-religious dialogue, there are also a few important things that have taken place recently. One is the long-standing dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran World Federation. Last year we had representatives from the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland, from the largest Lutheran church coming to Serbia, and there was a week-long conference on dialogue in Eastern Serbia, in Golubac. That was the ninth study group on the dialogue between Orthodox and Lutherans; previously they had usually taken place in Germany, so this was the first time it was organized in Serbia. That was a significant thing because it was covered by the media very

well. A few bishops from Germany and Austria came, and we had representatives from the World Council of Churches. This was a good step in dialogue between Protestants and Orthodox.

Just recently, in September, 2006 was the ninth meeting of the joint commission for official theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches, and that took place in Belgrade. Again, that was well covered by the media. As most of you know, the Orthodox are resisting the Pope to come to Serbia and visit. There is strong opposition, but at least this joint commission for official dialogue is working and they had very successful meetings in September.

Also in September, we had another conference, entitled “Jesus Christ: Light of the World and the Foundation and Hope for Europe,” which was held in Novi Sad, just north of Belgrade. That was in preparation for next year’s big conference of the Conference of European Churches, the third European Ecumenical Assembly, which will take place in Sibiu, Romania, in September 2007. In that conference, high-level representatives from the five traditional churches participated. There were representatives from two Lutheran denominations, the Reformed Church, the Catholic, the Greek Catholic and the Orthodox. Representatives including bishops from other parts of the world came. So there are all these good things happening, and this dialogue is taking place.

Earlier in 2006 I had the privilege of participating in two ecumenical services on the 9th of May – the Day of Europe, organized by the Society for Serbian-German Cooperation. At the ecumenical services were Orthodox and Catholic priests and I was representing the Protestants. We went to the largest mass graves of people killed by the Nazi regime in the town of Kragujevac, and conducted an ecumenical service. Then we held another service in Knićanin in Vojvodina, where many Germans were killed by the Communist regime after 1945. Those Germans that managed to escape death were put in concentration camps. That part of history has been hidden for many, many years and has never been talked about. We had these ecumenical services recognizing that the Germans, but also Serbs and the Serbian government, committed atrocities. That was on the Day of Europe, and it was all about reconciliation. It is a good sign that the Orthodox also sent their priest to represent the church and to take part in the ecumenical services in the cemeteries.

Similar meetings have been taking place, *but* it is usually only on the highest level and not all-inclusive, not reaching to the grassroots level. These are only the first steps now in

Serbia to create more inter-religious tolerance. The public needs to be educated, and it needs to be done in a way so that they understand *why* this is taking place, *why* that is important. It needs to trickle down more to the level of the actual religious communities and believers, who are often not involved and do not know about those meetings.

There are also a number of other noteworthy initiatives. In July we held an inter-religious seminar for Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants in the town of Novi Pazar, which is 90% Muslim. There was a Catholic from Canada who came, a specialist on Islam, who holds a chair in Islamic studies at the University of Montreal and speaks fluent Arabic. He gave a couple of lectures. There were many Muslims who attended. It was a great atmosphere. Together we visited some Orthodox monasteries, and then some mosques, where we were very well received. So we had this time of getting to know each other. Angela and I were quite involved in organizing this, and it was exciting to see that most of the participants were students, as the emphasis of the seminar was on young people and on how they can make a difference. There was good attendance, and there was just great relationship-building that week, friendships being built and barriers broken down.

Regarding Americans' involvement, and that is part of the theme of this conference, Americans are still not well received in our part of the world. To a large extent, American help is usually associated with the small and newer religious communities – most of which are often referred to as sects and cults. In other words, American help often does not go to mainline Protestants but it is usually associated with marginal groups. Being connected only to them in some sense tarnishes the image and usefulness of what the Americans can do. An important exception to this is the American help to Jewish communities, but they are also numerically small. The question concerning the future of Kosovo also plays an important role in how Americans are viewed. A lot of people and religious leaders are convinced that the American political establishment and leaders are mostly on the side of the Albanians. That is what is believed in Serbia: that America really wants to see Kosovo independent. So the Christians are resisting help from America because they are suspicious of Americans. Serbian society at large is not ready for Americans yet, also because of the NATO bombing in 1999 and all the recent history. I believe it is essential to come with a willingness to learn, not with all the answers and saying, “we are going to help you, we know how to do it, you don't know anything, we have it all — we have democracy and we're going to teach you.” That is not going to work. As Jim Payton said earlier, it is important to know something about the

country's history and language. So doing it smartly, observing things first, not coming with all the right answers into the country – I think that is the key.

Questions asked of Angela Ilić [see next paper] after her presentation that relate to Serbia

Q: In Serbia, with reference to those religious groups other than the traditionally recognized ones, are they subject to a Russian-style registration process or a 15-year waiting period before they can get legal status?

A: They will be subjected to a re-registration process, since the government is saying, “because we’ve had a legal vacuum since 1993, all of those who have registered since then — those registrations are void.” So they will all have to re-register. There is no temporal requirement, but there is a requirement for a minimum number of followers or members for needed registration. That was actually one of the most controversial issues in the draft legislation set before the religious communities for discussion. There was a different number proposed than in the actual draft that was accepted in Parliament: now that number is around 750 (0.01% of the total population), which a lot of religious communities might not be able to meet.

Q: Speaking of numbers, do you have an approximate number of the new religious groups and can you say something about the Greek Catholics in Serbia?

A: I do not know an exact number of the followers of new religious groups, but I would guess it is somewhere under 10,000. As to the Greek Catholic Church in Serbia, there are different ideas within it about which churches they should relate to and how. They are a lot more connected to the Roman Catholic Church, but there is at least one priest in particular, who is one of the main proponents of ecumenism in Serbia. He is very open, at least at the level of his own parish and within his own realm of influence, to working together with the Serbian Orthodox Church. He has also done that through one of the initiatives Luka mentioned, through the Center for Tolerance and Inter-religious Relations. However, I think in general as a church, they are not that keen on a close relationship with the Orthodox.