

Secularization and Orthodoxy: The Case of the Serbians

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In the Western literature and periodicals there is an inadmissible small number of articles, studies and books dealing with either Orthodoxy in general or the Serbian Orthodoxy and the Serbian Orthodox Church in particular. *Ernst Benz*, the famous German theologian is right in his remark that it is considerably difficult for non-Orthodox citizens of Western Europe to understand the Eastern Orthodox Church since people in the West do not have enough knowledge of the Orthodox life and doctrine; moreover, their present meagre knowledge is covered with prejudices and misunderstandings which are partly confessional and partly political (1991, p. 9).

Now is the right political, cultural and spiritual moment to pay attention to Orthodoxy as to the other equal branch of Christianity, in order to eliminate the existing prejudices and to overcome the confessional and political disagreements. Christian Europe with its noble goal of building up the »European home from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains« cannot allow itself to overview the fact that its spirituality is based on the Orthodox cultural heritage as well. The Orthodox nations — the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Armenians, the Georgians, the Romanians, the Bulgarians, the Greeks and the Serbians — as descendants of the Byzantine civilization are representatives of the contemporary very active European spirituality. If they are excluded, it is practically impossible to constitute One Europe, and thus the building up of a new »Berlin Wall« between East European and the West European cultures has to be absolutely prevented. Why? *Milorad Pavić*, the most famous Serbian writer and author of the widely read »Dictionary of the Hazards« considers himself »the last Byzantine« and explains this view as a real connoisseur: »The European spirituality cannot survive if it excludes or writes off its cultural inheritance which began in the Classical Greece and reached the world of today through the East Roman Empire and Byzantium« (1992, p. 39).

All the Eastern Orthodox nations were doomed to live under the Communist regimes in various periods of time ranging from fifty to seventy years. These regimes were primarily unjust to the Orthodox confession and to the Orthodox Church, that is, to the institution which had been guarding and cherishing the Byzantine tradition for centuries. The disintegration of the »Communist tzardom« has freed the Orthodox nations of the bondages and they are now directed towards two goals. Namely, on the one hand, they are returning to the roots of their civilization and culture and, on the other hand, they are engaging themselves in the contemporary democratic Europe. In both cases there is much bewilderment and misunderstanding as well as many planned and unplanned actions; in short, there are things for which Western Europe does not have a good ear and enough understanding.

The case of the Serbians sharing the common fate which befell all the East European nations is specific in one sense. This can be seen in view of the relationship between secularization and Orthodoxy as presented in this paper. The key question which should be asked here is, how it happened that secularization and atheisation had such deep roots among the Serbians so that they had almost completely departed from their religion and Church.

Up to the latest radical changes and the disintegration of the socialist totalitarian societies, the Orthodox spaces (except for the Greek one) were considered extremely secularized environments. It could have been decidedly claimed and supported by empirical evidence that the secularization process of the whole reality had flourished mostly in the Orthodox homogenous societies unlike the one in the Catholic, Protestant and Islam areas. The Serbian Orthodox space confirmed such theses which were elevated to a sociological principle.

Three facts played an important role in creating an ambient background for a great concentration of the forms and products of secularization on the Serbian Orthodox terrain, that is, for a deep rooting of secularization among the Serbians: the great sufferings of the Second World War, the Bolshevik regime and the internal weakness of the Church as an institution. The War period maimed the Serbian Orthodox Church. More than a million Serbians died in the War including over two hundred clergymen; over 450 Orthodox shrines were destroyed, burnt, damaged, desecrated and robbed. The Church came out of the War with its flock, priests and houses of God devastated, that is, in a situation which much larger and greater religious organizations could hardly cope with. What the War did not manage to do was left to the Bolshevik regime: the new socialist government brought about the total defeat of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The political government did not have the same attitude towards all the religious confessions and religious communities so that each of them had a different share of the official mercy. The Serbian Church was also the greatest victim under the Communist regime which was partly its own fault. It was inaptly and inadequately led. For instance, its former Patriarch *German* was nicknamed the »red Patriarch«. The Church showed an excessive loyalty to the system, brought harm upon itself and increased the negative effects of the War sufferings and of the Bolshevik torture.

In short, any sketch of the ambient framework of the Serbian's secularization would show that it was stimulated by a series of concrete causes among which the ideologization of social relations and the atheist upbringing and education were the most prominent ones, due to their specific character. The former Yugoslav society was an example of a monolithic system which cherished one-dimensional atheist culture and ideology. The main centers of social power imposed patterns of behaviour and forms of activity within the atheist paradigm. Chances for a higher social promotion were denied to the citizens who were outside the integrated atheist environments. The chances were theoretically given but not in the real constellation of social factors and relations. More demanding social engagements required atheism and very often the one with a triumphant note. The Serbians carried the greatest burden of the anti-fascist fight and of the social revolution led by the Communists and were also the most agile in respecting the canons of the socialist ideology. For instance, this went so far that in Serbia people

were denied membership of the only political party (the Communist one) or they had problems at work as a punishment for going to church, whereas in Croatia and Slovenia people had no such trouble and they openly declared and publicly expressed their religiosity.

In the Orthodox countries the propagation of the triumphant atheism did a great evil to religion and to the Orthodox Church. In Serbia there was no militant atheism with its inquisition methods as in Albania. Neither was there a scientific atheism with its scientific exclusiveness as in the Soviet Union; still, Serbian authors conclude that »the integral Marxism inevitably assumed atheism and atheism was one of the most effective weapons for destroying the Serbian national identity. The greatest atheist pressure was directed against Orthodoxy« (*Vučковић*, 1990, p.9). The Serbian Orthodoxy gave up under the attack of mass atheism which was effectively spread through its system of education and upbringing. This did not happen to Catholicism and Islam in Yugoslavia. Therefore, it should be admitted that Orthodoxy had not fully experienced its internal »protestantization« yet. Neither had it contributed to the formation of a modern and firm »civil« awareness. This explains why it was possible to find that, »behind a considerably large non-religiosity, there was a kind of political and cultural shock induced by the fusion of such an ideology as Marxism is, such an organization as the Communist one was and certain environments which had not been prepared for it, especially when it comes to religion (namely, agricultural ones, especially the Orthodox ones). This situation is best exemplified in the saying: The Party commissar says, there is no God« (*Kerševan*, 1984, p.39).

As nowhere else in Yugoslavia, all the above mentioned factors brought about the fact that in the Serbian Orthodox social and cultural environment the Church was highly demopolized, the number of the faithful was enormously reduced, the religious practice was withering away, the influence of religious orientation and behaviour on everyday life disappeared, the decomposition of faith took place, the religiosity left the propulsive social strata and groups and spread only among the marginal ones, and faith had become the mark of the poor just as unfaithfulness became the mark of the rich. Therefore, the typical faithful came from agricultural and working layers and rural or rural-peripheral areas; they included mostly women and the older part of the population, usually people with low education who were politically passive and outside the main information flows and general modernization. Secularization produced the so-called marginalization of the typical Orthodox faithful. Serbians were separated from their Church and religion as shown by the data given in the following tables (the first two show the Catholic population — Croatians and Slovenians — and the third shows the Serbian Orthodox population).

Table 1 – Religious Panorama of the Population in the Region of Zagreb (Croatia)

	1968	1972	1982/83
	%	%	%
Faithful	48,9	51,2	44,6
Neutral	20,7	20,0	19,5
Not faithful	16,7	15,9	18,0
Atheists	13,7	12,3	17,8
No reply	–	0,6	–

Table 2 – Religious Panorama of the Slovenian Population

	1968	1975/76	1978	1980	1981/82	1983	1984
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Faithful	67,8	51,9	45,3	48,1	50,5	47,7	50,9
Not faithful	29,5	36,6	42,7	41,6	39,1	38,1	38,0
Neutral	2,6	11,5	12,0	8,3	8,1	11,4	9,8

Table 3 – Religious Panorama of the Serbian Population

	Vojvodina	Region of Niš	Belgrade	Belgrade
	1975	1982	1974	1984
	%	%	%	%
Faithful	29,2	23,8	9,0	10,0
Neutral	13,4	22,5	12,0	16,0
Not faithful	55,5	45,4	21,0	37,0
Atheists	–	8,2	58,0	38,0
Rest	1,9	–	–	–

In the last few years the secularization thesis has been losing its good repute burdened with the »empirical picture« of revitalization of conventional religiosity and an increase of the social importance of religion throughout the world. This has made sociologists concentrate upon the pre-elaboration of the secularization thesis and conclude that the support is not given to the triumphant scenario of secularization, according to which a decrease of the importance of religion is a necessary feature of modernizing and modern societies (*Beckford and Luckmann, 1989*). The secularization process is extremely hindered in the Second and Third World countries.

Serbians seem to prove the above-stated opinion. A tendency to a more distinct separation of the Serbian Orthodox population from the classical religiosity, which had continuously been going on ever since the Second World War, came to an end by the late eighties. A single breadth of democracy and pluralism was enough to disperse all

illusions about a society without religion. Religion has proved itself to be a hard nut to crack, much harder than assumed by the Communist leaders. The disintegration of the Communist regimes and the liberalization of social relations in Serbia made possible the liberation of religious complex, and religiosity is freely expressed on the general, group or individual level. Repressed a long time ago, liberated recently, religion is coming to the surface of public life and leaves an impression of its revitalization, if not an élan. It is true that a certain revival of the Serbian religiosity can be noticed, but we cannot conclude *a priori* that a radical and spectacular shift had taken place from the secularization state to the all-inclusive and firm desecularization process. It is more likely that it is the same religiosity appearing as a new phenomenon due to an increased number of people freely expressing their religious feelings, which were hidden before. Much effort is needed on behalf of the Serbian Orthodox Church along with its lay surroundings to annul or reduce the consequences of the Serbian's secularization.

The process of desecularization is troublesome. There are many dangers awaiting the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbians. It is clear even now that there are awkward gestures, empty ceremonies, verbal foliage, religious pathos, unsuitable celebrations and tasteless iconography. Sometimes the return to the roots is connected with an extreme manifestation of confessional mentality including nationalism and intolerance towards other ethnic groups. If the desecularization process is not followed by a general humanization of life, Orthodoxy will not find itself on the road to modernity and Serbians will be still considered »a cosmic failure«. This they certainly are not, but it is necessary for them to establish a connection between a historical vertical and a contemporary life horizontal. Wise nations do this and persist. Religion and religious communities play an indispensable part in it.

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