

THE ATTITUDE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH TOWARDS EUROPE

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Even after the events in Serbia in October 2000, which brought a democratically elected president to power and helped the country to enter the way back into the community of democratic European nations, one can still find in broad layers of Serbian society a certain reserved attitude towards Europe. Europe is here to be understood as a symbol for the Western states — the so called ‘international community’ — as well as a system of values and political and economical processes. Western observers frequently do not pay attention to this fact; they are rather happy that Serbia will, as they expect, now develop in a democratic way. However, one should not forget about this reserve which can be found in many statements by Serbian politicians and which can be seen in the reluctant attitudes to co-operate with the International Tribunal in The Hague. Such an attitude can be found very frequently among people close to the Serbian Orthodox Church, and it is broadly spread in church circles. The roots for this are to be seen in the historical development of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its theology.

Not only in society and in (church) politics, but also in the contemporary theology of the Serbian Orthodox Church we often find a rather reserved attitude towards the term and the idea of Europe as well. Europe is here regarded as something different to Serbia, something that Serbia does not belong to and that is usually understood in a negative way. Topical issues concerning the Church and especially politics are usually interpreted in the light of this basic attitude. In this paper I want to elaborate on these basic assumptions of the Serbian Orthodox Church and to shed some light on their background and sources.

Historical background

We first have to ask why Europe poses a problem to Serbia at all. The core of Serbian territory was for long time under Ottoman rule until the nineteenth century. During this time Serbia was cut off from all the changes and intellectual developments that took place simultaneously in

Central Europe. There was almost nothing existent which belonged traditionally to the Serbian heritage: no schools, no academic or cultural institutions. In fact, there was only one Serbian institution which could keep something of a national identity, which was capable of preserving values and which was able to mediate after Serbia had become independent — the Serbian Orthodox Church. And even the Church hardly had the infrastructure necessary for this as it could not live freely under Ottoman rule and had no possibility of developing the instruments necessary for a 'normal' church life. It was only much later and only in the areas under Austrian or Hungarian control, that a first modest written culture of Serbian Orthodoxy — apart from the rich Serbian heritage of the Middle Ages — could develop. From travelogues dating from this time we know that many Serbian monasteries in Bosnia did not possess more than three or four books. There was no possibility of printing books then, so that the tradition of hand-written manuscripts was alive until the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the Serbs living in Hungary employed teachers of theology from Russia who laid the first foundations of a theological thinking, and they managed to get some books printed in Venice. But one can hardly speak of a Serbian culture which developed within the framework of Western European culture of this time. It was only after the liberation from Ottoman rule and mainly among the Hungarian Serbs that the Western way of thinking and Western ideas entered Serbian culture. This development finally made Serbia catch up on large parts of cultural history once it had become independent, and it is highly interesting that in a short period of time and in many areas the Serbs reached the level of the European culture of that time.

This process was not always free from problems. People who had devoted themselves to the ideas of Enlightenment and Western Education were often not accepted by the Church as, for example, the famous monk Dositej Obradović (ca. 1741-1811), the most important representative of enlightenment in Serbia, who was to become the first Serbian minister of education later on. Today Obradović is seen in a very negative way among representatives of the Serbian Church and theologians, and his system of thinking (which means in the perception of those theologians a Western way of thinking) is juxtaposed to the traditional way of Serbian thinking. According to this perception, the introduction of the 'foreign', Western intellectual attitude suppressed the traditional Serbian values and replaced them by such which were inappropriate for Serbia.

Due to the decelerated development described above, the late modernisation and emergence of modern society, Serbian people long regarded

themselves as not belonging to Europe. The fact that the Church, which has had such an important role in national liberation, emphasised the national idea very strongly, greatly contributed to this perception. Serbian Orthodoxy wanted to preserve not only Orthodoxy in general, but Orthodoxy of the Serbian kind. Even today, one can find remarks like 'Europe and us' (which implicates that 'we' do not belong to Europe) or 'Europe wants us to ...'. Frequently, the notion of Europe is simply identified with the European Union.

Nikolaj Velimirović

In the twentieth century, there have been two important Serbian theologians who influenced Serbian thinking to a considerable degree: Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and the monk Justin Popović. I will try to outline the main aspects of their thinking.

Nikolaj Velimirović (1880-1956) was a bishop in Serbia during the time between the two World Wars. During World War II, he was imprisoned both in Serbia and abroad, also in the concentration camp of Dachau. After the war he did not return to Communist Yugoslavia but emigrated to London and then to the United States where he died in 1956. His relics were brought to Serbia in 1991, and he is revered today as a Saint. Bishop Nikolaj had been the leading supporter of a lay organisation, the so called *Bogomoltsy* movement, which had been very popular and very active between the wars and which was known above all for its publishing work. The *Bogomoltsy* were of highest importance for the development of Orthodox spirituality among laypeople in Serbia between the World Wars.

In his works, Bishop Nikolaj describes Serbian Orthodoxy as the ideal form of Christian faith. In his eyes, it includes elements of Western Christianity as well as those of Asian religions, and thus Serbian Christianity stands 'above east and west', as he puts it in the title of one of his writings. The Eastern, Asian religiosity is characterised by meditation and contemplativeness as well as by being close to God, and Western religiosity is seen by him in the categories of activity and a narrow relation towards man. Serbian Orthodoxy, in his view, unites the positive aspects of both two principles. Serbian Orthodox thinking does not relate mainly to God or mainly to man, but is balanced to the God-man Jesus Christ. It is thus the ideal combination of Western and Eastern thinking, it is above them.

This position leads Bishop Nikolaj to a critical view of humanist Europe of the Enlightenment which has, in his opinion, lost all original

religious values. Velimirović names the 'French thinkers and authors of the Eighteenth Century' as the chief enemies of Christianity who have helped Europe to abandon Christian faith as a centre of meaning. Europe is said to have fallen from Christian faith and can only be saved by a spiritual rebirth. Since the most Orthodox nations were suppressed at this time, it was only Russia who preserved this 'only real' form of Christianity and who could pass it over to Serbia when Russia herself fell under Communist rule. The spiritual power of Russia is of great importance for Velimirović. It is interesting to see that Velimirović (from his own experience) has also great faith in a contribution from the USA in such a renewal. Western Europe, Velimirović says, has put itself above God so that the idea of a superman (*Übermensch*) could develop. Europe's blind activism made it turn away from Christ. Only the Slavic East forms an exception here. In contrast to Western and Central Europe, religiosity in Russia was still the centre of civilisation in the nineteenth century. Serbia had special significance because the Serbian Church and nation had to bear and to suffer so much in history. With regard to this extraordinary witness of Christ, 'Christian Serbia can assume the apostolic responsibility to lead the East [which means: Asia, Th. B.] back to baptism and the West back to repentance.' One can see clearly how important the notion of suffering has been for the development of Serbian self-consciousness, which even today is formed by the idea of suffering, and especially by the idea that the highest degree of suffering had to be borne by the Serbs.

Velimirović emphasizes the old, medieval form of Serbian Christianity as its original and best form. This is due to the fact that Serbs have allegedly devoted themselves to serving God. Velimirović develops a theory of *theodoulia* (service to God) of the Serbian nation. In this context he describes the Serbian farmer in his simple spirituality as the ideal of Christendom. All his life is characterised by devotional fulfilling of his tasks, and he transforms all he does into service to God. In this way, his house can be described as the pre-form of a monastery. The Serbian national Saint Sava (who gained autocephaly for the Serbian Church in the thirteenth century) and his principles of thinking play a very important role as well. The term of *Svetosavlje* which is almost untranslatable and which means something like 'principles according to Saint Sava' or 'living according to these principles' was developed by Velimirović and is still of great importance in Serbian theology today. One should notice the fact that Sava did not develop any 'system' of thinking. His main merits were of a political nature, as he organised the Church in the first

years of its autocephaly, founded dioceses, translated the canon law books etc. The notion of *Svetosavlje* implies two connotations: Sava was a monk, and so monasticism and ascetism are emphasized. Furthermore, Sava was the founder of the Serbian national Church, so that there lies an accent on the theme of the Serbian nation, united with its Church. *Svetosavlje* is the principle juxtaposed to the ideas of Enlightenment that were brought into Serbian thinking by Obradović and that are perceived as negative, as 'European'.

Starting from such views, Velimirović comes to a clearly negative attitude towards Europe. One can already see this from some titles of his works, like *Above East and West* or *Christ on the Balkans*. The Balkans are not only geographically, but especially spiritually between and even above Asia and Western Europe. Here Velimirović seems to have been influenced by the Slavophile Russian philosophy of the nineteenth century. So his criticism concerning Europe implies also criticism towards Western values and the Western intellectual attitude. Two systems of thought will be found which are not compatible. Therefore it is logical that Velimirović sees the only salvation for Europe in going back to its former values which are identical with Orthodox ones.

In Serbian Orthodoxy today Velimirović is regarded as its most important figure in the twentieth century. It is interesting that his positive remarks on the ecumenical movement, which can be found in his writings as well and which are due to his positive experiences in England, which he visited frequently, and in the United States, are rarely quoted since there is great criticism of the ecumenical engagement of the Serbian Orthodox Church within the Church itself. Paradoxically, Velimirović is presented by the critics of the ecumenical contacts of the Serbian Orthodox Church as the main argument for their position since he had such a critical attitude towards the West. His positive ecumenical experiences are not mentioned. Yet his views on the relationship between Europe and Orthodoxy are perceived as a valid explanation and interpretation even of today's position of Serbia.

Justin Popović

After having studied in St. Petersburg and Athens, the monk Justin Popović (1894-1979) became professor of dogmatics at the University of Belgrade. After World War II, he had to give up his job for political reasons and from 1948 onwards lived in a remote Serbian monastery where he wrote a lot of articles and books. Popović, who had been a pupil of

Velimirović, basically agrees with his teacher's criticism of Europe. He too considered that Western Europe has moved away from true Christianity and has tipped the balance between God and man, as established by and in Jesus Christ, and put man at the centre of its own thoughts. But Popović goes even further than Velimirović and no longer assigns any value to Western Europe. To him Catholics and Lutherans are no better than Arians, Monophysites or other heretics. In his eyes, it is only in the Orthodox tradition, which proves itself through adhering to the patristic teachings and to the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, that the Christian faith is preserved.

Such an exclusive position must naturally be followed by the rejection of all ecumenical efforts. Popović wrote a number of works in which he talks very critically about ecumenism and the ecumenical movement which, in his words, is 'the heresy above all heresies'. The only possible ecumenism is the return of all Christians to Orthodoxy. Any kind of dialogue with the Catholic Church or Protestant Churches, however, is not only unthinkable but even prone to heresy itself. Popović attacked his own Church very harshly because of its engagement in the ecumenical movement. Thus he has laid the ground for the critical approach towards ecumenism which is broadly spread in the Serbian Church today. In his theological works, he also quotes Western church fathers, but no Western theologians after the eleventh century, the great schism. This corresponds to the traditional Orthodox vision that there is no Church and even no elements or traces of 'churchhood' outside the institutional framework of the Orthodox Church.

Religious and political aspects

Both theologians just mentioned have had a strong influence on the Serbian Orthodox Church. Both are worshipped as saints and, as a spiritual father, Popović has had a decisive influence on several young monks of the 1970s, most of whom are bishops today. This is how we can explain that there is a strong group of people within the Serbian Orthodox Church who oppose ecumenical dialogue with other Churches in a very determined manner. In March 1997 a letter signed by 340 monks and priests made its way round which urged the Synod of the Serbian Church to withdraw from the World Council of Churches as well as from the Conference of European Churches. Such opinions then had some tradition within Serbian Orthodox thinking. The Serbian Church has not yet made such a decision, but the Holy Synod rather said it will wait for a

decision of all Orthodox Churches. Yet it is interesting that during recent years there has been hardly any contribution to ecumenical dialogue on doctrinal questions from the Serbian Church. Quite often, the Serbs simply did not send representatives to dialogue meetings without officially withdrawing from the very dialogue. This may be due to the complicated situation during the years of war and to the fact that they do not have enough theologians who could be sent to such meetings, but it is also an expression of a certain attitude towards ecumenical questions.

The low opinion of Europe as we find it in large parts of the Serbian Orthodox Church concerns intellectual and religious matters as well as political ones. Europe, meaning Western Europe only, is rotten and not capable of recognizing and propagating true human virtues and values of its own accord. In the minds of these Serbian theologians (which corresponds to the opinion of Orthodox theologians of other Churches), the topical questions discussed by the European Churches (ordination of women, homosexual partnership) show that a dialogue with these Churches does not make any sense as they do not discuss the most important theological matters and as the Orthodox Churches would have no opportunity to express their concerns in an adequate way and to push them through. Furthermore, a discussion of individual topics like Eucharist or ecclesiology does not make sense since an agreement on such themes can have consequences only if an agreement is reached in all topics which are discussed among the Churches. This position corresponds to what Orthodox participants said in the beginning of the ecumenical movement, when they gave their own statement to the consensus reached by ecumenical assemblies. The reluctant attitude of Orthodoxy towards a lot of themes discussed today in the ecumenical movement is nothing new, and it does not diminish the ecumenical engagement of Orthodoxy which is well known for long decades.

At the same time Europe is accused of being biased against Serbian interests. We find such statements regarding the political events of recent years. From a Serbian perspective, Europe reacted in favour of Bosnia and Croatia during the crisis of the 1990s up until the bombardment of Yugoslavia by NATO in 1999. It is interesting to see that the Serbian Church frequently assumes a position of moral superiority. This became obvious when in his Easter address 1999, Bishop Artemije who is in charge of Kosovo and who is regarded as quite open-minded, pitied the Western countries for being the ones who suffered — from their own morality and not the Serbs from the bombs. On the internet homepage of the Serbian Patriarchate, the ecological catastrophe on the Danube which

was a consequence of an accident in a Romanian gold mine, was interpreted as the 'mirror of all spiritual, social and technological currents and deviations of foremost European culture of the last centuries'.

Concluding remarks

Let me make two final remarks for the better understanding of this phenomenon. First, we have to see that there is also a group of people within the Church which is much more open to the Western world. Among these are bishops and theologians of the Faculty of Theological Studies in Belgrade. One of the most influential of them, Bishop Sava of Sumadija, passed away June 17, 2001. Several professors of the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade are highly interested in co-operation with Western scholars and institutions. We have to admit, though, that the more influential group is the one which is extremely sceptical of Europe.

On the other hand, we have to notice that similar attitudes can also be found in Greek and Russian Orthodoxy today. This is most frequently explained by a revival of Hesychast theological traditions within Orthodoxy. Accordingly, the Christian East and the Christian West stand beside each other like incompatible systems of thought — one determined by Hesychasm and the other by Scholasticism. This neo-Hesychast tendency of Orthodox theology is characterized by the same mysticism as we find in the Serbian Church. Since modern Western thought is not really scholastic any more, one has to ask whether these two systems of thought are really complete opposites. This would lead us to the very interesting, but also very broad, question of the relationship between the two theological systems which cannot be discussed here. But for our interest, the question remains open whether an Hesychast approach necessarily means an opposition towards European values.

So we can see a rather complex situation within the Serbian Church. It seems to be in a process which is not yet finished, and it will be quite important which of the two main tendencies prevails. It is in the interest not only of the Serbian Church, but also of the Western Churches, to support the development of a Serbian ecclesiastical and theological identity which on the one hand would preserve all the traditional heritage of Serbian Orthodoxy, and on the other hand is not built on distance to and confrontation with the West. An identity which will be able to keep up a dialogue and to co-operate from its own point of view. A critical solidarity on the part of Western Churches and scholars will be an important element for such a development.