

The Serb Church and Negative Peace in Kosova

By Xhavit Shala

The activity of the Serb Orthodox Church¹ has since long ago now crossed the bounds of spirituality and moved to political matters.² Instead of focusing on its spiritual mission and use the sign of the cross, a symbol of salvation for Christians, to bless and steer the Serb people towards peace and understanding, the Church is openly encouraging a dangerous anti-western attitude³ that may backfire. With regard to Kosova especially, the Serb Church is playing a destructive role. Instead of leading the Serb people towards a European future, it is pushing them towards a position of outdated nationalism.

The Serb church became an ally of Milosevic in his rise to the pinnacle of Serb power. The flags of the Church were waived alongside those of the Milosevic's Communist Party during the celebrations of the 600th anniversary of the Kosova battle in 1989. Both parties planned to benefit mutually from this cooperation.⁴ Milosevic needed the support of the Serb Church to provide a spiritual cover to his nationalistic and criminal mission. While the Church, on the other side, took advantage of this opportunity to awaken itself from the lethargic sleep forced by the Communist regime and embark on a path of reassuming its historical role in both social and political matters.

The Serb church has played a historic role in the establishment of the Serb state. The church was able to preserve its power during the period of Ottoman rule. Unlike the Catholic Church that was viewed with suspicion from Supreme Porte, the Orthodox

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² The article, with some small variations, was first published in the daily "Tirana Observer," March 14, 2006

³ Nis, February 27 2006 ("Beta") – The Bishop of Rashka and Prizren, Artemije has said during a rally in Nis that an imposed solution on the status of Kosovo would mean an "occupation of Kosovo." "If there will be something imposed, then it must be accepted with the sense that Kosovo has been reoccupied. Every democratic state has the right that at the proper moment to liberate it and bring that occupied territory under its integrity," bishop Artemije told journalists in Nis. He reminded them that Serbia has employed her right to reclaim Kosovo even after the 500 years of Ottoman Empire. "If such a thing will be imposed again, this is our only answer that is befitting to our honor and name," he said.

⁴ Olga Popovic Obradović – With the rise of Milosevic to power in 1987, the old alliance between the Serb state and the Church was revitalized. What brought the Church and Milosevic together was the compatibility of their final goal that was the unification of all Serbs under one state. Communism as an ideology presented too weak of a foundation to bring about the realization of this political project and the Milosevic regime soon found the new foundation of legitimacy on the ethno-nationalist ideology. The only authentic bearer of this ideology was the Orthodox Church. Expecting in return practical support, the Serb Orthodox Church offered Milosevic its active support becoming in the process the key factor in the creation of the new history of Serbia and of the new regime in general. Having provided a powerful contribution in the reawakening of the ethno-nationalist sentiments among the larger masses, manipulating their nationalist and religious sentiments for political aims, the Church that was ruled by a strong nationalist spirit, provided Milosevic with practical support by way of blessing his military expedition and the redrawing of the borders in the Balkans. ("Helsinki povelja", June – July 2004).

Church gained a special status that granted it certain rights and powers. The Orthodox Church exercised full civil and judicial powers over its people, powers that were very similar with those exercised by the church during the Byzantine period. The Patriarch was assigned a position on the Ottoman hierarchy and given the title of Pasha. The Church was entrusted with the administration of the Orthodox community. The church could collect taxes from the believers and possess movable and immovable assets. Under its serene cover, the Church ensured a link of communication with the Russian church and led the resistance against the ottomans.⁵ In such circumstances, the Serbs view their Church as the symbol of their state. Even the first meetings of the Serb Government, following their independence from the Ottoman Empire was held in the Monastery of Voljevča, near Kragujevac.

It was this privileged position that the Church had historically enjoyed but lost during the communist regime that it sought to restore by choosing to cooperate with Milosevic. The ethnic cleansing of Albanians in 1999 was carried out under the tacit approval of the church. After the liberation of Kosova from the Serb forces and the disintegration of former Serb power structures, the Serb church is again trying to assume a political role. With the purpose of ensuring that it remained the only protector of Serb interests in Kosova, the Church deliberately discouraged any attempt for political participation of Serb population in the Kosova institutions.

The Serb boycott of the Kosova parliamentary elections in 2004 and the clash of positions in Serbia demonstrated this very well. While President Tadic, under international pressure, called on the Serbs in Kosova to participate in these elections, one day before the voting the head of the Serb Orthodox Church, Patriarch Pavel, called on them to stay in their homes. In addition, the Serbs in Kosova boycotted the elections. This was a show of force of the Serb church before the official institutions. Serb politics have often felt inferior or “out of game” in relation with the power of the Church. The public trust in the church is so strong that politicians cannot but take into consideration the church’s political position.

According to the Serb analyst, Mirko Gjorgjević, in the case of Kosova the opinion of the church is very important and may even be decisive. “Politicians are looking to find a common language with the church. They would like to speak in unison because they know that the church is viewed as the historic defender of the people’s interest,”⁶ he says.

⁵ Esat Myftari - “The Serb Church became a protected oasis that preserved everything else: the old language, the traditional iconography, the national features and the hope of salvation. The Serb Church was given the chance to assume the spiritual attributes of the state that had disappeared. On the other side, while wearing the “neutral religious credentials” it was able to assure the continuity of the communication links with the Orthodox people in general and with Russia in particular. The Church served as a place where the culture, diplomacy and even the work of a secret service was conducted. That is why it is not surprising that when the time of the Ottoman Empire’s downfall was drawing near, the Serb priest were co-authors of this political project. The Clergy would then continue to play the role of the vanguard because of the enormous moral capital than the Church had accumulated through the years.” “IMPAKT Ndërkombëtar”, Issue 2, April May 2005, A publication of [Jehona Study Center](#).

⁶ Tanja Matiç in Beograd, Deçan and Belo Polje: “The Serb Church wants to have the final word on any agreement,” a publication of IWPR.

The Media, or the fourth estate as it is otherwise known, seem subdued to the power of the church. They do not dare to oppose the statements and opinions of the Church or to provide an alternative view to the Serb public opinion. It is almost impossible to find in the Serb press any position that stands against the Church's viewpoint

The Church's interference in Serb politics has frustrated even that part of the Serb public opinion who would like to see a quick and realistic solution to the Kosova issue. Sonja Biserk, of the Serb Committee for Human Rights, "the Church is openly playing the role of a para-political organization with an undefined and unclear position on the future of Kosova and without any concrete strategy for realistic resolution."⁷ Dushan Janjić, of the Forum for Inter-ethnic relations says, "The church interferes with the state's policy in Kosova much more than the government or the bishops are willing to admit."

Serb media analysts have noted that the influence of the Church has grown since the elections of Kostunica as Prime Minister. In his efforts to appear as a true believer, Kostunica wants to make sure he has the support of the Church just as Milosevic did. Serb nationalist politicians are interested in strengthening the power of the Church in Kosova because they hope to use it to destabilize the situation there in keeping with their power interests. According to Mirko Blagojević, a religious issues sociologist, "In Kosova, the Church remains the sole institution that can potentially mobilize people."

The leader of the Serb Church in Kosova, Archbishop Artemije Radosavlević, has put aside his spiritual mission and has undertaken a fervent political and diplomatic action against Albanians and against the independence of Kosova⁸. He began this anti-Albanian campaign in Washington that he visited upon invitation from the Congress of the Serb Union. His offensive aimed to make Americans aware of the alleged threat that Kosova's independence presents to the Serb population there. "Kosova independence means an extermination of the Serbs from the region." Aware of the American sensitivity to Islamic fundamentalism, Artemije also threw the thesis that an independent Kosova risks becoming "a powerful base for Islamic jihad." The bishop also made sure to remind the West, which is trying to wrap up the Kosova case as soon as possible, that any imposed solution on the status of Kosova would imply an "occupation of Kosova" which according to him means the right to fight against it.

The Serb church feels so powerful in Kosova as to demand, in the words of Bishop Artemije, that the Church should be part of any agreement on the final status of Kosova. Artemije and other Serb Church authorities do not want to come to terms with the fact that the political role and power that the church has exercised and wants to preserve in

⁷ Tanja Matić in Beograd, Dečan and Belo Polje: "The Serb Church wants to have the final word on any agreement," a publication of IWPR.

⁸ The Bishop of Rashka and Prizren, Artemije, undertook a diplomatic tour in the United States during the months of January-February 2006. According to the News Agency Beta, January 31, 2006 during his two week stay in the US the bishop was planning to meet with various US lawmakers in Congress, attend the UN Security Council meeting on Kosova and visit the Serb communities in Chicago and Cleveland.

Kosova has been done away with in Europe centuries ago. Europe was able to escape religious fanaticism and enter the path of modernization only when it achieved a separation between the church and state.

It is unlikely however, that Artemije theses will stick. The Church's tacit approval of the ethnic cleansing of the Albanians from Kosova and the other crimes committed cannot be easily forgotten. While it is true that the majority of the Albanians in Kosova are Muslims, it is true that they have nothing in common with Islamic fundamentalism. NATO's presence in Kosova will ensure that Serbs will not dare to enter into new adventures.

A possible change in the position of the Orthodox Church would contribute positively to the stability of Kosova and would greatly benefit the Serb Community in particular. The Church could very well contribute towards the creation of a new spirit of trust that is necessary for coexistence to develop. The continuation of this policy makes it very difficult for the Serb community to grow in their trust in the Albanian population and would make it very hard for the Serbs in Kosova to enjoy their rights.

The role assumed by the Church presents a threat and does not bode well for both Serbia and Kosova. Its interference in politics presents a serious threat to democracy and security in the new Kosova state. Given these circumstances, the Kosova negotiating team must pay close attention to the conditions related to the role of the Serb church and premises in an independent Kosova. In keeping with international standards, these conditions should clearly stipulate that the Serb Church should not interfere in the political process and must respect the secular nature of the state. It is equally necessary that full guarantees are given to protect the Serb Churches and monasteries in keeping with international standards but it should never be allowed that these premises become advanced posts of Serb intelligence services or operating centers for officers dressed in the churches' black clothe. There shall be no definitive solution to the conflict in Kosova unless the Church withdraws from its current position that is reminiscent of medieval times.