

## The Serbian Orthodox Church: Not What We Have Been Led to Believe

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The cover of a recent issue of *The Tablet* displayed a drawing of an Orthodox bishop kneeling in the rubble of a bombed church. On his knees behind him, looking far and away the more pious of the two, was President Milosevic. The headline beneath the drawing read, "Serbia's Martyr Complex," the featured essay in that issue, but it was the drawing that interested me more than the text it illustrated. The bishop's face was that of a typecast Hollywood villain. With only a small change in costume, he could have been Count Dracula contemplating a victim's neck or a ruthless Mafia boss imagining an enemy's death. The archbishop was the arch-Serb.

The art of enmity has for years given us a steady diet of images of evil Serbs, sometimes shown as cavemen, often dripping with blood, victimizing their neighbors. Nor is it unusual to show the Serbian Orthodox Church playing the role as chaplain to the state and accomplice in Serbian war crimes, preacher of a nationalistic mythology which the faithful heard as a blessing to create, by any means necessary, a Greater Serbia.

It is human nature, not only the nature of the mass media, to want to iron out the wrinkles that complicate our perception of others, always with a tilt toward bad news – a process that reduces the world to comic book simplicity. Thus the English say "rather" and drink tea, the French make love and drink wine, the Dutch grow tulips and drink gin, and Serbs kiss icons and drink their neighbor's blood.

In fact the religious identity of Serbs is not what we have been led to believe nor has the Serbian Orthodox Church been a pillar of support for Milosevic. While it's true that church attendance in Serbia went up during NATO's bombardment – exploding bombs turn one's mind to ultimate things – the Church is a minor element in Serbian social and political life.

Among the reasons for this is that Tito was extraordinarily effective in his 35-year struggle to marginalize the Orthodox Church. Throughout the Tito era, it was a major disadvantage to put one's toe in the church door. Those who wanted to advance in life had to join

the Communist Party, in which atheism was obligatory. Tito died in 1980, but many of his policies survived, including the view that religion belonged to the past. While Milosevic used nationalist rhetoric in his successful bid for power in 1989, in other ways he remained faithful to his political and ideological roots.

It was thus a weakened Serbian Orthodox Church that had to define its response to the events which tore Yugoslavia to shreds in the nineties. Serbian priests I have interviewed estimate that perhaps five percent of the population is engaged in the Church in a significant way, while the vast majority is unbaptized. There are few cities in Europe more secular than Belgrade.

Nonetheless, the head of the Church, Patriarch Pavle, now 85 years old, is widely respected and often described as a saint even by unchurched people. A small, lean, white-bearded man with a meek but determined manner, he is well known for having personally taken part in various anti-war, anti-government protest demonstrations. In 1997 he led a procession of many thousands that freed protesting students who were under police siege in central Belgrade.

Pavle has touched Serbs even more deeply through significant gestures in his private life. One cleric in Belgrade complained to me how inconvenient it was when Pavle came to visit his parish. "You can never say how late he will arrive. He travels by tram and bus, then walks the rest of the way. He says he will get a car only when the poorest person can have one."

Not every cleric set such an inspiring example. A deacon I know in Serbia complains about priests who "are more interested in cars than souls." Two friends of mine had to delay their wedding in Belgrade until they could find a priest who didn't begin the conversation by announcing his fee. (It should be noted that most Serb clergy have no regular salary and depend on gifts for services for their livelihood.)

Further complicating the problem of the Church's role in post-Tito Serbia is that the Church, however crippled by past oppression, is the only institution that still incarnates Serbian identity. No other social structure is so deeply linked with Serbia's history, traditions, achievements and sorrows. One easily finds Serbs who value the Church for "cultural" reasons while regarding its beliefs and teachings as irrelevant. For the ultra-nationalist, ultimate values are

national, yet he may regard himself as somehow Orthodox simply because to be Serb is to be Orthodox. An icon in someone's home can be more a sign of Serbian than Christian identity.

Every Serb I met, no matter how alienated from Christian belief, held the ancient monasteries and churches – many are in Kosovo – in high regard. In more peaceful times they were always ready to take guests like me to visit these "monuments," but those who crossed themselves, kissed icons or visibly prayed in such places were the exception. Though there have been many conversions of young intellectuals, Serbs tend to regard the Church as a beautiful museum with little relevance to the modern world, though in recent years the outspoken criticism by the hierarchy in regard to the Milosevic regime has earned the Church a certain respect among those working for a more democratic society.

The direction of the Church's hierarchy, while wanting to preserve all that is good in Serbian identity and tradition, has been to oppose malignant, intolerant forms of nationalism.

The church's pastors see the neglect of spiritual life as being at the heart of the nation's crisis. "For 45 years under communism, atheism was the official religion," Bishop Lavrentije of Sabac-Valjevo explained in an interview in 1995. "Priests were forbidden from going into schools and from visiting the army. People were educated without any contact with belief in God, and were taught that there was no soul. Those generations [who received an atheist education] are now soldiers. That is the reason for genocide. As one philosopher said, 'If you take away God from man, man becomes the strongest animal.'" (One of Lavrentije's projects has been to make available works of literature that will help restore Serbia's spiritual life. The press he founded has published an edition of the complete works of Dostoevsky.)

Patriarch Pavle speaks with a similar monastic directness. When I first met him in 1994, I asked about the civil war that was then raging in Bosnia. Pavle responded that the blame must be shared among Serbs along with everyone else – the governments of the several republics of former Yugoslavia plus the rest of Europe and the United States: "Everyone is guilty. There are criminals on every side. God alone knows who has the greatest blame or who has committed the most sins." (His answer reminded me of the figure of Father

Zosima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.) In such a situation, Pavle continued, "the Church must condemn all atrocities that are committed, no matter what the faith or origin of the person committing them may be. No sin committed by one person justifies a sin committed by another. We will all face the Last Judgment together where each of us must answer for his sins. No one can justify his sins by saying someone else is guilty of a crime."

Few bishops east or west have spoken so tirelessly against ethnic division, hatred and war. "Let us grasp the teaching of the Holy Apostle Paul, that one cannot accomplish good by evil means – a lesson our mothers taught us through the ages, warning us that evil never brings good," he said on one occasion. "Oh, that God would help us to understand that we are human beings and that we must live as human beings, so that peace would come into our country and bring an end to the killing."

The principle was summed up in a statement issued by the Serbian bishops on March 23, two days before the NATO attack: "The way of nonviolence and cooperation is the only way blessed by God." Still more significant are the special prayers the Serbian Church added to the Holy Liturgy early in the breakdown of Yugoslavia, including this petition: *For all those who commit injustice against their neighbors, whether by causing sorrow to orphans, spilling innocent blood or by returning hatred for hatred, that God will grant them repentance, enlighten their minds and their hearts and illumine their souls with the light of love even toward their enemies, let us pray to the Lord.*

For years Church response to the war was expressed chiefly in the reiteration of fundamental moral principles and efforts to relieve suffering. In the past year, as the danger of war in Kosovo increased, the bishops began actively promoting policies they hoped might make peace more likely.

The person chiefly responsible for Church peace efforts, Bishop Artemije of Prizren, made five trips to Washington and traveled repeatedly to European capitals in his efforts to convince the West that it was mistaken in its long-running support of Milosevic. In a letter the bishop hand-delivered to US Secretary of State Albright in February, he said: "We believe that US policy must cease to be perceived as hostile to the legitimate interests of the Serbian nation and must, instead, be directed toward the replacement of the Milosevic

regime by a democratic government . . . the Milosevic regime, as the repeated generator of crises, cannot be relied upon to help secure a just and durable peace. However, current American policy seems to be repeating, once again, the mistakes of the past, relying on the one hand, upon guarantees given by the Milosevic regime, while holding only the Serbian nation responsible for the escalating cycle of violence. This mistaken policy, we believe, now on the verge of NATO intervention in Kosovo Province, will be entirely counterproductive."

NATO intervention, he argued, would only strengthen the Milosevic regime and be a major setback for the democratic opposition in Serbia, which in turn would delay democratization, a precondition for peace in the Balkan region. "NATO intervention in Kosovo would risk setting back the cause of democracy in Serbia and in the Balkans for years to come."

Bishop Artemije proposed a solution inspired by the Swiss example – that Kosovar Serbs and Kosovar Albanians each be granted the right to self-administration in rural areas in which they constitute relative or absolute majorities with economic, judiciary, and political links to Serbia, while in major cities a system of multi-ethnic rule be adopted in which political power is shared through a two-chamber Assembly.

On February 3, Patriarch Pavle sought permission for a non-negotiating representation at the Rambouillet negotiations. The request was denied. Even so a week later the delegation went to Rambouillet, hoping to put forward the Church-backed peace proposal. Bishop Artemije held a press conference in a local café, telling journalists that "the Serbs in the castle represent only two parties, Milosevic's socialists and the neo-communists of his wife." He stood in prayer outside the chateau gates, truly a voice crying in the wilderness.

The monasteries in Kosovo, most notably the Decani monastery south of Pec, have given their own witness for peace both before and during the war (see various articles in the news section of recent issues of *In Communion*).

It was Hieromonk Sava, assistant abbot of Decani, who explained to a journalist, "This is a war between extremists. On one side is a totalitarian regime, and on the other, secessionists. We condemn violence on both sides."

He regretted that "the spiritual side of Orthodoxy" was not so well known among Serbs after 50 years of communism. "You might be surprised to know," he commented, "that at our Sunday service of worship we have only about ten people from Decani in attendance. For the Serb, tradition is important, but there has been a secularization of tradition here just as in other parts of Europe, and that has taken man further from God."

Asked who Kosovo belonged to, he responded: "Adam and Eve, that's who." Asked which side does God take in this conflict? "God is on the side of the suffering people."

Now, after dropping 23,000 bombs in 79 days, NATO is in charge of Kosovo and refugees are returning home while many Serbs flee the province. Much of Serbia and Kosovo lies in ruins, with thousands killed by soldiers and paramilitaries or as "collateral damage" of NATO bombing. While Serbia's military was only slightly harmed, the country's infrastructure was severely damaged. Even water purification plants were targeted. The results will be a high mortality rate for years to come among the more vulnerable members of society.

In June the Serbian Orthodox Church renewed an appeal it first made in 1992 for Milosevic to step down and for the creation of a government of national unity acceptable both to the Serbian people and other nations.

It may be a time of renewed persecution for Orthodox Christians. Bishop Artemije has had to flee Prizren after being under siege from the KLA, but remains in Kosovo and hopes to return to Prizren. As of this writing, two monasteries have been destroyed, one monk reported murdered, and a nun raped by KLA soldiers.

The most striking and hope-giving gesture since the bombs stopped falling has been Patriarch Pavle's decision to move from Belgrade to Pec, the historic center of the Serbian Orthodox Church, an action he hopes will encourage other Serbs to remain in Kosovo or return from Serbia. It is also a gesture to Kosovo Albanians. If Pavle and the monasteries of Kosovo can give witness of Serbians who love their neighbors, and even their enemies, perhaps there can yet be a multi-ethnic, multi-religious Kosovo.

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